Multicultural Poland as Discovered from the Canadian Perspective of a Polish Émigré – Eva Stachniak’s Necessary Lies

The statement that a majority of Canadian writers are interested in narrating a place would probably not be an exaggeration. The notion of place and its derivatives like placement and displacement, have acquired a special position within the body of Canadian writing. As it is highlighted by the title of this congress, the idea of place is inextricably connected to memory which filters, influences and changes perceptions of certain places. Eva Stachniak’s debut Necessary Lies (2000) shows how this Canadian perspective helps the main character to rediscover her hometown – Breslau. Her peregrinations through Poland and Germany show how she defines the place of her birth as well as the lost homeland of her family. The aim of this paper is, however, two-fold. Apart from the discussion of how Canadian heritage and experience enable people to find out about their origins, it also points to the importance of memory in such journeys and an evolution of a concept of homeland.

In an interview, the author of the novel confirms that the story of Anna is partially autobiographical. But the importance of this personal experience pertains less to certain facts than to the whole idea of seeking one’s roots and defining the notion of origins. Stachniak refers to the question which every immigrant has to answer at some point of their stay in Canada, or anywhere else abroad: “Where are you from?” This particular inquiry appears in most of the emigrant writing in English. In many forms it can be found in the novels by Eva Hoffman, Michael Ondaatje, and Salman Rushdie, to name just a few immigrants whose place in literature has become significant. The need to describe one’s origins, especially in the light of Canadian multicultural approach, does not mean to erase the roots. On the contrary, it fosters the search for one’s identity. As, according to Brian S. Osborne:

1 In this paper I refer to the interview with Eva Stachniak by Agata Tuszyńska and published in Odra vol. 6, 2003, also available: http://odra.art.pl/article.php/122. I do not quote from this interview as it is only in Polish.
Self-knowledge and personal identity cannot be reconstructed without place-worlds. Not merely neutral containers, geography, locale, setting, place — whatever you wish to call them — are complicit in strategies of cultural survival. Places are defined by tangible material realities that can be seen, touched, mapped, and located (Osborne, 42).

For emigrants, trying to render a place of their origins accessible, it is necessary to take into consideration the vital aspect of memory and its creative character. As has been proved the bits of knowledge, memories or information people preserve are not stored passively. They are subjected to constant reorganization, which can have a form of selection, adjustment, or reconstruction, and as Ian Chambers wrote “memory [...] knows the impossibility of ever fully knowing either itself or the past. What are transcribed and translated are traces, residues, shadows and echoes” (81). It is one of the reasons for which emigrants respond to the need of narrating one’s homeland – or in more general terms, place – in a fictional way: that is by writing fictional autobiographies and novels that freely play with the genre of autobiography. Therefore, Necessary Lies becomes Stachniak’s answer to the quandary of where she comes from and what it means to come from Breslau – a city of many faces and versions of history. The Canadian atmosphere of celebrating a complexity of experiences and origins, and especially the spirit of Montreal, as not only a francophone capital of Canada but also a place where many immigrant minorities settled down, triggers the fascination with “[…] émigré writers, stories scattered in émigré papers, thin volumes of poems printed by the small presses of London, Chicago, Montreal. As if the mere act of leaving anointed people with some mystical, unexplainable superiority” (Stachniak, 42).

Canada has always been a multicultural country and as a result of a consistent promotion of such an approach an Official Languages Act was issued in 1969. Canada had already been open to immigrants earlier and, as Kuester claims, it started to be acknowledged as such with the completion of the transcontinental railway back in the 19th century (Cf. Canada, 14). It becomes, thus, visible that such a reconsideration of even a distant Polish/German city could have been done thanks to such a praise of multiculturalism widely present in Canadian culture. Throughout the novel the readers feel the importance of the main character’s emigration to Canada, which enables her to analyze the history of Breslau without hatred or prejudices, but with the fascination with its multilayered history. In one of the letters
which Anna receives after her husband William, a Breslau-born émigré to Canada, dies, Father Albrecht writes:

"[William] was of the generation touched by the war. Too young to have taken a stand, too old to say it happened before his time. This is a European disease, this mixing together of blood and soil. Pick a handful of it, they say, and you will squeeze blood" (Stachniak, 82).

In Europe then, and especially on the soil of both German and Polish influences, on the borderlands, where the Germans miss the lost Heimat which the Polish call Ziemia Odzyskane (the Regained Territories) it would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach the multicultural perspective and find Wroclaw/Breslau an intriguing city which has an undoubtedly interesting past and to see this past without the burden of claims from the two nations. But the troubled history of this place that has been a hometown for many from at least two nations becomes an exemplary notion of a multicultural home as defined by Vijay Mishra: “the idea of ‘home’ has indeed become a ‘damaged’ concept. The word ‘damaged’ forces us to face up to the scars and fractures, to the blisters and sores, to psychic traumas of bodies on the move” (Mishra, 7). It is engaging to trace the context in which Vijay Mishra writes the aforementioned statement. It behooves to the paradoxically outlaying and remote situation of the postcolonial narratives devoted to the study of the lost homelands. After a close consideration of his view, it is clear how true it is in relation to any loss of homeland in any circumstances. Stachniak notices that Wroclaw/Breslau is such a ‘damaged’ place and she does not dodge the wounds and scars of her town. On the contrary, her book attempts at cicatrizing them, bearing in mind the difficulty of the undertaking.

Necessary Lies tells the story of Anna, a Polish scholar who visits Montreal. After she falls in love with William Herzman and Martial Law is proclaimed in Poland in 1981, she decides to stay there. Her life in Canada influences Anna, and her ideas about the world and Poland are shaped through this experience. As has already been mentioned, the novel reflects her formation of the understanding of her place of origin through the analysis of her grandparents’ exile to Wroclaw and William’s legacy of German Breslau. Looking back into the most distant past, Anna sees them in Warsaw where her grandmother was sent from Tarnopol, now Ukraine, to get education and find a husband. Her grandfather owned a “colonial store” selling all kinds of goods and prospering in a quiet and modest way. After the 1939
Nazi invasion and the subsequent bombing of the store and the difficult months of the Warsaw Uprising spent in a basement, Anna’s grandparents leave for Wroclaw in the Regained Territories to seek a safe place to live. Although the lands are granted to Poland by Stalin as a kind of reward for the lost borderlands in the east, communism does not spare them. The grandfather loses the store and is imprisoned and after a period of “socialist reeducation” (Stachniak, 142) he is released to work in the store as an assistant. The fresh war memories of her grandmother influence Anna’s perception of Warsaw and Wroclaw. The granny, or Babcia, as she is consistently called, refuses to accept Wroclaw as her hometown. She equates it with the German bombings, round-ups and raids that she lived through in Warsaw. She rejects the idea of burying her husband and herself in Wroclaw. Therefore, during her stay in Warsaw, Anna visits Powązki to see the graves of her grandparents. Granny also refuses to talk about her feelings in relation to this:

when Anna asked her why she had to bring Dziadek’s body here, why she did not bury him in Wroclaw, Babcia would only scowl at her. Babcia did not trust Wroclaw. It was enough to have her parents lie in a village cemetery near Tarnopol, now in Ukraine, where she could never go. Why tempt fate? No, he was her husband after all, and he would rest in Polish soil (Stachniak, 137).

Owing to the summary of the grandparents’ history, which Stachniak includes as Anna’s reminiscence, we see the impossibility of a distanced look at the problems of borderlands for the people who experienced the war suffering. It is the second generation who discover the two-fold truth of such places. In Anna’s case, it is triggered as a result of the experience of immigration. Only being abroad, and especially in Canada, one is able to see the multilayered reality. I would even risk a statement that such a distance cannot be acquired without the experience of leaving one’s homeland.

This negative, one-sided picture of Wroclaw/Breslau and its history starts to be reshaped through Anna’s love affair and then marriage to William Herzman. The Wroclaw of her youth: “this city without a past, where history ended with the desperate Nazi defense of Festung Breslau” (Stachniak, 22) clashes with his memories. Breslau was for him a symbol of the lost homeland, a city in which there was the house he was born, but on the other hand a city from which he, among other Germans, had to escape, calming “himself by staring at the spirals and mazes of cracks on the ivory tiles
lining the tunnel of Breslau Hauptbahnhof” (Stachniak, 34). Anna confirms overtly that before meeting William she never thought about the second face of Wroclaw. In her youth, in the Poland of that time, “just pronouncing the word Breslau made the children uneasy, as if recalling a secret, silenced but still dangerous. A Polish city without the past. A Polish city filled with German ruins” (Stachniak, 154). The perception of this place is created and inextricably connected to Anna’s memories of her childhood escapades to old German bunkers, cellars, and ruins which are scattered everywhere. But this memory does not go beyond the Second World War. The memories of the Poles clash with the war destruction visible in Wroclaw many years after the war ended. The history from before 1939 was amputated and those who came to Wroclaw after 1945 as well as their children felt like patients with amnesia who were suddenly woken up and realized they were in a foreign place. This is how the collective memory of whole generations of Poles was formed: on the basis of amputation, a certain lack of true history and memories as well as on the silenced and faked histories. This feeling of being deprived of memories connected with Wroclaw is familiar to many people living in Lower Silesia. The people, despite the constant acknowledgement of the authorities of the Polish character of Wroclaw, subconsciously felt different. The gap in memories was even further widened due to the propaganda of the Communist regime which said:

Returned to the motherland, the slogans of her childhood said in big red letters. Slogans spread on thick, concrete pillars, on white billboards. Slogans perched on the roofs of houses, on the bays of bridges, their red and white background flashing in store windows. We haven’t come here, we have returned. Returned to the ancient Piast capital of Lower Silesia which, too, was a Polish province. To think otherwise would have been a betrayal (Stachniak, 155).

The Poles who came to Wroclaw after the war were aware of the history of the place but were probably afraid to think of their new hometown as German, although the haunting remnants of Breslau were being constantly found in the form of “flattened toys, bent silver spoons, broken knives, forks with missing tines, pieces of green and blue glass, shards of white and blue porcelain, black gothic German lettering still intact” (Stachniak, 155). But the generation of after-the-war newcomers, represented by Anna’s father, treated Wroclaw as the Wild West and the land of unrestrained opportunity, still perilous and risky, but undeniably abundant in possibility. Strange as it may sound, it is Anna’s father, who despite having experienced prison and
degradation, declares his willingness to be buried in Wroclaw. He comes to realize that it is the first place to which he really belongs. Unlike the previous generation of grandparents he is able to acknowledge Wroclaw as his hometown and his place on earth. For Anna this decision must be a confirmation of the positive choices of her parents from the past. It also creates an explicit image of a place from her childhood which, when contrasted with William’s heritage, becomes the place of at least double legacy. Thanks to this personal experience and memories of herself and her relatives as well as Canadian praise of multiculturalism she comes to understand more.

Anna’s Canadian experience and redefining her Polish identity after the fall of Communism in 1989 is enriched by a Berlin episode. Just after William’s death and after ten years of a happy marriage, Anna finds a bundle of letters from his lover from Germany – Ursula. It turns out that he had had a lover throughout the whole marriage to Anna as well as earlier. Although it is striking news for Anna, she gradually gets to know the fact that his daughter as well as the former wife knew about it. She realizes her position of not the only woman who was loved by William at the same time and becomes terrified. Loves as places do not have ready-made identities – they are formed as a result of people’s memories, knowledge, upbringing and ultimately their personalities. Anna, who feels betrayed and whose identity is formed in relation to her postwar experiences as well as the parents’ war experience suddenly sees this event in terms of a German offensive and invasion:

> From the darkest corners of her memory come the thoughts she has never allowed herself to think. What was it that Hitler thought of the Slavs? An inferior race of slaves? The dirt of history, a mere notch above the Jews. Slated for death to make living space in the East for the master race. **Drang nach Osten. Lebensraum.** Hasn’t she been warned so many times? Hasn’t she seen evidence, the ruins, the graves? But she wouldn’t listen, would she?
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> **Lebenslüge**, she says remembering the German word William once used […] The lie that transforms your life (Stachniak, 106).

With this one outburst of feelings and emotions she questions her acquired Canadian heritage and comes back to the dark Polish legacy, full of scars and wounds. But at the same time she already knows she has to see Ursula. At this particular moment we start to realize the meaning attached to the title
of the novel. The lies are sometimes necessary in order to be able to leap over the hidden emotions and begin to cope with them. To transform one’s life – literally – when Anna has to learn a new life without William and with his memory as a liar, but also figuratively, when she attains a new perspective and an identity freed from prejudices.

Ursula shows Anna her heritage of the divided Berlin and her perception of Communism. They also try to come to terms with Anna’s newly-gained knowledge of William’s past. What serves as a turning point in Anna’s change is a visit to the archives with the Stasi documents. Together they discover a silenced distant past of William’s grandparents. It turns out that his grandfather, Professor Claus Herzmann, did not support Führer and together with his wife were against the marriage of their daughter, Käthe, to a SS-Strurmbannführer. Käthe left Helmut Rust, but having been already pregnant, gave birth to William and partially lied about his father, saying he was an officer. Another lie in the story, and Ursula comments on their discovery in such a way: “Lebenslüge, she says. This is what you get here, in this country. A lie you live with for so long that it transforms your life. But also, she adds after a moment, a lie that enables you to live” (Stachniak, 257-8). This breakthrough and final revelation of the whole truth liberates Anna who is readier to accept the lie. She once again, but now for all, realizes that a cohesive picture of Wrocław/Breslau can, paradoxically, only be found in the lack of cohesion and one-sided unity.

During her stay in Berlin, Anna also visits an old friend of William’s mother, and she hears the following words, which once again undeniably support the Canadian experience as a crucial one:

> It’s good Käthe [William’s mother] is in Canada, […] This is the cursed land. People are afraid of the past here, afraid to love their country, afraid to be proud of it. No matter what the young ones do, the world will never forgive the German people. Käthe was right to go away with Willi (Stachniak, 238).

The memories of people who suffered during the war cannot fade, and that is why they create their perception of the world, full of fear, intolerance and only some of them are able to come to terms with the burden of remembering and necessity to forgive. Anna has even greater luck: through a painful experience of emigration, divorce, death of the beloved as well as betrayal, she receives an insight into Polish multiculturalism which perished after the
war. Stachniak’s novel does not discuss these matters openly but throughout the book the atmosphere of Canadian influence prevails. Anna says near the end of the book that people from Eastern and Central Europe “have all been marked for life” (Stachniak, 245), which proves Keefer’s point of view that all immigrants from this part of the world come to Canada with their “traumas, hatred, prejudices and fear”\(^2\). Even if, as in Anna’s case, those prejudices are not so visible she is scared of examining the truth of her hometown. Her lack of knowledge and lack of willingness to know, so widespread in Poland, is converted into deeper understanding. Graham Huggan, while discussing Michael Ondaatje’s return to his roots, claimed that such an “in-betweenness can be liberating, allowing the freedom to experiment with alternative identities or to oppose and outmanoeuvre monolithic cultural codes” (Huggan, 119). The necessity of such a ‘Canadian treatment’ is not to be underestimated as from the very beginning Anna feels her world is transformed by the influence of the English and French. She discovers how the ethnicity can flourish, how lively it can be, unlike in Poland, silenced, eradicated or closed in Scansen museums:

You would not believe it, darling, she wrote [home]. It’s a world straight from pre-war Poland I thought I would never see. I heard haggling prices, in Yiddish, and Polish. They still sell pickled herring, here, from barrels, wrapped in old newspapers! Measure out fabric with wooden rulers! Yesterday I saw Hassids in black coats and hats, their beards untouched by scissors and it was as if I were transported right into my grandmother’s Warsaw. They walked with their eyes cast down, to avoid temptations (Stachniak, 27).

Therefore, Stachniak, as well as her protagonist, is able to make an advantage of her Canadian experience and approach the city of her youth and its complicated past in a new way. What she does to Polish and German history and Wroclaw/Breslau heritage would be best commented on by travestying Heble’s words: that she offers a new direction for our reflection on the meaning of postwar belonging\(^3\). Parallel to this conclusion there is another reflection that comes after discussing Stachniak’s novel. Despite the physical

\(^2\) Janice Kulyk Keefer in her article “In Violent Voice…” refers to Ukrainian immigration in Canada but I think this example serves similarly in the case of Polish immigration as well (Kulyk Keefer, 44).

\(^3\) Ajay Heble in “‘Rumours of Topography’…” used those words to discuss Michael Ondaatje’s return to his homeland and origins but I feel that the way postcolonialism
distance separating Canada and Poland or Germany and the seeming impossibility of sharing the experiences, *Necessary Lies* paradoxically offers a new rendition of truth about Wrocław/Breslau. It is far from categorizing the place in terms of possession but rather in accord with the Canadian treatment of places as declared by George Woodcock: “In Canada we are all immigrants. Whenever Man first appeared [...] it was certainly nowhere in the Americas. There are no autochthonous Canadians, even among the Indians and the Inuit” (Woodcock, 98). What we read about the past of the city in question is that it participates in a similar phenomenon of a place with no autochthonous inhabitants as all Wrocław/Breslau past or current residents are either emigrants from it or immigrants in it. For many, it becomes their home, their place on earth and for others a distant and lost homeland.

**Works Cited**


reshaped our world is similar to how novels about Eastern Europe and emigration from it change our perception of this part of Europe (Hable, 189). The same refers for instance to Eva Hoffman and her *Lost in Translation*. 

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