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Immigrants Descent and its Expression in American Culture and Language in the 20th Century

Imigranckie pochodzenie i jego odzwierciedlenie w amerykańskiej kulturze i języku w XX wieku

Abstract

It is undoubtable that the immigration to the US is largely due to the steady flow of fresh minds and a new spirit that influences the development of the American society. These new forces help protect the American society from the stagnation experienced in the Old World. The importance of immigrant experiences puts the United States on the brink of a very difficult, but often successful combination of the new and the old. Beyond question, this is true, especially regarding twentieth-century emigrants such as Eva Hoffman or the family of Alfred Kazin. Although Vladimir Nabokov having been himself an exception, not easy to categorize as writer, in his life as an émigré in the USA, he could also prove that the absorption of the American culture and language to a large extent took place, and was fruitful. For much of the twentieth century, the immigrant osmosis of the New World was associated with assimilation to the highly desirable, largely monolithic, English culture of the East Coast.

Key words: *Tzvetan Todorov, Thomas and Znaniecki, Old World, New World, immigrant, identity, new culture, émigré, Vladimir Nabokov, translation, memories, Eva Hoffman, Alfred Kazin.*

Abstrakt

Bez wątpienia imigracja do USA jest w dużej mierze spowodowana stałym napływem świeżych umysłów i nowego ducha, który wpływa na rozwój społeczeństwa amerykańskiego. Te nowe siły pomagają chronić społeczeństwo amerykańskie przed stagnacją obecną w Starym Świecie. Znaczenie doświadczeń imigrantów stawia Stany Zjednoczone na krawędzi bardzo trudnego, ale często udanego połączenia nowego i starego. Nie ulega wątpliwości, że jest to prawda, szczególnie w przypadku emigrantów z XX wieku, takich jak Eva Hoffman lub rodzina Alfreda Kazina. Chociaż sam Władimir Nabokov był wyjątkowym, niełatwym do sklasyfikowania pisarzem, w swoim życiu jako emigrant w USA mógł także udowodnić, że absorpcja amerykańskiej kultury i języka w dużej mierze miała miejsce i była owocna. Przez większą część XX wieku imigrancka inkorporacja do Nowego Świata wiązała się z asymilacją z wysoce pożądaną, w dużej mierze monolityczną, angielską kulturą Wschodniego Wybrzeża.

Słowa kluczowe: *Tzvetan Todorov, Thomas i Znaniecki, Stary Świat, Nowy Świat, imigrant, tożsamość, nowa kultura, emigracja, Vladimir Nabokov, tłumaczenie, wspomnienia, Eva Hoffman, Alfred Kazin.*

Introduction

Tzvetan Todorov, in his book “Podbój Ameryki: problem innego”¹, studies the perception of others (i.e. foreigners) and the typology of attitudes towards them. He states that others may be regarded both in abstract terms as a certain psychological configuration, or as a certain social group that we do not belong to. Members of this group may have similar history, culture, or morals to ours. On the other hand, they may be completely unknown, foreign, and strange in terms of customs and language to the degree that we have doubts whether to classify them as human beings or not. Therefore, the question of attitude towards others appears at once.

Todorov assumes that this attitude towards others must be analyzed on three different levels in order to show a tangible distinction between us and them. (Todorov, 1996) First of all, he refers to our judgment of others. They are good or bad and we love them or not. Second of all, Todorov talks about integration with others or complete isolation from them. They are evaluated in terms of superiority or inferiority to us. One possibility is

¹The English title of the book originally written in French is “The Conquest of America: the question of the other”.

that we identify ourselves with others and adopt their religion, value system, or culture. This alternative would obviously prove their superiority to us. The opposite option is that others are adjusted or even subordinated to our religion, value system and culture. They are modelled by us. We are sculptors of imperfect, incomplete, and deficient creatures. Consequently, it clearly shows their inferiority to us. Finally, our attitude towards others may be neutral or indifferent. We do not interfere with their lifestyle but let them live freely and peacefully. (Todorov, 1996) This latter possibility suggests an idealistic vision of a tolerant world where all nations live together harmoniously. The sources which demonstrate the „nature” of others and portray various attitudes towards them are historical documents, scholarly studies, and literature. Autobiography, which appears at the threshold of documents and belles lettres, is of special significance in this context also because it can provide a rendition of a participant’s perspective on being the other.

It should be stressed that life and history of immigrants, have been focused on the issue of the opposition between immigrants and America. And, the assimilative goal was to overcome this opposition. Many of the intellectuals from the Old World had to make a painful choice between preserving the memories and values of their past or adopting themselves to new surroundings. „The writers, of various ethnic backgrounds, have no sociology to tell, but rather the stories of life lived and felt by particular people in particular places”. (Wheeler, 1971, p. 2)

The problem of immigrant generations

While being a source of enrichment of the American society and culture, it seems that immigrants faced strong internal problems and contradictions. According to Marcus Lee Hansen, a typical member of the second generation:

wanted to forget everything: the foreign language that left an unmarkable trace in his English speech, the religion that continually recalled childhood struggles, the family customs that should have been the happiest of all memories. He wanted to be away from all physical reminders of early days, in an environment so different, so American, that all associates naturally assumed that he was as American as they. (Hansen, 1961, p. 494)

Hansen stresses that the second generation deliberately threw away what had been preserved at home. But it appears that not all has been lost, as an old rule states that what the son wishes to forget the grandson who wi-

shes to remember, and hence: "After the second generation comes the third, and with the third appears a new force and a new opportunity which, if recognized in time, can not only do a good job of salvaging, but probably can accomplish more than either the first or the second could ever have achieved". (Hansen, 1961, p. 495)

Hansen's theory, known as "Hansen law," seems to share some degree of similarity with Thomas and Znaniecki's study of the Polish immigrant community. Thomas and Znaniecki pointed to the fact that in many cases, while being cut off from their parental heritage, the younger generations were more conscious of their ethnic identity than the older generations. Because translation from one culture to another is not always complete, it is possible for one person to be both a second and third generation. And, in some cases this translation can go both ways. Then being numerically a second generation, a person could be a third generation in spirit. He may also be a third generation by descent but behave like a second generation.

Thomas and Znaniecki's study appears to be important in examining the problem of immigrant generations as on the basis of one particular community in a particular place, it is possible to get a closer view on the above mentioned problem as a whole. Thomas and Znaniecki's study can serve as an example of close dependence between the socio-cultural environment in which immigrants lived and the environment that especially the older generations knew from their past.

It is possible that the transition from the Old World into the New World would have its negative effects. In *Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the authors stressed that when the first generation of Polish Americans becomes demoralized, during the process of assimilation, in any particular sphere (concerning family life, economic sphere or community relations), it loses moral self-control in general. But in the second generation of immigrants this process seems to be less harmful and less dramatic as those people appear to be associated more (but not entirely) with the culture of the New World than with the culture of the old one. (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1984)

When viewing the second generation of immigrants from the position of the first and third generation, it seems that the second generation usually occupies the cultural space in America that is marked with lack of most of the acquired prejudices of their ancestors. But at the same time, the second generation appears not to be thoroughly rooted in the newly acquired culture, often occupying an "in between" position.

Apparently, for immigrant generations the vital problem was connected with making a decision whether to translate themselves to the language

and culture of the New World or refrain from doing so. The choice between the rejection of old culture and customs and adjusting to new ones seemed to be more than painful. But all the efforts to adjust to a new situation were vital. Even though some of the immigrants spoke funny broken English, it was always better to speak this type of English than not to speak it at all. And, the price for being unable to adjust to the new reality, as observed by Thomas and Znaniecki, was extremely high. These effects of emigration targeted both first and second generation immigrants but in a different way, and the causes were probably different. "Some immigrants to America, uprooted from family, land, customs, expectations in the Old World, literally died from the uprooting, unable finally to stir from the stifling tenement in which they were set down. But the emotional suffering of the second generation, the American-born may have been as intense". (Wheeler, 1971, p. 9)

Wheeler believes that the importance of immigration to the USA was connected with bringing along fresh blood and a new spirit to the American society. This new spirit helped prevent the American society from numbness experienced in the Old World's countries like the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Russia, the places which many immigrants came from. The importance of immigrant experience for America puts the USA on the verge of true and difficult meeting of the old and the new.

Without a doubt, Wheeler's remarks were true concerning quite many early twentieth century immigrants. So was the example of the parents of Alfred Kazin, a notable American intellectual and writer. So was the situation of many post war refugees such as the family of Eva Hoffmann, an important American writer and scholar. Their blending with the New World was connected with integration with the highly desired, in some way monolithic Anglo-Saxon culture of the American East Coast. On the other hand, this desired culture was still mostly mysterious both for the newcomers (like Hoffmann) and for those who left their immigrant ghettos (like Kazin).

Immigrant Descent and its Expression in Literary Form

Immigrant writing evolved along with the development of American literature. The beginnings of American literature started with writings of colonial times in the form of travelogues, letters, sermons, biographies, or essays upon different subjects connected with the New World – freshly discovered. Consequently, it evolved into more sophisticated forms of poetry, and prose. It is not surprising that *per analogiam* the historical development of ethnic writing was almost identical. Abraham Cahan's or Thomas and Znaniecki's

examination of immigrant letters could serve as an example here. Werner Sollors sees this evolution in the following way:

The literature then 'grows' from nonfictional, to fictional forms, [...] from folk and popular forms to high forms (e.g., from Indian folklore to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* [...] or Leslie Silko *Ceremony*, or from Mexican American popular culture to Louis Valdeze's dramatic *Actos* and Richard Rodriguez's *Education*, from lower to higher degrees of complexity (e.g., from Dion Boucicault to Eugene O'Neill, from Abraham Cahan to Saul Below) and from 'parochial' marginality to 'universal' significance in the literary mainstream (and the American mainstream now includes more and more writers with identifiable "ethnic" backgrounds). (Sollors, 1986, p. 241)

According to Sollors, writers well renowned in their homeland or those of them of international fame are quite commonly believed not to be associated with ethnic writing. And, as immigrant writing is often characterized by parochialism, these writers who are not parochial are usually classified as non-ethnic but entirely American, like Nathaniel West or Vladimir Nabokov.

Switching from one ethnicity to another involves culture contact and it can be a source of cross-cultural interaction giving sometimes surprising effects. Thorsten Veblen in his essay *The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Western Europe* (1919) argued that it is when the Jew,

falls into the alien lines of gentile inquiry and becomes naturalized, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise. It is by loss of allegiance or at least by force of divided allegiance to the people of his origin, that he finds himself in the vanguard of modern inquiry. (Veblen, 1993, p. 474-475)

Sollors stresses that in contemporary multi-ethnic societies most people can act as if they were Veblen's exceptional Jews in relation to others. This also applies to artists or those who take active parts in ethnic or ethnocentric movements. (Sollors, 1986)

Artists, like other immigrants, were often caught between cultures. This aroused the question of the place they should be fit in or associated with, whether it should be the Old World or the New World. In other words, the painful choice was between adhering to the Old World's culture and languages or switching into the New World's realities, often trying to be more American, or Americanized, than the Americans themselves.

Being aware of their roots in the Old World, writers like Eva Hoffman, or Vladimir Nabokov, have mastered the language of the New World to such a degree that in this respect, they were even better than native speakers of English. The complexity of syntax, blended with the richness of semantic associations, places these writers among masters of the English language.

Often, such authors use strange or humorous words to fool the reader turning the text against his expectations. For example, according to Sollors: "Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), written in the form of a paranoid line-by-line commentary upon a poem, has a ten page index which does nothing but add circularity to an already maddening array of untrustworthy information by a Zemblan-American". (Sollors, 1986, p. 252) In this respect, Nabokov gives a perfect example of language mastery. The aim is not to enjoy just sheer playing with the words, but to display immigrants' paranoid fear of not being understood.

Vladimir Nabokov, a White Russian émigré writer, was a perfect example of an individual who, being a master of language, swiftly entered mainstream American literature. Nabokov's life odyssey started in 1919 when he and his family were forced to emigrate a year after the Bolshevik coup in Russia. Since then, Nabokov's European emigration was characterized by constant journey or escape from one country to another. He graduated from Cambridge in the 1920s, then moved to Berlin. In 1937, escaping from Nazi Germany, he fled to Paris, but three years later he had to escape from France in fear of Nazi invasion. After the escape from Europe, the last chapter of Nabokov's European pre-war period ended and a new life in America, his adopted country, began.

The experience of being a constant refugee provoked Nabokov to look for response to it. Sometimes in order to halt or recall his memory, Nabokov was confessing to not believing in time, which gave him the opportunity to switch at random from one event or place connected with his life to another. Nabokov compared this attitude to the unfolding of a magic carpet exactly according to his will. His long lasting immigrant experience provoked Nabokov to engage in a more detailed analysis of his life. He does this by invoking the metaphor of a spiral: "The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time". (Nabokov, 1999, p. 211) Broadening the metaphor of a spiral, Nabokov believed that every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. And, in this way, it is possible

to say that the spiral represents both unity and change; a constant growth of identity, which is not threatened by its own fluidity.

If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call 'thetic' the small curve of arc that initiates the convolution centrally; 'antithetic' the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and 'synthetic' the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on. (Nabokov, 1999, p. 211)

Reasoning in this way, for Nabokov it was essential to explain his immigrant life odyssey in the context of the triadic circle.

A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899-1919) take care of the thetic arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany, and France (1919-40) supply the obvious antithesis. The period I spent in my adopted country (1940-60) forms a synthesis – and a new thesis. (Nabokov, 1999, p. 211)

Long and often painful migratory experience had a strong influence upon Nabokov and resulted in his preoccupation with the theme of exile. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov examined the problem of exile connected with his experience with the White Russian emigration especially in Berlin and Paris before World War II. "As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd, but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers". (Nabokov, 1999, p. 211)

After having left Europe and entering the New World, Nabokov's émigré existence equipped him with the sense of two opposite feelings. He felt a strong degree of nostalgia for his lost past, but on the other hand, Nabokov seemed to be fascinated with his newly adopted country, the USA. In the interview with Pierre Dommergues in 1968, after Nabokov had returned to Europe, he said that ever since becoming an American citizen, he had a strong affection for America. Nabokov acknowledged that this was the only country in which he felt perfectly happy even though he was not always able to determine the exact cause of this happiness.

Many of the people who were forced to emigrate from their homelands, and even those who emigrated voluntarily, often experienced the state of

emptiness of immigrant existence. According to Di Pietro and Ifkovic, the void for Nabokov was associated with the space or landscape his displaced heroes were living in.

The void that is the immediate world emptied of security and sense of home is partially annihilated through memory and artistic sensibility. These internal, creative forces allow Nabokov's lonely itinerants momentarily to reshape their lives. Characteristically, the past haunts the present, often surfacing in the instant when painful, isolating or threatening experience mingles with a re-creation of an earlier, less rootless life. Not surprisingly Nabokov himself chose to remain permanently "uncountryed". (Di Pietro, Ifkovic, 1982, p. 226-227)

According to Di Pietro and Ifkovic, Kazin described Nabokov's immigrant experience most accurately: "Our is an age so dominated by politics, historical 'necessity,' the seeming total reality of social and racial conflict that Nabokov stands out just now because he has no country but himself. He is the only refugee who could have turned statelessness into absolute strength". (Kazin in Di Pietro, Ifkovic, 1983, p. 230)

The case of Vladimir Nabokov's emigrant experience could undoubtedly be considered largely unique. However, by describing his peregrinations and the fate of Russian emigration, Nabokov's life reflects the choices that newcomers from the Old World had to make. Certainly for emigrants, the basic problem was to decide whether to switch to the language and culture of the New World or refrain from it. The choice between rejecting one's own culture and customs in order to adapt to new realities often had to be more than painful. It is vital to stress again that even if some newcomers spoke funny, inaccurate English, it was always better than not using it at all. And the price for not adapting to new realities, as observed by Thomas and Znaniecki was quite high, because "some of the immigrants to America uprooted from their family, country, customs from the Old World, literally died because of this uprooting". (Wheeler 1971, p. 9) Wheeler believes that immigration to the US is largely due to the steady flow of fresh minds and a new spirit that influences the development of American society. These new forces help protect the American society from the stagnation experienced in the Old World. The importance of immigrant experiences puts the United States on the brink of a very difficult combination of the new and the old. Undoubtedly, Wheeler's remarks are true, especially regarding twentieth-century emigrants such as Eva Hoffman or the family of Alfred Kazin. Although Vladi-

mir Nabokov having been himself an exceptional, not easy to categorize writer, in his life as an émigré in the USA, could also prove that the absorption of the American culture and language to a large extent took place, and was fruitful. For much of the twentieth century, the immigrant absorption of the New World was connected with adjustment to the desperately looked-for, uniform, English culture dominating in the East Coast of the country.

On the other hand, this culture so sought after was often *terra incognita* for both newcomers and those who had just left their emigrant ghettos in New World cities. Most of the newcomers wrongly believed that America constituted a cultural monolith symbolized by lifestyle and traditions of inhabitants living on the East Coast. But during the second half of the twentieth century till the end of this century, a process of building a multicultural and multi-ethnic society was in progress. And actually, immigrants from the Old World were an important part of this process, even though, they were not always often conscious of it. Strongly focused on blending in with a new and unknown culture, immigrants were often unaware of the fundamental changes taking place in America. Meanwhile, the second half of the 20th century, and especially the eighties and nineties, were a time of a dynamic development of the concept of multicultural and multi-ethnic society. The effect of this is the modern American nation being a mosaic of various cultural traditions, and beliefs.

Conclusion

Apparently, at the beginning of the 20th century, emigrating from the Old World to the New World meant making a choice between sticking to the old traditions or changing them. So the costs of adaptation to the New World were high to the people who decided to start a new life on a different continent. It often led to a situation when the second generation emigrants, being almost fully assimilated, rejected the traditions of the first generation emigrants and started a new life of their own. According to Oscar Handlin, emigration meant alienation with all its positive and negative consequences. When Handlin wanted to write a history of the immigrants in America, he learned that the immigrants actually constituted American history. (Handlin, 1966) The main problem of those who left the Old World and decided to assimilate to the new culture and language was connected with the fact that they actually knew very little about their new homeland.

But what has distinguished the USA from all other countries of the world is that from its beginnings till now, it was and still is a safe haven for all

the refugees like Kazin's parents or the Hoffmans. Vladimir Nabokov and his family were also among those who found refuge there. Those emigrants accepted and believed in the tolerant New World, which appeared to be far distant from the gloomy 20th century and the European experience of the time. The experience which, some people sadly believe, may not be finite but in some parts of the world including Europe could reoccur *ad infinitum*.²

Pointing at immigrants as those who created the fundamentals of American experience is not new in the development of the USA. The Founding Fathers, bearing in mind the 18th century European tyrannies, created, in the Constitution (1787), a basis for a future multiracial and multicultural America. In this way, they also immunized the future USA to the 19th century European concept of nation state prior to the 20th century racism and nationalism in Europe.

The second half of the 20th century brought substantial changes to the American society. This was the time when the concept of multicultural and multi-ethnic America was developing and dominating. It formed the basis for creation of the contemporary American society as a mixture of different cultural heritages and attitudes, in which immigrants played an important role. And, it is evident now that, both before and after the Founding Fathers had established the American state, immigrants and refugees were those who changed and built America both in literary sense of this word, but also as far as culture and ideas are concerned.

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²The Russian aggression causing current war in Ukraine, and resulting in unprecedented immigration crisis in Europe could be a good and sad example of this thesis.

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