

# THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN POLISH AMERICAN FICTION OF THE EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

GRAŻYNA J. KOZACZKA

Cazenovia College

Compared to other Polish emigrant cohorts, the broadly understood Solidarity emigration to the USA and Canada of the early 1980s occupies a distinctive place. Their literary output produced for the most part in English came quickly and entered the mainstream book market already at the turn of the century. Even though their fiction deployed fairly typical themes of dislocation, emigrant experience and construction of immigrant identity in the receiving country, its uniqueness rests in the two-fold vision of two very closely related generations: the first generation emigrants who left Poland as adults, as well as their children, classified as the generation 1.5, who experienced growing up in two countries. In their semi autobiographical fiction, writers representing the older generation such as Eva Stachniak and Czesław Karkowski, devote much of their work to justifying the decision to emigrate and attempt to position their successful characters within the narrative of the American dream. In contrast, younger generation authors such as Karolina Waclawiak and Dagmara Dominczyk, construct a much darker vision of the fragmented immigrant identity that leaves their fictional characters psychologically fragile. In their struggle, they identify the cause of this suffering in their parents' choice to leave the home country.

**Keywords:** literature, Polish, immigrants, Solidarity emigration, fiction, identity

The difficult political and dismal economic situation in Poland in the early 1980s that escalated to the imposition of the martial law (1981–1983) by the communist government drove a large and heterogeneous wave of exiles and emigrants to leave the country. Even though it is often referred to as the Solidarity cohort, many in this group left for purely economic reasons while others gave

into governmental pressure exerted to rid Poland of political dissidents many of whom were interned during the martial law of 1981–1983. The uniqueness of this emigrant cohort characterized by high levels of education and social engagement is demonstrated by the speed with which they managed to enter the mainstream literary scene of the receiving countries. Already within a couple of decades after their arrival in the United States and Canada, they succeeded in transforming their immigrant narratives into works of fiction for the most part written and published in English. The literary output of this group is particularly important because the immigrant and ethnic experience became a literary topic for two generations within this one immigrant wave: the parents, representing the first generation, who reached adulthood in Poland, and their children, belonging to generation 1.5 or the midway generation, who although born in Poland spent their formative years away from the home country. Thus through their fiction, we become privy to a rare dialogue between two very closely related generations who share the trauma of, often forced, emigration as well as struggles with acculturation and assimilation, yet whose identity constructs are deployed along very different trajectories.

The topic of literary interest for both groups is the powerful and very personal experience of emigration, yet the perception of its significance to one's construction of identity suggests a serious generational rift between "Solidarity" parents and their children. For the parents, the resumption of ordinary life after the trauma of leaving the homeland seems of utmost importance. They want to justify their decision, not always freely made, to emigrate and simultaneously prove their ability to succeed abroad. Often employing the archetypal American rags-to-riches plot structures, their fiction outlines the path of their success from the initial hardships to a full entry into the American middle or upper middle class. Their literary self-image is also strongly positive: they see themselves as well adjusted, resilient and capable of overcoming great adversities in the new and often disinterested, or even openly hostile environment. In contrast, in their children's much darker narratives, they appear as deeply flawed characters, seriously damaged by their exilic experience and especially by their inability to reconcile the mythos of a Polish patriot and freedom fighter with the decision to abandon the cause and leave the homeland still suffering at the hands of communists. The 1.5ers expose also their own struggle with integration into the receiving society that might seem surprising. Mark Ellis and Gunnar Almgren define such young immigrants as a group who "arrived in the United States at a young enough age to be socialized into American life through pre-college educational experience and youth

culture”<sup>1</sup> and assert that the unique experience of 1.5ers warrants identifying them as a discrete immigration category since in contrast to their parents they have been able to gain both language and “social skills necessary for...integrating smoothly and completely into US society.”<sup>2</sup> In their fiction, twenty or thirty something characters find this integration to be elusive and appear to be maladjusted, psychologically fragile, and at times exhibiting symptoms of mental illness. They seem hardly able to construct a coherent identity while struggling with the opposite pull of two cultures: Polish and American; and failing in their attempts to be either Polish or American. Their characters may try to “crawl out of”<sup>3</sup> their Polish skin, or try to reconcile being simultaneously Polish from Kielce and American from New York City, “I am Polish...But I live in New York City.”<sup>4</sup> However, what they are certain of is that the responsibility for their existential difficulties rests squarely on the shoulders of their parents: for the trauma of uprooting, for the difficult adjustment in a foreign environment and for the psychological and physical abuse and neglect suffered often at the hands of frustrated, anxious and frightened immigrant parents.

This literary analysis of texts by four authors, Czesław Karkowski, Eva Stachniak, Karolina Waclawiak and Dagmara Dominczyk, argues that in addition to reflecting typical tensions between successive generations, the intergenerational discourse offered by recent Polish American fiction provides a nuanced portrait and an important commentary on the nature of the “Solidarity” immigrant cohort which occupies a unique place in the history of Polish diaspora in the United States and Canada. This literary discourse underscores the generational differences in creating immigrant identity complicated by the challenges of isolating urban existence and reveals the necessity for each immigrant to consciously construct a permanent home.

Writing about the broadly understood wave of Solidarity immigrants of the 1980s which began shortly after martial law,<sup>5</sup> Małgorzata Krywult-Albańska posits that they “represented the segment of the Polish society whose financial situation was ‘fairly good’”<sup>6</sup>, many of whom were well educated and “In Poland they would leave apartments, cars, and at least during the first period abroad,

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Ellis, G. Almgren, ‘Local Contexts of Immigrant and Second-Generation Integration in the United States,’ *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 35, No 7 (2009), p. 1062.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> K. Waclawiak, *How to Get into the Twin Palms*, Two Dollar Radio, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*, New York, 2013, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> H. Znanięcka Lopata with M.P. Erdmans, *Polish American*, New Brunswick, 1994, p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> M. Krywult-Albańska, ‘Caught in a Fever? The Social and Economic Background of Emigration from Poland in the 1980s,’ *Polish American Studies*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 2 (2011), p. 115.

they used to live in much worse conditions than the ones they left behind...”.<sup>7</sup> While Stanislaus Blejwas considers the fact that “They were the children of the Polish People’s Republic [PRL] and its corrupting socio-economic system” to be the defining factor of this “entirely new generation of immigrants”<sup>8</sup>, which must have influenced their experience abroad. Czesław Karkowski, a philosopher and journalist who for many years wrote for New York City’s *Nowy Dziennik*, and himself a Solidarity immigrant, serves as a perfect example of an immigrant writer whose Polish language novel, *Kamienna Drabina* (2008), focuses on the issues important to his generation. In *Kamienna Drabina*, Karkowski’s protagonist Henryk goes to great lengths to justify his decision to emigrate because after all looking back at his first New York City apartment, he acknowledges that what he left in Poland was incomparably better than his American beginnings and recalls a statement from an acquaintance who declared that he also had “a better America in Poland”<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, Anna, the protagonist of Eva Stachniak’s novel *Necessary Lies*, who after the declaration of martial law decides to remain in Montreal, Canada where she is an exchange professor at McGill University, hides the gruesome details of her Canadian living conditions from her family in Poland, “The first day [in her new apartment] she made the mistake of leaving an opened cereal box on the counter, and found it swarming with cockroaches. This was a detail she did not include in her letters home”<sup>10</sup>. Even though faced with such difficult beginnings both Karkowski’s Henryk and Stachniak’s Anna unequivocally identify as the motives for leaving Poland what Krywult-Albańska calls “The exhaustions with the constant struggle for everything and the psychological fatigue with the system...”<sup>11</sup> as well as “a sense of a lack of control over one’s life”<sup>12</sup>. In Stachniak’s novel, Anna who can claim a strong connection to the Polish opposition movement going back to the 1968 wave of student protests asks the vital question, “Is leaving really such a betrayal?... Don’t we also have a right to a normal life?”<sup>13</sup>. She subsequently justifies her decision to remain in Canada in a letter to her husband, a Solidarity activist, “*Only now, I see how life could be like... Without the daily humiliations we have to go through... I know I will only grow bitter with each day spent on these little*

<sup>7</sup> M. Krywult-Albańska, ‘Caught in a Fever?...’, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> S. Blejwas, ‘American Polonia: The Next Generation,’ *Polish American Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1992), p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> C. Karkowski, *Kamienna Drabina*, Lublin 2008, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> E. Stachniak, *Necessary Lies*, Toronto 2000, pp. 27–28.

<sup>11</sup> M. Krywult-Albańska, ‘Caught in a Fever?’, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> E. Stachniak, *Necessary...*, p. 128.

meaningless victories we have learnt to expect from life, a pair of shoes, a bar of soap. I can't return to life led to a script written by others, always by others, never by ourselves"<sup>14</sup>. Such simple human needs, and not the high minded ideals of freedom and independence, are also identified by Karkowski's Henryk as his justification of emigration even though he makes it clear that his political activity earned him a one way ticket out of the country. Yet, he strongly believes that the great personal upheaval of uprooting oneself and starting from nothing abroad has been preferable to the hopelessness of existence in Poland, and to the everyday struggle with an oppressive as well as irrational system. Living abroad finally allows him to fulfill the basic human desire to lead a stable life where he can solve simple everyday problems<sup>15</sup> with reasonable ease.

While Stachniak, and especially Karkowski downplay the heroism of the Solidarity movement, and ideology as reasons for emigration, in fiction by the next generation represented by Dagmara Dominczyk, a successful American actress with feature films and TV shows to her credit, and Karolina Waclawiak, an editor of a New York city based magazine, politics becomes both romanticized and mythologized to suit a specific purpose. Both authors fit well within the definition of the 1.5 immigrant generation, sometimes also referred to as the "midway" generation. Anna Baran, a New York City actress and one of Dagmara Dominczyk's three focal characters in *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*, deploys stories of her father's dissident past and Polish heroic struggles for freedom to construct herself into an exotic and alluring other. In a post-coital conversation with her new lover, Ben, she frames her identity in reference to her Polish childhood and her father's activities,

"You're a refugee? You sure don't look like a refugee," Ben had said eyeing her naked body supine next to his.

"*Daughter* of a refugee, if you wanna get technical. The commies ousted my dad years ago. I was seven."

"The Commies sounds so..."

"Dated?" Anna reached her hand toward his pretty American face.

"Sexy."<sup>16</sup>

Anna attracted to Ben's quintessential American ease, his unquestioning and somewhat naïve acceptance of privilege, his solid middle class and mid western

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> C. Karkowski, *Kamienna...*, pp. 144–145.

<sup>16</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 7.

background and his comfortable New York City life, draws him in by constructing herself as an exotic heroine of Ben's sexual adventure.

In the beginning, she offered him exotic tales of growing up in the Flatbush projects, tales of a homely little Polish immigrant. She offered him daily blow jobs and Thai take-outs every night. She offered him her world, a world of small but incomparable measure, a world where tanks rolled in the streets, where armed *milicja* jailed idealistic young men who fought for their freedom as their fathers and grandfathers had before them. She offered romance; it was so incredibly romantic—the turmoil of a foreign country recounted by a Slavic-looking Marilyn Monroe.<sup>17</sup>

Dominczyk consciously uses discourse to meld the racialized, Slavic body of her female character with the quintessentially American ideal of objectified female sexuality: Marilyn Monroe. Anna's narratives of her mythologized Polish past move her from undesirable otherness, which excluded her from her group of peers during her teenage years, to the desired exotic otherness. Her stories are not only safe since they happened in a faraway country, but they also support one of the favorite American archetypal plots: brave people fighting for freedom and democracy against an easily recognizable evil enemy, in this case against the communists. Thus both physically and ideologically, Dominczyk constructs her Polish other to become acceptable to middle class Americans. This is probably the reason why Anna's nightly Scheherazade-like tales are heavily sanitized and do not include the tragic subplot of her father's depression, his suicidal attempts, as well as his physical and psychological abuse which lead his wife and daughter to live in terror and result in Anna's own bouts of depression and great difficulties in forming lasting relationships. So Ben knows about Anna's father—the hero freedom-fighter, but does not hear about the times when he yells at her at a slightest provocation and calls her “*a debil*”<sup>18</sup>, about the nights when Radoslaw Baran “cries about the Commie pricks who killed his father, the Commie pricks who ‘castrated’ him. ‘Commie pricks, Commie fucks, *skurwusyny*,’ he whispers as he pounds his skull with his fists”<sup>19</sup>. The stories about Radoslaw's frequent travel abroad using multiple passports and identities, and his possible involvement in smuggling operations are also kept from Ben since they might turn the hero of one acceptable and simple plot into a villain: an undesirable, criminal other.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 23–24.

Contrary to Karkowski and Stachniak who focus a simple American dream of a normal life as the main reason for emigrating for the Solidarity cohort and who present a trajectory of success abroad for this group, Dominczyk foregrounds political causes of the exile. In her fiction, the forced expulsion from the home country and the inability to reconcile these two emotional locations: home and exile as Eva Hoffman suggests in her article “Poza obczyzną,”<sup>20</sup> are responsible for turning idealistic heroes into deeply flawed individuals dangerous to themselves and their loved ones. Danuta Mostwin, a sociologist and writer, identified similar problems in this immigrant cohort plagued, according to her, by numerous crises and influenced by an internal shift in the value system often resulting in the breakup of marriages<sup>21</sup>. Likewise, many of the interviews included by Andrzej Krajewski in *Region USA: Działacze Solidarności o Kraju, o Emigracji, o Sobie*, support such conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

Even though a very different immigrant discourse is deployed by Karolina Waclawiak’s novel, *How to Get Into the Twin Palms* (2012), set not in New York but in Los Angeles, yet her protagonist Anya shares with Dominczyk’s Anna Baran a common refugee past from the early 1980s. Details about her own childhood and her family’s story in Poland are sparse. The reader only knows that as a child she participated in many activities organized for refugee children from different countries to ease their assimilation to the American culture. Contrary to Dominczyk, Waclawiak de-romanticizes the dramatic events of the early 1980s, and treats them with a good dose of irony. For Anya, Solidarity/“Solidarność” means nothing more than a name of a cheap eatery in a working class neighborhood of Los Angeles. It might seem exotic to non-Polish customers, but to her it is a representation of kitschy ethnicity and an embarrassment that for many non-ethnic others, it will forever become the image of Polish culture. She feels shame as soon as she walks into this establishment:

Inside was cramped, booths were crammed next to each other, the inside of the place filled with cheap tables and plastic floral tablecloths. The walls were cubbies filled with dust-covered artifacts from Poland. Blue and white plates with dots and ducks, Polish flags with eagles, everything red and white and fake-royal looking...I just stared at the walls. Pope John Paul II in a gilded frame, the Black Madonna nearby, beer steins from Gdansk, dried flowers pressed into frames and looped into woven, matted straw-sewn vases. My face grew hot. This was like

<sup>20</sup> E. Hoffman, ‘Poza obczyzną,’ *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 25 września, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> M. Stępień, *Trzecia wartość: o twórczości Danuty Mostwin*, Kraków 2000, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> A. Krajewski, *Region USA: działacze „Solidarności”; o kraju, o emigracji, o sobie*, Aneks, 1989.



the mobile homes on the side of the highway in Poland – tucked in the woods. Frequented by truckers and young girls from Moldavia and Romania who would bend down over their laps in the cabs of the trucks.<sup>23</sup>

After a short conversation with the proprietor, Anya quickly places him in a specific social class. He was one of these Polish truckers who frequented the dubious highway establishments and who reconstructed the familiar home milieu abroad to create both familiarity for the compatriots and exoticism for the Americans. “I’m sure they [non-ethnic Poles] were laughing at this version of us, with all its kitsch and old-world charm. I was embarrassed that the owner pushed it this far...I felt like I had to tell him how it really was, but then, I didn’t really know at all”<sup>24</sup>. Thus the low class kitschy “Solidarność” restaurant reduces the ideals of Polish struggle for freedom and independence to dusty touristy artifacts, simple peasant food and cheap American vodka substituted surreptitiously for Polish Żubrówka by a dishonest restaurateur.

The visit to “Solidarność” restaurant, serves as one of many symptoms of Anya’s serious identity crisis. Even though she was born in Poland, she left at such a young age that she has no memory of her Polish past. Her parents’ settling in Texas, away from any strong Polish American community, their understandable focus on financial success to support a transplanted family, her mother’s constant conflating of religious piety with Polishness, as well as her own lonely existence on the margins of a major American metropolis, do not provide this young woman with any tools to construct a viable Polish American ethnic identity.

Therefore it is not surprising that already the first page of Karolina Waclawiak’s novel signals the author’s preoccupation with identity construction. *How to Get Into Twin Palms* is a very personal narrative for Waclawiak who identifies with her protagonist’s “questions about culture and identity”<sup>25</sup>. In this first person narrative, its protagonist-cum-narrator, a 25-year-old woman, confesses, “I had long attempted to inhabit my Polish skin and was happy to finally crawl out of it.”<sup>26</sup> But of course, shedding her Polish skin, necessitates growing a new skin. Waclawiak enters here a well-established American literary tradition of “self-

<sup>23</sup> K. Waclawiak, *How to Get...*, pp. 140–141.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> J. Williams, ‘ArtsBeat: L.A. Story: Karolina Waclawiak Talks About Her First Novel,’ *The New York Times*, July 25, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> K. Waclawiak, *How to Get...*, p. 3.



fashioning” and “self-construction”<sup>27</sup>. The two obvious identity options clearly open to Waclawiak’s protagonist as an immigrant privileged by her whiteness: a generic non-ethnic white American or a Polish American do not satisfy her. Interestingly since ethnic identity is all she knows, she rejects a neutral white American identity construct, but opts for another strongly ethnic one, just not Polish. Her choice of a new identity seems purely accidental and frivolous. She becomes obsessed with a private club, The Twin Palms, that caters exclusively to recent Russian immigrants and she carefully plans to do just about everything possible to “pass as a Russian”<sup>28</sup> and join the other Russians at the club.

Waclawiak by allowing her character to invent a new ethnic identity has shifted ethnicity from what Werner Sollors calls one of the “essentialist categories” to being accepted as “cultural constructs crucial in the social construction of reality”<sup>29</sup>.

Karolina Waclawiak is not alone in entering the discourse of ethnic “cross-dressing” where “ethnic identity need not be coterminous with ancestry”<sup>30</sup>. Similar ethnic inventions have been successfully deployed in America by such writers as for example Polish American Suzanne Strempek Shea or Chinese American Gish Jen. In Strempek-Shea’s novel, *Lily of the Valley*,<sup>31</sup> a Polish American character, Louise Wilk, chooses to become Chinese, while in Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*,<sup>32</sup> Mona, of Chinese ancestry, after failing to assume Japanese identity reconstructs herself as Jewish American. Ethnic “cross-dressing” appears also in *My Zdies’ Emigranty*, a brief novel by the Polish writer Manuela Gretkowska, where a Polish immigrant character in Paris introduces herself as Russian to avoid discussions about the political situation in Poland which bore her, “I am not interested in Jaruzelski nor Wałęsa. When I say that I am Russian, they are stunned, and then they look at me with both admiration and fear...”<sup>33</sup>. These examples suggest that ethnic identity is a “subtle matter”<sup>34</sup> especially for whites and it may be discarded, recreated or invented at whim. In each of these narratives, the author engages in layering of character construction creating an impression that characters out of their own volition can reject the author-given identity and reconstruct themselves at will.

---

<sup>27</sup> L. Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, Chapel Hill, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> K. Waclawiak, *How to Get...*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> W. Sollor, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, New York 1989, p. x.

<sup>30</sup> R. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*, New Haven 1990, p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> S. Strempek Shea, *Lily of the Valley*, New York 1999.

<sup>32</sup> G. Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, New York 1997.

<sup>33</sup> M. Gretkowska, *My Zdies’ Emigranty*, Warszawa 2007, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> R. Alba, *Ethnic Identity...*, p. 25.

For Waclawiak's Anya, the process of assuming a Russian identity includes writing a new plausible life story, acquiring a Russian immigrant lover and changing her name from the Polish Zosia to Anya since it offers the "Eastern European feel...[and] It could pass for Polish or Russian. I could move easily with it. Fluidly."<sup>35</sup> She desires to pass as a Russian. Her decision is not motivated by any particular deeply thought through cultural, political or historical reason, but rather, by what she calls a reason of "proximity"<sup>36</sup>, a simple fact that her Los Angeles apartment is located next door to a private Russian social club, and she is able to observe recent Russian immigrants interacting in the neighborhood. Her desire is strengthened by her curiosity about the club itself which she cannot enter since she is not Russian. Her only hesitation comes from the anticipated reaction of her mother: not the outrage that she wants to take on another identity, but rather that this would be a Russian identity. She knows very well that her mother "thought of them [the Russians] as crooks and beneath us"<sup>37</sup>.

Similarly to Dagmara Dominczyk's Anna who perceives her body as highly racialized and exotic, a body of the other, which betrays her foreignness, Anya also uses her body to construct a desired ethnic identity. Anya soon realizes that even though her physical appearance fascinates and excites the Russian men who frequent the Twin Palms, they are cautious in approaching her because they fail to identify her ethnic background. To them, she could possibly be Russian, but also Polish, Swedish or even American and they want their women to be unmistakably Russian. Thus after carefully observing Russian immigrant women, Anya decides to change two things about her appearance. First she invests in a padded bra and a revealing tank top, and then colors her hair a succession of ever darker shades from auburn through brown to black, "I would be big busted and dark haired and exotic again"<sup>38</sup>. She believes that this will make her "look Russian, maybe Siberian, and it would look good against fur. I had a vision of myself and I liked it"<sup>39</sup>. The new exoticized body is accompanied by a new name. Zosia sounds too Polish so she chooses Anya, spelled with a "y" that suggests to her a vaguely Eastern European origin. The final validation of her transformation is attracting a Russian lover; however, he quickly sees through the artificiality of her self-construct. Not only Anya cannot speak the language, she also misreads many ethnic markers and cues.

---

<sup>35</sup> K. Waclawiak, *How to Get...*, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Waclawiak's protagonist cannot succeed and she pays a high price for her creative ethnic self-construction. More and more unhinged by both her desire for and revulsion against her Russian lover, Lev, she engages in self-abusive behavior. In two very symbolic and disturbing scenes, she attempts to literally take off her skin. First on a Los Angeles beach where she explains "I went down and sat in the embankment and covered my hands in the cool, damp sand ...I rubbed them deep in the sand in a frenzy, purposely taking off layers of my skin. I rubbed them raw..."<sup>40</sup>. And in a second episode in a shower when she uses Epsom salts and "scoured my skin, taking off layer after layer"<sup>41</sup>. In the end, as the hills around Los Angeles are burning during a severe fire season, the young woman conflates the burning city with her life of loss: the loss of culture and her roots, the loss of a series of jobs as well as the loss of the promise of belonging and acceptance offered by the Twin Palms. In a final act of desperation, she burns Lev's possessions thus starting yet another fire that destroys the home of the only friend she has in Los Angeles.

The psychological fragility of the 1.5 generation is also suggested by Dagmara Dominczyk's *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*. Just like Anya, Dominczyk's Anna Baran, exhibits several different symptoms that could point to an incipient mental illness, possibly clinical depression. She loses interest in keeping her body properly groomed, develops an eating disorder, and fears leaving the safety of her apartment, which she refuses to keep clean. Dissatisfied with her relationship with Ben, but chasing a fantasy relationship with a Polish boy whom she knew as a teenager, Anna decides to have an abortion, which only exacerbates her symptoms. Just like Anya who loses her job, Anna is unable to get new acting roles because of her sudden unreliability and substantial weight gain. Her psychological problems could be possibly traced not only to her childhood immigrant trauma and her father's abusive behavior, but also to her constant confusion about her identity and belonging. As a teenager growing up, Anna spends every summer in Poland living with her grandmother in Kielce. She firmly believes that she is Polish, "Jestem Polka...I am Polish...I am from here. I was born here"<sup>42</sup>. Yet this self-image is challenged by the children from her grandmother's neighborhood as they quickly and brutally label Anna as the stranger, the other, an American. They construct her identity based not on her place of birth but on her place of residence, which is New York. Thus Anna feels

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>42</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 28.

at home in Poland while at the same time, she is othered by the natives. While in New York, Anna with her fluent English, and her whiteness, blends perfectly with other white American teenagers where she is accepted as such. Yet she perceives herself as the other, through a self-imposed difference identifying herself as Polish. Thus Anna both in Poland and in the United States has to cope with a discrepancy between self-construction and how others construct her.

It is possible then that the superficial ease with which the 1.5ers assimilate into American society, may mask the psychological wounds inflicted on them by the childhood trauma of emigration and by the parents who feel lost in the unfamiliar circumstances and demand that the children perform adult tasks because of their greater language proficiency, while, on the other hand, they fail to give adequate emotional support to the children and in their frustration may even resort to abusive behavior. It is hardly surprising then, that for Dominczyk's and Waclawiak's female protagonists, the arduous process of identity construction is accompanied by serious depression, eating disorders and self-abusive behaviors. Research conducted in recent years, such as the University of Vienna study headed by Elisabeth Stefanek and published in 2012, proves a strong correlation between depressive symptoms experienced by young people and their immigrant status or the immigrant status of their parents. Stefanek and her team identified that immigrant children and adolescents suffer from "higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to native youth"<sup>43</sup> and are highly affected by critical life events (migration, separation from family, moving to a new place) as well as daily hassles, defined as minor negative experiences (school difficulties, peer issues, acculturation rates)<sup>44</sup>.

In Polish American fiction, the issues of a new identity are not as urgent for the first generation for Solidarity immigrants, but they are crucial for their children who are seemingly better assimilated into the American society. For the first generation the necessities of life: a safe place to live, language acquisition, a succession of jobs bringing this individual closer to the Polish level of professional education are paramount. Their identity is reconstructing itself as if without their conscious participation. Usually, the changes in their identities go unnoticed until the first visit back to Poland. Such a visiting immigrant is often perceived as a stranger, as the foreign other who may not understand the newest idiom of the language, or who may become irritated by

---

<sup>43</sup> E. Stefanek, D. Strohmeier, H. Fandrem, C. Spiel, 'Depressive Symptoms in Native and Immigrant Adolescents: The Role of Critical Life Events and daily Hassles,' *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, Vol. 25, No 2, March 2012, p. 212.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

a Polish traditional way of doing things. Such a visitor, like Stachniak's Anna for example, may be warned by her family members that her easily detectable otherness evidenced by physical appearance and certain naïveté about the darker side of Polish life might be dangerous. To the irritation of the visitor, the natives may feel compelled to explain simple cultural contexts as if forgetting that not that much time elapsed since emigration or exile. Thus the visitor is clearly identified as a foreign other both through racialized body and through the assumed disconnect with the continuity of constantly developing native culture and social and political realities.

In *Kamienna Drabina* Karkowski's discussion of the immigrant identity construct is full of contradictions as the identity itself. He definitely rejects the Romantic ideal of an immigrant pining for the lost homeland. After a visit to Poland, Karkowski's protagonist Henry is shocked to realize that "Poland causes him a physical discomfort or even pain"<sup>45</sup>. Even though he imagines himself as permanently suspended over the Atlantic without being rooted in either the homeland or the place of immigration<sup>46</sup>, he clearly identifies the moment of realization that after all he is not homeless. It happened when upon his return from Poland, he was greeted by an INS officer with the customary "Welcome Home, Mr. Frankowski." His first reaction was anger since after all this was not his home, but a place of exile, but as soon as he walked outside, he realized that the familiarity of the New York City summer, the smell and feel of the air, the sights and sounds surrounding him, meant home<sup>47</sup>.

It is probably not surprising that so much of immigrant writing is devoted to finding a justification for leaving Poland and abandoning those who continued to struggle against the unjust political system imposed on the country, even though the exile, as in the case of Karkowski's Henryk, was hardly free to make this decision. What is surprising is the attempt to downplay the heroic qualities of the expelled dissidents while bringing constant attention to the universal human desire to lead an ordinary life with all its basic needs met. Patriotism does not seem enough to keep one in the homeland where practical life problems are simply too difficult to solve. This attitude translates also to the immigrant definition of success in the new environment. Again, it does not have to be anything spectacular. Czesław Karkowski quite clearly defines immigrant achievement as first overcoming the communist conditioning: xenophobia, lack of trust and

---

<sup>45</sup> C. Karkowski, *Kamienna...*, p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

the lack of belief in success<sup>48</sup>; and then entering the American middle class as a person with a job commensurate with one's education and experience gained in Poland as well as the ability to reach the typical milestones of the American Dream: a good car, a nice house, financial stability and participation in the cultural life of the country<sup>49</sup>. For Karkowski, a successful immigrant, although always a construct of two cultures, must make a commitment to an emotional home in the receiving country. Overall, the story told by the first generation, is the archetypal story of American success, the variation on the Horatio Alger plot: the initial hardships and the shock of immigration can be overcome by perseverance, resilience, talent and hard work and lead to a successful life of a well-established member of the American middle class.

Much of this immigrant optimism is missing from the narratives by the 1.5 generation who seem unable to construct a coherent self, dissatisfied with identity options available to them: the generic white American, the Polish, or finally the Polish American ethnic identity. Even though they should be well acculturated and socialized into the American society, they struggle with fitting in and exhibit many symptoms of mental imbalance and even mental illness. At times, they are deeply confused about which country they should call home.

This rare intergenerational dialogue offered by Polish American fiction written within the last decade or so not only reconsiders the new iteration of the generation gap experienced within the reality of immigration, but also offers a valuable insight into the processes of acculturation in a receiving country and construction of immigrant or ethnic identities. In addition, this dialogue poses important questions about the relationship of immigrants to their homeland and to their new country in a world order that has removed most of the ideological and political barriers between both countries.

---

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.