

Belonging Beyond Borders:
Cultural Transition in the Context of Polish Immigration to Canada

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Abstract

Immigration is a common worldwide phenomenon which has profound effects on an individual's cultural identity. Indeed, the shift from one culture to another has significant and unexpected consequences for an individual. My essay explores the issues of cultural identity in the context of Polish immigration to Canada. This essay analyzes the Polish-Canadian collection of short stories assembled by Kasia Jaronczyk and Malgorzata Nowaczyk, while also drawing from some of the real-life accounts from the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. Although literature from other diaspora communities has been published in Canada previously, the anthology, Polish(ed): Poland Rooted in Canadian Fiction, is the first collection of literature from the Polish diaspora in Canada. Published in 2017, several of these stories offer valuable insight into the Polish immigration experience, even in cases where immigration is not the primary theme of the story but rather forms the backdrop. A close reading of these fictional stories uncovers an array of unique perspectives on the issues of cultural belonging and identity. It is, moreover, an accessible and interesting way to gain an understanding of the issues which come into play with immigration. The issues are manifold. Firstly, the paper considers the complexity of the linguistic challenges involved in immigration. The stories show the struggles, vulnerabilities, and coping strategies used by immigrants to deal with the language barriers. The paper also discusses the importance and role of the diaspora, in terms of its educational, cultural, and social role. The relationship between the diaspora and the immigrant is by no means straightforward; this paper considers some of the nuances of that relationship. Secondly, my paper explores the issue of choosing one's cultural identity. Specifically, it answers two questions: Is cultural identity something which an individual can claim and choose? And what does the process of cultural transition or adoption involve? Through the lens of the stories, we see that the process of cultural transition includes elements of cultural shock stemming from numerous sources—the topography, popular culture, celebrations—and the experience is unique to each individual; even within one family, the experience is not uniform. A final section of my paper goes beyond the specific context of immigration to show how individuals may adopt other cultures without crossing geographical borders.

Keywords: cultural identity, cultural shock, acculturation, language acquisition, diaspora, community, immigration literature, cultural minorities

Introduction

In assembling an anthology of Polish-Canadian short stories, titled *Polish(ed): Poland Rooted in Canadian Fiction (Essential Anthologies)*, published in 2017, the goal of editors Kasia Jaroczyk and Małgorzata Nowaczyk was to showcase Polish writing and authors whose work included Polish themes: “A Polish diaspora anthology gives us a sense of pride, to see what we, as people coming from the same culture, have accomplished in another culture, and how similar and different we are in what and how we write” (Jaroczyk and Nowaczyk). They note that other minorities in Canada have been represented in literature but the Polish diaspora was not: “This is the first Polish diaspora collection published in Canada” (Jaroczyk and Nowaczyk). Not all of the contributors are of Polish origin, although the majority are. For eleven of the writers, “Poland has a meaning if not as a native land then as a land of their ancestors,” and the writing of five other writers “contains Polish elements” even though the authors themselves “don’t have Polish roots” (Jaroczyk and Nowaczyk).

Although they did not necessarily aim to showcase the themes of Polish immigration, several stories in the anthology shed light on this topic. Despite the fact that these are works of fiction, they nevertheless contain valid reflections on the experience of Polish immigration to Canada. My paper will also be supplemented with real-life accounts of the Polish immigration experience. Through the framework of these stories, the first part of my paper delves into the complex and multifaceted aspects of the immigration experience with a special focus on linguistic challenges as well as the role of the diaspora and the immigrant’s nuanced relationship with it. In the second part of my essay, I will explore the issue of choosing one’s own cultural identity, both within the context of the immigration experience and within a wider multicultural context.

Aspects of the Immigration Experience

Linguistic Challenges

In “Pushpins,” Douglas Schmidt portrays the linguistic struggle so often associated with immigration. “Pushpins” follows the life of a young boy named Patryk who lives in Toronto with his parents and sisters. The story shows his life at home, school, and church, particularly his journey while learning about geography and family backgrounds. Despite the fact that Patryk arrived with his family to Canada as a toddler, his parents did not teach him English prior to him starting school: “When he started grade one, he barely spoke any English” (Schmidt). His father, Fryderyk, who works as a taxi driver, views the multilingual aspect of Canada as a barrier to understanding, presumably based on his own linguistic struggles: “His father always says Canada has too many different kinds of people with too many languages and cultures. And he says that’s why people don’t understand each other here. In Poland, everyone speaks one language and understands each other, he says” (Schmidt). The author focuses on the mother’s speech and linguistic errors. She struggles, for instance, to express herself in English the way she wants to, especially when she is tired:

She puts her hand on the side of her face . . . She searches for the right word. “This is good idea,” his mother says. She smiles and nods at Patryk, and looks at their father. “To learn about world.” At the end of the day she’s tired and forgets to say the the’s and the a’s. (Schmidt)

It is not the only instance of imperfect English in the anthology. Babcia in Katherine Koller’s “Polish Wedding” says, “No be alone all your life . . . Why not with a man to make you feel like a queen?” However, in “Pushpins,” Schmidt does more than show the errors; he also describes the emotions and worries that Joanna, the mother, feels while navigating a new language. When she makes errors, she feels embarrassed. She scolds her children for not correcting her and preventing her from experiencing social awkwardness. However, there are

times when having her children correct her in public is more embarrassing than making mistakes, so sometimes she does not appreciate their help:

Earlier today he and Danika had been out shopping with her. At Loblaws their mother had said to him: “Don’t correct my English!” Then, when they got home she said: “Why didn’t you correct my English at K-Mart? You let me embarrass myself!” (Schmidt)

Patryk mentions that while he is not always able to predict when his mother wishes to be corrected, his sister can accurately calculate when it is a good idea: “She seems to know just the right time to correct their mother’s English” (Schmidt). The author shows the complexity that is created when the children’s knowledge of the language is superior to that of the parent’s and the consequences this has on the family dynamics. In normal circumstances, the parents have superior linguistic knowledge and abilities compared with the children; Joanna therefore has trouble relying on them in this way and accepting help from them.

Joanna’s vulnerability stems from not being able to speak the language fluently. She worries that others will judge her for her poor linguistic abilities. Readers see that she is afraid of making mistakes and making a fool of herself in public, so having her children able to help her provides a sense of security, especially if she is unaware of her errors. The author illustrates the concept of status loss through intimate family moments. The reader understands that their life in Poland would have been more straightforward and that they would have had no linguistic difficulties. The situation is different in Canada for Joanna and Fryderyk; communicating means being willing to make mistakes and therefore sometimes appearing less respectable or dignified. They cannot speak in an eloquent fashion, and they cannot understand everything that happens around them, making them prone to err further. Joanna lacks confidence when speaking English; she is less comfortable and feels restricted. By contrast, the husband and wife feel safe and truly themselves when they speak in Polish. It

is the language of home, used for joking and being silly together: “His parents start laughing together, and talking quickly in Polish . . . They keep laughing until they’re crying”

(Schmidt). When they are happy, they quickly switch to the mode of communication that is more familiar.

Patryk felt excluded and vulnerable when he began school because of the language barrier: “There’s always someone who doesn’t fit in. Patryk knows what that feels like” (Schmidt). Being the one who did not “fit in” means that Patryk has experienced sadness and isolation because of immigration, and Schmidt’s narrative emphasizes the foreignness and loneliness that comes from being the outsider. The story shows that not knowing the language results in feeling excluded from the social group. Meanwhile, in “Lessons in Translation,” the narrator describes the story of her life through the framework of translation, context, and language. She tells how she invents a language to connect with her son, but this causes her son to suffer ridicule: “But when he went to school, no one could understand him. My son named an object on a picture card in our made-up language and was told that he was wrong. Other children laughed at him. He cried when he came home. So we spoke our language less and less” (Jaroczyk).

Turning to a real-life example, Waław Iwaniuk was an immigrant who expressed his feelings about his journey of immigration through poetry. For Waław Iwaniuk, who was a poet in pre-war Poland, overcoming the language barrier signified a break from cultural isolation. Initially, he did not desire to be part of the Canadian literary landscape, but later, he chose to embrace it and write his poetry in English. Therefore, in his case, he entered Canada without desiring that his identity be connected to it. However, a personal desire for an identity within a new culture can emerge and form, as it did in his case. So despite his initial reservations about the ‘new Canadian environment,’ he finally came to “a gradual

reconciliation then some sort of accommodation with it” (Możejko 5). His poetry in English documented his experience:

From My Canadian Diary is Iwaniuk's first attempt to write in English. It is an interesting and in many ways revealing experiment. First of all, it indicates the poet's desire to become part of the Canadian literary landscape and a clear departure from the attitude of isolation. In doing so, he brings into Canadian literature a peculiar experience, full of contradictions, both ironic and serious, disapproving and approving of the existing situation (Możejko 6).

Another real-life example comes from the editors of the anthology themselves. In the Preface, they write about their own experience of feeling limited by their English ability. Their careers were shaped by what they felt they were and were not capable of doing:

Margaret, convinced that her newly-acquired English would not get her far in any field other than science, chose medicine . . . Throughout, they felt culturally and linguistically dispossessed and struggled to find a home in a new language. But, with time, reading books written by Polish immigrants to Canada gave them hope that they could also become Canadian writers. (Jaronczyk and Nowaczyk)

For this reason, the anthology represents a personal accomplishment: “During her first years in Canada she [Kasia] never thought it would be possible to come from a different culture, from a different language, and to write in a new country, in a language other than her mother tongue” (Jaronczyk). In her Foreword titled “Palimpsest Identity: Polish-Canadian Linguistic Condition,” Magda Stroińska supports the idea that truly succeeding depends on a high level of language achievement: “[S]peaking ‘good English’ is recognized as one of the means to power.”

The editors made career choices based on their language abilities, which is a coping strategy for immigrants; this theme of coping with linguistic challenges is evident in the

stories. In discussing the mother's interactions with her children, Schmidt describes the coping strategy of relying on one's children as translators. It is a technique with definite advantages: children are often accessible, and they offer a non-judgmental and private source of help. Children are more immersed in the language and culture than the parents (who often find employment with less English immersion), and they are younger, which means they have been exposed to the new language from an earlier age. In Anna Mioduchowska's story, "A Temporary Pinprick," Ziotka, the protagonist, steals a book to help her with her fatigue. She left Poland during the Uprising twenty years ago with her small child from Warsaw and the story follows her moral dilemma. Ziotka also relies on her children: "With the help of the children, and the dictionary which was beginning to resemble an old woman's prayer book, she should be able to manage it" (Mioduchowska). This fictional account echoes the actual experience of Joseph Majocha, preserved at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21: "To overcome the barriers they were assisted by other people who spoke the language then translated into English which worked well providing there was a person present to translate. As time went by dad was able to understand and learned English well enough to get by, through a Polish-English dictionary." These excerpts highlight the importance of acquiring the language of the new country. It is one of the first milestones which one must reach because it allows one to express one's identity in the new culture, as Stroińska explains:

Language is one of the least noticeable, yet at same time one of the strongest links between our internal life and who we think we are on the one hand, and the way we function in the outside world and interact with the fellow human beings on the other . . . Language use and language behaviour define, to a large extent, an individual in the eyes of others.

Language acquisition is also essential to those immigrants who wish to adapt fully to the new culture. Because of language's deep connection to culture, those who do not adopt the

language—both the verbal and the non-verbal aspects of it—will find themselves in difficult predicaments. The essential need to acquire the language is a constant theme in the stories. In Mark Bondyra’s story, “Minus Twenty-Five in Vegreville, Alberta,” the narrator, Jacek, has just arrived in Canada with his wife and son to escape Poland during the Communist occupation. He is helped by other Polish immigrants but soon discovers Canada’s extreme cold and nearly freezes during a snowstorm. Jacek worries about how his wife, who does not speak English, would manage without him: “Marta doesn’t speak English and the prospect of leaving her alone in this new country fills you with terror” (Bondyra). In “Lessons in Translation,” Jaronczyk asks, “How does one learn the importance of words? When does understanding what another person says become more powerful than prayer? . . . I wanted to enter their thoughts, to learn about everything I saw and name it in their language.” In the Joseph Majocha account, the author says it was the first priority: “The most important adjustment an immigrant had to make was to learn the language. Dad spoke Polish, German, Russian and Ukrainian but had no knowledge of English in Canada.”

And what happens to the language which is brought over by the immigrant? In the story of Joanna and Fredyryk, Polish is an active part of home life; it is what the couple has brought over from Poland. Language is interestingly described as the one item that all immigrants carry with them out of their homeland:

However, no matter how different the experience and mode of leaving the familiar territory, no matter whether one is allowed to take all of their belongings or is lucky to escape alive, there is one thing all displaced individuals take with them: their language (or languages). With language comes a representation of native culture in the form of verbalised beliefs and traditions. (Stroińska)

The language which immigrants bring shapes their identity as it is wrapped up with their memories:

Whenever we move to a new territory, whether physically or emotionally, we carry with us the baggage of experience that is stored in the form of sensory and, more often than not, verbal memories. Without those memories—images, feelings, voices and words, we would not be who we are. Thus the languages we grew up with and know well are factors in the process of identity construction. (Stroińska)

Thus the act of being immersed in and learning a new language is part of transitioning to a new culture; Patryk learns English as he begins school, which signifies the beginning of his public life in Canada. Almost all of his interactions with the wider Canadian society will be in English. Meanwhile, Patryk's connection to Poland and his Polish relatives grows weaker: "Patryk can talk Polish pretty well with his parents, but it's hard to talk with his grandmother. The words she uses are so fast, and some are different from the ones he knows" (Schmidt). Similarly, in "Polish Wedding," where the narrator describes her Aunt Magda's preparations to marry Lowell, a man who is not Polish, the narrator cannot understand her Polish grandmother and aunt:

She and Auntie Magda are speaking Polish. I didn't know that Auntie Magda still could, and then I recognize the prayer. I think it's the "Our Father" because I hear the word for bread, chleba . . . But she prays to her dead father . . . At least I think that's what she's saying. I don't understand the language. (Koller)

The linguistic loss between generations is also depicted in Corinne Wasilewski's "Happily Ever After." In the story, the protagonist, Anna, believes that her late grandmother would like to be buried in Poland. She travels to Poland, despite the fact that she does not speak Polish, only to discover that Poland is not what she imagined and that her grandmother would like to be buried in Canada. Anna cannot speak Polish, so she is glad to meet Marek upon arrival because he speaks English: "Either way I was lucky—he being a rare breed, a Pole who spoke English" (Wasilewski). The readers would conclude that the grandchildren

are losing an important part of their Polish identity. Do these grandchildren realize that the lack of language skills will hinder them from communicating and connecting as successfully to the culture in the future? Stroińska argues that it is easy to forget the importance of language: “We realise the importance of language only when the link between the world and our internal linguistic representation of it is called into question, for instance when we leave our country and enter a new ‘life in a new language.’”

The Diaspora

The stories in the anthology show the functions of the diaspora. In “Pushpins,” the diaspora has an educational role in teaching children the Polish language and geography: “In the basement of the church there are usually Polish lessons after the service . . . When Patryk goes downstairs to use the washroom he sees the map of Poland on the wall” (Schmidt).

The diaspora also sustains the culture. Those who are separated from the original homeland continue with the traditions practiced there. In “Polish Wedding,” the happiness of Babcia (grandmother) is evident in her baking: “Babcia is beyond delighted. She is in ecstasies. She even made *chruściki*” (Koller). The members of the diaspora preserve and promote the material aspects of the original culture. “Minus Twenty-Five” prominently features a large pysanka sculpture erected by the Ukrainian diaspora in Vegreville, Alberta. The pysanka is a traditionally decorated Easter egg familiar to Slavic cultures. In the story, it is a source of shelter and a navigational tool and seems to be almost symbolic of a homeland:

You’re afraid to walk away from the egg because you fear losing your only reference point . . . You don’t want to leave the little shelter that the egg offers but you know you can’t stay here. You step into the white void and head towards the sound . . . When the sound recedes you stop walking and turn around to make sure that you can still see the egg. (Bondyra)

The protagonist, Jacek does not want to go away from the pysanka when he is alone outside surrounded by snow. Perhaps this is a sign that he needs his cultural identity; he does not know where he belongs, so he clings to his culture (or, to be exact, the most similar one he can find). Jacek is terrified of freezing to death on his first day in Canada in the middle of the prairies. He tries to remember his Polish army training and walk straight towards the pysanka by using the sun as a guide. Jacek is trying to survive in the new country—quite literally. Being anchored in the culture offered by the diaspora is part of survival.

The Vegreville pysanka, installed in 1975 and standing 3.5 stories high, is a real-life example of how the diaspora contributes to the development of cultural identity. There are numerous other examples; for instance, the diaspora organizes events which feature traditional dancing, cooking, or which display arts and crafts, such as textiles, paintings, or ceramics. Such events are aimed at creating a sense of what the original traditions were like and recreating a vision of the homeland. Also, the diaspora may commemorate events which are celebrated in the homeland such as Independence Day or Constitution Day. Nevertheless, in the stories, the diaspora's activity is most evident in the church on Sundays, preserving the traditions according to the liturgical calendar and ceremonies. The church serves as a way for the diaspora to gather its members on a regular basis. Days such as Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas hold special significance. Religious processions, such as Corpus Christi may be replicated by the diaspora. The Sunday services serve an essential role in connecting Patryk to Poland: "Being at church on Sundays is the only time Patryk wonders what it would have been like to have stayed in Poland" (Schmidt). To varying degrees, the diaspora members hold and maintain the culture's values through their daily routines, such as the rosary, prayer before meals, and having religious images in the home; these habits and values are passed down to the next generation.

The diaspora recreates values which were central for Poles when they lived in Poland. The mother in “Pushpins” complains about what is shown on television and film because it contradicts her values:

“Hurting is not a game,” their mother says. “Or entertainment.” She shifts on the couch. “Television and these videogames, so much violence and death.” She puts her hand on the side of her face. “And movies full of . . .” she searches for the right word. “*Reproduction?*” She laughs then sighs. (Schmidt)

Respect for the dead can also be considered part of a culture’s value system, and in both Koller’s story and Schmidt’s, this theme is very prominent. Koller provides detailed descriptions of everything Babcia does (bringing fresh flowers, leaving some *sękacz*, kneeling, and saying prayers) to honour her deceased husband when she visits the cemetery. In Schmidt’s story, there are no Polish lessons on All Souls’ Day in order to commemorate the importance of the occasion, and the adults look solemn: “It’s November 1st and in Poland it’s All Saints Day, for remembering people who died. Some of the adults look sad and serious.” Whatever value system the original culture has is replicated and passed down through the diaspora, with greater or lesser success. So, for example, if a culture has strictly defined moral codes then the diaspora will attempt to maintain those. The reason behind the diaspora’s efforts in maintaining the homeland’s values is to keep the culture alive despite the obvious displacement. Of course, this is a challenge, as the stories show; creating a pocket community to preserve the values within a wider community that has its own values and traditions is a complicated process because the diaspora is the minority and still dependent on mainstream society in order to keep the community together. “Pushpins” shows the tension when the mother struggles to preserve her values while what normally surrounds her children differs from what she would ideally let them see. However, she does not feel like it is within her ability to prevent them from seeing it: “That boy is your age Danika. You should not

watch this,' their mother says. But she doesn't change the channel or turn the TV off" (Schmidt). Joanna is conflicted between wanting her children to fit into the wider society, while also wanting to keep them in line with her more conservative values. The classroom is a place where there is exposure to new issues and dilemmas; even simple things such as family ties can show a difference in values. When the children try to place pushpins on the map of where their siblings were born, Patryk takes note that "A few days later, the classroom activity of putting the pushpins on the world map gets complicated. Marcus doesn't know where his dad was born or even if his dad is still alive . . . Other kids have step- and half-brothers and sisters" (Schmidt).

In addition, the diaspora fulfills a social role. This aspect is critical for arriving immigrants, and it would be a mistake to overlook this purpose of the diaspora. As has been said frequently, people are social; they yearn for community: "There exists in us a primal desire to find 'our people'—people who are similar to us" (Stroińska).

For those who have been displaced from a familiar society, ties to the diaspora community are especially valuable. The immigrant is surrounded by unfamiliar faces after having lost many, if not all, former contacts. The diaspora offers a place where immigrants can be themselves again and regain a sense of belonging. Its familiarity is immediately attractive, drawing in the displaced. To the immigrant, who has left everything behind, the diaspora offers a taste of home.

In Bondyra's story, Tadeusz and Małgosia help Jacek's family by picking them up at the airport, giving them food to eat, a place to sleep, and advice about how to start life in Canada. Sometimes the diaspora helps new immigrants settle and becomes their strongest tie to the new country. When Jacek expresses gratitude by saying, "I appreciate everything you're doing for us. Letting almost complete strangers stay with you like this," Tadeusz explains his motivation and his own experience of receiving help from the diaspora: "It's the good

Christian thing to do. And we wouldn't be here in Canada if some family hadn't sponsored us" (Bondyra). Tadeusz and Małgosia act as gatekeepers of the Polish diaspora, by kindly welcoming them in. In "Polish Wedding," Babcia is arguably also a kind of gatekeeper because she allows Lowell into the family by letting him marry Magda, thereby allowing him into their Polish community. She creates the rules (and exceptions) for entry:

Babcia has always wanted a Polish doctor for her Magda, but with Lowell, the doctor part cancels out the need for the Polish part in her equation. For my Dad, who is neither Polish nor a doctor, Babcia invented a new formula that perfectly describes him: Handsome, Handy, with Height, and Holy . . . Babcia's essential four Hs for husbands. (Koller)

The acceptance from the gatekeeper is important. The diaspora is a social construct, and like almost all social constructs, involves people with varying levels of power and influence. A diaspora is often led by people 'in control.' These people, who arguably 'belong' in the diaspora more than the newcomers (by virtue of having arrived earlier, or being more socially connected, or being wealthier, for example), act as gatekeepers to the community, accepting or rejecting new people. The powerful promise of belonging, then, may come with barriers. The gatekeepers may be the ones to enforce the basic rules of entry. For example, unstated rules of entry might be based on ethnicity (being Polish), language (solid knowledge of the Polish language), or date of arrival. Other qualifications may relate to which wave of immigration the person arrived with, which region they have come from, the immigrant's level of commitment (how devoted to the community the person is willing to become), whether the immigrant has family or friends in the diaspora, and whether the gatekeepers get along with the person in question. In "Polish Wedding," Babcia's list of qualifications involve having appropriate status ("doctor"), as well as a connection to their culture ("Polish"). In her second formula, Babcia includes physical traits, such as good looks and

being tall, but also practical skills and religiosity. Interestingly, Babcia will in fact accept a groom who does not have any Polish background provided that he is a doctor (or dentist), and she will also accept any groom if her daughter is already older (Magda is “permanently thirty-nine years old” [Koller] and Babcia is worried that Magda will never get married.)

Despite Babcia’s preference for a Polish son-in-law, the story shows that cultural acceptance is largely subjective; the people allowed into the culture are evaluated not by their commitment or love for the culture (Lowell is not brought to Sunday dinner, he misses the trip to the cemetery to ‘meet’ Dziadziu, and the wedding will not include a Mass), but more often than not by their looks, behaviour, and connections. In the case of Babcia, she is mainly concerned about her daughters marrying; she views marriage as essential: “Make sure you marry. No be alone all your life. You make food anyway. So? Make enough for two” (Koller). While Babcia is willing to make exceptions because she views marriage as necessary for happiness, perhaps Koller is suggesting that Babcia was too accepting; the reader learns that soon after the wedding, the marriage is falling apart.

Of course, other diaspora gatekeepers might not always be as lenient as Babcia, or as selfless as Tadeusz and his wife. The subjectivity can go both ways because just as Babcia made obvious exceptions for acceptance for marriage based on personal opinion and reasons, another gatekeeper might have subjective reasons for rejection. Not every immigrant will feel welcomed by the diaspora. For example, one might feel rejection from the diaspora for not participating in the local diaspora events, for lacking certain connections to the community, or for being too low in status to be of help to the diaspora. Faith-based diasporas may require that people demonstrate an active faith. In “Pushpins,” Johanna presents herself as a believing Catholic in order to gain acceptance and make social connections within the diaspora, although in reality her faith is weak: “Their mother sees the value in meeting different people, and some days she believes in God” (Schmidt). The church-based diaspora is a place for the

children to socialize as well: “Danika doesn't mind going to church. She flirts with boys there even though she says they're mostly losers . . . Paulina runs around with the other kids” (Schmidt).

In her article, “Gossiping in the Polish Club: An Emotional Coexistence of ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Migrants,” Aleksandra Galasińska deals with the issue of the gatekeepers of a diaspora, showing how sometimes newly arrived immigrants experience rejection because they come from a different wave. She explores the situation of different Poles in the United Kingdom, and reveals how sometimes the older waves of immigrants are not very accepting of newer waves. She recalls how a member of an earlier wave described the recent wave of immigrants:

Recently I was talking to a woman who is a volunteer helping newcomers to deal with matters to do with the city council. She reported some cases as illustrations of her work and then she added: “[W]hat comes here is trash, it is a catastrophe. *[T]o co tutaj przyjeżdża to jest dno, to jest katastrofa . . .*” Her choice of descriptive vocabulary (*trash, catastrophe*) is an explicit way of passing an emotionally negative judgment on newly arriving Poles (945-6).

In some cases, the existing diaspora resents new immigrants because they feel like the newer wave is abandoning Poland for no reason, whereas the earlier immigrants were forced to leave: “Post-1989 migrants were rejected by the old Polish diaspora (‘They were not Polish enough’; ‘How you could leave a free motherland?’)” (Galasińska 948).

The effect of such a rejection by the diaspora on an immigrant would vary depending on a variety of factors. It depends, for example, on whether the immigrant has family or friends living in the host country, how well the immigrant integrates with the non-diaspora community (such as their knowledge of English, and whether they have a prestigious job or other type of recognition outside the diaspora), how formulated the immigrant’s life plans for

the new country are, the immigrant's economic situation, and the immigrant's personality. In "Minus Twenty-Five," Jacek is completely reliant on the diaspora because he has no connections in Canada, his family does not speak English, he has no food or shelter, and he has no plan. He ponders while staying at Tadeusz's house: "You sit at the kitchen table and try to imagine what your new life in this country will look like. Where will you work? What will you do?" (Bondyra). If Tadeusz had rejected Jacek and his family, Jacek would not have had anything upon arrival. Certainly, for those who desire to be part of the diaspora, rejection from the diaspora is an additional struggle while trying to gain acceptance from mainstream society: "Having such a strong and vivid tradition of migration, it is not a surprise then that consecutive waves of Poles had to deal emotionally not only with local host-country communities, but also with existing Polish communities in the country of destination" (Galasińska 940).

Of course, an immigrant may choose to reject the diaspora, which is a significant decision potentially affecting the individual's sense of their old community and their new community. The author of "Pushpins" presents the option of rejection of the diaspora through the character of Fryderyk. Fryderyk chooses to not accompany his wife and children to Mass: "Instead of getting up and getting ready to go to church, their father sleeps in. He's an atheist and doesn't see the use of church" (Schmidt). Fryderyk does not view the diaspora's benefits as worthwhile if it means that he must attend church. By going against the unwritten rule of being religious to be part of the diaspora, Fryderyk puts himself outside of it. Likewise, Galasińska shows that some of the newer Polish immigrants prefer to reject the established diaspora, especially on a religious basis: "In contrast, the post-enlargement group . . . was straight away dismissive of the old migration and usually uninterested in the other waves . . . The fact of not belonging on an emotional level to the Polish places associated with the postwar group is evident most vividly in the religious field" (946-7).

Choosing Cultural Identity

The Element of Choice

One of the most important elements of our identity is our cultural identity; the relationship between our personal identity and our cultural identity is intertwined. But what do we mean when we refer to our ‘cultural identity’? It is the answer to the question: What are you? What is your background? What is your ethnicity? What is your race? Where are you from?

In Bondyra’s tale, it is the second question asked of the immigrant:

“My name’s Stan,” he says, reaching his hand out.

“Jacek,” you say, shaking his hand.

“Jacek. You French or something?”

“Polish,” you say.

“Oh, Polish. Lots of Ukrainians around here, but I’ve never met a Polish guy,” he says.

There are many variations of this question, but at the heart of it, the question is ultimately: with which cultural group do you identify most strongly? To put it simply: to which group do you belong?

And indeed, our cultural identity provides us with the feeling of belonging, a community and a common place to ground ourselves, because our cultural identity links directly to feelings of home, patriotism, and national camaraderie. Our history, language, country and environment (social and psychological) are shaped by our culture and thus we associate these things closely with our cultural identity. Therefore, one’s cultural identity is generally formed through the parent’s cultural heritage and ancestry and place of birth. Of course, this is not necessarily straightforward because a person may have a mother from one culture and a father from another; this is especially true in a multi-ethnic context such as the Canadian one.

In “Happily Ever After,” Anna Wilson says: “I’m one part Irish, one part French, one part German, and one part Polish” (Wasilewski). Many Canadians would have a varied list. In my own personal experience, I remember one time a Polish woman asked me about my ethnicity; I began by explaining that I identify as Canadian, but that I am partly Polish, partly Korean, partly English, partly French (Acadian), partly Irish, partly Ukrainian, and I also have some Mi’kmaq ancestry. This is just one example of how, for Canadians especially, the list of cultural heritages can be quite long, and it also shows that one can have or identify with several cultural identities.

Those born into two or more cultures may have the complicated experience of trying to navigate and untangle their identity between the two cultures. They are born on a ‘cultural hyphen’ and could be described as having a dual cultural identity, belonging to two groups at once. However, very often having a dual cultural identity may feel like not belonging completely to any culture; it may, at times, feel like perpetually being between two worlds. A community may not accept a person fully because that person seems like an outsider on some level and is viewed as representing other cultures. For example, a person who is half-Polish and half-Chinese may not feel accepted fully by the Chinese group or the Polish group. Yet a person may feel incomplete without having both cultures involved. For example, if a person’s home life involves a blending Swedish and Spanish, the person will not easily find such a combination outside the home. Magda Stroińska describes how in Canada, the multiple backgrounds means never quite assimilating: “One becomes a Canadian relatively easily, but never completely . . . We all live here as hyphenated nationalities: Polish-Canadians among Italian-Canadians, German-Canadians or Ukrainian-Canadians. For some, this double identification with cultures and tongues may be the constituting factor of being Canadian.” In these situations, a person may wish to change their cultural identity to simplify or enrich their experience.

So I wish to explore two questions which arise from the short stories relating to cultural identity. Firstly, is a cultural identity a matter of personal choice? In other words, can one change one's cultural identity? Can one reject one's cultural heritage and choose again? Secondly, what does the process of changing cultures, or cultural transition, involve? The stories send the message that it is possible to change one's cultural identity. Furthermore, the stories show that when one moves (even by choice) from one culture to another, one may experience cultural shock from the transition. Along the way, I will explore how these authors view Canadian culture.

In Wasilewski's story, Anna Wilson says that her Irish, French, and German parts are not very significant:

The Irish in me keeps a low profile. It goes back five generations and manifests itself in predictable ways—my tolerance for cold and damp, for example . . . That's the bulk of my Irish legacy, as far as I know. That and my affinity for fisherman knit sweaters. My obsession for order comes from the German . . . And from the French, what? My weakness for french fries with gravy? It's a bit of a stretch, I know.

She does acknowledge these ethnicities or cultures as belonging to her and influencing her. Each of these cultural identities has a place within her personal identity (love of order, tolerance for damp weather, taste in food or clothing), however, her message is that a person can choose one culture above the rest. She says, "Not that it matters. I am Polish through and through" (Wasilewski). Despite the fact that the narrator, Anna Wilson, was born in Canada and has various nationalities that she is tied to, she especially cherishes her Polish identity. She has a romantic and idealized view of Poland, a place she views as far superior to Canada:

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" adults would ask when I was small.

“Polish,” I’d say. They’d chuckle, a restrained chuckle—half amusement-half bewilderment.

“But, you’re Canadian.”

“Polish is better” . . . I’d hold the hands of a pretend prince, and pirouette in his arms . . . Then again, anywhere was probably better than Pennfield, where there’s no royal ball, no prince, no palace, and the men have short stubby fingers and the build and grace of refrigerators. (Wasilewski)

Indeed, for Anna, Poland is the land where her dreams can come true. She does not feel at all that she belongs where she is, and she does not identify with her Canadian identity. Her idea of Poland, her sense of belonging to it, and her detachment from Pennfield stem from her *babcia* because her *babcia* loves Poland. Her feelings of cultural attachment stem from her love for her *babcia*. The story offers a variation on the more typical pattern: usually the children or descendants of immigrants feel more at home in the new country than the elders. However, one’s idea of cultural identity may not always correspond with their surroundings. One may desire to fit into a culture that is not one’s own or desire to be understood by people from a different culture. When immigrants arrive, sometimes their children will feel more attached to the native land than their current residence. Thus they may wish to return to a parental or ancestral culture. It depends on the individual, especially for those who are struggling to understand their dual or multiple cultural identities.

When Anna visits Płock, Poland, she sees that it is not how she imagined, and the man she meets is not princely. The reader sees that Anna’s fairy tale is challenged, especially because her *babcia*, at the end, embraces Canada as a better place for her to be buried than Poland. Instead of a story about Anna Wilson choosing Poland, it becomes a story about *Babcia* choosing Canada:

That night I had a dream: Babcia standing in the blueberry field back home, one hand on a rake, one hand swatting flies. In the background, her house with the pale green siding, and beyond that a shimmering sliver of sea. She swatted a fly on her bare shin, then looked up and smiled a wide, toothy grin. Her hair was hanging loose and the wind made it ripple like water. She raised an arm and gestured me to come. (Wasilewski)

The experience of having two or more cultures will be handled differently from person to person, as well as differently by the same person from time to time, sometimes rejecting one identity in favour of the other. Anna Wilson rejects her Canadian identity because the Polish one seems better. She seems to be imitating her babcia, but her babcia chooses Canada in the end. In other cases, a person might grapple with both cultures together. The sensation of being torn in half might lead one to juggle both. It may involve having one set of languages and expressions and social interactions for one cultural context, such as school or work, and another set for home.

The theme of choice is also very strong in “Pushpins.” The class project involves putting pins on the map. Green pins are for the student’s birthplace, yellow for their siblings, white for parents, and black for grandparents. Purple pins are for places visited. Patryk takes a purple pin from the box when nobody is looking. This pin symbolizes his freedom to choose anywhere in the world: “The pin in his pocket reminds him that he’s not stuck in one place on a map. He can go *anywhere*” (Schmidt).

The concept of a map and being like a pushpin on a map is an interesting analogy. It suggests that we all began or belong somewhere, but that we can be moved or move ourselves. It shows our roots, but reminds us that we can move away from our roots and begin somewhere new. Patryk, who has a partly Polish, partly Canadian identity, is connected to both these countries, but the message is that he is also free to create his future: “He feels

weighed down and weightless at the same time, like an astronaut” (Schmidt). The reader wonders where Patryk will choose. He decides not to place his pin on the Poland map in the church basement, and in fact he does not put the pin on any map; instead he uses it to mark where he has been: “No one is looking so he quickly takes the pin out of his pocket and scratches ‘Patryk was here’ on the window ledge” (Schmidt). The story shows that even when one is born into a specific culture, there is the possibility of gaining another cultural identity. His parents chose Canada in order that their children could have a better life, but Patryk could choose again.

The second question is: what does cultural transition look like? What do the stories tell us about the experience of changing cultures? In “Lessons in Translation,” the narrator was forced to leave Poland, and so she says, “My roots were torn out like baby teeth” (Jaronczyk). In *Twenty-Five Degrees*, the author begins with: “You wake up one cold February morning and you are in a different country” (Bondyra); this shows the uncertainty and the unfamiliarity ahead. In that story, Jacek is in Canada for freedom:

You remember discussing whether to return to Poland or to try and emigrate to Canada. To a better life. For months things had been getting worse in Poland . . . You feel happy that you managed to leave. That you managed to strike some small victory against the communists that had wormed their way into every aspect of your life. Staying would have meant the army and the expectation that you would be willing to turn against your own countrymen to support a regime you did not believe in. (Bondyra)

Nevertheless, even though the characters choose Canada, there is still an element of surprise or even shock. In the first place, they must cope with the climate. This comes through especially in Bondyra’s story:

You look at the thermometer attached to the outside of the window frame. The red line stops around minus twenty-five. You wonder if it's broken . . . It is stunningly cold. Every time you breathe in your nostrils stick together. You pull your zipper higher and step into the snow.

These words show how unaccustomed and ill-prepared Jacek is for the Canadian environment. Even his heavy jacket is not enough, and he tries to keep warm in various ways (wiggling his toes, walking faster, running, doing jumping jacks) but this only results in him losing energy and even falling into the snow on his face. He realizes he has risked his life with his decision to cross the snowy field: "You consider the possibility that you might freeze to death on your first day in Canada and that the police will find your frozen body here in the middle of the prairie. *'No, jesteś taki głupi,* ' you can hear Marta saying to you" (Bondyra).

Moreover, the town is "much smaller than the big cities you're used to living in . . . beyond the barbershop the town just ends" (Bondyra). Jacek is unfamiliar with the rural Canadian lifestyle and the open rural prairie setting that he is now in. The town seems isolated and small. To him, it is like something from a Western film. When Jacek and his host stop to change a flat tire, they hear coyotes howling in the distance, which is a theme of wilderness that repeats itself throughout the story. This echoes the experience of Anna Wilson's Babcia, who is not used to the prairie setting of Canada:

At least I was used to vast empty spaces; endless sea, endless sky, endless trees; used to life at the end of the world; used to feeling alone. Not Babcia. She grew up in a very old house in a very old square in the centre of a town called Płock.

(Wasilewski)

Her babcia grew up in a much older town, with its own long history and its own establishment, far different from the places in Canada. The European architecture includes castles, and Anna is delighted to see a turret through the willow tree when she visits. By

contrast, Canada looks empty and unusual. Jacek is surprised to see things that are very old-fashioned:

You pass a barbershop. There is a wooden bar outside for tying up a horse. The kind of thing you've seen in the many Westerns that you watched while in Germany. You feel as if you have not only travelled through space but also through time to some bygone era. (Bondyra)

Overall, the stories show how the geographical qualities and features are one of the first things that the immigrant notices. In "The Immigration Story of The Otto Froese Family (Polish immigrant)," the real-life account of the Otto Froese family, the mother sees that by the time the train reaches Saskatchewan, it is endless prairie: "At first there was a lot to see. The train stopped in Winnipeg where we enjoyed some ice cream. It was absolutely delicious. As we travelled through Saskatchewan, Mom said to us to wake her when we saw a tree. We did not have to wake her!"

However, weather and geography are not the only shocking things about Canadian life and culture. Those who transition from one culture to another when emigrating to another country encounter a new culture and lifestyle. Indeed, the immigration transition can result in cultural shock. The new environment, both unfamiliar and unwelcoming at times, not only lacks the people and places one knows, but it also lacks the language and everyday behaviors that one is aware of and understands. What was built up and developed in the home country no longer exists in the new. One's status is lost, and often one's confidence is also lost. The transition between cultures requires adaptation and reinterpretation because one is forced to reinterpret the connection between one's new surroundings and one's identity, deciding whether to reject or accept the elements one finds.

The stories provide the readers with a discussion of Canadian culture. Wasilewski names some aspects of Canadian culture in "Happily Ever After." Marek says that it is "very nice to

make acquaintance of a woman from America,” to which Anna Wilson replies, “I’m not American, I’m Canadian” (Wasilewski). Being mistaken for American is a part of the Canadian experience. Anna gives a gift of “Canada #1 Medium Pure Maple Syrup” as well as a red Roots T-shirt to Marek, symbols of Canada. In “Pushpins,” set in October of 1987, Schmidt delves deeper into how Canadian culture appears to the immigrants who arrived from Poland nine years ago. The parents have opinions about many aspects of Canadian culture. They dislike the tradition of Halloween:

Patryk’s parents slowly got used to Halloween, which is not celebrated in Poland. His mom still thinks it’s a ghoulish day and she wonders why children need to go from house to house begging for candy. She says Halloween must have been created by candy makers and dentists. (Schmidt)

For Fredyryk and Joanna, Halloween is a shocking thing and entirely different from the solemnity of All Souls’ Day. They did not expect that their children would dress up like Spiderman, Madonna the pop-star, and a bunny. Nevertheless, the parents allow it because they want their children to be immersed in the culture despite its questionable aspects. The parents also comment on the artificial friendliness of Canadians: “His parents say they don’t understand why so many Canadians smile all the time and say: ‘Have a nice day.’ His mom says this makes Canadians seem stupid and simple” (Schmidt). The cultural practice does not translate to them as warmth but rather insincerity and foolishness. Another cultural difference has to do with feminist values. In Canada, the term ‘Ms.’ is used, and both of Patryk’s parents ridicule this: “‘One thing we want to know about Mizz Cowan,’ his mom says, giggling. ‘What is a Mizz?’ His father starts to laugh. ‘And if she’s so Mizzerable,’ he asks, ‘what would make her happy?’” (Schmidt). However, while they scoff at the departure from traditional values, it can also be seen that the more traditional mentality creates limitations for Joanna: “His mother says she’d like to train as a pharmacist. Paulina is too young, his father

says. They should save up to move to downtown Toronto where he might be able to get a better job . . . They start to argue” (Schmidt).

For all of these reasons, the reader understands that Canadian culture has elements that Patryk’s parents are not comfortable with. In many ways, they prefer the Polish culture. Meanwhile, both Patryk and his older sister do not see themselves as belonging to Poland. Patryk considers putting his pushpin on the map of Poland, but then decides against it, feeling that it would be too “out of place” (Schmidt). He does not feel a complete belonging to the Polish culture; he does not identify with Polish culture in the way that his parents do. It is likely that he will be in the situation of a dual cultural identity, where the new country’s culture exists on top of, or side by side, the original culture.

In contrast to Patryk’s parents, in the real-life story of Joseph Majocho, the father of the family makes every effort to learn about Canadian culture so that he will be able to adopt it. He is willing to change aspects of his and his family’s Polish identity to gain acceptance and begin forming a new identity: “To blend into society dad contacted the Canadian Immigration Board as to dress code and style among men, women and children. With this information we fit in well amongst people” (Majocho).

In some stories, there is an obvious cultural difference between the Polish immigrants and Canadian life, but the immigrant seems to carry on with their own culture, even if others do not approve. In “Polish Wedding,” Babcia maintains her conservative values, especially when it comes to marriage. When she gives a short speech at her daughter’s wedding, she ends, “teary and tongue-tied,” with “Dziękuję Bogu za rodzinę, przyjaciół i dziedzictwo, thank God for family, friends and my heritage” (Koller). She does not realize that some of the young women at the wedding are ridiculing her. Babcia continues the traditions that matter to her, and the readers get the impression that she is isolated from mainstream society. Even her family members do not reveal to her that her daughter’s marriage is falling apart. Likewise,

the *babcia* in “Happily Ever After” does not seem to care about transitioning into Canadian culture:

She really didn’t belong in New Brunswick. For one thing, she was the only woman I knew who put on lipstick to do chores. And she had long hair down to her waist . . . She braided it in a coil on top of her head so that it looked like a crown. She wore silk stockings—even in summer—that clipped to a garter. She was in another league. Nobody in Pennfield gave her the respect she deserved. People here thought she was weird. (Wasilewski)

This *babcia* remembers and longs for Poland and never accepted Canada (or so it seems). *Babcia*’s experience is one of displacement and being far from where she belongs, feeling emptiness and a lack of belonging:

Fifty years and *Babcia* never felt at home here. She’d be on the beach digging clams or in the field raking blueberries . . . when she’d suddenly go quiet, and stand perfectly still. “I miss Poland,” she’d whisper, eyes fixed on the horizon and berry-stained hand pressed to her heart . . . Poor *Babcia*. (Wasilewski)

Unlike their own children, *Fredyryk* and *Joanna* seem to display a similar attitude to the two grandmothers in that they do not seem interested in embracing Canadian society: “*Patryk*’s parents make fun of his teacher, and of Canadian things and people in Polish” (Schmidt). The children do not participate in these conversations, in keeping with the theme in Schmidt’s story that each individual chooses his own path. It is a theme one can find in *Bondyra*’s work as well. When *Jacek* arrives home, he sees his wife and child still sleeping in the basement. The fact that his wife and son are have not woken up shows that they have not even begun their adventure in Canada and that they are unaware of his eventful experience. This shows that the struggle of the immigrant is an individual one—each person must find their own way. Indeed, the process of navigating through a new culture (and the process of

forming one's cultural identity in general) is a very personal one. Each individual has a unique story, whether they are navigating a new culture, trying to acquire a new culture, developing a new cultural identity or trying to retain or revive an older one. Each has a different pattern of cultural transition, and the experience of cultural change is different from individual to individual, being influenced by several factors, such as age, appearance, gender, past experiences of travel and culture. Each person's method of dealing and interacting with new circumstances and places is unique. As Stroińska writes:

The general terms exile or displacement apply to millions of people world-wide, and yet no two experiences of exile are similar enough to warrant the creation of a prototype of exile or of an expatriated individual. Even immigrants from one country of origin settling down in one new host country hardly ever form a homogeneous group. Poles in Canada are no exception.

The examples of the traditionally-minded grandmothers in the stories show the situations in which the older generation is not concerned about its own assimilation or acceptance while prioritizing the younger generation's transition into Canadian culture. When the mother in "Pushpins" says it is good that Patryk is learning about the world, the father disagrees: "No, it is not . . . You are Canadian now, Patryk, like all the children in your class" (Schmidt). Indeed, often the whole reason for immigration in the first place is to provide the younger generation with a better life. Schmidt writes that Patryk's parents "wanted to get out to make a better life for their children." Similarly, in the real-life account from Joseph Majocha, who immigrated to Canada in 1928, the theme of a better life for the family drives him to fully transition to the Canadian culture:

At the time, Dad's desire was to be a proud Canadian and us kids followed him. Something we wanted to achieve. The parents wanted to think, speak, and act like a native and knew there were laws to obey and protect us, freedom to own property

and we no longer be exploited. Dad had the urge to accept any established symbol of Canadian identity. In selecting his new country, knowing the choice was for the better life for his family, of course we learned our first language was “Polish” which will always be with us. Dad strived and obtained his Canadian citizenship accepted the culture of his new country to make for a peaceful life. We’re proud to be Canadians. There is no better land than “Canada.”

With this motivation, these immigrants are prepared to face and cope with, in varying ways, the challenges of immigration. These include adjusting to all of the aspects of Canadian culture, such as its weather, its landscapes, and its culture. Schmidt’s work in particular offers a summary of Canadian culture; the parents are surprised by its superficial friendliness, its mixture of cultures and languages, its acceptance of feminist values, its widespread depiction of immorality, its celebration of pop culture, and its practice of Halloween. So in addition to dealing with issues of language and integration with the diaspora, Joanna and Fryderyk deal with these cultural differences. In “Happily Ever After,” Marek, who speaks English, describes Anna Wilson’s journey to visit Poland:

You have come a long way, and not only this, you have committed many sacrifices. Number one, you have sacrificed currency. Number two, time. Also, you have sacrificed your tongue, your friends and relations, and your well acquainted way of life. Last of all—and this is the grand condensation—you have sacrificed all your security. (Wasilewski)

Marek says “condensation” instead of “condescension,” but it is still a good summary of immigration and the sacrifice made when coming to a new culture for the first time. Giving up one’s “well acquainted way of life” is indeed part of the journey and a difficult sacrifice. He acknowledges the fact that she loses all of her security with the transition to a new

country; she has stepped outside her 'comfort zone.' To give up her tongue and her circle of friends and relations means leaving her past and part of her identity.

Cultural Transition Without Immigration

This paper has focused on cultural transition that happens for political, economic, or other practical reasons, specifically in the context of immigration. Part of the immigration experience is usually a sense of exile or displacement. The immigrant has often left a community, and the original cultural identity does not necessarily function in the same way when someone parts from the cultural homeland. For this reason, the immigrant begins to create a new cultural identity, such as, for example, Polish-Canadian. It is an identity which begins after arrival in the new country.

However, the idea that one can choose one's cultural identity, or cultural group, has implications beyond immigration. One might be drawn to another culture in other ways, for example, by marrying someone from that culture. The author Corinne Wasilewski does not have Polish ancestry, but she visits Poland with her husband "and has a weakness for sernik," according to her biography in the anthology. In "Polish Wedding," Babcia has two son-in-laws who are not Polish. They have the opportunity to interact and be part of another cultural group.

But it is also possible to fall in love with a culture in other ways. A personal love or desire for a particular cultural identity or connection can be triggered in several ways, such as through travel, learning a new language, or learning about a culture. It can also develop when one learns more about one's ancestry—a person may have a 'legitimate' claim to a culture, but have only weak practical experience of it, and therefore want to strengthen this connection. The reasons are as varied as those involved in deciding to learn a new language. It can be sparked by meeting people from the culture or learning about a specific aspect of a culture that awakens a desire to learn more. Perhaps a culture seems 'cool' or unique, and we

want to have a greater share in it. Personal love for a culture is a more voluntary way of entering a culture than immigration because it is the culture itself which is being pursued. In the immigration context, cultural transition is not usually the goal of a move; the immigrant immigrates for other reasons and then encounters the culture afterwards and decides how to deal with it. Some immigrants may choose to avoid the new culture as much as possible. By contrast, those who want to gain a culture are making a free choice to step into that culture.

How can we understand this phenomenon? Can one change one's own identity?

Although it is intertwined with personal identity, changing one's cultural identity does not mean that one becomes a new person, or that one loses their old identity. Identity can change and be reconstructed; it may transform; a person may choose to reshape it. Most parts of our identity are stable, and this is why when a person changes or attempt to change some part of that person's identity, the whole world can feel as if it has just changed. The feeling of losing a part of one's identity affects an individual deeply, and, similarly, the sensation of needing to hide a part of one's identity can cause individual behaviour to drastically change. Our identity expands with time and develops with time. Like a tree, if we examine the stem of our identity, the trunk, we can see all of the rings around it and can tell how it has aged and grown (we can examine the 'dendrochronology' of our identity). Identity can change, but this does not necessarily mean that it will shift and transform entirely. Instead, it builds up and forms a new shape. Even if one changes their identity, one cannot erase the past, therefore, we still carry the baggage or roots of the identities that we try to leave behind. As Jaronczyk's protagonist notes, even though her transition away from Poland was as harsh as having one's baby teeth torn out, her "etymology" survived. The choice of the word "etymology" in this context is intriguing and accurate; one's journey creates a new path and set of transitions and adjustments, but the 'original' person can still be uncovered and their 'etymology' traced.

Cultural identity is thus a complicated topic because it is a central part of identity, and yet very often people love more than one culture and desire to belong to more than one—or already do. However, when they step into a new culture, quickly they find that their former identity is now challenged or complicated.

Our cultural identity does not change or switch quickly. Some wonder whether it is possible to truly switch: “Is it at all possible to free oneself from one's old identity and adopt a new language and new set of cultural values?” (Stroińska). Indeed, such an important and familiar aspect of our self-identification and self-perception does not leave us, even when we leave our native land. So even though there is a large element of choice (immigrants either continue or abandon the language and other cultural practices of their native land for themselves and future generations) in embracing or resisting the new culture—we have seen examples of both through these works of fiction and from the real-life excerpts—one thing which is certain is that the immigrant’s cultural identity will not switch automatically to the new culture, and the immigrant must form that desire before they are able to adapt to a new culture. Parts of our identity stand strong and will often prove to be very resilient when put into question; thus while the cultural identity can change, it takes time. When we feel lost, we cling to what we know, as did Jacek when lost in the Canadian snow.

Thus the process of transitioning to a new cultural identity or acquiring an additional one can be very challenging, even for determined individuals. We cannot ‘buy’ a ticket into any culture or necessarily ‘belong’ to it as easily as we may hope. Even when we have married into the culture or have ancestors from that culture, it can be difficult to belong. We discover that there are invisible borders preventing our entry. Those who desire to enter into another culture may face many of the same obstacles faced by immigrants. Not knowing the language or speaking the target language with an accent can cause all of the embarrassment felt by Joanna in “Pushpins.” Gatekeepers of the local diaspora may reject someone for lack of

community connections; it may not matter that the interested person loves the culture or has ancestors who immigrated from the same country as those in the current diaspora. As a result of these barriers, one may abandon attempts to acquire another culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has explored the theme of cultural transition and cultural shock experienced by Polish immigrants who came to Canada. The paper delves into the linguistic challenges of such a transition, the importance of language for maintaining the culture, and the issue of the loss of the language by younger generations. The role of the diaspora is also portrayed through the stories—in particular, its educational, cultural, and social role. With respect to the social role, the paper discussed the issue of a gatekeeper of the diaspora, the diaspora's rules, and acceptance and rejection by the diaspora for various reasons. In the next section, this essay showed how one's cultural identity is ultimately defined and chosen by an individual, and then explored the experience of cultural transition by immigrants in terms of weather, geography, symbols, and cultural values. The final section explored more fully the notion of choosing one's own cultural identity, and its implications for those who wish to belong to another culture because of a love for that culture. My essay argues that wherever one originates from, one is not restricted to any particular culture; those who love a culture can belong beyond borders.

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