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Essay

Insight into the Process of Writing the Same Memoir in Two Languages: Different Languages, Different Personalities?

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Abstract

The experience of a civil war is always traumatic, as is refugee status and settling down in a new environment. Writing about such traumatic events takes a great deal of processing and a lot of time. Almost 30 years after the events, I set out to write a memoir describing them. One surprising fact was that the language in which the book was first rendered was English. Although I have near native proficiency in English, it is not my mother tongue. It was only after the book was completed that the idea of translating/rewriting it in Serbo-Croat started to emerge.

The link between language and identity is well-known, but some aspects might seem rather strange. In this essay, I analyse various psychological processes that accompanied my writing. I note the differences in emotions and reactions, as well as something I would refer to as a change of personality traits, depending on the language I was writing in. Completing both versions of the memoir helped me process my trauma and bring together previously fragmented pieces of self.

Keywords: trauma, identity, psychological processing, language/personality traits, civil war, refugee/immigrant

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Insight into the Process of Writing the Same Memoir in Two Languages: Different Languages, Different Personalities?

In 2019 at the time when Brexit rows culminated, I became very upset, and that puzzled me hugely. Brexit rows did not warrant that level of anxiety. I then began to recognise that it was the association with the 1990s divisions in former Yugoslavia that disturbed me so much. This association brought back my latent heavy trauma load.

I was born and lived in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the former Yugoslavia. Although I was born into a family of Jewish origin, neither my parents nor I accepted Jewishness as the ethnicity that defined us. After the horrors and killings among the ethnic groups within Yugoslavia during the Second World War,[1] my parents readily accepted Yugoslav identity[2] as well as the idea of 'brotherhood and unity'. As a post-war child I happily followed suit. I would say we were a middle-class family[3] of professionals that lived a rather well-organised life, minding our own business. I read English language and literature at university, and later, having acquired both MSc and PhD in linguistics, I became a lecturer at the English department at Sarajevo University. In the final year, still a student, I got married, but the marriage did not last very long. Otherwise life was quite uneventful.

I was in my mid-forties when the Bosnian civil war broke out. It genuinely took me by surprise. Given that my surprise was largely a consequence of persistent denial, when the conflict started, it hit me hard. Understandably, living under the horrendous circumstances of a civil war and its aftermath left a huge trauma wound. The most difficult to deal with during the war was the threat of the highest order: a very real and overwhelming threat to life itself. I had to fight for survival. At the same time, life was reduced to satisfying only basic needs: food, water, and shelter—a rather dehumanising state. A few months later, fleeing the war-

[1] According to Stephen Hart the total toll in Yugoslavia in the period between 1941 and 1945 was over 1.7 million dead. Out of the 1.7 million, about one million were 'caused by Yugoslav killing Yugoslav, whether it was Croat Ustase against Jews, Muslims, Serbs, Chetniks and Partisans; or Partisans against Chetniks and Ustase; or Chetniks against Ustase, Muslims, and Partisans.'
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/partisan_fighters_01.shtml

[2] Along with the well-established identities of major ethnic groups, at one point the 'Yugoslav identity' was introduced, and some people (including my family) readily accepted it. However, the issue of Yugoslav identity is far too complicated to be discussed in this relatively short essay.

[3] I have to mention here that the Yugoslav socialist society was officially classless.

torn country, I had to cope with the pain of being forced to leave behind my previous existence with all that it entailed. Alongside that, I had to face the issue of a loss of the identity that I believed defined me, i.e., the Yugoslav identity. That identity abruptly disappeared due to a sudden disintegration of the foundations upon which it had been built. The loss inadvertently initiated a search for some sort of backup identity, a 'replacement' identity. This resulted in the gradual awakening of the identity of my ancestors, i.e., the Jewish identity I had not acknowledged before. Like my original Yugoslav identity, my replacement Jewish identity was not a religious one. I started seeing myself as a secular Jew now trying to evoke from memory those elements of Jewish culture and tradition I could identify with (which I would have encountered mostly in my grandparents' homes).

My Bosnian war trauma, along with my parents' collective trauma as Holocaust survivors,[4] which was less obvious to me, formed a heavy trauma load. The desire to write about my war experiences seemed to be guided by my unconscious need to process it all—a form of self-therapy, which, although not a conscious decision, turned out to be a welcome by-product. Overall, it had a calming and liberating effect.

The first step was to admit to myself the painful truth that 'Yugoslav' as an ethnic identity must have been an artificial construct. It could not withstand the test of time—it disappeared in less than 50 years. Also, I had to acknowledge the truth that as a consequence, I was left without identity and without much choice other than the urge to define myself somehow. No mean feat. Since both my parents were of Jewish extraction (although not religious), Judaism seemed to be the obvious answer. After some searching and struggling, I eventually accepted the dormant identity and decided to define myself as a traditional secular Jew. That about described me; it became my new, albeit incomplete, identity.[5] With the new identity acknowledged, my inherited collective trauma became more relevant too. However, the more immediate trauma of living under shelling and starvation seemed to me more complicated, and I felt I had to deal with that first, in whichever way I could.

[4] At that time, the presence of 'second hand' trauma from my parents did not seem relevant. Although they did not talk about it much, the dire destiny of the Jewish population in World War II, especially in the Balkans, a territory with a turbulent history and many a war, was among the worst in Europe. Yugoslavia, along with some other European countries, according to some sources lost over 70 percent of their Jewish population (other sources claim a higher number). It was impossible not to inherit that collective trauma.

[5] Incomplete since it was a 'non-domiciled' version.

The next step was to face it fully, with open eyes. The core narrative of my war story was already in my head. In late 1990s I had actually written a short text in Serbo-Croat[6] about my war memories that covered the most painful recollections. It was almost all rendered in direct speech with a kind of childlike perspective, strongly reflecting the sense of helplessness. The Serbo-Croat text was published first, and later my husband (who was English but fluent in Serbo-Croat) and I translated it into English. My husband was then trying to convince me to write a memoir, but I was not ready. The passage of time helped, so in 2019, instead of watching the disturbing current affairs programmes surrounding me, I set off to write about my past. This has definitely helped me define myself.

Spontaneously, I wrote the book in English (Levinger-Goy, 2022a). I am not sure when or how I began to embrace my English identity. My Jewish identity has always felt insufficient. The transition must have occurred parallel with the conscious attempts to define my identity. It was a subtle process, not even noticeable. Helped by the desire to integrate, it felt very natural and organic. The foundation of my identity was Yugoslav, while the English one was built upon that foundation.

The writing itself started without any preparation. I just sat in front of the computer and did not even think much about the structure of the book, least of all about the language. The first sentences simply came out in English, I guess pretty much the same way, over a decade earlier, the short text about war memories spontaneously came out in Serbo-Croat.

The biggest puzzle for me was what to do with the narrator. Initially I did not want the text to be very personal, so I started with the narrator in the third person. I believed it was safer for me; it gave me a chance to distance myself. I struggled with the third-person narrator at the beginning, but a friend's advice to try a few pages in the first person helped. So, eventually I accepted it as my memoir and wrote it in the first person.

After that the text started to flow. My fear that I needed the third-person voice to distance myself proved to have been unfounded. I suddenly realised that in my mind, I the writer perceived myself as English; I had

[6] Serbo-Croat is a non-existent language, but I cannot claim to speak any of the languages it was split into in the post-civil war era. The previous variants, Eastern and Western, became Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian—differing from each other as much as UK, US, and Australian English. What was previously known as Serbo-Croat, a mixture of the two variants, was widely spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is the language I translated the book into.

fully embraced my new, by then officially confirmed, British identity. That was enough of a distance. Problem solved. I felt calm, content, and strangely fulfilled as the time went by and the pages accumulated. All in all, it was a pleasant and at the same time cathartic process. I noticed that I managed to explain to myself things that had initially seemed unexplainable. Things I thought I was unable to understand suddenly became clear. I was surprised to find myself at peace and that I felt so little distress. Writing about my husband's death was the only part that truly upset me. Naturally! That happened to the 'English me' in the present. Most other chapters dealt with me in the past.

Having heard about the book, some of my friends who did not read English suggested the book should be translated. At the beginning I was quite reluctant, maybe even apprehensive. The translator would have to be Yugoslav. But who? A professional translator? I did not like the idea. I just assumed it could only be me. Could I do it? I would need to be writing in my mother tongue Serbo-Croat. I would have to penetrate deeply and closely into my past self. How close would I get to the pain and trauma, I wondered. It felt unsettling. With time, I was slowly getting used to the idea that I would be writing again, i.e., translating the book (Levinger-Goy, 2022b). And then COVID and the lockdown came. Writing was a great way to occupy and distract myself! There were no contacts with people, at least none in person. The computer became my saviour; it became a means of connecting both with my present (mostly English) friends, and my past (mostly Yugoslav) friends. The process of writing in Serbo-Croat also turned out to be a connection between my present and my past selves. So I embarked on a process that felt like writing a new book. In a way, I was.[7] Or at least it was a different *me* writing the book.

While engaging with the translation my feelings turned out to be equally different—it was a different process full of different emotions. I was not calm anymore. I recognised that writing in English meant some sort of acknowledging, identifying, and processing my trauma, although not always reliving it. The presence of trauma in the 'Serbo-Croat me' was certainly acute, and more often than not it was a case of reliving it. The collective intergenerational trauma, as well as my more immediate trauma

[7] I managed to find a publisher in Serbia, and they approved of those changes in the text I found necessary since there were some explanatory elements redundant for Yugoslav readers and I also freshly remembered an odd detail that I wanted to add.

caused by the circumstances of a civil war[8] with its aftermath, were both in the forefront, although maybe not in an equally powerful way. The collective intergenerational trauma felt almost like a backdrop for the more recent one.

I guess while writing the English version, I tried to explain to myself what had happened, how it had happened, and even *why*. In a way it turned out to be an exploration of my past experiences from a distance. It was as if I was watching myself from afar; I analysed my erstwhile actions and reactions while dealing with unimaginable war circumstances as well as coping with my experiences of having refugee status (which for me was greatly unpleasant). However, during the process of translation I became immersed in the time and place from which I had fled. Distance was now even less possible than I had imagined. The trauma was awakened; the pain became sharp. I grew angry, bitter, and resentful. I became very aware of all my negative emotions. There were so many reasons for such feelings, so many trauma-inducing experiences evoked. One among many realisations was that during the Bosnian war I had voluntarily chosen to be an outcast because I had had no other choice, as Bogdan Rakić, a reviewer of the translation, aptly noted on the book jacket of the Serbian edition of the memoir (Levinger-Goy, 2022b). And nobody likes to be an outcast. Rakić further remarked, 'Memories of a tragic yet confined historic conflict becomes a bitter drama of a modern person attempting to restore the sense of personal dignity and humanity' [my translation]. Again, not an easy task.

Even though neither writing the original nor the translation of it were meant to be a form of self-therapy, I could not help but notice the different psychological and emotional reactions between both tasks. Linguistically, there were no specific limitations in either language, since my ability to express myself is more or less equal in both. However, the differences I noticed, both in me and in the process itself, genuinely astonished me. Although I was originally a linguist by profession, and I only later qualified as a psychotherapist, I did not expect such an outcome. But those two professions helped me recognise the phenomenon. As a linguist I researched about the close connection of personality traits or 'self', culture,

[8] Any form of war traumatises, but I feel a civil war is somehow more difficult in that there is no common enemy as such. Instead, former neighbours, friends, even family members become enemies. Also, the conflict erupts from within, unlike the case of invasion, where the enemy attacks from the outside; having an external enemy is less confusing. Survival, just as in every war, becomes the main, not easily attainable, goal, but in the case of a civil war, it is harder to identify where the threat is coming from.

and life events with language (or sometimes language variants). I had always known *theoretically* that identity/personality traits and language were closely connected, but *experiencing* the effect of the integration of my two identities/languages intrigued me. I now consider myself British of Yugoslav–Jewish origin. I am more or less bilingual in English and Serbo-Croat, yet I have not paid much attention to the deeper consequences of this development. The processes of both the writing and then translating of my memoir showed that the issue was much more complex than I had realised.

The first, and probably the biggest, surprise in writing was that English was the first language in which I chose to express my thoughts and feelings, not my mother tongue Serbo-Croat. The next was my deep reluctance to translate the book. It seemed as unreasonable, as was my later very strong desire to translate it. However, most amazing was that when both books came out, I was able to own both texts and everything that was in them. I realised with some pleasure that I had finally reached a kind of wholeness, which must have been a result of successful integration of two identities and two languages; I proudly owned the simultaneous presence of my English and my Serbo-Croat personalities, both modified by language as much as by the environment and circumstances.

I also recognised that even disregarding the trauma, in Serbo-Croat I was often unhappy and frustrated, that I often felt 'othered'. It was due not only to my Jewish origin that placed me in a minority group among few minority groups, but also to the nature of the Yugoslav environment, where eccentricity was mostly looked down upon, and I am somewhat eccentric. There were other mostly social/cultural factors that made my life in Yugoslavia more difficult than it should have been, but here is not the place to go into that. I did feel that I could not realise my full potential there, but I certainly did not flee my country to feel more accepted or realise my potential—I fled to save my life. I chose to come to the country I was familiar with (my BA is in English language and literature) and had frequently visited. However, this time I came to the UK with a heavy trauma load.

While translating the book, I felt that I had begun to offload the trauma; it was transferred from within, from my mind onto the paper, so to speak. It was pulled out. Sometimes I even felt I managed to step out of the narrative, despite being deeply immersed in the events. The narrative began to take on a life of its own, and I could almost watch myself within it. In writing the English version, I felt a pressing need to interpret, to

understand, to make sense, as much as possible. I was involved with the *narrative*, not so much with events. At that point I felt no anger.

However, the translating took me back. The process created a bridge between the past and the present, in spite of my feeling somewhat torn at the beginning. I needed closure with the past, I needed to look at the bridge from afar. I think it was for that purpose, while translating from English into Serbo-Croat, that I eventually I managed to acknowledge my anger and own it. The result was that my life turned into a reinforced bridge, paved with the analyses of issues, both past and present, supported by understanding, interpreting, and eventually owning them. It was a way to integrate my past self with my present self, creating a whole self rather than being fragmented. And it seems to be working. In the book, I talk about the three separate lives I had lived. Now it genuinely feels like one life of various, more or less dramatic, parts or of more or less different personality traits and bilingual, yet whole and mine! My English and Serbo-Croat 'personalities' coexist, and each has its place in my life. I live mostly using English. Only occasionally I use Serbo-Croat, and the Serbo-Croat personality traits re-emerge 'unscathed'.

My 'English self' grew very gradually. With time I noticed that I was less frustrated and more confident and self-assured in English. After a while, I realised I was free from fear, be it of military or any other authority. I also realised that I did not feel judged—I felt included; I was one of a huge number of people of various foreign origins. Although the country I fled to was in a way a country of my choice, adapting to the new life was neither easy nor smooth. My previous visits had been temporary, with the knowledge that there was home to go back to. When I fled to England, I had the difficult task of making that my home. But that was a conscious decision and the solution I opted for, having experienced bewildering and hugely traumatic changes in my home country. Or at least that was the way I perceived the unfortunate circumstances in what was Yugoslavia in the 1990s and my life afterwards.

A significant element, if not the most important one, was that I found love 'in English' and that my husband selflessly provided support and understanding. I discovered that I could breathe freely; that there was no need to defend, protect, or hide. Maturity helped as well, as did the fact that I was self-employed and independent. My English self finally, about a decade after fleeing the war-torn area, chose to process my trauma in therapy (unfortunately including bereavement due to my husband's sudden death). That was the first step toward bringing together my

fragmented parts. The book was a way to complete the process. The end result is my much calmer, content, and confident English self, albeit 'spiced up' with my more 'temperamental' Serbo-Croat self. I am at peace with myself—I finally gave myself permission to be my unadulterated self, and I feel I now know who I am.

Jasna Levinger-Goy *was born in Sarajevo, the former Yugoslavia. She received her BA in English language and literature from Sarajevo University, her MSc in linguistics from Georgetown University (Washington DC, USA) and her PhD in linguistics from Zagreb University. She worked as a university lecturer both at Sarajevo and Novi Sad universities, a lector for Serbo-Croat at SSEES, University College London, and a tutor in interpreting at Metropolitan University London. She has published several articles, mostly in the field of linguistics and psychotherapy.*

She came into the UK during the Bosnian civil war. She later married Cambridge University Slavist Edward Dennis Goy and worked on various translations with him, including two major Yugoslav novels. After his death, she qualified as an integral psychotherapist and now has a private practice in Cambridge.

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