



Ursula Owen

Apprenticeship in assimilation

Closing speech at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals

Assimilation is a dirty word in multicultural politics. But as a child of German–Jewish immigrants growing up in postwar Britain, it was what Ursula Owen most desired. The sense of being different, she says, only became an advantage later in life, as she became confident enough to reinvent herself through language.



Cultural diversity is on everyone's mind at the moment, and some astonishing things are going on. The debate about wearing the veil in Britain is one of them. What we can be pretty sure about is that attacking religion and its customs is not the answer to difficulties about integration and immigrant communities. The real threat to a mixed society will come when the mainstream, moderate–voiced Muslims in particular, and all immigrants in general, have lost all hope of feeling at home.

Of course the re–entry of religion into political life is something we could not have predicted even fifteen years ago. It has certainly made the issue of multiculturalism in Britain more complicated. Has multiculturalism failed? Some people think so. In order for it to succeed, it requires equality of respect and equal resources for different communities, and that doesn't happen.

But my subject here is assimilation, one of the ways in which some immigrants have attempted to integrate into their host societies. How does one feel at home as an immigrant? By hanging on to one's identity? Creating a new one? But then it's not just a question of identity — we all have, after all, many identities.

Assimilation has always been a dirty word. There was a certain amount of contempt in the world I grew up in at the very idea. German Jews were always thought of as inclined to assimilation, usually for the worst of reasons, partly because that's what they'd attempted in their mother country.

But is assimilation such a bad idea? I'm not so sure. I don't think it saves much of the pain of being an immigrant, an outsider, because it has its own pains. But if we want to bring commonalities into a diverse society, how are we to see a city like London, where over 200 different languages are spoken in its schools, where you find 70 per cent of a class of nine–year–olds who have great difficulty speaking or understanding English? Or what do we feel about families in which the wife and mother speaks no English and relies on her children for shopping and all social communication with her non–immigrant neighbours?

Is it such a bad thing for immigrants to learn certain habits of fitting in, language at the very least? Or is integration or assimilation a process so full of anxiety that the price — a certain loss of identity — is too high to pay? But what is identity anyway? I was one of the world's great assimilators, and, yes, it involved a lot of anxiety, among other things such as pleasure and curiosity and observing how other people feel and live. But I suspect I was also doing what a lot of people do when they're growing up — learning to be myself — though I had at least in part to create a new self, the kind of process that Eva Hoffman describes so brilliantly in *Lost in Translation*.

As I write, I'm not sure about all this, and when I was re-reading the piece I wrote some years ago about assimilation I'm aware how confused I still feel about these issues.

What I do think is that we're living in a slightly mad world where politicians rush in where angels fear to tread. Where in some cities different communities are living parallel lives with no points of contact, where it's becoming very difficult to distinguish between cultural pride and cultural defiance in the face of undoubted prejudice.

Anyway, for better or for worse, I'm going to tell my assimilation story. I should preface it with two things: first, I am white, which makes my attempts at assimilation particular. Secondly, when the story was first published, a lot of people who were entirely British wrote to me and said: that's my story too. So perhaps we all feel outsiders in one way or another. Perhaps we even want to.

I seem to start my apprenticeship in assimilation in the womb. My parents are German Jews, born in Frankfurt in the first decade of this century. Neither family is Orthodox and both are highly assimilated into German bourgeois life. My family has never denied their Jewishness. On the contrary, my parents often made a point of it, even after they became converts to Christianity. No one in my wider family supports the Zionist movement; many of them see assimilation as a positive good. It is easy to dismiss this as a craven desire to belong, but nothing as simple as that makes sense.

Is it justified to feel an exile in a country to which I came at the age of 18 months? In fact, the odd thing is that I have felt so English for so many years. My parents spoke with strong German accents and small English vocabularies, we ate German food, our social and family life is almost entirely German in its patterns and habits. Looking back, I see how hard I work at being a little English girl. I live a double life without being conscious of it. It isn't until I am in my twenties that I really begin to understand I am in an important way a foreigner. And it isn't until my late thirties that I begin to see that being an outsider is a sort of gift, bringing a particular sort of energy for which I am grateful. It takes me some time, too, to realise that politics entered my life long before I had the faintest notion of what politics was.

The English are, after all, a decent people, and they will give some people refuge from some situations, sometimes. But, like most host nations, they have problems when immigrants stand out, don't become enough like them, don't fit in. In 1989, I hear the historian Bill Williams give a talk on Jewish immigration to Britain at the turn of the century. He describes a list that was produced by the indigenous *Jewish* community for the new immigrants, telling them what to avoid — speaking their own language in public places, talking loudly in buses, wearing the wrong clothes — in other words anything that made them appear un-English. Nothing changes much.

My parents discover this very early. We, their children, will be their English representatives in their new-found land. They will not try to be English themselves — they are shrewd enough to know they'll never succeed. Ours is a bilingual household — they speak German to us, we speak English back. We learn each other's languages and, much later, I realise I don't feel quite at home in English, that I speak in translation more than I thought.

I turn out to be a brilliant assimilator. A conformist child, I take to it like a duck to water. I am duly embarrassed on buses with my relatives, who do talk loudly, sometimes in German. My parents' conversion to Christianity soon after they arrive in England must help, though I am not greatly conscious of it. My parents are confirmed at the same time as we are christened and my mother actually teaches Sunday School in St Mary's, Oxford, when we are evacuated there.

At school, I am extremely shy and very silent. An early report says "Ursula seems to be an intelligent girl but she does not speak." In my teens I gravitate towards the most English of friends. But I also live a sort of split life, becoming close to two girls whose parents have also come from Nazi Germany, and spending time with their families. They make me feel uneasy. The accents, the food, the aspirations — they are deeply familiar, and yet they jar. I am busy with my apprenticeship in assimilation. They are not the root to belonging.

I work hard too at trying to be a success at the local tennis club, to acquire boyfriends who are the essence of Englishness, to be a star at the youth club dance, to make jokes in the best colloquial English. Socially, my teenage life seems to me a failure. I am too shy and awkward. I don't speak a lot and I apologise too often. I don't have the patter, the inflections, the speedy responses (I still don't). I don't dress right, still much under the influence of my parents, who remain resolutely continental and old-fashioned in their tastes.

I grow up feeling confusion about what language can do. My parents express nuance and humour in German. But my attempted subtleties are earnestly imitated from friends. I have no real confidence in my ability to express precisely what I am feeling. I use words experimentally, testing them out on what I think of as my critical audience. (I was well into my thirties when an irritated friend told me that I used swear words as if I was a child, with a desire to shock but without any real conviction. I was shaken as much by her irritation as by her insight.)

When Eva Hoffman's book *Lost in Translation* comes out in 1989, I feel an extraordinary lurch of recognition:

My speech, I sense, sounds monotonous, deliberate, heavy — an aural mask that doesn't become me or express me at all. This willed self control is the opposite of real mastery, which comes from a trust in your own verbal powers and allows for those bursts of spontaneity, the quickness of response, that can rise into pleasure and over-flow in humour. Laughter is the lightning rod of play, the eroticism of conversation; for now, I've lost the ability to make the sparks fly [...] I become a very serious young person, missing the registers of wit and irony in my speech, though my mind sees ironies everywhere.

Even so late in my life, when I think I have dealt with much of all this, I am

deeply comforted by reading about something so recognisable, and still surprisingly painful.

Surely I exaggerate these feelings? After all, I enjoy my school life, I am popular, I have friends. And I get pleasure from some of the things I am good at. All children have to assimilate to something and I am not unique in this respect. But I am precarious in particular ways. I am not making sense of the two worlds that I am growing up in. I am never sure why people like me or whether they will go on liking me, whether I will go on being clever or in the school teams. One skin too few, someone once said about me. I need too much to be part of things, things I don't feel are available to me. Much later, of course, I want to discard a lot, some of the very things I wanted so much to belong to then.

Influence is even more significant for us than it might be for an English family. My parents, like all parents, want things for their children, but perhaps more ardently and anxiously because we are the outward and visible signs of their success in coping with exile. I suspect they listen out very intently for signals. It isn't easy to read them. There's class, for instance. I go to an overwhelmingly middle-class school, but befriend someone from a more lower-middle-class family who lives in my street. One awful day we dare each other to hide under my mother's bed and watch her dress. We're bound to be caught, and so we are. My parents are shocked and angry, but the brunt of their anger is for my friend, who they say is vulgar and a bad influence. She is from the wrong class. They more or less forbid me to see her, and I capitulate. I do not like being disapproved of. Looking back, I see that they were truly afraid. They were immigrants and so had even less control than other parents over what was happening in their children's lives because they didn't know what to look for.

I make up for my lapse. I am diligent. I am reasonably clever, but have to work hard to stay at the top end of the class. I throw myself into sporting activities. I am successful at being a Good Girl and an achiever, and it keeps some of my sense of otherness at bay. It is precarious and I never feel really safe. Of course, aspirations to be good are not uncommon in girls, and there are many pressures to be so. But I am representing more than myself. I have my parents' desires to consider. They want to give us a new world and for us to create a new life and at that time I believed that I should act in response to their desires. In retrospect I am moved by their attempts to help us on our way to being English.

But there are drawbacks to these efforts. For a long time, and always recurrently, I don't know how to judge things, don't have a sense of certainty, of a structure against which to measure things, for myself. I have no sense of the normal. I am often sure I'm not normal, and I want to be, badly. All my life, especially when the going gets tough, I try and assess myself against such normality. It's a hopeless task, and not fruitful. But it's hard to give up. And it sometimes produces a sort of obsessive frozenness about decisions.

And sometimes I rebelled against these attempts to assimilate. In my teens I often go and stay with a Jewish friend and her family in Golders Green. I love their Friday night ceremonies and long to have them in my life. It's another kind of certainty and I try it out on myself. It never lasts much beyond the visits, but it's a sort of recognition that there are other worlds which I could join.

When I leave home, I decide that I am going to reinvent myself. I will be free of difficult family circumstances and uncertain cultural messages. I will create myself from scratch. Oddly enough, this crazy project helps me to gain confidence. Spontaneity has not been my strong suit so far but I begin to feel freer to discover things. And I no longer feel so responsible to others for my behaviour.

I still want to be part of the mainstream, but here is a stream that is something to do with me as a separate person. Some part of me decides that reinventing myself will involve using language. I begin to talk less tentatively, to try out new words more confidently. I become intoxicated with words, discover what I think by saying it out loud, worry less about getting things wrong. I feel I might have a place in the scheme of things.

Somehow my opinions and feelings begin to belong to me. There is still a sense of danger: if I let go the opinions I think I ought to have, it would be to acknowledge that I can never be an insider, ever. But even that begins to seem an acceptable possibility. There seems to be a bit of a turning point in my apprenticeship. I'm beginning to stop listening out to how things are, to stop trying to fit in so much, to need to belong. I start to recognise some advantages in a sense of displacement, though it will be a long time before I revel in my difference. And even longer before I can look more objectively at how my family coped with living in a new world.

But as I write about this change I wonder whether taking on one's own past can ever ring true. My retrospective understanding of my apprenticeship in assimilation seems to teeter on the edge of a fiction. Perhaps it's because I am putting together this story from fragments. My memories come in fits and starts. It is often the briefest, oddest incidents that stand out, sharp and powerful, and that seem to me to demonstrate larger truths about the past. I am comforted by what Salman Rushdie says: "Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved, perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely."

Perhaps the difficult part comes later. What became of this person who tried so hard to belong and who begins, in complicated ways, to like being an outsider?



This article is based on the closing speech at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in London from 27–30 October 2006. Parts of the text are extracted from an article of the same name, published in Andrew Motion, Candice Rodd (eds), New Writing, 1994.

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