

David Albahari **The Exiled Fragments**

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1

With the fall of the Berlin wall exile was exiled from Europe. Unfortunately, it was not exiled from the other parts of the world but it might – who knows? – some day totally evaporate from the terrestrial globe. This is at the moment hard to imagine as it is hard to imagine Europe without exiles in the 60s and 70s of the last century. The charm of history is the fact that it flows regardless of all expectations: "I can't believe it." or "I would never have guessed." are rhythmical mantras to which history dances its tiptoe dance. On our toes, not on its own.

2

Is it possible to write about the exile experience, if you yourself did not experience the fact of exile? On one hand the answer can be affirmative because it is not necessary for writing – like any other creative activity – to be based on direct experience: a man can, for instance, write about childbirth as well as a woman can write about some man's passions that don't exist in a woman's world. Literature is, in other words, stronger than reality and this is the reason why it can never be objective. Presentation of exile can be challenging but it doesn't succeed in accomplishing the reality of exile or of what an exile has to deal with every single day and night. In other words, do I have the right to continue after declaring not being an exile at the beginning of the next fragment?

3

I'm not an exile. An exile is only the one who has to go; the one who is ordered to leave a city or a country or literature in which he used to live; the one who can only take as many things as can be put in one or two suitcases or who leaves

without anything except of what he managed to keep inside of himself, in his memory; the one who has no time to say goodbye; the one who in the clattering of carriage's wheels or roaring of aircraft's engine recognises things for which, at least at the moment, he is not sure he will ever hear again; and the one who, intentionally or unintentionally cannot master the thought of revenge because he already knows – although his exile has not yet begun – he will not feel well as an exile.

In autumn 1994, when I came to Canada, they interviewed me for a local newspaper and at some point I said I'm a "voluntary exile". The journalist who was speaking to me was up to this moment somewhat disappointed for he didn't hear the story he was hoping for: the story about an artist who was at odds with the authorities and who – not willing to give up the fight for the truth – decided to sacrifice everything he has created. This uncompromising and incorruptible artist, as the journalist imagined, became so disturbing for the government, for the hidden dictatorship, that the government didn't have any other choice than buying him a one-way ticket. This was by all means cheaper than an international scandal, which would have broken out if the government got rid of his unwanted presence. Exiles are, as I could read from the journalist's eyes, living dead, victims who managed to escape the sharpness of the hangman's axe or the pressure of a snare in the last second. An then I said I'm a "voluntary exile"; the journalist became excited, he ordered another beer and I also felt a little more at ease as if I would be curled up in a warm blanket, as if I ensured myself others will take care of me. "Look at me", my statement spoke: "I'm the one who survived the deep-seated evil of the Balkan retardation. I'm the one who escaped the forces of darkness and chaos. Take me and take care of me for if you protect me, there is still hope you will protect all others and yourselves." If nothing else, I made the journalist happy.

"Voluntary exile" is of course an absurd term. Exile is in itself compulsory and if it is voluntary, then it is not exile for one doesn't go in exile at one's choice - one is sent into exile. Grammatically speaking, exile is a passive state, a passive form that spends the whole time trying to become the active form of the verb "live" which never succeeds completely. I must admit that most of dictionaries describing the word "exile" allow the possibility for exile to be voluntary and this does no good for my statement. I nevertheless insist in my conviction that "exile" can only be a forced category. The one who decides to go; the one who chooses and leaves his country can't be called an exile for, if nothing else, one thing is for sure - an exile can namely not choose.

What about an apatrid? Am I an apatrid if I'm not an exile? This makes the whole situation even more complicated. Most of the dictionaries describe apatridness as leaving the homeland and they strongly indicate the act of giving up the loyalty to one's country. Does this mean that exile is a form of leaving, where the loyalty to the country, which prosecutes an exile is not even questionable; does it mean that an exile is not at the same time also an apatrid or that an apatrid and an exile are two totally different phenomena? Or is this just another proof of the Babylonian language chaos, another proof of a language choking on its incapability of being accurate?

I presume that at least some explanations for this chaos derive from parts of the word which became part of the word during the development of language. The word "exile" derives from the Latin word "exilium", meaning prosecution, as well as from the word "exul", meaning an *exile person*, or - and in my opinion this is very important for the chaos - *a person wandering*. When we add the fact of the preliminary word being composed of the prefix "ex-", meaning *from* or *out of*, and the base "salio" - *jump*, deriving from the Sanskrit "sar"-*go* - then there is a greater possibility for the word "exile" to contain the basic level of the meaning or that it on one level describes mostly the movement, bound carrying a man from one world into another, where wandering -spiritual and physical- is basically the only form of his resting. Such definition of "exile" - regardless of how overestimated and by all means how hard to explain it may be (in fact inexplicable!) using one single word - I could accept myself and would still call myself an "exile"; still, there is a question of how many people would actually be prepared to listen to a story of Latin and Sanskrit word-bases. Nobody believes linguists anyway.

What am I trying to do? I'm trying to escape from the definition of exile coloured with political thinking which determined the way we accepted the term "an exile" in the second half of the 20th century. This kind of exile - let's name it political exile in this case - has completely changed the image of the true essence of exile, prosecution, absence from the frame of what made a man for what he is. The fate of exile in the 20th century seen as something inseparably connected with the political arrangement or with inner dissident and this became the only criteria to identify a person as an exile. With this, the traditional definition of exile as an inexorable human faith, trembling of the mythical prosecution from paradise as in Judea-Christianity, or tossing in a cursed circle of reincarnation as in Eastern definitions, is being pushed away. In the 20th century, the whole spectrum of a

human being was narrowed to his political conviction and of the whole colourful richness of our faith only the black and white world of politics has remained.

The political exile led to another thing noticed by Joseph Brodsky.ⁱ It changed the usual life path of an exile, it changed what exists already from the mythical times and it led from better to worse. A man is banished from paradise and sentenced to live in a dark, uncertain world; from the civilised Rome he had to go among the Barbarians, he was sent from empire to colonies: in short, exile meant that the defeated was sent to places where living conditions were incomparably more difficult; he crashed from the top into thorns. In the second half of the 20th century this life path was changed because "from tyranny" as Brodsky said, "a man can only be exiled into democracy". The path of exile doesn't lead only downwards in the direction of always stronger glowing circles of hell, but also upwards in the direction of the glow of freedom". In other words, the political exile doesn't restrict a man and it doesn't encroach upon his basic rights like in old times, but it frees him and gives him everything that he would never have had where he came from. When we realize this, the tragedies we heard from many writers - political exiles -, get a sad modulation of falseness and hypocrisy or they become, citing Brodsky again "tragicomedies". An exile writer is satisfied with what he got, although he is much more desperate about what he has lost - he got security and certainty although he became yet another one of those nameless residents in a democratic country. Exile actually made him socially unimportant which is the destiny of many artists in democratic systems and in the end he will probably become a strict critic of democracy although this time his sharp critics will not derive from observing common injustice but will be built on the basis of his personal dissatisfaction.

Finally, all of this may not even be so important. Exile contains in its essence something of the fact of leaving, a kind of bounding or jumping out which removes a writer (let us finally concentrate on writers!) from his natural environment, from his first residence. In the case where exile is defined as the act of leaving, regardless of what caused it, ideology is not important anymore and we get closer to the essence of living in a different environment: in a writer's language. Brodsky puts it nicely: "Exile is mostly a linguistic event", an event in which a writer ejects himself totally from his language and then surrounded by another language he totally withdraws back into his own language. Exile, says Brodsky, tremendously speeds up a writer's withdrawal into isolation, "into state where a man stays by himself and his language, without anybody or anything between them." Brodsky uses a metaphor and compares a writer in exile with a dog or a man sent into space in a capsule and this capsule is actually his language.

And he adds, which I think is very important: his language was until then his sword has become his shield, his capsule, his last defence. So, regardless of destiny, story or ideological implications that were predecessors of the act of leaving, regardless of differences that may be present, every writer who decides (or for whom someone else decides) to live abroad ends the same: as a prisoner in the tower of his language.

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To a certain extent this clinging to a language cannot be avoided. In a new environment, where everything is slippery and incatchable and mostly in a total disharmony with the coordinates of culture from the hometown, the mother tongue is the only safe refuge. A writer doesn't withdraw to his language to protect himself from the good or bad influences of this new environment, but to get the confirmation from the sonority and structure of his language that after all he has not yet changed. To stay the same is the mantra he is living now, this is the hope he can't lose. This is also the explanation for why the experience of exile (or in the widest sense the experience of absence) very quickly changes to an almost unbearable frustration: with coming to a new environment the unstoppable process of changing begins and everything in a man longs to stay unchanged, longs to stay like he was before he came.

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When - after 8 years of living outside my homeland and my language - I'm trying to resume my experience, the first word on my mind is "liberation". I don't mean the feeling of liberation from the pressure of every day's troubles in a war-shaken Yugoslavia but the feeling of liberation from the pressure of the local literary practice and theory. When a young writer enters the literary life, he doesn't think that the game, which will last for many decades, is starting and that in time he will take a specific place in the critics' and readers' visions on literature; a place he won't be able to change, just like he won't be able to change the role the literary and cultural observers and critics will give him.

This role, at first interesting and attractive, changes to an almost unbearable hoop and the main result is that a writer - like most artists - craves such works as he is expected to. In the course of time it gets harder and harder to get out of the sphere of these expectations and writers who try to change radically come across incomprehension or they start using pseudonyms. Leaving Belgrade made such a change possible: suddenly it became totally unimportant, if everything I do is in accordance with the reviews of my literary work. I didn't have to trouble and each and every time confirm my loyalty to post modernism and poetics of serridity, especially to the short story. I could write everything I wanted and however I wanted, I could as well write a new literary play, totally in accordance with the demands of post modernism. This feeling of endless creative freedom is for me

more important and more valuable than all possible negative aspects of literary life abroad (which are not, this is clear, the same for each artist) and sufficient enough to convince me that exile, especially if we can imagine it as "voluntary", is for a writer actually good and valuable.

Saying this I mean most of all the art of writing, the professional extension of a writer's work. Brodsky finds the praise for the experience of exile on a different level - he says exile teaches writers modesty: "Being lost in humanity, in mound - mound? - between billiards; becoming a needle in the proverbial haystack - but a needle someone is searching for - this is the essence of exile." Exile warns a writer that if he wants to be a writer, he has to free himself from his vanity and he shouldn't value himself according to his colleagues but according to human infinity. Well, as Brodsky finishes, maybe this is the reason why most of the exiles don't think so; maybe this is also the reason why not more writers decide to go into exile. The vanity fair is better visited than the modesty monastery.

The negative aspects of literary life abroad are, of course, not the same for every writer. What pleases one artist - like the feeling of creative freedom I have mentioned - can gather upon another artist like an unbearable pain. It's not long ago since I have read a text, full of exile wrath, where a writer, who came to Canada from Iraq or maybe Iran, talks about how in his country even the taxi-drivers knew his poems by heart and here, in Canada, nobody reads his works and the worst of all, there is nobody to write for. Even Brodsky, despite of good financial status and appreciations believed that poets in democracy don't get enough attention and that the world would be a better place if poem collections were published (and read, of course) in million editions. On the other hand, shortly after I arrived to Canada and told a local writer how happy I am because I'm invisible and far away from the pressure of public, who keeps inviting writers, he sadly looked at me and said that as a writer he dreams of how sometimes public would like to hear his opinion. Of course I told him he should think about going abroad but I saw in his no longer sad eyes he didn't take me seriously.

Incapability to define the term exile is becoming an obstacle for a whatsoever conclusion on exile. In other words, exile always exists only in one specimen, for exile represents an experience contrary to what forms a person from the inside. There are no common contents as there is no common exile. In a writer's case exile can be described as the act of living outside a language; however, literary history provides a great number of writers who were, for number of reasons,

creative in the environment of other languages as well as in other language. Would Joyce really be Joyce, if he weren't an "exile"? What is the tragedy of Nabokov's "exile", mostly after his transition to writing in English? Were all the American writers who lived and worked in Paris "exiles"? What about the South-African writers living in London? With all writers from different countries who live and work at American universities? Are there writers who were not able to write in "exile"? Can a writer be in "exile" at all, regarding the fact that he always carries his tool - his language - with him? Did "exile" in the 20th century serve as a good opportunity for ideological fights between two apparently irreconcilable opponents? Of course it did but paths always led from East to West and never in the opposite direction.

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As time passes by and as this text passes by it seems like I keep returning to the fact that the essence of exile consists of a significant level regarding wandering over and over again. It is possible that this level shifts borders between forced and voluntary absence and it indicates the inevitability of spiritual wandering. Besides all, this level connects the Judea-Christian myth about banishment from paradise, making us all eternal exiles, with the antique Greek myth about Odysseus, making us all eternal wanderers. An exile, a wanderer, a writer - are these synonyms, borderers on the same path?

17

I don't want anyone to think I don't have respect for a painful life of an exile, regardless to what his departure was effected by - as Brodsky noticed - apparent suffering of exiled writers vanishes in comparison with the real suffering of the army of refugees and emigrants (who are also exiles) cruising around the world. What I am trying to express is the writer's point of view, for a writer doesn't suffer from going into exile, not even when it happens contrary to his will. The suffering he faces afterwards is the most common suffering burdening every exile, regardless of his profession - loneliness, dissatisfaction, nostalgia, wrath, isolation, drowning in silence. In a writer's case one can always say that exile brings a tragic separation from readers, although this is only a generalisation, which doesn't hold for the majority of authors. Many East-European writers, who in the 20th century found themselves in the forced exile, didn't have a large circle of readers and, if at all, were published in very small or separate editions and in only couple of copies. Maybe it is more appropriate to say that many writers came to a larger number of readers thanks to exile and publicity connected with it. A certain part was also played by the political backgrounds which were contrary to the act of exile - a kind of a fight between the "free" and the "captured" world. Thus, a writer in exile very quickly discovers some advantages of his situation as well, including the fact that in the most cases he is living in one of the world's

cultural centres like Paris, London, Berlin or New York. This will, regarding the fact he is in the mixture of different creative influences, help him to a better understanding of the complexity of a human being he is trying to describe.

We could as well say that every writer is by nature actually an exile, even when he stays in his homeland and his language. Independently of whether a writer wants it or not, the only way to acknowledge what he is describing is, at least during the writing, to loosen up from his subject or to take a stand from which he will be observing - with critical or praising eyes - individuals and society that will be displayed on the pages of his book. In other words, a writer must be "an exile" so he can be a real writer and this also in cases in which he is a folk writer living among so called common people. On this point, a careful reader could turn my attention to apparent contradictions of my text: I've said earlier the "voluntary exile" doesn't exist and now I'm talking about something one could easily understand as a statement that "voluntary exile" is a prerequisite for the artistic creativeness. I admit there is some truth in this, even though what I wanted to say regards mostly the writer's observation role. In this sense, every observer is a kind of "an exile" and if he himself doesn't see himself this way, then it is of a great possibility "the observed ones" will nevertheless see him as an exile. A writer is therefore "an exile" standing aloof from everything and looking at paradise he was exiled from, or maybe at hell he was exiled from, repeating the already mentioned Judea-Christian myth about banishment. Later on, when a writer will start writing, he will become Odysseus, for works arise from wandering in the fields of spirit or through the treasures of language in the eternal longing for the return. In the eternal wish for exile to stop.

It is enough to only superficially look through the richness of literature on exile to realize that the term "exile" is used for various categories of emigrants, including the ones who voluntarily leave their homeland in searching for a better life. Political exiles, emigrant, immigrants, displaced persons, refugees, homeless people, who really fit in these different categories, seem to be a part of a unique population and so "an exile" and "exile" become indicative for everybody who doesn't live in the country where he was born. While this confusion may not even be so important in cases when we are generally speaking about smaller and bigger migrations of the world population, it may as well, if I'm not mistaken, of course, be intolerable when it comes to writers. If we call every writer who is not living in the country where he was born "an exile", then we must distinguish between a couple of categories. There are, for instance, writers who were truly exiled and who had to leave their homeland even if they didn't want to. Then, there are writers who chose to leave, convinced that changes brought by wars or

revolutions wouldn't be to their benefit; there are writers among them who still write in their mother tongue and there are also others who write in the language of their new homeland. There are also writers who haven't been writers when they left their homeland (mostly because they were still children) but became writers in the newly acquired language. Finally, there are also writers who, for different reasons, without war or rusted political declaration, decided to live in another country and who mostly stayed loyal to their mother tongue. If the question about exile refers also to the question of choosing between language, wouldn't it then be appropriate to consider writers in multi-ethnic countries who don't write in their language but in the language of their country as well? Is then, for example, an exile writer from Vojvodina writing in Serbian of Hungarian or Rumanian origin? And are exiles also all writers of Jewish origin (of whom the majority doesn't even speak any of the official Jewish languages) living all over the world and writing in languages they call their mother tongue, even though they are not Jewish? All these objective and subjective categories are mentioned only to show how searching for the real exile writers is a very painful and according to everything also a hopeless and hard work because we can for almost every writer say he is, in one way or another, an exile.

20

The most common thing to write about exile is the fact all exiles are looking for their homeland (to re-create or totally destroy it) in the country they are living in and that mostly, in spite of the change of the living environment, they long for things to stay the same, to stay unchanged. It is also expected from all exiles to be compulsively retrospective and therefore obsessed with memories, "they see double, feel double, become double". For them everything has two sides and "exile, just like love, is not only a state of pain but also a state of betrayal".² However, none of this makes a writer in exile different from a writer who is not in exile.

21

The most appropriate thing to say is that every written text, every poem or story is in fact a record of exile, because, while writing, an author exiles them away from himself, he forbids them to return to their country and condemns them to eternal wandering. Every single word is an exile and it is completely the same where the one who is speaking is located.

22

A writer lives in his language and regarding this fact he is like a turtle; he always carries his house with himself. From this point of view, he can never be an exile. To be an exile, a writer doesn't have to be exiled from his language but the

language must be exiled from him and afterwards nothing really matters. A writer will, in this way or another, not be alive anymore.

In the second half of the 20th century the West praised exile, for it was a sign of triumph of its ideology over the ideology of the Eastern Europe. The polarised relationship between East and West has changed and therefore exile is not fashionable anymore. Words like "an exile", "a refugee", "a displaced person" are almost not heard anymore; people are now talking about the world as a global village, through which the New Nomads are travelling. "The basic change", as Eva Hofman noticed, "is that exile and the group of mental and emotional experiences connected with it, have a positive sign. Exile used to be a difficult situation. It included dislocation, disorientation, partition of a human being. Today, on the other hand, at least in the theory of the post modernism, we appreciate those quality experiences required by exile: uncertainty, extirpation, identity's fragmentariness. In this concept, exile is becoming sexy, glamorous, interesting. The Nomadism and diaspora became fashionable terms in intellectual conversations."³ These are, of course, serious warnings that not only show how we are no longer living in a world strictly divided in two opposite political blocks, in two political ideas, but that we are living in a world without clearly defined borders and territories according to which an exile could define himself. In such a world there is also no clear idea about home, house anymore, because this world says home is no longer a fixed place on our mental map. A Nomad cannot be an exile, for the act of nomadic travelling in itself, changing the world into a fluid creation, represents the destruction of exile that can only exist where area points are fixed and unchangeable. In the end, there are no clear answers, only new dilemmas. If the human heart and the human home are inseparably connected, like Dorothy from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* suspects, and if in the nomadic life there is no home, where is then our heart? And if there is no home - can literature or art in general - exist without nostalgia? Are Nomads really freed from nostalgia? And can the whole world really be our home?

Ah, nostalgia! Ah, the huge wave that washes away everything and changes a man into a slave to memories and into a slave to longing for home.

The restitutive nostalgia forces a man to build the lost home and homeland with the "paranoia determination"; the reflected nostalgia passionately brings a man to fear the return, it brings him to surrender to longing, pain and loss. Nostalgia that can be "as well a society's disease as a creative emotion, a poison and a medicine"; introduction to move back and stimulation to move forward. If there is one thing common to all exiles then this is without a doubt nostalgia. Still, nostalgia doesn't define every writer in exile and for some it is the main stimulation, as for example

for Nabokov, and some writers don't even notice it and don't write about it in their works.⁴ This is yet another confirmation that, when it comes to exile writers, one cannot generalise because every single writer reacts to the experience of absence and living in other environment in his own, very unpredictable way.

By the way, the announcement of nomadic regulations is present also in the words spoken by Thomas Mann, when he himself was in exile: "Exile has become totally different as it used to be; it is no longer a state of waiting, programmed for the final return, but it predicts the decay of nations and uniting the world."⁵

Exile is not only a teacher of modesty; living in another environment enables a writer to directly experience and deeply feel the experience of another culture, in some cases even of more cultures. Eva Hofman says this experience warns a writer to the fact that even the most natural aspects of our identities are not something given but something constructed and something that can be formed and arranged in totally different ways. It also gives an impression of liberation from vice of the narrow, one-national viewpoint on the world. Cross-breeding of perspectives, comparison of traditions, looking at personal and common in a different light are the virtues shaped in exile and which enable a writer to restrain the feeling of loss and being lost and actually to revive his creativeness. In this sense, exile is a sort of a purifying ritual for all those who are willing to let themselves go and are not afraid of changes.

Exile, and this has to be stressed, also has negative sides. An exile is nevertheless a cast-away on an ice cube, a cast-away who can as well freeze or drown, if the ice cube melts away.

Exile is also a kind of a drug; it is ravishing and seducing and when it becomes a habit, it loses all attraction. Exile can be fatal for everyone who cannot see the clear distinction between the real and the fantasy world or who make a cutting edge between these two worlds and every move they make causes pain. In the end, exile also represents a greater or smaller loss and this means it leads to destruction of an exile's inner balance. An exile has a constant feeling of regression and decay even if he is making progress.

One can write about exile only out of his own experience. So, I presume, my text sounds more like a praise and not as a sad song or a warning like the most

frequently intoned texts on the exile fate. I don't know if it is possible to set some general characteristics of exile, but in a writer's case exile can only be seen as a positive experience. A writer as a human being doesn't have to feel fine in a strange environment but as a writer he has to be afraid. The exile experience can only help him understand the world and the essence of a human being more clearly. It won't make him a better person overnight, this is for sure, but it will help him to notice the cultural, historical and ideological similarities and differences more clearly and he will find more convincing ways of presenting the reality and gain certainty in his writing. The only thing he will have to get rid of is his nationalistic consciousness (if he is already its victim), although it is very hard to get over this illness anywhere in the terrestrial globe. Such a writer will probably not think about going to exile for he feels sick just by thinking about foreigners who can disturb his "clean" consciousness or if he will be forced to leave, he will probably return as soon as he'll get the first chance. For the others, exile will stay the narrow passage to the fullness of the world and identification with language - i.e. to the goals every writer aims for.

Exile is, of course, much more complicated and complex as I have presented it, but I wasn't interested in numerous sociological and cultural aspects. I was only interested in the question if exile can be seen exclusively as a stimulation for writing. Exile is surely - as many writers have noticed - always more appealing as a poetic image than a realistic experience. It also has to be stressed that it is not necessary for exile to be build on nostalgia or stories about the fictional homelands.

Svetlana Boym writes about a double consciousness as the main distinction of exile and about a double exposition of different times and spaces, as well as about the eternal separation regardless of how much these items are interesting and enable interesting explanations. They are actually not restricted to the experience of exile. It is not necessary to leave one country and go to another to find himself in the net of the double consciousness and parallel images: the same experience can have someone who leaves a village or a smaller town to a metropolis city and this experience can be associated with a certain feeling of language duality, if the dialects are visibly different. Every change of a city, every transition from one environment to another, every "out-jump" (ex-salire) is the act of exile and in all of this a writer can't play any authorised role. We are all exiles; the only difference is that a writer, thanks to his artistic skill of dealing with words, can describe his feelings.

In the end, as I've already said, nostalgia is actually everything that is left from exile. This absurd longing for home, this yearning for what we tried to escape

from, this fading of the soul, this hopeless belief in the unchangeable ... All the exiles from the horrors of communism, totalitarianism, dictatorship, civil wars, poverty and hunger, who, somewhere in the "shining West" dream of happiness that, contrary to all beliefs, fulfilled them, where they, after definition, should be unhappy. Happiness and unhappiness are flexible terms, just like exile and their unreliability is their the most existent constant.

I have never liked texts where authors wrote like being highly superior beings over the things they write about. In other words, I don't speak about nostalgia and exile like I haven't been touched by them or because I'm superior to them. On the contrary, as majority of the Nomads, I am paying the price to nostalgia. I don't allow it, and this is the truth, to overcome my thoughts and my behaviour, but I did let it leave some traces. There are three postcards of Belgrade on our refrigerator door: all three, as I've just noticed, show Belgrade by night; all three show as the most important the river Sava and its bridges; the city, colourfully painted in the stars of lighting and neon lights, rests in the background. I also have a large postcard of Zemun in my study - a typical Zemun sight: the view from Gardoš towards Danube and Belgrade - accompanied by a large black and white photograph of one of the Zemun's city doors, probably from the Jovan Zmaj Street. There are also some details: traces, photographs, books, little stones, articles from newspapers, but there are no complete reconstructions of the past and this is - if I'm not mistaken - the real reflection of nostalgia. Such is, for example, a bookshelf of an acquaintance of mine, on which - although the shelf was bought here - books are arranged in exactly the same way as they were in his apartment in Vračar. Such complex constructions are also the rejections of a young woman from Sarajevo, to accept anything from the everyday life here: all her daily rituals - from drinking "Turkish coffee" in the morning, to preparing only "our" dishes for lunch and baking her own bread ("because people here don't know what bread really is"), to a compulsory watching videotapes with "our" serials and musical acts - have the goal to completely push away the reality and change it with the conviction that it is possible to be in two places at the same time, There and Here. The life is, of course, There, somewhere else; this Here is only a shady existence, necessity not worth remembering. The meaning is hiding in expecting the return, in an act, which will, in some magical way, restore the past as if nothing ever happened.

First, the Berlin wall fell and caused the East-European exile the destructive blow, then the virtual world of Internet came and distracted nostalgia. With computers and constant completion of the net it is becoming harder and harder to find something inaccessible, something you can long for. The local newspapers from

my hometown keep coming to my screen every morning, more regularly as back home; many cities and towns have their commercial home pages with maps, chronicles, photographs, events, political parties, museums, zoos, flower shops, book shops, cemeteries, motor-mechanics and watchmakers - they all have their own smaller or larger space in the parallel internet space. Electronic messages bring with the top speed news on births, deaths, weddings, bombing, presidential elections and literary scandals. Nobody awaits a postman anymore - this peering, uncertainty if he will or won't bring something as a sign that "it" from There, the other city, really exists - represented the greatest proof of one's own absence. Now, even this absence is virtual, unreal, unconvincing and there is no difference, if a man is on the next continent or in the next room. A postman sadly walks down the street and distributes the commercial leaflets nobody reads. Yes, not even the distance is what it used to be. Not even exile.

¹ Joseph Brodsky, *The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh, On Grief and Reason*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1995.

² André Aciman (ured.), *Letters of Transit*, The New Press, New York, 1999.

Brodsky also says in his essay that the writer in exile is a "retrospective and retroactive being."

³ Eva Hoffman, *The New Nomads. At: Letters of Transit*.

⁴ Svetlana Byom writes about different points of view on nostalgia in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York, 2001.

⁵ Hallvard Dahlie, *Varieties of Exile: Canadian Experience*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1986.