In trying to define the main characteristics of émigré literature, it seems to me that the personal decision as to whether to write in a foreign language and then the possible switch from one language to another is an issue of special significance in all émigré writing. It is closely connected to the way in which the reality of the new homeland influences a writer and how this is reflected in his or her writing. Contact with a previously unknown reality — a different, strange and sometimes exotic world — can transform an author's perspectives and inspire his or her artistic creativity. So emigration can be understood either as a banishment or as a school of life; it can be treated as an opportunity or as a curse. Jósef Wittlin was the first to articulate this viewpoint in his famous essay "Blaski i niedze emigracji" (The Splendours and Squalors of Emigration), first published in 1957. The personal decision to write in a foreign language depends on an author's self-awareness, his/her openness, while living in emigration, towards his/her new homeland, its people, language and culture.

Switching language is a significant step and radical solution to the problems of living in emigration. A switch in language is a consequence which arises from the pressures of what could be termed "language-exile". Such a switch demands an inner determination to overcome isolation and to tear down what the Polish émigré writer Jan Brzękowski called les murs du silence — the "walls of silence". This is why a writer's response to emigration (his view of it as restriction or liberation) is the decisive criterion not only for creative development within himself, but also for his possible switch of languages.

The investigation of these consequences is a crucial task for studies of émigré literature. As the literary critic George Steiner has observed, traditionally a writer was considered a being rooted in his native idiom, housed more closely, more inevitably, than ordinary men and women in the shell of one language. To be a good writer signified a special intimacy with the rhythms of speech, it meant having an ear for those multitudinous connotations and buried echoes of an idiom no dictionary can convey. A poet or writer whom political exile or private disaster had cut off from his native speech was a creature maimed. The emergence of linguistic pluralism or
"unhousedness" in certain great writers as dialectical hesitance, not only towards one native language but towards several languages, speaks of the more general problem of a lost centre. It makes for example Nabokov, Borges and Beckett the three representative figures in the literature of exile which is, perhaps, an important impulse in current literature.1

It goes without saying that all the past collective experiences of a given language community are encoded in its vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and result in a particular Weltsicht which is passed on from one generation to the next. So any voluntary change of languages leads to a fundamental divorce from the language tradition within which this person is born. It also means liberating oneself from the conditioning of imposed thought structures and preconceptions of the world, and coming to similar conclusions as that of Jerzy Kosinski: "The borders of my language determine the borders of my mind".

In emigration language cannot easily function as the guarantor of national identity or culture. Language is treated more and more as a mediator or bridge between different cultures and civilizations. Hence a change of language can also stand for liberation from cultural and linguistic taboos, collective myths, ethical norms and behavioural patterns and encourage a general anti-puritanical attitude. It is after all easier to write obscenely about taboos in a "foreign language". The effort made by an émigré writer to reach his new audience, which is rather ignorant of his culture and its traditions, requires a change in his "writing strategy".

By "writing strategy" I understand the way an émigré writer copes with his/her situation in exile through writing, and how he/she faces up to the different expectations of his/her country of origin on the one hand, and of his/her new homeland on the other. A successful switch from one sphere of collective experience to another demands a new self-presentation and self-interpretation. Everything written in the new language should satisfy the expectations of the new readership, which has to be able to understand and to reconstruct the world as intended by the author without difficulty. Therefore it is only natural that such a writer's personal life and experiences are frequently used as the main literary subject. But another danger follows on from this successful switch of language and adaptation to the demands of a new audience. Often the writer, who has learnt to adapt to a new language, cannot resist the temptation to adapt his books completely to the tastes of his new readership, becomes dependent on sales and again loses his newly gained freedom. But if an émigré writer cannot or does not wish to make the switch to a new sphere of experience, because of his sense of moral obligation to fulfil his traditional patriotic duties, he will continue writ-