

Experiencing history in Hanna Krall's small narratives

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There is only one ledger for recording
misfortune: Time.

Emil Cioran¹

1

In his essay *O pamięci zbiorowej* [On collective memory], Jerzy Jedlicki wrote: "Memory scrutinizes its own biography before others begin to scrutinize it". A sentence later, he added: "Collective memory? There is no collective memory. Memory is always and only individual – though this does not change the fact that some of its contents may be shared by many people, and that there exist, as the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs wrote, 'the social frameworks of memory'"². Four paragraphs further on, Jedlicki observed: "Human memories do not add up to a collective sum; more often than not, they engage in a fierce dispute with one another"³.

I cite Jedlicki's perhaps obvious remarks in order to inquire about an equally obvious relationship, one that forms between the questioner and the questioned, and, on another level, between the person who seeks to uncover a certain truth and the one who is its custodian, transmitter, or guardian. I look for an answer to my question in Sigmund Freud's *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* [Moses and Monotheism], in which the psychoanalyst took part in the discussion on memory and knowledge⁴. A supporter of phylogenesis, Freud argued that there is no essential difference between

¹ Emil Cioran, *Okno na Nic* [A window onto nothing], translated by Ireneusz Kania (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2020), 186.

² Jerzy Jedlicki, "O pamięci zbiorowej" [On collective memory] in *Historia a świat wartości. Wybór esejów* [History and the world of values: selected essays], introduction by Maciej Janowski (Warszawa: Towarzystwo „Więź”, 2022), 281.

³ Jedlicki, "O pamięci zbiorowej", 282.

⁴ The Polish version is based on Sigmund Freud, *Pisma społeczne*, translated by Robert Reszke, Aleksander Ochocki, Marcin Poręba, edited by Robert Reszke (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2009). English version: *Moses and Monotheism*, translated by Katherine Jones (London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1939).

what has been recorded and what has been repressed, because “the facts which the so-called official written history purposely tried to suppress were in reality never lost. The knowledge of them survived in traditions which were kept alive among the people”⁵. Elsewhere he wrote: “What has been deleted or altered in the written version might quite well have been preserved uninjured in the tradition”⁶.

Sigrid Weigel transposed Freud's observations onto the terrain of reflection on generations. She was particularly interested in what she called the “legacy of non-working-through” – that is, what was not recorded or fixed by one's ancestors, but transmitted to subsequent generations in the form of “unconscious traces of memory, contents forgotten and repressed”⁷. Recalling that Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*, wrote of “an inheritance of memory-traces of what our forefathers experienced,” of “an assured case of archaic inheritance,” and of “inheriting a thought-disposition”, Weigel radicalizes his insights and argues that this inheritance takes place outside the act of transmission and even in opposition to it – “insofar as the transfer between generations occurs through the medium of the language of the unconscious”⁸.

In view of the fact that in Freud the unconscious intergenerational transfer of knowledge and repressed content occupies the foreground, it becomes clear why his interpretation of intergenerational relations has acquired particular significance in the post-history of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Its relevance grew especially from the moment psychoanalysis, in its work with the children of survivors and the descendants of perpetrators, increasingly encountered phenomena that could be explained only as the effects of events in which these individuals themselves had not taken part. These are, rather, the experiences of their parents or ancestors – hence the term ‘transgenerational traumatization’⁹.

Perhaps I am approaching, somewhat circuitously, what in fact will be my main concern here – namely, the question of the extent to which, to cite Jerzy Jedlicki once again, the “experienced” and the “attested” past become testimony in Hanna Krall's small narratives, and to what extent they become literature. “When [...] literature wishes to perform the function of testimony, it does not even want to call itself literature,” wrote Jedlicki¹⁰; yet he added that

[...] it is not from a conventional, learned “social” consciousness but from the writer's individual superconsciousness that testimonial literature takes its origin. Not the beautiful “lie of literature,” but – on the contrary – its striving toward a truth that is not given to us whole in the nakedness of experience, despite (or perhaps precisely because of) its inhuman excess. And if that is so, then the function of testimonial literature begins exactly where the original, documentary function of testimony ends¹¹.

⁵ Freud, 109.

⁶ Freud, 108.

⁷ Sigrid Weigel, “Pokolenie, genealogia, płęć. Historia koncepcji pokolenia i jej naukowej konceptualizacji od końca XVIII wieku” [Generation, genealogy, gender: the history of the concept of generation and its scholarly conceptualization since the late eighteenth century], translated by Jerzy Kałużny, in: *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie historii* [Generations, or the ordering of history], selected, introduced, and edited by Hubert Orłowski, translated by Izabela Drozdowska-Broering, Jerzy Kałużny, Rafał Żytyniec (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, 2015), 223.

⁸ Weigel, 224.

⁹ Weigel, 224.

¹⁰ Jerzy Jedlicki, “Dzieje doświadczone i dzieje zaświadczone” [Experienced history and attested history], in: *Historia a świat wartości. Wybór esejów* [History and the world of values: selected essays], introduction by Maciej Janowski (Warszawa: Towarzystwo „Więź”, 2022), 92.

¹¹ Jedlicki, “Dzieje doświadczone i dzieje zaświadczone”, 97.

I am still, though in various guises, speaking about the relation between writing and speech / speech and writing, relations that both support and oppose one another. In each variant, they also confront what belongs to the realm of knowledge and what pertains to the sphere of the unconscious. “The content of the unconscious is collective, universal, and of the same kind in all men”, wrote Freud¹². What is “repressed” returns in various forms, ultimately colliding with the limits of speech. What is certain speaks fluently; what is repressed stammers. By enclosing her small narratives in the written word, Krall wrestles with the spoken one – a word that is both a sign of knowledge (that is, of certainty) and a chain of silences, distortions, or evasions (that is, of fear before certainty). Yet each time we remain within the circle of narration – that is, a story told by someone to someone else.

2

I refer to some of Hanna Krall’s reportage pieces as *small narratives* because of their generic form. Are they different from her larger – or even medium-sized – narratives? Not necessarily. Their essence lies in their persistence within speech, in the living word that must be voiced by the protagonists. The author’s role seems secondary. Mariusz Szczygieł has written: “In a world that talks too much, [Krall] proposes reticence”¹³. Herta Müller observed: “The documented realities of the author seem to speak for themselves. But that is where her virtuosity lies: to forgo commentary and yet, through invisible intervention, stand behind every sentence”¹⁴. What appears self-evident, then, proves not simple at all.

Those who write about Krall often draw attention to the reportage form of her works. Egon Erwin Kisch maintained that the subject of reportage is “a real event”, and that the reporter’s task is to convey facts and occurrences as they are. In this sense, the reporter assumes an obligation similar to that of the critical realist. Yet while the realist deceived himself into believing he could meet the ultimate demand of truth, the twentieth-century (especially the late-twentieth-century), writer already knows that this is impossible. Language has lost its former power; the truth of literature has turned out to be a beautiful lie. Reality cannot be rendered as it is, because – as we know at least since Frank Ankersmit – it will always be a privatized image, shaped by the author’s perspective, judgments, and emotions.

The reality of reportage – if its very fabric is authenticity rather than the mere probability of events, as in artistic prose – must find expression in a new kind of language. Tadeusz Różewicz wrote that after the Second World War, the masks fell, the costumes were cast off, and the old garment of words was torn away. Hanna Krall, speaking about the first Holocaust text in Polish literature, Józef Mackiewicz’s *Ponary – “Baza”* [Ponary – “Base”], paused to reflect on language:

“Mackiewicz wanted it to be beautiful. He still didn’t know that when one writes about the Holocaust, it mustn’t be beautiful. [...] Mackiewicz was still reaching for the beauty of words – an innocent beauty of words, an untainted beauty of words, an untainted beauty of words”¹⁵.

¹²Freud, 157.

¹³Mariusz Szczygieł, “Zdążyć. Nawet przed deszczem” [To make it – even before the rain], in: Hanna Krall, *Fantom bólu* [The phantom of pain], introduction by Mariusz Szczygieł (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2024), 6.

¹⁴Szczygieł, 6.

¹⁵Szczygieł, 7.

This, after all, is an involuntary echo of Różewicz's assertion: "The dance of poetry came to an end during the Second World War, in the concentration camps created by totalitarian systems"¹⁶.

A reporter who wishes to rescue the genre from journalistic immediacy, to renew it or to carry it into the dimension of literature, must therefore turn to what lies at the very foundation of literature: poetics, with its repertoire of tropes, styles, themes, and devices¹⁷. In the gesture of renouncing the exclusive task of rendering "real events" – a gesture that, to borrow Jan Mukařovský's term, is a *semantic gesture*¹⁸ – the works of both Ryszard Kapuściński and Hanna Krall have given rise to a form of reportage that finds its connection with the twentieth-century reader not through journalistic but through literary language. This contact is achieved through another's voice, through quotation, allusion, montage. Thus, it is not the fact, the event conveyed in its factuality, but rather the manner of narration that determines the genre's impact.

3

Naturally, one must know how to tell a story. Once this ability was called talent, though today we would probably speak of creative capacity. Hanna Krall listens, and then turns the first story into a second-degree narrative, in which, between protagonist and narrator, between the questioned and the questioner, between speaker and listener, linguistic osmosis becomes a communion of words. A single fate always lies at the source of every story. And even if it does not connect with another fate, even if – as in *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [To Outwit God] – we embed it within the framework of collective memory, it nevertheless individualizes itself in its very singularity, to use a tautology.

And yet it seems to me, and I have written about this before¹⁹, that in Krall's *small* narratives, individual fates, fractured life stories, and disrupted biographies are shown within the dimension of some unifying idea and thus are transformed into parables of existence. So even if individual stories resist generalization, as a collection of narratives they blur over time, space, and individual being. They become parables, or citations, of life itself.

In *Zbawienie* [Salvation], we read:

My work as a reporter taught me that logical stories – those without mysteries or gaps, in which everything is clear – are often untrue. And things that cannot be explained at all do happen in reality. After all, life on earth itself is real, yet it cannot be logically explained²⁰.

¹⁶Tadeusz Różewicz, *Utwory zebrane* [Collected works], vol. 3: Proza [Prose], cz. 3 (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2004), 41.

¹⁷This issue has been credibly described by Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska in the study "Reportaż literacki wobec literatury. Korzenie i teorie" [The literary reportage and literature: roots and theories], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2014): 119–131. See also Joanna Jeziorska-Haładyj, "Zawartość zmyślonej, żółtej walizki. O prozie Hanny Krall" [The Contents of an Imagined Yellow Suitcase: On Hanna Krall's Prose], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2010): 37–60.

¹⁸The "semantic gesture" "organizes the work as a dynamic unit, from the simplest components to the most general plan." See Jan Mukařovský, "O języku poetyckim" ["On poetic language"], in *Praska szkoła strukturalna w latach 1926–1948. Wybór materiałów* [The Prague school of structuralism, 1926–1948: Selected materials], edited by Maria Renata Mayenowa, translated and annotated by Wojciech Górny (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1966), 195.

¹⁹Marian Kisiel, "Los jako pamięć" [Fate as memory], *Wiadomości Kulturalne* 20 (1994): 13.

²⁰Hanna Krall, "Zbawienie" [Salvation], in: *Fantom bólu* [Phantom of pain], 583.

The experience of a single existence is the experience of history. I will recall Stanisław Brzozowski's well-known *a posteriori* dictum: "What is not biography – is not at all. Whatever ascribes to itself a supra-biographical, supra-concrete individual significance is, in fact, less real"²¹. The history of a life is a social history; an individual fate is the memory of fate itself. And even if – as Jedlicki argued – memories do not add up, by showing both great and small experiences they nonetheless create great or small narratives.

These are narratives about good and evil, virtue and vice, life and death. When a writer undertakes such themes – those for which we have only our clumsy words – there always arises the suspicion that they are consciously aligning themselves with a moralist current. Would such an assumption be accurate in Krall's case? Not entirely, or at least not in the traditional sense of the term (I will return to this later). Krall does not reveal her convictions, though we may assume they are unshakable. In her conversations, she becomes the shadow of the speaker, the medium to whom the one being listened to entrusts their experience – a story of singularity extracted from the history of the community. This trust is not without fear, for what is spoken will be written down, and what is hidden will be drawn forth by the listener from the sphere of the unconscious.

Stories that unfold in speech are authentic; they do not require external confirmation of their truth. Yet those who speak do not distinguish illusions from events, and the listener must maintain a distance from the words she hears. This is not a matter of distrust, but of vigilance. To record an experience is to preserve an existence. When necessary, one should provide a bibliographic reference pointing to the source—although the most important source is, and will remain, the human being and their memory.

The great theme of Hanna Krall – wrote Ryszard Kapuściński – is the fate of the human being entangled in the cruelties of history, caught in its crushing mechanisms, degraded and annihilated by them. And this history is not some terrifying abstraction – it takes the form of a concrete relationship between one human being and another²².

4

Let us move on to the small narratives. I will not, however, spectralize, dissect, or analyze them to fit a pre-established thesis. Instead, I wish to enclose them within a formula that might itself become the point of departure for spectralization, dissection, and analysis. Why in this way? Because each of Hanna Krall's small narratives is a distinct story and touches living tissue: a biography that resists closure, or cannot be told to the end, or remains an open wound. In order not to disregard biography, story, and wound alike, I therefore choose to construct a formula that may generalize (and generalization is always omission, separation), but which – while closing – feels ashamed of its closure, flees from wounding, and, in essence, speaks of biographies as though touching them empathically, yet without truly making contact.

²¹Stanisław Brzozowski, *Pamiętnik [Diary]*, introduction by Marta Wyka, text edited and annotated by Maciej Urbanowski (Wrocław, Warsaw, Kraków: Ossolineum, 2007), 164.

²²Ryszard Kapuściński, [excerpt from an address delivered on the occasion of the Samuel Linde Prize awarded to Hanna Krall, Göttingen, March 18, 2001], quoted in: <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/hanna-krall>.

Krall is particularly concerned with three general issues: first, the Jewish theme (*primo*); second, the German question in its Jewish context (*secundo*); and third, the entanglement of Poles and Jews (though not only them – also of “mixed” individuals²³) in the politics and history of their own nation (*tertio*). This web of concerns naturally leads us toward what shaped the historical consciousness of the twentieth century. Since Krall's prose revolves around individual memory (life) against the background of collective memory (history), it is no surprise that the protagonists of her stories are people born in the first half of the last century. Why precisely they? Let us answer with the words of Michael Wildt, author of numerous works on terror and Nazism:

Above all, the political generations of the first half of the twentieth century once again demonstrate how dramatically they staged both world time and life time in order to establish an absolute beginning and inaugurate a new era²⁴.

In *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [*To Outwit God*], the “world time” and the “life time,” to recall Wildt's terms, are not defined by the heroism of the Warsaw Ghetto insurgents, but by their everyday reality—their human choices in the face of annihilation. When the writer asks about the rhythm of the everyday—about the conditions of life and the circumstances of dying—she is, through the voices of the murdered and the survivors, in fact asking the same questions that writers across the world have pondered for centuries and will continue to ponder for centuries to come: Where does evil begin? Is it only external to me? And when I am a victim, do I cease to be a perpetrator?

In essence, this is a repetition of the very question posed by André Malraux in 1946 at the UNESCO conference: “[...] whether, on this old European earth, man has died – or not”²⁵:

Above everything we see – above the spectres and the ruins of cities – there extends over Europe an even more terrible presence: the devastated and blood-soaked Europe is no more devastated, no more blood-soaked, than the man it believed it was creating. [...] There has been in the world a suffering of such magnitude that it rises before us not only as a human drama but as a metaphysical one. And today man must answer not only for what he has done, not only for what he wishes to do, but also for what he believes himself to be²⁶.

Malraux's statement became an extraordinarily important point of reference for the work of Tadeusz Różewicz who, it seems to me, in the context of Hanna Krall's small narratives, may be regarded as an iconic figure of the “three general issues” mentioned earlier. Różewicz wrote: “The poetry of the Resistance and the poetry of the postwar years answered that question

²³I refer here to a category introduced into reflections on the fate of generations by Teodor Parnicki, and brilliantly elevated to the level of metaphor by Jacek Łukasiewicz in *Republika mieszańców* [The republic of hybrids] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974).

²⁴Michael Wildt, “Pokolenie jako początek i przyspieszenie” [Generation as Beginning and Acceleration], translated by Rafał Żytyniec, in *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie historii* [Generations, or the Ordering of History], selection, introduction, and ed. Hubert Orłowski, translated by Izabela Drozdowska-Broering, Jerzy Kałużny, and Rafał Żytyniec (Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje Press, 2015), 400–401.]

²⁵André Malraux, “Czy człowiek umarł?”, [Has man died?], in *Panorama myśli współczesnej* [Panorama of contemporary thought], ed. Gaëtan Picon, selection and ed. Roland Caillois (Paris: Libella, 1967), 620.

²⁶Malraux, 621.

not in the language of the Muses, but in the language of man”²⁷. This “human language” leads Krall toward a creative stance similar to that which Janusz Sławiński described in reference to Różewicz’s poetry. It is, fundamentally and unconditionally, a matter of rendering “the situation of a man who is unable to grasp his experiences (psychological, social, or ideological) as a coordinated and meaningful whole”²⁸. Sławiński argued that Różewicz opposed the uncontrolled revival of avant-garde style after the Second World War and constructed his own lyrical speech from the perspective of someone who refused to repeat prior experiences. In his case, it was, so to speak, construction upon a rubbish heap – searching where others refused to search. “All those aesthetic reflections, volumes, lyrics, metaphors, ‘schools’ – into the garbage bin, into the sack!” wrote Różewicz²⁹. Yet he asked:

Do I have the right to present myself in such a light? After all, that’s a garbage bin. And what will happen when I throw that garbage out of myself? There will be emptiness. What will they put in place of the garbage? What will grow there, inside me? Perhaps the tree of poetry?³⁰.

Różewicz’s “poetic moralism,” that is, his “human language” rather than the “language of the Muses,” Sławiński argued, “negates the need to define its own boundaries – among other forms of speech”³¹.

And in the case of Hanna Krall? Differently, undoubtedly so. Here, the boundaries of speech expand its genres. Reportage, understood as a “real event”, becomes each time a narrative of remembrance, a parable (a parabolic allusion), a warning, and at the same time a record of experience – its trace or its clue. “Reportorial moralism”, in which emphasis is placed not on the “event” but on language itself, caught in the helplessness of articulation, thus becomes a struggle between writing and speech – something I mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

5

Józef Wróbel observed that in the novel *Sublokator* [*The Subtenant*], the title itself is of crucial importance:

The metaphor structuring the text [...] makes use of a modified motif of the double and defines the duality of the heroine’s personality – her grounding in two worlds of values, in two traditions and cultures: Polish and Jewish. The bright attitude is under the patronage of the biblical Mary, the dark one of Martha; the first determined by the history and mythology of Poland, the second by Jewish fate. [...] The bright attitude is associated with the stereotype of heroic death, for a cause deemed higher than human life; the dark one – with a senseless death that thrusts her below human dignity. [...] The heroine’s biography is rooted in two historical and biographical orders; it is a literary device that renounces the

²⁷Tadeusz Różewicz, *Proza* [Prose], vol. 3 (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2004), 41.

²⁸Janusz Sławiński, “Próba porządkowania doświadczeń” [An attempt to organize experience], in: *Prace wybrane*, t. 5: *Przypadki poezji* [Selected works, vol. 5: Cases of poetry], (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 292.

²⁹Różewicz, *Proza*, 285.

³⁰Różewicz, *Proza*, 285–286.

³¹Sławiński, 294.

illusion of reality, and, consequently, authenticity. The whole is an illustration of the thesis that behind the bright Mary there follows, like a shadow, the dark Martha – the Pole accompanying the Jew³².

What we are dealing with here is not simple moralism, but rather what in Yiddish is called *beshert*. *Beshert* is that which is inevitable – destiny. “A Jew will always remain a Jew. Even if he’s baptized”, says Old Tag in Julian Strykowski’s *Austeria* [*The Inn*]³³, while the naked Hasidim jumping into the river at dawn cry out: “Joy! Joy to be a Jew!”, “The nation of nations is eternal”³⁴. Thus one world came to an end, and the First World War foretold the coming of the second. After it, defining Jewish identity became far more difficult. *Beshert*. Who is Izolda R. from *A Tale for Hollywood* – a Pole or a Jew? And “the woman from Hamburg” – a Jew, a Pole, or (by choice) a German? Passport entries are misleading; the search for one’s own place is futile. And departures – are they necessary? “I went to Israel because there are no Poles there. But you know what I found out? There are Jews”, says the protagonist of the reportage *Rozenfeld*, from the collection *Hypnosis*. And he asks, with despair: “So where am I supposed to go back to?”³⁵.

What is bright is inseparable from what is dark. As in every fate, every story, we experience a duality of personality. In *Okna* [*Windows*], Krall confesses:

I intend to write a book in which there will be nothing about the war; ideally, the word itself would never appear. Nor a few other words, for example ‘Jew’. To write a book without the words ‘Pole’, ‘German’, ‘Jew’, or ‘war’ – that would not be the worst thing”³⁶.

Of her protagonist Celina, she writes:

She sometimes thought it would be good to photograph the past [...]. The source of sorrow should be visible in photographs, just as the source of light is visible in a painting. She decided to look at places where the past might have been preserved³⁷.

But elsewhere she adds, in Celina’s own words:

I should photograph the stomach. The one you weren’t in. The one in which – do you understand the word exactly? – never – you will never be. I should photograph never³⁸.

A custodian of the past, of a real event, yearning to photograph “never” – and at the same time, a reporter of a vanished world, one in which words charged with identity would not appear. And yet she knows she is a double, Celina herself, and that

³²Józef Wróbel, *Tematy żydowskie w prozie polskiej 1939–1987* [Jewish themes in Polish prose, 1939–1987] (Kraków: Universitas, 1991), 160–161.

³³Julian Strykowski, *Austeria* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1973), 173.

³⁴Strykowski, 169.

³⁵Hanna Krall, “Rozenfeld”, in: *Fantom bólu*, 377, 378.

³⁶Hanna Krall, “Okna” [*Windows*], in: *Fantom bólu*, 196–197.

³⁷Krall, “Okna”, 250.

³⁸Krall, “Okna”, 282.

she was caught by that particular strain of Polishness she felt worst about. Celina is made up entirely of doubts, while that Polishness consists of declarative sentences (except, of course, for one: 'we shall not yield our land...'). That is why Celina felt more comfortable among people whose time had passed – there was no exultation or fervor around them³⁹.

6

What is the experience of history in Hanna Krall's work? Perhaps it is the photographing of "never"; perhaps it is the search for an answer to what is inevitable. The small narratives are always demanding; their virtue lies in offering no illusions – they are not a whole, but a fragment. Walter Hilsbecher reminds us that the fragment escapes rationality and opens before the perceiving subject "the possibility of representing the infinity of the world, as well as the infinity of the path of knowledge – which in other words means: the insolubility of the world's enigma"⁴⁰. The small narrative is precisely that: non-recognition, an insoluble enigma, a literary *beshert*.

Within the space of memory – of "those whose time has passed" – their lived and attested histories, under Hanna Krall's pen, become literary: not so much testimony as, to recall Jerzy Jedlicki's term, "literature that bears witness". The experience of history becomes the transference into the world of what is true and what is merely probable. This mimetic duality shifts along with the changing community of readers. For some (the witnesses, the observers), it is an existential experience; for others (the post-generation), it is an archival one. To know history as the archive of existence, to confront "never," and at the same time to deny "never" and retrieve from time "those whose time has passed" – this, in essence, is the task of the reporter, the author of narratives that bear witness. Let us recall once more the words of Stanisław Brzozowski: "What is not biography – is not at all".

translated by Paulina Zagórska

³⁹Krall, "Okna", 231.

⁴⁰Walter Hilsbecher, *Tragizm, absurd i paradoks. Eseje* [Tragedy, absurd, and paradox: essays], selection and introduction by Stefan Lichański, translated by Sławomir Błaut (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1972), 32.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

What does the experience of history mean in the work of Hanna Krall? Perhaps it is the act of photographing “never”, or perhaps the search for an answer to what is inevitable. Small narratives are always demanding; their virtue lies in offering no illusions. They are not wholes but fragments – forms of non-recognition, insoluble enigmas, literary besherts. Within the space of memory belonging to “those whose time has passed”, their lived and attested histories, under Krall’s pen, become literary: not so much testimony as what Jerzy Jedlicki called “literature that bears witness”. Experiencing history means transferring into the world what is true and what is merely probable. This mimetic duality shifts with the change of readership: for some (witnesses, observers), it is an existential experience; for others (the post- generation), an archival one. To know history as an archive of existence, to confront “never”, and at the same time to deny “never” and retrieve from time “those whose time has passed” – this is the task of the reporter, the author of narratives that bear witness.

E X P E R I E N C E

testament

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Marian Kisiel – b. 1961; professor at the Institute of Polish Studies, University of Silesia. Poet, translator, literary critic, and editor. Member of the Polish Writers' Association and the Polish PEN Club; President of the Upper Silesian Literary Society; Editor-in-Chief of the social and cultural monthly *Śląsk*. Initiator of the series *Światy poetyckie* [Poetic Worlds] (2014–2025) and *Śląska Biblioteka Poetycka* [Silesian Poetic Library, 2025]. He has edited, among others, *Poezje zebrane* [Collected Poems] by Arnold Słucki, *Poezje zebrane* [Collected poems] by Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz (2025), and *Dziennik 1936* [Diary 1936] by Wilhelm Szewczyk (2025). His most recent publications include the pandemic journals *Mały cmentarz* [The little cemetery] (2024) and *Czwarta nad ranem* [Four in the morning] (2025), as well as a collection of memoir essays *Radość spotkania* [The joy of encounter] (2025). |