Trauma and Reality: On Hanna Krall's *Synapsy Marii H.* (Maria H.'s Synapses)

Beata Przymuszała

ORCID: 0000-0002-8915-748X

"This is a story about remembering and not remembering - of Maria Twardokęs-Hrabowska (based on hundreds, perhaps thousands of her letters to me) and Maria Hrabowska (based on her memoirs)," - this a note preceding the text; a note that also serves as the motto of *Synapsy Marii H.* [*Maria H.'s Synapses*].

In a conversation with Hanna Krall, journalist Katarzyna Janowska, highlighting these very words, remarks:

> Memory is as much the protagonist of your book as oblivion. Often, it's unclear whether what your characters remember truly happened, or whether they only imagine it that way. You used to try very scrupulously to determine what was real and what was the imagination of memory. Is it still true today?

Krall's response offers an important interpretive clue:

> Marysia often doesn't know whether she did something or whether she should have done it. But what matters isn't what actually happened in her life - it's how she remembers it, or the other way round. What kind of memory we wish we didn't have[1].

[1] Hanna Krall: dlaczego jedni ratują, a inni chcą zabić? Myślę o tym coraz częściej (wywiad). Z Hanną Krall rozmawia Katarzyna Janowska [Hanna Krall: why do some people save and others want to kill? I think about it more and more often (interview). Katarzyna Janowska in conversation with Hanna Krall], https://kultura.onet.pl/wywiady-i-artykuly/hanna-krall-wywiad-synapsy-marii-h-o-czym-jest-ksiazka/v671ybv, accessed: 26.10. 2023.

The statement "what matters isn't what actually happened" does not imply a rejection of factuality. Instead, it shifts the focus and changes the lens through which we look.

Synapsy Marii H. continues the poetics characteristic of the author of *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [*Shielding the Flame*]. As Joanna Roszak insightfully revealed in her monograph on Krall, the essence of this poetics lies in weaving: interlacing motifs, layering stories, and allowing histories to overlap.

The figure of Maria already appeared in *Katar sienny* [*Hay Fever*] and in *To ty jesteś Daniel* [So *You Are Daniel*][2], reaffirming the idea of writing as an embodied act, a process of weaving that is as physical as it is textual:

> Krall's reportage [...] is created as much through the precise technique of weaving as through collage and montage, resembling a hypertext - a notion that may also be linked to arachnology and Nancy K. Miller's metaphor of women's writing as the spinning of a spider's web. It involves a strong symbiosis with the material - an experience of writing *through* the body, with the suspension of distance from one's own work. [...]
> The thematic threads in Krall's reportage intertwine, gently illuminating the same motifs and characters. Krall says of each of them that they became a part of her: Marek Edelman, Apolonia Machczyńska, Adam Boniecki, Maria Hrabowska, Barbara Sadowska, Axel von dem Bussche [...][3].

Each person "became a part of her," and at the same time, the writer's own experiences and emotions form a "filter through which we read"[4] her texts. Noting this biographical dimension, Roszak exposes the almost somatic - certainly deeply affective - nature of Krall's writing about specific, chosen lives:

> For Hen and Krall, writing is a form of existence through preserving the memory of existence. [...] Her texts, minimalist yet immense, unfold behind the screen of the third person: they are the reverse of oblivion.[5]

It is crucial to highlight this form of "screen", which allows the writer's experiences to reflect and refract through the trajectories of other lives. But distortion - the imperfect reflection - is equally essential. As Andrzej Juchniewicz observes, Krall in a sense hides behind her narratives, unwilling for readers to adopt a purely biographical mode of reading:

> The invoked relationships cannot be classified according to any ready-made typology, as Krall's works devoted to other protagonists (Izolda R., Maria Twardokęs) contain no overt references to her own life. Revealing what the protagonists might have felt or seen would inevitably fracture the delicate structure of her reportage and expose her through a first-person account. Krall hints at certain biographical traces in interviews, and through them one can reconstruct elements of her life story[6].

[2] Andrzej Juchniewicz, „Autobiografizm w twórczości Hanny Krall" [„Autobiographism in the works of Hanna Krall"], Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich 67 (2024): 186.

[3] Joanna Roszak, Krall: tkanie [Krall: weaving] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2024), 174–175, 176–177.

[4] Roszak, 200.

[5] Roszak, 101, 110.

[6] Juchniewicz, 187.

At the same time, Juchniewicz emphasises that this act of concealment - retreating behind the stories - not only builds a protective sphere of intimacy, into which one should not intrude, but also carries an ethical dimension. It universalises Krall's gesture, highlighting the necessity of recognising the suffering of others, not only of those directly marked by the Holocaust[7].

In *Synapsy Marii H.*, the intertwined fates of two women named Maria - the first, a survivor of the Holocaust, and the second, her daughter-in-law raising an autistic son whose inner world remains inaccessible - reveal a subtle confrontation between two forms of trauma: the historical and the existential one. The former is culturally recognised as a turning point in the study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); the latter arises from the ongoing, intimate reality of a child's illness.

The book opens with the story of women who chose to end both their own lives and that of their sick child. The second fragment recounts Marysia's mother-in-law's reaction upon learning that her grandson is autistic: a response framed as a distant rebuke aimed at her daughter-in-law. The third one presents the behaviour of that same mother-in-law's who continually stresses her need for isolation, even in close relationships[8]. Marysia, who cares for her son, lives under chronic stress. Her constant worry about his well-being, the fear of how others will react to his behaviour, and the dread for his future, when she and her husband are no longer there, can lead to emotional instability and over-sensitivity to others' needs (pp. 48, 70). These are reactions often seen in those who have experienced trauma. Marysia:

> "...was wondering what she was supposed to feel (p. 13)
>
> She cannot distinguish
> between what she wanted to do, what she thought she ought to do, and what she actually did.
> In short - she doesn't fully understand her past self (p. 33).

This inability to define her emotions may stem from personality, upbringing, cultural conditioning, or may function as a defence mechanism. In her letters, Marysia tries to reconstruct her life, yet recounting events does not necessarily equal understanding them. She supports others - her son, her mother-in-law - but rarely feels strong or confident herself. Paradoxically, she seems strongest when helping others. She researches, reads, and tries to make sense of things:

> She read an article by a physicist. He wrote that, really, no one understands quantum theory.
> There are equations and correlations, but nothing truly explains anything.
> So she isn't the only one who doesn't understand.
> You can know and not know something at the same time. How very interesting (p. 95).

This sense of simultaneously knowing and not knowing reflects not only her struggle to comprehend but also her difficulty remembering, and her inability to connect. The absence of

[7] Juchniewicz. „The application of a third-person narrative bears the hallmarks of an ethical gesture. A recounted history becomes emblematic of wars and genocides"– Juchniewicz, 187.

[8] Hanna Krall, Synapsy Marii H. [Maria H.'s synapses] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020), 9, 10, 11. Other page citations can be found within the text.

dialogue, of mutual understanding, of any alternative perspective, is particularly painful in relation to her son. She lives in constant fear for him, forced to guess what he feels or needs:

> **Her son**
> screamed and slapped his face with his hands.
> He went silent.
> He walked into her room, as if he wanted to say something, as if he were searching for something.
> She didn't know why he was screaming, what he was searching for, or what he wanted to say.
> He left.
> He lay down.
> He was half-singing, half-whimpering. She was afraid to fall asleep, afraid that his scream would wake her.
> She finally slept and dreamt that her son got lost and she couldn't find him.
> She woke relieved it was a dream - but then he started screaming again, this time for real (p. 61).

The restrained description focuses on the son's behaviours, while the mother's fear surfaces only through her dream. The image of losing the child, being unable to reach him, is not merely a nightmare; it encapsulates her waking experience. The dream gathers her anxiety, and the boy's cry upon waking confirms that the nightmare never truly ends. What was a dream was not just a dream, because she keeps searching for some contact with her son and cannot find it.

The inability to communicate shapes not only Marysia's bond with her son but also her interactions with her mother-in-law. The latter's emotional distance manifests as a preference for solitude and self-sufficiency - a desire, as she claims, not to be a burden ("…when she visits next time, she would rather stay at a hotel. So as not to inconvenience them" – p.11). At first glance, this insistence on independence may seem cold or dismissive, but as the narrative unfolds, it appears to be a defence mechanism. Marysia maintains contact with her ("**She calls her husband's mother every day**. Like she used to call her own mother" (p. 12), she talks to her and listens to her stories about the crime novels the mother-in-law reads and fragments of memories she unexpectedly chooses to share. These recollections are fragmentary, opaque: a man with a child to whom her own mother once gave water she used to cook noodles (p. 19); the story of that mother's death in the ghetto (p. 75); and a terse recollection of the Umschlagplatz, where, by coincidence, the family narrowly escaped deportation, only to perish later in unknown circumstances (pp. 81-83).

By sheer luck the mother-in-law was not shot dead by a Ukrainian guard at the Umschlagplatz. Everything she experienced echoes inside her, strengthening her. On September 11, 2001, as she was coming down from the Manhattan skyscraper hit by a plane, she was reassuring herself ("…there's smoke, a lot of it, and the heat from the fire, but are they shooting? No one's shooting. They're not setting dogs on us. There's one dog, but it's leading a blind man" – p. 79). And yet that same memory later fed her anxiety ("…if I managed to survive then, I might not be so lucky the second time around" – p. 80). The echo of the Umschlagplatz returns when the book's protagonist talks about how her mother-in-law overdosed on sleeping pills and could not be awakened. The narrator's description captures both concern and tenderness, revealing how Marysia sees in the elderly woman traces of the frightened child she once was:

> Her husband's mother spoke in her sleep, almost angrily. Her tiny fists - delicate, small, therefore „tiny fists", not „fists" - were clenched, her legs had slipped off the bed, as if she wanted to leave. She straightened her legs and uncurled her fingers, but the mother did not wake. A few hours later, her tiny fists were clenched again and she wanted to leave (p. 107).

Perhaps this is not an image of a little girl after all? The evocative detail of the "tiny fists" conjures the vision of a little girl, yet we cannot know what that little woman is dreaming about or why her body remains tense, suspended mid-motion.

Here, one woman's story is told through another's gaze. Both are profoundly affected by experiences that have scarred their lives. As readers, we receive only fragments, taken out of context: snippets of conversations, traces of reading, glimpses of daily routine. Nothing aligns neatly, yet certain coincidences - especially in the mother-in-law's fate - are haunting. The book resembles a broken children's kaleidoscope: we hold its pieces in our hands but cannot reassemble them into any coherent pattern.

One Maria - Marysia - lives through every intentional gesture of her son, fearing the reactions of others (believing they see him as a monster, someone to be feared). She values - seemingly disproportionately - the simplest signs of kindness or politeness. Yet perhaps it is not disproportionate at all; perhaps she merely perceives how the community behaves toward those who are different. That is why she so deeply appreciates that the neighbours allowed her son to play with their cat - so much so that after moving away she sent a letter of thanks to the local newspaper for this gesture:

> She sent a letter to the local newspaper. In it, she thanked Mr and Mrs Ramsey and their cat, Louis, for the time they had shared - and for allowing their cat to play with her autistic son.
> "I truly cannot say how much this friendship has meant to us," the letter concluded (p. 48).

The other Maria - the mother-in-law - does not wish to impose. By refusing hospitality (perhaps not fully realising that, in doing so, she is being hurtful), she chooses her own solitude. That is why, even during her visits, she withdraws to her room, perhaps as a way of escaping the possibility of being hurt.

Both women seem acutely sensitive to stimuli; the world overwhelms them; and yet, in their own ways, they manage to function day by day. Each relies on defensive mechanisms learned long ago, survival strategies developed when reality was unbearable. But has that reality truly changed?

The first issue worth noting is the fragmentary nature of their accounts: the way impressions and scenes emerge through spontaneous associations. The older Maria, a Holocaust survivor, recalls isolated moments and sensory details, as if mentioning them in passing. She appears to live in a state of constant tension, not always aware of its source. The younger Maria, struggling to ensure her son's wellbeing, cannot "understand her own story," nor grasp her emotional responses ("…she wondered what she ought to feel." – p. 13). The metaphor of a children's broken kaleidoscope may also point to the experience of people scarred by trauma to such an extent that they are incapable of reporting their feelings. Research on trauma demonstrates that:

> "[...] memories of trauma may lack an explicit verbal component. They may be organised at an implicit or perceptual level, without any accompanying narrative about what happened. [...]
> After listening to hundreds of children and adults recount their experiences of trauma, we have found that such memories are initially stored at a nonverbal level [...] By its very nature, traumatic memory is dissociative and is first preserved as sensory impressions without a linguistic component[9].

Thus, intense affectivity becomes bound to recurring sensory images: flashbacks that disturb stability and unsettle perception. This perhaps explains the recurring sense of fragmentation in both Maria's accounts: crumbs of broken caleidoscopes, which do not even attempt any coherent patterns. Research on traumatised people also shows that:

> Even after a long time, and even after developing a coherent narrative about the traumatic experience, most subjects report that the trauma continues to return to them as sensory impressions and emotional states. The persistence of trauma-related intrusions contradicts the assumption - central to many therapeutic methods - that articulating trauma in words is an effective way to eliminate flashbacks.[10]

This insight, drawn from clinical practice, is crucial: organising one's experiences into a narrative form does not necessarily weaken their emotional impact. Verbalisation can have therapeutic value, but it does not guarantee mastery over trauma.

Trauma alters the perception of the world: reality after trauma feels fundamentally different from what came before[11]. As Paul Conti observes in his popular study of post-traumatic experience: "Trauma has fogged our mirrors and our windows. We no longer see ourselves clearly, and we perceive others only as threats."[12] The metaphor captures an essential truth: trauma is not only collision with an incomprehensible reality[13]; it also reshapes the capacity to perceive reality at all. The protective mechanisms it triggers blur the sense of the real, simultaneously shielding and isolating the sufferer. Just as trauma induces the feeling that what is happening cannot be real - the dissociative reaction - so later encounters with reality are coloured by the expectation that the worst may yet return. Even when calm seems restored, dread remains latent, pulsing beneath awareness.

> Trauma is like a wind-up toy that jumps about chaotically: unpredictable, impossible to control [...] "In reality, trauma works more secretly. [...] Without our awareness, it takes control of our limbic system, distorts our memories, and changes our brain. We feel, think, decide, and act differently than before. We become different people, often without realising it[14].

[9] Bessel A. van der Kolk, „Trauma a pamięć" [„Trauma and memory"], in: Traumatyczny stres [Traumatic stress], ed. by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, Lars Weisaeth, transl. by Paweł Luboński (Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2025), 386, 387, 388.

[10] van der Kolk, 390.

[11] Paul Conti, Trauma: niewidzialna epidemia. Jak ją oswoić [Trauma: an invisible epidemic. How to tame it], transl. by Bartłomiej Kotarski (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Kobiece, 2023), 44.

[12] Conti, 153.

[13] Agata Bielik-Robson, „Słowo i trauma: czas, narracja, tożsamość" [„Word and trauma: time, narrative, identity"], Teksty Drugie 5 (2004): 25.

[14] Conti, 188–189.

Losing access to reality is not necessarily conscious. For outside observers, it may seem evident, but for those who live through trauma, the sense of reality feels sharper, not weaker; they believe they perceive more clearly than others. Conti's image of the "jumping toy" captures how defence mechanisms function: the mind oscillates between moments of intense intrusion - when memories break through vividly - and periods of emotional withdrawal, when numbness sets in[15]. This inner pendulum creates an exhausting cycle of tension and release.

> [...] both the social environment tends to withdraw from the trauma sufferer, and the sufferer turns inward, away from others. Trauma leads to diminished social engagement, reduced interest in family, and increased feelings of alienation and mistrust[16].

Trauma not only closes one off from the world but it also closes the world within the boundaries of the traumatised person's perception. Reality becomes filtered through trauma; indeed, trauma itself becomes reality. When it occurs, it collides with the real, and becomes the only certain reality (when reality is not traumatic, it is not traumatic *yet;* trauma is merely latent, but always present).

This might explain why Marysia fears that her son's caregiver has fallen ill because of him ('Oh no,' said Mrs Scott. 'Your son doesn't cause any trouble. Quite the opposite. Because of him, I've smiled more often than usual'. – p. 70). Meanwhile, the older Maria, when watching a movie together, suddenly recalls that man and child from the ghetto; those who were given "noodle water" and who slept on a stairwell in the ghetto (p. 19).[17] One can only infer the states in which the two women find themselves: the older one reveals fragments of her memories almost inadvertently, while the younger one speaks more about herself, yet her accounts never directly name her experiences or define what is happening to her.

Ewa Kobylińska-Dehe identifies various ways in which trauma manifests itself, emphasising its non-verbal dimension**:**

> Silence, too, has communicative value and can become a space for working through trauma; if only we learn to listen to it. Speaking about trauma not only offers relief; it is also a burden. Silence can serve a containing function. Working through trauma takes place not only through speech, but also through scenes, dreams, silence, and symbolic actions. [...] There is no doubt that severe trauma resists both psychic and symbolic representation. The concepts of *scenic memory* and *body memory* assume that representation does not vanish altogether, but takes a specific form: through a scene

[15]Krzysztof Szwajca, „Psychiatria a trauma" [„Psychiatry and trauma"], in: Konteksty psychiatrii [Contexts of psychiatry], ed. by Bogdan de Barbaro (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2014), 258.

[16]Szwajca, 270.

[17]Researchers point to these states, recurring as a result of incidental stimuli, also in the context of involving other people in them: „In the long run dissociation leads to lack of stability and living in constant expectation of another catastrophe. Bottled memories can be released any moment and flood the psyche. Traumatised people, in their attempt at shedding that burden, involve others in their situation. This is how scenes are created, in which separated fragments of a traumatic experience manifest themselves as facial expressions, look, intonation. Scenic memory is pervasive in everyday lives of traumatised people, adopting externalised forms, which serve as warnings to the environment [...]". Ewa Kobylińska-Dehe, „Scena i pamięć ciała – o przekazach międzypokoleniowych" [„A body's scene and memory – on transgenerational communication"], in: Psychoanaliza w cieniu wojny i Zagłady [Psychoanalysis in the shadow of war and the Holocaust], ed. by Ewa Kobylińska-Dehe (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 465–466.

> and through the body. Even that which is not verbally represented is somehow communicated as tension or withdrawal.[18]

Attempts to reconstruct emotional states are always risky - they can easily misinterpret or overreach - but they remain the only available path, not so much for approaching the two protagonists as for revealing their motivations, sketching their inner contours. Kobylińska-Dehe's distinction between *scenic memory* and *body memory* refers to the possibility of working through trauma, yet it is not relevant for noticing external symptoms. Her remark on trivialising bodily signs and symptoms, as a consequence of Cartesian dualism, is important. For both Marias, we can hardly speak of "working through" in the therapeutic sense. Instead, Krall presents brief, almost accidental traces of lapses of control and symptoms of tension, which are the products of trauma.

The mother-in-law can no longer recall certain facts. She knows *something* happened, but cannot, or will not, reconstruct the details:

> **Her husband's mother doesn't remember**
> how her mother died.
> It's not that she doesn't know - she once did - but she doesn't remember.
> Once she said that her mother died of a heart attack at the ghetto gate. [...]
> Then again she said, she did die of a heart attack, but it happened the day before, and it had nothing to do with the gate or the policeman. [...]
> Lately, she has said that she actually doesn't know how it was.
> Everything that happened after the Umschlagplatz is as if under water: blurred and indistinct. (pp. 75-76)

Her difficulty remembering may point precisely to the event's exceptionality, to its emotional charge. The blurring of memory, its lack of sharpness, becomes a symptom in itself. This "not remembering" paradoxically confirms the existence and depth of loss of the mother-in-law's mother.[19]

The younger Maria's fear for her son, in turn, takes the form of obsessive analyses of his behaviours, conjecturing, searching for causes in lack of other means of communication. This burden is visible, for instance, in her helpless expectation: she does not want to be the only one who has to know what to do when her son is not at ease („'What do you want me to do?', her husband asked. She didn't know what she wanted. She wanted her husband to know what to do" – p. 108). The problem is not so much her husband's helplessness as Maria's conviction that she is responsible for all decisions (which can be read from her husband's question). She is the one who has to face her son's disease alone, sensitive to every gesture, frown, change in his behaviour ("Her son didn't put back his T-shirts [...]. He always does. Always. Could this mean an approaching depressive episode?" – p. 109). She searches for clues to help her

[18]Kobylińska-Dehe, 474.

[19]As noted by Krzysztof Szwajca: „It is impossible to keep trauma away from consciousness. Traumatic information invades awareness (intrusion) and attacks as a living, tangible emotional experience (flashback), which evokes emotional experiences similar to those which accompany the act of being punched: fear, helplessness, humiliation, shame, guilt and hurt. A traumatised person oscillates between an intrusive experience [...] and a generalised withdrawal [...]" – Szwajca, 258.

understand his behaviour, emotions, thoughts. She wonders whether her son, who can read aloud but does not speak, understands the words he reads ("It's strange: her son can read aloud, even though he doesn't speak" – p. 113). Maria doesn't know what world he inhabits. As Krall comments:

> Marysia has an autistic son. There's a whole chapter about him in the book. In truth, no one knows what world that boy inhabits. No one knows why he cries, screams, laughs, or scratches his face bloody. He corrects the number on a car plate, the teacher's signature, the things in the wardrobe. He corrects the world[20].

The world in which Marysia's son lives remains inaccessible to her. The world of her mother-in-law is still confined within the invisible walls of the ghetto. Marysia's own world has condensed around the life of her ailing child.

As Anna Tatar observes in her study of Krall's method,

> For Krall, the story is the most important thing. She protects it: from readers who seek first and foremost entertainment, from her own potential fascination with dramatic events, and, not without moral dilemmas, from the protagonists of her reportages [...][21].

It is hard to say whether *Synapsy Marii H.* is a story of protection. What matters, however, is Krall's persistent effort to capture the reality her characters inhabit. Trouble is, this is a reality shaped and shadowed by trauma. In her book Krall introduces this pathway of accessing reality, which is why she says that "it's not about what really happened in her life, but about how she remembered it; or the other way around. It's about what kind of memory we wish we didn't have".[22]

Marysia turns to popular science books in her attempts to understand her experiences:

> Carlo Rovelli explains to her that it is the brain that has built bridges between the past and the present. The past has left traces in the synapses, in the connections between nerve cells. Synapses... Very interesting (p. 118).

The influence of experiences (particularly of emotionally charged experiences) is one of the central questions of contemporary science: research on biological consequences of trauma is ongoing[23]. The title's focus on memory inscribed in synapses highlights how Krall endows that memory with cultural meaning. Returning to Roszak's concept of weaving in Krall's work, we might recall a line from her earlier book *Jedenaście* [*Eleven*]: "Erudite memory, imprisoned in letters, archives, libraries, and documents. And the memory in synapses, in people, the most precious kind.[24]" This embodied memory is preserved and accessible (manifests itself) through

[20]Hanna Krall: dlaczego jedni ratują, a inni chcą zabić?

[21]Anna Tatar, „Wobec ocalałych i ich opowieści. Elementy warsztatu reporterskiego Hanny Krall" [„In the face of survivors and their stories. Hanna Krall's reporter tools"], Pamiętnik Literacki 3 (2016): 116.

[22]Hanna Krall: dlaczego jedni ratują, a inni chcą zabić?

[23]Szwajca, 269.

[24]Hanna Krall, Jedenaście [Eleven](Kraków: 2024), 57.

gestures, flashbacks, fragments of images. It is unverifiable yet tangible, often surfacing at the edge of articulation.

Understanding the reality of those who have endured extreme suffering demands not only empathy but also a willingness to accept that their experiences remain present, and constitute their lived reality. It matters *how* they remember, even if *why* they remember that way is beyond comprehension. This realisation also delineates the ethical boundary of access to their world.

Synapsy Marii H. is therefore a book about memory and about the reality of that memory. Maria, the mother-in-law, is fearful of who will remember the man and the child drinking noodle water. In *The Reality Is Not What It Seems*, Carlo Rovelli writes:

> The essence of a human being is not their inner structure, but the network of personal, familial, and social relations. It is these that make us who we are and protect us. As human beings, we are those whom others know us to be, and those whom we know ourselves to be[25].

Memory and forgetting thus are forms of accessing reality. For many, the reality perceived through trauma is the only reality they know. Yet it is difficult for others, especially those untouched by similar experiences, to acknowledge such reality. Following from Krall's commentary on *Synapsy Marii H.* ("What kind of memory do we wish we didn't have?"), I would like to address the issue of reactions to the suffering of others. Recent studies on post-traumatic experience stress the role of the community in providing genuine support:

> On the one hand, society resists having its illusions of safety and predictability shattered by people who are the living proof of the fragility of that safety. On the other hand, many victims struggle to translate their trauma into a language comprehensible to others. Unable to talk about their experiences, even to themselves, without re-traumatising themselves, they remain unable to articulate their needs [...] The reluctance of bystanders to engage with the emotions of the hurt people, combined with the latter's inability to express what they feel and need, makes it difficult for them to overcome the trauma's grip. [26]

This challenging social dynamic exposes a troubling intersection between the near-inexpressibility of traumatic reality and fear of being confronted with an experience that reveals the fragility of the images of that reality. What memories do we reject? What reality are we afraid of? Which issues do we banish from conscious visions of reality? *Synapsy Marii H.* confronts these questions head-on.

Yet again, one can return to the metaphorical gesture of weaving a story. In her book *Jedenaście* Krall retells the story of „people on the move" on the Polish eastern border. She writes:

[25]Carlo Rovelli, Rzeczywistość nie jest tym, czym się wydaje. Droga do grawitacji kwantowej/elementarna struktura rzeczy [Reality is not what it seems. The road to quantum gravity/ elementary structure of things], transl. by Michał Czerny (Łódź: Feeria Science, 2017), 274.

[26]Alexander C. McFarlane, Bessel A. van der Kolk, „Trauma jako wyzwanie dla społeczeństwa" [„Trauma as social challenge"], in: Traumatyczny stres, 39–40.

> What does an autistic boy have to do with people on the move?
> Nothing. It's just that one begins to wonder – should I write about him?
> As if people on the move made the autistic boy a little less important.
>
> Foolish talk, isn't it? [27]

Therefore, she asks, are there better and worse traumas? The trauma of a grandma who still is/ is not at the Umschlagplatz, and the trauma of her autistic grandson... The trauma of a daughter-in-law and mother, affected by her child's illness.

The ending of *Synapsy Marii H.:*

> She slipped and fell. She wasn't able to get up, she crawled to a spot which was not covered in ice and she rested on her longer leg. She didn't break anything but something hurts, ligaments or muscle.
>
> She felt sleepy (p. 119)

Sleep signifies a disconnection from reality, an attempt to step away from it, to forget. But, as Krall demonstrated, the dreams of her protagonist and her mother-in-law offer no escape from the trauma; in fact, they can manifest it[28].

In Krall's book, trauma *is* reality: a psychological, existential, and cognitive challenge. This we seldom admit, even to ourselves.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

[27] Krall, Jedenaście, 90.

[28] „Nightmares and problems with falling asleep mean that even the path of escape into unconsciousness is closed"– Alexander C. McFarlane, Rachel Yehuda, „Odporność, podatność i przebieg reakcji potraumatycznych" [„Immunity, sensitivity and the progres of post-traumatic reactions"], in: Traumatyczny stres, 241.

References

Bielik-Robson, Agata. „Słowo i trauma: czas, narracja, tożsamość". *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2004): 23–34.

Conti, Paul. *Trauma: niewidzialna epidemia. Jak ją oswoić*. Transl. by Bartłomiej Kotarski. Białystok: Wydawnictwo Kobiece, 2023.

Hanna Krall: dlaczego jedni ratują, a inni chcą zabić? Myślę o tym coraz częściej (wywiad). Z Hanną Krall rozmawia Katarzyna Janowska. https://kultura.onet.pl/wywiady-i-artykuly/hanna-krall-wywiad-synapsy-marii-h-o-czym-jest-ksiazka/v671ybv. Accessed: 26.10.2023.

Juchniewicz, Andrzej. „Autobiografizm w twórczości Hanny Krall". *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 67 (2024): 175–191.

Kobylińska-Dehe, Ewa. „Scena i pamięć ciała – o przekazach międzypokoleniowych". In: *Psychoanaliza w cieniu wojny i Zagłady*, ed. by Ewa Kobylińska-Dehe, 439-479. Kraków: Universitas, 2020.

Kolk, Bessel A. van der. „Trauma a pamięć". In: *Traumatyczny stres*, ed. by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, Lars Weisaeth, transl. by Paweł Luboński, 375-406. Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2025.

Krall, Hanna. *Jedenaście*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2024.

– – –. *Synapsy Marii H*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020.

McFarlane, Alexander C., Bessel A. van der Kolk, „Trauma jako wyzwanie dla społeczeństwa". In: *Traumatyczny stres*, ed. by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, Lars Weisaeth, transl. Paweł Luboński, 35-67. Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2025.

McFarlane, Alexander C., Rachel Yehuda. „Odporność, podatność i przebieg reakcji potraumatycznych". In: *Traumatyczny stres*, ed. by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, Lars Weisaeth, transl. by Paweł Luboński, 210-245. Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2025.

Roszak, Joanna. *Krall: tkanie.* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2024.

Rovelli, Carlo. *Rzeczywistość nie jest tym, czym się wydaje. Droga do grawitacji kwantowej/ elementarna struktura rzeczy*. Transl. by Michał Czerny. Łódź: Feeria Science, 2017.

Szwajca, Krzysztof. „Psychiatria a trauma". In: *Konteksty psychiatrii*, ed. by Bogdan de Barbaro, 255-274. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2014.

Tatar, Anna. „Wobec ocalałych i ich opowieści. Elementy warsztatu reporterskiego Hanny Krall". *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (2016): 93–117.

KEYWORDS

the Holocaust

trauma

Abstract:
Drawing on the structure of Hanna Krall's texts, the article demonstrates how *Synapsy Marii H.* [*Maria H.'s Synapses*] renders the experiences of people affected by trauma. The long-term effects of traumatic events penetrate multiple dimensions of life. Krall's protagonists have endured different forms of trauma: one survived the Holocaust, while the other, her daughter-in-law, struggles with her son's chronic illness. Both encounter difficulties in social functioning, shaped by their ways of coping with post-traumatic stress; at the same time, the communities around them rarely manage to understand their perspective. The narrative's focus on how these women perceive reality underscores the need to recognise such perspectives and to raise collective awareness of the process and consequences of trauma.

MEMORY

Hanna Krall

Note on the Author:
Beata Przymuszała – Ph.D, Professor at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her research focuses on literary theory, Holocaust studies, and the exploration of trauma and emotionality in contemporary culture. She is the author of *Szukanie dotyku. Problematyka ciała w polskiej poezji współczesnej* [*Seeking Touch: The Problem of the Body in Contemporary Polish Poetry*], 2006); *Smugi Zagłady. Emocjonalne i konwencjonalne aspekty tekstów ofiar i ich dzieci* [*Traces of the Holocaust: Emotional and Conventional Aspects of the Texts of Survivors and Their Children*], 2016); and *Smugi Zagłady – książki przeoczone. Borwicz i inni* [*Traces of the Holocaust – Overlooked Books: Borwicz and Others*], 2019). Co-author of *Ekspresje buntu. O wyznaniach poetek* [*Expressions of Rebellion: On the Confessions of Women Poets*] (2025, with Agnieszka Czyżak and Agnieszka Rydz).