Trauma in Words, Trauma in the Body: Narrating Trauma in the Works of Hanna Krall

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This article examines psychological and psychotherapeutic perspectives on trauma, showing how Hanna Krall's short stories exemplify the dynamics of trauma narrative.

Trauma Narratives

Since 1995, I have conducted individual and group therapy with Holocaust survivors.[1] I also carried out a series of interviews with Holocaust survivors from Poland and Romania for my book *Życie po Zagładzie* [Life After the Holocaust].[2] Listening to them, I was struck by how closely their speech echoed the voices in Hanna Krall's works: short, factual sentences; an emphasis on external details; narratives that at times became fragmented or incoherent.

[1] A description of the program can be found, among others, in the chapter: Katarzyna Prot-Klinger, Krzysztof Szwajca, "Późne skutki wczesnej traumy. Psychoterapia Ocalałych z Holokaustu" [Late Effects of Early Trauma: Psychotherapy of Holocaust Survivors], in: Psychoanaliza w cieniu wojny i Zagłady [Psychoanalysis in the Shadow of War and the Holocaust], ed. Ewa Kobylińska-Dehe (Cracow: Universitas, 2020), 301–324.

[2] Katarzyna Prot-Klinger, Życie po Zagładzie [Life After the Holocaust] (Warsaw: Instytut Psychiatrii i Neurologii, 2009).

Their emotions were rarely expressed directly, and I often had to infer what they felt. Some Holocaust survivors, however, sought a more literary form through which to tell their stories.

This focus on detail—on precise description—can be understood, in the context of the Shoah, both as an effort to preserve a world that survives only in memory and as evidence of the damage trauma inflicts on narrative form. To construct a coherent account— a "proper" story with a beginning and an end, enriched by reflections on one's own feelings and efforts to grasp the perspectives of others—requires symbolic thinking. Jean Améry describes how this capacity for symbolic thought declines under the weight of traumatic experience:

> I remember one winter evening when, after work, we trudged back to the camp from the IG Farben site, out of step, driven on by the exasperating shouts of "Left, two, three, four" from the Kapos. For some reason, I noticed a flag fluttering in front of a half-finished building. "Walls stand cold and speechless. In the wind, the weathervanes creak"[3] I muttered to myself—mechanically, almost automatically, by association. Then I repeated the verse a little louder, listening to the sound of the words, trying to follow the rhythm, expecting that the emotional and intellectual resonance this Hölderlin poem had always carried for me would return. Nothing. The poem no longer transcended reality. It stood there as nothing more than a factual statement: it sounds like this, the Kapo yells "left," the soup is watery, and in the wind, the weathervanes creak.[4]

Later, in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* [Beyond Guilt and Atonement], Améry recalls the words of the Austrian Jewish writer Karl Kraus on the Third Reich: "The word fell asleep when that world awoke." His experience in the concentration camp convinced him that words wither wherever "reality makes total demands." For the prisoners, language "has long since fallen asleep" and, as Améry observes, "not even the feeling that we should regret its passing remains."[5]

In this light, Theodor Adorno's dictum on "the death of poetry"[6] emerges not as a theoretical postulate but as a stark reality, one scarcely possible to transcend. For Améry—then still Hans Mayer—even Friedrich Hölderlin had perished in Auschwitz.

An extreme example of the loss of the capacity to symbolize—and with it, of language—following traumatic experience is found in the account described by psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub.

[3] Quote from the poem "Half of Life", in: Friedrich Hölderlin, Hyperion and Selected Poems, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Continuum, 1990), 189.

[4] Jean Améry, Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1966), 26. The German original reads: "Ich erinnere mich eines Winterabends, als wir uns nach der Arbeit im schlechten Gleichschritt unter dem entnervenden »Links zwei, drei, vier« der Kapos vom IG-Farben-Gelände ins Lager zurückschleppten und mir an einem halbfertigen Bau eine aus Gott weiß welchem Grunde davor wehende Fahne auffiel. »Die Mauern stehn sprachlos und kalt, im Winde klirren die Fahnen« murmelte ich assoziativ-mechanisch vor mich hin. Dann wiederholte ich die Strophe etwas lauter, lauschte dem Wortklang, versuchte dem Rhythmus nachzuspüren und erwartete, daß das seit Jahren mit diesem Hölderlin-Gedicht für mich verbundene emotionelle und geistige Modell erscheinen werde. Nichts. Das Gedicht transzendierte die Wirklichkeit nicht mehr. Da stand es und war nur noch sachliche Aussage: sound so, und der Kapobrüllt »links«, und die Suppe war dünn, und im Winde klirren die Fahnen."

[5] Améry, 45.

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

Dori Laub is well known to Holocaust scholars as the co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, established in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the world's first video archive dedicated to the testimonies of survivors and witnesses of the Shoah.

In 1999, researchers discovered that among the long-term patients of psychiatric hospitals in Israel—most of them diagnosed with schizophrenia—there were 725 Holocaust survivors. Laub initiated a project to record their accounts as well; twenty-six interviews were conducted in 2002 and 2003. According to Laub, these testimonies reveal both the collapse of narrative and the raw voicing of trauma. The survivors' accounts are marked by inconsistency, silences, broken sentences, and expressive body language. Their fragmented speech can, of course, be interpreted as a symptom of mental illness, but it may also be understood as the consequence of a traumatic experience that had never been heard. For decades, these patients were dismissed as "crazy," and their stories were not considered worth listening to. Laub's project reframed their words as traumatic narratives, a view reinforced by hospital staff who observed the project's therapeutic effect and noted the patients' calmness after giving testimony.[7, 8, 9]

The question arises: What is trauma in the psychological sense, and why does it disrupt narrative structure? As noted above, Dori Laub argued that the Holocaust was an "event without a witness"—a rupture of the empathic dyad.[10] By its very nature, trauma prevents the participant from becoming a true witness, since the event cannot be cognitively grasped in the moment of its occurrence.

Trauma overwhelms the psyche with an influx of information that cannot be assimilated into the individual's existing cognitive frameworks. Such experiences, resistant to both emotional and intellectual processing, remain unintegrated, held outside of consciousness by the strenuous work of defense mechanisms. As a result, traumatic memory is not incorporated into the personal past. It is not remembered or recalled in the usual sense; rather, it intrudes, forcing itself upon the present. Because of this, trauma resists articulation through conventional narrative forms.

The story of trauma is, in this sense, a testament to the impossibility of telling. One example of such testimony appears in Hanna Krall's portrayal of Izolda, the protagonist of *Król kier znów na wylocie* [Chasing the King of Hearts]. Izolda longs for her life to be set down in a book that would follow the familiar conventions of fiction—novels "for Hollywood." Yet, like other Holocaust survivors, the manner in which she recounts her story— fragmented, elliptical, and punctuated by silence—resists those conventions. She talks

[7] Dori Laub, Irit Felsen, "Traumatic Psychosis", in: Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Testimony: Unwanted Memories of Social Trauma, ed. Dori Laub, Andreas Hamburger (London, New York: Routledge, 2017), 228–241.

[8] Dori Laub, "The Israel Project Story", in: Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Testimony, 193–201.

[9] Baruch Greenwald et al., "Psychiatry, Testimony, and Shoah: Reconstructing the Narratives of the Muted", Social Work in Health Care 43 (2006): 199–214;

[10] Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival", in: Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 75–92.

> Precisely, matter-of-factly [...]. At times she tried to understand the person she had once been. At other times she abandoned the effort, rightly assuming that such understanding was no longer possible; what remained was only the utmost matter-of-factness. This calm distance from *that* created the impression that a transparent, invisible, stage curtain hung between her and the past.[11]

Therapists and researchers who study trauma and its effects on the human mind distinguish three types that lead to lasting psychological change: early maladjustment in the mother–child relationship resulting in attachment disorders; abuse and violence during childhood; and large-scale traumatization inflicted by others.

This view aligns with the understanding of trauma as the absence or rupture of relationships and bonds—whether in the earliest stages of development or through their severing later in life. An early relationship with a "good enough" mother fosters the formation of an internal "good object," which supports further development and enables survival in the face of difficult, even traumatic, experiences. Yet even the presence of such a "good object" in childhood does not suffice to withstand massive traumatization. In such circumstances, what is required is not only a "good internal object" but also an empathetic witness, or what psychoanalyst Samuel Gerson terms the "moral third."[12] Gerson employs this concept to describe what unfolds on both personal and social levels when catastrophe goes unnoticed or unrecorded. His analysis centers on the position of the witness and on circumstances in which witnessing itself becomes impossible, exceeding both individual and collective capacities. Such failures of acknowledgment give rise to what he terms "present absences:" losses registered emotionally, somatically, and unconsciously. The resulting narratives are fractured, riddled with "holes," and structurally impaired. Gerson traces this fragmentation to the absence of social concern and engagement at the time of the traumatic event.

During a traumatic event, relationships with others often prove vital. Such connections may take concrete forms—receiving help from someone else or even finding strength in rescuing another. For Krall's heroine Izolda, the will to survive is fueled by an unrelenting drive to save her husband. Yet this sustaining force can also arise from a broader sense of belonging: ties to family, community, and religious or cultural rituals.

An example of a "moral third"—not a specific individual or relationship, but rather a sustaining connection to tradition and faith—emerges in the story of Ryfka, one of my interlocutors from Transylvania. Her testimony illustrates that a traumatic narrative does not encompass the entirety of lived experience. Ryfka was able to articulate her pre-war and wartime life, but the most devastating experience of the camp resisted integration into narrative form.

She evokes the traditions of her pre-war home most vividly through the figure of her father:

> He understood us, even though he never allowed us to go to the swimming pool with the boys—or to do much of anything else... He would stand by the window and say: "You must give up many

[11]Hanna Krall, "Powieść dla Hollywoodu" [A Novel for Hollywood], in: Fantom bólu [Phantom of Pain] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), 294.

[12]Samuel Gerson, "When the third is dead: memory, mourning and witnessing in the aftermath of Holocaust", The International Journal of Psychoanalysis 90 (2009): 1341–1357.

> things for me. I forbid you everything, but it is better this way. If you remain alone, your soul stays pure." And perhaps, in some sense, it was better that way… Yet we constantly stood at the windows, watching others walk by, because everyone around us belonged to Zionist organizations. We were not permitted to join. We stayed at home, and it never occurred to any of us to object, or to say boldly: I want this, or I want that. When our turn came, each of us received her dowry—a trunk with a trousseau—and was ready to marry. My eldest sister did marry; she was thirty-two, with three children, and her husband was thirty-five. Together with their children, they were all taken to Auschwitz.[13]

In recounting the events of the war, Ryfka turns to a form of religious storytelling familiar to her: the midrash.

> We reached the gate, and my father said to them: "I built this house with great effort. Here I lived a balanced life, grounded in moral integrity and faith in God. And yet today I have not said my morning prayer. As I leave, allow me to say it now." It was the prayer of thirteen verses of faith, recited at least once every morning. He continued: "I want to say it at least once together with my whole family. I will translate it into Hungarian, so you will not think I do not understand what I am saying." Then he asked us to join him: "I believe with unwavering faith that there is one God, and may He be blessed and praised forever and ever." This refrain was followed by the thirteen verses—the thirteen principles of Jewish faith. And we were allowed to pray. When we finished, we walked out, and they locked the gate behind us with a padlock.[14]

This narrative form begins to break down when she attempts to describe the most traumatic moment of her story: the separation from her mother on the ramp at Auschwitz.

> And Mengele said to me: "Fräulein, bitte, sind Sie Geschwangene?"—meaning: "Miss, are you pregnant?" He did not use "du"… And I thought to myself: How stupid this man is. I answered him: "Nein, ich bin nicht verheiratet."—"No, I'm not married." He moved my arm away from my mother's and… The world would have lost nothing if I had not been there, for what I was about to suffer in life, I suffered because of that moment. He took my arm and said: "Gehen Sie nach links, Mutti geht nach rechts."—"You go to the left, Mother goes to the right." And you will see each other in the evening. Then he added: "Sie geht mit dem Auto."—"She's older and cannot walk, she will go by car." At that moment, very few people stopped. My mother stood alone, dressed in several layers of clothing. Her zipper came undone, and she began adjusting it. My God, I read it in her eyes: "My children, I am now all alone…" I read it in her eyes as I looked at her and followed her with my gaze. If you are condemned to live, then beyond fate, there must be something else directing you from above.[15]

In quoting Mengele, Ryfka slips into German, recounting the scene as if it were happening here and now.

[13]Prot-Klinger, 121.
[14]Prot-Klinger, 121–122.
[15]Prot-Klinger, 123.

Trauma Stored in the Body

Experiences that remain unspoken—or for which no words exist—become lodged in the body. For Holocaust survivors, such experiences may manifest as psychosomatic symptoms, persistent pain, or a fractured sense of integrity. The body thus becomes a repository for what Christopher Bollas has termed the "unthought known." Coined in his book *The Shadow of the Object*,[16] Bollas's concept of the unthought known (or unthought knowledge) refers to unconscious formations that arise from experiences lived but never fully understood. While Bollas originally applied the term to early childhood experiences from the pre-linguistic stage, it also encompasses traumatic events that are registered by the psyche yet remain inaccessible to conscious memory. Trauma, by its nature, is preverbal. Neuroscientific studies confirm this, showing that when traumatic memories are activated, the brain's speech centers are inhibited. This highlights the aspect of the psyche that exists outside the reach of language. The "unthought known" thus designates preverbal or traumatic experiences that may unconsciously shape behavior and later undergo "embodied reconstruction" throughout life.

These traumas can also be transmitted across generations.

Hanna Krall's short story "Dybuk" [The Dybbuk][17] serves as a kind of "case study" of this process, showing how parents' unprocessed emotions, unspoken memories, and dissociated aspects of their personalities can be passed on intergenerationally. The story is narrated by a man—the son of a Holocaust survivor—who is haunted by a spirit: his father's child from a first marriage, a boy who "somehow got lost in the ghetto." The protagonist, Adam, recalls that he "realized quite early on that he wasn't alone. He was plagued by outbursts of inexplicable anger, someone else's anger; at other times, he was gripped by sudden, unfamiliar laughter." Adam describes visiting a monk, where he suddenly breaks down in tears like a distraught child. The monk attempts to exorcise the spirit, but Adam instead addresses it in a "rustling language:" "Stay. You are my brother, don't go."

Traumatic transmission, imagined as an "object" passed on to the next generation—a dybbuk—resonates with Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia."[18] In that work, Freud demonstrates how in melancholy the lost object is not let go but rather incorporated into the self through identification.

Freud's reflections on melancholia were later developed by the Hungarian Jewish psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok,[19] who worked in France. They reconceptualized the incorporation of the lost object—so central to melancholia—not as mere metaphor but as

[16]Christopher Bollas, The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

[17]Hanna Krall, "Dybuk" [The Dybbuk], in: Dowody na istnienie [Proofs of Existence] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo a5, 1996), 5–17.

[18]Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in: Sigmund Freud, On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. and introduced by Mark Edmundson (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 201–218.

[19]Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, "New Perspectives in Metapsychology; Cryptic Mourning and Secret Love", in: Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, The Shell and the Kernel, ed. Nicholas Rand (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 99–176.

literal absorption: the placement of the lost object within the psyche in what they termed a "psychic crypt." Within this crypt, the lost object persists as a kind of "living corpse." Born of an unfulfilled capacity to mourn, this process frequently defines the experience of the first generation marked by trauma. In this sense, one might say that in Krall's story Adam's Holocaust-surviving parents buried his brother—the child who was "lost in the ghetto"—within such a crypt. The story of the child's disappearance remains incomplete; it leads to a demetaphorization of language akin to that described by Jean Améry, where trauma destroys the very possibility of thought.

Holocaust Survivor Syndrome

Holocaust survivors had no opportunity—either during the war or in its aftermath—to mourn their loved ones. In her short story "Syndrom Ocalonych" [Holocaust Survivor Syndrome], Hanna Krall draws on the reflections of Henry Fenigstein, who describes the condition he terms "survivor syndrome." He emphasizes, above all, the survivors' pervasive feelings of guilt:

> [...] They felt guilty toward their murdered parents, children, brothers, and sisters because they had not shared their fate. They had committed no other crime—they had not stolen anyone's bread, nor had they pushed another from a bunk... Their only "sin" was survival itself, and it was a burden they could never forgive themselves.[20]

Hanna Krall's short story "Tylko króciutko" [Keep it Short][21] explores the profound lack of space for survivors to grieve. It centers on individuals like those I am currently working with—members of the "Children of the Holocaust" Association—who were adopted and rescued as young children, sometimes as infants, by Poles. Many of them know little or nothing about their Jewish families. Krall demonstrates that their situation is frequently met with incomprehension, especially within American Jewish communities. From both conversations and therapeutic work, I have come to recognize that this sense of misunderstanding and inadequacy is widely shared among Children of the Holocaust across social contexts. In Poland, many remained silent about their Jewish identity for decades; abroad, within Jewish communities, their limited knowledge of religion and tradition left them both feeling—and being perceived as—outsiders. In both settings, their war stories went unheard, and they themselves were unable to tell them. This broader social phenomenon, often referred to as the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the Holocaust, stifled the development of survivors' narratives.[22] Silence also pervaded family life. Dan Bar-On coined the term "double wall"

[20]Hanna Krall, "Syndrom ocalonych" [Holocaust Survivor Syndrome], in: Fantom bólu (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), 334.

[21]Hanna Krall, "Tylko króciutko" [Keep It Short], in: Fantom bólu (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), 472–479.

[22]Yael Danieli, "Families of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust: Some short- and long-term effects," in: Stress and Anxiety: Vol. 8, ed. C. D. Spielberger, I. G. Sarason, and N. Milgram (New York: McGraw-Hill/Hemisphere, 1982), 405–421.

to describe this dynamic:[23] even when Holocaust survivors were willing to speak, or their children were willing to listen, the other side was often not ready. As a result, unspoken stories were transmitted not through words but through gestures, emotional states, and indirect narratives—what can be called "embodied reconstruction." The inability to find an adequate narrative form for Holocaust survivors' experiences leads to what has been described as concretization: the traumatic experience becomes a tangible "object" within the second generation, carried forward in embodied and often unconscious ways.[24]

Just as the "crypt" is the result of Holocaust survivors' unresolved grief, so too is the "phantom" a transgenerational phenomenon. These "phantoms," passed down to children, are sometimes referred to colloquially as "skeletons in the closet."[25]

Marianne Hirsch, who developed the concept of postmemory, argues that trauma can often only be processed by subsequent generations—those who did not directly experience it but instead confront its impact through the stories, silences, actions, and symptoms of their parents and grandparents.[26] Similarly, Vamik Volkan, a psychoanalyst who has worked extensively with traumatized groups, observes that the collective processing of trauma by descendants of both victims and perpetrators is rarely achieved by the second generation; more often, the burden is usually passed on to those who follow.[27]

Adam, the protagonist of Krall's story, resists this inheritance. While accompanying his wife during childbirth, he refuses to allow his lost brother to live on in his son:

> He was preparing to get out—preparing to take up residence inside my child. I leapt out of bed. "Oh no," I cried aloud. "Don't you dare. No ghetto. No Holocaust. You will not live inside my child."[28]

The story implies that the brother heeded Adam's words, yet this stands in contrast to research on collective trauma, which shows that such burdens are typically transmitted to subsequent generations.

Listening to Holocaust Survivors

Given the long-standing "conspiracy of silence," it is worth asking how Hanna Krall foresaw the later moment when Holocaust survivors would finally be heard. Her interview with Marek

[23]Dan Bar-On, Fear and Hope Three Generations of the Holocaust (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[24]Maria V. Bergmann, "Thoughts on Superego Pathology of Survivors and their Children," in: Generations of the Holocaust, ed. Martin S. Bergmann, Milton E. Jucovy (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 287–309.

[25]Nicolas Abraham, "Notes of the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology", in: Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, The Shell and the Kernel, ed. Nicholas Rand (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago 1994), 171–176.

[26]Marianna Hirsch, "Surviving images: Holocaust photographs and the work of postmemory," The Yale Journal of Criticism 14 (2001): 5–37.

[27]Vamik D. Volkan, "Traumatized societies and psychological care: Expanding the concept of preventive medicine", Mind and Human Interaction 11 (2000): 177–194.

[28]Krall, "Dybuk", 546.

Edelman, *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [Shielding the Flame], first appeared in 1976 in the magazine *Odra*, with the book edition following in 1977. The earliest psychological studies of Holocaust survivors worldwide were linked to compensation claims against the German government and, in the late 1960s, led to the identification of "concentration camp syndrome" or "survivor syndrome." [29, 30] Yet systematic research on larger groups of Holocaust survivors for scientific purposes did not emerge until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Strikingly, Polish psychological research addressed these issues much earlier. At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, a Cracow team led by Antoni Kępiński conducted one of the first systematic studies in Central Europe—and among the earliest worldwide—on the chronic effects of war trauma. They carried out structured interviews with one hundred former prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp, laying the groundwork for later trauma studies.[31] Interestingly, even with Holocaust survivor Maria Orwid among the researchers, the experiences of Jewish camp prisoners were not examined as a distinct category. This omission reflects the broader "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the Holocaust, a silence that extended even into the work of specialists—psychologists and psychiatrists.[32] It was not until 1994 that Orwid published the first psychological study in Poland focusing specifically on the families of Holocaust survivors.[33]

What unites the practices of listening to Holocaust survivors—whether in research, reportage, or therapy— is the recognition that neutrality is impossible and that one must take the survivor's side.[34] Reconstructing a story demands not only attention but also an active and empathetic listener. Holocaust survivors can rarely construct their narratives on their own; they require the presence of the "empathetic third." Some of my interviewees have requested recordings of our conversations, and the cassettes produced for the Shoah Foundation often constitute the first coherent account of their story, later shared with their families.

Trauma therapists describe listening to testimony as "embodied testimony," a process that engages both the mind and body of the interlocutor or therapist. When working with a patient who is reliving their own trauma—or one transmitted transgenerationally—the psychoanalyst shifts from the stance of detached observer to that of witness: a present and significant other. This position resonates with relational psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity. For Benjamin, the psychoanalytic encounter is not a one-sided relation but a meeting between two subjects. It requires recognition of the analyst's

[29]William G. Niederland, "Clinical observation on the «survivor syndrome»", The International Journal of Psychoanalysis 49 (1968): 313–315.

[30]Henry Krystal, Massive psychic trauma (New York: International University Press, 1968).

[31]Krzysztof Rutkowski, Edyta Dembińska, "Powojenne badania stresu pourazowego w Krakowie. Część I. Badania do 1989 roku" [Post-war PTSD Research in Cracow. Part I. Research to 1989], Psychiatria Polska [Polish Psychiatry] 21 (2015): 1–10.

[32]Yael Danieli, "Psychotherapists participation in the conspiracy of silence about the Holocaust", Psychoanalytic Psychology 1 (1984): 23–42.

[33]Maria Orwid et al., "Psychospołeczne następstwa Holocaustu u osób ocalonych i żyjących w Polsce" [Psychosocial consequences of the Holocaust among survivors and Polish residents], Psychiatria Polska 1 (1994): 91–111.

[34]Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening", in: Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), 57–76.

subjectivity: the analyst is not merely the "object" of the patient's needs or drives but, like the patient, an experiencing being.[35]

Krall is skeptical of psychotherapy, yet many of her reflections offer valuable guidance for therapists on how to listen to Holocaust survivors. She writes, "My profession is not to know,"[36] a phrase she attributes to Krzysztof Kieślowski. A similar idea is captured in a well-known remark by British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who urged analysts to practice "without memory and desire."[37] Both statements converge on the same demand: a radical openness to the patient, grounded in an attitude of not-knowing and non-judgment. Krall says she "hears better."[38] I find this an apt principle for therapeutic work. The therapist does not know better; rather, she must "hear better:" attending to essential phrases, perceiving what lies beyond words, and allowing meaning to emerge in the shared space of listening. Krall argues that a reporter must possess not only a keen ear but also a genuine curiosity about the world. In psychotherapy, this same curiosity is directed inward—toward the inner worlds of our patients. The parallel between the reporter or writer and the therapist lies in the attempt to describe the reality of those with whom we speak while striving to remain "outside the frame"—all the while knowing that such neutrality is ultimately impossible. Marek Edelman does not tell his story to a reporter in the conventional sense, but to someone who, like himself, survived the Holocaust. The same dynamic shapes Krall's encounters with her other interlocutors. What does the act of building this shared narrative mean—for them, and for her? In psychotherapy, we analyze the feelings of both patient and therapist, exploring transference and countertransference as universal phenomena. Yet it is equally important to recognize how a shared experience shapes the therapeutic process. In my own case, this means inhabiting two positions at once: that of the "mother," a role often projected onto me by patients, and that of the "daughter," as a representative of the second generation.

My experiences with psychotherapy for Holocaust survivors do not reflect Krall's pessimism about its value. In "Hamlet," she thus describes a group therapy session: "[...] one woman talked about the little brother she 'didn't keep an eye on' in Auschwitz, and another about the closet she tried to enter in front of strangers. They'd been telling this story for thirty years, still shaking with fear and tears in their eyes."[39] Yet in my experience, group therapy for Holocaust survivors does bring change. The most fundamental transformation lies in the opportunity to tell the story. When we began therapy in 1996, many participants would start by saying, "I'm telling you this for the first time." For many, the founding of the Children of the Holocaust Association marked the moment they discovered that others carried stories like their own. Psychotherapy gave them the space to voice these experiences. After the initial meetings, a number of participants chose to share their stories with those closest to them.

[35] Jessica Benjamin, "An Outline of Intersubjectivity: The Development of Recognition", Psychoanalytic Psychology 7 (Supplement) (1990): 33–46.

[36] Jacek Antczak, Reporterka, rozmowy z Hanną Krall [Reporter. Conversations with Hanna Krall] (Warsaw: Rosner i Wspólnicy, 2007), 34.

[37] Wilfred Bion, "Notes on Memory and Desire," in: Melanie Klein Today: Developments in Theory and Practice, Vol. 2: Mainly Practice, ed. E. B. Spillius (London, New York: Routledge), 17–21.

[38] Antczak, 34.

[39] Hanna Krall, "Hamlet", in: Fantom bólu (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), 635.

We came to understand that, with the group's support, Holocaust survivors were able to build a coherent narrative—one that allowed them to speak first with loved ones, and later with a wider audience, sharing their memories in interviews and written accounts. Through psychotherapy, Holocaust survivors gained greater freedom in their inner dialogue: the ability to name and understand their mental states, and thus to cope with them more effectively. As Dori Laub observes, "[t]estimony is the narrative's address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear—and listen to—himself."[40]

Mourning

I have the impression that Hanna Krall, in voicing her skepticism about the possibility of comprehending or accommodating Holocaust survivors' experiences and their "healing," may in fact be pointing to the impossibility of mourning. In "Życie" [Life], the story of a Holocaust survivor I know, a doctor returns again and again to the same question, posed in the shadow of the ghetto and the famine: "Do you want to tell me about it?"[41] It is implied that the person to whom the question is addressed is either unwilling or unable to speak. I spoke many times with the protagonist of this story about the ghetto, the famine, and her other experiences. She also participated in group therapy, where she shared her story and took part in discussions about the present. Was this helpful to her? I believe it was. Did it bring the mourning process to an end? I believe it did not.

Returning to the concepts of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the work of mourning, as they describe it, involves displacing the libido from the lost object through the creation of a metaphor. In this process, incorporation is gradually transformed into introjection—an act of appropriation and meaning-making that enables individual growth and the development of the ego.[42]

Jacques Derrida, drawing on Freud's theory as well as the ideas of Abraham and Torok, with whom he was personally close, speaks of the necessity of an ongoing process of mourning, which he terms *demi-deuil* ("half-mourning"). He argues that mourning for the lost object can never be fully completed but instead entails a perpetual state of "in-betweenness," oscillating between incorporation and introjection.[43]

To inhabit this state of "in-betweenness," while remaining aware that mourning can never reach a definitive conclusion, is something that resonates profoundly with me.

[40]Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening", 71.

[41]Hanna Krall, "Życie" [Life], in: Fantom bólu (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021), 735.

[42]Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, "Mourning and Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation", in: The Shell and the Kernel, 125–138.

[43]Jacques Derrida, Élisabeth Roudinesco, For What Tomorrow...: A Dialogue, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Historical Trauma

Psychoanalysts Dori Laub and Johanna Bodenstab were able to locate several of the Holocaust survivors whom Laub had first interviewed in the late 1970s and 1980s. In the early 2000s, Laub re-engaged these survivors and, together with Bodenstab, conducted a comparative analysis of their earlier testimonies alongside more recent recordings.[44] Both scholars argue that the growing public awareness of the Holocaust over those decades shaped the survivors' capacity to bear witness, reinforcing their identity both as survivors and as witnesses of the Shoah.

Alessandra Cavalli writes: "Events become experience when they become meaningful, have a name, become known."[45] Without a supportive environment, however, such events remain unrepresented—and in that form, they take on a traumatic character.

In their work with traumatized patients, psychoanalysts have developed theories of testimony. Testimony creates a space in which the "living" or "moral third" (as opposed to the "dead third")[46, 47] can come into being. When translated into the social sphere, this highlights the essential role of telling one's story in the presence of the "empathetic listener."

Returning, in this context, to Hanna Krall's heroine Izolda, our first impulse may be to dismiss her request for a Hollywood script as naïve, childish, or even excessive. Yet this impression changes once we consider the imperative to bear witness. Perhaps she senses that her story must take on a recognizable form—that the raw material of trauma resists direct narration. And given the contemporary reception of the Holocaust, she might be right.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[44]Dori Laub, Johanna Bodenstab, "Twenty-five Years Later: Revisiting Testimonies of Holocaust Survivors," in: Hitler's Slaves: Life Stories of Forced Labourers in Nazi-Occupied Europe, ed. A. Plato, A. Leh, Ch. Thonfeld (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 426–440.

[45]Alessandra Cavalli, "Transgenerational transmission of indigestible facts: From trauma, deadly ghosts and mental voids to meaning-making interpretations", The Journal of Analytical Psychology 57 (2012): 597–614.

[46]Shoshana Feldman, Dori Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (New York, London: Routledge, 1992).

[47]Jessica Benjamin, "A relational psychoanalysis perspective on the necessity of acknowledging failure in order to restore the facilitating and containing features of the intersubjective relationship (the shared third)", The International Journal of Psychoanalysis 90 (2009): 441–450.

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KEYWORDS

Hanna Krall

HOLOCAUST

Abstract:
This article investigates trauma and its psychological consequences as they manifest both in narrative and in embodied experience. It demonstrates how Hanna Krall's prose conveys the psychological reality of Holocaust survivors not only through content but also through the distinctive form of traumatic narration. Furthermore, it considers the doubts articulated within these narratives regarding the possibilities—and the limits—of psychotherapy for Holocaust survivors.

PSYCHOTHERAPY

trauma

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Katarzyna Prot-Klinger – Doctor Habilitated in Medical Sciences, a psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and group analyst. Her research has long focused on the psychological consequences of trauma, with a particular interest in individuals who experienced childhood trauma. For many years, she has conducted both individual and group therapy with Holocaust survivors. She is the author of numerous articles on this subject as well as the book *Życie po Zagładzie. Skutki traumy u ocalałych z Holocaustu–świadectwa z Polski i Rumunii* [Life After the Holocaust: The Effects of Trauma on Holocaust Survivors – Testimonies from Poland and Romania]. She is currently a professor at the Institute of Psychology at the Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education in Warsaw.