

The Subtenant (Sublokatorka)

Author: Hanna Krall

First Published: 1985 (exile edition in Paris); re-print Cracow 1985, Lodz 1987, official edition: Warsaw 1989.

Translations: German (*Die Untermieterin*, 1986); Dutch (*De Onderhuurster*, 1987); English (*The Subtenant*, 1987); Hebrew (*Dayeret mishneh*, 1989); French (*Le sous-locataire*, 1994).

Theatre Adaptations: Kluby Inteligencji Katolickiej, directed by Zofia Kucówna, monodrama based on *The Subtenant* (Poland, 1983); Teatr Śląski im. Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, directed by Jan Maciejowski 1989; Staatstheater, Hannover (Germany, 2004), *Macbeth*, directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski, Katowice (Poland, 1989), fragments of *The Subtenant* were used.

Film Adaptation: *Blind Chance* (Przypadek; 1981, directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski, a figure from *The Subtenant* was used [Werner]).

Further Important Publications: *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* (1977, Shielding the Flame; reportage with the elements of documentary novel and interview); *Hipnoza* (1989, Hypnosis, reportages); *Taniec na cudzym weselu* (1993, Dancing at Someone Else's Wedding; documentary stories); *Dowody na istnienie* (1995, → *Proofs of Existence*); *Tam już nie ma żadnej rzeki* (1998, There is No River There Anymore; reportages); *To ty jesteś Daniel* (2001, So You Are Daniel; documentary stories); *Wyjątkowo długa linia* (2004, An Exceptionally Long Line; novel); *Król kier znów na wylocie* (2006, Chasing the King of Hearts, novel).

About the Author: Hanna Krall (born between 1935 and 1937) is a writer and journalist of Jewish origin. Her works revolve around the Shoah and the fate of Polish Jews. She has a degree in journalism from the Warsaw University. In 1955, she started to work as an editor for *Życie Warszawy* daily; later she also cooperated with *Polityka* weekly and "Tor" film studio. She made a name for herself for an interview with Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, entitled *Shielding the Flame* (1977).

Content and Interpretation

Hanna Krall's novel *The Subtenant* was to be published in 1984 but it was intercepted by censors. The novel's plot starts in Warsaw in 1939, during the German occupation, and finishes during martial law imposed in 1981.

The novel starts with an account of a meeting. The book's protagonist does not have memories, documents or graves of her ancestors. She realises her sense of defi-

ciency. She reminisces a pang of jealousy when she receives a letter written by a soldier who accompanied her father, Major Krall, in his last moments. She started to create a new identity, narrating various stories reflecting her father's heroism and patriotism.

The narrating protagonist ponders the meaning of brightness and darkness. She looks for other examples like Cain and Abel, Mary and Martha and popular literary figures. To her, the difference between the definition of brightness and darkness has become obvious. The protagonist's friend opposes the distinction between the bright and the dark. The protagonist asks if the bright are uncomfortable when they pretend to be dark. This is a reference to individuals with a soft spot for Jews and their culture, who miss it. However, the narrator whose name appears to be Maria, attempts to create an alternative bright lineage. From that moment on, various hypothetical scenarios of the Major's life are presented. In the course of spinning the yarn about her family, she comments on the apartment: "There is really no way to avoid this apartment and the meeting between me, the Major's daughter, and the other one" (Krall, 1992, p. 16). The other one, the protagonist's "dark" *alter ego* is a Jewish girl hidden by a Polish family during the German occupation behind a closet. The narrator describes the rules of the house and the girl's harrowing experience.

Every year, on 5 May, the narrator and the subtenant travel to Majdanek concentration camp. Through this repeated ritual, the protagonist intends to restore the memory of people deprived of it in the Shoah (Wołk, 2005, pp. 296–299; Tatar, 2016, pp. 40–45).

The tenant and the subtenant went their separate ways during the Warsaw Uprising. It turns out that this dramatic moment in Polish history poses the only opportunity for the Polish and the Jewish fates to unite. They met again after the war. The tenant visits the subtenant in an orphanage near Warsaw. For a moment, the subtenant actually has a name: Marta.

On 28 June 1956 she found herself in Poznan when demonstrations of workers started. Just like during the Warsaw Uprising, she felt one with the protesting crowd. The narrator came back in March 1968. Delighted with communism, she stood up for Jews, expressing herself in the only form acceptable at that time: "This is not the Marxist way [...] Antisemitism is at odds with our ideology" (Krall, 1992, p. 96). At night, she talked with the subtenant, and the sense of fright from childhood made its way back. The subtenant confessed: "Fear is the only thing I am afraid of" (p. 96).

The narrator was admitted to doctoral studies in victimology in order to explore and understand the concepts of brightness and darkness. The narrator saw the subtenant for the last time on 13 December 1981 when martial law was introduced in Poland.

The author describes the relations between Poles and Jews, the issue of their co-existence after the Shoah, the experiences of individuals of Jewish origin in Communist Poland (Mandziej, 1998, pp. 87–90). The novel's narrative is fragmentary, takes many courses with numerous plots and episodes supplemented with narrative com-

ments. The conditional mood is frequently used in order to depict the diverse scenarios of the events (p. 93). As the summary shows, the stories are superimposed while the numerous plots create a sense of chaos. The author is unwilling to talk about herself, entrusting the protagonists with her story (Wołk, 2005, pp. 294–296; Kowalska-Leder, 2009, p. 244; Tatar, 2016, p. 30). She breaks the novel's structure, subordinating it to the categories of brightness and darkness (Tatar, 2016, pp. 29–58). The narrator is a survivor of the Shoah and she received the author's name. She suggests that she is a person from another world, a bright person. The author designates her to speak. The subtenant has not been offered this opportunity. Her biography is subjected to de-privatisation (Wołk, 2005, p. 298). The history of the Shoah survivor is contrasted with a Polish life story. The narrator attempts to modify her father's biography to ensure that it belongs to the world of the bright. The author works on her theory of brightness and darkness according to which brightness is associated with a better part of fate, with being Polish (Maria, Major Krall) while darkness symbolises the inferior part, being Jewish (Marta, Bernard Rajnicz). In fact, the narrator is split into two different persons: she is the tenant (Maria) who belongs to the world of the bright, and the subtenant (Marta) from the world of darkness. It is a “mark of internal decomposition of a survivor” (Wołk, 2005, p. 294). The relations between the tenant and the subtenant are asymmetrical, not equivalent. Their lives are variants of a biography which are subjected to the criterion of brightness and blackness – a better or a worse life (Krall et al., 2014, p. 16; Krall, 2021a, pp. 58–59) as it was the case of the Mary and Martha in gospels. This becomes obvious at the end of the text when the narrator writes about the subtenant as about herself. The protagonist's double identity illustrates split personalities of the Shoah survivors incapable of navigating between Polish and Jewish identities.

Main Topics and Problems

The novel's genre is hard to qualify unambiguously because it is polymorphic, combining elements of a novel, a diary and an autobiography. The author drew on the techniques applied in the reportage. It seems that a traditional novel would not be able to contain the experiences related to the Shoah. To a large extent, the plot is based on real life stories: the author has used both her own biography and the stories of people she met through her profession. In her novel, Krall created the protagonists on the life stories of real people disguised as fictional characters. The boundary between reality and fiction remains unclear. The author uses numerous intrusions of meta-textual nature, irony and repetitions; she also skilfully shows a range of emotions faced by the protagonist. She uses a reporter's techniques, making accounts of the events, without commenting on them. She shows the details which make the world real, the adoption of the human perspective, immersion in the past and rescuing it from oblivion, looking to the future. It is also the author's reflection on the writing techniques and rules as well as an attitude to life: the girl saved from the Shoah “decides to survive”, “separate herself from the world and unnecessary sadness”,

“train herself for brightness, living through darkness through and through” and in this experience combine what is incompatible.

One of the issues presented in the novel is the life of people of Jewish origin after the Shoah and subjected to antisemitism in Poland. The author analyses the problem of being a Jew among Poles, confronting emotions and sensations. The novel is a “study of the Jewish heart” which wants to operate in the Polish society in a rightful way (Mandziej, 1998, p. 88). A sense of “being a subtenant” is palpable and accompanied by exclusion, alienation, lack of belonging. Only when everyone is stripped of their sense of safety, are they united. The readers are left with a question if Jews in Poland will always feel like subtenants.

In her novel, the author also touches upon the issue of children saved from the Shoah.

Equally interesting is the issue of Bernard Rajnicz, an avid communist and a Jew, probably persecuted in March 1968, a Solidarity movement activist arrested during martial law.

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