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**The structuring of Jewish-Polish identity in autobiographical fiction
by Artur Sandauer, Ida Fink, and Hanna Krall**

Abstract: Artur Sandauer (1913–1989), Ida Fink (1921–2011) and Hanna Krall (born 1935) represent three literary generations of modern Polish-Jewish authors, three different paths of life and three various attitudes to writing. Nevertheless, their autobiographical fiction shares an important common feature: they alternate the first- and third-person narration in the process of creating the author’s self-portrait. These changes of perspective seem to constitute a textual representation of the complex Jewish-Polish (or Polish-Jewish) cultural and ethnic identities of the writers. In Artur Sandauer’s writings they also reflect the author’s tendency to look at himself from without, the tendency stemming both from his situation of a Jew assimilated into Polish culture and of his critical approach towards what he considered the “inauthentic” identity of a Jew-Pole. In Ida Fink’s autobiographical novel *The Journey* (1990) extensive use of the third-person narration (interchanging with the first-person one) reflects the situation of someone hiding their identity during the Holocaust, forcing alien, non-Jewish identities on themselves as the only chance to survive. Finally, in the autobiographical novel by Hanna Krall *The Subtenant* (1985) the identity of the main character, who had lived through the Holocaust as a child, remains split into two conflicting personalities, thus showing far-reaching aftermath of the Shoah. Here, the alternation of the first-, third-, and occasionally also second-person narration is a textual representation of the psychical trauma as well as a metaphor of the ambivalent attitude towards Jews and the Holocaust in the post-war Polish culture.

Ida Fink, Hanna Krall and Artur Sandauer represent three literary generations of modern Polish-Jewish authors, three different paths of life and three various attitudes to writing. Nevertheless, their autobiographical fiction shares an important common feature: it uses combination of internal and external perspectives in the process of creating the author’s self-portrait, first- and third-person narration, autobiography and fiction. The changes of narrative perspective influence textual representations of the complex Jewish-Polish (or Polish-Jewish) cultural and ethnic identities of the writers.

Artur Sandauer was born in Sambor (today's Ukraine, then Austro-Hungary) in 1913, in an assimilated Jewish family. He died in Warsaw in 1989. His father was a socialist sympathizing with the anti-Zionist party of Bund, while the mother came from a Zionist background. He said it himself that this first ideological contradiction, along with the family's position on the borderland between Polish and Jewish cultures, determined his "evidently fractured" and "dual" personality.

In Poland, before the II world war, Sandauer read classics at the university, published a monograph on Teocritus and his first essays of literary criticism. He also experienced various forms of anti-Semitism. He made friends with Bruno Schulz who lived in Drohobych, 30 km away from Sambor. In the beginning of the war, on the territories under Soviet occupation, he taught Russian in a local school. When the Germans invaded the area and established a ghetto in Sambor, he worked in the ghetto's administration and at the same time tried to organise resistance movement. Eventually he managed to escape from the ghetto and later on, when it had been liquidated, went into hiding with his mother and sister in an attic of a Ukrainian family's house. He reconstructed the experiences from that time in excellent short stories from the collection *Śmierć liberala* [Death of a liberal], published in 1947 and translated into French and German. After the war his mother and sister emigrated to Erec Israel, while Sandauer stayed in Poland and actively participated in the Polish cultural and literary life. His political views were always left-wing, even communist, but he never belonged to any political party and remained immune to indoctrination and political pressure. Because he criticized the doctrine of socialist realism, the government limited his rights to publish. As a result he started working as a translator from ancient Greek, Russian, German and Hebrew. Towards the end of the 1940s he went to Paris, where he met Jean Paul Sartre. At the outbreak of Arab-Israeli war he was still in France, where he tried to enlist to the Israeli army, but without success. He went to Israel several times, but never meant to emigrate; together with his wife, the painter and poet Erna Rosenstein, they chose Poland as their place of residence.

Sandauer did not consider himself a Polish Jew or a Pole of Jewish origin, but saw himself as a Jew-Pole, a Jew and a Pole at the same time. This dual identity manifests itself in his autobiographical fiction, particularly in *Zapiski z martwego miasta* [Notes from the dead town], published in 1963. This book, made up of varied fragments, has a dual structure, which is alluded to in the subtitle: *Autobiografie i parabiografie* [Autobiographies and parabiographies]. In the "authobiographies" Sandauer presents the history of his own family –

which can be seen as a typical Jewish family in Poland undergoing the process of assimilation – as a slow passage, stretching over generations, from the peripheries to the centre of the town, from the Jewish quarter to the Polish one. In the writer's parents' generation this journey came to a standstill in the district of Targowica, a quarter intermediate between the poor district of Blich and the elite Rynek, marketplace in the centre of the town. This topography gains a symbolic meaning as Sandauer emphasises the fact that Blich is situated below the Rynek, which is located on the hill. As a result, the assimilation and upward mobility within Polish society are presented as a journey upwards, halted midway along the road towards Rynek. This passage is completed, in a terrible fashion, in the days of the Holocaust, when the Jews of Targowica escape "the action" by going down to the sewers leading to Rynek, so they get out straight under the machine guns of German soldiers and Ukrainian policemen. This episode metaphorically expresses Sandauer's disbelief in the sense and possibility of complete assimilation with the non-Jewish world. The autobiographic hero of the story does not go with the others in the sewers towards Rynek, but turns and goes back to Targowica. This choice saves his life and in Sandauer's interpretation also has a symbolic meaning – it signifies the acceptance of remaining between: between cultures, nations and languages.

Duality, ambivalence and being in between are key notions also in the fictional "parabiographies", particularly in the grotesque story entitled *From the memoirs of Mieczysław Rosenzweig*. The eponymous hero bearing the traditional Polish first name and typically Jewish surname is Sandauer's *alter ego* – his second, unwanted self: a Jew aspiring after the Polishness (in its most chauvinistic and regressive form), trying to ascend the hill and reach Rynek at all costs. From his ideal model of Polishness he takes not only the love of Polish history and culture, but also anti-Semitism. As a result he ends up observing, controlling and hating himself because of his own Jewish origin, typical looks (as if from an anti-Semitic caricature) and the surname.

Writing of his hero Sandauer makes reference to Sartre, who in *Reflexions sur la question juive* (1946) suggested that European Jews should embrace their identity along with the mark of otherness forced upon them by the world. Only then will they be able to exist fully authentically. In Sandauer's eyes it is an allosemantic view – it does not express the aversion towards the Jews directly, but still marks them out as different, the other. Criticising Sartre's suggestion, Sandauer asks: "A Jew already assimilated and located between two nationalities

– which of them should he be faithful to?” His own answer to this question was “faithfulness towards one’s own quandary”, the acceptance of the lack of authenticity and stable identity – which gives one an access to different cultures – at the price of not belonging to any of them. In the essay entitled *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku* [On the Situation of the Polish-Jewish Writer in the Twentieth Century] (1982) Sandauer writes of himself (“from without”, in the third person): “Sandauer never overcame his duality, never found a solution to the problem of self-identification. He generally avoids solutions and limits himself to analysing his incongruities. (...) He is always poised in uncertain equilibrium”.

While Sandauer chose the fate of homelessness, non-belonging, and the role of an intermediary (also in his work, as a literary critic and translator), Ida Fink chose full identification – not with the Jewish tradition or Polish nationality, but with the idea of modern Israeli state. Curiously, as an author she remained faithful to the Polish language.

Ida Fink (nee Landau) was born in 1921 in Zbaraż (nowadays Ukraine) in the family of educated, assimilated Jews, probably closer to “Rynek” than Sandauer. She was well educated herself and read in Polish, French and German. Shortly before the outbreak of the world war II she commenced musical studies in Lwów. In 1942 she escaped from the ghetto with her sister Elżbieta and with false Polish ID papers volunteered to go to Germany as farm labourers. They survived the war in Germany constantly concealing their real identity and changing names and places. In 1945 they returned to Poland. Soon afterwards they decided to emigrate to Israel, where their family lived. In Israel Ida Fink found employment in the Yad Vashem, where she documented the stories of Holocaust survivors. She died in Tel Aviv in 2011. Her first book, an excellent collection of short stories *A Scrap of Time*, was published as late as 1976. It came out in Hebrew translation, later, in 1983 in German, and in 1987 in original Polish. In 1990 she published the novel *The Journey*, which I would like to discuss now.

The novel tells the story of a young woman, who fled from the ghetto with her sister. Having obtained false ID papers the girls sign up for farm labour in Germany and thus begins their journey-escape, which was going to last till the end of the war. The stages of this journey are marked out by blackmails and denouncements, stays in German factories and farms, exposures and changes of identity. The narration switches between the first and the third person, “I”/”we” and “she”/”they”, and sometimes also other grammatical forms, which is an

expression of the question of transient identity in the novel. The narrator, unnamed Jewish woman, usually speaks in the first person, but whenever she presents her Aryan guises, all those Katarzynas, Joannas, Marias: their looks and manner, she shifts into the third person. The tension between subjective “I” and objective “she” emphasises the narrator’s distance from the role she has to play, the sense of control over it, or at least the attempt to take control.

Gradually the Aryan persona evolves, improves, is better fitted to the circumstances, which evokes ambivalent feelings in her “owner”. On the one hand it is a profitable development, because a well-fitting mask minimalizes the risk of exposure and provides shelter for the defenceless “I”. On the other hand this perfected guise poses a threat for the real identity of the narrator, invading the most private personality areas and tampering with the closest relationship – the relationship with her sister. The necessity of constant self-control, self-observation and pretending renders the moments of respite, when they can have a break between successive false incarnations and be “nobody”, very precious to the sisters.

The price for surviving includes also the breaking of relations with the world they come from, because in the circumstances of the Holocaust to choose life means to choose estrangement, otherness. The chance of flight from the ghetto entailed a profound shakeup of the mental image of reality, suddenly governed by the principle on which what is one’s own means danger and what is strange means safety. This principle applies to appearance (in the novel there recurs the motif of “bad” i.e. Jewish looks), to space (the sisters strive to run away as far as possible from their home town and then they live in constant fear of meeting someone from their native land), to education (they must hide their love of music, knowledge of foreign languages and lack of experience in farm work), and to human relations (they are afraid of meeting other Jewish women who could be hiding just like them, because shared vulnerability is too easily recognised and poses a threat).

The narration in *The Journey* is structured according to the convention of reminiscence, and the labour of remembering is shown here as a hard, painful task, of uncertain value. This also leads to employment of the “external” perspective in self-consideration. The look from without, which is a part of looking back upon oneself, transforms “I” into “her” and sometimes affects even the Jewish identity of the narrator. It acquires particular significance in the novel’s ending, which describes the apparently happy reunion of the sisters and their

father at the end of the war. The third-person narration used in this passage suggests that a prolonged concealment of one's true identity poses an actual threat of losing it.

The paradox of surviving the war on the "Aryan side" described by Ida Fink consists in the fact that it is possible to live in such circumstances solely on the condition that one is ready to renounce their own name, face, past, language, tradition and family ties – all the elements which used to determine both their individualism and sense of belonging. In order to survive as a human, one has to die as a Jew, because loyalty to one's national identification would mean death with those, who could not or would not pretend. It is only the relationship between the sisters, even though it is not free from tensions and sometimes a burden, that is never questioned in the novel. The younger, weaker and more vulnerable sister of typically Jewish appearance stands for the whole world which is lost for ever.

Such bond with the sister actually existed in Ida Fink's life. In the old age, both widowed, she and her sister lived together and addressed each other by their last false "Aryan" names: Ida was Helena, and Elzbieta was Maria.

While *The Journey* can be described as a novel about direct psychological damage caused by the life in hiding on the "Aryan side" in adult people, the novel by Hanna Krall entitled *The Subtenant* deals with the late effects of a childhood spent in hiding and a distressing, ambiguous process of re-integration after the war trauma. There is a generation gap between the two writers: Hanna Krall was born in 1935 (or 1937) in Warsaw, with the social background like that of Artur Sandauer or Ida Fink. She spent the first years of her life in Lublin. Her father was killed in the Holocaust. After the war the girl was raised in an orphanage. Not much is known about her fate during the war, as she avoids talking about herself; there is just one short relation entitled *Gra o moje życie* [A Game for my Life], which she published in a magazine in 1968, when the communist Poland was a scene of a virulent anti-Semitic propaganda, which brought about the last wave of Jewish emigration from Poland. Hanna Krall probably never considered emigration, she also never thought of herself as a Jewish woman. The two-page article names forty five Poles who helped her survive the Shoah and summarises their actions, but does not dwell on the author's own childhood experiences.

In the 1950's Hanna Krall graduated from the journalism department in Warsaw. Later on she worked as a reporter and published a few collections of reportage. The turning point in her career and whole life was meeting Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943. On the basis of interviews with him she wrote her most acclaimed book *To Outwit God / Shielding the Flame*, published in 1977. Since then she has published several books, mostly collections of reportage stories, which describe the tangled and difficult lives of Jews, Poles and Germans before, during and after the II world war. She always treats the heroes of her stories with great consideration, without prejudice or judgement, and reconstructs their histories with utmost care, often in their own words. It is interesting that the writer who always observed the principle of "siding with those who are sorrowful", although herself undoubtedly belonging to "the sorrowful", never decided to tell her own story. In one of her interviews she explained: "I don't want to talk about my own sorrow, and certainly not in the first person. I sometimes write about it, but in the third person".

The main characteristic of her oeuvre seems to be author's resistance to the direct confession, the search of an artistic form which would reduce the painfulness of an intimate tale. In her writing the stories of other people often contain veiled reminiscences of the Krall's own experiences. It is also the case of *The Subtenant*. This structurally complex autobiographic novel is not a straightforward account of the writer's life, but rather a presentation of two variants of her life and personality: the "light one" (which is Polish) and the "dark one" (which is Jewish). It is also an analysis of the asymmetrical relation between the person who is hiding from persecution and the other one, who helps them out and gives them shelter.

The Subtenant is a story of two women, a Pole (sometimes symbolically named Maria) and a Jew (Marta). The narrator is "Maria", who also has the surname of Krall. "Marta" is an adult embodiment of the Jewish girl hiding in the home of Maria's parents – which brings to mind the author's own experiences, which she alluded to in the article mentioned earlier. Therefore "that little one" from behind the wardrobe and the tiled stove, who could not come close to the window, is more likely to be Hanna Krall's own portrait, also because of her appearance – she has got dark skin, black eyes and black hair. She is the eponymous "subtenant", whose problems are coldly scrutinised by the daughter of the people who own the wardrobe, the stove and the window. But the ideal, desired, purely Polish "I" also contributes to this portrait. It is the "happy consciousness" (as one of the critics named it), which turns out to be

possessive and comes to dominate the narration. As a result it is the “light” one telling the story of her “subtenant”.

The deprivation of the ability to speak for oneself is a consequence of homelessness, of being a stranger on other people’s mercy, of the limited power of self-government. In this sense the life of the “subtenant” represents not only the situation of a Jewish child being saved from the Holocaust, but also the condition of a Jew who survived the Holocaust in a non-Jewish country. Hanna Krall juxtaposes the typical Jewish fate with equally typical Polish history and also the histories of Jews living outside Europe, who did not experience the Holocaust. The novel presents several alternative lives of major Krall (the father of “Maria”), all of them equally attractive and noble, although invariably ending in heroic death, while there is just one biography of the “subtenant’s” father, who is simply taken to the gas chamber. Similarly, the uniqueness of the mother and child relation is juxtaposed with the situation of having two mothers: one is the real one, whose picture brings on the sense of terrible guilt, and the other is the war one, whose figure evokes gratitude mixed with humiliation. The richly decorated tiled stove, remembered from the lost home, is shown against the stove in other people’s home, behind which the girl had to hide whenever any guests arrive. And also against the furnaces in the death camps’ crematoria and metaphorical “fire furnace” on which the whole nation was burned.

The biographies of “subtenants” are constructed by Hanna Krall around the notion of deprivation, referring basically to everything that determines human sense of belonging and self-definition. Names, family genealogies, nationality, remembrances and tokens of the past (photographs, family graves) are taken from them. Moreover, they do not find solace in remembering, because their memories are dangerous, better not known to anyone, even themselves. Home, genealogy, individuality evolving within community, memory which is stronger than time and makes one’s life a whole – these categories are fundamental to autobiographical writing. The experience of the Holocaust brought along the ruin of those anthropological “constants” and the disintegration of the literary form of autobiography in *The Subtenant* seems to be the inevitable consequence of that ruin.

Instead of classic autobiography, understood as a consideration of one’s life and search for its organising principle and meaning, the novel is more of a chronicle of the writer’s auto-therapy, which divides her disintegrated personality into two components: the “light” and the

“dark” part. The light one is then given a status of the desired standard, while the dark one is turned into a medical, legal and psychological “case”. The dark girl is obliged to adjust to the model she is confronted with and give up everything which makes her different – and what makes her different is exactly the “darkness”, the experiences gained behind the wardrobe and the stove. So the therapy consists in defining and banishing “that little dark one” from the writer’s psyche, getting rid of the experiences which, although painful, were her very own, and substituting them with someone else’s story. If the only cure to posttraumatic personality disintegration is to be substituting it with a false personality and the only therapy involves self-denial, it means that the disease is incurable. Polish-Jewish “sorrow” cannot be appeased.