

The Polish Woman: A Novel

Eva Mekler

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When Karolina Staszek shows up in Phillip Landau's Manhattan law office one rainy afternoon in 1967 claiming to be his long-lost cousin—who was thought to have been killed during the Holocaust more than twenty years earlier—Phillip doesn't know if she's a liar, a con-artist, or a psycho. Karolina claims to have had memories that recently resurfaced, triggered by an obituary picture. It was a photograph of Phillip's uncle Jake, the man Karolina believes to be her Jewish father who hid her in a home in the Polish countryside with a Catholic family willing to keep her safe during the war.

No one is sure if they can trust her story, including Karolina herself, who doubts her repressed memories. But there are things—like the name of Jake's wife and daughter, which he had never spoken aloud to his family after moving to America after the war—that it seems impossible she would know. Regrettably, the only man who could confirm her claim—Jake himself—is dead.

At stake is Jake's inheritance, but Karolina claims she merely wants the truth. She's spent a lifetime feeling out of place—a sense that followed her as she left her native Poland to come to America on an art fellowship—and believes it's because the Polish couple who took her in (now both deceased) left town before her father could come back, kidnapping her to keep as their own. Karolina and Phillip set off on a trip back to Poland to beg her former neighbors for more information and, even while trying to focus on the task at hand, it becomes harder for the pair to ignore their physical attraction (though it seems odd that very little attention is paid to the possibility that Karolina and Phillip may very well be cousins).

Mekler was born in Poland shortly after World War II and lived in a German displaced-persons camp until age four. She is a former actress and the author of several books on acting. In this simply-written, beautiful tale, she tells the story of a Catholic woman and a Jewish man unconnected to their pasts, who might just find that they arrive at exactly the same place. Karolina's mission to put together the puzzle pieces of her history drives the story, but the more intriguing element is Phillip's tumultuous relationship with his past. As a child of Holocaust survivors, Phillip struggles with revenge fantasies about killing Nazis at the same time he feels anger about the weakness he felt his Jewish ancestors demonstrated—an anger which took root in childhood and persisted “even when he was older and understood the impossibility of resisting the Nazis.” Mekler's stark telling makes the very human emotions that much more powerful in this tale about how the ghostly fingers of the past reach out to touch the present.

IRIS BLASI (April 10, 2007)

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