
In America: A Novel by Susan Sontag (2000), 385 page.



Normally a work of fiction does not carry a subtitle "A Novel," but here it is deemed needed by the author; otherwise the title could mean a social treatise. Above all, the work is not a biography, although right from the start it is obvious that it is a story of the Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska (1840-1909). Miss Sontag is a well-known and highly regarded author of essays and novels, and this book was widely reviewed in recent months. We feel free to deviate from our usual routine and to offer an informal comparison between the facts and fiction presented in this very interesting novel.

This remarkable woman and talented artist was known by such names as Opid, Zimajer, Modrzejewska, Chlapowska and in America, Modjeska. Miss Sontag chooses to name her Załęzowska, Countess Dembowska and, while in this country, Marina Zalenska. Her son's true name was Rudolph or Ralph; Sontag calls him Piotr. Lastly, the talented writer who plays a prominent role in the story, Ryszard Kierul, is based on Henryk Sienkiewicz. On Polish stages, the actress performed in at least fifty plays, and there was no doubt that she was a veritable queen of the theater. Even though some of the facts, are changed by Sontag, her unbounded admiration for Helena/Marina is obvious.

The author begins in a highly original manner, pretending to be an invisible guest observing an evening banquet during which the decision to emigrate to America to seek a new life in faraway California is taken by a dozen individuals. The decision is inspired by the belief that only a communal experience, a socialist utopia such as Brook Farm in New England and as advocated by the French writer Charles Fourier makes sense in this wicked world. First, a two-person advance team of Ryszard (read: Sienkiewicz) and his friend depart to locate and prepare the paradise; they are followed by these idealistic (and, frankly, unbelievably naive) Poles who sail from Germany via New York to eastern Panama, then trek to the Pacific Ocean (there was no Panama Canal) and continue by sea and train via San Francisco to their Garden of Eden, otherwise known as the German village of Anaheim. All this takes place in 1776. This pathetic little group has no experience in farming. They bring a thousand books from Poland, but are totally unprepared for the urgent task to raise crops and survive. In contrast, their neighbors know exactly what they are doing and thus thrive. Within a year \$15,000 (a considerable sum at that time) of Dembowski/Chłapowski is gone and it becomes urgent to make the next decision. Here Marina/Helena rises to the occasion: she moves to San Francisco and with the determination and intensity so characteristic of her, re-enters the theater world, winning an audition with the city's leading impresario. Five-hour daily coaching lessons in English are her self-imposed regimen. Her acting talents are unquestionable, and her success astonishing. This meteoric rise to new fame in America is faithfully recorded by the author and makes fascinating reading. Soon her annual income exceeds the entire amount lost on the farm while, not surprisingly, the intended community group breaks up. Private pullman cars carry her entourage to dozens of American towns, and her name becomes known to millions.

As we read the novel, the expression "Only in America" comes to mind time and again. The novel ends at the height of her career. This country becomes her treasured home, and it is equally true of her devoted husband. Yet, to the end, Marina/Helena maintains the warmest relations with her native land, visiting Poland many times. For those interested, our library has two biographies of Modrzejewska in Polish: by T. Terlecki and by J. Kydrynski, and one in English by A. Gronowicz. A very rare volume of Sienkiewicz's reports in English, entitled *Portrait of America*, is also available. They contain numerous details which are not part of the novel.

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