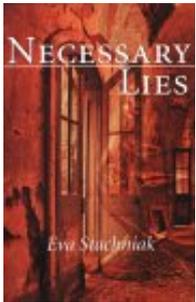


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**Necessary Lies by Eva Stachniak (2000), 265 pages.**



This is a first novel by the Polish-Canadian writer who is now in her forties and is teaching at a college in the Province of Ontario. She was born in Wrocław, Poland, attended the local university, and continued her studies at McGill University in Montreal. After completing her Ph.D., she got married and stayed in Canada. We gain the impression that some of her novel is autobiographical. The heroine Anna can hardly believe her good luck when, in the summer of 1981, her Canadian permits arrive. In Poland, at that time, her husband is caught up in a momentous event: martial law is decreed by the government. However, the novel leads into an entirely different direction that has very little to do with contemporary politics. Anna, enchanted by the Canadian college atmosphere, takes delight in her studies as well as in her teaching duties, and unexpectedly falls in love. Obviously her Polish marriage was not truly solid.

To her surprise, she discovers that the object of her affection William, who teaches music and is a fine composer, was born in the city then called Breslau, the place which to Anna is Wrocław. The challenge for these two people is how to reconcile this ironic situation and how to handle it. William left the city in January of 1945, when he was only five, with a feeling of utter horror. The world as he knew it suddenly disintegrated, with no prospect or hope for rescue; his family at that time had nowhere to escape. Yet, by some miracle, he found himself in Canada two years later. On the other hand, Anna's parents arrived in Wrocław the very same year. They were frightened to walk past the abandoned shells of walls, of houses gutted and burnt, deserted valleys between mountains of debris. This was the city where she was born. It was overrun by people who were terribly tired, defeated, humiliated, mourning their dead in far away eastern parts of Poland, remembering minute details of their homes left behind forever.

In the relationship of Anna and William, each is sensitive enough not to tread on the other's feelings; they make valiant efforts in this regard. No doubt the peaceful Canadian skies are a balsam for their bruised souls. In due course, Anna's divorce from Peter, who does not want to leave Poland, is granted, and her marriage to William (Bill) becomes possible. A tragic blow occurs when Bill dies of a heart attack ten years later, and a new dramatic turn follows: Anna discovers some old letters of her late husband. It would be unfair to reveal more than that, but it is an original twist. Let it only be said that she sets out on her return journey to Europe where she visits Warsaw, Wrocław, and Berlin in search for the truth. The novel includes familiar motifs: the determination to leave the old country for the West, the period of acclimatization, and the all-important return visit full of significance. The romantic content offers additional spice.

The novel contains vivid descriptions of many parts of Wrocław and Montreal. One should also note that this new "genre" of Polish literature is becoming quite popular. Tadeusz Konwicki started it (as pointed out recently by Anna Frajlich), followed by Pawel Huelle who writes about the Gdańsk area, by Artur Liskowacki who writes about Szczecin in a recent novel *Eine Kleine*. But the novel reviewed here seems to be the first one written in English.

**George E. Suboczewski**