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COVID-19 and the Book Market. Fleeting Phenomena and Lasting Changes

ABSTRACT

The article presents selected issues related to the antiquarian book market in Poland during the pandemic. The first part shows the increased interest in three titles of world prose with epidemic themes (*A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, and *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez). Demand for these titles increased significantly, as did their prices, although these depended on market opportunities. However, interest in these titles waned over time. However, the changes in the antiquarian auction market, which had already moved entirely online as a result of the pandemic, proved to be permanent. Meanwhile, the Internet has allowed new sellers and buyers to enter the market, although the top position of the industry has not changed.

KEYWORDS: antiquarian books, bookselling, e-commerce, book auctions, pandemic

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 i rynek książki. Ulotne zjawiska i trwałe zmiany

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane zagadnienia związane z rynkiem książki antykwarycznej w Polsce w okresie pandemii. Pierwsza część pokazuje wzrost zainteresowania trzema tytułami prozy światowej o tematyce epidemicznej (*Dziennik roku zarazy* Daniela Defoe, *Dżuma* Alberta Camusa i *Miłość w czasach zarazy* Gabriela Garcíi Márqueza). Popyt na nie wyraźnie wzrósł wraz z ich cenami, choć te zależały od możliwości rynkowych. Zainteresowanie tymi tytułami z czasem jednak spadło. Trwałe okazały się natomiast zmiany na rynku aukcji antykwarycznych, który w wyniku pandemii przeniósł się całkowicie do internetu. W tym czasie Internet pozwolił nowym sprzedawcom i kupującym zdobyć przyzółek na rynku, choć czołówka branży nie uległa zmianie.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: książki antykwaryczne, księgarstwo, e-commerce, aukcje książek, pandemia

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The contemporary secondary book market in Poland was formed after 1989 as a result of the political transformation. The changes included the ownership and spatial structure. The vast majority of state-owned establishments, operating during the years of communism under the banner of Dom Książki, were privatized or liquidated, while new private companies were established. Most antique shops and bookstores have withdrawn from prestigious and attractive, but very expensive, locations in city centers. In towns, they have ceased their operations altogether. The development of the entertainment industry, its offer multiplied under free market conditions, has reduced interest in books. In the following years changes took place in connection with the growth of the Internet. Stationary companies became interested in the opportunities offered by new technologies, and with time also companies operating exclusively online emerged, along with forms of business already specific to this medium. These were processes of varying dynamics, drama, chronology and scope, often occurring simultaneously, but stretched over time (Nieć, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic hit suddenly and unexpectedly, not sparing the book market. The restrictions associated with the pandemic were gradually lifted, but certain forms and institutions of the book market did not fully return to their former forms. The changes brought about by the restrictions proved to be profound and lasting. This text will present examples of such changes, concerning two independent links of the antiquarian market, and their consequences of differing nature: fleeting and permanent.

First hit – pandemic bestsellers

The pandemic was a media fact, and was itself an object of public interest. First of all, news were followed, there was interest in the particular virus and its variants, and the broader context of the issue quickly appeared in the media. Public interest in the issue of epidemics was growing, and numerous materials on the subject appeared of a strictly medical, but also historical and cultural nature. Reissues and new studies on the topic, scientific, popular and literary, including well-known works from the canon of world literature, were suddenly published in significant numbers.

For obvious reasons, the secondary book market was able to respond to this demand immediately, albeit on a much smaller scale, while publishers, wholesalers and bookstores took a little longer, especially when the titles they wanted were not in stock. Not all reissues could be published quickly. It took time, and even more time was needed to write and publish new ones. Media that directly or indirectly popularized reading on this current topic from the very beginning of the pandemic. A good example

of this is the article by Michał Czyżewski, posted on March 20, 2020 at the website of the Polish Radio, titled *Nie tylko “Dżuma Camusa. Co czytać w czasach zarazy?”* [Not only Camus’ *The Plague*. What to read during the times of the pandemic?] ¹

A significant barometer of the Polish book market, including the antiquarian market, is the Allegro.pl sales platform, which for years has maintained its position as the absolute leader on the web. ² As a rule, it is on Allegro that the search for a particular title begins, and there the offer of used books is mixed with new ones. Both occasional sellers and professional ones of all types – from individual entrepreneurs to large companies – are active on Allegro. Traders of old books include bibliophiles–collectors as well as small book traders, antiquarians, auction houses, etc.

Literary works, as well as scientific and popular science books on natural disasters, including epidemics are quite numerous. However, not all of them are well-known and popular, while few became hits of the pandemic era. There was, in fact, increased interest in a small number of them, and only a few achieved high prices. All sorts of factors, not just those related to the momentary spike in interest, have determined prices. These are: readership appeal, recognizability, which may be established by school compulsion, a film adaptation or some promotional campaign, and the availability of copies in circulation.

This included three well-known works of world literature: *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Plague* by Albert Camus and *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez. The starting situation of the various titles was radically different, although their supply was relatively balanced, i.e., the books were available on the secondary book market at prices significantly lower than those at which new books are sold, for less than 20 PLN per copy.

The famous *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Polish edition: *Dziennik roku zarazy*) by Daniel Defoe, originally published in 1722, was printed in Polish translation made by Jadwiga Dmochowska in 1959 by a well-known publishing house, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, in an edition of 15,000 copies. The translation was reissued by the London-based Polish publisher Puls in 1993, with a foreword by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, an acclaimed Polish émigré writer. Already private, but still operating, company did not relaunch the title until 2022.

1 <https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/Artykul/2474368,Nie-tylko-Dzuma-Camusa-Co-czytac-w-czasach-zarazy> (access: 01.08.2023).

2 According to a survey, 86% of respondents recognize Allegro.pl, while 40% recognize OLX. <https://www.gemius.pl/wszystkie-artykuly-aktualnosci/e-commerce-w-polsce-2020.html> (access: 29.07.2023).

La peste (English edition: *The Plague*, Polish: *Dżuma*) by Albert Camus in turn, is not only a work present in the world literary canon, but also a mandatory school reading. It was first published in 1947, in English in 1948, and in Polish only in 1957 after the Stalinist era, translated by Joanna Guze. Since then, the novel has been systematically reissued in various editions, as well as in sets with other works by the same author by various publishing companies.

Another, the third pandemic bestseller, is Gabriel García Márquez's novel titled *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (English: *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Polish: *Miłość w czasach zarazy*) published in 1985, in English in 1988, and in Polish translation by Carlos Marrodán in 1994 by Warsaw's Muza. Since then, the novel has been reissued several times by this publishing house, and has also become part of high-volume publishing series. An important impetus, which undoubtedly revived interest in the novel, was its 2007 film adaptation directed by Mike Newell.

As I have already pointed out, all three of these titles were, on the threshold of the pandemic, available on Allegro.pl at prices averaging from a few to around dozen zlotys. The number of used copies offered at the same time in the case of *A Journal of the Plague Year* averaged from a few to a dozen copies, in the case of *The Plague* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* as many as over a hundred, some of which were new copies put up for sale by publishers, wholesalers and bookstores. In 2020 and 2021, no new copies of Daniel Defoe's book were in bookstore circulation.

During the first few days, in February and March, including the 13th when Europe was declared the center of the pandemic, almost all the copies on offer were bought up or withdrawn by sellers, and they reappeared at higher prices. Most spectacularly, the prices of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, auctioned and sold under the "buy now" option, rose to 195 PLN per copy. The supply increased, but not by much, as only the resources in the secondary book market remained available. The prices of the other two titles increased, but compared to Defoe's *Diary*, insignificantly and not for long. This was determined by a much larger supply, including new releases and additions. Interestingly, some vendors offered a kind of pandemic sets, such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* along with *The Plague*.

The increased interest in the three titles lasted for several months, although the abundant supply of works by Camus and Márquez effectively kept prices moderate, although they still did rise noticeably, for Defoe's *Diary*, however, one had to pay much more than before the pandemic until the new edition was published in 2022, but even after that, prices did not return to their former level below twenty PLN. The first two works were well-recognized and popular on the market at the beginning of the pandemic, and the offer was extensive, including used and new

copies; *A Journal of the Plague Year* along with *The Plague*, in comparison, was a rather forgettable title whose commercial circulation was limited to the secondary market. The effect of the pandemic increased interest in the title in a significant and, it seems, lasting way, which was sealed by a new edition that was heavily advertised and available for general sale.

In summary, the increased interest in pandemic topics, which should be considered a typical and temporary phenomenon, has its own dramatics, depending both on external factors, but also internal from the point of view of the book market. The demand intensifies, the price increases, resources are mobilized, and new editions appear. As the fashion fades, the demand falls, stabilizes, but – especially for less popular titles – it stabilize at a higher level than it was before.

Old book auctions during and after the pandemic

While we can consider the pandemic careers of three selected titles of world prose described above as typical, what has happened in the online auction market already has the character of fundamental and – it seems – irreversible changes.

Until 1989, auctions were organized by state antique shops, mainly in Krakow and Warsaw, but also those in other cities. The structure of the auction offerings was driven both by trends and fashions in the collectors' market, but was also influenced by the authentic needs of libraries and scientific and educational institutions, as well as researchers, teachers, students and pupils, and ordinary readers. They were specific and characteristic of an economy of shortages, resulting from both political reasons (censorship) and the weakness of the publishing market, operating under a centrally managed economy (Nieć, pp. 83–85).

In the 1990s, there were quite a few companies organizing auctions, but the market soon became saturated. After 2000, the number of antique dealers and auction rooms holding auctions began to steadily decline, eventually limiting itself to a handful of companies, mainly in Warsaw and Krakow. This resulted in the outclassing of antiquarian bookstores from other cities, whose customers (buyers and sellers) were largely forced to use the services of Krakow and Warsaw establishments, to which an attractive assortment flowed in a wide stream, bypassing the others (Nieć, pp. 308–311). The situation formed in this way lasted until early 2020. Several companies held more than a dozen stationary antiquarian auctions a year, their tops were Warsaw's Lamus and Krakow's Rara Avis and Wójtowicz. Traditional fixed auctions held in rented halls attracted participants from all over the country, and online auctions were also held, but

rarely and on a small scale.³ Such events integrated the community and provided an opportunity for meetings, conversations, although the number of bidders by correspondence and telephone and through intermediaries was growing. Catalogs were developed and printed, which were distributed to customers by mail, while at the same time an electronic version would be in operation, in which a larger number of photos of the items on offer were available. The customer could personally inspect the items of interest in advance in an antique shop or at an auction, where they were displayed in a separate room, or they could just go by the catalog description and photographs. Antiquarians and their customers used a variety of communication facilities, operating in a traditional manner.

The pandemic forced everyone to switch to remote forms, which happened almost overnight. The auction calendar was already filled, auction bids were prepared, and companies specialized in organizing remote bidding were already in operation, allowing a smooth transition to remote mode. The auction market was dominated by the OneBid auction platform, which has been operating since 2014. The platform's offerings are aimed at a wide audience, so alongside the former monopolists of the auction market, others immediately appeared.

The auction calendar, which until 2019 included more than a dozen auctions per year, is now tight. The auctions take place several times a week, even during the summer holiday months, their number steadily increasing. However, they differ in the quantity and quality of items exhibited, the standard of catalog development, the number of participants, and finally the results achieved. The significant differences in the number of auctions, objects displayed and the prices are largely due to the nature of the assortment in which each company specializes. Between 2008 and 2018, there were about a dozen auctions per year, and in 2019 the number of auctions increased to 24, in the next – the pandemic 2020 there were already 45, in 2021 – 105, and in 2022 – 156 auctions.⁴ However, the increase in the number of items put up for auction was already somewhat smaller: 15,074 (2018), 17,148, 25,316, 45,589, 74,571, respectively. Interestingly, as the percentage of sold items at auctions was more or less in the range of 68–57 percent, it dropped to 42 in 2022, while the average price of a copy went down in the 2020–2022 period to the lowest level of PLN 418.06. An analysis of auction sales in 2022, a record year in terms of the number of auctions, yields interesting and quite telling findings that put the overall

3 According to compilations by Paweł Podniesiński, two auctions by Lamus Secreter i12 and i13 in 2019 put up 1,759 objects of which 1,220 were sold, while the other organizers sold between a few and twenty-something percent of the auction offer that year.

4 I provide auction data based on statements compiled by Paweł Podniesiński and Janusz Pawlak.

figures in a slightly different light. In 2022, 37 companies held 156 auctions with a total of 74,571 items, with the absolute leader in terms of sales efficiency and average price and a market share of 26.32 percent. The Warsaw-based Lamus held just four auctions, while the next two tycoons, the Krakow-based Rara Avis and Wójtowicz, with a combined market share of 26.58 percent (14.34+12.24), held 23 auctions. In a nutshell: The three antique book dealers that dominated in the era of stationary auctions have maintained their market position at more than 52 percent, with another 26 percent of the market held by the next 10 companies on the list.

Observing the practice of antique stores and auction rooms and analyzing the available data, at least two types of auctions can be tentatively identified: large auctions and small auctions. I consider large auctions to be those that correspond to the size and quality of the offer, its structure and level of elaboration to those stationary auctions organized by reputable antiquarians before 2020. On the other hand, I propose to consider all the others as small auctions that include a smaller and – above all – qualitatively poorer quality set of items, significantly less developed, without a traditional catalog. The auctions are organized quite often mainly by less prominent companies, although renowned market leaders also organize them, exhibiting an inferior assortment of products, which, as it turns out, finds its buyers.

Such a dynamic and sudden development of this form of book sales, including just the quantitative aspect of the multiplication of the assortment and with its active (auction organizers) and passive (bidders) participants, must have brought a lot of new experiences, surprising events, phenomena, although the previous elite of the market retained their positions. Auctions of quality items are still held in a similar manner, but records have begun to be set not only for auctions of valuable books, but also for those that were not previously on sale and can still be purchased for little money from the current offerings of antique stores and sales services.

Thus, for example, *Homerowej Iliady Pomór i Gniew* with illustrations by Stanisław Wyspiański (Kraków 1903), which sold for amounts ranging from a few hundred to a thousand several hundred PLN, Suszek Books put up three copies in 2021 at a starting price of 2,500 PLN and sold consecutively auctioned for 14,000, 3,200, and 5,500 PLN.⁵ Records were also set for the first edition of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* [*The Wedding*], which is not uncommon and sold for an average of 3,000–4,000 PLN: Wójtowicz sold a copy in 2020 – for 13,000 PLN, Suszek Books for 17,000 PLN, and Antykwariat Epicki for 9,000 PLN. Currently, most do not find buyers at much lower prices.⁶ It should be noted that all the listed copies of

5 <https://onebid.pl/pl/archive/1/0/0/0/Pom%C3%B3r%20Gniew> (access: 01.08.2023).

6 <https://onebid.pl/pl/archive/1/0/0/0/Wesele%201901> (access: 01.08.2023).

Homerowej Iliady... and *Wesele* did not have additional elements that could significantly affect their value. As one can see, it is difficult to see any regularity here.

Much more confusion arose around books generally available in the secondary market offerings, cheap and of little interest, which until now had not found their way into auction catalogs, for which there are plenty of examples. For example, the first edition of Janusz Sowiński's *Polskie drukarstwo* (Ossolineum: Wrocław 1988) in the *Polskie Rzemiosło i Polski Przemysł* series, the price of which on Allegro.pl is between 10 and 20 PLN, on December 3, 2021 was sold for 550 PLN, and on January 18 of the following year for 600 PLN.⁷ Another record was set at this latter auction: Bohdan Baranowski's *Polska karczma, restauracja kawiarnia* from the same series (Wrocław 1979) was sold for 1,800 PLN, and on March 10 of that year for 1,400 PLN. Other books from this publishing series were also sold at high prices, although they are widely available for small amounts.

Surprising and non-substantive (rare, sought-after book) auction out-bidding, both at old stationary auctions and on the most popular sales site, Allegro.pl, happened in the past as well, but relatively rarely. This phenomenon was much more common in 2020–2022. It is possible to notice a certain calming down lately, and auctions with mediocre bids usually end in failure, a good example of which is the Easter Auction of the “Sobieski” Antiquarian Shop, where only 7 of the 360 items put up for auction were sold.⁸ The issue is undoubtedly complex and requires in-depth research, however, already preliminary observations and analyses of partial data allow us to outline the main problems and make hypotheses. The number of auctions held in the period since 2020 has increased by almost ten-fold, which, for obvious reasons, had to be reflected in the quality of the assortment, with a lot of books going up for auction available in the current offer of both online and stationary sellers. Among the organizers of the auctions appeared, already well-known companies active mainly on Allegro.pl. Let us call them predatory companies. This predation here consisted of a strong image of a professional, or even elite antique shop or auction room with an exclusive offer aimed at a wealthy customer. The items on offer, mainly books, were characterized by impressive covers, which were often made at the seller's request. The best examples are provided by Antykwariat Sobieski, Piękne Książki, or – previously less known – Suszek Books. However, taking a closer look at the offer of this type of companies and comparing it with what is sold by renowned and well-known antiquarian bookstores in Krakow and Warsaw, one will easily notice that this offer

7 <https://onebid.pl/pl/archive/1/0/0/0/Sowi%C5%84ski%20Drukarstwo> (access: 01.08.2023).

8 <https://onebid.pl/pl/auction/-/4961> (access: 01.08.2023).

is rather shallow and narrow, as it covers mainly 19th century and inter-war Polish books, while the marketing strategies implemented may already raise considerable doubts, although much can be explained/justified by little experience and low competence of both sellers and buyers.

An interesting example of this is the apparent blunder of with Piękne Książki regarding boxes attributed to Robert Jahoda⁹, which, by all indications, were converted German publishing bindings. A monogram deciphered as “RJ”¹⁰ had nothing to do with the famous Krakow bookbinder. It was “FR”, Fredericus Rex, used to decorate a rather popular edition of the works of Frederick the Great.¹¹ Interestingly, according to information available at the Onebid.pl archive, three sets consisting of four cassettes were sold consecutively at prices of 5,280, 9,300 and 4,400 PLN, respectively, at auctions on March 5, April 9 and October 2, 2022. As if that were not enough, less than three weeks later, the works of Frederick the Great in these bindings, in the version that was used to make the boxes, were put up for 1,800 PLN at an auction of Antykwariat Wójtowicz (auction No. 58) with a fair and corresponding description.¹²

Such sellers repeatedly display the same copies, which is a rather conspicuous practice. On the one hand, high asking prices and the high frequency of auctions held, and on the other, the evident lack of abundant supply are probably the reason for this. A good example is the set of Józef Ignacy Kraszewski’s *Rachunki*, offered without success by Piękne Książki at five auctions from January 2021 to March 2022¹³, or Vitruvius *O budownictwie ksiąg dziesięć* (Wrocław 1840) equally unsuccessfully put up for auction, this time by Antykwariat Sobieski from October 2022 to August of the following year.¹⁴

At the auctions held before the pandemic, of which there were more than a dozen during the year, the number of items that did not find buyers ranged from 25–40 percent, and the efficiency calculated by sales value oscillated between 80–110 percent. Nowadays, the opposite trend can be increasingly observed, especially when the momentum of the audience, which has somehow stabilized, began to dim. The audience of the old

9 <https://onebid.pl/pl/ksiazki-i-starodruki-jahoda-robert-4-ksiazki-kasety-na-osobiste-dokumenty-pelna-skora-maroquin-z-monogramem/1370218> (access: 01.08.2023).

10 <https://onebid.pl/pl/ksiazki-i-starodruki-jahoda-robert-4-ksiazki-kasety-na-osobiste-dokumenty-pelna-skora-maroquin-z-monogramem/1165953> (access: 01.08.2023).

11 <https://www.antbuch.de/Buecher/Bibliophile-Ausgaben/> (access: 01.08.2023).



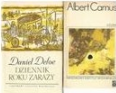

12 <https://onebid.pl/pl/ksiazki-i-starodruki-fryderyk-wielki-die-werke-friedrichs-des-gros-sen/1621786> (access: 01.08.2023).

13 <https://onebid.pl/pl/archive/1/0/0/0/Kraszewski%20Rachunki> (access: 01.08.2023).

14 <https://onebid.pl/pl/archive/1/0/0/0/WITRUWIUSZ> (access: 01.08.2023).

stationary auctions, it seems, was quite stable, but also hermetic, and in an accelerated mode this community came to confront not only the new technology, but also a new online audience. Investigating this process, while probably not easy for a number of reasons (a solid roadblock was the anonymity of auction participants and trade secrets), would certainly yield interesting data. The above-described cases indicate that just as the ranks of antiquarians would be filled by new, not always competent and skillful adepts of this profession, the public has been enriched by new bibliophiles – full of enthusiasm, often possessing considerable financial means, but inexperienced, acting under the influence of emotions, perhaps – which is not at all uncommon – treating participation in auctions as an amusement or a game. This last factor, which is psychological by nature, is extremely important and cannot be ignored.

Selected offers for sale of *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe before and after the introduction of the pandemic state (www.allegro.pl)

	<p>Dziennik roku zarazy - Daniel Defoe Okładka: miękka Rok wydania: 1993 Tytuł: Dziennik roku zarazy zakończona 7 lutego 2020 o godzinie 20:57:24</p> <p>8,54 zł SMART z kurierem kup teraz 14,04 zł z dostawą</p>	
	<p>Dziennik roku zarazy od Super Sprzedawcy Okładka: miękka Rok wydania: 1993 Tytuł: Dziennik roku zarazy zakończona 5 lutego 2020 o godzinie 23:19:23</p> <p>10,50 zł SMART z kurierem kup teraz 16,40 zł z dostawą</p>	TEZEUSZ antiquariat i biblioteka
	<p>DZIENNIK ROKU ZARAZY Defoe + DŻUMA Camus Okładka: miękka z obwolutą Rok wydania: 1959 Tytuł: DZIENNIK ROKU ZARAZY / DŻUMA zakończona 1 kwietnia 2020 o godzinie 14:35:33</p> <p>140,00 zł SMART z kurierem kup teraz 146,80 zł z dostawą</p>	
	<p>Daniel DEFOE - Dziennik roku zarazy PULS Londyn Okładka: miękka Rok wydania: 1993 Tytuł: Dziennik roku zarazy zakończona 31 marca 2020 o godzinie 18:58:04</p> <p>125,00 zł 133,00 zł z dostawą</p>	16 osób licytowało

To sum up, the last three years have shaken the antiquarian market hard and changed, it seems, the auction segment of sales permanently, although it has remained unshaken in its main core. The decisive factor is, first of all, the quality of the offer, but also the reputation of the company and the professionalism of its employees, which attracts participants and gains their trust. The participants, in the case of the secondary book market, let us remember, are both sellers and buyers. It can be assumed that

over time the competence of new antiquarians will improve, that new bibliophiles will gain experience and bid more prudently, however, “surviving shapes no miracle will return to existence”. The online form of conducting auctions and the subsequent massification of antiquarian book auctions are already an everyday occurrence.

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