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Shaping the Memory of Irena Sendler in Polish Children's Literature¹

Abstract: The paper is an analysis of contemporary Polish children's literature presenting Irena Sendler (1910–2008), a social worker who during World War II was one of the people helping Warsaw Jews persecuted by the Nazi regime. For her courageous actions in 1965 she was recognized as Righteous among the Nations by the State of Israel. Although her life was an inspiration for Renata Piątkowska's *All of My Mums* (2013), the first Polish children's biography of Sendler was published in 2018 (Anna Czerwińska-Rydel's *Lists in a Bottle: A Story about Irena Sendler*). Later Ewa Nowak's *Kto uratował jedno życie... Historia Ireny Sendlerowej* (Whosoever saved a single life... A Story about Irena Sendler) and *Irena Sendlerowa: Magiczny koralik* (Irena Sendler: A Magical Bead) by Beata Ostrowicka were published. The paper focuses on the presentation of Sendler in children's literature in the context of the 21st century discussion about relations between Poles and Jews during the Holocaust. She became a symbol of courageous Polish people helping persecuted Jews in the time of the Shoah and children's authors present her in this manner, in most cases resisting the critical approach, as it was presented e.g. by Anna Bikont in the recently published biography for adults *Sendlerowa: W ukryciu* (Sendler: In Hiding). The analysis shows how contemporary Polish children's literature interferes with political and historical debates about the contentious issue of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.

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In 2018, the National Year of Irena Sendler was celebrated in Poland. Among many activities initiated due to this occasion, a number of books about Sendler

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was published, including those for younger readers. Similar celebrations took place in 2012 during the National Year of Janusz Korczak (1878/9–1942), a famous Polish author, pedagogue and—eventually—director of an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto. The commemorative occasion led to editions of numerous children's books about his life and work, e.g. *Pamiętnik Blumki* (Blumka's Diary, 2011) by Iwona Chmielewska. Korczak is known not only as an author of one of the most influential Polish children's novels *King Matt the First* and his liberal approach towards children, but also, as it was observed, “in literature and culture Korczak lives by his death”² (Wądołny-Tatar 2015: 366), as he decided to accompany the orphans he had been taking care of when the Warsaw ghetto was “liquidated” to the death camp in Treblinka, having rejected to use his chance to flee.

Although it is Korczak who is a globally recognized figure, I intend to focus on another Polish “icon” related to the Holocaust period, whose biography has recently raised a debate in Poland. Irena Sendler (1910–2008) was a social worker and one of the people helping Jews persecuted by the Nazi regime. In 1965, she was recognized as Righteous among the Nations by the State of Israel, but until then she had been little known not only to the international audience, but even in Poland. Particularly, a group of American high school students who produced a short play *Life in a Jar* about her life (Mayer 2010) in 1999 contributed to the public awareness of her actions. The secret group Sendler was part of helped Jews living in the Warsaw ghetto and saved from there around 2500 children: as they lived with Gentile families under new identities, Sendler noted their “old” and “new” names and stored the paper scraps in glass jars or bottles, which she hid under the tree hoping that when war ended, children would be able to find their Jewish relatives. Or—as it was later observed—this is the most popular version of the story told. In many interviews Sendler presented herself in a specific manner, changing the narrative of her life, sometimes failing to remain compliant with other historical sources.³ Janina Zgrzemska, her daughter, said that Sendler “[p]resented her life in a way she wanted to, that's a fact. Should we criticize her for that? I don't think so” (qtd. in Grysiak 2018).⁴ For the last twenty years she was recognized as a courageous woman who fought Nazi regime and the “myth” of Sendler is vivid in collective memory of Polish people,⁵ therefore it was no surprise that

² If the translator is not mentioned, all translations are my own.

³ “She had a tendency to present past events in different versions with varying degree of distance from reality. [...] Why did she describe events that did not take place or add so much to those that really happened? [...] And how to tell it all without offending the memory of the person treated with the highest respect?” (Bikont 2017: 426–27).

⁴ As Teresa Torańska said, Sendler “was insanely despotic, imposing her own vision [...]. And after the war she was an unfulfilled person; hence, the various needs to improve her resume or surrender to people doing so” (qtd. in Bikont 2017: 425).

⁵ In contrary to history, collective memory is often based on naive and marginal views, myths, or suppositions standing in contrary to historical knowledge. On collective

Anna Bikont's biography *Sendlerowa: W ukryciu* (Sendler: In Hiding) published in 2017 was named one of the most important books of the year, as the author questioned the "legend" of Sendler.⁶

I argue that Polish children's literature about Sendler also reflects continuing debates in Poland about public use of the traumatic past in order to legitimate political arguments pointing to Poles' honor or disgrace during World War II. To elaborate on that, I will focus on four contemporary books: Renata Piątkowska's *Wszystkie moje mamy* (2013) based on Sendler deeds, yet having her as a secondary character (translated to English as *All of My Mums*, 2016); the very first Polish children's biography of Sendler, that is Anna Czerwińska-Rydel's *Listy w butelce: Opowieść o Irenie Sendlerowej* (translated as *Lists in a Bottle: A Story about Irena Sendler*), Ewa Nowak's *Kto uratował jedno życie... Historia Ireny Sendlerowej* (Whosoever saved a single life... A Story about Irena Sendler) and Beata Ostrowicka's *Irena Sendlerowa: Magiczny koralik* (Irena Sendler: A Magical Bead), the last three published in 2018. Although there are only four Polish books discussing her life⁷, one can also encounter mentions on her in the collections of short stories, e.g. *Damy, dziewczuchy, dziewczyny: Historia w spódnicy* by Anna Dziewit-Meller (Ladies,

memory of high school students in Poland, see Malicki 2012 (especially the chapter on memory of Polish-Jewish relations during WW2, *ibidem*: 169–176). What is interesting, in results of a query from 2009 Irena Sendler was placed on the 6th position in the ranking of "historical figures as role models" (with 1,9%), after John Paul II (43,6%), Józef Piłsudski (19,7%), Lech Wałęsa (6,0%), Napoleon Bonaparte (2,2%) and Tadeusz Kościuszko (2,1%) (*ibidem*: 82). In 2015 Irena Sendler fell to the 9th position (1%) (Malicki & Piróg 2016: 145).

⁶ For her book Bikont was nominated in 2018 for one of the most important Polish book prizes "Nike."

⁷ Sendlerowa appears also in *Mirabelka* (Mirabelle Tree) (Harasimowicz 2018: 88–92, 94, 142). In the afterword Cezary Harasimowicz notes that Sendlerowa saved "many, many Jewish children during the occupation" (200). Also, in 2018 a Polish comic book *Irena Sendlerowa i łyżeczka życia* (Irena Sendler and a Spoon of Life) was published (Gałka-Olejko & Wyrzykowski 2018). Because of its comic book format, I did not include it in my research, but it is worth closer investigation as an educational paratext *Pomocnik historyczny: Zagłada Żydów w okupowanej przez Niemców Polsce i ratowanie Żydów przez Polaków* (Historical Guide. The Holocaust in Poland Occupied by Germany and Rescue of Jews by Poles) by Elżbieta Olczak is added. This 10-pages-long (the narrative consists of c. 25 pages) text is a very interesting example of contemporary political and historical discussions on the Polish-Jewish relations, as the comic book was published by the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. When opened in March 2017, the main exhibition was critically received by conservative journalists and right-winged government of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) party, so consequently soon after the opening the authors of the exhibition (including the head of the museum) were dismissed and the exhibition was slightly changed (Cieślińska-Lobkowicz 2017: 840–842).

Chicks, Girls: History Wears a Skirt, 2017)⁸ as well as books published originally outside of Poland.⁹

Sendler's biography has recently become a controversy, so first I will reconstruct her life presented in biographies for adults, showing Sendler's myth-making process in which she took an active role and comment on the use—or rather abuse—of her deeds in contemporary Polish politics. Then I will analyze the image of Sendler in four children's books and—basing on biography (Saul 1988), second-generation memory (Ulanowicz 2013) and Holocaust studies (Kokkola 2003) in children's literature—show, how contemporary Polish texts for young readers shape the memory of her and how these books may be received in the political climate (Pearce 1997), as their ideological (McCallum & Stephens 2011, Keyes & McGillicuddy 2014) connotation cannot be ignored. An important notion formulated by Anastasia Ulanowicz must be stressed at this point:

[...] as works of literature aimed primarily at juvenile audiences, they [second-generation texts – K.R.] share the objective of imprinting memories of the recent and traumatic historical past onto the consciousness of a new demographic [...] of readers. [...] Second-generation memory, although it draws upon and is shaped by the memories a previous generation, nevertheless cannot exactly replicate these originally posited memories. Rather, it re-imagines or re-formulates these memories from within the new and distinct material, cultural, and historical conditions in which its bearer is located. (2013: 10–11)

Then, how is Irena Sendler “re-imagined,” “*produced*” (ibidem: 22) or shaped, as I have suggested in the title? And to what extent had she co-created her image, so vivid within contemporary Polish people? To answer these questions, I will briefly combine the most important facts about Sendler and confront them with biographies for adults published in the last two decades before closely examining children's literature examples mentioned before.

How to introduce Irena Sendler then? Both authors and journalists often use the term “mother of the children of Holocaust.” It was coined by Anna Mieszkowska, the author of the very first biography (for adult readers) of Sendler published in 2004 as *Matka dzieci Holocaustu: Historia Ireny Sendlerowej* (2004).¹⁰ The Polish-American movie entitled *The Courageous Heart of*

⁸ Sendler was described together with Stefania Wilczyńska who worked with Korczak at the orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto as “the greatest heroines” (Dziewit-Meller 2017: 125–130). Also *12 wyjątkowych postaci: Polscy autorzy o marzeniach* (12 Extraordinary Figures: Polish Authors on Dreams) contains a short story about Sendler (Onichimowska 2017: 78–87).

⁹ Among others, Sendler is mentioned in *Irena's Children: A True Story of Courage* (Mazzeo & Farell 2016), *Irena Sendler and the Children of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Goldman Rubin 2011), *Jars of Hope* (Roy 2016) and an international bestseller *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli & Cavallo 2017: 74–75). An interesting example is also a French comic series *Irena*, recently published also in Poland (Morvan et al. 2017–2018).

¹⁰ For English translation see Mieszkowska 2007 (22-pages-long brochure) and Mieszkowska 2011 (full edition).

Irena Sendler (2009) was based on the book by Mieszkowska, which was published in Poland in four editions, each slightly changed.¹¹ After Sendler's death, *Ta, która ratowała Żydów: Rzecz o Irenie Sendlerowej* (The One Who Saved Jews: A Story about Irena Sendler) by Halina Grubowska (2014)¹² and *Sendlerowa: W ukryciu* by Anna Bikont (2017) were published.¹³ It is worth noting that Mieszkowska's biography was published when Sendler was still alive and, as one may read in Bikont's biography, Mieszkowska admitted that Sendler interfered in the process of writing, deciding what should and what should not be included in the published text.¹⁴ Michał Głowiński, a Polish scholar and also one of the children saved by Sendler and her group, judged that "[t]he book may be considered as Sendler's autobiography. She treated Mieszkowska with an iron fist" (Bikont 2017: 430). Grubowska's book, in contrary, is mainly based on the archival research, and the author is affiliated with the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Nearly ten years later, Bikont's biography was published and it was quickly recognized as one of the most important books of the year, as the author rethinks and critically approaches the events discussed in previous biographies, interviews with people connected to Sendler as well as huge amount of archives, both in Poland and Israel. The book was also received as controversial by some, as Bikont's "investigation" points out that many situations described by Sendler might have never happened. Elżbieta Ficowska, one of the children saved by Sendler, decided not to authorize her interview for Bikont's book. She said to Bikont:

crushing the myth today, when authority figures are so needed, is extremely harmful and I [Bikont – K.R.] cannot sadden thousands of children from the schools named after Sendler. Because of that I cannot question the number of 2500 children saved by Sendler and I cannot write, that she was a member of PZPR [Polish United Worker's Party, a communist party which governed Polish People's Republic from 1948 until 1989 – K.R.]. (2017: 395)

¹¹ What is interesting, they were published under different titles: *Dzieci Ireny Sendlerowej* (Children of Irena Sendler) (Mieszkowska 2009), *Prawdziwa historia Ireny Sendlerowej* (A True Story about Irena Sendler) (Mieszkowska 2014) and *Historia Ireny Sendlerowej* (A Story about Irena Sendler) (Mieszkowska 2018).

¹² When she was still alive, Sendler refused Grubowska a permission to publish her biography (Bikont 2017: 423–24).

¹³ Besides the three books, a brief article by Jan Grabowski was also published (Grabowski 2014: 622–625).

¹⁴ Anna Mieszkowska said: "Irena Sendler has given me three conditions: do not record, do not make notes and do not ask painful questions. When I wrote something on a piece of paper, she ripped it and threw it in the trash. This text was authorised twice [...]" As said Sendler to Mieszkowska after reading the first chapter written without her authorization: "Either it will be as I want it to be or there will be no book." Barbara Engelking, the director of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research said to Mieszkowska: "We get a dripping Vaseline trash that cannot be read. My conclusion: you lost by creating a deceitful myth" (Bikont 2017: 428–29).

The biography by Bikont encouraged me to look closer at the children's books about Sendler and investigate, how they may shape young readers' perception of her. I do not want to pose myself as an "investigator" or a "judge" but rather show how unclearly her life is presented and how confronting all texts—both for adults and for children—may confuse a reader.

First, there is an impressive number of 2500 children saved from Warsaw ghetto during the Holocaust. One can see the number in almost every book about Sendler, but it is often seen as too high.¹⁵ As Bikont states (Bikont 2017: 403), Sendler told Michał Głowiński to write it down in his memoirs *The Black Seasons* (Głowiński 2005: 77)¹⁶. In the biographies by Grubowska, Bikont and even the more recent editions of Mieszkowska's book, the information on the number of saved children is verified negatively, yet still one may observe how it is continuously reappearing in the popular texts on Sendler, especially in the paratexts of her biographies (cover, preface or afterword). This number is brought in three out of four children's books discussed here (Piątkowska 2013: 47–48, [back cover]; Piątkowska 2016: 4–6, 51–52, [back cover]; Czerwińska-Rydel 2018a: 3, 83–85, 99, [back cover]; Czerwińska-Rydel 2018b: 3, 81, 84–85, 99, [back cover]; Ostrowicka 2018: 77, [back cover])¹⁷, but only in *Irena Sendlerowa: Magiczny koralik* the number is questioned by one of the characters who works on a school project about Sendler (Ostrowicka 2018: 77–79).¹⁸ As one may argue, all the estimations of victims or other people involved in the Holocaust is easy to criticize, as they are more or less based on the documentation that remains only partially preserved. Even though it is often said that the numbers are not important in face of deeds and facts themselves (in this case the estimated number of saved children is not as important as the fact of rescuing many of them), particular numbers—especially high ones—are commonly used as a tool of exaggeration drawing reader's attention. At the same time, numbers in literary texts are often left without any comment or remark on the obvious impossibility to precisely count, remaining under such severe conditions, all the victims or survivors, such as the children smuggled from the Warsaw ghetto. Again, the only exception is Ostrowicka's work.

The second questionable element, which I find particularly confusing to the readers, is the type of container in which Sendler kept the names of

¹⁵ Halina Grubowska notes: "[t]he press reported that Irena Sendler saved 2,500 Jewish children, which is untrue and impossible" (2014: 111).

¹⁶ Głowiński said to Bikont: "[a]t the end of the nineties, I told Mrs. Irena that I was publishing my memories. I heard: 'You must write that I saved two and a half thousand children.' I was aware that it would be difficult to add it to the narrative. But what else could I do, I thought you don't refuse Irena Sendler."

¹⁷ In *Kto uratował jedno życie...* the number does not appear. Instead, the word "many" is used (Nowak 2018: 4, [back cover]).

¹⁸ Ostrowicka's book was published in a series "Polscy Superbohaterowie" (Polish Superheroes); hence, one may expect a strong patriotic approach towards history. Instead, it is the only example of a critical children's biography of Sendler.

Jewish children. In the first two biographies dedicated to the adult audience, one may encounter some inconsistent mentions: about a glass jar (Mieszkowska 2004: 47, Mieszkowska 2009: 47, Mieszkowska 2011: 25), a glass jar and a glass bottle (Mieszkowska 2004: 209–10, Mieszkowska 2009: 199–200, Mieszkowska 2011: 107, Mieszkowska 2014: 152, Mieszkowska 2018: 203), or (a) glass bottle(s) (Mieszkowska 2007: 16, Mieszkowska 2014: 33, 35; Mieszkowska 2018: 45, 50; Grubowska 2014: 104), although in the film *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler* one can see a glass jar. Vision of a single jar most probably descends from the play *Life in a Jar*, later rewritten by Jack Mayer into a book with the same title (Mayer 2010). An important issue in this context is that Bikont failed to find a list of Jewish children which according to Sendler was handed to Adolf Berman who lived in Israel (2017: 397–99). Misleading information about the container(s) can be consequently encountered in children's literature: in *All of My Mums* from 2013 both in text and illustrations reader finds a glass jar (Piątkowska 2013: 41–43, [front cover]; Piątkowska 2016: 45–47, [front cover]), in *Lists in a Bottle* a single glass bottle is depicted (Czerwińska-Rydel 2018a: 81–84, [front cover]; Czerwińska-Rydel 2018b: 80–83, [front cover])¹⁹, and in *Kto uratował jedno życie...* several glass bottles are brought (Nowak 2018: 48–51). Again, the only exception is *Irena Sendlerowa: Magiczny koralik*, where the absence of the list is mentioned and different types of containers are depicted (Ostrowicka 2018: 78–79). The type of the container may be perceived as a marginal element of the story of Sendler, but different versions of the story may easily confuse the reader. Furthermore, sharing Lydia Kokkola's thought, this inconsistency may lead even to denying the Holocaust (2003: 2).

Certainly, a number of other issues can be named as well. For instance, Sendler is said to have saved Jewish children only by herself (Piątkowska 2013: 27–30, 36–39; Piątkowska 2016: 31–34, 40–43; Nowak 2018: 32–38, 41–43, 46; Ostrowicka 2018: 70–71), which could have happened a couple of times, but was probably not possible on a larger scale (Bikont 2017: 102). In most of the discussed biographies, the active role of Sendler's collaborators is usually omitted. The only exception is the figure of Antoni Dąbrowski, a driver who helped Sendler smuggle the children out of the Warsaw ghetto with the use of his dog's barking as they were passing by Nazi's to mute children's crying (Piątkowska 2013: 27–30, Piątkowska 2016: 31–34, Nowak 2018: 35–36, Czerwińska-Rydel 2018a: 57–58, Czerwińska-Rydel 2018b: 57–58). However, he probably did not exist (Bikont 2017: 374–75). Only one children's book questions these "legends", as named by one of the characters (Ostrowicka 2018: 77).

¹⁹ The title itself leaves no space for misleading the type of the container. Furthermore, Sendler—after seeing the play *Life in a Jar* and noticing that the container was misrepresented—says to American high school students: "What does it matter if it was a bottle or a jar?" (Czerwińska-Rydel 2018b: 86).

As Kokkola states, “[h]istorical inaccuracy, even in works of fiction, is morally unacceptable in writings about the Holocaust” (Kokkola 2003: 23).²⁰ In this context, books presenting Sendler are worth interest, because their biographical sources can be easily identified, even though they lack bibliography or other explicit information about the sources.²¹ *All of My Mums* by Piątkowska was based on Mayer’s *Life in a Jar* and Mieszkowska’s book (or *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*), as the list of children is hidden in a glass jar. Books by Czerwińska-Rydel and Nowak are probably based on Mieszkowska’s biography as well, as in the illustrations the bottles are shown (one bottle in Czerwińska-Rydel, many bottles in Nowak). Only Ostrowicka’s *Irena Sendlerowa: Magiczny koralik* published in 2018 seems to take into account a critical work by Bikont.

Hence, it seems that Polish authors do not mention sources they use. For example, Czerwińska-Rydel said in an interview that a lot of the information she used to write her book she had received from Marek Michalak, a former Polish Ombudsman for Children, coordinator of the National Year of Irena Sendler (Berwid 2018). In opposite, American authors often publish a list of sources and quotes (Goldman Rubin 2011: 38–39, Roy 2016: 31, Mazzeo & Farrell 2016: 249–257). Also, the Polish edition of a comic book *Irena* was complemented with additional endnotes. Moreover, French authors state that they have found contradicting information about Sendler and they wanted their work to be regarded as a fictional story which may push the implied reader to look further (Morvan et al. 2017–2018b, vol. 3: 67). This approach seems justified, as “[b]iographies, by their very nature, are a selected retelling and interpretation of events, and children’s biographies in particular have great latitude in choosing which events they portray as typical and important” (Saul 1988: 218). As states Kokkola, author’s task should be to work on the sources and present a story based on historical facts, because any misinformation may lead to a denial of the Holocaust (2003: 2). Obviously Kokkola’s postulate is easily arguable, as history is a narrative created by historians (or—as in this case—by a historical figure herself) as well as it is unclear whether a young reader will “perceive possible worlds as historically authentic” (Nikolajeva 2014: 39). One

²⁰ Additionally Kokkola states: “[s]ince biographers [...] do not have first-hand knowledge of the events, they are supposed to conduct research in the form of interviews or search for information from such sources as official archives, letters, and diaries as well as other publications already available on the subject’s life or era where available” (2003: 88).

²¹ Only Nowak’s book imprint contains information about the substantive consultants: Mirjam Böhm and Anna Dybała-Pacholak from the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The former was criticized by Polish Jews Forum when she published an article in “Rzeczpospolita” (13 October 2007), in which she claimed for example that “[m]any Jews still do not want to accept the involvement of Irena Sendler and her colleagues in activities to save children” or “[r]ecently also in Poland one can hear voices of Jews doubting the number of 2,500 rescued children.” This makes Polish Jews Forum members “doubt the reliability of Mirjam Boehm’s information, their sources and deeply doubt the author’s diligence in reaching the truth” (Marcinkowska 2007).

should also remember that authors use *licentia poetica* to deliver their books as readable and plausible as possible. These factors determine that all four children's biographies are only subjective presentations of Sendler's life, though the question considering their educational value remains an important one.

All the books for young readers show Sendler as a strong individual (yet working within a group of people) and their main message is to promote the Righteous Among the Nations as a heroine. As Sharyn Pearce states,

[f]rom the beginning of children's literature onwards, children's novels have [...] been heavily pedagogical and riddled with the moralism and values of their times. Clearly novels can operate as powerful shapers of children's imaginations and can transmit, consciously or otherwise, myth-like messages about national identity. (Pearce 1997: 10, cf. Ulanowicz 2013: 23)

Sendler—or rather the myth of Sendler—is presented as a national treasure, the same way she was “used” by politicians at the beginning of the 21st century. Bikont notes that two facts helped spread Sendler's fame (2017: 366–67): Steven Spielberg's famous film *Schindler's List* (as Sendler saved twice as many people as Schindler did) and Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbors*, a historical essay about the mass murder of Jews by Poles in a small Polish village Jedwabne (2000). Gross (who emigrated to the USA in 1969 after strong antisemitic campaign initiated by the communist party leaders ruling Polish People's Republic between 1948 and 1989) quickly became criticized by mostly right-winged commentators and the Polish government was in need of someone who would reverse the negative feelings emerged with Gross's publication, in which he ultimately stated that Poles were actively involved in the Holocaust. As Sendler admitted herself: “[a]fter Gross a hero was needed. [...] I am a national alibi” (Bikont 2017: 367).²² In 2007, she was even nominated by the Polish government for the Nobel Peace Prize and — as she told Michał Głowiński — it was to “vanish the shame of Jedwabne” (qtd. in Bikont 2017: 373).

Both in her first adult biographies as well as in those written for children particular elements of her life are ignored (such as membership in the communist party or her being an atheist) in order to fit into the “myth” of a Catholic Polish woman who actively fought the Nazi regime.²³ Sendler became a symbol

²² The same title was used in a documentary film (Grysiak 2018). As notes Bikont, “[w]hen in 2001 Gross's book appeared in the USA, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs panicked. A frontal attack on the book and the author would surely be counterproductive, so Sendler was sensibly used as an example of another—in the assumption of a more real—Poland of the times of war. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized worldwide exhibition devoted to Sendler, financed translations of biographies and their shipment, organized meetings” (2017: 373).

²³ Hamida Bosmajian notes: “[t]o be sure there were victims with such goodness; to be sure there are victims-survivors with such care, but they are not the norm; however, it is as a norm that the reader will perceive them. The humane, if not saintly inmate is a rare as is the Christian rescuer of the Jews – another privileged topic in literature for the young

of all Polish people helping the Jews during the Holocaust and it seems that she accepted her role. As Bikont writes:

I asked Hanna Rechowicz what she thinks about her mother being forgotten and Irena Sendler becoming a great figure. – That’s how it is, one person is chosen and the chosen one was Sendler. Irena was very pleased that they made her a legend, so I am happy for her. (2017: 364)²⁴

Sendler could not have predicted that she would be used in a harsh political propaganda as in an artistically well-done short animated film produced by the Institute of National Remembrance, released both in Polish and English to promote Polish history from the beginning of World War II until the end of communist regime in 1989 (IPNtv 2017a, IPNtv 2017b). As one may see, during World War II Poles only saved Jews.²⁵ The short film may present history in a brief, not complex manner, the same approach in children’s literature I find disturbing. Other issues, such as antisemitism, making profit on Jews (both by blackmailing and taking their belongings after deportation) or other violent acts are barely present in Polish children’s literature. For example, *Kotka Brygidy* (Brygida’s Kitten) by Joanna Rudniańska published in 2007 was brutally criticized by Anna Maria Krajewska because of a suggestion that a Polish man hid Jews for financial benefits (Krajewska 2008: 47–48). In the case of Sendler’s biographies for children reader can only see Poles in a positive light.²⁶ What is striking,

Sendler till the end of her life did not change her political [leftist – K.R.] views and truly hated the right wing which she associated with antisemitism. The

[...]. Given that kind of focus, the untutored reader may indeed conclude that the camps brought out the best in the victims and that Christians, given their values, were inevitably disposed to rescue the Jews” (2002: 144).

²⁴ As said Bikont in an interview, Sendler “[p]racticled underground conspiracy all the time. Irena Sendler is not an example of the fact that Poles helped Jews. It is an example of the fact that Irena Sendler helped Jews. She always felt that she was doing it against the public” (Grysiak 2018).

²⁵ A difference between Polish and English versions is worth noting. In Polish it is said “Ratujemy Żydów, choć grozi za to śmierć,” which literally means “[w]e save the Jews, despite the threat of the death penalty.” Official English version is: “[t]here are Poles who save Jews, despite the threat of the death penalty.” Political (ab)use of Righteous Among the Nations is a visible trend in contemporary Polish political and historical discourse (Haska 2014: 1067–72, Kowalska-Leder 2014: 1073–82).

²⁶ A Polish scholar in the field of education, Agnieszka Kania, argues: “[e]xperience shows that young people—before learning the cruel truth about the Holocaust, including the attitudes of a part of Polish society—should first encounter such images of countrymen against the tragedy of Jews, which inspires appreciation and pride and contributes to building a national identity based on positive models. The knowledge that during the war there were Poles behaving heroically, allows young people with a smaller shock, and even with appropriate indignation, accept information also about such behavior of countrymen, who deserves the highest condemnation” (2017: 108).

huge paradox is that an atheist and socialist became an idol of the right wing and the Catholic church. (Urbaniak 2017)

I argue that also in the political debate Sendler is used in the didactic context both as a “legend” and as a role model. In the very same context she was presented and promoted during the National Year of Irena Sendler by the main coordinator Marek Michalak, who strongly manifests his commitment to her legacy.

As Robyn McCallum and John Stephens state, ideology – understood as “a system of beliefs which a society shares and uses to make sense of the world” – shapes all aspects of textual discourse and is “immanent in the texts produced by that society” (2011: 360). In the context of the Holocaust in children's literature Kokkola argues that

[w]hen authors choose to address a child readership in a piece of Holocaust literature, they inevitably take on a highly moralistic set of ideologies for shaping their texts. How these ideologies are guided depend, in no small part, on how the authors respond to the multiple pressures brought to bear on their works, specifically which of the strands they value most. (2003: 7, cf. Ulanowicz 2013: 22)

Ideology is clearly seen in the examples of children's literature discussed in this paper. These books mostly lack critical approach towards the “myth” of Sendler, they are based on common knowledge presented for example by Mieszkowska, who only wrote down Sendler's version. As Kokkola observes, “the implication is that whereas autobiography *reflects* the biographical subject's life story, biography *constructs* it” (2003: 89). This remark is very important in the contexts of both political climate in Poland as well as in the didactic aspect of Sendler's biographies for children. All four authors construct or shape her figure, building a statue of the courageous “mother of the children of the Holocaust” not only as a literary figure in their books, but also in the field of common memory of the young generation.

Still, there are many uncomfortable questions one should ask, especially in the period of political tensions in Poland (Kridle 2018: 1–15): Should historical fiction for children be critical? Should we revise biographies of authority figures? Or should they present only one, the most popular version, so that many years later young reader may discover nuances ruling the world? Marian Thérèse Keyes and Áine McGillicuddy stress that children's literature is an effective tool to promote or question particular beliefs and ideas; hence, it has a “powerful potential [...] to shape and influence their readers and subsequently the society in which they live” (2014: 11). Only one example analyzed in this paper seems to present critical approach towards Sendler's biography—in her *Irena Sendlerowa: Magiczny koralik* Beata Ostrowica presents different versions, “myths” and “legends” and cleverly decides not to input one, final answer. One may hope that in the future Polish Holocaust children's literature authors will critically approach this delicate topic on a bigger scale as implied readers will be a part of national discourse of the historical past just as adults are nowadays.

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