

EXPERIENCE OF OLD AGE IN THE WORKS BY BRONISŁAWA BETLEJ

DOŚWIADCZENIE STAROŚCI W TWÓRCZOŚCI BRONISŁAWY BETLEJ

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Summary

The following article refers to the attitudes towards the old age described in line with poet Bronisława Betlej's considerations. Being old is a successive stage on the way towards eternity, requiring acceptance, despite the ambivalence presented by the poet to the issue. The aim of the practical this article is to present an analysis of rows about the experience of being old in the art by Betlej. Further, it is to promote the attitude to their own homes and the generalization of "calculated" old age, which according to the priest Adam Boniecki "we should be preparing ourselves from our childhood. Constantly" (Boniecki, 2014, p. 228). In addition, the aim of the article is to build an awareness of the recipient that one should permanently educate the young generation to show respect, tolerance and acceptance of the old people's participation in social life. The old, thanks to their experience and wisdom, values and cultivated traditions, the elderly are an important part of the local community. Thus, old age can be beautiful, lively and full of gratitude, provided that man leaves behind themselves a satisfaction and dignity.

Keywords: old age, attitudes, experiencing old age, poems by Bronisława Betlej, creativity

Streszczenie

Treść niniejszego artykułu odnosi się do przyjmowanej bądź przejawianej postawy wobec starości m.in. opisanej w wierszach poetki Bronisławy Betlej, okresu starości jako kolejnego etapu w drodze ku wieczności, akceptacji starości, mimo przejawianego przez poetkę ambiwalentnego do niej stosunku. Celem praktycznym niniejszego artykułu, dokonanej w nim analizy wierszy na temat doświadczenia starości w twórczości Betlej, jest promowanie postawy wobec własnej starości oraz upowszechnienie "oblicza" starości, do której zdaniem ks. Adama Bonieckiego "powinniśmy się przygotowywać od dziecka. Ciągle" (Boniecki, 2014, s. 228). Ponadto celem artykułu jest zbudowanie świadomości odbiorcy, że należy permanentnie kształtować młode pokolenie w okazywaniu szacunku, tolerancji oraz akceptacji uczestnictwa osób starszych w życiu społecznym. Dłat ego, że ludzie starzy, dzięki doświadczeniu życiowemu, mądrości, wyznawanym wartościom i kultywowaniu tradycji, stanowią ważną część społeczności lokalnej. Starość zaś może okazać się pięknym, pełnym wdzięczności okresem życia, pod warunkiem, że człowiek zostawia za sobą spełnione życie – pełne satysfakcji i godności.

Słowa kluczowe: starość, doświadczenie starości, poezja Bronisławy Betlej, twórczość

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Introduction

The following article refers to the poems selected from three volumes (the poet has published 54, with the first one when she was 61 years old), and thus the perspective research is both thematical and chronological. The study focuses on the volumes published in the years 2006-2012 entitled: *Podróż w głąb człowieka – Tryptyk* (2006) [Journey into the human's heart – Triptych], *Lew i Panna* (2009) [Leo and Virgo] and *W pogoni za uciekającym życiem* (2012) [In pursuit of fleeting life]. The third volume was written by the poet during her hospitalisation.

She writes about the experience of a difficult period of her life in old age, in the years 2006-2012, the time of her husband's severe illness and death and the Poet's illness requiring hospitalisation and surgery. Nevertheless, she did not lose her sense of humour and the "hunger for life", which she describes in the poems examined in the next sections of this article. The poet asks questions and gives answers, 'painting' with words a personal picture of life in old age, about which, like the last, seventh stage of life, writes Kathryn Patricia Cross, calling it a stage of reflection on life, which coincides with the period after reaching 65 years of age.

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I made this selection of volumes due to the experience of old age which is presented in them. It is the period of life in which Elkhon Goldberg, the author of the book *The Wisdom Paradox: How Your Mind Can Grow Stronger As Your Brain Grows Older*, discovered himself. According to him, "life is not a one-way road that leads to disintegration. It is full of currents pulling in opposite directions, which should be experienced, learnt, understood and which must be enjoyed to the fullest" (Goldberg, 2014, p. 17). The conclusions drawn by Goldberg translate into the poet's life who has a clear mind and creates (writes poems), as she expresses her emotion with words. In her poems, we get to know her as a person distanced from life, full of reflection and humour. Despite her senile physical helplessness, even when she is ill, waiting in hospital for surgeries, the poet wrote:

"Along white corridors shadows of living and the spirits are walking that came here to mark their presence – rickety figures as if cut from old newspapers - limp – somehow strange - no colour - no vigour - who once were - today only a breath-catching hope. (...) Along the hospital corridor the sick are shambling - a strange way of dancing - nothing imaginative – only cautious meetings with the floor - which like a magnet is waiting for a fall – they still live in hope that they will catch life that is already fleeing" (Betlej, 2012, p. 9, 64).

Elkhon Goldberg, the author of the book mentioned above tells us to stop thinking about the ageing of our brains and minds only in terms of losses because the ageing of the mind brings some profits as well. Because, as he claims, with increasing age our memory may lose a little efficiency and our attention loses the ability to long-term focus, but as we age, we gain wisdom - experience and competencies. This is exactly the experience Betlej presents to us in her poems comparing elders to an icon before you humbly bow your head, because the elderly pass the wisdom of the learning time – "so that we know what to do to find the truth" (Betlej, 2012, p. 36).

In the words of the Holy Father John Paul II (1920-2005): "Elderly people help us to look wiser at earthly matters because owing to their life experience they gained knowledge and maturity. They are the guardians of the collective memory, and thus they have a particular title to be exponents of common ideals and values that are the foundation and rule of social life (Letter of the Holy Father, 1999, p. 8)."

In the analysed poems, Betlej presented a subjective dimension of old age, shown in its various aspects.

Seniors's attitude towards own old age – a research review

There are many examples of the attitude of the elderly towards their old age in the literature. The most popular and most common typology is the one provided by D. B. Bromley. Given that it was established in the 1960s (1969), this typology can only be a starting point for a reflection on the

attitudes of elderly people towards their own old age. Discussing this typology, it is worth making some modern reinterpretation of it. S. Reichard (see Bromley, 1969, as cit. in Steuden, 2012, Szatur-Jaworska, 2006, Szarota, 2004 and others) lists five attitudes (approaches) of the elderly to own old age, which she divided into the following categories:

- Positive attitude - a constructive approach to one's old age. This approach highlights the opportunities and strengths of the elderly person. Older people characterised by this particular type of attitude are considerably active for their nearest environment and family. They engage in a range of activities of social nature, for example, voluntary service for older persons. It is this group of seniors with a positive approach to life and their ageing that is becoming more and more often the target consumer group for many manufacturers. This economy sector was even given its name – "grey market" (i.e. a group of products purchased exclusively by the elderly). Changes in the image of the old are becoming more and more visible - they can be captured in several points:
 - generation 50+ rising in power will be different from the current fifty-year-olds (mainly in the way of living), preferring free and open lifestyle, engaging in a number of new tasks; future seniors will rarely choose early retirement, they will work and enjoy working at the same time without sacrificing other areas of life such as leisure time with their loved ones, hobbies and passions;
 - future seniors will be healthier, professionally active, young at heart, happy and joyful, and wealthier – they will spend more money and, at the same time, they will not have to save it;
 - due to longer life expectancy, they will also have more time after raising their children.
- Attitude of dependence - a negative attitude. The elderly, despite their psychophysical fitness and good health, expect care and help from their closest family and friends. They rarely engage in social activities – they are characterised by passivity, discontent and pessimism. A quick analysis of the Polish society may evoke many associations with this type of approach to old age.
- Defensive attitude - characterises seniors who, due to their actual poor health, need constant help and care. These seniors adopt a defensive approach, while at the same time defending themselves against any attempt of being helped to come from their immediate environment.
- Attitude of hostility and self-destruction - two attitudes characterised by a negative and even a hostile approach to their environment. The first attitude is a pejorative attitude towards other people, which is often associated with the conviction of bad intentions of these people. The second, in turn, is a hostile attitude to oneself: self-destruction, expectation of death, despair. Ageing poses a challenge for everyone and, as

B. Szatur-Jaworska (2006) writes, not everyone can properly adapt to their old age. Definitely, strategies of adaptation to old age are influenced by many factors, including type of personality and lifestyle, also environmental factors are crucial, strategies of dealing with crisis situations, as well as health, disability, etc. C. S. Ford (see Muchnicka-Djakow, 1984, as cit. in Szatur-Jaworska, 2006, p. 59) distinguishes several methods of solving problems of old age and manifested attitudes, such as:

- regression – coercing others into helping the senior in everyday life, even though health condition does not require it;
- escape - change of the place of residence as if in the hope that old age will not come;
- voluntary isolation from the environment – an attitude of passivity and minimising contact with the environment;
- perverse behaviour - an approach characterised by a desire to gain higher social status and get the environment interested in oneself;
- integration and adaptation – distinguished by a commitment to social life, kindness to others, treating health problems as a personal matter without notifying the environment.

G. Orzechowska (1999) lists some forms of activity of elderly people. However, the mere fact of undertaking an activity can perform multiple functions, *inter alia*, adaptive function (better adaptation to life in old age), integration function (better adaptation to life in the community of the elderly and reconciliation with one's old age), compensatory function (compensation for shortages arising from old age), educational function (development and improvement of the personal characteristics and dispositions), as well as recreational and psychogenic function. In contrast, lack of adaptation to life in old age can take various forms and be expressed by avoiding an elderly person to compensate for the experienced losses or, as defined by S. Steuden (2012), "inefficient struggle with difficulties, inability to adapt one's own abilities to environmental conditions, a sense of loneliness, inability to plan and organise free time". The way of experiencing old age is always dependent upon many factors – they create individual, an internal strategy of coping with the difficulties of that period, which can be referred to as certain old age lifestyles. Szatur-Jaworska (2006) provides the following list:

- expansive style – focused on the goals and values such as innovative changes or development, brings new challenges and experiences, gives more opportunities for growth;
- conservative style - focused on traditional values and stability, values family ties and old friendships.

Due to some psychosocial, physical and cultural conditions, we may consider two ways of adjusting oneself to old age. The first is adaptive in nature, while the other is desadaptive. The selection of a particular

style depends on several factors, often not related to given persons, e.g. external factors over which the elderly have little impact: finances, political situation, health care system and environmental factors such as family support. The selection of a specific strategy of adapting to the old age of is greatly influenced by external circumstances. The approach to one's own old age is dependent on two groups of factors, the first of which are personality-related (endogenous) – internal, including health, a sense of meaning in life, a sense of coherence, certain attitude towards old age and passing, health behaviour, lifestyle, life experiences. The other group encompasses external factors (exogenous), including family relations, a social image of old age, social policy and social assistance. An important factor (among those mentioned), influencing the way of adapting to old age is life satisfaction or a sense of meaning in life. Life satisfaction is not only an indicator of a positive assessment of life but also reflects the process of dynamic balancing of personal aspirations with life achievements and possibilities of their implementation (Steuden, 2012). Old age can also be a time of sadness, loneliness and hopelessness – when there is lack of meaning and purpose in life. Also, in the gerontological literature, there is lack of positive references to the period of old age, because researchers unusually concentrate on negative attitudes, showing old age as a sad period full of hopelessness. There are also positive sides to old age, which are described by Stanisława Steuden (2012), following P. G. Coleman and A. O'Hanlon (2004), whose research revealed both positive and negative emotions referring to one's own old age. The content of the fears and concerns was related to poor health and lowering of material status. The attitude towards one's old age can be explained by anticipating the risks associated with old age – physical aspects (the risk was associated with a fear of poor health, disease, and death), mental aspects (awareness of transience and lack of acceptance of inevitable death) and social aspects (difficulty in social interactions). Other studies (O'Hanlon, 2004, as cit. in Steuden, 2012) show factors relevant in determining attitudes toward one's age. The occurrence and severity of the feeling of loneliness is also dependent on the seniors' level of education, income and health condition. The higher the level of education and income of individuals, the less frequent the sense of loneliness; the worse the health condition, the lower the life satisfaction (Dubas, 2000).

In addition, Szatur-Jaworska (2006), draws attention to undertaken activity, dividing it into three types:

1. formal activity – involves the participation of the elderly in various organisations and associations, local community, in work for their environment, politics, etc.;
2. informal activity - involves the contact with family, friends and the commitment to work for the neighbourhood;

3. solitary activity - includes those forms of behaviour which exclude social events and activities for the environment; it is characterised by solitary leisure activities, e.g. reading, developing one's interests, nurturing a hobby" (Szatur-Jaworska, 2006, p. 161).

Noteworthy is also the concept of the styles of attachment to old age introduced by Adam A. Zych (1988, following Szarota, 2004 and Zych, 1999), depicting four types of attitudes of the elderly towards their own old age: fear of old age, rebellion against ageing, surrender and isolation, acceptance of old age.

Attitude to old age in autobiographical poems by Betlej

The subject of old age in the works by Bronisława Betlej does not occur only in the three selected volumes of her poems. The poet also introduces single poems to other volumes, where she refers to the period of life in which she is now – old age. She does it in most volumes, perhaps because "previously she kept her writing in the sock drawer only", her poetic debut took place when she was 61. At that time, she published the first volume of poems entitled *Przeciw światu* [Against the world]. The poems are her autobiographical memories from childhood, through the occupation period (World War II, which she describes through the eyes of a several-year-old girl, a liaison nicknamed Monika), the period of youth, marriage, severe disease of her husband (suffering 4 years from Alzheimer's disease), until the contemporary times, which some researchers refer to as old age.

On 26 August 2016, the poet celebrated her 88 birthday and the poems selected by me for the analysis come from the period between the years 2006 and 2012. Aged 78 (in 2006) she published a volume entitled *Podróż w głąb człowieka – tryptyk* [A journey into a man's heart – triptych] which contained the following chapters: *Mystery of existence*, *The Creed of another one* and *Prologue to old age*, where she wrote about herself: "girl-woman-old lady, still insistently looking for human favour, emotion and warmth" (Betlej, 2006, p. 68). Aware of the physical weaknesses characteristic of her age, in the poem *Optymizm* [Optimism], she wrote with humour: "I don't care I can hardly step the threshold of my own house – I don't care about all the infirmities of age as long as I can hold the pen in my hand" (Betlej, 2006, p. 67). But at the same time, on the next page of the volume there is the poem *Trudny rachunek* [Difficult account], in which she writes: "I make settlement, I cannot reconcile, so many gone, along the alleys among the crowd of graves in silence, though they are still alive in my memory (...), there is no fear in me anymore – hurry up, dictates the common sense, life passes quickly, take your time, save your minutes, hours of reverie, with hot font" (Betlej, 2006, p. 64). In this fragment of the poem, we see the poet's reflection on her life

in old age, which in literature is perceived as a time in which there is a decrease in self-esteem, and even a desperate search for the meaning of life and commitment. The poet also considers whether she should ask about how old age should look like, or rather go over the state of her body that hurts to the order of everyday life. In the first verses of a poem she writes "Is it supposed to look like that, it is best not to ask - it hurts" (Betlej, 2006, p. 57). I raise the alarm for the helpless old age" (Betlej, 2006, p. 59). Despite the poet's appeal for the helpless old age, she does not succumb to it. In the period 2006 - 2009 she is active, writes poems on various topics and publishes volumes: *Zawieszenie w czasie* [Suspension in time], *Pośpiech zachwytu* [Rush of delight], *Jeśli byś zasiał miłości zairno* [If you sowed a seed of love], *Santo subito* and *W labiryncie czasu* [In the maze of time] (which I do not analyse in this article). The second volume of poems which I submit to analysis is one written three years later, after the *Triptych* in 2009 (after the death of her beloved husband), the volume *Lew i panna* [Leo and Virgin]. The poet describes in it her memories of 59 years of marriage (from her youth until the declining years), asking herself questions she analyses the adopted life attitude; in the poem "Dokąd" [Where to] she writes: "Where do you rush so, you stubborn old lady - the young are selling – can't you see that. Where do you rush – you can't change the fate, it gave you a penance to stay alone (...) I have to talk the muse into staying with me - let the death take the trouble - when she wants to defeat me" (Betlej, 2009, p. 88). The poet asked another question in the poem "Czy życie jest piękne" [Is life beautiful], writing: "Is life beautiful I ask the question - me who stands at the end of my road. Is life worth so much trouble rebellion – how to call failures - when the heart hurts so much. Life incidents I learnt thoroughly – from bitter sensations I gained my knowledge. I was looking at death - until I got used to it - and now it's difficult to accept this close one" (Betlej, 2009, p.76). The volume closes with the poem "Epilog" [Epilogue], in which just as the neuropsychologist Goldberg (mentioned in the introduction), who tells us to live through, learn and understand our life and to enjoy it to the fullest, the poet encourages the reader to adopt a brave attitude to life – she writes: "If you doubt your destiny. If you fear discovering new cards. Think - that there's only one life - use it completely - because it's worth it" (Betlej, 2009, p. 90). Three years later, in 2012, aged 84, the Poet published the third of the volumes analysed here *W pogoni za uciekającym życiem* [In pursuit of the fleeting life], in which she writes about the experiences of her own illness and her suffering, in introspection she writes in the poem "Skomplikowana staruszka" [A complicated old lady]: "They say that old people are stubborn - maybe it's true – as still hungry for life - complicated as her CV - a stubborn old lady - believes that she'll still see a new - painted sunset" (Betlej, 2012, p. 51). The poet loves life and hopes for other days of life. The

poet's ambivalent, autobiographical approach to old age is visible not only in the verses evoked above, but also in subsequent poems in which she writes about helplessness and the temptation of life that is accompanying her at the same time. Despite old age, barriers, and suffering that accompany her, in her poems she expresses her thirst for life, writing "Senile helplessness is difficult to understand if you were so close to heaven - and there the fulfilment had stellar charm - I want to bring humility to persistent efforts - I want yet to continue to enjoy every hour" (Betlej, 2012, p.23). In the next poem she omits the problem of senile physical helplessness that accompanies old age and writes a poem entitled *Pokusa życia* [The temptation of life] "(...) my life - a great gift for me" (Betlej, 2012, p. 21). While experiencing old age the poet values life, she accepts what old age brings with it. During her stay in hospital, waiting for cardiac surgery, she presented her deliberations in the poem *Szpital-wtorek 24 stycznia 2012* [Hospital-Tuesday 24 January 2012]: "life is born in pain - old age passes by hand in hand with suffering - if effective help delivers the dull body - after the difficult experience of suffering it will return home with gratitude for experienced help" (Betlej, 2012, p. 59).

The poems reflecting the poet's emotions and suffering due to her body's ailments are optimistic as they contain hope for another day of life. In her works, the poet also shares with us her observations about the world around her. In another poem, i.e. *Drzwi* [Door], she writes about loneliness that accompanies her and other patients in hospital: "A wide door - opposite a bed filled with pain - fear and hope - a door full of eyes - waiting for revelation - that somebody will come - bringing the smell of the holidays - in the time of lonely nostalgia" (Betlej, 2012, p. 34). From her experience of a long life the poet confesses:

"that there are secrets that you need to explore - by not doing anything in this regard we lose a lot - (...) it's a sin not to know the elders of the story. Irreparable loss the living word will not return - taken by the one that is setting off on the last journey. The elders are icon - before whom you humbly bow your head - they will pass the wisdom of the time of learning - so that we know what to do to find the truth" (Betlej, 2012, p. 36).

Upon experiencing old age, Betlej expects others to pay it respect, for this stage of human life, because from her personal experience she knows that despite physical weakness, an elderly person has clear mind and memory (memories), which should be shared with others. At the end of her life, she is accompanied by prayer. The conversation with God was captured in the poem *Modlitwa przed operacją* [Prayer before surgery], in which she wrote: "I paint the beauty of this earth with words as best as I can - I raise my prayer - asking and thanking - let me, my Creator - survive this difficult experience - look again at the sky - sing a psalm of thanksgiving - touch the cover of a new work" (Betlej, 2012, p. 56).

In the presented fragments of poems, Bronisława Betlej wrote about the experience of living in old age, the essential element of which, according to her, is suffering. She encapsulated in her poems not only the utilitarian perception of the environment and characteristic emotions typical of elderly people and hospital patients but also an ambivalent and autobiographical approach to life, old age and suffering. The poet presented a picture (portrait) of a suffering woman at the end of her life who cares about this life and learns how to live in suffering, in pain - practices resilience recognising that much can be done to make the daily life look more colourful. The poet hopes to live longer. She also reminds us how important it is for a person not to be left alone in disease, to be with another person who can offer a word of consolation and hope, cures with words, and allows one to forget about the pain. According to the poet, one can bring relief in suffering with just a word. It should be noted, however, that the picture of life presented in Betlej's poems, although it depicts suffering and loneliness, also presents strength and persistence in life, the desire to live, and even thirst for it.

Betlej's poems are the result of experience gained during her long life (as of now 88 years). This is a serious age, in which people frequently look at their life and examine their conscience. The poet wrote the third of the examined volumes at the age of 84; therefore, we should agree with the findings coming from Elkhonon Goldberg's observations and research on life, which at every stage gives yield - even in the final years, a good example being the Poet's life. The women who through her creative activity (poems) shares her experience of old age, being already in the evening of her life, leaves us its fruit - volumes of poetry about old age which she is trying to learn and understand.

Bronisława Betlej as a patient of a hospital in Krosno wrote dozens of poems which bring us closer to the world of a hospital patient at the end of her life, full of pain and suffering. She describes relationships, feelings, and dreams of the sick as well as gives reflections on life. These poems are a great lesson - an educational element, they teach empathy, sensitising to suffering and old age. In her writing, the poet analyses and summarises her life: "I completed everything - I was carrying crosses - although sometimes I was near rebellion - I accepted suffering" (Betlej, 2012, p. 57).

I believe that Betlej's poetry is a testament to all people, regardless of their age and physical condition, whether in health or disease. For diseased (suffering) and old people it is consolation and gives hope that at every stage of life one may find joy, because she (the poet) is still hungry for life, persistent and ready to fight for another "twilight of a day", which she described in the poem *Przeznaczenie* [Destiny]

"so many plans yet - willingness to work - although the body is obstinately asking for rest - strong spirit - the heart gallops like a frightened horse

- to make it – to fill in notebooks waiting for Muse’s sighs - Oh Lord let me - do not blame the hunger for life (...) - trusting in your favour - now please - listen to the stubborn one” (Betlej, 2012, p. 57).

In the next poem, *żyć jeszcze* [To live still], the poet makes a flashback and, at the same time, evaluates her life, writing about its fruit from its various periods, accepting it despite her loneliness and suffering: “I will change nothing in my CV anymore - everything had already happened - loneliness - love, suffering - faith – I got to know the attributes of life completely – to live still - life is a temptation” (Betlej, 2012, p. 12).

Betlej’s poetry is also a testament for the young and healthy because it builds in the receiver/reader the courage to live and eliminates the fear of old age. The poet does not regret her youth, as she made the best of it and in the autumn of her life she uses its fruit. Despite the (suffering) accompanying her, she is still active and creative, after 2012 she wrote a few hundred more poems which were published in the volumes: *W zgodzie z górniczą tradycją - AGH pełna historii* (2013) [In accordance with the mining tradition - AGH full of history], *Na harfie wzruszeń. Antologia* (2013) [The harp of emotions. Anthology], *Rozmowy z milczeniem* (2014) [Conversations with silence], *Pochyl głowę, który przechodzisz. Kapliczki i krzyże przydrożne gminy Jedlicze* (2014) [Bow your head, you that are passing by. Chapels and roadside crosses of Jedlicze Commune], *Wzięci w Boskie Posiadanie* (2015) [Taken in God’s Possession]. In addition, her previous work was crowned with an autobiography published in October 2016, entitled *Smak czarnego chleba* [The taste of black bread].

The source of inspiration for the poet is the experience of life, its transience and reflection on it.

Bronisława Betlej - a brief biographical note

The poet was born on 26 August 1928 in Dominikowice in the vicinity of Gorlice. She wrote more than 54 volumes of poetry. She published her first volume of poetry *Przeciw światu* [Against the world] in 1989 at the age of 61. Five years later, in 1994, she received the title of the “Woman of the Year in world literature” awarded by the International Biographical Centre (IBC) in Cambridge. Her poems raise patriotic and religious themes, the poet writes through the prism of her experiences, thus creating an autobiography. Suffering is her companion – she was orphaned by her mother at the age of three, she survived the occupation, lost the opportunity to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków (due to a decision of her aunt who raised her and forbade her to paint), which she described in her poems. She devoted many strophes to the suffering caused by her aunt’s decision (prohibition to paint), among others in the poem entitled *Modlitwa przed operacją* [Prayer before surgery] – “Creator, you gave me the gift of words (...), a strong word replaced the brush – I paint with a word the beauty of this earth as I only can best” (Betlej, 2012, p. 56). Another very difficult period in her life was her husband’s disease (he

had suffered from Alzheimer’s for 4 years), which she described in several poems in the volume *Lew i Panna* [Leo and Virgo], which is a summary of 59 years of their marriage, her husband’s serious illness, and his death in 2009.

Bronisława Betlej has won many prestigious awards and distinctions, including the Badge of Merit awarded by the General Board of the Children’s Friends Society, the Badge of the Operation Tempest, Veteran’s Cross of Merit, Cross of Fight for Freedom and Home Army Cross awarded by the President of Poland in 1995, and in 2007 the badge of the Person of Merit for Polish Culture awarded by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. She is a member of the Polish Writers’ Association Branch in Warsaw. She was also honoured with regional distinctions by the Marshal of Podkarpackie Province, the presidents of Subcarpathian cities and local government authorities. Uninterruptedly since 1995, the Municipal Cultural Centre in Jedlicze near Krosno, where the poet lives and creates her poetry, has been organising a declamation contest of her poetry.

Conclusions

In relation to the analysed poems, the receiver is forced to carefully reflect on the word and its meaning (message), which triggers empathy. On their basis, it can be inferred that Betlej treats life in old age as another step on the way to eternity, she accepts old age despite manifesting an ambivalent attitude towards it. She feels sorry to leave this ordinary earthly life, even when it is burdened with disease and suffering, which she describes in the poems written in hospital. The attitude of acceptance towards one’s old age is one of the styles of adapting to old age proposed by Zych (as mentioned in the first section of the article devoted to research review). In his concept, apart from the attitude of acceptance, Zych lists three other opposing (negative) attitudes displayed by the elderly. These attitudes are manifested by fear of old age, rebellion against ageing, surrender and isolation. Owing to her activity in old age, the poet has adopted a positive attitude, which manifests itself by a constructive approach to her own old age – an example of it being her participation in a declamation contest jury and her autobiography *Smak czarnego chleba* published in October 2016. Furthermore, as Z. Szarota (2004) writes, a life filled with activity is a good life. Human activity is a way to communicate with the environment, and with the passage of life this gains particular importance.

The practical aim of this article and the presented analysis of poems on the *experience of old age in works by Betlej* is to promote positive attitudes (distanced, full of humour) towards one’s own old age and promoting an “image” of old age, to which, according to Reverend Adam Boniecki, “we should be preparing ourselves from our childhood. Constantly” (Boniecki, 2014, p. 228). Furthermore, the aim of the article is to raise the receiver’s awareness to the fact that we

must permanently instruct the young generation in showing respect, tolerance and acceptance to the participation of the elderly in social life. Owing to their life experience, wisdom, nurtured values and cultivated traditions, elderly people constitute an important part of the local community - an example would be the *Contest of declamation of contemporary poetry by Bronisława Betlej* held annually (already for 22 years), in which the Poet takes active part as a member of the jury.

The perception of own old age is determined by strategies of coping with the problems of everyday life, which according to Steuden (2012), are essential for maintaining good health - both mental and physical - in the later period of life (primary and secondary behaviour control strategies). Primary strategies include the so-called proactive strategies

- focused on overcoming the obstacles and achieving the intended aim. Secondary behaviour control strategies focus on emotions and perceptions of the situation. Strategies based on secondary control can be associated with different forms of positive assessment of the given situation - for example, by seeking optimistic aspects of a seemingly unfavourable situation (Steuden, 2012, p. 175), e.g. poems written by the poet during her hospitalisation. Accordingly, the way of experiencing one's own old age depends on many factors, but one of the most significant is one's history of life. Olga Czerniawska (2000) believes that old age is somehow the result of previous developmental stages. Old age can turn out to be a beautiful period of life, full of gratitude, provided that a person had a "fulfilled life" - full of satisfaction and dignity.

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