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## Meetings with the Past: Figures of Memory, Values, and Education in Contemporary Polish Narratives for Children and Young Adults

**Abstract:** Contemporary Polish children's historical novel is genre-differentiated. It grows out of a traditional historical, travel-adventure, crime and sensational novel, but it also takes into account fairy-tale storyline structures and fantasy in a broader sense. As shown in the article – the current shape of these stories, rooted in the individual and collective culture of remembrance – is a peculiar combination of various types of narration, both literary biographies and historical “facts,” curiosities from the lives of the rulers, taking genre-hybrid and syncretic forms maintained also in the poetics of postmodern novels, practical tasks or playing with conventions. However, the most important – from the point of view of a child's audience – is exposed in these stories the world of axiology and the issue of shaping ethical attitudes.

**Keywords:** historical novel, syncretic genres, representations of the past, culture of remembrance, narratology

In our country, literature is connected with history more closely than anywhere else, and many a distinguished man who excelled in counsel and in battle later took to writing. And then, you know how it used to be here, everyone became involved in everything [...] Nowadays some say that art is self-sufficient, and that literature can progress [...] even separately from the nation. Well, we've never held such a theory. In Poland, literature has always been close to our lives. Each thought that has troubled our society has been taken apart in literature; anyone who has had a warm heart and could do something about it by using their head—has written and printed the best they could [...] So far, the history of Polish literature has not been considered as part of the history of the nation itself, and yet you can see here, my dear children, how strong the relationship is between these two manifestations of life. (Bartoszewicz 1861: 2<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the authors'.

## 1. HISTORICAL VALUES AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES — INTRODUCTION

Education towards values has always been a challenge and one of the most important educational tasks. Defining values is a complex problem, as it is generally assumed that the notion of value is the basic category of axiology. According to some scholars, “values represent basic convictions that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Robbins and Judge 2018: 88). On the other hand, according to Mieczysław Łobocki, a value is “anything that is considered important, precious, and desirable for the individual and society, which is associated with positive experiences and is simultaneously the goal of human aspirations” (1993: 125). Values in socio-cultural life have various functions and, above all, are a factor shaping the relationships between individuals as well as between individuals and social groups and communities; what is important, they also co-create community life (Chałas 2004: 33–59).

Values are also an element constructing social memory (Szacka 2005).<sup>2</sup> Maurice Halbwachs in his classic sociological study of memory *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire (On Collective Memory, 1925)* talks about the issues of location and storage of memories as well reconstruction of the past. He considers the concept of collective memory, which manifests and becomes active in various communities, social circles, and family groups. Halbwachs maintains that each individual depends on the community to provide a specific framework within which this subject places the memorized facts.

One of the goals of upbringing is identification of children with their own social group; learning by children about the history of their own country plays a large role in the formation of national identity, creation of interpersonal bonds, and integration around the common good, determining the continuity of the socio-cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> Common history plays an important role in the

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<sup>2</sup> Social memory serves several functions: conveys knowledge about the past; conveys cultural competence (including communicative competence, i.e. ways of understanding certain symbols); presents patterns of behaviour important for the future of the group; conveys values considered by the group as important and thus worth maintaining; conveys information about true or presumed (mythical) genesis and structure of the group; contributes to the group identity; co-determines the relations between the neighbouring groups (including between the dominant and dominated groups); expresses certain ideologies (including socio-political interests); sometimes is used to legitimize the authority; and influences the future by marking a specific, relatively permanent trajectory of the history of the group (Golka 2009: 17).

<sup>3</sup> An important factor that builds national historical memory and the related issues of collective memory and historical values is the concept of collective identity, whose complexity and multilevel structure is discussed by the sociologist Zbigniew Bokszański in *Tożsamości zbiorowe (Collective Identities, 2006)*. Katarzyna Kraczoń identifies the following features as characteristic of collective memory: relationship with a social group

development of national culture, but, above all else, it is an important element of humanistic education of young generations. In the field of humanities education, literary education plays a special role because literature not only presents the facts and mimetically reflects reality but can also sensitize readers to existential problems, shape their ethical attitudes, and expose moral dilemmas provoking discussion; it can evoke, name, and explain emotions; last not least, thanks to the “filtering” of the past, it can help to understand the contemporary world. Therefore, historical literary fiction for young readers constitutes an important element of reflections on understanding of the past, its representation, and more broadly, the issue of shaping historical awareness and respect for tradition. An important consideration in our discussion are historical values, understood here primarily as a memory of the past, with particular emphasis on the figures of memory which, in the perception of the young reader, allow to focus on various literary narrative strategies and their artistic creations. Moreover, as noted by Ewa Domańska in her discussion of research by Hayden White, it is the issue of narrativization (including storytelling) that constitutes “a certain meta-code [...] through which transcultural contents can be transmitted [...] and reality becomes a pure, meaningless stream of events,” whereas “historical facts [and their “literary presence” – D.M.] cannot in any sense be given to a historian, who instead establishes them” (Domańska 2000: 22–23).

Analyzing the above issues from the perspective of narratology, the most important elements shaping the figures of memory include: literary conceptualizations of the image of a protagonist entangled in the past (including artistic creations of a real historical figure); poetics of time-space (Bakhtin’s *chronotope*) (category of time as well as moments and places of memory belonging to this area); and organization of the plot scheme, in which images of the past “act” by strengthening the power of the message (e.g. they “illuminate” the behavior of the protagonist seeking answers to bothering questions, while the memory of the past and analysis of its traces provoke reflection on the present; they also demonstrate the selectivity of certain events as modelling of a given historical period). The relations that exist between these three elements of the structure of the presented world seem to be a specific artistic dominant of the works analyzed here. This article discusses contemporary literary works on historical themes, from traditional historical novel to modernist and post-modern fiction, to practical project tasks and playing with conventions.

Contemporary Polish historical novel for children encompasses diverse genres. Although it grew out of the traditional historical novel, it currently seems to constitute a kind of

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and culture, dynamic character, eventualization and emotionality, verbalness (more broadly: linguality), processuality, and structurality (2014: 214). She also emphasises the functions performed by the collective memory, e.g. cognitive, subjective, identity-based, self-presentational, socio-cultural, communicative, legitimizing, consolidating, group-forming, and—most important for the discussion conducted here—text-forming.

tension between literary biography, the historical “fact,” the “truth” of historical curiosities, and fictional plots, [which] seems to be a source of intra-textual and reading emotions of these hybrid, and often formally syncretic, modernist novels, using plots and motifs characteristic of travel adventures, crime thrillers, and historical novels of manners, drawing on fairy-tale narrative structures and elements of speculative fiction. (Skotnicka 2008: 406)

## 2. INVENTION AND TRUTH

History (national history, the past) may become a clear frame of reference in works presenting actual events; however, it is worth noting that it has interesting and ambiguous relationships with reality. In the process of examination of literary historical works, the question of the relationship between a literary work and historical truth, highlighted by researchers, becomes debatable.<sup>4</sup>

Polish historical literature has been greatly influenced by the tradition of historical novels of Walter Scott, characterized by “adventure in history,” historical dynamism, and the so-called principle of two plots: public and private (Bartoszyński 1984:13). It is also worth noting that in Polish literary tradition a book on a historical theme creates a certain model of the represented world and reveals to the reader an outline of the modelled reality (Bartoszyński 1984: 21).

Gertruda Skotnicka attempted to adapt and organize the problems raised here for the purpose of discussing children’s and young adult literature (1974; 1987; 2008). In her examination of literary works for children, Skotnicka highlights three groups of topics:

1) history, myths, and legends: the author includes in this group a search for the roots; the role of the Piast and Jagiellonian dynasties in the history of Poland; the figures of kings, commanders, and princes and the topic of authenticity and fictionality of these characters; the Napoleonic legend; and important historical events: battles, conspiracies, and uprisings;

<sup>4</sup> The problem of the “burden of history” should also be considered. According to White, the historian’s task is not how to get into history but how to get out of it (2000: 8). White also observes that, as indicated by Lévi-Strauss, Western understanding of history is a myth of Western civilization, which is used to justify its expansion around the globe and destruction of all those cultures whose “primitive” status is defined by their lack of “historical awareness” (White 2000: 117). In the essay “The Discourse of History” by Roland Barthes, the “realistic” text of a historian, with his naive faith in “reality” of his reference, is associated with fictional texts of myths, epics, legends, and novels (1981: 3–28). According to White, without this historical reality (or its ethnographic and sociological equivalent), which forms the basis against which one can assess the fictionality of texts created through imagination, each representation of reality becomes just another text, which can only generate the *effect of reality* (2000: 117)

2) historical themes and motifs: war, wandering soldiers, family manors, landscapes with cottages, abductions, escapes, and chases; and

3) themes covering, among others, relationships between tradition and modernity and pacifism.

The process of interpretation of historical texts intended for children and young adults can also include issues related to the poetics of historical writing, superbly discussed by White (2000; 2009), such as metahistory, historical fictionalization and the problem of truth, “tropology and tropic of history” and the related ironic attitude to history, historical fiction, fictional history and historical reality, history versus myths, legends and speculative fiction, importance of narrative for presenting reality, representations of the past, and figures of memory. This type of presentation is also often found in speculative fiction, whose artistic and literary conceptualizations take the form of time travel with amusing consequences. The protagonists transferred to the past do not “intervene in history” and do not change the course of events; instead, they take on the roles of experienced witnesses (since they are also shown from contemporary perspective); they are observers, correspondents, reporters, and commentators; they uncover the meaning of the events; they play characters representing the investigated historical period; and they gain information about the details of everyday life: costumes, cuisine, music, house interiors etc. It seems, however, that the greatest value of modern books on historical subjects intended for young readers is the use of contemporary elements familiar to children: a contemporary hero, contemporary narrator, and often contemporary language that includes colloquial expressions, playful dialogues, aphorisms, and ripostes, inserted in speech bubbles or fragments of comic strips which, in addition to caricatured illustrations showing the story with a grain of salt, introduce one more narrator, i.e. modern media such as TV or social networks.

### 3. THE PAST IS TODAY

Some of the most interesting contemporary historical novels for young readers on the Polish publishing market include adventure thrillers by Grażyna Bąkiewicz set in medieval Poland, e.g. *Mówcie mi Bezprym* (*Call me Bezprym*, 2016), *Ale historia... Zygmunście, i kto tu rządzi* (*What a History... Sigismund, and Who Is in Charge Here*, 2017), and *Jadwiga kontra Jagiełło* (*Jadwiga vs. Jagiełło*, 2017).

The novel *Mówcie mi Bezprym* won a literary award of the Polish section of IBBY in 2016. The readers are captivated by fast action, dynamism of the story, colorful characters travelling around medieval Europe, and faithfully reproduced realities of the epoch, but also by family conflicts, difficult intergenerational dialogues, and the unresolved issue of succession. The book transports them back to the times of Bolesław the Brave, who transfers his power to

Mieszko II rather than to his eldest son, Bezprym. Bezprym, the main character in the “game of crown” (the colorful plot resembles the TV series *Game of Thrones*), is a fourteen-year-old boy conflicted with his horrible stepmother and malicious and conceited half-brother. The protagonist is deeply affected by the rivalry with his brother for the love and trust of his father – he is apprehensive and anxious; he wants to show his father his wisdom and convince him that he is worthy of being the heir to the throne. The crown is within his reach, but there are many family obstacles. The novel is accessible thanks to the modern language used by the teenage Bezprym, which is the language of a contemporary teenager. The author shows not only the broad historical background of the epoch and the realities of medieval Europe entangled in political conflicts but also evokes distinct figures of time (the story begins in the autumn of 999 and the historical events depicted in the story are set in the tenth century). Moreover, Bąkiewicz emphasizes the brutal struggle for power, vividly presenting the dramatic life of the boy, and assesses the ethical attitudes of the participants in “the game of crown” in Europe, which is undergoing cultural and religious transformations. “When fate is not kind to him, the hero wonders whether he has offended Roman Fortuna or maybe Svarog takes revenge on him because his statute has been overthrown by Duke Bolesław. However, old beliefs slowly give way to a new religion, which already has its martyrs, relics, and holy places,” writes Irena Bolek-Wiącek (“Mówcie mi Bezprym”).

Verification of historical truth is not always possible even based on medieval chronicles, because they provide no reliable sources of information about Bezprym. We know little and only from the times when Bezprym was a teenager. The historical value of the story is undoubtedly associated with the expressive artistic representation of this historical figure. The rich psychological portrait of the hero results from his internal dilemmas. Based on the meagre historical sources, Bąkiewicz creates with passion an extraordinary story of a boy who, like any modern teenager, has dreams, seeks parental love, and wants to be noticed and appreciated by his father, the king.

The socio-cultural memory of the past is created in the story not only by historical figures, settings, and events but also by old customs (with emphasis on everyday life), which in themselves are of historical value. A significant role in creating the world of the past is also played by narrative strategies and references to the new Christian religion, old and new gods, martyr saints, and holy places, which add an important educational layer to the book.

Bąkiewicz is also the author of *Ale historia... Jadwiga kontra Jagiełło* (2017), an ingenious story of human rivalry, intricately woven from modernist elements. The writer introduces into her narrative the theme of time travel to “test” the essence of the historical moment and the “essence” of the specific event. An intriguing literary concept in the novel is the situation where the teacher, in accordance with contemporary guidelines on school education, instructs students to independently search for information and look around

“for some *detail* about Jagiełło” (Bąkiewicz 2017: 16). In addition, Bąkiewicz skilfully overlaps and with great narrative skill mixes the levels of historical truth and literary fiction as well as categories of fictional fabrication and reality, which, according to the findings of White, results in a situation where an event becomes indistinct and the boundary between the past and the present becomes as thin as between the conscious and the subconscious (2009: 275).

Moreover, the story about Jadwiga and Jagiełło breaks with the lyrical and romantic trend of presenting Jadwiga in history and is clearly a fresh departure from the literary tradition. This makes the novel valuable from the point of view of educational recommendations concerning fictionalization of history, the social memory of historical heroes, and the search for the so-called historical truth. “Unlike in 19th and early 20th century dramas and novels [...] Jadwiga is no longer a ‘victim’ of separation from William, Duke of Austria, or a ‘loser’ forced by the will of the people and the *raison d’état* to marry Jagiełło, a martyr-ruler in personal life, an oppressed innocence, an angel-woman or a saint,” writes Magdalena Jonca (2013: 126–127). In Bąkiewicz’s novel, history becomes somewhat “humanized” and “gender-adjusted”; the author emphasizes a different model of the portrayed protagonists to that adopted in history textbooks – Jagiełło ceases to be an uncouth man and king and becomes a thoughtful, diplomatic, and reasonable ruler, while Jadwiga boldly faces challenges.

The novels by Bąkiewicz confirm the thesis of Skotnicka who writes that in order to create a real-life protagonist entangled in history, the modern historical novel for young readers borrows so much from the genre code of biography that it is sometimes difficult to determine its genological affiliation. The incorporated customs and traditions serve other purposes in addition to uncovering the material and spiritual culture and recreating the spirit of the era. In many cases, the social layer of the depicted reality may be formed in such a way that it still requires the use of the convenient term “historical novel of manners [...] The modern novel may also include simultaneous, parallel plots creating the time-space” (Skotnicka 1974: 406).

Several stories by Paweł Wakuła also introduce historical and cultural images of the memory of the past with a particular emphasis on well-rounded representations of historical characters associated with particular places. His numerous literary works on historical themes include a funny book about Polish rulers with the provocative title *Jagiełło pod... prysznicem (Jagiełło in the Shower, 2015* – illustrated by Mikołaj Kamler). and several collections of short stories written in collaboration with Kazimierz Szymborski and Bąkiewicz, which arrange native history in a chronological whole<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> This book series consists of the following titles: *Piastowskie orły – 10 opowiadań z czasów Piastów* (2016); *Od morza do morza – 10 opowiadań z czasów Jagiellonów* (2016); *Husarskie skrzydła – 10 opowiadań z czasów Rzeczypospolitej Szlacheckiej* (2017); *Walka o wolność – 10 opowiadań z czasów rozbiorów* (2017); and *Odzyskana niepodległość – 10 opowiadań z XX wieku* (2018)

Szymeczko is also the author of the collection of stories *A to historia! Opowiadania z dziejów Polski* (*And That's History! Stories From the History of Poland*, 2013), a collection of dialogues with a thesis. The narrators of the stories, Historynek, Wierszynek, and Militarek, are witty and inquisitive bookworms who analyse selected episodes of Polish history, from the times of baptism of Poland till the Solidarity movement in the 1980s. They disagree about historical facts, express many doubts about political decisions of kings and commanders, assess the behavior of individual characters, discuss the importance of details of everyday life and, above all, argue about who makes history—and is it always the winners? This educational historical novel for young adults not only has an attractive narrative structure but also provokes discussions focused on assessment of historical events and shaping of ethical attitudes, shown from the perspective of both the winners and losers, and presents a simplified image of “history of ideas for ordinary mortals.”

Another outstanding author of historical stories for children is Magdalena Zarębska. The hero of her novel *Kaktus na parapecie* (*Cactus on the Windowsill*, 2011, 2016) is an unruly, stubborn, and selfish Mikołaj, who is transferred from the year 2009 back to the reality of the Polish People's Republic in the 1970s where, to the boy's surprise, life goes on without computers, iPods, and McDonald's restaurants; instead of huge shopping malls, there are so-called universal department stores where shopping is illusory; tiny Trabant and Syrena cars replace big, elegant cars; and children eat very modest breakfasts, consisting of slices of bread thinly spread with jam instead of calorie-rich breakfast cereals. Weird things happen at school as well – for example, in autumn, instead of attending classes, pupils are taken to the so-called potato-lifting. In her narrative, the author uses the strategy of bewilderment of the hero and poetics of surprise, which becomes evident in the contact of the boy with everyday life fifty years ago and in the confrontation between the modern world of countless goods and consumerism of today and the poor and modest world of products of the 1970s.

Many of the publications discussed here are visually attractive owing to the high artistic quality of the illustrations, e.g. multi-colored, skillful caricatures of historical figures, characterized by clear facial expression, and expressive in terms of the period props assigned to them in Wakuła's *Jagiello...* In the novel, a figure of memory is also an experienced and wise storyteller, a representative of the older generation, a noble man full of knowledge. The verbal message is thus strengthened by the figure of a mentor – a master and a grandfather well-read in history, who involves his grandson in discussions and researching of sources. This type of didactic narrative based on intergenerational dialogues has its roots in outstanding Polish literary models from the 19th century, e.g. Lucjan Siemieński's *Wieczory pod lipą* (*Evenings Under the Linden Tree*, 1845), in which the history of the Polish nation is told by a witness of the insurgency – Grzegorz from Raclawice, or *Pielgrzym w Dobromilu* (*Pilgrim in Dobromil*, 1819) by Izabela Czartoryska.



Another great asset of contemporary historical books for the young reader is the humorous presentation of the characters and situations (e.g. unexpected and unusual accumulation of unfortunate, unexpected mishaps and missteps of the protagonist as well as numerous meetings, adventures, and impressions), attention-grabbing sense of humor constantly present in the novel, which is based on modernization of language and use of colloquial phraseology and intriguing trivia. The chapter titles of Wakula's *Jagiello...* are inviting and linguistically intriguing, suggesting particular interpretations of the selected episodes of history.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. MEETINGS WITH THE PAST AND TEACHING PROJECTS

Another example of a historical fictionalization (shown in the context of historical truth) in the poetics of a postmodern novel with a historical theme is *Wszystkie lajki Marczuka* (*All Likes of Marczuk*, 2012) by Paweł Beręsewicz. The story takes a contemporary view of historical events, although the narrative is set on two levels—the present and the wartime past.

A secondary school in the town of Choszczówka near Warsaw announces an educational project whose aim is to find, promote, and popularize a hero in the local community. A group of friends: Adam, Rafał (nicknamed “Horse”), and Ania search in vain for the project material in their region and finally come up with the idea of creating such a character in virtual reality. Using Facebook, other social networks, and finally Wikipedia, they manage to create a historical figure, the eponymous Marczuk who, in the imagination of the secondary school students, and then the Internet world at large, “reveals himself” to the readers as a hero who helped to hide Jews and died during the Warsaw Uprising. A well-thought-out publicity campaign and effective promotion of the imaginary local hero play out perfectly. The virtual image of this consistently developed character, set in historical contexts carefully thought out by the students, is convincing to the audience both in terms of his personality and ethics. The heroic Marczuk really and in a spectacular fashion “comes to life” in the social consciousness of the small town; he becomes a mythical figure who is no longer controlled by his authors, especially since he attracts the attention

<sup>6</sup> Here are some examples: “Mieszko II, Bezprym, Otto. Gdzie trzech się bije” [Mieszko II Lambert, Bezprym, and Otto: Battle of the Three]; “Kazimierz I Odnowiciel. Remont kapitałny” [Casimier I the Restorer: Major renovation]; “Bolesław II Szczodry. Śmiały czy szalony?” [Bolesław II the Generous: Bold or crazy?]; “Władysław I Łokietek. Mały wielki człowiek” [Władysław I Łokietek: Little big man]; “Ludwik Węgierski. Placek po węgiersku” [Louis I of Hungary: Goulash with potato pancake]; “Anna Jagiellonka, Stefan Batory. Polak, Węgier – dwa bratanki” [Anna Jagiellon, Stephen Báthory: Pole and Hungarian brothers be]; “Jan II Kazimierz. Siła złego na jednego” [John II Casimir Vasa: It never rains but it pours], and others.

of the Regional Office of Education, journalists from Poland and Israel, and Jews rescued during the war; finally, the school decides to change its name to Jan Marczuk Lower Secondary School. The problem is that this person has been invented by the students.

The story by Beręsewicz takes place on two planes: contemporary, in the community of students attending the secondary school in Choszczówka, and historical, reflecting the cruel reality of German occupation. The plane of historical events, whose hero is Marczuk, is realistic, filled with details of everyday life of inhabitants of a small village, and provides the reader with solid knowledge of the wartime past. In the novel, the memory of the past brings out an image of an ethically and existentially complex world. The author touches on morally difficult themes, presenting both good and noble people, devoting themselves to others, as well as blackmailers and informers. The narrative strategy of conveying historical content is reinforced by the creation of an image of a war space filled with fear and terror:

Marczuk had no intention of going straight into the hands of policemen [...] “We should make it,” said Marczuk, perhaps more to himself than to the woman, who, fatigued from the fast pace, had leaned against a pine trunk and was catching her breath. There was no time for rest. They cautiously left the forest and, jumping from fence to fence, moved towards the railway tracks. In the northern part of the village, the Germans methodically searched property after property. (Beręsewicz 2012: XX)

However, apart from representing the war past, the novel serves another purpose. The author asks the young reader important questions about the power of influence of virtual reality, manipulation, and propaganda. The protagonists of his story – ingenious secondary school students – invent their character, deftly and confidently construct their “own” image of wartime Choszczówka based on the available knowledge of the German occupation, and create a vivid image of their war hero, presenting him as a “real-life” legend; their efforts provoke not just social acceptance of Marczuk’s actions but universal adoration of the hero.

In literary images of history depicted in contemporary historical books for children and young adults, the principle of confronting the present with the past is of great importance. The structure of the Zarębska’s *Projekt Breslau* (*Project Breslau*, 2016) fits this formula perfectly. The protagonists of the novel are contemporary teenagers – a group of six Wrocław secondary school students: Ada, Olga, Natalia, Adam, Leon, and Maks. While looking for a good meeting place for their group in the old school building, they accidentally come across the entrance to a hidden corridor, a neglected vestibule. They decide to clean up the old and dusty room. They find inside it precious traces of history – artefacts. The memory of the past is conceptualized in the story not only through objects (the children are excited to discover, among others,

old books and maps as well as a mysterious trunk, which, as it turns out later, can travel in time) but also manifests itself in the sphere of ideas – individual and private memories contained in a mysterious German-language diary written by a boy named Hugo (cf. Assmann 2006; Ulanowicz 2013).

The incomprehensible language is a challenge – the students decide to study the language and translate the document together, which, as it turns out, was written just after the war. Hugo is an inhabitant of the former Breslau (renamed to Wrocław) but, in accordance with international political decisions, he and his family should leave the city immediately after the war. The candid confessions of the German boy reveal the drama of his family and evoke in the young readers of the diary many valuable reflections about the history of the city in which they live. The search for the author of the diary, culminating in time travel with the use of the trunk, results in extraordinary adventures of the students but also allows them to experience history and introduces them to the realities of life in the pre-war city of Breslau.

The story encourages a discussion on the role of history and memory in the education of young generations and perfectly reflects the meaning of the findings described by the historian and sociologist Pierre Nora in his essay entitled “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. (1989: 8)

Zarębska's story prepares and encourages the readers to learn about the history and culture of the city. She skillfully weaves historical events into the plot – the novel includes, among others, scenes from the visit by the German Emperor Wilhelm II, the siege of the city by Jérôme Bonaparte, and a description of *Kristallnacht*. In *Projekt Breslau*, the literary message also becomes a kind of scientific and educational project carried out by the students and its credibility is further enhanced by old maps of the German city of Breslau and a contemporary plan of Wrocław. Thus, time-space (in accordance with Bakhtin's theory of *chronotope*) is present in the novel not only in the artistic creation of the place (literary Wrocław seen through the eyes of children), reinforced by a literary conceptualization of the structure of time (present–past), but is also confronted with the real space – map of the city, which in the book undoubtedly becomes a figure and a sign of historical truth.

Direct confrontation with the German past of Wrocław, immersion in the space of interwar city streets, savoring of the city bustle, colorful crowds, unusual costumes, and architecture of burgher houses, getting to know German,

and then the wartime turmoil allow students to experience the city rather than just learn about it by reading the book. The children begin to understand how traumatic it must have been for Germans to be ordered to leave the post-war Wrocław, the city that had been their home. This message is reinforced by the highly intriguing and emotional private family story of Hugo, a boy of the same age as the Polish teenagers. The Polish secondary school students from the 21st century identify themselves completely with the author and hero of the diary.

Therefore, *Projekt Breslau* becomes not only a history lesson but also a lecture on empathy and tolerance, a call for dialogue between cultures, and a wise literary sketch about the memory of places and respect for more than one national tradition. Referring here to the theory of White, it can be noticed that the book by Zarębska also shows a specific transformation of historical awareness related to, among others, tropology, alternative paradigms of historical explanation, treatment of the provided knowledge of memory with increasing caution, and its verification by checking various sources (cf. White 2000).<sup>7</sup>

The image of the city of Wrocław in the Zarębska's aptly titled book that convincingly combines the two opposites allows, however, to extract this integrated cultural phenomenon – both the historical spirit of the city and the essence of its memory. *Projekt Breslau* also takes part in debate on social memory. Social memory can generally be characterized as socially created, transformed, and relatively unified and accepted knowledge that relates to the past of a given community. This knowledge covers various content, performs various functions, persists thanks to various cultural carriers, and reaches the consciousness of individuals from various sources. Its relative unification occurs precisely thanks to the mechanisms of social life. Consequently, there is a partial unification in a given group of ideas relating to the past (Golka 2009: 15) – in this case, the Polish-German community living in the city of Breslau-Wrocław.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In this context, we should also mention an extensive monograph of the multicultural Wrocław, *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*, written by Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse (2002). According to the synopsis by the English publisher, “the history of Silesia’s main city [...] embodies all the experiences which have made Central Europe what it is—a rich mixture of nationalities and cultures; the scene of German settlement and of the reflux of the Slavs; a Jewish presence of exceptional distinction; a turbulent succession of imperial rulers; and the shattering exposure to both Nazis and Stalinists. In short, it is a Central European microcosm” (“Microcosm”). The Polish publisher also notes that “this book, which deals more with European regional history than Polish national history, aims to overcome the historiographical rivalry that has led to the emergence of two competing visions: one of the German city Breslau and another of the Polish city Wrocław” (“Mikrokosmos”).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth adding that functions of social memory are usually carried out in the processes of social life spontaneously, but they are also consciously used in literature on historical topics. An important element in these considerations could also be the issue of historical policy, which creates and uses the collective consciousness of the community, leading to a kind of instrumentalization of social memory (cf. Sakson 2005: 206).

## 5. SUBJECTIVITY OF NARRATIVE AND CULTURE OF FAMILY REMEMBRANCE

The subjectivity of the narrative considered in the context of the culture of remembrance is represented in Cezary Harasimowicz's *Mirabelka* (*Mirabelle*, 2018 – illustrated by Marta Kurczewska). The novel focuses on family events and individual life stories of different characters and is a universal parable that considers the issues of the passage of history and time.

The protagonists of this story are Jewish inhabitants of Friedman's tenement house in the pre-war Warsaw district of Muranów (during the war, this area comprised the Jewish ghetto). The story of the families living in the tenement house covers many years: the time of wartime extermination and the Holocaust, post-war communism, the anti-Semitic campaign of March 1968, political protests of workers in the 1980s, the martial law in 1981, and the period of political and economic emigration in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The time-space of the depicted world is shown from the perspective of a non-human narrator because the story of several families living in this house is told by a mirabelle plum tree. The narrative magic of the novel centers around the figure of a tree that takes part in the events and is subjected to poetic personification characteristic of the folk view of the world. The mirabelle tree not only understands human speech but also expresses opinions about life, makes simplistic comments on historical events, and shows emotions and feelings. It can also talk to children because, as it claims, only children understand the speech of trees.

In his review of the book Krzysztof Rybak observes that

unfortunately, this ability only lasts until people reach adulthood, which happens to almost of protagonists. The only exception is “an actually adult” Romek with “a very big head” who still plays in the sandbox and is nicknamed “stupid Romek” by other children [pp. 158, 161]. The story of intolerance towards the intellectually disabled protagonist, juxtaposed with the anti-Semitism of the period of Holocaust, is a recurring theme of *Mirabelka* that sensitizes the readers to all forms of discrimination, making this ostensibly historical story an extremely contemporary and universal text. (2018)

Although Harasimowicz uses situational humor in dialogues, in many places the narrative force stems from discreet halting of action, allusions, fragmentation of the story, and sketchiness of the description. Such a selective way of presenting events by the plum tree is possible thanks to its description of the events taking place under its branches (e.g. intimate touch of the hands of a couple in love and their first kiss) and secret conversations of adults who meet at this spot to ensure privacy when taking important decisions affecting other household members (e.g. the consent of a wealthy family to the wedding of their daughter with a poor boy). The “silence of emotions” reflects the unique anthropological sensibility of the narrative, which is expressed not in words but in simple

gestures and glances. The dominant artistic features of the narrative are: the strategy of silence, instances of narrative stoppage during critical situations (cf. Jaspers), and the category of time shown in the book in the context of its duration (cf. Bergson): from infinity to seconds extracted from snippets of memories. The time that is felt or experienced by the characters determines the meaning of their existence; it can be individual and psychological but also takes the form of “intersubjective specific time” (cf. Bartoszyński), creating questions “about continuity, permanence, and sameness in the time of the human individual [...] and about the relationship of individual memory with the permanence of the self” (Bartoszyński 1987: 220; cf. Ingarden 1960: 302–312; Skarga 2014).

However, in the interpretation of the story we also refer to the category of time as defined by Joanna Hańderek:

Apart from the biological dimension, anthropological time includes the concept of psychological time (also referred to as internal time)—a subjective way of experiencing duration and transience, independent of objective measures of the length of physical time [...] Internal time, therefore, is time lived, time of consciousness. And although it owes its origin to the experience of the passage of time that is external to consciousness and the perception of what is temporal, internal time has little to do with what is external. That is because consciousness is governed by its own laws and principles of constructing its objects; it embraces what is present, remembered, or designed. (2004: 227)

Although the narrative is dominated by the present (events happen here and now), the author also employs time shifts, consisting in oneiric and phantasmal returns to the past. They become visible in mental images of the characters because ghosts of the past – spirits of the inhabitants of the Friedman’s tenement house who died during the war – circle above the courtyard (e.g. the musician Isaac playing the violin). Isaac’s violin and music, like the mirabelle tree that can talk to children, become clear key words that strengthen the fantasy aspect of the story. In a way, they are also bridges connecting the past with present, a symbol of the continuity of history, a spiritual bond of the history of families that come together in historically and politically uncertain times (e.g. during the wartime Holocaust, dictatorship of communism, or difficult everyday life in the Polish People’s Republic) and constitute a clear artistic dominant of the narrative of the story. Representations of the past are visible and recognizable in the history by Harasimowicz in, among others, the multi-sensory narrative and literary figures of a happy and safe family (which include the sensuality of aroma of a home-baked mirabelle plum cake, sounds of music, and colors of the garden), in idyllic images of peaceful nature, in poetic scenes of carefree childhood and adolescence (e.g. in scenes of love confessions made by young couples: Dorka and Chaim, Luska and Staszek, and Dorotka and Maciek-Noam, the boy saved by Irena Sendler), and during the almost sacred, ritualistic time of picking plums in the garden.

The sensuality of sensations in the story is also emphasized by the rustle of trees, which share among themselves the most important information about daily events in the city. As Rybak observes,

the trees communicate with each other through the rustle of their leaves, so news from different parts of the city reach the mirabelles through messages passed on by chestnuts, lindens, and other Warsaw trees. The trees are as important protagonists of *Mirabelka* as people: “So many of us—chestnuts, beeches, and oaks—screamed in pain, burning like torches along with our city.” [p. 111]. (2018)

Nostalgic images of a happy past (image of the “family” courtyard of a prosperous and elegant tenement house in pre-war Poland) clearly refer to the Arcadian tradition and aesthetics and allow the protagonists to temporarily forget about the unfolding nightmare. Such narrative strategy allows to emphasize in the text the issues of psychology of the characters and resistance of the human psyche. It also influences the understanding, naming, and controlling of emotions, especially those related to wartime loneliness, anguish, and fear of death, but above all it influences the defining of critical situations as moments of self-experience. When analyzing individual and personal experiences of war or the cruel period of communism, the story reveals universal truths, perception and understanding of time, and presentation of temporal behaviors and ideas of time related to its duration and change.

The history of families and continuity of generations described by the mirabelle (and her “children”) in the novel take place over a large span of time that covers the most important political and socio-historical events from various historical periods, from pre-war Warsaw to contemporary Poland with an American emigration subplot.

Rybak notes:

The description of the pre-war period is not limited to the ‘charms’ of Socialism and the race to rebuild the capital, symbolized by an uneducated worker [“Move aside, comrade, I gonna cut it!”, p. 113], but also encompasses student protests and the anti-Semitic campaign of March 1968, anti-government protests in December 1970 as well as the introduction of martial law in 1981. [Additionally – D.M.] the adult readers may appreciate the use by Harasimowicz of fragments of songs evoking nostalgia for the times (not) long gone, such as “Dziwny jest ten świat” by Czesław Niemen, “Przeżyj to sam” by Lombard, and “O! nie rób tyle hałasu” by Maanam. (2018)

Dorotka and Maciej emigrate to Washington, D.C. for political reasons during the martial law. Maciej-Noam, persecuted by the authorities during a wave of anti-Semitism in the 1960s, makes a dramatic decision to leave his homeland and says in despair:

This is a cursed place. Maciek purses his lips again. I’m telling you, Dorota. These houses were built of bricks from the burned ghetto. They are filled will

suffering and death. I don't want to live here. I don't want to live in a country where someone is always being persecuted by someone else. I don't want our son to live in such a country. We must leave this place, my dear, there's no other way." (Harasimowicz 2018: 176)

In the Washington garden of the house of Dorotka and Maciek, the mirabelle is reborn thanks to the pit of the plum tree taken from Warsaw.

The verbal narrative of the story is enhanced by convincing illustrations. Kurczewska uses in her paintings delicate colors, full of warmth, nostalgia, and sensitivity; she pays attention to social and cultural details, architectural buildings of Warsaw, and clothes of the protagonists that reflect the trends and fashions prevailing in different historical periods; she also presents everyday lives of orthodox Jews (with culinary recipes in the background and the ritual celebration of the Jewish holiday– Sabbath). The artistic convention of the illustrations fits perfectly into the poetics of the reflective and existential mood of the story (e.g. light colors provide the background for scenes of happiness; darker, brown colors reflect the period of the wartime nightmare and death; green stands for hope for a better tomorrow; and yellow of the mirabelle brightens the story with optimism and joy). "The garden of family memory," in which information about the most important events is passed on to the posterity by the mirabelle as a direct witness of unfolding history, is a clear metaphor of human existence; at the same time, it becomes a treasure trove of historical values and a clear sign of social memory. The private, individual fates of Jewish protagonists of the story by Harasimowicz become expressive, legible, and understandable only from the perspective of historical events and their place in the socio-political context. The story provokes philosophical and ethical reflections and shows universal values of human behavior, thus becoming a clear, contemporary parable of human fate.

## CONCLUSION

The discussed history-themed books for young readers are, as noted, genologically diverse, representing modernist genre-bending syncretism and various types of narrative. A traditional novel in the style of Walter Scott is combined with a narrative in the style of a reflective story focused on the concept of time (e.g. *Mirabelka*), prose in style of the postmodern novel, "school genres" including implementations of project tasks (e.g. *Projekt Breslau*), and a story that includes "dialogues with a thesis." It is also worth noting examples of playing with literary conventions by using fantastical themes (e.g. time travel in *Kaktus na parapecie*). Here, odd historical facts are mixed with fiction, while literary biographies of child protagonists are embellished by elements of travel adventures, crime thrillers, and novels of manners. The dominant artistic features of the discussed novels are private lives, psychology, and emotions of the protagonists. Thus, the young reader can make friends or even identify with his literary peer.



Studies show that contemporary Polish historical fiction for children and young adults, as an element of historical education, can constitute a specific cultural and social form of remembrance of people and events from the past. The literary narratives interpreted in this article, which highlight representations of the past and figures of memory, are often based on real events and contain clear and implicit ideological codes; consequently, they not only represent a system of social norms and values but also try to construct a specific view of the world, introducing the young generation to the past of their corresponding social group (Parlevliet 2014: 470).

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