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## Michał Rusinek's *Eyelids* in the Light of Children's Interpretations

### Powieki Michała Rusinka w świetle dziecięcych interpretacji

#### KEYWORDS    ABSTRACT

picturebook,  
interpretative  
knowledge, visual  
literacy, competences  
of preschool  
children, taboo in  
children's literature

The aim of this article is to identify children's ways of understanding and interpreting the book *Eyelids* by Michał Rusinek (2012). The material for the study (preceded by an analysis of the iconotext) was provided by educational classes conducted in a preschool department in one of the community primary schools in Łódź. The study was set in a qualitative paradigm (participatory observation), and the researchers put themselves in the role of interpretively engaged observer-as-participants. By analysing the workshop, as well as the statements and artistic concretisations, it was possible to identify children's interpretations of the categories of characters, the relationships between them, and the world in which they live. During the session with Rusinek's work, interpretative potential was revealed, referring primarily to the emotional and social dimension. The participants

<sup>1</sup> The author's contribution to the preparation of the text, including the planning of the research concept, the search for theoretical references, the implementation of the workshop, the analysis of the book's iconotext and the children's statements and drawings, the formulation of conclusions, is 50%.

<sup>2</sup> See above.

also suggested alternative plot solutions on the basis of excerpts from the story about mice in distress, thus reducing the tensions created by dealing with emotionally charged topics. The organisation of educational situations based on the book *Eyelids* is part of the discussion on how to confront children with challenging issues that are on the edge of cultural taboos. The way in which the text is received makes it possible to believe that it may be used again in early childhood education.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

książka  
obrazkowa, wiedza  
interpretacyjna,  
alfabetyzacja  
wizualna,  
kompetencje  
dzieci w wieku  
przedszkolnym,  
tabu w literaturze  
dla dzieci

Celem niniejszego artykułu uczyniono identyfikację dziecięcych sposobów rozumienia i interpretowania książki *Powieki* Michała Rusinka (2012). Materiał do badania (poprzedzonego analizą ikonotekstu) zapewniły zajęcia edukacyjne, przeprowadzone w oddziale przedszkolnym w jednej ze społecznych szkół podstawowych w Łodzi. Badanie zostało osadzone w paradygmacie jakościowym (obserwacja uczestnicząca), a badacze przyjęli rolę interpretacyjnie zaangażowanych obserwatorów-jako-uczestników. Analizując przebieg warsztatu, wypowiedzi i konkretyzacje plastyczne, udało się zidentyfikować dziecięce interpretacje kategorii bohaterów, relacji między nimi oraz świata, w którym żyją. Podczas spotkania z pracą Rusinka ujawnił się potencjał interpretacyjny, dotyczący przede wszystkim wymiaru emocjonalno-społecznego. Uczestnicy proponowali również alternatywne rozwiązania fabularne na podstawie fragmentów historii o myszach będących w niebezpieczeństwie, dzięki czemu zredukowane zostały napięcia powstałe w wyniku obcowania z obciążającą emocjonalnie tematyką. Organizowanie sytuacji edukacyjnych wokół książki *Powieki* wpisuje się w namysł nad sposobami konfrontowania dzieci z wymagającymi zagadnieniami, będącymi na krawędzi kulturowego tabu. Sposób przyjęcia omawianego tekstu otwiera drogę do ponownego sięgnięcia po niego na etapie edukacji wczesnoszkolnej.

## Introduction

An extremely important competence of modern man is visual literacy, so it is important to ensure, from early childhood, the quality of visuals that children are exposed to. It is important to support them in accumulating the stock of visual codes that will be necessary to interpret the non-literal sphere of illustrations (Cackowska, 2014, pp. 276–277). Both visual literacy and reading images are extremely important in pedagogical practice, primarily at the stage of elementary education. The youngest learn to read the relationships between images and words, to recognise the meanings hidden in images, and to value them critically.

The development of visual literacy and interpretative competence is facilitated by contact with a picturebook, mediated by a reflective teacher (Cackowska, 2010, pp. 354–355). In picturebooks, the information carrier is not only the text, but also other elements such as visuals, typography, paperweight, cover, title and book format. The whole is seen as an integral aesthetic product (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, pp. 241–257). Western literature presents a picturebook as a unity of image and word, the so-called *iconotext* (Hallberg, 1982), and categorises it as a product of multisensory arts (Cackowska, 2010, pp. 342–343). Reading picturebooks may lead to the creation of new interpretations through the personal nature of their reception. The recipient fills in the gaps in the text and the image with his/her interpretations. The reader's/listener's experiences and knowledge are important in order to receive the work on different levels. Picturebooks gain meaning when they are read and interpreted. Picturebooks unleash the child's freedom and his/her subjectivity; they do not hide real problems from readers; they do not infantilise their audience. They are an opportunity for the child to come into contact with art, respecting children's individuality and potential for interpretation.

Interpretative knowledge is of great importance in children's development. It has important educational qualities as a result of which the youngest learn to interpret social events and formulate arguments to justify their points of view. Such interpretative knowledge also has educative qualities, as it enables children to voice their opinions with courage and respect the views of others. Designing and conducting classes that trigger children's interpretations can have an impact on shaping open-minded, multi-dimensional, reflective and inquiring children (and eventually adults). Unfortunately, the development of reflective and interpretative thinking is marginalised in classes for preschool children (Sławińska, 2010, p. 165). It is important to remember that education is based on sharing knowledge and mutual construction of meanings. Teachers and children should establish dialogic relationships. The task of adults is to be open to children's perspective (Śliwerski, 2007). In order to support the development of interpretative knowledge in children, problem-based teaching situations should be organised. To sum it up: "conversation is irreplaceable" (Kłakówna, 2016, pp. 423–430).

As a medium for developing this interpretative potential (Arizpe & Styles, 2016), a picturebook does not avoid topics that fall within the scope of cultural and social taboo. Although contemporary taboo in children's literature is successively decreasing in scope (Baszewska, 2016, pp. 146–172), the organisation of educational situations around works dealing with death generates many doubts and problems among teachers. The cause of these problems often includes the perception of children as "cute elves" (Klus-Stańska, 2014), the lack of faith in children's interpretative possibilities, and the desire to spread a socio-cultural protective umbrella over them. As a result,

not only individual topics and specific cultural texts, but, above all, children themselves are infantilised.

The organisation of an educational situation around the book *Eyelids* (the textual and pictorial layers of which had been previously analysed) is part of the reflection on confronting children with texts that touch on difficult topics. The choice of literature that reconciles ethical obligations with a high artistic level and psychological aspects of reception (cf. Wiśniewska-Kin, 2019) can make the picturebook a medium that allows to trigger children's reflection on the meaning of the text and visualisation.

### *Eyelids* as a Starting Point for the Construction of Verbal and Visual Messages by Children

This work by Michał Rusinek, illustrated by Ola Cieślak, was published as a programme supplement to the musical *Korczak*, with music by Chris Williams and libretto by Nick Stimson (staged by Robert Skolmowski at the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic in 2012). It is a story about field mice whose difficult and monotonous existence is interrupted when, one day, a strange smell begins to waft over the meadow. One of the mice, having climbed a withered tree, notices approaching fire from which escape will be impossible. The animal loses its balance, falls off the branch and, as a result of the fall, for the first time in its life looks up at the sky. Enthralled by the view of the sky, she encourages her terrified companions to lie on their backs and gaze up at the clouds, so that the view of the sky can stay under their eyelids forever.

In describing the visual and verbal layer of the book, it is worth noting the following components<sup>3</sup>:

#### *Characters*

Mice, along with rabbits, are the most frequently anthropomorphised mammals in children's picturebooks (Hara & Koda, 2020, p. 311). As the protagonists of Rusinek's story, these animals have a symbolic potential. A similar procedure was used by Art Spiegelman in the graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (*Maus. A Survivor's Tale*; 2001) in which animals represent people of different nationalities, including: mice – Jews, cats – Germans, etc. Mice, traditionally perceived as fearful, break this stereotype in *Eyelids*, proving that new abilities can be developed in them when confronted with an imminent threat (Dymel-Trzebiatowska, 2016, p. 125). The representation of the characters in the textual layer is close to the perception of animals from

<sup>3</sup> The analysis of the iconotext was organised according to the categories that emerged during the children's work with the book. The research part of the children's exploration is described later in the article.

the perspective of a child, as indicated by the diminutives used (“They had long little tails, greyish little furs, and were very skinny”), and the element that reinforces the anthropomorphisation (“they never went on holiday”). The graphic representations of the mice, reminiscent of children’s drawings, are distinguished by the absence of a mouth. In the form of a small arch, the alignment of which suggests a smile, they only appear in the illustration on page twelve (the mouse with its eyes closed floats towards a set of arches that look like a cloud). The eyes become an element that determines the emotional state of the characters.

Printed arches, which appear three times on the faces of the mice, can also be associated with the eyes. They can be considered a symbol of eyelids:

[...]on a metaphorical level, the eyelids, stretched out like brackets in this concise tale, allow the mice to disconnect from reality and move into the realm of fantasy, which is a reference to Korczak’s pedagogical methods encouraging orphaned children to use fantasy in escapist activities in the face of the impending Holocaust (Dymel-Trzebiałowska, 2016, pp. 124–125, the author’s own translation).

On a verbal level, apart from the title framed in arcs, present on the cover and spine of the book, eyelids are mentioned by the guide mouse in the last scene of the story, when the mice know they are going to die, yet they admire the sky: “And when you are full of this view”, whispered the brown mouse, “close your eyes. You will keep these images under your eyelids, forever”. Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek notices in Rusinek’s text the presence of a rite of passage, which is the ultimate liberation, and aptly points out the construction of the narrative around the words: “eyelids” and “forever and ever”. This play of meanings finds its finale in the symbol of infinity (Wójcik-Dudek, 2016, p. 121), which is placed under the quoted passage from the book.

### *Relationships Between Characters*

Undoubtedly, Rusinek’s story deals with a certain collectivity: mice who experience the hardships of everyday life, existing more side by side than with each other. The protagonists are unable to answer the question of what to do in the face of imminent danger; they quickly succumb to panic: “How is someone who has spent his entire life just running around with his nose to the ground, hunting for food, supposed to answer these questions? The mice panicked: they squealed and ran in circles, hitting each other. All of them – except for one”. Thanks to the character of the mouse guide, *Eyelids* can be read not only as a story about a group. The adult reader, noticing the obvious links between the text and the biography of Janusz Korczak, identifies the behaviour of the guide as that of the Old Doctor, who “in 1942 died in the German extermination camp of Treblinka together with his students whom he did not want to

abandon until the end” (Lorek & Zatorska, 2016, p. 18). Thinking about this story and knowing the historical context cited above, the notion of a group used above, i. e. a group of people staying together in a specific area, does not seem to be a very accurate term. More appropriate would be the notion of a group as community in which there are closer, more personal relationships. Being a part of a community means being able to sacrifice, but it also includes the growth of a sense of responsibility, reinforcing an attitude of mutual solidarity. Without the knowledge of Korczak’s story, it is difficult to expect the viewer to become immersed in the presented phenomenon of community life.

The revealed relationship between the mouse characters needs to be complemented by a look at other inhabitants of the meadow who only appear in the visual layer. One of the illustrations provides information about the presence of insects. Their representation is, in contrast to the anthropomorphised rodents, realistic. Insects, like (in most cases) mice, are drawn as outlines, taking on the colour of the background. They hover above three blocks of empty houses (it is not clear to whom they belong). Four insects are depicted above the glow of the fire (only the beetle remains within the reddish-brown patch). However, they do not interact with the mice; they seem to belong to a different world order.

### *The World in Which the Characters Live*

The world in which Rusinek’s story takes place is small, generating a sense of confinement. Only the aforementioned insects are able to leave the meadow: they are depicted in flight which may emphasise the dramatic status of mice who are closed within the danger zone. This is compliant with the observations of Anita Jarzyna, who cites works for children in which, on the one hand, we can meet people condemned to slavery, and, on the other, we can see birds who are able to leave the Jewish quarter (Jarzyna, 2016, p. 246).

The space traversed by the animal protagonists is presented in a vertical order. In the first illustration, the gaze is focused on the ground to see individual blades of grass. As the story progresses, the perspective becomes wider and the mouse’s gaze is shifted to objects shown further and higher up: the guide “remembered that in the middle of the meadow there was a hill, and on it – a withered tree [...]. What she saw from above, when she climbed the highest branch of the tree, terrified her: a fire was approaching them from all sides”. The death of the mice takes place on the hill; the sight of the animals is focused on the sky. The back cover shows aeroplanes circling among the clouds (this vertical journey, ending in death, is reminiscent of the adventures depicted in Andersen’s *The Little Match Girl* – also set in a world that does not come to the aid of those who suffer).

The colours in which the space appears relate mimetically to the objects depicted: red accompanies the fire, blue is closely associated with the sky, while the final clouds of smoke are grey (Dymel-Trzebiatowska, 2016, p. 125). The field representing the mice's habitat is greyish-brown at first, and when "one afternoon, however, something has changed" and the mice begin to smell a strange, disturbing stink, the meadow becomes yellow. In the context of constructing the visual memory of the Holocaust in children's books, Rima Shikhmanter recognises the presence of yellow details (not only the triangles or stars worn by Jews in the concentration camps, but also children's toys, hair, clothes, landscape elements) and backgrounds as one of the illustrative practices through which the fate of Jews during World War II is depicted. A yellow background appears, for example, in the book by Batsheva Dagan: *Chika, the Dog in the Ghetto* (Shikhmanter, 2021). In *Eyelids*, this colour, dominant in the illustration (also filling in the silhouettes of the mice), and supplemented by the sparing verbal signal: "No doubt danger was approaching. But what kind of danger? From where? What to do?", can be read symbolically and become a war sign of a non-obvious nature. Like the yellow spots placed on the passage of text describing the impression of the mouse after seeing the beautiful sky and on the silhouettes of the animals in the story's finale.

The world in which the mice are closed, marked by problems that make existence difficult ("they lived in just such a place and time that they could hardly find anything to eat"), is expanded with visual messages that testify to the wartime context of the story presented. Those visual signals vary in their degree of obviousness. According to Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska, elements clearly signaling the war theme appear in the form of two paratexts: a visual one (an illustration of two aeroplanes on the back cover of the book) and a verbal one (included on the front cover is a short text printed vertically in small letters on the right "eyelid": "Dedicated to the memory of Janusz Korczak"). War signs of a subtle nature, intended for more experienced readers, are, in turn, contained in the layout. The font used may be associated with German language and culture in Poland, and the background ornaments allude to Gothic imagery (Dymel-Trzebiatowska, 2016, p. 125). The Star of David is hidden in the book three times, having a special significance on a card filled with a red and black gothic pattern on which the words of the mouse are written in white font: "There was nowhere to escape".

## Children's Reading of *Eyelids*

The aim of the study, which adopted the perspective of an interpretatively engaged observer-as-participant (Angrosino, 2010), was to identify children's ways of

understanding and interpreting the categories presented in the visual and verbal layers of the book *Eyelids*. The three-hour workshop was attended by pupils (ten girls and six boys) from the kindergarten department of one of the community primary schools in Łódź. The workshop was based on suggested research paths: “*book talk*” (Chambers, 1993) and “*storybookpicture walk*” (Paris & Paris, 2001). A distinctive feature of the workshop was that the content of the book was not revealed at the beginning, but that three visualisations were presented in sequence as a starting point for the children’s reflections. They were chosen in such a way as to create a cause-and-effect sequence between them, while leaving space to create individualised interpretations. At a later stage, the children were introduced to the content of the whole story, which gave them the opportunity to verify the hypotheses they had formulated earlier. In the last part of the activity, the participants produced an artwork to complement visualisation number 2 (whereby the teacher indicated that the children should not reproduce the plot solution used in the text). Creating art as a response to being exposed to a picturebook can be justified by the fact that 1) some children find it difficult to formulate a verbal interpretation, and 2) words may not be sufficient to summarise the aesthetic experience (Arizpe & Styles, 2016). Through this activity, tensions created by dealing with emotionally charged subject matter could be reduced. Prior to the activity, the children consented to their statements being recorded, and these were transcribed and later analysed (along with their artwork). Given the important role played by the teacher – a professional intermediary between the children and the book (Cackowska, 2012, p. 74) – the workshop took place after his or her prior assessment and eight months of work with the selected preschool group. It is noteworthy that the children participate in the implementation of the innovative literacy method called “effective surprise” (Wiśniewska-Kin, 2020), an essential element of which is the analysis of graphic visualisations by Marta Ignerska, designed around specific sounds. The presented illustrations remain dynamic and moving, provoking the completion of gaps in figures and the perception of incomplete figures as complete. The visualisations encourage conversation about the representational layer and non-literal meanings, activating associations about visualised gestures that materialise sound. The children develop their interpretive and dialogic skills during the activities. As a result, all the children in the group attempted to interpret the iconotext presented.





Figure 1. Visualisation From Pages 2–3 of the Book *Eyelids*



Figure 2. Visualisation From Page 6 of the Book *Eyelids*



Figure 3. Visualisation From Page 12 of the Book *Eyelids*

During the analysis of the course of activities presented in the article, as well as statements and visual concretisations (selected from all the works to illustrate the diversity of children's interpretations), three main categories emerged around which the children built their verbal and non-verbal expressions:

### Characters

When interpreting the illustrations from *Eyelids* (see Figure 1), the children paid attention to the appearance of the female characters which they identified with their emotional state:

Teacher: Have you noticed that all the mice are in a similar position? What might they be doing?

Child 1: They are looking at the sky.

Ch 2: It's like there's a storm out there. They're scared.

T: Perhaps. You can see a slight anxiety, can't you? What else might indicate that they are anxious?

Ch: Eyes!

T: Eyes? What about the eyes?

Ch 3: I can see that they are open very wide.

T: Yes, they are gazing at one place. Do you think they are focused on this beautiful place that surrounds them?

Ch: No!

T: What are they focusing on?

Ch 1: On the sky.

The children recalled potential threats that could induce fear in the mice and cause them to focus their eyes on a single point. Analysing illustration number 3, the children attributed the closed eyes to the physical state the characters were in:

T: Look at the eyes now. What are they like?

Ch: Closed.

T: When do we have our eyes closed?

Ch 10: When we sleep.

T: Only then?

Ch 6: When we die.

Ch 12: No, when we die we can keep our eyes open.

Ch 9: When we feel bad.

The way the children visualised the mice was also analysed. The individual works were characterised by a consistent style of drawing animals. They all looked similar, none of them stood out: they were of similar size, in similar colours.

The positioning of the mice's bodies on the children's concretisations is also noteworthy. On two works, one can see mice raising their hands. This gesture signifies a desperate plea for help (the drowning mouse extends its hands upwards – fig. 5), or (in the second visualisation) the same gesture is a sign of joy (fig. 7). The mice are happy to have been saved by a huge tsunami. They boldly display the gesture of victory without restraining their satisfaction.

The gesture of covering the eyes with the hands (which, however, are visible all the time, as if the hands were transparent), which appears in the children's works, was interpreted in a multidimensional manner. Some children assumed that the mouse covers its eyes because it does not want to look at the suffering that is affecting its loved ones (and yet sometimes glances away, in the hope that perhaps someone has survived or can still be helped). The children noted that the gesture of covering the eyes is also accompanied by surprises (I don't peek because I shouldn't peek, but I do peek a little because I can't wait for the surprise). "The mice have organized a picnic for this mouse. She can't look because it's a surprise" (see Figure 6). In this case, the above-mentioned gesture was an expression of unbridled curiosity. Further interpretations treat the covering of the eyes as an attempt to ward off imminent danger. The mice nevertheless peek to have an idea of how far away the danger is from them.

The visual anchor when reading the text appeared to be the unique faces of the mice: "It seems to me, when I look at the mice, that I don't see any face. That's how it seems to me that they see some kind of storm and that they are serious, for example" (comment on Figure 1). This artistic solution was also used by the children in their visualisations. There are, however, works in which, through the positioning of the figure's mouth, the authors signal the emotions felt by the mice: an arc of sadness or

mouth-circles as an expression of fear (fig. 4). In none of the sixteen visualisations was the mouth of the mouse standing on the branch “added”. However, the author of Figure 4 “attributes” the schematic face drawn on the left to the guide mouse, and this schematic face resembles an emoticon: “And this is such a smiley face which suggests that the mouse knows what is going to happen”.

### *Relationships Between Characters*

In the interpretations of the relationships between the characters depicted in the narratives and the visual concretisations, a clear tendency to see the animals as a community emerges. The children signal this through the introduction of the concept of family (which did not occur in Rusinek’s text): “Here are the mice who are afraid because the birds have already flown away and the storm has started. But one mouse climbed the tree and saw what was happening; she saw how her family was dying” (fig. 4); “The mice... The flood starts. The mice are drowning. One mouse is trying to save them, but she must also save herself. She fell; she fell on a rock, but she was the only one who could swim. She went down and she saw her family dying. She swam ashore and cried: ‘Why, my parents?!’”. The community is also depicted in situations of a non-dramatic nature. In one of the children’s concretisations, the theme of common celebration, which cements the ties that bind the members of the community together, was revealed (see Figure 7). What is evident here is a shift away from seeing the characters as a collection of individuals who merely exist in each other’s presence to identifying them as a family, a strong community with members who support each other and try to face dangers together.

In *Eyelids*, the author builds relationships within just one animal species, leaving insects out of the tragedy. According to the children, birds appear in this context, having “managed to fly away and there was a flood”, or a horse grazing in a meadow (not experiencing the discomfort of heavy rain due to its size). Not all inhabitants of the same space face the same problems. One author, however, has introduced an animal of similar size and characteristics into the mouse world, experiencing the same danger as the protagonists: “And here, next door, is a hamster who is a friend of the mice”.

Other introduced animals pose a threat to the tiny mice. Already at the stage of interpreting the visualisations from the book, the children alluded to the natural relationships between rodents and birds of prey (“maybe the mice see that a bird, for example an owl, has taken one mouse”; “the birds have caught the mice and put them in a dark nest”) or cats (“this mouse may be summoning them to the tree because of a cat”). However, the way in which other animals were introduced in artistic concretisations was not always realistic: cats diving from the sky towards the mice heighten the impression of an unexpected attack the escape from which is extremely difficult.

The relationships between the guide and other mice result in an effective rescue in the children's interpretations. While, at the interpretative stage of the visualization, it was an attempted rescue that could not succeed ("I think the mouse that is jumping is trying to go down to the bush, to warn the others, but it failed"; "This smoke wants to get into the burrow. One mouse noticed it, so she is jumping off the branch to warn the others, but she saw that they had already been poisoned"). The ingenuity and determination of the chairman's artistic concretisations reflect a childlike disagreement with the suffering of the small and the vulnerable. Thus, the authors guide their characters onto a path of hope leading to life.

### *The World in Which the Characters Live*

When interpreting the space shown in Figure 1, the children did not initially see a potential danger. They concentrated on the elements present in the environment, trying to identify them. In one girl's statement, the plants visible in the illustration were referred to as "mouse houses":

Ch 12: I think the bushes are homes for mice.

T: Home can be something different for everyone, right?

Ch 12: Because I feed the mouse in the bushes.

T: Exactly, you always talk about going to the park to feed the mice. Do you think this is such a good dream home for the mice? How can they feel in that house?

Ch 12: Good.

T: And why do you think they feel comfortable?

Ch 12: Because cats can't find them.

T: How else can they feel at home?

Ch 2: Safe.

Ch 8: They are not afraid and they hide in the houses whenever cats go there.

The space shown in Figure 3 (after the children discovered that the mice were exposed to a danger they had not yet identified), for example, was perceived as a threat from the elements:

Ch 2: It seems to me that, at the beginning, it's like the waves and the storm are approaching; and then the mice are running away from the storm and they're already underwater and so drowned. Because these sort of clouds are such reflections and these white ones are like waves.

T: I see, and the blue colour, what do you think it means here?

Ch 2: Well, it's the water and sort of the sand that floats into the sea sometimes.

The worlds created by the children after listening to *Eyelids* are threatened by an incoming danger from outside (as in the original story) or by several dangers at once:

for example, a combination of flood, storm and predator attack. Dark colours and strong, dynamic lines (in the depiction of storms, black clouds or flood waves) emphasize the horror of the situation. In *Eyelids*, it is impossible to escape from the world; the mice leave it only after they die. However, in the children's opinion, the dangers pass, and they can be avoided (although not everyone succeeds). Some mice manage to hide in a safe hole or bravely go away in search for a new home – an example of such topophilia (cf. Bachelard, 1976; Baluch, 2008; Kotaba, 2015) is the island created by one of the authors: “The storm came, and it was so high up to the branches, and still the little mouse managed to escape, in my opinion, and they swam luckily to another island, and, by the way, when they were travelling, it was raining and there was a rainbow. Those mice were a bit sad that they were sailing, but when they saw all this and the rainbow, they cheered up” (Figure 5).

A unique narrative is the one by the boy who introduces an object with magical powers into the world (this is the only case in which a mouse guide is added an element into the visual concretisation). Thus, the story acquires a feature associated with the fairy-tale world order, when the mouse – a tiny, weak protagonist – manages to tame the elements with the help of a unique object (which, in the child's understanding, is something the mouse naturally deserves to have): “I have a very silly, strange story. I used two sides of a piece of paper. First, there was a sudden tsunami, and this mouse suddenly fell on some stick and covered her eyes with her hands, but peeped a bit. She had a sword-bucket and she warned the other mice, because they were in front of her, and the other mice were so frightened that... they were so scared that they couldn't move. And this mouse, with its sword-bucket, caught this whole tsunami. And at the end there was a party because they managed to stop the tsunami. And that's the confetti at this party. The mouse won” (Figure 7).



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

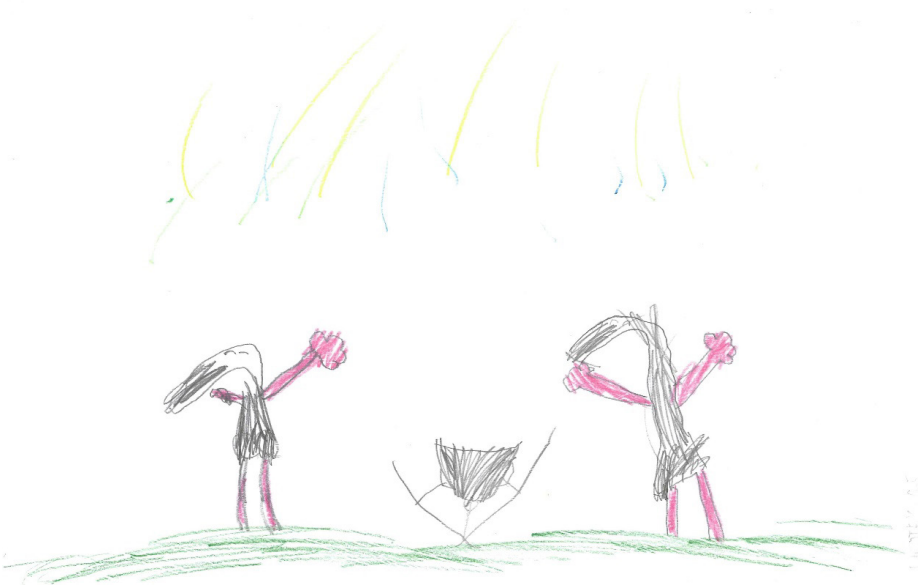


Figure 7.



## Conclusion

During the encounter with Rusinek's work, the children's interpretative potential became apparent, touching, above all, on the emotional and social dimension. Already at the stage of decoding the meaning of the three visualisations, the children were free to find elements to which they attributed meaning, and were open to different points of view. These components belonged both to the category of the protagonists (faces, gestures of mice), their actions and the relationships they have with each other (the search for rescue, the communal dimension of existence), and the world they live in (seeing the printed arcs as clouds, mountains, waves, smoke, birds). Interpretations of the above categories expanded the narratives around artistic concretisations.

The children's illustrations and statements about them did not always touch on the themes of death and suffering that the story presented to the workshop participants might have suggested. The visuals and the accompanying narratives can be ordered according to the degree of harm or fear experienced by the characters. According to the children, the way out of the threatening situation most often turned out to be escape ("the best thing to do was to run away"), which, however, required courage or speed. Mice are small; they do not have the resources to engage in physical combat, but they have the cunning, choosing to actively change where they are in order to protect themselves from danger. Physical combat is an exceptional action and succeeds thanks to an almost magical object (the guide mouse, worthy of holding it, has tamed the destructive forces of nature).

The work with *Eyelids* was aimed at introducing children into the subject of the Holocaust. Polish preschool teachers do not face the problems and dilemmas faced by Israeli educators in this context (cf. Ziv et al., 2015). Schools and kindergartens can, however, seek support from cultural institutions when implementing topics related to: history, conflicts (also current ones) and the possibility of helping others during them, tolerance, etc. A wide range of workshops on these topics, designed with the youngest audience in mind, is run by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews Polin (these include the socio-educational action 'Daffodils', workshops developed around the short story '*Strasznie straszne*' [*Terrribly Terrible*] by Paweł Beręsewicz, or a walk through the exhibition on the history of Polish Jews, with elements of games).

The way in which the text was received by the readers opens the way for it to be used again at the stage of early childhood education. This is because educational materials contain not only excerpts from Janusz Korczak's works or Iwona Chmielewska's *Pamiętnik Blumki* [*Blumka's Diary*] about life in the Orphanage, but also biographical information about the Old Doctor. "In 1942 he died in the German extermination camp at Treblinka, together with his students whom he did not want to abandon until the end" – this last sentence in a note about Korczak in the textbook *Our School* for

the third grade could be complemented by a symbolic story dedicated to the memory of a man “forever” devoted to children.

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