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Therapeutic Function of Literary Accounts of the War in Ukraine Addressed to Children

Terapeutyczna funkcja literackich relacji o wojnie
w Ukrainie adresowanych do dzieci

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

bibliotherapy,
literature for
children, research
on children, war in
Ukraine, fairy tale
therapy

The aim of the article is to analyse children's books on war, written by Polish and Ukrainian authors, with special emphasis on the war in Ukraine. The starting point for the considerations is the methodology of *children's studies*, which is a scientific discipline that places childhood as the subject of in-depth research. The interpretation used current data on psychological problems related to the youngest refugees from Ukraine. Children's books by Polish authors published in the series *Adult Wars – Children's Stories* about the war in Ukraine were analysed, and their indisputable therapeutic functions were indicated. Reading them individually or collectively brings relief to the traumas experienced by Ukrainian children who find themselves in exile in a new, unknown country. At the same time, it teaches compassion and creates empathy for those in need among the youngest Poles. Then, the works from the indicated series were compared with those written at the same time, i.e. from February 2022, by Ukrainian authors. It turned out that they did not take into account the psychological needs of Ukrainian children, promoting primarily patriotic content and focusing on providing knowledge about the homeland in a state of danger. The summary includes a postulate regarding the need to adapt the content and form of the message related to war in children's literature to the audience of early school age, in such a way that its therapeutic function is fulfilled.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

biblioterapia,
literatura dla dzieci,
studia dziecięce,
wojna w Ukrainie,
bajkoteria

Celem artykułu jest analiza książek o wojnie adresowanych do dzieci, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wojny w Ukrainie, autorstwa pisarzy polskich i ukraińskich. Punktem wyjścia rozważań jest metodologia *children studies*, dyscypliny naukowej stawiającej okres dzieciństwa jako przedmiot wnikliwego badania. W interpretacji wykorzystano aktualne dane dotyczące problemów psychologicznych związanych z najmłodszymi uciekinierami z Ukrainy. Analizie poddano książeczki dla dzieci polskich autorów wydane w serii „Wojny Dorosłych – Historie Dzieci” opowiadające o wojnie w Ukrainie i wskazano na ich niepodważalne funkcje terapeutyczne. Indywidualna lub wspólna lektura tych książek niesie ukojenie doznanych traum przez dzieci ukraińskie, które znalazły się na uchodźstwie w nowym nieznanym kraju. Jednocześnie uczy współodczuwania i rodzi empatię dla potrzebujących wśród najmłodszych Polaków. Utwory ze wskazanej serii zostały zestawione z tymi, które w tym samym czasie, tj. od lutego 2022 roku, napisane zostały przez autorów ukraińskich. Okazało się, że nie uwzględniają one psychicznych potrzeb dzieci ukraińskich, propagując przede wszystkim treści patriotyczne i skupiając się na przekazaniu wiedzy o ojczyźnie w stanie zagrożenia. W podsumowaniu zawarty jest postulat dotyczący potrzeby dostosowania treści i formy przekazu związanego z wojną w literaturze dla dzieci do odbiorcy w wieku wczesnoszkolnym w taki sposób, by realizowała się jego funkcja terapeutyczna.

Introduction

The war-related issues broaden the scope of research of *children's studies* (Szymborska, 2016, 2020), the discipline with its own subject of study, system and theory based on childhood. Therefore, posing questions like, for example, “Is war for children?” (Kotaba, 2015), becomes an important research task and a starting point for historical, educational, psychological and pedagogical observations.

Although war is not meant to be experienced by the youngest, the children, nevertheless, are its participants, witnesses and victims. The evidence of the presence of this problem in the public space is to be found in the publication entitled *Dzieci i doświadczenie wojny. Wiek XX i XXI [Children and the Experience of War. The 20th and 21st Centuries]* (Grzywacz & Okupnik 2020). The researchers, who are interested in the status of civilians during war, discuss traumatic experiences of children, that are often left unmentioned and overlooked. They also formulate theses related to the memory of war in contemporary times. Among the many topics, there is a suggestion to make children interested in war through visual forms, like exhibitions or museum displays. Joanna Ostrowska comments on this way of activating young audiences by describing the Museum of World War II in Gdańsk. Instead of traditional showcases,

the museum uses open spaces to visualize the living conditions during the occupation. Ostrowska writes: “Without any intrusive narrative of struggle, violence and cruelty, this exhibition shows how civilians, ordinary people – including the peers of those who visit the exhibition, experience it” (2020, p. 232).

A slightly different solution is offered at the Warsaw Rising Museum where children can spend the part of sightseeing meant for adults in the Little Insurgent Room where they can enjoy some entertainment:

The interior of the room resembles a common room or a kindergarten area in which the walls are decorated with simple, schematic, colourful, as if “childish”, drawings. Thanks to this, the Little Insurgent Room looks like a playroom with military accents. The attractions prepared for children are, among others, a field post office, where you can seal letters, and a field hospital, where you can take care of a wounded friend. There is also a corner with board games and jigsaw puzzles about the Warsaw Rising, and a replica of the insurgent puppet theatre in which puppet shows for the youngest are presented (Ostrowska, 2020, p. 233).

In such a way, children start to associate war with different forms of play. The Author adds: “The message of this room is clear: war is a game, it is a kind of game” (Ostrowska, 2020, p. 234).

The ideas presented above suggest that topics related to the time of war should be an essential element of knowledge passed on to a child. However, such knowledge ought to be adjusted to the mental condition of the young recipient. The topic should not be imposed intrusively, yet some solution should be found so as not to leave the child feeling anxious.

Is such a way of making children familiar with war experience appropriate? It certainly satisfies the most important need for a happy childhood and provides the fastest response to this need. The question of what children need to be happy is answered by the 2019 report of UNICEF Poland Association entitled *Children's Rights from the Perspective of Children, Parents and Teachers*. According to the report, top three activities that provide a sense of satisfaction are: 1) spending time with friends: 43%, 2) being loved by family: 40%, and 3) pursuing hobbies and interests: 37%. In turn, the three main reasons for being unhappy in the case of children are: 1) school, learning: 17%, 2) relationships with the loved ones: 16%, and 3) relationships with peers: 15% (Falkowska & Telusiewicz-Pacak, 2019). The list of reasons why children feel unhappy includes neither cataclysms and natural disasters, nor wars. The boundaries of the children's world do not comprise such events, so children do not incorporate them in the scope of their experiences.

This harmony of needs was changed by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The aim of this article is to point out that individual or joint reading

of books on the ongoing war in Ukraine serves an additional function. Such books not only are useful for the Polish young reader as they shape their personality, but they also bring relief to the traumas experienced by Ukrainian children who found themselves in exile, in a new unknown country, among the people who speak a similar, yet still foreign-sounding, language.

Before the war in Ukraine, it was World War II that had been the most exposed and exploited Polish topic related to combat. Due to this, the Second World War has been present on obligatory school reading lists since the end of hostilities in 1945. It can even be said that school curricula in the Polish People's Republic were dominated by this kind of issues.¹ There has also been a frequent discussion on how to use the most traumatic images of war, related to the experience of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, in school education, since these are also the images which appear in the readings discussed in Polish language or history classes (Trojański, 2008).

The period of the 1989 breakthrough verified the ways of creating reality and freed literature from the obligation to take up particular topics. This was naturally reflected in the explosion of motifs that had not existed before and which would concern broadly understood otherness, exclusion, existence on the margins of nations, minorities, genders, subcultures, etc.

The Significance of the Series Called Adult Wars – Children's Stories

Despite focusing on happiness and cheerful topics, the 2017 *Early Childhood Education Curriculum for Grades 1–3 in Primary School* prepared by WSiP [the School

1 In primary school, from the fourth grade onwards, the following books would be discussed: Halina Rudnicka's *The Boys from the Old Town* or Maria Zarębińska's *Children of Warsaw* – the books show the destructive impact of war; Janina Broniewska's *Krystek from Warsaw*, Janusz Przymanowski's *The Mystery of Hill 117* and Wiktor Zawada's *Cacti from Green Street* – these stories use the element of adventure and thus diminish the tragedy of war events. War narratives were also presented in the convention of fairy tales, for example, in Zofia Lorenz's *Little Heroes*, Wojciech Żukrowski's *Kidnapping in Tiutiurlistan*, and Irena Jurgielewiczowa's *A Boy Who Was Looking for a Home*. There were also stories in the form of coverages, like Arkady Fiedler's *Squadron 303* and Melchior Wańkowicz's *Westerplatte* – these texts were documentaries about heroes. The same is true of Aleksander Kamiński's *Stones for the Rampart* [The book was published in English in 1944 under the title of *Stones for the Rampart: The Story of Two Lads in the Polish Underground Movement*]; the film adaptation of the book has become a popular form of telling stories about heroic exploits. In secondary school, the texts used to refer to the wartime reality were the following: *Smoke over Birkenau* by Seweryna Szmaglewska (since 1947), *Medallions* by Zofia Nałkowska (since 1950), *Auschwitz stories* by Tadeusz Borowski (since 1972), poetic texts by Jerzy Ficowski (since 1982), Leopold Buczkowski's *Black Stream* and Janusz Korczak's *Diary* (since 1984), *Shielding the Flame* (translated into English in 1986) by Hanna Krall, and *A World Apart. A Memoir of the Gulag* (first translated into English in 1951) by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (since 1991).

and Pedagogical Publishing House] included Joanna Papuzińska's autobiographical book *Asiunia*. It means that the book, the plot of which is set during World War II, was listed among the literary texts recommended for individual or joint reading in the early stages of primary education. The book belongs to the *Adult Wars – Children's Stories* series which has been published by Wydawnictwo Literatura [Literature Publishing House] under the auspices of the Warsaw Rising Museum. Asiunia is a character who resembles Anne Shirley from *Green Gables* and brave Pippi Langstrumpf from the world created by Astrid Lindgren. Asiunia may impress young readers with her cheerfulness and apparent naturalness in accepting adversities with her head held high. The title character says, for example:

Now it turned out that the war could not only come to the house, but even take it away. There is no home, there is no crib, no pillow or quilt. You have to sleep in someone else's house, where, instead of your mom, there is a strange lady and strange furniture, and you have to drink milk from someone else's cup instead of drinking it from the one you would always use. And, instead of your own pyjamas, they give you some awful, floor-length, stretched shirt to sleep in (Papuzińska, 2017, p. 9).

A little 5-year-old girl bravely accepts all the changes that take place around her: various people, about whom no one is allowed to talk, are hidden in the house; her parents and older brothers engage in dangerous activities that are seemingly overlooked. You have to call your dad, who is hiding away from home, by his first name in order to hide the kinship. When the closest person – your mom – disappears, and she disappears forever, you have to be a brave girl, you must not cry, but adapt to a few new dwelling places where you can neither reveal the pain you feel after your loss, nor your true identity.

While discussing the *Adult Wars – Children's Stories* series, Katarzyna Wądołny-Tatar draws our attention to its indisputable features:

Narratives about World War II for the youngest expose individual experiences of the protagonists according to the principle of peerage, they capture the situations of the child-figure in the constellation of the family, they take care of the emotional safety of the child-recipient, and, without shocking the reader with cruelty, they trigger deep compassion and empathy in the recipient (2017, p. 113).

Today, the series consists of several dozen books, aimed at audiences aged six to nine. The books touch on various themes related to World War II: the Invasion of Poland [known in Poland as the September Campaign], the occupation time, the heroism of the fighters, patriotism, the Holocaust (Extermination, the Shoah), the Warsaw Uprising, the Recovered Territories (among others, East Prussia), exile to Siberia, and the fighting in the West.

Among the authors of the books from the series, there are Michał Rusinek (*The Spell that Starts with "W"*), Paweł Beręsewicz (*Is War for Girls?*), Renata Piątkowska (*All My Mothers, Children Who Are Not There*), Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala (*Jutka's Insomnia, Siberian Adventures of the Cloud*), Joanna Papuzińska-Beksiak (*Asiunia, My Lucky Dad, Spared Lines*), Katarzyna Ryrych, (*Mr. Apoteker, Little War*), Kazimierz Szymeczko (*The Dove of Non-Peace*) or Andrzej Perepeczko (*Jędrus. A Boy from Lviv*).

After reading these books, one gets an impression that the writers have found a way to make children want to learn about war. By this I mean the use of autobiographical memoirs or the inclusion of fragments of biographies of people who survived the turmoil of war as children. This time, these are children who tell their adventures to the youngest readers. At the beginning of each story, they present the world around them without fully understanding what is actually going on. On the one hand, the child-characters grow up faster due to the changes brought about by the war (the disappearance of loved ones, a quick relocation, the departure from their hometown, etc.). However, at the threshold of calamity, when they are yet unable to imagine it and know neither the extent nor the nature of the approaching changes, they resemble any child of any time.

Aleksandra Sikora sees the success of the *Adult Wars – Children's Stories* series in the way the stories are narrated. Typically, there is a child protagonist who quite frequently turns out to be the narrator, and the language of the characters is very vivid and lively as, according to some of the authors, it is to reflect the child's speech. Yet, in Sikora's opinion, the weakness of war stories lies in the protagonist's lack of awareness of the events taking place – the child does not always understand what is happening (Sikora, 2014, 25–44). However, it should be noted that, in order to protect a child from the trauma of war, one should not explain to a child the mechanisms of evil, which it is incapable of understanding. Two examples can illustrate this point. The first is Roberto Benigni's famous film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), in which Guido, imprisoned in a concentration camp together with his son, constantly tells the boy that the cruel reality is only a form of fun for adults. The second is a book by Agata Tuszyńska and Iwona Chmielewska entitled *Mom Always Comes Back* (2020). It contains an authentic story of Zosia Zajczyk whose mother kept her, when she was a little girl, in a basement, thus isolating her from the atrocities of war. Thanks to that the girl did not experience war traumas.

Books for Children on the War in Ukraine

In recent years, within the already mentioned series: *Adult Wars – Children's Stories*, three books reporting on the events of the ongoing war in Ukraine have been

published. These books also function as a way of making children familiar with a situation which, for them, is new and entirely unrecognisable. Two of the books: *Now Here Is Our Home* and *The Power of Amelka*, were written by Barbara Gawryluk, while the third one: *How Mr. Giraffe Was Fleeing from War*, was written by Rafał Witek.

Picture 1. The Covers of the Books for Children on the War in Ukraine Issued in the Series “Wojny Dorosłych – Historie Dzieci” [“Adult Wars – Children’s Stories”]: Barbara Gawryluk, *Moc Amelki* [*The Power of Amelka*] (2022a); Barbara Gawryluk, *Teraz tu jest nasz dom* [*Now Here is Our Home*] (2022b); Rafał Witek, *Jak Pan Żyrafa uciekał przed wojną* [*How Mr. Giraffe Was Fleeing from War*] (2023)



The war in Ukraine has become some kind of a new, generational experience, covering all age groups, including the youngest. The course of war is particularly dramatic for children in Ukraine. They became direct witnesses and participants of this circumstance. According to the UNICEF data as of March 31, 2022, “Two million children from Ukraine have crossed borders with neighbouring countries in search of safety. In addition, 2.5 million of them have been internally displaced. A total of 60% of Ukrainian children had to leave their homes” (UNICEF, 2022b). They were not only victims of the armed attack (the deaths of 117 children were reported in March 2022), but also the victims of rape and eyewitnesses of the violence and bestiality of the invaders. Moreover, at some point, a problem of wartime orphanhood appeared. According to UNICEF:

Between 24 February and 17 March, more than 500 unaccompanied children, who crossed the border of Ukraine and ended up in Romania, were identified. The actual number of unaccompanied children who have fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries is probably much higher. These children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation (UNICEF, 2022a).

These examples of data already outline main problems accompanying the cataclysm of war that involves millions of people, and nearly half of them are children. According to the Border Guard data provided on the “Ukrainian in Poland” website, from February 24, 2022 to May 21, 2023, 12 million refugees from Ukraine, mainly women and children, crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border (Turaieva, 2023). In turn, the Lalafo platform², which was created to help Ukrainian refugees in Poland get the most basic things to live, reports that about a half of the Ukrainians who have come to Poland because of the war are of working age. More than 96% are women in the age range of 30–50; 16% are under this age; and 10% are older. Of the respondents to the Lalafo survey, almost 90% have children, one or two in most cases.

Representatives of social sciences and humanities almost immediately made statements that pointed to the issues implied by the events of the war. As Elwira Kryńska wrote:

War is not only about destroyed cities and destroyed infrastructure. It is also about destroyed human lives, which means that the effects of the Russian aggression against Ukraine also have a psychological dimension. Long-term suffering experienced by the Ukrainian population, including children, is detrimental to health and life, and causes trauma which often leads to profound changes in human functioning. Such an injury may result in persistent difficulties in returning to previous functioning; difficulties that sometimes form a set of symptoms called post-traumatic stress disorder (2022, p. 63).

The aforementioned author, in one of the first diagnoses on this subject formed under a telling title, i.e. *We Don't Want to Die – Children Say*, points out that

[...] the stress response includes symptoms typical of anxiety, such as: difficulty in breathing in, incomplete breathing, stinging sensation, aches and pains, a feeling of increased heartbeat, abdominal pain, dizziness, diarrhoea. There may also be symptoms which are specific to an acute reaction to stress, such as fainting, a sense of unreality, fear of losing control, “going crazy”, a sense of numbness. The latter, especially in children, can lead to withdrawal from the expected social interaction (a condition that, in its extreme form, can be seen as immobility and lack of contact of the person with the environment), disorientation, anger, despair, etc. A common consequence of an acute

2 The Lalafo.pl service is a charity initiative aimed at helping Ukrainian refugees in Poland get the most necessary things to live. Unlike other advertising websites, the Polish Lalafo website offers goods for free. A team of volunteers collects, sorts, photographs, and describes things, then places them on a specially designed virtual platform. The website, created as an electronic free market, allows people in need to search for and select the goods they need, regardless of their location in Poland. To make it easier, the offers provided on the website are divided into some categories: personal belongings; the child's world; home and garden; sports and hobbies. In these categories, you can find clothes, shoes, groceries, goods for children, furniture, household items, electronics, and even products for pets (Turaieva, 2022).

stress reaction are memory gaps which manifest themselves in forgetting specific events or their fragments (despite the lack of brain injuries), tormenting, recurrent memories, avoidance of conversations and everything that may be associated with the injury. Hence, people who have experienced acute stress disorder require professional medical and psychological help; they need time, because the trauma of being a war victim can last for years (Kryńska, 2022, p. 63).

It should certainly be added that, at the time of the crisis, free psychological support has been provided by a number of organizations³. However, although psychological help is available, the people who should receive it do not always realise they need it.

Bibliotherapeutic Function of Children's Books About the War in Ukraine

Maria Molicka, the author of many publications on the influence of literature on the development of a young person, points out that it is the immaturity of the phylogenetically programmed nervous system which causes that “at a certain time, anxiety appears in a child, just like the raising of a head or sitting down [occurs] in infancy” (2002, p. 10). The anxiety can be soothed by bibliotherapy, that is the use of fiction for therapeutic purposes:

[...] in situations of experiencing stress, after traumatic events or in mood or personality disorders. [...] In the deliberations on the role of literature, it is the therapeutic function of literature that is mainly emphasized, although its importance in the creation of “I” is not forgotten, and neither is its influence on the psychological development of a child (Molicka, 2011, p. 132).

The impact of “word therapy” has been repeatedly praised by researchers and academics who would point to indisputable benefits stemming from the therapy via fables, poetry or a dramatic text that can be heard in the theatre. The earliest works related to the said topic are the ones of American researcher Caroline Shrodes (1949).

3 These are: the Red Cross Helping Hand platform; the ZUSTRICZ Foundation in Kraków; the Terappo online platform which belongs to the Health and Psychotherapy Centre; the Polish Migration Forum Foundation, the eKropka Foundation; the Foundation for the Development of Ukraine; the Children's Helpline of the Ombudsman for Children; Psychological help from the Foundation for Social and Economic Development; Psychological assistance from the BeeHuman organization; the Polish Migration Forum; the Polish Psychoanalytical Society; the “Faces of Depression” Foundation; the Psychological Help Centre in Wrocław; Psychotherapy Centre “Bridges Instead of Walls” in Gdańsk; Foundation for Psychological Assistance and Social Education “RAZEM”; Psychological Centre “Kompas” in Radom; Centre for Psychotherapy “HELP”; Centre for Women's Rights; ART Foundation; the “Nagle Sami” Foundation (Sharapova, 2023).

When it comes to Poland, the principles of bibliotherapy were formulated by Irena Borecka (1991) and Maria Molicka (Molicka, 1997, 2002, 2011). As for the latest publication in this field, comprehensive insight into bibliotherapy is provided by *Podstawy współczesnej biblioterapii [Principles of Contemporary Bibliotherapy]*, a handbook published in 2017 (Czernianin et al., 2017). But new compendia of knowledge on this subject are constantly being created. They include detailed descriptions of bibliotherapy as well as practical ways of using the knowledge about it. Alongside such publications, various campaigns are being initiated to popularize reading and to emphasize its undeniable value. There are various forms through which bibliotherapy can be carried out. The youngest ones benefit from fairy-tale therapy and fable therapy. Fairy-tale therapy, aiming at eliminating children's fears, makes use of three types of fairy tales, i.e. therapeutic, psychoeducational and psychotherapeutic ones. In order to achieve the most beneficial effects of fairy-tale therapy, specially created stories are applied to face a specific situation that caused anxiety, phobia or trauma. The Polish book market offers children both translations of foreign-language fairy tales (Brett, 2003, 2005) and fairy tales by Polish authors who are often educators and therapists (Ortner, 1995, 1996; Molicka, 1999, 2003; Szaga, 2014). When it comes to fable therapy, it makes use of elaborate plots and utilizes the already existing works, especially the ones by Hans Christian Andersen. In fable therapy, the young recipient, while listening to a complex story, subconsciously becomes familiar with a problem that is similar to their own one, identifies with it, undergoes catharsis and then, he/she is ready to overcome their own problem.

However, in the process of therapy, it is possible to use ready-made models of literary texts belonging to various genres of children's literature, because, as Anna Bautsz-Sontag writes:

The use of literature to design activities supporting the development of children and the youth seems to be the right direction for pedagogical and therapeutic activities. Both children and adolescents grow up with books. Fairy tales, fables, short stories and novels, as well as poetry, accompany children in their journey towards adulthood (2013, p. 11).

The researcher has developed a collection of workshops based on well-known texts of children's literature. The workshops show the therapeutic procedures step-by-step (Bautsz-Sontag, 2015). The use of literature in the development of a child's knowledge about the world, in shaping their sensitivity and aesthetic development, is also discussed by Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb (1999, 2007, 2009, 2011).

Literature addressed to children can, therefore, become a psychological support for the children affected by various traumatic experiences related to war. Such a function is fulfilled by the aforementioned series *Adult Wars – Children's Stories*, and the

three books that belong to it. The books can be used in school practice to soothe fears caused by the cataclysm of the modern war in Ukraine. Barbara Gawryluk, the author of the two of them, i.e. *Now Here Is Our Home* and *The Power of Amelka*, is a writer, a journalist and a winner of numerous awards, and her publications are bibliotherapeutic in nature⁴:

The world depicted in the books by Gawryluk is situated in the present day reality, in spaces that are well known to a young person: a house, a school, a park, a beach. The plot concerns universal issues important to a young person, such as: friendship, falling in love for the first time, family relationships (divorce of parents), death of a loved one, moving home, etc. Her books provide support to young readers, help them cope with difficult situations, and act as a catalyst for the change in attitudes or behaviour (Kotaba, 2021, p. 5).

In these works, Gawryluk tries to alleviate, above all, the deep fears of Ukrainian children, that were born of the war. One of the most tangible fears is the unexpected disaster itself and the resulting loss of home, of the loved ones, of a place previously considered safe. The following stage is the problem of assimilation in a new place which is foreign linguistically, culturally and religiously. Being marked with the stigma of the Other, the Stranger, and the difficulty of convincing the new environment to oneself is the next phase, the end of which will probably never come. However, even when you manage to get used to the new environment, you still feel nostalgic about the home, family, friends, school, as well as the idealized daily life that used to be the norm.

The book *Here Is Our Home* was created in 2014, after Russia's first invasion of Donetsk in Ukraine. It tells the story of a family that managed to escape the war. The main problem for the family is to adapt to a new situation and to find the "home" mentioned in the title. The adaptation to new circumstances has become an extremely difficult experience for the children. Polish peers do not immediately accept the siblings in their group. This situation is the hardest for the youngest child who is eventually helped by his older brother in reconciliation with his peers. Despite their young age, the children experience loneliness which results from the absence of their compatriots and extended family. What they also left behind in Ukraine were their friends, their favourite pastime activities and forms of play. They lack contact with their mother tongue and the freedom of acting. In Polish schools they feel as if

4 The book *In the Green Valley* was nominated for the Kornel Makuszyński Literary Award, and in 2012 another book *Dżok. The Legend of the Dog's Fidelity* received a distinction from the Jury of the Polish Section of IBBY as well as the title of the Most Important Book of the tenth anniversary of the "All of Poland Reads to Children" social campaign organized by the ABCXXI Foundation. Moreover, in 2010, *Zuzanka From the Pistachio House* won the Kornel Makuszyński Literary Award.

they were under observation and marked with the stigma of otherness. They slowly learn to live in difficult conditions, to overcome the difficulties related to everyday life. They also gradually learn Polish and establish new contacts, familiarize themselves with an unknown culture and the customs different from their own. However, they still retain the memory of what they have lost. The story has a happy ending, giving hope for the formation of proper peer relationships.

The second story, *The Power of Amelka*, is based on true events that became known all over the world. The title Amelka, a little girl with a beautiful voice, captivated millions of social media viewers around the world by singing a well-known song from the Disney film *Frozen* entitled “Let it go” in the Kyiv underground, which was used as a shelter during the Russian air raids. Together with her grandmother, Amelka was sent to Poland where she took part in a concert supporting the people of Ukraine. Her touching performance helped Amelka adapt to the unfamiliar environment, as everyone was incredibly kind to her. However, this situation neither eliminated her sense of danger due to the dramatic events taking place in her homeland nor diminished her ongoing longing for her loved ones and the fear for their safety. The circumstances were changed by the grandmother’s illness as it forced the arrival of Amelka’s beloved mother. The story of a little girl, known all over the world, is an example of childhood heroism, not giving in to adversity, but facing it. Amelka has become a paragon of endurance in a foreign, albeit friendly, land, and a symbol of faith that one must keep as long as the war rages in one’s homeland.

The third story, *How Mr. Giraffe Was Fleeing from War* by Rafał Witek, was written as part of the Polish development cooperation program implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland in 2018, and was first published in the form of a *kamishibai* storytelling theatre available under a Creative Commons license. The author did not think that the story would become so relevant a few years later. Mr. Giraffe mentioned in the title of the book is Tatiana’s mascot with whom she had to part while fleeing from Ukraine. The girl’s fate is a typical example of the ordeal of refugees who take up an uncertain nomadic life in order to possibly avoid the inevitable death. The story shows the successive stages of making the decision to leave the homeland, as well as being condemned to isolation in a foreign place because of otherness. The book ends with the girl’s pondering about the future:

She looks forward to tomorrow. She wonders what tomorrow will be like in a foreign country. Will there be any people in this tomorrow? Will they turn out to be nice? Will there be girls her age; friends? And will there be a house similar to her old one, the one that was destroyed even though Dad and Mr. Giraffe were guarding it? Will she ever have her own room again? Will ...? Will ...? Will ...? (Witek, 2023, p. 37)

All the three books evoke empathy for the participants of these events, contemporary refugees, and enhance understanding for their situation. Empathy can be aroused by finding affinities and similarities between the experiences of young readers and the characters presented in the books. That is why the authors concentrate on presenting those emotions of the children from Ukraine which are known to all children, including those who have not experienced war. The authors talk in detail about unsettling situations which are connected with being knocked out of a safe space, thus showing the fear of an unknown place, darkness, of being away from parents; about looking for safe places: corners, cellars, shelters; seeking friends, colleagues, peers with whom you can play in order to forget what was bad and be happy.

Other Examples of Children's Books About Modern Ukraine

In 2022, three publications related to the changes in the territory of Ukraine were created by Ukrainian authors. These were Olena Kharchenko and Michael Sampson's *Little Book about Great Ukraine* [English title: *The Story of Ukraine. An Anthem of Glory and Freedom*], Olena Mikhailova-Rodina and Lyudmila Nikorycz's *Ukraine*, and *Owva! Ukraine for the Inquisitive* by Zhanna Slovovskaya.

Picture 2. The Covers of Books by Ukrainian Authors. The Books Were Written After the Outbreak of the War in Ukraine: Olena Charczenko, Michael Sampson, *Mała książka o wielkiej Ukrainie. Z tekstem hymnu narodowego*/Розповідь про Україну. Гімн слави та свободи [Rozповід' pro Ukraïnu. Gimnslavitasvobodi], (2022); Olena Michajłowa-Rodina, Ludmiła Nikorycz, *Ukraina* (2022); Żanna Słoniowska, *Owwa! Ukraina dla dociekliwych* (2022)



Their authors do not look for original literary ways to present the new situation of their youngest compatriots. Despite the outbreak of the conflict, the first two publications do not take up the subject of war. Rather, they serve as a form of patriotic

agitation. *Little Book about Great Ukraine*, a bilingual publication, originally issued in English and Ukrainian, presents basic information about Ukraine to preschool children. The greater part of the book is devoted to the national anthem. Each verse of the anthem is accompanied by some commentary and explanation. The book does not contain any information about the war in Ukraine, neither the one from 2014 nor the one from 2022. In a similar manner, the subject of war does not exist in another book for slightly older children, that is for six-year-olds. In the Introduction we can read that “This book shows Ukraine as we had known it until recently. A lot has changed since the Russian invasion and the reality is different now. However, we hope that, in the future, it will be again the way it is presented on these pages”.

On the other hand, Zhanna Słoniewska’s book is addressed to an older, but still young, reader. The publication is in a form of a guidebook and provides detailed information about Ukraine as well as about the unleashed war conflict. The book explains many issues related to living in the new, Polish, reality. Subsequent chapters deal with the following: the problem of communication in a foreign land (“Do you howorysz ukrajińskoju?”), the golden Scythian pectoral (“The Universe on the Neck”), religious diversity and multiculturalism (“Golden Domes”, “The Tzaddik of Podole is singing and dancing”), the description of the figure of the opera singer Solomiya Krushelnytskaya. In addition, there are issues that are neither easy nor obvious to children, such as the Chernobyl power plant accident (“Chernobyl”) or the Holodomor (“Chernozem and the Great Famine”), but also the perseverance of Ukrainians (“Revolution of Dignity”).

Conclusions

Summing up the deliberations on books addressed to the youngest readers on the subject of war, it should be stated that the way the events are arranged, the creation of characters, the presentation of places and symbolic objects, as well as adapting all these elements to the early school recipient, are the most important in spreading the knowledge about war. The plot of these stories should not serve educational purposes when it comes to presenting factual knowledge about the ongoing war as well as about the country in which it is taking place, as was the case with the publications of Ukrainian authors. On the one hand, the obligation to fulfil a patriotic duty by talking about the homeland when its sovereignty is threatened is quite understandable. On the other hand, young recipients do not expect schematic narratives about their homeland, but stories which reflect their own experiences and their own fate. In this way, children’s literature can fulfil its most important functions of today, that is ludic, therapeutic and entertaining ones.

Examples of stories about the effects of the war in Ukraine from the series issued by Wydawnictwo Literatura also touch upon the subject of contemporary refugees. As Anna Józefowicz rightly suggests, books about such experiences make young readers sensitive to the tragedy of refugees. In her study: *What can you learn from children's literature that presents a childhood marked by the refugee experience?*, Józefowicz sums up her considerations as follows:

The experience of being a refugee, being a stranger, shown in the book from the point of view of a child who does not see his or her otherness, who constantly wonders what it is about him/her that bothers people – can be an introduction to a dialogue about stereotypes, about our often unfounded fears (2019, p. 122).

Children's literature related to the war in Ukraine can become an important element in shaping attitudes towards other people, as it enriches the young reader with the ability to build relationships based on friendship and camaraderie. It shows what coexistence in Europe is all about. It teaches tolerance for different cultures and broadly understood otherness. It awakens the sense of empathy and compassion, willingness to help and to be kind towards other people. It illustrates what it means to do good deeds. It introduces serious topics, reflections on the threats posed to man by all kinds of cataclysms: from natural disasters such as floods, to wars resulting from the foreign policy of countries.

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