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## The Memory of the Great War in two books for children – Polish and English perspectives

The centenary of World War I was an opportunity to recall this traumatic global disaster and to transmit the memory of this event to children. In 2014, *The Guardian* listed fifteen books about the Great War for children and teenagers.<sup>1</sup> Several readers have added their proposals to the list, which is still open to comments and additions. Tony Bradman, a contemporary English writer born in 1954, published his choice of the ten best children's books about the First World War. In his article, he recalls his family history:

The First World War has cast a very long shadow over the last century. My parents were of the generation that lived through the Second World War, but I grew up listening to my mother recounting her dad's tales about his terrible experiences during the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 and later on the Western Front. I never met my grandfather – he died in 1946 – but I always felt a strong personal connection to him because of those stories. That's probably why I developed an early interest in the history and literature of the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

For the English, the Great War constitutes an event that is truly worth commemorating and remembering, but based on the book market, the Poles are not as prolific in their literature about the event. This is particularly puzzling when we recall that

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<sup>1</sup> *What are the best first world war books for children?*, <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/jun/30/best-first-world-war-ww1-books-for-children-and-teens> [access: 4.04.2023].

<sup>2</sup> T. Bradman, *Tony Bradman's 10 top books about the first world war*, <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/jul/03/top-ten-childrens-books-first-world-war> [access: 4.04.2023]. The author writes about the difficulties in choosing only a few books: "Choosing a top 10 has been a challenge – there are so many great books for children and young people about the first world war."

the war was also part of the Polish struggle for independence. As a result of the war, Poland appeared again as an independent state on the map of Europe after 123 years of partitions. Despite this fact, there are no Polish contemporary novels for young readers that deal with the subject.<sup>3</sup> Although there is a very popular series that is now lauded by scholars called *Wojny dorosłych – historie dzieci* [Adults' wars – children's stories], it deals mainly with the experience of World War II. (It covers some of the war in Ukraine as well.) WWII is treated as the model of children's war traumas; these stories teach the youngest readers about the cruelties of wartime. They serve as a warning against totalitarian systems and evil connected with all military conflicts. Contemporary Polish writers rarely go back to the history of the Great War in children's literature. The only novel about it, still available in Polish bookshops, is *Bohaterski miś, czyli przygody pluszowego niedźwiadka na wojnie* [*The Heroic Bear, or The Adventures of a Teddy Bear in the War*] with the subtitle: "for children from 10 to 100 years old, written down by Bronisława Ostrowska," published in 1919.<sup>4</sup>

In my research, I want to compare two national perspectives that present this historical event. At first, I assumed it would be possible to choose from among many contemporary books, both English and Polish, yet my assumption was wrong. I could choose from several English novels, but – as I mentioned above – there was no choice in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Polish children's literature. Books about the events from 1914–1918 were written during the interwar period,<sup>5</sup> but they were banned during the communist regime for political reasons. Now, they are only remembered by literary scholars, with one exception: the above-mentioned Ostrowska's book. Thus, I will compare her *Bohaterski miś* and the celebrated English book, *Five Children on the Western Front*, written by Kate Saunders and published in 2014 as a sequel to *Five Children and It* by Edith Nesbit. This choice presented another research opportunity to compare the memorial and post-memorial perspectives of describing the same historical period.

I have explained why Ostrowska's book became one of my primary sources. The motives underlying the choice of the English novel are more complex. First of all,

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<sup>3</sup> There are only a few educational books, mostly biographies of Józef Piłsudski who became a symbol of Polish fights for independence during World War I, eg. A. Czerwińska-Rydel, *Ziuk. Opowieść o Józefie Piłsudskim*, Łódź 2018; M. Strękowska-Zaremba, *Polscy superbohaterowie. Marszałek Józef Piłsudski*, Warszawa 2017; W. Wiślak, *Komendant wolnej Polski*, Warszawa 2018.

<sup>4</sup> There are a few contemporary editions of the book issued by different publishing houses: Polwen, 2004; Zysk i S-ka, 2011; reprint from 2012 (Volumina.pl); audiobook, Promatek 2013; audiobook, Polskie Radio Rzeszów S.A., 2017. It is worth noting that in 1951, the book was banned in Poland and withdrawn from libraries; that is why it could be published again only after the political changes in 1989 (The phenomenon of banned books and their comeback is discussed in M. Nadolna, *Powrót książek zakazanych dla młodego odbiorcy po transformacji ustrojowej w latach dziewięćdziesiątych*, [in:] *Literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży (po roku 1980)*, vol. 2, ed. K. Heska-Kwaśniewicz, Katowice 2009, pp. 109–118. The author mentions also about the 1984 edition of Ostrowska's book in an underground press).

<sup>5</sup> Some of them were mentioned in Z. Biątek, *Literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży w latach 1918–1939. Zarys monograficzny. Materiały*, Warszawa 1979. The interwar books about the World War I for young readers are also discussed in a monograph by M. Graban-Pomirska, *Szkoła narzeczonych. O powieści dla dziewcząt w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, Gdańsk 2008.

I wanted to choose a book that is in some way similar to the Polish one; in both books, one of the main characters comes from a fantastic world, accompanying children who are presented realistically in a real, historically defined world. The setting of both novels is similar; even a few of the same places are described. Besides the fictitious characters, historical figures appear in both. The word “remember” stands out as one of the keywords in both books. Secondly, Ostrowska’s novel is already a Polish classic for children and was highly valued from the very beginning. On the other hand, Saunders’ novel was created as a sequel to the famous Nesbit trilogy, the classic English children’s series published from 1902–1906, and has already been recognised by critics.<sup>6</sup>

My main research questions are: What is similar, and what are the contrasts between these two children’s novels about the Great War? What are the images of the war from the Polish and English point of view? What are the aims and means of transmitting memory? What did the writers want to “save” for new generations? Are there any common “places of memory,” and how are they described?

The methodological background of the paper is memory and postmemory studies, which have become crucial in contemporary literary research, specifically children’s literature.<sup>7</sup> Elżbieta Rybicka defines memory in literature as:

[...] both a motivation and a building block of the presented reality’s architecture (in other words, a literary concept) as well as an existential category conditioning individual identity and being-in-the-world (a concept from an anthropological dictionary). Finally, it is a medium of the past and a receptacle of collective memory (from a socio-cultural perspective).<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Marianne Hirsch coined the term “postmemory,” defining it as follows:

[...] postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its objects or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It was the winner of Costa Children’s Book Award 2014, shortlisted Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize 2015, nominated CILIP Carnegie Medal 2016.

<sup>7</sup> One of the recent works with rich bibliography is A. Kuchta, *Wobec postpamięci* [Towards postmemory], Kraków 2020. It contains, among the others, two chapters: *Postpamięć – definicja i historia* [Postmemory – definition and history], pp. 15–22; *Postpamięć w badaniach polskich* [Postmemory in Polish research], pp. 38–48. Postmemorial narratives in Polish children’s literature are presented, among the others, in M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust: Practices of Postmemory in Recent Polish Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Peter Lang Verlag 2020. The whole issue of the journal “Filoteknos” is also devoted to the problem of memory and postmemory in children’s and YA literature: “Filoteknos” 2021, vol. 11: *Figures of Memory: Reading – Experiences – Emotions*, eds. M. Świątlicki, M. García-González, D. Michułka.

<sup>8</sup> E. Rybicka, *Place, Memory, Literature (from the perspective of geopoetics)*, “Teksty Drugie” 2012, no. 2, p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> M. Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA – London 2012, p. 22.

She adds that she has “developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but [...] it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences.”<sup>10</sup>

Both terms can apply to children’s stories about historical events. These stories can be seen as “a medium of the past,” and they create a “collective memory” for the generations that cannot remember the described events. I would add to Hirsch’s definition that not only are postmemory narratives “mediated [...] through an imaginative invention and creation,” but they are also based on recollection and personal memories. Ostrowska’s book will serve as proof of this claim.

In a journal issue devoted to the figures of memory in children’s and YA literature, the editors of “Filoteknos” claim, “Unquestionably, memory – frequently associated with traumatic historical events – has become a significant theme in global children’s and young adult literature and children’s literature studies” and provide quotes from numerous papers and books that deal with this subject.<sup>11</sup> The goal of my article is to contribute to the rich studies already published by adding a comparative perspective on the Great War – one of the historical events not often analysed by current literary scholars, especially those in Poland.

### **Autobiographical memory and postmemory – the importance of storytelling, senses, and emotions**

Memory in the two chosen books is one of the primary motifs, and it appears in many forms and on many levels. The most basic difference, as mentioned above, is the time of creation: Bronisława Ostrowska wrote her story just after the events she described, and her novel appeared in 1919. Kate Saunders was born in 1960, forty-two years after the end of the war, which means that even her parents would not have experienced the event.

Some biographical facts are important to understanding the novels as they both, in different ways, are rooted in their authors’ experiences. Bronisława Ostrowska (1881–1928) was an eminent Polish poet, translator, and children’s writer. When the war broke out, she was a 33-year-old married woman of cultural and literary importance in Poland. Her first volume of poetry appeared in 1902.<sup>12</sup> In 1914, she was sent with her family to Charkov, a distant place in Russia (now Ukraine), and spent the whole wartime there. In exile,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> D. Michułka, M. Świetlicki, M. García-González, *Theory and Practice of Memory in Culture of the Present from the Perspective of Research on Literature for Young Readers*, “Filoteknos” 2021, vol. 11, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> The biographical information about Bronisława Ostrowska may be found in A. Wydrycka, *Poetka “wielkiej jedności,”* [in:] B. Ostrowska, *Poezje wybrane*, ed. A. Wydrycka, Kraków 1999, pp. 5–39; eadem, “Drogi promienia.” *O biografii i opowiadaniach wspomnieniowych Bronisławy Ostrowskiej* [“Trajectories of the ray” *Some remarks on Bronisława Ostrowska’s biography and recollection short-stories*], “Wiek XIX. Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. A. Mickiewicza” 2009, pp. 106–127.

[...] the poet took an active part in the works of Polskie Towarzystwo Pomocy Ofiarom Wojny [Polish foundation for the war victims' help]; she gave lectures on Polish literature in the coeducational Polish Gymnasium, watched over the developing scout movement, and organised the amateur theatre performances. Besides her social activities, Ostrowska was also active as an artist: she wrote occasional verses where she combined patriotic issues with social problems.<sup>13</sup>

She knew exactly what it meant to be forced to fight in foreign armies. While she was writing about it in *Bohaterski miś*, her brother, Stefan, was a "Russian" soldier (incorporated into the tsarist army), and her husband's brother, Witold, fought on the Austrian side. This was not an exceptional situation for Polish families whose family members often lived in different countries under the partitions, and relatives had to fight one another.

After coming back to Warsaw in December 1918, Ostrowska became seriously ill. As Barbara Olech writes, it turned out to be a "limit experience" for the poet. During her recovery process, she was writing a novel for children "between the age[s] of 10 and 100." Her war "travels," experiences, and thoughts became an inspiration for *Bohaterski miś*, which may be treated as a kind of travel book or a book of the road, as the main character travels all over Europe. In many sentences, the reader can "hear" the voice of the author herself, although it is hidden in the narration of the teddy bear.

*Bohaterski miś* was only "written down" by Ostrowska, as she emphasised in the subtitle, because the narrator was actually a little toy – a very special teddy bear called Niedźwiedzki. This Polish surname was given to him by his first child owner, seven-year-old Hala Niedźwiedzka. Her twelve-year-old brother, Staś, a scout, made a nice collar for his sister's toy. She wanted him also to write on the collar: "Miś Niedźwiedzki, Lwów, address and year 1910." The boy noticed that it was the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Grunwald (1410 – the great Polish-Lithanian victory over the Teutonic Knights; this event became a powerful symbol of the greatness of Poland, the source of national pride and hope). Hala treated her teddy bear as her son and decided to teach him Polish history. Thus, from the very beginning, the titular character and the narrator became a Polish patriot, so during the war, he could see and comment on everything from a Polish perspective.

When the war broke out, the teddy bear's family had to escape from Lwów, and they left him in their flat. At first, a Russian officer moved into it, and when he, in turn, had to leave, he took the teddy bear with him. From that time, Miś changed hands several times, sometimes quite rapidly. He was in a Polish soldiers' camp; he also accompanied the Germans and the French. He even found himself in Paris once, and he was flying with the German and Polish pilots. Thanks to the teddy bear's "travels," the description of many places during the war was possible. Barbara Olech claims *Bohaterski Miś* is a "modern fairy tale" with a "philosophical overtone." She explains, "The structure of (a skilful combination of an action novel and travel literature) made

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<sup>13</sup> B. Olech, *Harmonia, liryzm, twóga. Studia o twórczości Bronisławy Ostrowskiej*, Białystok 2012, pp. 16–17; transl. – K.Z.

it possible to give the readers some detailed information about warfare 1914–1918. It also enabled the author to convey the atmosphere of those years.”<sup>14</sup>

The facts and the atmosphere were remembered by the author, so the book can be treated as a narrative based on her own memories. Kate Saunders, on the other hand, presents a clear model of postmemorial narrative as the memories in her novel were transmitted to her by her grandmother and other people in her grandmother’s generation. She writes about it in the “Afterword from the Author”:

The sixtieth anniversary of the First World War fell in 1974 when I was fourteen [...], and you couldn’t turn on the television or open a newspaper without being bombarded with images of this terrible international tragedy. All old people remembered the First World War in those days, and they talked about it to their children and grandchildren because **it was so important Never to Forget**.

My grandmother (born in 1897) told wonderful stories about being a teenager during the war – often funny [...], but mostly very sad, about the boys she knew were disappearing one by one. I remember going to see her while she was in a nursing home, and she was sharing a room with an ancient lady named Miss Ball. Granny told me that Miss Ball had been a nurse in Gallipoli and that she still cried to remember the sick and wounded men she’d been forced to leave behind when they were evacuated. She wanted me to shake Miss Ball’s frail hand, so that **I wouldn’t forget** meeting her, and of course I never have – it was an honour.<sup>15</sup>

The imperative “Never to Forget” became one of the motives for writing the novel, just as it was for the Polish writer who had experienced the war herself. What is interesting is that both women repeat the essentiality of storytelling in the process of remembering in their books (information and stories in media, like the press, radio, and TV, literary works, and personal conversations). They both emphasise how important it is to be able not only to get to know but to **feel** and **experience** with one’s own senses. Saunders recalls the unforgettable touch of an old woman’s hand. Ostrowska repeats a few times in her story: “I saw” (these are the words of a teddy bear narrator, but undoubtedly, we can treat them as the author’s own voice). Emotions and sensual cognition are crucial for both writers. In Saunder’s book, there is also a moving scene when the siblings’ suffering arises from the impossibility of touching the beloved person. The younger children are taken to the front, where they can see their elder brother, and they want to hug him, but it appears to be impossible:

Eddie gave a scream of joy and ran to hug him – but her arms went right through him, and he went on eating as if nothing happened.

<sup>14</sup> B. Olech, *Dziecięce odkrywanie świata wojny. “Bohaterski miś” Bronisławy Ostrowskiej i “Dzieci Lwowa” Heleny Zakrzewskiej*, [in:] *Pierwsza wojna światowa w literaturze polskiej i obcej. Wybrane zagadnienia*, eds. E. Łoch, K. Stępnik, Lublin 1999, pp. 221, 224; transl. – K.Z.

<sup>15</sup> K. Saunders, *Five Children on the Western Front*, London 2014, pp. 322–323; emphases – K.Z. All quotations from the novel come from this edition and they will be marked in the text by the letter S and the page number in parentheses.

“It’s horrible that he can’t feel us!” Eddie’s tears were welling up again [...]. (S 110)  
 “I don’t care if he can’t feel me,” Eddie said. “I’m going to hug him anyway.” She put her arms around him as best she could and kissed the air near his face. (S 113)

The scene is heartbreaking because it reminds us of all those people we will never be able to embrace. It is the English author’s own experience, too: she lost her son and writes about it at the end of her afterword (“In 2012, my darling son Felix died when he was just nineteen, and it’s the worst sorrow there is” [S 324]). In a way, it was not only her grandmother’s memories that Saunders had written down but also her own; she identifies with “all the sad mothers and fathers” of the young people who were killed during the war. As Amanda Craig wrote in *Kate Saunders Obituary*, the writer’s “many achievements emerged despite a life of suffering and loss.”<sup>16</sup> And this difficult experience is also visible in the analysed novel, which she called “the book of my life.”<sup>17</sup>

It is worth repeating that *Five Children on the Western Front* was conceived as a sequel to Nesbit’s trilogy.<sup>18</sup> Saunders admitted her literary inspiration:

Bookish nerd that I was, it didn’t take me long to work out that two of E. Nesbit’s fictional boys were of exactly the right ages to end up being killed in the trenches – and it was like turning round a telescope to look through the other end. Nesbit was writing at the start of the twentieth century, and her vision of the distant future, as described in *The Story of the Amulet*, was a rather boring socialist utopia. But the chapter of *The Amulet* that most haunted me was the one I have adapted for the prologue of this book, in which the children visit the Professor in the near future – their own future. He knew and I knew, as Nesbit and her children could not, what the future might contain. (S 323–324)

The prologue mentioned above is a perfect introduction, though it also could be seen as a spoiler: the children who visit the Professor in 1930 saw their pictures in his room. But there were only photos of grown-up women (Anthea and Jane), not men (Cyril and Robert). The reader may think that both of them were killed during the war (actually, it was only one of them). The last sentence of the prologue is touching and introduces the atmosphere of the whole novel: “Far away in 1930, in his empty room, the old professor was crying” (S 9).

The choice of Nesbit’s trilogy was fortunate, also, because of two characteristics that help to make the difficult war theme easier to digest for young readers: magic and humour. The Saunders’ sequel, like the classic novel (and Ostrowska’s book, as well), “contain[s] single fairy story motifs appearing in mimetic contexts and functioning as fantastic elements that breach the initially suggested mimetic character of the

<sup>16</sup> A. Craig, *Kate Saunders Obituary*, “The Guardian,” 24 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/24/kate-saunders-obituary> [access: 14.07.2023].

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by A. Craig, *ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> It was not her only sequel. “An ardent fan of C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books and E. Nesbit, she found increasing success and comfort in what she termed ‘the prelapsarian’ world of child readers. She was also a contributor to the 2016 authorised Winnie-the-Pooh sequel, *The Best Bear in All the World*”; *ibidem*.

presented worlds.”<sup>19</sup> Thanks to this device, the authors could make their characters travel in time and space without any limits. Psammead, a fantastic creature from *Five Children and It*, is “a remarkable and rather amusing personality: it is rather vain, impatient, short-tempered, easily takes offence, and is mortally afraid of getting wet. Its most important quality, however, is that it can [...] grant wishes.”<sup>20</sup> This last quality is no longer valid in Saunders’ sequel. Psammead lost his magical power of granting wishes, but he was still able to travel in time and space, taking children with him. Thus, he could enable the siblings “going” to the Western Front to see the last minutes of their eldest brother’s life. The fantastic character turns out to be a source of humour, a role shared by the teddy bear and other anthropomorphised objects in Ostrowska’s book. According to Jadwiga Węgrodzka, “humour seems to be one of the most important aspects of her [Nesbit’s] fantastic texts, especially since it frequently derives here from the juxtaposition of the magical and the homely.”<sup>21</sup> A. Craig wrote about Saunders’ novel that it was a “mix of wit, comedy and tragedy.”<sup>22</sup> The same may be stated about Ostrowska’s book. In both cases, humour helps to ease the message of the war scenes.

## Memory of people

“Don’t let’s forget any of them” (S 324). This is the last sentence of the afterword to *Five Children on the Western Front*. Who are we to remember and how? Both authors are again on the same page: these are “young people” and even children who must not be forgotten. In one of their visions, the Lamb and Eddie saw a green meadow with “thousands of white crosses” and “a grand stone arch with writing carved into it. [...] ‘NOW HEAVEN IS BY THE YOUNG INVADED’” (S 246). Psammead comments: “That writing on the stone arch reminded me how hard – how very hard – wars are for the young. The old people only start them” (S 254).

Almost the same image appears in the Polish book: crosses near the roads “crying over soldiers’ graves;”<sup>23</sup> “The lists of losses were crying with the rows of names”<sup>24</sup> (O 99). The narrator adds: “Oh, I remember all these names!” (O 100). Remembering the names in both books seems to be imperative. That is why both authors decided to write about the individuals, not the nameless millions of young people, but – Cyril, Robert, Ernie, Harper, Muldoon; Staś, Szczapa, Zosia, André, Feliks... They stand for “all the boys and girls 1914–1918” to whom Kate Saunders dedicated her book.

I want to emphasise that both authors remember both sides of the conflict, and they show children readers that the suffering is the same and the victims of the war

<sup>19</sup> J. Węgrodzka, *Patterns of Enchantment: E. Nesbit and the traditions of children’s literature*, Gdańsk 2007, p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> A. Craig, *Kate Saunders Obituary...*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> B. Ostrowska, *Bohaterski miś, czyli przygody pluszowego niedźwiadka na wojnie*, Warszawa 2011, p. 98. All quotations from the book come from this edition and will be marked in the text by the letter O and page number in parentheses. All translations are mine – K.Z.

<sup>24</sup> In the original: “Listy strat płakały szeregami nazwisk.”

should be remembered, regardless of their nationality. A reader is to have compassion on her/his compatriots as well as “enemies.” Bronisława Ostrowska writes, “It seems it is not such an obvious word – an enemy” (O 72). At first, it was surprising for the teddy bear narrator that the “enemy” (like Griszka, the Russian) can also feel sorrow and may suffer. Many young boys invaded a foreign country not of their own free will. Even the worst of them (in Polish minds) – the Germans – can miss their homes. The little teddy bear is shocked and puzzled:

So they also miss their fatherland? With amazement, I found in these cold machines – people. They reminded me of Griszka.

– So also these people the same? – I thought. – Then what is everything for? What for – this war? (O 150).

In Kate Saunders’ novel, the main character calls the Germans who surrendered to him, “rather decent,” which surprises the Psammead. When the sand fairy states that Cyril should HATE his enemies, the boy answers, “There are too many of them to hate individually... They’re only following orders” (S 130). To make her idea clearer, the writer decided to relate a historical fact, making it a part of her story. On Christmas Eve, the German soldiers from their trenches wish all the best to the English, who return the wishes.

Far away in the darkness voices chorused, “MERRY CHRISTMAS, TOMMY!”

A murmur went along the trench. “Go on, Mr. Harper!”

“I don’t suppose there’s any harm in shouting back,” Harper said. He climbed the ladder up to the machine gun in its nest of sandbags and yelled at the top of his voice, “FROHLICHE WEIHNACHTEN, FRITZ!”

From the German lines, they heard the sound of cheering. (114)

During the meeting with his siblings, Cyril tells them more about those exceptional days: “My chaps just did a bit of shouting and singing, but some were out in No Man’s Land playing football with the Huns, and giving them Red Cross chocolates” (S 129). Psammead’s comments sound remarkably similar to Miś Niedźwiecki’s (teddy bear) reflections: “It is silly... All those men dying, for the sake of a few yards of mud!” (S 129). But pointing out the nonsense of the war, at the same time, both authors (and especially the Polish one) try to justify the claim that wars are “sometimes necessary” (S 37). “It’s impossible to be anywhere else” (S 13) – Cyril says. The young boys and girls feel that they have to fight for their country and for the safety of their families. The young English soldier explains, “The French are having a rotten time of it, far worse than us. You should see how the Huns have ripped up their countryside. Harper says he’s fighting to stop them doing the same to ours” (S 128). For the Polish, the situation is even more obvious; they are fighting for the independence of Poland, to unite the three parts of the divided nation. It is a kind of refrain in Bronisława Ostrowska’s book: “Every war must be ours if you can fight for Poland in it” (O 40).

Both writers describe the young people who were fighting there as full of life, energy, and ready to make jokes. In his letters, Cyril tries to treat reality with humour.

Saunders seems to repeat in her book what one of the characters, Anthea, says about her dead brother: "I know he'd prefer to be remembered in a cheerful sort of way" (S 315).

In both books, people of different nationalities appear: the English, French, and Germans in *Five Children on the Western Front*; the Poles, Russians, English, Americans, Belgians, and Germans in *Bohaterski miś*. Among the main and background characters, there are also historical figures. In the Polish book, the direct reason for the war is explained, so Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria is mentioned. But there is a person who appears a few times from almost the beginning to the end of the story and is treated nearly as a god, certainly as a great superhuman hero, Józef Piłsudski, but his name is never mentioned. For the narrator (and apparently for the author), he is simply Dziadek (Grandpa or The Old Man – his common nickname), Komendant (Chief, Commandant), On (He), or Naczelnik (Commander in Chief). As Barbara Olech remarks, Ostrowska's novel "plays also a legend-creating role."<sup>25</sup>

What is interesting is that in the English novel, the presented historical character has some inhuman features, too. He is the reverse of the Polish hero, being called "the beastly little man." It is Wilhelm II of Germany, a Kaiser, blamed by the children for the outbreak of the war: "If it wasn't him, there wouldn't be a war" (S 104). He is presented as a dictator who does not care for people in his "beastly" desire for power.

These two men are clearly opposing the young characters involved in the war. They make decisions, and the boys and girls have no choice. Piłsudski is idealised (nearly deified), while the Kaiser is demonised. But both novels show that the individuals (good or bad) influence the lives of millions of ordinary people, and the memory of these figures is also transmitted as their names are saved in a (hi)story.

## Memory of places

Elżbieta Rybicka claims that "the memory of places and places of memory are amongst the most highly esteemed themes in the literature (both fiction and non-fiction) of recent years."<sup>26</sup> It is also true as far as children's literature is concerned, especially literature that deals with the war theme. As Małgorzata Czermińska defines it, "Place [...] is a distinct part of space, a part we distinguish not only in connection with its material qualities, but above all, on account of the cultural symbolism attributed to it, created, transmitted, and transformed within a social tradition."<sup>27</sup>

Such places are important for collective memory. Cultural and historical significance create the settings of both discussed narratives for children. There are a few especially meaningful toponyms in each of them.

The term "memory of places" can also be associated with Pierre Nora's "places of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*). What is crucial to both terms is their function of creating

<sup>25</sup> B. Olech, *Dziecięce odkrywanie świata wojny...*, op. cit., p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> E. Rybicka, *Place, Memory, Literature...*, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> M. Czermińska, *Places of Autobiography: A Geopoetic Proposition*, [in:] *From Modern Theory to a Poetics of Experience. Polish Studies in Literary History and Theory*, eds. G. Grochowski, R. Nycz, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 255.

and maintaining personal as well as national identity.<sup>28</sup> The Prologue of *Five Children on the Western Front* is entitled "London, 1905," and the Epilogue is called "London, 1930." Two scenes, from the past and the future, in reference to the time of the plot, create a frame for the story. They both are situated in the English capital city, which becomes one of the novel's "characters." Its image during the years of war changes, as well as its inhabitants and institutions:

The war was spreading across everyday life like a khaki stain; soldiers milled on the streets and crowded the pubs and trains; Father's train into London was constantly being "beggared about with" whenever there was a big movement of troops [...] the long lines of khaki ambulances streaming out of the big London stations and bringing the traffic to a standstill. Suddenly all the young men had gone... (S 117)

Saunders described the city as if she were painting a picture. The repetition of the name of the colour khaki, which is usually associated with soldiers' uniforms, makes the image gloomy and threatening. It feels like a view from above: no individuals, just "a khaki stain," crowds, troops, and lines.

The description of the place where the action of *Bohaterski miś* starts seems to be surprisingly similar. Lwów, one of the most important cities in the Austrian part of Poland in partitions, changed in a similar way. The view is from the same distant perspective because the teddy bear narrator can see the streets through the window. He describes them in detail, emphasising the colours like the narrator of the English novel and trying to guess the meaning of the picture.

The appearance of the city did not explain anything.

People, all loopy, were wandering the streets. Frantic groups were standing on the corners in front of great colourful posters.

The army was marching in the middle.

It was marching and marching without the end, singing a foreign mindless note of Austrian wake-up call – like a bluish, disgusting serpent with iron barrels of rifles. I saw them all the time through the window like animated tin soldiers – childish toys of Staś. (O 43)

This image of a "serpent" is repeated. At first, it represents the Austrian army and then in this bluish stream, some lines of grey appear, representing the Polish Legions (O 48). September 3 was the day of the capitulation of Lwów, and again there was a foreign army, this time a fawn-coloured one, akin to steppe sand symbolising the Russian soldiers, who are also compared to predators (O 59). Again, one can see only

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<sup>28</sup> Nora differentiates a few kinds of *lieux de memoirs* and this classification can also be used for my analyses though the development of the concepts would exceed the format of the article. I will focus on the places defined by the scholar as "natural, concretely experienced." P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire* (1989), transl. by M. Roudebush, <https://courseworks2.columbia.edu> [access: 14.07.2023]. See also: P. Nora, *Między pamięcią a historią*, transl. J.M. Kłoczowski, Gdańsk 2022.

crowds of people and soldiers devoid of any human features, compared to the images of reptiles and thoughtless toys. In another image, the city is described similarly as devoid of humanity: "The city looked like an agitated anthill. The crowds were hurrying to the railway station with their trunks, packages" (O 55).

London and Lwów are special places of memory for both nations; they became symbols of heroism and resistance, being presented as such in the children's books analysed in this work. There are also other meaningful places: Stanisławów, Gdańsk, Poznań; Ypres. After the victory and the restoration of the independent state, the teddy bear narrator recalls his adventures and lists the now-free Polish towns:

The images in memory change like in a kaleidoscope.

Old Poznań. The busy streets of Warsaw. Cracow Market Square. The Gate of Dawn in Wilno. Lwów. (193)

The Polish teddy bear was travelling with Polish soldiers throughout the country, where he could see only ruins and destruction: "Demolished, burnt villages shake his chimneys at the sky" (O 103). The enemies left just "pure desert" behind (O 104). The English soldiers were lucky that they observed not their own land but rather the French countryside that was "ripped up" by the Germans, as Cyril told his siblings (S 128).

France, and specifically the "Western Front," is the place where Polish and English novels "meet." But Ostrowska quickly sends her teddy bear narrator to the nearest village so that he does not have to describe life in the trenches. Saunders, however, decides to show the cruelty of the war by presenting the terrible conditions "on the western front": mud everywhere, rats, exploding shells, and constant danger of being killed or seriously wounded. These are very dark pictures that the readers get to know thanks to Cyril's letters to his family: "...the rats are a constant nuisance...This is a horribly wet winter and absolutely everything is caked with the stuff [mud], even the food" (S 283). The boy tries not to frighten his siblings too much, so he attempts to write in a humorous, lighthearted way. However, the reader may have a touch of a horrible war reality.

## Conclusion

It could be surprising that two books written at different times and in different languages have so much in common. There seem to be more similarities than differences in narrating the Great War to children by the Polish poet at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the English writer a hundred years later. Though Polish and English perspectives certainly vary because of the historical context, both writers' main reflections are the same. Above all, they both want to transmit memories, especially about the youngest victims of those cruel times and the leaders who – being safe themselves – send their soldiers to kill other people, their peers. It is important to emphasise that Ostrowska and Saunders show the readers that there are real, suffering, and loving people on both sides of the conflict.

The analysed children's books about the Great War present the terrible reality of war, including deaths, wounds, fear, and suffering. Yet they also try to preserve the

memory of the young people “in a cheerful sort of way,” presenting them as ordinary boys and girls. It is a good way to allow readers to identify with the characters. Ostrowska and Saunders wrote about historical events, but they both emphasised the human emotions and reactions on both sides of the conflict. Their idea was to commemorate those who had given their lives while believing in a better future.

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## The Memory of the Great War in Two Books for Children – Polish and English Perspectives

### Abstract

Two books for children about the Great War will be discussed: *Bohaterski miś* [Heroic teddy bear] by Bronisława Ostrowska and *Five Children on the Western Front* by Kate Saunders. It will be a comparative analysis. The books differ in terms of national perspective (Polish and English), but also in the time of edition – just after the war and a hundred years later. Thus, Ostrowska's memory about the war is her own memory, whereas Saunders' writing can be called a post-memory narrative.

The aim of the paper is to answer the questions: what is similar and what is different in the two selected children's novels about the Great War? What are the ways of transmitting memory? What do the writers want to save for new generations?

**Słowa kluczowe:** Bronisława Ostrowska, Kate Saunders, I wojna światowa, pamięć, literatura dziecięca

**Keywords:** Bronisława Ostrowska, Kate Saunders, the Great War, memory, children's literature