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# Displacement and Discoveries: Cultural Trauma and Polish Child Refugees in Contemporary Australasian Fiction

*Izvorni znanstveni rad / original research paper*

*Primljeno / received 27. 8. 2014. Prihvaćeno / accepted 10. 7. 2015.*



This paper focuses primarily on the experiences of Polish child refugees in World War 2, some of whom were relocated to New Zealand. In 1944, the New Zealand government accepted 733 Polish refugee children who had survived deportation to the Soviet Union labour camps in Siberia before reaching Red Cross camps in Iran. For these Polish children, arrival in New Zealand, the southernmost colonial outpost of Britain, was a challenging and bewildering process. While many refugee narratives have been produced as a consequence of World War 2, few, if any, document the journeys undertaken by families who were evicted from their Polish homeland and deported to Russia, before being relocated to countries such as New Zealand. Displacement on such a scale underscores the depth of cultural trauma and its manifestations in the selected texts. This paper suggests that the mode of historical representation in the texts constructs a timely pathway for further exploration of transnational literature, signalling how texts can extend beyond national boundaries, and foreground interactions between cultures. The paper probes how children's literature that depicts the experiences of Polish child refugees situates itself within a discourse of cultural trauma.

**Keywords:** World War 2, cultural trauma, deportation, transnational, relocation, children's literature

*If you don't know history,  
You don't know anything.  
You're a leaf that doesn't know  
It's part of a tree.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> This quotation is often ascribed to Michael Crichton.

## Introduction

While the quotation that introduces this paper is contestable (whose version of history?), nonetheless it offers a context for a story that has hitherto received scant attention. Although many refugee narratives have been produced as a consequence of World War 2, few, if any, document the journeys undertaken by families who were evicted from their Polish homeland and deported to Russia before being relocated to countries such as New Zealand. It is only comparatively recently that the post-war generation of writers has mined this concealed history and made it accessible through fictionalised accounts of the cultural trauma experienced by Polish refugees. Conflict between retaining cultural identity and developing a sense of belonging in a new (and for most, a permanent) land are echoed throughout the texts. This paper contends that it is due time for another version of the Polish historical narrative which foregrounds the journeys of child refugees to be made available for the child reader. It will investigate issues of representation by situating the discussion within a discourse of cultural trauma, and examine how contemporary Australasian texts rely on the use of emotions in the construction of trauma. The paper will also focus on thematic aspects considering the construction of combined national identities of the characters and the representation of historical fact in the analysed narratives.

## Transnational literature and text selection

Transnational literature reflects cultural interaction and transfer of views. Constructions of cultural trauma in the texts under consideration expose tension and negotiation arising from the shifting zones of contact. Resettlement highlights cultural and linguistic instability, signalling what Ommundsen refers to as “[...] the growing realisation that writing does not stop at national or linguistic borders, but spills across nations, cultures and languages” (2012: 2).

World War 2 provides the context for three of the texts referred to in this paper, all of which foreground Polish refugee experience, while the fourth text references an earlier indeterminate period of migratory experience. A variety of literature has been chosen to illustrate how cultural trauma is constructed for the implied reader.

The portrayal of refugee children’s experiences of cultural trauma is investigated in the following three New Zealand texts: Halina Ogonowska-Coates’s *Krystyna’s Story* (1992), Melinda Szymanik’s *A Winter’s Day in 1939* (2013), and Jennifer Beck’s *Stefania’s Dancing Slippers* (2007). In an attempt to determine how the medium of a wordless text relies on the use of emotions in the construction of cultural trauma, the paper will conclude with an exploration of a generic migration text, Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2007), initially produced by Australian publisher

Lothian. The New Zealand authored narratives all explore representations of exile, displacement, and cross-cultural experience in response to the historical crisis of World War 2, while the Australian text interrogates trauma within a non-specific context.

Both New Zealand and Australia share a colonial heritage where contact zones between indigenous populations and newcomers have harboured tension. Subsequent waves of migration in both countries reflect global patterns of relocation due to a variety of reasons. What is apparent in the New Zealand situation is that the first large group of designated refugees emanated from Poland and they comprised mainly children. What Australian artist Tan depicts is an exploration of trauma and bewilderment akin to that experienced by the child protagonists in the prose narratives presented in this paper, albeit in a culturally non-specific setting. Nonetheless, the general cultural meanings that underscore *The Arrival* are applicable to any situation of displacement and cultural encounter. The affective impact resonates in each of the genres.

Findings from recent studies, informed by a sociocultural perspective on learning, confirm the need for more inclusive pedagogical practices where image-based texts such as *The Arrival* complement the use of literary genres to introduce what Fleckenstein et al. refer to as “welcoming into our classrooms the necessary transaction between imagery and language” (cited in: Arizpe et al. 2014: 200). The research of Arizpe et al. (2014) which focuses on critical engagement with the visual image to investigate meaningful ways of responding to the needs of immigrant populations in classrooms, including a high percentage of Polish immigrants in Glasgow, highlights the picturebook’s role in mediating empathy. As the authors posit, “*The Arrival* seemed to effectively support the immigrant children’s sense of making and negotiating their identities and offered them a channel to make sense of the many emotions they experienced” (Arizpe et al. 2014: 117). As a means of enabling children to develop awareness of sensitive issues related to migration, the novels and picturebook discussed in this paper constitute their own border crossing as they invite readers to pose questions about experiences of departure, relocation and (un)settlement.

While the principal focus is on the first text, *Krystyna’s Story*, which expands on its protagonist’s resettlement in New Zealand, the other selected narratives enhance awareness of the process by which webs of displacement and dislocation are negotiated. The reason for including a generic visual wordless text is to maximise the interdisciplinary potential of what Arizpe (2013) refers to as a fusion of children’s literature scholarship and educational research. Each research strand adds to a more nuanced interpretation of the effects of cultural trauma.

As my research interest encompasses issues of migratory and refugee experiences, this juxtaposition of texts signals how patterns of dislocation are represented in literature produced for children. All of the texts, I believe, offer thought-provoking portrayals of cross-cultural issues and multi-layered constructions of narrative complexity. To date there has been little acknowledgement in texts produced for children of one of the more significant enforced migrations in recent history involving children. Implicit references to ethnic cleansing underscore the narratives that focus on the cultural dislocation of Polish children. The paper will first examine definitions of cultural trauma in relation to refugee experience, then explore how trauma is constructed in the texts under discussion, and finally suggest that exposure to narratives that probe intersections between Polish and New Zealand history prompts readers to navigate participation in their varied cultures, and interpret their more pluralistic worlds through historical encounter with hitherto untold tales.

## **Cultural trauma and historical representation**

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as someone who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UN General Assembly).

All the texts discussed in this paper address contexts where persecution and discrimination are embedded in the narrative.

Only since 2000 has there been an internationally recognised day to honour refugees. The annual World Refugee Day commemorated each year on 20 June signals the relevance of historical refugee experiences, along with their contemporary counterparts. The purpose of proclaiming such a day honours the courage, strength and resilience of refugees and provides a day of global recognition which acknowledges not only the plight of refugees and the causes of exile, but significantly the contribution they make to their host communities. Törnquist-Plewa cites cultural trauma theorists such as Bernhard Giesen who suggests that working through trauma requires the production of new narratives about the past to confront present and future issues: “It is about the need for reconciliation not only with ‘the others’ but also with oneself, that is, accepting a ‘new master narrative of national identity’” (2014: 4). To this end, Törnquist-Plewa argues that the rhetoric of some specific texts casts light on received versions of historical events and focuses on their present relevance. As the mode of historical representation in the texts elicits an affective encounter in the construction of cultural trauma, Neil J. Smelser’s view

is tacitly echoed in the belief that “those interested in establishing a historical event or situation as traumatic must speak in a language that will reach individual people” (2004: 40-41).

Exposure to children’s literature that invites an affective response offers a conduit for development in imagination, language, empathy, and critical inquiry. Tribunella (2010) explores the ambivalence of conflicted affection and hostility generated by loss and trauma in his interrogation of the complex relationship between romantic views of childhood and melancholy and maturation. In referencing the privileged status of award-winning American texts that deal with trauma, he explores the cultural contexts that produced the texts and offers a compelling argument that focuses on representations of trauma and the depiction of melancholia as a catalyst for maturation. Tribunella problematises assumptions related to melancholic maturation, especially when resolutions align with hegemonic values. The recurring narratives of trauma investigated in his research prompt the reader to embody loss as a platform for maturation, recognising the impact of narrative style in representing characters’ dilemmas.

As examples of recurring narratives of trauma, the texts examined in this paper prompt readers to explore different perspectives and gain closer realisations of their own identities. While the literature I am focusing on locates itself within an historical context, the narratives contain contemporary resonance, both for those children who are unaware of the circumstances surrounding the Polish diaspora and for present-day refugees whose lives are disrupted through events beyond their control, such as children displaced by recent events in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine. Children’s vulnerability and dependence are accentuated in times of conflict, most revealingly in the ways in which cultural values underpin the construction of children’s traumatic experiences in literature. As Mike Cadden asserts, “[...] no literary genre has ever taught us more about a culture and its values than the literature published for a society’s children” (2010: xxi).

The texts selected for analysis in this paper reinforce the significance Cadden places on the transmission of cultural values. The New Zealand texts that focus on Polish child refugees use a mode of historical representation that relies on an affective response to the construction of cultural trauma. Interwoven through the narratives are ideas about nationhood, cultural values, and identity that permeate memories of the places of dislocation and relocation – Poland and New Zealand, respectively. Scholars, including Short (1994, 1997, 2003) and Kokkola (2003), have written extensively on representations of the Holocaust in children’s literature. Problems of representation and distortions of the past are highlighted in their research, with historical accuracy foregrounded as a non-negotiable criterion.

The texts discussed in this paper all reflect significant historical research that underpins the narrative structure, prompting readers to engage in critical reading. Encountering historic disclosures of trauma and experiencing affective empathy for characters' situations introduces child readers to a wider global situation beyond their national boundaries. While Kokkola (2003) is unimpressed by the fact that fiction is often prioritised as a substitute for learning about history, I believe, for the affective reasons outlined in this paper, that literature is an integral accompaniment to the exploration of historical events. None of the texts under consideration shirks the reality of life in a Russian camp, the scarcity of food, or the hardships associated with displacement. Engagement with literature that foregrounds cultural trauma invites children to reflect on, and challenge, their understandings of historical events. Interrogating stereotypes is one means of developing deeper historical awareness related to persecution and deportation. Short's emphasis on human rights education as a means of breaking down stereotypes can be summed up in a statement that also carries contemporary resonance: "any group, if sufficiently vulnerable can suffer the effects of racism and if sufficiently powerful can perpetrate it" (2003: 281). As a vehicle for promoting a more inclusive pedagogy, exposure to texts that challenge stereotypes and investigate racist ideology contributes to the reader's awareness of a wider socio-political context. The next section illustrates how a New Zealand destination offers scope for engaging with a little-known historical event, that of the relocation of hundreds of Polish children.

## **New Zealand background**

It is a legitimate question to consider why such an isolated corner of the world became one of the destinations for Polish child refugees. What follows, therefore, is a brief background to the arrival of the children in New Zealand. The idea was conceived in 1943 due to the influence of Countess Maria Wodzicka (1901–1968), wife of the Polish Consul in Wellington, NZ. That year, the US transport ship *Hermitage* carrying a group of 706 Polish refugees from Iran to Mexico anchored in Wellington where the Countess visited them. Concerned for the welfare of other Polish orphans still in Iran, she approached the wife of the Prime Minister Peter Fraser. This level of informal diplomacy/networking produced an invitation from the NZ Government to offer hospitality to 733 Polish children and 102 accompanying staff members. So began the journey from Isfahan to Pahiataua, New Zealand (**Fig. 1**). The group arrived on 1 November 1944 and the children were mobbed at the Wellington Railway Station by hundreds of school children waving New Zealand and Polish flags. The former internment camp at Pahiataua had been



**POLISH CHILDREN FIND REFUGE IN NEW ZEALAND:  
YOUNG WAR VICTIMS ARRIVE AS GUESTS OF DOMINION**

After being driven from their homes in Eastern Poland by the German invasion to temporary asylum in Russia and Persia, a party of 838 Poles has arrived in New Zealand to form a small colony at Pahiatua. Above are some of the party's 725 boys and girls who have survived terrible hardships during the past five years. They will live in this country until the time is opportune for them to return to their native land. 8 November, 1944

- Fig. 1** Polish children find refuge in New Zealand: Young war victims arrive as guests of the Dominion. *Auckland Weekly News*, 8 November 1944.
- Sl. 1.** Djeca iz Poljske nalaze utočište u Novome Zelandu: mlade žrtve rata stižu kao gosti Dominiona. *Auckland Weekly News*, 8. studenoga 1944.

converted into the Polish Children's Camp administered by the NZ army. As it was envisaged that after the war all the children and staff would return to Poland, Polish was the medium of instruction and some of the camp street names were in Polish. By 1945, with the installation of a pro-Soviet regime, the New Zealand Government assured the children and staff they could remain in New Zealand. The camp itself was closed in 1952 and today a white marble monument whose shadow at midday casts the shape of a mother and child is the only evidence left of the former camp. The monument, based on Greek mythology, was unveiled in 1994 to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the children's arrival (cf. NZETC, Polish Children's Reunion Committee).



**Fig. 2** View of the Polish children's camp, Pahiatua, New Zealand.  
**Sl. 2.** Pogled na poljski dječji kamp, Pahiatua, Novi Zeland.

Whilst the welcome in New Zealand was friendly, nonetheless the Polish children were transported to a camp, replete with barbed wire. As mentioned previously, this was envisaged as a temporary relocation prior to the children returning to Poland, so every effort was made to forge a community based on Polish tradition and protocol (**Fig. 2**). Exchange and communication with New Zealand families was sporadic and generally confined to visits during school holidays. As the medium of instruction was Polish, opportunities to develop fluency in English were limited. Yet the resilience of the children, assisted by the nurturing of their teachers and caregivers, provided a strong patriotic bond that was to stand them in good stead for an uncertain future. *Krystyna's Story* traverses the entire journey through East Europe and Asia to New Zealand and is the only text to situate itself within the Camp and to encompass adulthood where no attempt is made to simplify the process of healing.

Three of the four texts under consideration document the stories of Polish refugee children who had survived deportation to the Soviet Union labour camps



in Siberia before reaching Red Cross Camps in Iran. For the children who came to New Zealand, the southernmost colonial outpost of Britain, this was a challenging and bewildering process, involving significant displacement. Such displacement, particularly when trauma is foregrounded, potentially undermines cultural identity. Carrying their Polish identity would be put to the test in a new environment with hegemonic assimilation policies as part of its societal fabric. Displacement underscores cultural trauma as a social and political process which Smelser defines as (2004: 44):

[...] a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant group and evoking an event or situation which is laden with negative affect, represented as indelible and regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions or groups' identity.

Furthermore, Smelser expands on the complexity of definition when he posits (32):

The most promising avenues of insight appear to be in the definition of trauma; its status as negotiated process; the roles of affect, cognition, and memory in trauma; and the roles of defence against, coping with, and working through traumas.

Cultural trauma as experienced by Krystyna intersects with the definitions Smelser provides. As engagement with the text relies on the roles of affect and coping with trauma through resilience, a discussion of the historical mode of this narrative may suggest insights into the use of emotions in the construction of trauma.

### **Identities, memory and displacement: *Krystyna's Story***

How might an “event [...] laden with negative affect” with attendant undertones of threat and violation impact the depiction of characters in *Krystyna's Story*? The italicised preface suggests that the story could be the author's mother's own story or it could belong to any one of the 2 million Poles deported to the Soviet Union during World War 2. Smelser's above-mentioned definition of cultural trauma as threatening a society's existence is foreshadowed early in the narrative when the 8-year-old protagonist recalls (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 10):

I can feel the fear rising. I cannot hear anything above the noise of the planes buzzing over my head [...]. There were big open fields in front of our house and the planes came right down low, dropping leaflets and sweets on to the fields. As soon as the planes disappeared my brother Feliks rushed outside and started picking up the sweets.

Their mother insists he puts them down and the sweets are dropped into the pig pen. In the morning the pigs are dead. From the outset, the reader is catapulted into a tale in which sinister, almost fairy-tale tropes, intersect with reality.

Written in the first person, the narrative conveys the uncertainty and increasing despair of the initial and then subsequent journeys undertaken by Krystyna. Beginning with her family's dispossession of their land and home, followed by a forced exodus by train to an unknown destination, and culminating in arrival at the Siberian labour camps where she works for 'Father Stalin', the journey is graphically depicted. Krystyna addresses the reader as the thirty minutes assigned for the family to pack is enforced (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 32):

Like an overdressed dummy I stood there in the middle of the kitchen, wondering what to do. Half an hour! The minutes were ticking away before my eyes. Soon there would only be twenty minutes left. What would you do if the soldiers came into your home and said they were taking you away? Destination unknown. What would you take? A spoon and fork? A bar of soap and a piece of bread?

Krystyna's address to the reader signals her panic amidst the indelible memory of threat faced not only by her family but also by their friends and neighbours, all of whom were treated with similar disdain. When Krystyna's mother asks a soldier if he is making a list so they can all be taken to Siberia, he retorts, "We don't want you Poles anywhere in our country, not even in Siberia" (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 30). But it was to Siberia that they were transported in wagons that (54):

[...] rumbled and swayed for days on end [...]. I longed to be able to run outside and look at the sky, to feel the sun on my face and my feet on the ground. Sometimes the train would stop for days on end. Nowhere. We lived without thinking about the life we had lost. All you wanted was for things to be better tomorrow.

Krystyna's impassioned plea for a better future carries a universality related to the rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and echoed in Short's (2003) research on the need for human rights education which discusses the contexts from which breaches of human rights have occurred. Krystyna's resilience underscores how the narrative structure can trigger inquiry and assist in posing questions through negotiated processes. While first-person narration traditionally connects to character identification, a surprising finding in Nikolajeva's essay "The Identification Fallacy" (2011: 200-201) suggests that this perspective can paradoxically enhance a dialogic encounter with the text, as subjectivity is split between the narrating and the experiencing self. Due to the pull between the narrating and experiencing self, the ability to free oneself from the protagonist's subjectivity in *Krystyna's Story* allows for a more robust evaluation of characters, which leads to increased empathy for their predicament. Food shortages, ill health, and neglect on a geopolitical scale are potent reminders of displacement, yet Krystyna's resolve remains hopeful, even when she is perpetually frightened and trapped in a vortex of uncertainty (cf. Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 54). The

tension between the hope Krystyna exhibits, and her bewilderment at the violation of fundamental human rights associated with a secure home environment and a country to call her own, develops the potential for a dialogic encounter with the text, encouraging the reader to explore more fully the tension constructed in this textured narrative.

Journeys, random destinations, and a tacit urgency required for adaptation propel *Krystyna's Story* into specific uncharted terrain. As a result of the amnesty granted to all Polish citizens imprisoned in the Soviet Union, Krystyna undertakes another perilous journey, this time from the labour camp to an orphanage. En route, assistance comes from an unlikely quarter – a Russian family, who, by hiding her, shield her from being ordered off the train, thereby subverting binarities related to heroism and villainy. The reader is challenged to enter into a dialogic encounter with the text to examine how personal exchanges disrupt prejudicial expectation. At the mercy of on-going and rapid geopolitical configuration, Krystyna finds herself once more on the move. Having cancelled the amnesty that allowed Krystyna to leave the camp, the Soviet authorities required all Poles to become Soviet citizens. The Poles who ran the orphanage were arrested but the children were able to leave. So began yet another journey that takes Krystyna to a Red Cross camp in Iran. There she describes the initial de-lousing process. The following quote illustrates her need for physical and emotional nourishment, as issues of identity, belonging, and memory become clouded (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 123):

We were all given a piece of soap. I bit mine to see if it was good to eat but the taste was awful and it burned my mouth [...]. I couldn't ever remember having washed in warm water before. At nightfall each of us was given a red blanket. I sat on mine so that no one would take it from me. It was the first thing I had owned for a long time. Someone said my name. It echoed far off in a distant consciousness. Somewhere far away in the back of my mind I remembered being that girl, but now things were different. I belonged to this group of children with shaven heads, sitting on the sand.

Krystyna's stark summary of her current situation contrasts vividly with her memories from which she is emotionally distanced. Paradoxically they each contain dream-like elements as she sits on the sand waiting for an announcement of her relocation destination.

In the Red Cross camp, the children find solidarity in their communal strength. Recognising the desire to safeguard their national and collective identity, Krystyna muses: "our teachers called us the dispossessed [...]. And we held tightly to each other because we knew we carried our Polishness in us" (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 132). The period in Iran provides the children with temporary respite from the myriad of hardships encountered over the previous two years. They experience gentleness, and the narrative incorporates some levity that reflects a new-found

optimism. Krystyna observes the egg sellers advertising their hard-boiled eggs for sale and ponders the strange fact “that hens in this place laid eggs that were already boiled” (124). Lydia Kokkola questions and examines the role of humour in representations of Holocaust literature and invokes the carnivalesque elements of Maurice Sendak’s text *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* to illustrate a subversive comic element that works to disrupt power through ironic distancing: “By attacking the rule of etiquette that suggests laughter should not be placed in tandem with genocide, Sendak creates a new position to view history” (2003: 275). The emphasis on food in Krystyna’s narrative captures the deprivation experienced and I suggest that the inherent levity in this instance serves to heighten rather than diminish the severity of the situation. The children are still isolated, contained within the confines of a camp, and unsure of their future. As an historical example of transnational border crossings, nowhere is this dislocation more keenly felt than in the ambivalence and tension experienced by the refugee children. A lighter text inflection signals the perceived safety surrounding the proposed evacuation destinations, places like Canada, America, Africa, Israel and New Zealand. When Krystyna asks where New Zealand is, she is informed that it is a small country located at the end of the world and is promptly reassured that she will be happy there as it is “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 89). While wartime travel posed many risks, the trip to New Zealand on the *General Randall* staffed by an American crew gives the children adult camaraderie and a (literal!) taste of kindness as they are introduced to chocolate and chewing gum.

*Krystyna’s Story* offers an unsentimental view of adjustment to life in New Zealand. Although evacuation to New Zealand was designed to be a temporary measure before the children returned to Poland, nonetheless tensions around how the children were prepared to adapt to the new culture without losing their cultural identity are explored. From a systemic perspective, the text examines how New Zealand institutions were slow to respond to a changing population profile. The role of memory and affect in working through trauma underscores a process of maturation developed in the final section of the narrative. ‘Carrying their Polishness’ would be put to the test in a new environment. On the day of the children’s arrival in Wellington, New Zealand, they are escorted from the wharf to the railway station. Krystyna is welcomed by crowds dispensing sweets and cakes before she climbs into a ‘proper railway carriage’ with seats. Their destination is Pahiataua Camp in New Zealand’s lower North Island which becomes known affectionately as ‘Little Poland’ (described earlier in this paper). Krystyna remains cocooned in the camp for two years before graduation from Primary School (Years 1-8) to Secondary School (Years 9-13) on the South Island.

Separation from the community at Pahiatua exacerbates the children's isolation and lack of belonging. Journeying once more to different cities to attend school and begin their working careers poses a further threat to the bonds forged at the camp. In their new school Krystyna and her friends are referred to collectively as the 'Polish girls'. Anglicised first names reflect the majority culture's attempt to 'normalise' their experience. So Krystyna becomes known as Christine and the children are not permitted to speak their mother tongue. The lengths to which Krystyna goes to develop her English proficiency reveal her determination. On requesting books from the nuns so that she could practise her reading, she is presented with *Oliver Twist* and *Wuthering Heights*. The only thing she knows about the former is that Oliver is a boy, and she re-reads the latter numerous times to help her "think in English without first having to change the words from Polish to English in my head" (Ogonowska-Coates 2008: 181). The nuns compliment her on her progress in English and, contrary to current pedagogical practice, advise against reverting to Polish when the children return to the Pahiatua Camp for a mid-year break. Tensions between retaining cultural identity and developing a sense of belonging in a new (and now for most, a permanent) land are echoed throughout the text. Cultural trauma is compounded by the children's ethnic minority and their lack of agency. Significant displacement and trauma had already occurred for the children before their arrival in the country of their final destination. While not within the scope of the selected texts under discussion, the long-term effects of cultural trauma are foreshadowed. Ogonowska-Coates hints at how the immigration discourse impacts on refugee re-settlement in New Zealand as the plot unfolds to follow Krystyna's journey into young adulthood, as she becomes an active member of her new society. Unlike *Krystyna's Story*, the following two texts halt the narrative in childhood. In a similar vein, all three probe the circumstances that precipitate their forced removal from their homeland, and weave through the texts the ensuing trauma of their journey.

### **Cultural trauma and dialogic encounter: Negotiated process (*A Winter's Day in 1939* and *Stefania's Dancing Slippers*)**

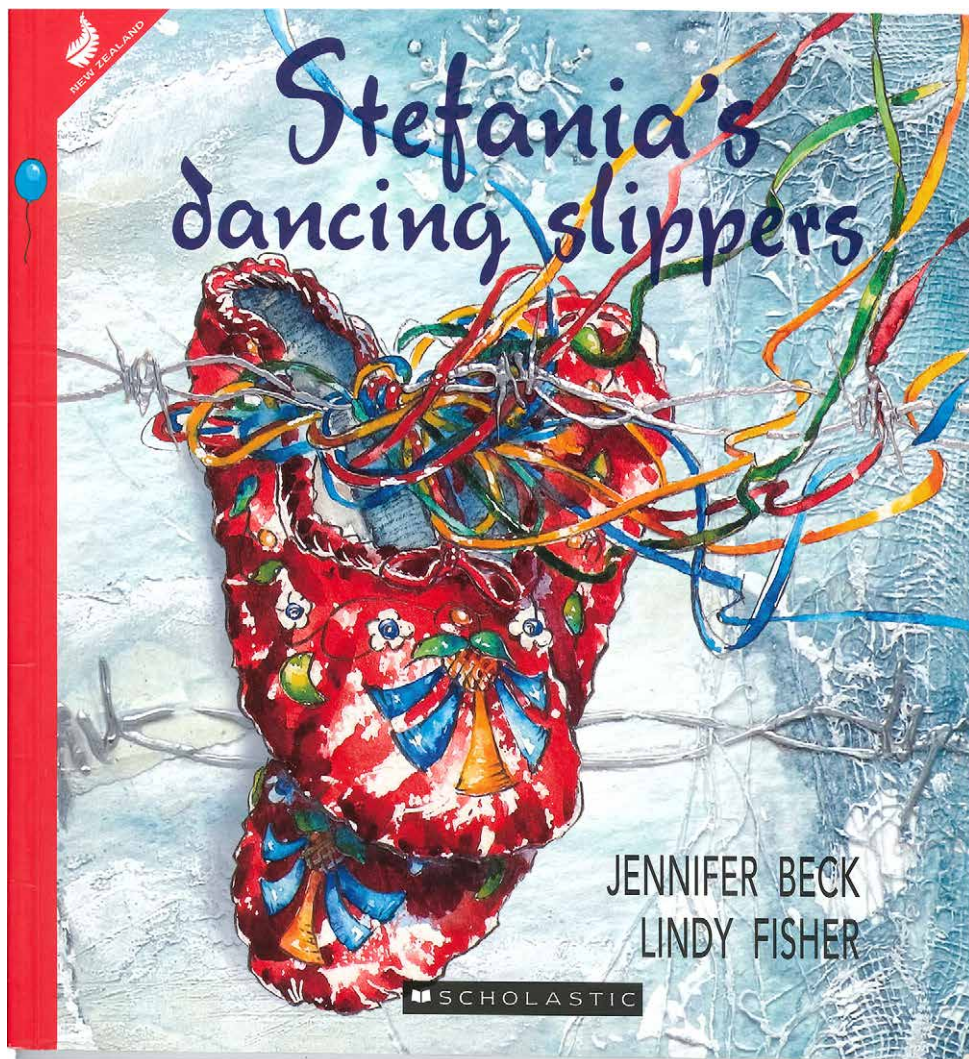
Both Melinda Szymanik's *A Winter's Day in 1939* and Jennifer Beck's picturebook *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* illustrated by Lindy Fisher poignantly illuminate Smelser's view that "those interested in establishing a historical event or situation as traumatic must speak in a language that will reach individual people" (2004: 40-41). Moreover, he emphasises the significance of the affected society's

sociocultural context at the time of the event. Echoes of the former world war and subsequent geopolitical history underpin the narratives. Hinting at the duration of future military events in *A Winter's Day in 1939*, innocuous lupins are described as “standing like a regiment of *weary* soldiers in *fading* blue, purple and green uniforms” (Szymanik 2013: 19; my emphasis). Protagonist Adam’s appreciation of the complexity of Polish society at the outbreak of the war where Ukrainians, Jews and Poles co-existed alert the reader to ethnic undercurrents in relation to land ownership and entitlement. The re-drawing/re-imagining of Polish boundaries following the First World War fuelled ethnic tension. Adam is aware of territorial history when he looks for his friends: “Instead I spotted a couple of my enemies; local Ukrainian boys who resented us being here. We were the invaders I guess” (19). Like Krystyna’s, Adam’s family is forcibly removed from their land in winter with scant time, measured in minutes, not hours, to pack. The desolation of the journey is described by Adam (97):

Buildings had tumbled down into the street. Some were roofless, like soft-boiled eggs with their lids off. Here and there I saw signs of repair: fresh wooden weatherboards like raw scars, and tarpaulins keeping out the winter weather. But some places were beyond fixing and had been abandoned to the elements, their insides exposed, frozen with an icing of snow.

Adam’s experiences mirror the cultural trauma experienced by Krystyna in echoing their sense of loss and their longing for Poland. Both novels elaborate how the occupation of Poland impacted on the respective families, and capture the extreme hardships entailed in progressive displacement. Perhaps the potential for a dialogic encounter promoted by first-person narration in both narratives reinforces the view that Ogonowska-Coates and Szymanik have constructed narratives that resonate affectively as they identify and establish respective situations as traumatic.

Picturebooks offer a complex synergy of the visual and written texts, and issues of displacement and trauma are foregrounded by both texts in *Stefania’s Dancing Slippers* (**Fig. 3**). The visual plot begins on the cover with an image of brightly coloured and textured slippers. It is further developed in the endpapers with a map and the heading “My journey 1939–1944”, and consolidated on the back cover with a monochromatic image using a cool blue palette depicting the bleakness of Siberia. Using the visual as a multi-modal text, illustrator Lindy Fisher has constructed collages in three-dimensional images that emphasise the following: ethnicity and traditions; geographical contrasts between Poland, Siberia, Isfahan, and New Zealand; the strength of family relationships that underscore all the narratives selected for discussion in this paper. The slippers referenced in the title were crafted by Stefania’s parents and they provide a motif that links back to



**Fig. 3** Cover of *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* by Jennifer Beck and Lindy Fisher (2007).

**Sl. 3.** Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* [Stefanijine plesne papučiće] autorica Jennifer Beck i Lindy Fisher (2007).

family, and forward to hope. Beck and Fisher's text foregrounds a recurring motif of loss which, as Tribunella's (2010) research suggests, recognises the experience of melancholia in developing the narrative. The text clearly examines how attachment objects impact on patterns of loss, most effectively demonstrated in the textured illustrations. The colour palette shifts to a darker hue as winter descends and Stefania is puzzled by the sight of her mother sewing their best silver spoons into

the hem of her coat. When Russian soldiers order the family to leave, Stefania's mother tells her to choose one thing that is most precious to her: "Just as they were being hustled out of the house, Stefania managed to tuck her dancing slippers into the pockets of her coat" (Beck and Fisher 2007: [5]). Just as the written text inhabits a torn, crumpled piece of brown paper which reflects the ripped, jagged nature of their lives, so the slippers in the colours of the Polish flag become a potent yet fragile symbol of resettlement and a return to normalcy.

## **Pedagogical implications**

In response to researchers who are sceptical about the value of Holocaust education (Kochan 1989, Novick 1999, Kinloch 2001), Short (2003) contends that literature of the Second World War contains useful lessons for individual students and the education system, yet is mindful of how historical narrative affects perceptions of the subject of history. His studies reveal the need to activate students' prior knowledge to gauge levels of understanding of historical events and determine students' cultural perceptions to avoid perpetuation of stereotypes. Literature that maintains historical accuracy encourages discussion of human rights and challenges the reader, and is also a powerful adjunct to the history curriculum. As with all the texts under discussion, historical research is assiduous. In *Stefania's Dancing Slippers*, scarcity of food, experiences of military brutality, and dangers inherent in forced evacuation reflect the children's reality (**Fig. 4**). The harrowing context of displacement includes crowded cattle wagons, intense hunger and thirst quenched by icicles broken off the door bolts, and work in the Siberian forest. There, Stefania's mother's astute preparation is revealed for the first time when she exchanges one of her precious spoons for an egg: "That night Stefania and her mother feasted, each savouring their half of the egg. They even tried to eat the shell" (Beck and Fisher 2007: [10]). Such deprivation is potently depicted in the interplay between the visual and written text where barbed wire barriers are a reminder of their captivity among the visceral events depicted in the stripped-back prose (*ibid.*):

Stefania's mother was forced to cut timber in the vast forest. It was so cold that when she went out the door her figure left a tunnel trailing through the icy mist. While the adults were working the children were made to learn about Russia.

The short sentences, visual metaphor, and enforced educational ideology of the written text are extended in the visual depiction of a monochromatic pale blue and white palette with ghost-like figures behind the wire barrier. The means by which picturebooks use the semiotic codes of written and visual sign systems signal emotional engagement with the meanings constructed in the text.





**Fig. 4** Illustration from *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* foreshadows the family's impending entrapment.

**Sl. 4.** Ilustracija iz slikovnice *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* [Stefanijine plesne papučiće] koja nagovještuje stupicu što se priprema obitelji.

Sipe acknowledges the power of the picturebook as a catalyst in promoting new literacies, and its role as a transformative force for society (2010: 244). Throughout the book the verbal and visual texts combine to expand understandings about the causes of cultural trauma. As in all the previous narratives, the ability to hold tight to cultural values often manifests itself through religious observance. This is especially significant when confronted by competing ideologies. In *Stefania's Dancing Slippers*, symbolic codes are inscribed mostly in Christian iconography, including the Madonna, a chalice and rosary beads, while Muslim iconography includes a mosque referencing the journey to Iran. Religious references to prayers and hymns are present in all three texts. They provide a conduit into prevailing beliefs about Catholicism and Communism, where epistemological tensions are played out on the small, faraway stage of New Zealand politics (**Fig. 5**). Historian Nicholas Reid (2006) has researched the 'struggle for souls' in New Zealand and acknowledges the role of the Catholic press and the Communist publication *People's Voice* in articulating the local repercussions of international events. He suggests that the Catholic press presented Poland as a Catholic country "crucified between Nazis and Communists", while the Communist press saw it as a backward



**Fig. 5** Illustration from *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* references significant cultural motifs explored in the text.

**Sl. 5.** Ilustracija iz slikovnice *Stefania's Dancing Slippers* [Stefanijine plesne papučiće] upućuje na važne kulturne motive koji se razrađuju u tekstu.

feudal land, deeming all non-Communist Poles Fascists (Reid 2006: 79). Indeed Reid asserts that (80):

throughout 1946 the '*People's Voice* directed a low level campaign of abuse at the Polish refugees' and the camp itself was described as 'an anti-Soviet racket with the refugees guilty of spreading lurid anti-Soviet stories'.

Such attitudes where insinuation is levelled at the camp occupants, albeit from a minority viewpoint, nonetheless posed additional barriers to integration.

The three texts discussed in this paper so far thus foreground the experiences of children during their forced migration from their Polish homeland during WW2. Exposure to such texts offers opportunities for child readers to investigate different historical knowledge and engage in dialogic encounters enabled by the narrative point of view. Furthermore, they provide a conduit for affirming cultural identities.

Similarly, inclusion of more generic texts dealing with similar themes stimulates children's literacy and sociocultural horizons. Several studies have focused on wordless texts as effective pedagogical tools in helping children from minority cultures develop meaning-making from text. Carmen Martinez-Roldan and Sarah Newcomer's (2011) study on immigrant students' interpretations of

*The Arrival* illustrates the purposeful nature of wordless narratives in helping immigrant students articulate their own stories. Jane Gangi's (2005) research on children's literature and social justice focuses on immigrant, refugee and bicultural experiences in historical and current events. She estimates there are six million refugee children in the world and challenges the publishing industry to widen its scope. Gangi's research elaborates the role of small presses in publishing books about cross-cultural experiences and notes the mission statement of the Children's Book Press "to give young people a sense of their own ethnic history and importance" (2005: 247). Given the significant numbers of children who, as a result of global civic unrest, have experienced psychological trauma, it is fitting that the final text discussed in this paper is Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*.

A wordless text like *The Arrival* allows the reader, especially one with recent experience of displacement and relocation, to make connections between the images and to layer his/her own story into the narrative. *The Arrival* visually constructs a generic migratory experience that offers the implied reader an explicit journey (as do all the texts under consideration) in which active engagement with the text enables the creation of co-constructed meaning. This wordless text documents displacement through a series of poignant back stories, and in the process presents a journey deeply accentuated by enigmatic imagery that interrupts expectations.

While the structure of six 'water-stained', parchment-like 'chapters' illuminates the book as an artefact, it also details an explicit chronology of departure, voyage and arrival, cultural interactions, language issues, and employment challenges. A similarly patterned chronology of events is evident in the Polish texts. *The Arrival* provides a useful adjunct to the aforementioned texts in that the overall filmic quality of the visual narrative creates multidimensional points of entry which enable the reader to move in and amongst the events of the plot in a non-linear way. From the outset, the reader is drawn to what Rozario (2012) refers to as the materiality of the book: in much the same way as *Stefania's Dancing Slippers*, *The Arrival* makes full use of page spreads, endpapers, and the cover to include a variety of dimensional print effects. Rozario argues that incorporating the materiality of a book into the narrative enhances the storytelling and becomes an integral component of how a text is read and absorbed. By constructing the migration experience as multi-layered back stories in *The Arrival*, Tan opens up new angles on belonging, and the textured role of memory. His depiction of uncertainty and fear registered by individuals as they depart their homeland, their bewilderment on arrival in a new place, and the mechanised processing procedures for 'clearance' into a new country resonate strongly with the representation of the children's own experiences in the texts about Polish children. Adjustment in the face of language barriers, unfamiliar

customs, currency, and cuisine is an ambivalent process and Tan deftly captures his protagonist's unease. Similarly, the unease displayed by the Polish children is observed by the sailors on board the *General Grant* when they are mystified about why the children never smile. Tan's sepia-toned imagery recognises perplexity within the host community as its members attend to the needs of newcomers, and acknowledge the duality of their lives. Like the previously analysed narratives, Tan's portrayal of displacement underscores the depth of cultural trauma experienced by the protagonists and augments the previous examples of the Australasian fiction on Polish historical experience that foreground the journeys of child refugees. Inclusion of *The Arrival* in this discussion raises the refugee/immigrant experience to a universal level and enhances the possibility of recognising generic elements, albeit through a specific sequence of historical events, in the other three Australasian 'Polish' texts.

Arizpe et al. (2014) use *The Arrival* to demonstrate how readers respond to the ideas in the narrative(s), and their comprehensive research project details how it was read by immigrant children around the globe. Globally, our education systems are striving to find ways to work effectively with diverse populations, including refugees and immigrants. Acquisition of a new language is one of the first hurdles encountered, and researchers develop a non-threatening space in which to explore ideas and themes in *The Arrival* that may reflect children's own experiences. The metaphor of the researcher as traveller is echoed in the organisational structure of embarkation, navigation of the interpretive process, and conceptualisation of possible transformative pedagogical practices. This international inquiry highlights the importance of the discussion of *The Arrival* as a tool for unpacking ideas and co-constructing knowledge.

## Conclusion

Exploration of the three Australasian 'Polish' texts opens up new narrative pathways for a re-focusing of New Zealand's neo-colonial Anglocentric privileging of mid-twentieth century history. The books under discussion point to a less well-known but equally turbulent Eastern European front. With the publication of narratives produced by second generation Polish New Zealand writers based on the experiences of family members, and, in time, the availability of embargoed Soviet records, more detailed representation of events will unfold. What is apparent now is the emergence of compelling information contained in the nuanced prose of the variety of narratives under discussion. Clare Bradford (2011) comments on the role of transnational literature in exposing patterns of dislocation, and signals

how texts can extend beyond national boundaries and foreground interactions between cultures. She suggests that transnational texts offer a way of thinking about how children's literature addresses and is "informed by diverse complex influences, sometimes from a variety of cultures and languages" (Bradford 2011: 1).

Working through trauma implies confrontation, and the refugee narratives selected for analysis in this paper construct cultural trauma for the implied reader through a negotiated process and invite engagement with the text through affective means. These narratives that probe intersections between Polish and New Zealand history prompt children to (re)discover ways of participating in their varied cultures, and of interpreting their worlds. The narratives foreground their protagonists' responses to all that contravenes human rights: deportation, loss, and starvation. In so doing they invite dialogical encounter and assist readers in developing their navigational skills for participation in more pluralistic societies. Powerful stories are integral tools in mediating migration.\*

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\* The author would like to thank all those who gave permission to include materials in both print and electronic versions of this issue of *Libri & Liberi*: to Lindy Fisher and Scholastic for permission to use images from *Stefania's Dancing Slippers*; the Alexander Turnbull Library for permission to use the photograph of the Polish children's camp in Pahiatua. There is no known copyright for the picture of Polish children in New Zealand from *Auckland Weekly News*, 8 November 1944 (Fig. 1).

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### **Iseljavanje i otkrivanje: kulturna trauma i djeca izbjeglice iz Poljske u suvremenoj australazijskoj književnosti**

Rad se ponajprije usredotočava na iskustva djece izbjeglica iz Poljske u Drugome svjetskome ratu prikazana u dječjoj književnosti. Neka od njih preseljena su na Novi Zeland. Vlada Novoga Zelanda prihvatila je 1944. godine 733 djece izbjeglica iz Poljske koja su preživjela deportaciju u radne logore Sovjetskoga Saveza u Sibiru, prije negoli su dospjela u kampove Crvenoga križa u Iranu. Za ovu poljsku djecu dolazak u Novi Zeland, najjužniju britansku koloniju, bilo je izazovno i zbujujuće iskustvo. Iako je Drugi svjetski rat iznjedrio velik broj izbjegličkih pripovijedi, malo je, međutim, onih koje dokumentiraju putovanja obitelji protjeranih iz rodne Poljske i deportiranih u Rusiju, odakle ih se selilo u države poput Novoga Zelanda. Ovakav razmjer iseljavanja ukazuje na dubinu kulturne traume i njezine manifestacije u analiziranim književnim tekstovima. Rad sugerira da način povijesnoga prikaza zabilježen u analiziranim pripovijedima naznačuje prikladan put za daljnja istraživanja transnacionalne književnosti, upućujući na mogućnost književnosti da nadilazi nacionalne granice te da interakcije među kulturama postavi u prvi plan. Rad propituje na koji se način dječja književnost koja prikazuje iskustva djece izbjeglica iz Poljske pozicionira unutar diskursa o kulturnoj traumi.

**Gljučne riječi:** Drugi svjetski rat, kulturna trauma, deportacija, transnacionalno, premještanje, dječja književnost

### **Auswanderung und Entdeckung: Kulturelles Trauma polnischer Flüchtlingskinder in der zeitgenössischen asiatisch-australischen Literatur**

Im Mittelpunkt des Beitrags stehen die in einigen kinder- und jugendliterarischen Werken verarbeiteten Erfahrungen der polnischen Flüchtlingskinder aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, die nach Neuseeland übersiedelt wurden. Die neuseeländische Regierung nahm 1944 733 polnische, die Deportation in die sibirischen Arbeitslager überlebende Flüchtlingskinder auf, bevor sie in den Rotes-Kreuz-Lagern in Iran untergebracht wurden. Für die polnischen Kinder war der Aufenthalt in Neuseeland, dieser südlichsten britischen Kolonie, sowohl eine Herausforderung als auch eine verwirrende Erfahrung. Obwohl aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg eine Vielzahl von Flüchtlingserzählungen hervorgegangen ist, ist die Zahl derer gering, in denen die Reise der aus dem heimischen Polen vertriebenen und nach Russland deportierten, bzw. von da aus nach Neuseeland übersiedelten Familien dokumentiert wird. Das Ausmaß der Reise weist in den analysierten literarischen Texten auf die Tiefe des kulturellen Traumas und dessen Erscheinungsformen hin. Im Beitrag wird darauf hingewiesen, dass die in den analysierten Texten festgestellten historischen Darstellungsweisen den Weg für weitere Erforschung im Bereich der transnationalen Literatur eröffnen, weil darin die nationalen Grenzen als überwunden erscheinen und die Interaktion zwischen den Kulturen in den Vordergrund rückt. Im Beitrag wird ferner die Position der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur,

welche die Erfahrungen der polnischen Flüchtlingskinder verarbeitet, im Rahmen des Diskurses über kulturelle Traumata erforscht.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Zweiter Weltkrieg, kulturelles Trauma, Deportation, Transnationales, Übersiedlung, Kinder- und Jugendliteratur