

UDK 821.162.1.09-93-31:341.485(=411.16)
 821.162.1.09-93-31:340.64-053.2
 394.3:340.64-053.2

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Hide and Seek with Nazis: Playing with Child Identity in Polish Children’s Literature about the Shoah¹

Izvorni znanstveni rad / original research paper

Primljeno / received 23. 8. 2016. Prihvaćeno / accepted 10. 3. 2017.

DOI: 10.21066/carcl.libri.2017-06(01).0001



The paper analyses child character identity change presented in contemporary Polish children’s novels about the Holocaust. Using the category of play described by scholars such as Erving Goffman, George Eisen, and Jerzy Cieřlikowski, it is shown that the change of a protagonist’s identity from Jewish to non-Jewish and vice versa is a sort of play containing a set of rules, practices, stakes, etc. As it is described, the child Jewish identity is something determined by the surrounding (mainly Nazi authority) and then something fluid, not solid (as the protagonists mostly come from integrated Polish-Jewish backgrounds). Playing-out as coming out of normal life seems to be the only way to survive the terror of war and the Shoah. Identity fluidity is presented as a mechanism to show the protagonist as a universal character facing terrible events, which makes these novels readable for contemporary readers.

Keywords: Holocaust, Shoah, Polish children’s literature, child identity, play

In 2013, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews (POLIN) in Warsaw was opened to visitors.² The main idea from the beginning was to create a narrative of the whole Jewish history in Poland from the twelfth century to the present times. The

¹ The article is based on my paper presented in Wrocław (Poland) at the *Child and the Book. Children’s Literature and Play* conference (19–21 May 2016). This paper was financed through state budget funds for science for 2016–2020, as a research project within the “Diamentowy Grant” programme of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The project is entitled *Oczami dziecka. Zagłada w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej i młodzieżowej po roku 1989* [Through the Eyes of a Child. The Holocaust in Polish Children’s and Young Adult Literature after 1989].

² The core exhibition was opened in 2014. For more information, visit the Museum of the History of Polish Jews website <<http://www.polin.pl/en>>.

museum rooms are full of paintings, documents, maps, and other elements which should help recreate and systemise the complicated and uneasy history of Jews in Poland. Since the Middle Ages through the early modern and modern eras, the Poles' attitude toward Jews has been constantly changing: every now and then Jewish people were welcomed, tolerated, accepted, and hated – in consequence, all these experiences strongly influenced their identity. Visitors of the POLIN Museum experience a journey through time and space, and discover why Jewish identity, especially in Poland, is so complex. It is worth noting that many of the Jewish people became integrated or assimilated with Poles – both these processes strongly changed the relation between the two nations, making Jews not only neighbours or friends, but in some cases people almost completely integrated with Poles.

Of course, one of the most tragic elements of the core exhibition of the POLIN Museum presents the time of World War II – the Shoah period (the Holocaust), when Jews did not have any rights and were heavily persecuted. One section of this exhibition deals with those who somehow escaped the Nazi “death machinery”. Małgorzata Melchior in *Zagłada a tożsamość. Polscy Żydzi ocaleni na „aryjskich papierach”* [Shoah and Identity. Polish Jews Saved with “Aryan Papers”] (2004) lists the conditions under which Jews were able to escape their tragic fate, which include: the survival of deportation from eastern Poland to Russia (after the Red Army's invasion on 17 September 1939); escape from ghettos, transport or camp; or participation in partisan groups. In some cases, concerning escape from ghettos (in both big and small towns), Jews had to hide on the “Aryan” side,³ not only in the same town in rented apartments or specially prepared hideouts,⁴ but also in smaller villages or even forests.⁵ Those who stayed in hometowns or villages had to camouflage themselves and pretend to be non-Jewish. Of course, not everyone could do that – there were special preparations and the most important element was to have a “good look”⁶ (*dobry wygląd* in Polish) – back then, not even good training could guarantee safety if someone could be identified as a Jew at first sight (Melchior 2004: 109, 175).

This article focuses on the young protagonists' identities, mainly Jewish, and the way they were changing during the Shoah period. In the paper, words like “child” and “children” are used to describe fictional characters, the young protagonists of Polish novels about the Shoah. These books are obviously based on true, historical events, but

³ Following Melchior's example, I will write the word “Aryan” within quotation marks, because this term relates to the racist Nazi ideology (2004: 10).

⁴ Hideouts are commonly presented in Polish children's literature about the Shoah, but only a few novels tell the story of a child hiding for the whole time. See, e.g., Irena Landau's *Ostatnie piętro* [The Last Floor] of 2015.

⁵ Melchior says that the term “Aryan' side” may be used not only in cases of towns where Jewish quarters were created, but also any other towns and villages, even if there was no special Jewish district at all (2004: 13). There is no Polish novel describing this situation, but, for example, *Run, Boy, Run* by Uri Orlev (2003) is a story of a young boy, Srulik-Jurek, who has to – as the title says – run through forests and small villages using any offered help and hiding from the Nazis.

⁶ Since only one Polish book quoted in this article has been translated into English (Piątkowska 2016), all other translations are by the author of this paper.

the creation of characters is strictly literary (fictional). Also, “identity” is understood as a person’s “self-knowledge of who he/she is, how he/she feels about himself/herself and how he/she is described by others” (Melchior 2004: 20). The most important element is the way Jews were classified by others, especially the Nazis and Gentiles, who may have denounced Jews who had escaped the ghetto. What is important is that many of those who put on armbands with the star of David⁷ (a sign that every Jew had to wear to be easily identified) and were later sent to ghettos were Poles of Jewish origin, in practice not closely related to any Jewish political or religious organisation: they may not even have been considered as Jews by their neighbours (103). Only in the eyes of Nazi laws did they need to be distinguished from their friends as Jews, although some of them did not consider themselves that way. After escaping the ghetto, they had to try to look and be as non-Jewish as possible. According to Maria Susułowska (1990), an absurd term was created for them: “Aryan Jews”, which Melchior describes as nonsense in the racist Nazi dichotomy (Jews/non-Jews), but at the same time was accurate evidence of the absurdity of the Nazi “race policy” (2004: 126). I also think that the term perfectly characterises the situation of these people who had to live between two identities and balance on the edge; the fall would not only be harmful, but also dreadful.

Melchior uses the term “mimicry” borrowed from the animal world, which means an ability to imitate other species or objects in order to survive (2004: 206). Her thoughts circulate around the process of the adopting of another personality by a Jewish person, who had to hide using “Aryan papers”. Properly forged documents were not enough to survive undercover. Equally important were a proper appearance, clothes, behaviour, the way of walking, facial expressions, etc., but also a mental frame of mind and the ability to control one’s emotions (206–207). Besides that, each hiding Jew needed a proper “story” about himself/herself: a logical biography of his/her life situation at that time, and also to be prepared to recite a Catholic prayer, which was usually a test children were forced to pass in the event of being caught by Nazis (221, 236). All these elements are present in Polish children’s literature about the Shoah. I decided to analyse a few of them containing the identity change motif. *Bezsenność Jutki* [Jutka’s Insomnia] by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala (2012) and *Wszystkie moje mamy* [All of My Mums] by Renata Piątkowska (2013) were published in the “Grownup Wars – Children’s Stories” series by Wydawnictwo Literatura. It is worth noting that *Bezsenność Jutki* was nominated for the Book of the Year of the Polish IBBY (International Board of Books for Young People) contest in 2012. I will also analyse the novel *Arka czasu* [The Ark of Time] by Marcin Szczygielski (2013). Szczygielski is a best-selling author for children and young adults and has received, among other prizes, first prize in the Astrid Lindgren Competition for this novel. The last, and most intriguing novel considered here, is Joanna Rudniańska’s *Kotka Brygidy* [Brygida’s Kitten] (2007). It is worth mentioning that, unlike British, American, or Israeli children’s literature about the Shoah, Polish books about the Holocaust are a new trend, which started at the

⁷ It is worth noting that in Poland the armband required by German occupation authorities was white with a blue David star and not a yellow star as in many other occupied countries.

beginning of the 21st century. Each year there are several new titles published and some of them win important Polish prizes for children's books. Nowadays there are about twenty books for child readers about the Shoah written by Polish authors. It is not easy to identify the exact moment when they began to be published, but some of the first titles in this vein appeared in bookshops around 2012, which was announced as the national year of Janusz Korczak (1878/9–1942). Korczak was a famous Polish-Jewish educator and children's author. His most famous novel and one of the best-known Polish children's literature titles is *King Matt the First* from 1923.⁸ Korczak was also a paediatrician, known as Old Doctor (*Stary Doktor* in Polish) and the director of an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto.⁹

All the novels I am going to analyse, apart from *Kotka Brygidy* (Rudniańska 2007), which is unique, present a similar plot: the protagonist is a Jewish child who lives in the ghetto and at one point in the story is walked out or transported to the “Aryan” side. What is also important is that children's play is a vital part of everyday life and of the activities in these books. Besides reading, helping the family and – the most horrifying – witnessing death and experiencing hunger or pain, the young protagonists are children as normal as one can imagine. They like to laugh, have fun, run, play in many ways. The coexistence of death, pain and play in the Shoah time is described by George Eisen in *Children and Play in the Holocaust* (1990). In the context of children's literature, this perspective was used by Daniel Feldman in his noteworthy article “Reading Games in Auschwitz: Play in Holocaust Youth Literature” (2014). Although he used Eisen's and Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* to interpret, for example, Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*, he juxtaposed the Shoah itself with the play theory and showed that these two opposite terms coexist in children's literature.

On the other hand, the goal in this paper is to analyse the process of the change of child identity (from Jewish to non-Jewish and vice versa) as an activity founded on play. To achieve this, I will use Erving Goffman's theory used in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) and the method presented in the 1967 *Wielka zabawa* [The Great Play] by the famous Polish children's culture and literature scholar Jerzy Cieřlikowski (second edition, 1985).¹⁰ First, I will focus on Jewish identity during the Shoah period, then show how it is described in children's literature and analyse it using the briefly introduced play theories.

Stefan Korboński in *The Jews and the Poles in World War II* (1989) reviews a decree of Hans Frank (who was Governor of the General Government – a German zone

⁸ The first English translation appeared in 1986 (*King Matt the First*, translated by Richard Lourie, introduction by Bruno Bettelheim, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux). For the time being, there is no Croatian translation of this classic.

⁹ For more information about Korczak, see A. Witkowska, “Janusz Korczak” (2016).

¹⁰ I am pleased to use Cieřlikowski's theory for two reasons. First, as far as I know, he is almost unknown to scholars outside Poland – his *Wielka zabawa* has, unfortunately, not been translated yet. Second, the “Child and the Book: Children's Literature and Play” conference in Wrocław, where I presented the paper on which this text is based, was closely related to the celebration of the centenary of Cieřlikowski's birth (two Conference panels were dedicated to his work and heritage).

of occupation established by Hitler after the invasion of Poland) according to which (1989: 43):

any person with three grandparents who had been a member of a Jewish religious community was Jewish. As a result, there were many people in the ghettos whose parents had already changed their religious affiliation, and who did not consider themselves Jews at all.

Of course, it was a formal, bureaucratic Jewish identity, set by Nazi law. In the chosen children's novels, Jewish identity is based on cultural rather than religious aspects (the latter might have been the main factor of Jewishness). These cultural aspects are, for example, the games children play, the food they eat, etc., as well as their physical appearance. The Jewish look, the so-called "bad look", was what determined Jewishness in the first place during the Shoah period and in the same way it is presented in children's literature. Even if someone has the so-called "good look", he or she has to wear an armband, so that he or she can be easily recognised in the street or in a crowd. Additionally, according to another Frank decree, Jews leaving the ghetto without permission (and also anyone who consciously hides a Jew) would be punished by death (Melchior 2004: 159).

Szymon, the protagonist of *All of My Mums* by Renata Piątkowska (2013), is a young boy who lives in the Warsaw ghetto. The Jewish identity of Szymon and his sister Chana is presented in the novel in a very interesting way: the religious sphere is absent,¹¹ but when they were hungry, because there was not enough food in the ghetto, they recalled many fine dishes of Jewish cuisine, which they would have liked to eat: tzimmes, challah dipped in honey, and cholent.¹²

But the crucial moment when Szymon realised he was a Jew occurred when the armbands with blue stars appeared in his home. Recalling that moment, he said: "At first I was even glad because I liked the star, although I never admitted that" (Piątkowska 2016: 15). He, as a child, did not really know what wearing an armband meant, but it looked attractive to him. Therefore, he did not say anything, perhaps because he felt that it would have been inappropriate. It took him very little time to realise that these armbands were not worn for decoration (16):

I always cringed in fear when Chana and I went out wearing our stars and saw a German patrol coming down the street from the opposite direction. When the tall, black boots were approaching us, thumping loudly on the cobbles, I would bend my head down low and look down. I was afraid that passing us by, they would suddenly stop next to my lace-up shoes and Chana's red boots. I repeated over and over in my mind: "Go away. Come on, go now."

¹¹ For example, Szymon only recalls Hanukkah when he says that when playing war with his friend Dawid they "made the medals from the buttons wrapped in gold foil from chocolate Hanukkah gelt" (Piątkowska 2016: 8).

¹² Tzimmes is a common name for several Jewish dishes, usually served as dessert. Challah is fluffy white yeast bread in the shape of a plait. Cholent is a slow-cooked stew which, in addition to beef, includes beans, onions, cereal, and potatoes.

The lack of religious elements is clearly visible in other novels with a Jewish child protagonist: similarly to Szymon, Rafał from *Arka Czasu* and Jutka from *Bezsenność Jutki* are basically identified by the reader as Jews not because of their professed religion but because they live in a ghetto – a small, closed district, where they long for freedom and the company of others, also those defined by Nazis as non-Jewish children. Although their identity is mostly known to them, Jutka – whose father was Polish and whose mother was from Vienna (both Jewish) – does not know who she really is (Combrzyńska-Nogala 2012: 11). What is interesting is that in the latter part of the novel children living in the ghetto discuss their identity, and one of the boys says that because Jutka's grandfather “doesn't know Yiddish, he is a Pole”, not a Jew (36). Also, Rafał does not play with children who live next door, because he cannot understand them – they speak in a “foreign language”, which is Yiddish (Szczygielski 2013: 20). He knows only Polish, because his grandfather forbade him to go to school and taught him at home, the Polish language among other subjects (24). As it is discovered later, Rafał was born in an assimilated Jewish-Polish family and sees himself as a “bit Jewish and a bit Polish” (76) – besides, he and his family have always been putting decorations on the Christmas tree, as he remembers it.

The young protagonists know they have to live in a ghetto because they are Jewish, although they do not understand why this is so. Rafał recalls the almost mythical “ONCE” before the war (Szczygielski 2013: 28):

They say that ONCE one's origin really didn't matter but what kind of person he or she was did matter. Everyone lived where they wanted to regardless of their name, religion, skin, hair, or eye colour.

Although the young protagonists are unaware of what will come in the future, their parents and grandparents are, and they begin the process of creating a non-Jewish child (or a grandchild) from their own child. For example, a nurse came to Szymon's home and helped to get him out of the ghetto. That lady was Irena Sendler, a real person, who saved about 2,500 Jewish children during the Shoah period. Szymon's mother, supposedly inspired by Sendler, was preparing him to live and hide on the other side of the wall (Piątkowska 2016: 28–30):

Once [...] my mother said something that surprised me:
 “You know son, your real name is not Szymon but Staś. Remember you are Staś. And your surname is Kalinowski,” she repeated.
 Afterwards she would wake me up at night, shake my arm and ask:
 “Tell me, what's your name?”
 At first I would get it wrong, which made my mother nervous, but finally I could remember and always replied the way she wanted:
 “My name is Staś Kalinowski,” I said, and my mother kissed me, wrapped in the quilt, and let me sleep on.
 I didn't understand any of this, but she knew that after leaving the ghetto I would have a new name. If I was to survive, I could no longer be Szymon Bauman. I was to become Staś Kalinowski and my mother helped me to remember that. She also made

sure that I was able to recite the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* prayers. All Polish children knew these prayers and if one day the Germans would order me to pray aloud, I could not afford to make any mistakes.

He had to learn Catholic prayers, change his name from Szymon to Staś Kalinowski – these kinds of preparations for life on the “Aryan” side are a common element of the memoirs of Shoah survivors (Melchior 2004: 110, 118). After the training, Szymon-Staś was transported in a truck and when he reached a safe house he was sent to the bathroom to clean himself. This scene is a very significant one, especially accompanied with Maciej Szymanowicz’s illustration (**Fig. 1**). In the picture, we can see Szymon-Staś in a bathtub, his armband lying on the floor, and a paper ship with a Polish flag is floating in the bathtub. The boy is cleaning himself not only from the dirt of the ghetto, but also, in a symbolic way, from all his Jewishness, to become a non-Jew now. This may be interpreted as a ritual immersion (taking a bath), which is very important in Judaism. Generally, the ritual cleaning of oneself is connected with women, who are stigmatised with menstrual impurity. For a week after menstruation begins women are not allowed to have any sexual relation and “at the conclusion of the term of impurity they would bathe in a *mikveh*, a special purification bath, before being allowed to resume marital relations” (Segal 2009: 264; emphasis in the original). The ritual immersion is also practised in many others circumstances, depending on the religiousness of the person, but it is an obligatory element of conversion to Judaism (Segal 2014: 593). Here the ritual immersion, as an element of conversion, is reversed – the change is from Jewishness to non-Jewishness.

Rafał, the protagonist of *Arka czasu* (Szczygielski 2013), also takes part in a special preparation process just before leaving the ghetto. His grandfather had arranged a meeting with two women who were to help Rafał: one of them bathed him and wanted to brighten his hair a little bit, but she made a mistake and it went wrong – he ended up with a bright orange mop on his head.¹³ The other woman, called Stella, appears later to walk Rafał out of the ghetto. She instructs him to pretend to be happy, that he should look straight into people’s eyes and behave as if he was going to the park. What is important is that Rafał, although knowing that Germans are dangerous, is not fully aware of how dangerous the walk with Stella is – he pretends to have a great time with her and after a while he really does. While walking with Stella out of the ghetto, he comes up with an idea (Szczygielski 2013: 95–96):

I imagined I was a Traveller in the Land of Time. I just came in a time machine to a mysterious, extraordinary future. No one should identify me as someone who came from here and now, so I had to pretend I was one of the natives. I discovered the dangerous land and Stella was my guide. [...] It was just some sort of play, but when I came up with it I immediately felt my fear went away and everything started to be more interesting.

¹³ Michał Głowiński (2005), a famous Polish literature scholar and writer who lived in the Warsaw ghetto as a child during the Shoah, recalls a similar story in his memoirs *The Black Seasons* (chapter “Jasio the Redhead”).



Fig. 1. Szymon-Staś in a bathtub (ill. M. Szymanowicz)¹⁴
Sl. 1. Szymon-Staś u kadi (il. M. Szymanowicz)

Rafał then treats the “training” and escaping the ghetto as a play/game to overcome fear. As Eisen says, “in the Holocaust [play] became an instinctual form for understanding the absurd and for accommodating the irrational” (1990: 122). Similar “training” before getting out of the ghetto is presented in *Bezsenność Jutki* (Combrzyńska-Nogala 2012). Jutka is unlucky, because she has the “bad look” – she clearly looks like a Jewish girl, but her aunt and grandfather tell her that she has to keep calm outside of the ghetto and pretend that she does not speak Polish – her beautiful black hair made even an accidental passer-by think that she was Italian.

All young protagonists are asked to pretend and play their roles the best they can. Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* says (1959: 10):

[...] when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that

¹⁴ We are grateful to Wydawnictwo Literatura in Poland for giving Krzysztof Rybak permission to include the picture from Renata Piątkowska’s *Wszystkie moje mamy* illustrated by Maciej Szymanowicz in his paper to be published in both printed and electronic versions of this issue of *Libri & Liberi*.

the character they see actually possesses the attribute he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.

Szymon, Jutka and Rafał, playing the non-Jew roles, try to make an impression on other people, mainly Nazis, but also on the Gentiles, who very often revealed information about the hiding Jews to the Gestapo. Melchior also describes this process as “a role to play-out” (2004: 237) and “a masquerade” (248). In these cases, children had to be focused all the time, follow the rules set by their parents or patrons, and interact with other people in a specific, trained and rehearsed way.

Make-believe is one of the most popular children’s games. In his *Wielka zabawa*, Jerzy Cieślowski says that game and play were created for children by adults and also that “play is indeed a supplement to ‘normal’ life; the act of play is a conscious escape from official, serious life, to the makeshift sphere of activity; it is a ‘pure’ form, free of the critical norms of realistic behaviour” (1967/1985: 215). The coming out of normal life is the experience of every child who is about to leave the ghetto and hide on the “Aryan” side. Abandoning “official life” and living in constant play also creates a “second” identity, as Cieślowski says, in contrast to a “constant” one (ibid.). According to him, “playing” with identity can be described as a transformation of the psychological self and the creation of a new self-identity. This creation needs solid preparation, but at the time of play both the “old” and “new” identities coexist – a well-trained player knows how to keep the right balance between these two (215–216). Also, in time, the illusion of “non-real” play is put aside and the play becomes more real than reality itself. Reading this definition of play by Cieślowski, I would assume that this characteristic is very similar to the process of manipulation with the child’s Jewish identity. Szymon, Rafał and Jutka have to live with their two identities: they bear two names (a Jewish and a Polish one),¹⁵ they have changed their appearance, including clothes and – in the case of Rafał – hair colour. Besides, they learned how to pray in the Catholic way using Polish, and how to pretend that they are happy, well-fed and healthy-looking children. At one point, their new Polish identity begins to overshadow their Jewish roots, which starts to be less important for the protagonists. Cieślowski is probably right in saying that this sort of “play” was invented or created by adults, who set the rules, but at the same time they did not explain to the children the major rule of that game: the thing they are actually playing for is life (or death). It is also worth noting that the “play” of identity change is played not only between the children themselves (which at one point – as Szymon’s conversation with other children rescued from the ghetto shows – may become a complete fiasco), but mainly between children and adults, especially Nazi soldiers, who are a continuous threat and – in terms of theatre – a very tough audience to satisfy.

In his article “Playing with the Past in Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*”, Daniel Feldman uses the following quotation from the novel he analyses: “Knowing and not-knowing [...]. It’s all part of the game. And the game is to uncover the hidden order of

¹⁵ Szymon is Staś and Rafał Grzywiński changed into Rafał Mortyś.

the universe. Seder means ‘order.’ I read that in a book” (2015: 100). It is interesting that after the ritual immersion in *mikveh* comes *seder*, which is a Hebrew word for “order”. Although this term does not appear in Polish children’s literature, I presume that *seder* is present in a similar way as the ritual immersion is in *All of My Mums*: the authors use these Jewish elements in a reversed way, which is how everything was in wartime. In another article, Feldman claims that “juvenile literature of the Holocaust shows how children can make sense of the Holocaust precisely in terms of the games often associated with youth” (2014: 364). So “making sense of the Holocaust” is only possible when *seder* is put aside, and when children, playing games such as make-believe, try to understand the surrounding reality. As Feldman concludes (375):

Games are not distinct from “real life” or an evasion of difficult experience, but a portal to how children test their emerging feelings and ideas in their negotiations with reality. Play may foster evasion from real circumstances if the participants see play and reality as separate and distinct; but it can also foster engagement with troubling events if one conceives of games as real and reality as the most serious game of all.

The last novel under analysis is, as mentioned above, very interesting and not an obvious example. *Kotka Brygidy* by Joanna Rudniańska (2007) is a story about Helena, a Polish girl who lives in Warsaw just before and during WWII. Her life changes dramatically when the war begins and “changes everything”, including her family’s friend Kamil, who “became a Jew because of the war” (34). The girl, as a Gentile, experiences the Shoah from the other side of the ghetto wall. Although Polish and Catholic, Helena identifies herself in a more complex manner. From the tree in her yard she can see three sacred buildings: a Catholic church, an Orthodox one, and a synagogue. Her neighbours are Jewish and every Friday evening they ask her to leave so they can celebrate the Shabbat. On summer days Helena can clearly hear the Jewish prayers through the window. One day (13):

She went home, put a little metal bowl on her head, sat by the table, swung on the chair muttering strange, made-up words.

– Stop it – said mom. – You were at the Istmans’, you have seen their Shabbat and that’s okay. But don’t mock them. They just pray to God in a different way, that’s all.

– And what kind of God is that! – added Stańcia.

– To which God? – asked Helena.

– For there is one God – mom said.

But Helena knew better. There, in Praga [a district in Warsaw – K.R.], where she lived, there were three Gods. And she prayed to all three of them every evening, changing a bit the prayer Stańcia taught her: “Oh God from the Catholic church, oh God from the Orthodox church, oh God from the synagogue, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...”.

Helena is an open-minded young girl who grows up in a diverse religious environment which enables her to adapt her personal beliefs and accept other religions, because “there is one God” (ibid.), as her mom says. Identity play concerns not only the religious element of her life. When uncle Erik comes to their home, Helena’s family is given the choice to sign into a *Deutsche Volksliste*: as Stańcia the housekeeper says,

everyone who gets on the list changes into a German, but Helena decides that she does not want that to happen (33–34). *Kotka Brygidy* is an interesting example of the play with Jewish identity, because Helena, being conscious of the diversity of the surrounding world, decided to change her identity from non-Jewish into Jewish – the situation is totally different from Szymon’s, Rafał’s or Jutka’s. When Jews started to wear the armbands, one of Helena’s friends – Tomek – answered her question about why he had to wear it in these words (36):

No one ordered me to wear it. It’s a magical armband. Everyone who wears it sees what others do not see. Only some people can wear the armbands. Look, it is a magical sign.

Then he pointed to the blue star of David. Of course, he was making fun of the little protagonist, but Helena believed him and asked him to let her wear the armband. After wearing it all day she noticed that all the neighbours ignored her or looked at her in a strange way. She met her family’s friend – Kamil – who was angry at her because she was wearing the armband. Later he explained that it was dangerous and asked her to put it away. Yet, Helena’s behaviour is understandable because earlier her mother had told her to ignore the armband on Kamil’s arm – she said to her that “it doesn’t really mean anything. It’s just a piece of cloth, nothing more” (35).

The protagonist’s parents, who before the war had a lot of Jewish neighbours and friends, now help the Jews who escaped the ghetto. A few times, the girls who are taken from the ghetto and have to change their looks, learn Catholic prayers, etc., come to Helena’s home. Helena spends a lot of time with them and witnesses many different operations, which create an “Aryan” identity for the girls. The protagonist begins to understand the critical situation of the Jews and one day asks her father (115):

– Daddy, maybe we are Jews too? – she asked.

– Come on! – said Stańcia and felt silent.

Mama looked through the window with fear, afraid that the smoke from the burning ghetto would enter the room.

– You are right, Helena. We are Jews. Now every decent man is a Jew – said her father.

It shows that Helena and her family, who help Jews and hide them in the warehouse near their home, start to feel as if they were Jewish. In Rudniańska’s novel, Jewish identity is not only defined by the armband, religion or ethnicity: it is the compassion and helping others that can change identity from non-Jewish into Jewish.

To conclude, Jewish identity presented in the discussed novels is something fluid, based on everyday actions and habits, not a professed or practised religion. One of the reasons may be that children are not as familiar with religious practices as adults are, and are not as sure of their ethnicity as their parents or grandparents. Because of the fluidity mentioned above, identity can easily be changed and replaced by a new, non-Jewish one. I think this is a process which perfectly fits children’s literature because the reader – who in contemporary Poland is more likely to be a Catholic than a Jew – is able to identify with the protagonist, who becomes a universal figure of a scared child, longing for love and a peaceful childhood.

The fictional transformation of a Jewish child into a non-Jewish one is a process planned by adults: it had its own rules, which had to be obeyed in order to succeed. Numerous preparations and processes were the required conditions to begin the game of hide and seek with Nazis – the stakes were high, but children usually did not know they were playing for their lives.

Racial and ethnic discrimination is shown in the cases discussed above as artificially created abuse – children did not know the borders, and the absurd dichotomy of Jewish and “Aryan” was not accepted, even though children had to abide by the rules because of Nazi law – just until the identity play began. Emphasising this artificial division may also help to revise the prejudicial stereotypes (of both Poles and Jews) still present in Polish historical discourse that have their roots in the history of *szmalcownicy* (people blackmailing Jews under the threat of informing the Nazis about their hiding place) or that are just anti-Semitic statements unconsciously referring to Nazi ideology.

From a didactic point of view, these stories present sympathising with persecuted minorities as a moral action, as shown in *Kotka Brygidy*. Child identity (Jewish or non-Jewish) can still be fluid, not ultimate and therefore free of prejudice. And today, more than 70 years after the tragedy of the Shoah, real, non-fictional children of different religions, skin colour, and ethnicity can explore historical and modern Jewish identity at the King Matt’s Family Educational Area at the POLIN Museum, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the place named after Janusz Korczak’s most famous children’s book.¹⁶

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¹⁶ For more, see King Matt’s Family Educational Area website <www.polin.pl/en/kingmatt>.

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Igra skrivača s nacistima: poigravanje dječjim identitetom u poljskoj dječjoj književnosti o šoi

U radu se analizira promjena identiteta dječjega lika predstavljena u poljskim suvremenim dječjim romanima o holokaustu. Koristeći se kategorijom igre kakvu su opisali, primjerice, Erving Goffman, George Eisen i Jerzy Cieślowski, rad pokazuje da promjena židovskoga u nežidovski identitet (i obrnuto) funkcionira kao neka vrsta igre s vlastitim pravilima, praksama, ulozima itd. Dječji židovski identitet opisan je kao nešto određeno vlastitim okruženjem (u prvom redu nacističkim autoritetom), a potom kao nešto fluidno, a ne strogo definirano (protagonisti uglavnom potječu iz integriranih poljsko-židovskih okruženja). Igranje u smislu iskoraka od normalnoga života doima se kao jedini način na koji je moguće preživjeti užase rata i šoe. Fluidnost identiteta predstavljena je kao mehanizam s pomoću kojega se protagoniste predstavlja kao univerzalne likove suočene sa strahovitim događanjima, što ove romane čini privlačnima i suvremenim čitateljima.

Ključne riječi: holokaust, šoa, poljska dječja književnost, dječji identitet, igra

Versteckspiel mit Nazis: Das Durchspielen der Identität von Kindern in der polnischen Holocaust-Kinderliteratur

Im Beitrag wird der in den zeitgenössischen polnischen Holocaust-Kinderromanen enthaltene Identitätswandel von Kindergestalten besprochen. Ausgehend von einem Spielverständnis wie jenem von Erving Goffman, George Eisen oder Jerzy Cieślowski wird darauf hingewiesen, dass der Wandel der jüdischen Identität in eine nicht-jüdische sowie umgekehrt wie ein Spiel nach eigenen Regeln, Praktiken, Rollen usf. funktioniert. Die jüdische Identität der Kinderprotagonisten wird als etwas beschrieben, das zuerst durch das Umfeld (vor allem durch nazistische Autoritätsstrukturen) bestimmt wird, um diese dann auch als etwas Fluides und insofern nicht streng Definiertes zu verstehen, insbesondere da die Gestalten überwiegend aus integriertem polnisch-jüdischem Umfeld stammen. Das Spiel als eine Form des Heraustretens aus der Lebensnormalität scheint die einzige Art und Weise zu sein, um die Gräueltaten des Krieges und des Holocausts zu überwinden. Im Beitrag wird die Fluidität der Identität als Mechanismus vorgestellt, anhand dessen die Protagonisten zu universellen Gestalten werden, die schreckliche Ereignisse erleiden mussten, was dann das Interesse an diesen Romanen auch bei den zeitgenössischen Lesern weckt.

Schlüsselwörter: Holocaust, polnische Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, Identität von Kindern, Spiel