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**Perspectives of Pre-primary and Primary
Education – Challenges and Strategies**

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Children's literature and educational games popularizing knowledge about the 20th century history among children at early school age (*Mikołaj Brenk*)

Introduction

In the work I would like to raise the problem of historical education of children from the first grades of primary school. In the course of compulsory school education in the I-III grades, history is treated marginally, however, in recent years there have been publications which fill this knowledge gap. Thanks to them, it is possible to familiarize children with history as part of additional classes, or to make them spend their free time together with their parents discovering the history of Poland.

The aim of the work is to present selected publications that prove to be helpful in bringing children at early school age closer to selected issues in the history of Poland. There is quite a many history-concerned publication that appeared in recent years, however in the following analysis we only manage to cover a comic book, a book and educational games issued by the Institute of National Remembrance.

The 20th century is definitely the dominant century in historical publications for children. This is a positive trend, inspiring hope, because it is the 20th century that is treated of a secondary importance in the school historical education, both in the primary and secondary schools. Especially the teaching content concerning the history after 1945 is carried out in the last grade at both educational levels (primary and secondary school). As Jarosław Durka emphasizes, "the key issues regarding European integration or political transformation in Poland are often discussed in a hurry in the face of the ending school year". There is often a lack of time and involvement of students to carry out debates or discussions. Maybe it is worth to rethink the matter, and even in upper secondary schools, to give up the chronological arrangement of content in curricula and textbooks?" (Durka, 2005, 56).

The situation of marginalization of an important historical point of reference, which is the fate of Poland in the last few decades, is astonishing because this is the period in the public space (media reports, political disputes, etc.). It is also definitely the dominant period in the history of Poland. This is evidenced annually by the celebrated anniversaries, for example related to the memory of the Unbroken Soldiers (1944-1947), the Warsaw Uprising (1944), the creation of Solidarity (1980); national holidays: regaining independence (1918), the Battle of Warsaw (1920); or historical disputes – for example, concerning the Germans forced to be resettled after the end of the Second World War, or the amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance (2018). These are just a few selected topics.

Lack of reliable knowledge about recent history undoubtedly makes it difficult for young people to have a deeper understanding of the contemporary socio-political situation. In turn, presenting the history of Poland in the 20th century only through the prism of controversial

statements by journalists, makes us accustomed to historical judgments without having at least an outline of professional knowledge.

18.1 How not to kill history?

Today's history education of children and adolescents from the point of view of the young recipients is the transfer and then enforcement of knowledge which, without a greater problem, can be extracted from the Internet resources within a few seconds. As Tomasz Tokarz emphasized, history education is today quite strong in the positivist paradigm. Despite the attempts to reform, the erudite model is still dominant, focusing on the transfer of factographic material. Students are required to know a large amount of information, the suitability of which is difficult to prove in the modern world. Treating history as a set of data that needs to be mastered is the best way to "kill history" (Tokarz, 2005, 33).

At this point, the question arises as to what and how should it be taught to ensure that the content conveyed is attractive to the young people and encourage them to delve into the mysteries of history? This is particularly important in the first grades of primary school, because already in this period of life you can ignite a passion for a field, or – as it often happens – burn bridges. Discussing "children's themes" in teaching history is nothing new. It has achieved some systematizations, including the one by Harmut Voit proposed on the basis of German historiography. He wrote that, besides universal history, he would also teach the newest history, which threads are present in the current social discussion. However, as the main topics to take up in teaching history of the youngest children, he lists the history of basic life functions, i.e. food, professional work, residence, dressing, celebrating holidays and spending free time. As the second area, he indicates the history of childhood, i.e. the history of games, school, child labour and the upbringing of girls. The third category is created by the history of the living environment: history of the district, population, environment, everyday life, functioning in previous periods – e.g. during the war (Voit, 1999, 125). Thus, the answer to the question about the content of teaching could be reduced to the indication that children will be attracted to content that is related to the familiar environment of their lives. In addition, the aforementioned areas should be supplemented, for example, with content that evokes emotions – children will certainly be interested in unusual stories about the heroes – and these are not missing in the pages of history.

18.2 Examples of historical books for the youngest readers

So how to make a modern child who has just learned to read treat history as an interesting, inspiring field for interesting explorations, worth devoting time and attention to? To answer this question, examples of publications popularizing the history of the 20th century, to which the creators included children from grades 1-3 of primary school, will be helpful. When discussing these publications, the study authors also indicated their basic educational values.

The young reader is introduced to the subject of the participation of Polish pilots in the Battle of Britain (1940) by the ¹⁸*Tale of the Spitfire*. It was written by Józef Mierzejewski in 1947 for his children, a Polish pilot who fought in the 308 Squadron in Great Britain during World War II. The book is richly illustrated with the original drawings from the first edition. In order for children to better understand the more difficult content, it was supplemented with contemporary photographs and illustrations, as well as a biography of the author and a historical introduction thanks to which an adult can help the young reader craving knowledge to explore the subject matter. An additional advantage encouraging to discover the intricacies of the operation of the aircraft machine is a cardboard plane model attached to the book for self-assembly. The CD with an audiobook is an addition broadening the range of recipients – for example, for young readers.

This example shows that the seemingly complicated subject matter of historical military machines may become the subject of teaching the historical knowledge of young children. At this point, it is worth noting that we are talking about teaching with methods of searching, while minimizing the methods of giving facts. Needless to say, a classic lecture in this area of knowledge would not find many amateurs in this age groups. Meanwhile, thanks to the appropriate form of the message, the child, after reading the text, can explore its meaning by analysing the model and scheme of the airplane in the book, explaining its elements, or by asking the parent or teacher questions about historical realities.

The second example of children's literature telling the history of the 20th century is the *War Odyssey of Antek Srebrny* – a series of comics designed for primary school children being issued by the Branch Office of Public Education of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw since 2015. The comic book is a form of literature undoubtedly attractive for young readers who are just beginning to read their first words fluently. They eagerly reach for a story told by sequential pictures, supplemented with a small amount of text. Its hero is Antek Srebrny, a 14-year-old scout from Grodno. In the first comic book, opening the series, we meet a brave boy who from the beginning of World War II, together with his friends, was prepared to fight against Germans, but the course of history caused that he faced another deadly enemy of Poland – the Soviets. The fate of Antek is running through important for Poles events of World War II (Robaczewski, Ronek 2015), and the series ends with the ninth comic book, the action of which takes place just after the war in 1946 (Konarski, Ronek, 2017).

Due to the fact that this publication is addressed to a very young reader who does not know historical facts, the story presented in it only simplifies the children's knowledge of the fate of Poles. The plot of the subsequent comics concerns the participation of Poles in World War II, and clearly indicates the participation of two aggressors in it – the Third Reich and the Soviet Russia. The hero encounters them. The main character was constructed to resemble many of his real prototypes, e.g. a 13-year-old heroic defender of Grodno, Tadeusz Jasiński.

¹⁸ The bibliographic guide of the National Library indicated children aged 6-13 as a group of readers of this position.

The plot of the comic character is strictly a fairy-tale. Of course, events are embedded within authentic historical events and there appear historical figures, such as General Władysław Anders, General Stanisław Kopański, and General Erwin Rommel. Thus, this comic book is not intended to replace the textbook for history, but only to familiarize the reader with interesting events and characters and thus encourage further exploration of knowledge.

The value of the comic book is also a combination of a simple form of communication, selection of interesting historical events and building a perfect literary creation. Antek Srebrny can certainly be regarded as an archetypal silhouette of a solitary wanderer, a traveller curious of the world, who without having a permanent place of residence, feels happy everywhere. He embodies the most primal human longing for adventure, very much desirable by a child. These are typically boyish dreams of danger, fighting, testing own strength in a meeting with a dangerous opponent (see Baluch, 1994, 78). Reading the book, the boy experiences sensational adventures, feels unusual tension and finally wins, which gives vent to his emotions.

In order to facilitate the search for knowledge to some extent, the *War Odyssey of Antek Srebrny* has been supplemented with several additions: a board game based on the story of comic books (containing historical information and iconographies, significantly extends the knowledge of players about the events in which the protagonist participates); two-sided puzzle (depicting the participation of the Polish Armed Forces during World War II); patches for clothes and a replica of an eagle (worn by Polish soldiers). In addition, short animated films were created based on selected parts of the comic book.

18.3 Educational games for children on historical topics

The approximation of historical knowledge, combined with the ability to analyse facts, is the domain of educational games. Their form is adapted to the age of the player, and among the selection of this type of publications, we find those which lower age limit includes six-year-old children.

Wojtek the bear is an educational board game for players from 6 years of age. Its plot is based on the realities of World War II – the history of Poles deported from Polish territories occupied by the Soviet Union, who evacuated from it, undertaking a laborious journey from Russia, through Iran, Palestine, Egypt and Italy to Scotland. During the journey, Polish soldiers bought a small bear and called it Wojtek. The bear went through the whole combat trial with the soldiers, giving them many opportunities to smile and help in need. He kept a watch out for the equipment, and during the famous battle of Monte Cassino he carried ammunition to the soldiers. In the game, following the route of the 2nd Polish Corps, cards are collected with souvenirs related to the fate of soldiers and their famous bear Wojtek. The player who collects the largest collection of souvenirs wins.

The educational value of the game is undoubtedly familiarization of children with the history of the Polish army during the Second World War. In addition, by placing the game board against the background of the then Europe map (also a part of Asia and Africa), children learn historical geography. Thanks to this, it is possible to better understand the location of Polish lands during the war between two aggressors: the German Reich and the Soviet

Union. The educational game conveys historical content in the form of a nice story, despite the difficult historical background. It is suitable for conducting an interesting lesson at school, also to arouse interest in the history of children at home. The game is supplemented with a book with an easily written story of the bear and Polish soldiers, explaining the meaning of the graphics on the cards.

The **Znajznak** game, which has a simple form, is slightly reminiscent of the Memory game, became very popular. Its basic variant is intended for children from 8 years of age. The educational task, which the creators set before the game is quite difficult – it is to introduce children to the world of basic code of symbols and historical signs. From the point of view of history teaching, this is very important, because it is impossible to navigate history without knowing the symbols that are common in the surroundings: on monuments, boards, in literature, media and commercial products. Their knowledge is necessary to understand the message conveyed and to skillfully remember historical events. The book included in the game contains a historical commentary on each symbol. Among the cards there were symbols important for Poles, related to the events of the past century: Józef Piłsudski, Lech Wałęsa, Fiat 126p, Fighting Solidarity, Fighting Poland, Monument to the Victims of June 1956 in Poznań, the Emblem of the People's Republic of Poland.

By learning about symbols, students build their own conceptual grid, allowing them to place events and characters in the right historical context. What is important, this knowledge is useful not only in school activities but allows to read signs and symbols in the urban space, in pictures, in films and in paintings, in literary and journalistic texts. Not only the factography, but also the cultural context, the ability to build associations, and the use of knowledge in broader statements create the educational value of this game (Sachnowska, 2014, 6).

7. In Defense of Lviv is a board game for children from 8 years of age, which also has a more difficult variant for older players. Its historical background is the Battle of Lviv (1920), during which Polish and American airmen of the 7th Fighter Squadron stopped the 1st Army of Bolshevik troops on the Bug line. For the first time in history, planes fought with cavalry armed with rifles.

Thanks to this game, the young recipient is familiar with the difficult history of Poland in the first years after regaining independence (1918). The attached instruction introduces the historical background, depicts the situation on the map on the front, shows the silhouettes of heroic pilots fighting for free Poland, and presents military equipment used during the fight.

Conclusion

The examples presented above are an exemplification of the positive feature of contemporary historical publications intended for early childhood education students. Thanks to them, the child learns history in an active way – she/he is a participant in historical events. The emotional sphere is involved, so that the acquired knowledge is memorized for a longer time and raises positive connotations. Reversing the traditional form

of knowledge administration through learning from detail to the general encourages children to seek answers to emerging questions and to reach to traditional knowledge resources. Learning symbols and detailed historical concepts is an extremely important quality of publications popularizing history, which would require arduous effort in traditional teaching methods in order for them to be assimilated. The illustrations and images used make historical knowledge easier to read. In addition to graphics created for the needs of books and games, the source material is used: authentic photographs or photographs of original objects. Especially games create the possibility of multiple observations of the same detail, thanks to which the user has time to focus on the details, to interact with the objects of analysis for a long time. In addition, the presentation of objects or people in action allows to understand the mechanisms of their actions or behaviour, to indicate basic and secondary characteristics, to note mutual relations. Historic maps, usually attached to the publications in question, are also very important. They are often necessary for the correct reading of a book or game. Their study teaches real distances (e.g. between states during the war), strategic places – e.g. bridges on the river or the situation on the front (see Wojdon, 2002, 45-46).

The wish that I allow myself to include in the conclusion is a request to create books also for girls, not only for boys. I am referring to the main tendency of this type of publications from the last dozen or so years. The stereotypically masculine features dominant in the publications, expressed by the exposed male characters, make history once again present as a story of men told for men. The resulting gap could be supplemented with interesting publications. In addition, there is hope that the tendency to talk about history will be interesting not only for publishing houses that popularize knowledge but will also include materials for students at school.

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