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[Milan Mašát](#) *

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Article

Literary Depictions of the Shoah as a Means of Familiarizing Primary School Pupils with Relevant Facts

Milan Mašát

The Department of Czech Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc

* Correspondence: milan.masat01@upol.cz

Abstract: The paper is devoted to contemporary artistic narratives in which the events of the Shoah are thematized. We are convinced that the selected publications intended for children, i.e. *Red Ribbon*, *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop* and *Rywka's Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto*, consist of an informative and formative function in addition to an aesthetic one. Through the interpretation of these publications, we show their potential in presenting facts that are connected to one line of events of the Second World War. The main benefit of narratives conceived in this way is that, based on narratives that are appropriate for children and are usually accompanied by impressive illustrations, these readers are introduced to facts in an interesting, engaging and holistically developing way. Mixing fiction and non-fiction in texts whose core is the event of the Holocaust is one of the basic functions of such oriented literature intended for children and youth. Through an aesthetic story, readers are introduced to the realities and various other facts of the Second World War period.

Keywords: Holocaust; *Red Ribbon*; *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop*; *Rywka's Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto*; interpretation; fiction literature; non-fiction literature

1. Introduction

In this contribution, we present three publications, at the core of which is the theme of the Shoah depicted in a certain way. Jackson [19] states that the term Shoah refers to the systematic genocide of six million Jews by the Nazi regime during World War II. It is a historical event that profoundly impacts Jewish memory and identity, with lessons that are both particularistic to Jews and universalistic for all peoples.

The publication *Red Ribbon* by Anika Tetzner [46] is a collection of three short stories in which the author conveys her own experience as a small child in the Terezin ghetto. The stories seen through children's eyes and told in children's language are intended primarily for young readers, but the impressive text will also appeal to adults. The stories are literally built on pictures - both words and visuals. Next to images of hunger, fear, sadness, there are experiences of closeness, joy, and small victories.

The book *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop* by Tamar Meir [33] tells the story of Peter, who loved ice cream so much that he found an excuse to pass by Francesco Tirelli's ice cream shop every day. Peter is a Jewish boy who lives with his family in Budapest, Hungary. Francesco Tirelli is an Italian who moved to Budapest and opened an ice cream shop there. Then war breaks out. Petr, his family, and many other people urgently need to hide somewhere. And Francesco gets the idea to help Peter's family and others.

The third publication we selected is *Rywka's Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto* (Lipszyc and Friedman) [27]. This is the diary of a Jewish girl who wrote down her feelings, but also the everyday life in the Lodz ghetto.

We selected these publications for several reasons:

- (1) these books are intended for children and present facts of different genres and narrative techniques to make young readers about this historical event [20];
- (2) the authors use various literary methods to authenticate the narratives as non-fiction, emphasizing the informative function of children's literature about the Holocaust [22];
- (3) these books often focus on victims rather than perpetrators and are aimed at children with topics such as prejudice, discrimination and racism, while provoking questions and discussions with adult guidance [24];
- (4) some select books for children and younger additionally using features of the Bildungsroman and engaging the reader through the transformative journeys of child protagonists from a culture of adolescent delinquency [16].

All the publications we have selected are primarily intended for children and can be classified as artistic narratives or records of authentic experiences from the Second World War. Bondebjerg [6] or Collins [10] state that artistic narratives of World War II serve as powerful tools for expressing the emotional turmoil and societal impacts of the conflict. Various forms of art, including documentaries, lithographs, and visual explorations, capture trauma, displacement, and cultural responses during the war.

Art literature plays a vital role in education about the events of World War II. Literature from various countries was instrumental in shaping public perception of the war [3]. Literary works such as historical novels not only reflect the period in which they were written but also provide a deeper understanding of historical events by depicting the socio-cultural and psychological impacts [37]. Post-war children's literature aimed to help young readers understand the war's historical circumstances and social aspects and offer valuable insights into family relationships, displacement, and coping strategies [9]. Children's diaries from the Second World War provide a unique insight into the experiences and perspectives of young individuals during the conflict [31]. These diaries serve as historical records and cultural documents reflecting the impact of war on children. Mixing personal narratives with public literary forms, they describe local events, resistance efforts and emotional struggles. The diaries reveal the resilience, creativity and moral reasoning of young writers facing extreme conditions [18].

Contemporary Shoah-themed children's literature explores themes of post memory, intergenerational communication, childhood experiences, memory, and trauma. Illustrations in picture books depict the aftermath of the Shoah and fill a gap in Holocaust literature studies [1]. Narratives in children's books solve the problem of bridging historical and emotional gaps and try to engage young readers in the legacy of the Shoah [26]. In some cases, there is a shift towards a psychological discourse in the representation of the Shoah, which focuses on trauma and memory rather than historical reality [47]. Some authors born after World War II use child protagonists to explore social impacts and challenge dominant narratives and seek alternative modes of expression [4]. These books emphasize the importance of studying resilience in the face of hardships, showcasing successful adaptation despite adversities [36]. Additionally, the narratives in these books highlight the concept of resilience through the experiences of individuals who faced trauma during the Holocaust, focusing on identity, memory, and the process of overcoming trauma [14]. Furthermore, children's art in these books reflects resilience in response to forced relocation, demonstrating how young individuals cope with significant challenges and adjust to new situations through their drawings [8].

These books serve as tools for post memory construction, visual symbols for transmitting historical legacies [13], and edifying tales that emotionally engage child readers in exploring the Shoah experience [41]. However, the development of Holocaust teaching materials for children involves a delicate balance between historical research and emotional remembrance [39]. Despite the

importance of educating children about the Holocaust, there is a pedagogical, psychological, and literary controversy surrounding the exposure of young readers to such traumatic narratives [34].

2. Materials and Methods

The analysis of selected works took place through literary content analysis. Cornell et al. [11] state that content narrative analysis involves examining narratives presented in various forms, such as public diplomacy efforts. Qian and Sun [40] add that it focuses on understanding the narrative structure, the presence of the narrator and the language used in the text. By studying narrative in literary works, we can discover the personal perspective of the narrators, the language they use, and the way they shape the story [45]. Crucially for our analysis, this method of discovery explores how narratives reflect social history, personal histories, and cultural codes, providing insight into the experiences of characters and the wider context of the narrative [43].

3. Results

In the following part of the article, we analyze the three publications we selected that met the above requirements. We focus especially on revealing the relationship of facts in fiction narratives and the possibilities of acquisition of historical knowledge by implicit readers based on the reception of the respective narratives. Bird [5] states that the relationship between fact and fiction in narrative storytelling is complex and multifaceted. Fictional stories often convey emotional truths that can help individuals cope with trauma and gain insight into the future. While fiction and truth are traditionally seen as opposites, they can coexist in narratives, with fiction sometimes conveying important truths about human experience [7].

The publication *Red Ribbon* by Anika Tetzner [46] consists of three short stories in which the author presents her own experience of her childhood in the Terezín ghetto. Annika Tetzner was born in Prague and spent her early childhood in the Terezín ghetto. Of her large family, only she and her older brother survived the war. She now lives in Israel. She has written several books about her early childhood experiences, which she accompanies with her own illustrations. Annika Tetzner has not stopped searching for her distant relatives and their descendants.

The stories seen through children's eyes and told in children's language is intended primarily for young readers. Although the individual stories are displayed in pictures, both visual and literary, the stories have the potential to appeal to the adult recipient. In addition to depicting the hardships that accompanied the girl in the Terezín ghetto (old age, hunger, insecurity, sadness), these stories also include joyful experiences, behind which are small, but important, victories.

Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop [33] is about a Jewish boy who lives with his family in Budapest, Hungary. Francesco Tirelli is an Italian who moved to Budapest and opened an ice cream shop. Peter goes to Francesco's ice cream shop regularly because the multicolored ice cream here smells and tastes so wonderful. The book *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop* is a story of friendship, courage and willingness to help. Little Peter (Yitzchak) was the father-in-law of writer Tamar Meir. She listened to his remarkable story and decided to write a book about him.

The Yad Vashem website [50] states that "between 1939 and 1945, six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, including one and a half million children and adolescents. According to Nazi racial ideology, all Jews regardless of age were deemed unworthy of life. The Holocaust was a period in which Jews were robbed of all liberties. They were starved, beaten, forced into hard labor, packed into closed ghettos, and murdered. Those still alive faced a daily struggle for survival. Despite and perhaps because of these hardships, we see a phenomenon of widespread diary writing, as well as personal and organized documentation efforts. The children, like all Jews, faced similar hardships, and many of them kept diaries as well. Due to the nature of war, only a very few of these personal accounts survived. Overall, these children enjoyed a relatively normal, worry-free childhood before the Second World War. Whether from Poland, Germany, The Netherlands, Hungary or Lithuania, they were born into Jewish communities that had existed in

Europe for thousands of years.” We fully agree with this statement, as does Jordan [21,201], who argues that “perhaps the easiest way for today’s children to identify with the children of the past is through the children’s own stories of the Holocaust. Modern readers easily realize that children who lived half a century ago are not so different from them, and this makes history seem less distant. When modern readers realize that they could easily have been in the situation they are reading about, the events of the past are not so unbelievable. When they identify with the characters in the books they read, history - the Holocaust - becomes very personal.”

The author of *Rywka’s Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto* [27] is 14-year-old Rivka Lipszyc. From October 1943 to April 1944, she wrote her diary in Lodz, the most isolated and longest-running Nazi ghetto. With the clear, honest and sometimes perhaps even naive eyes of a teenage girl, she describes her daily life, her experiences at school and religious meetings, as well as her impressions, dreams and feelings. In addition to the real problems of life in the ghetto, hunger, hardship, illness and the horror of deportation, she describes her inner world, her opinions, reflections, her difficulties with writing and finding her own identity, and her grief over the loss of her loved ones. Her parents, brother and two sisters all died in the ghetto or in the extermination camps, but despite everything Rivka did not give up and did not lose hope and faith in God.

The diary was found in 1945 by a Red Army doctor at the dismantled crematorium in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She took it with her to Russia, and after her death, it was inherited by her relatives and only became known when her granddaughter, who had immigrated to the USA, brought the handwritten notebook to the Holocaust Center of Jewish Family and Children’s Services in San Francisco after more than sixty years.

3.1. Space

Space plays a significant role in all three publications studied. It is a key compositional aspect for the depiction of the respective reality. All the books are based on a realistic depiction of space, either in a concrete (ghetto) or in a broader sense (city). The environment in which all the stories are set is undoubtedly a significant nonfictional element within these narratives.

3.2. Time

Red Ribbon, *Francesco Tirelli’s Ice Cream Shop* and *Rywka’s Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto* are set in a relatively distant past for the implicit reader, describing a specific section of history through the example of the story of a concrete individual (see below for more details). We are convinced that by linking historical events and characters that may be familiar to the expected readers, the function of aesthetic, informative and, of course, formative can be combined.

3.3. Characters

As we have already indicated, in all books the fate of certain ethnic groups is based on the story of a particular individual. This narrative approach is currently very noticeable, especially in introducing children and adolescents to events that are distant in time and mentally or that exhibit a certain degree of abstractness. Finet [15] states that in texts on the Shoah, the telling of a particular person’s story is often intertwined with the broader themes of memory, transmission and historical documentation. These narratives not only serve as a means of transmitting the memory of the Shoah to future generations but also highlight the significance of individual stories within a broader historical context, emphasizing the complex interplay between personal experience and collective memory [25,32].

3.4. Narrator

Narratives in which the de-abstraction procedure is applied should be a priority be told in ich-form. This assumption is fulfilled in *Red Ribbon* and *Rywka’s Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto*, in *Francesco Tirelli’s Ice Cream Shop* the story is not only told in er-form, but the fate of

the memoirist is narrated based on a transformation of a real conversation between the author and the memoirist.

4. Discussion

Based on the interpretation analysis of selected publications dealing with the Holocaust, we have tried to prove that these publications combine all the basic functions of artistic literature, i.e. aesthetic, informative and formative, while the aesthetic function presents a kind of “attractive” framework in which facts from one line of the Second World War are set. In our opinion, it is therefore impossible to clearly define which of the functions is primary in these publications.

In the introduction to this paper, we have defined four basic aspects that Holocaust literature, which aims to introduce children and adolescents to this historical phase and at the same time to present them with certain warnings against repeating these events, should fulfil. It can be concluded that all the publications analyzed are intended for children and that one of their core missions is to inform implicit readers about the facts emerging from this historical phase. de Souza Reboucas Bulhoes [12] argues that the historical phase of familiarizing children and adolescents with social constructs and legal frameworks has evolved over time to reflect changing perceptions and treatment practices. We believe that, based on the reception of these books, this assumption can be fulfilled.

All the authors of the publications in question also make use of various literary methods (combining fiction and non-fiction), with the aim of familiarizing readers with these events and at the same time developing their aesthetic sensibilities. Schenkel [42] states that linking fiction and non-fiction enhances the narrative by providing a rich variety of information and engaging the audience in the story. Fiction makes historical events vivid and understandable, painting word pictures within an engaging narrative. Nonfiction, on the other hand, enriches fiction by offering facts about history, places, and scientific concepts, making the story more informative and engaging [23]. By combining these elements, storytellers can create narratives that not only entertain but also educate, arousing curiosity and a desire to learn more about the world around us [29]. We hope that we have succeeded in proving that the publications we have selected fully meet these theses.

The heroes of all these publications are victims, whose fate is used to present the reader with the mechanism of discrimination, racism or other hateful behavior, and at the same time they are provoked in a certain way to ask questions, not only in relation to the (impossible) search for truth, responsibility or in relation to guilt and punishment. The portrayal of heroes as victims in media stories serves to draw attention to the problems of discrimination, racism and other forms of hateful behavior, while at the same time making the reader think about complex issues of truth, responsibility, guilt and punishment. This phenomenon is still used today. Lirola Martínez [28] provides an analysis of sub-Saharan immigrants represented as victims; Vecchioli and Soledad Catoggio [49] supply an articulation between the sacred and victim activism in Brazil and Argentina. Tiscareño-García and Miranda-Villanueva [48] give examples of the language used in Mexican newspapers to refer to victims and perpetrators of femicide, and Sola Morales [44] mention the construction of female identities in media narratives. Gregori [17] mentions representations of outcasts as victims or victimizers in literature.

All the heroes of the analyzed publications function as so-called reference heroes. Implicit readers can therefore identify with them or define themselves in relation to their behavior and actions. Based on which they can build their decision-making abilities or construct their axiological profile. The given is based on readers experiencing a certain period of their lives with the protagonists, in which they resolve and experience situations with them. Márcio [30] states that heroes in children's literature play a vital role in shaping the perceptions and values of young readers. From analyzing historical novels to comparing biographies of prominent figures to inspire and educate young readers [2], heroes in children's literature serve as powerful role models. These heroes not only entertain, but also educate, offering children interesting characters to admire, emulate and learn from. By presenting real or fictional heroes in a variety of contexts, children's literature instils

important values, teaches history, and encourages young readers to navigate their own journeys from childhood to adulthood, thereby promoting personal growth and development [38] [35].

5. Conclusions

The main goal of the contribution was to point out the fact that the publications *Red Ribbon*, *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Shop* and *Rywka's Diary: The Writings of a Jewish Girl from the Lodz Ghetto* combine an aesthetic function, as well as informative and formative functions. These last two mentioned functions are represented in the publications analyzed mainly by space, i.e. the real environment in which the stories take place and which, in addition to the narratological function, also fulfils the function of familiarizing implicit readers with one line of events of the Second World War. Finally, yet importantly, the events of the Holocaust are de-abstracted by reference heroes, i.e. characters close in age to the readers, which can to a certain extent increase the level of internalization of the warnings that the events of the Holocaust pretend to be.

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