

# Summary

## Childhood in the Labyrinth of the Ghetto: Reception of the Labyrinth Myth in Polish Children's Literature about the Holocaust

The research question that underlies the investigation of Polish children's literature dealing with the Holocaust and published in the 21st century was the question of the presence of mythological motifs connected with the labyrinth known from the adventures of the mythological hero Theseus in these works. The positive verification of this thesis allowed me to investigate how myth and the Holocaust affect each other, which led to reflection on the function of children's literature in general. At the same time, the elements of children's literature about the Holocaust were described in detail.

The body of analyzed works includes narrations set in the ghetto: *Kotka Brygidy* [Brygida's kitten] and *XY* by Joanna Rudniańska, *Bezsenność Jutki* [Jutka's insomnia] by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala, *Arka czasu* [The ark of time] by Marcin Szczygielski and *All of My Mums* by Renata Piątkowska. Other works, including *Pamiętnik Blumki* [Blumka's diary] by Iwona Chmielewska, *Po drugiej stronie okna* [The other side of the window] by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel, *Ostatnie piętro* [The top floor] by Irena Landau and *Szlemiel* [Schlemiel] by Ryszard Marek Groński among others, I recalled on the margin of my analysis. Foreign titles, such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne or *Island on Bird Street* by Uri Orlev, were also discussed in the context of Polish works.

The first chapter ("Ancient labyrinth") is devoted to the analysis of ancient literature and archaeological discoveries in Crete. In its first part,

classical works mentioning the labyrinth, including *Metamorphoses* by Ovid and *The Life of Theseus* by Plutarch, are synthetically presented. These brief descriptions are extended by later mythographers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author of *Tanglewood Tales* from the mid-19th century, including one of his short stories *The Minotaur*. The literary image is confronted in the second part with archaeological discoveries made by Arthur Evans, who discovered the ruins of the palace of Knossos, including the “labyrinth” located in its basement. The conclusions proposed by the archaeologist concerning the palace’s destination were rejected by Hans Georg Wunderlich in his controversial book *The Secret of Crete*. According to him, the structural features of the buildings make it possible to treat this architecture as a complex of buildings with funeral functions, such as burial and mummification. For the interpretation of the character and the meaning of the labyrinth, this statement was an interesting reference as it allowed me to associate this space with death and hell.

The second chapter (“In the labyrinth of the memory of the Holocaust”) analyzes two fields related to the Holocaust in which myth is present. The first part consists of documentary and autobiographical literature on the Holocaust created both “there and then” and after the war, describing the ghetto in a way that reveals references to the ancient tradition. Most of the published accounts do not contain a comparison of the ghetto to a labyrinth, as do the memoirs and autobiographical novels written after the war. Two examples are exceptional though: the unpublished journal of Stanisław Srokowski from the war times and the memoirs of Michał Głowiński: *The Black Seasons* and *Kręgi obcości* [Circles of strangeness] respectively. *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* by Miron Białoszewski, *If This Is a Man* by Primo Levi, and Anne Frank’s and Dawid Sierakowiak’s diaries, among others, are also mentioned. The second part is an analysis of architectural and artistic projects commemorating the Holocaust, such as the Valley of the Communities (part of the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem) and the Jewish Museum Berlin, the overwhelming spaces of which become a metaphor for life not only within the walls of the ghetto but also the everyday life of persecution and extermination.

The third chapter (“Childhood in the labyrinth of the ghetto”), devoted to children’s literature, was divided into several sections related to the space of the ghetto-labyrinth. The first part (“Entering the labyrinth – descending into hell”) concerns resettlement to the ghetto: pointing out the differences between the “Aryan” and “non-Aryan” sides

serves to emphasize the infernal character of the latter. In such an image one can find a reflection of the situation of Athenian youths thrown into the labyrinth to die in torment at the hands of the Minotaur. The **second part** ("Ghetto – an (un)tamed labyrinth") investigates the adaptation of the characters to life in the ghetto. Despite its infernal character, the characters of children's literature often manage to tame this unfriendly space. What is worth noting, being in the ghetto-labyrinth is not a situation that is clearly perceived as pleasant or unpleasant. The **third part** ("Time of the ghetto, time of the labyrinth") focuses on experiencing time and draws attention to the fact that the authors of children's literature emphasize the contrast between the time before and during the war, which serves to introduce the reader to the represented world. Generally, the time in the ghetto is the present, while the past has two aspects: mythical (religious) and historical, which become an escape from the dramatic "now". An alternative is the use of the time travel motif. The **following, most elaborated part** ("The figures of the labyrinth: Daedalus, Minotaur, tribute of Athenian youths, Theseus, Ariadne") is dedicated to the "inhabitants" of the labyrinth. By pointing to the often complicated networks of dependencies and analogies, such issues as the agency of the heroes, the presentation of German soldiers as dehumanized beasts (including the Minotaur, the Furies or harpies), the dispute over the names of this event (Holocaust, Shoah, Khurban) associated with its inclusion in the series of other Jewish community disasters in the history of the world, or active resistance against the occupier are discussed. In the **final part** ("Labyrinth outside the labyrinth") it is pointed out that the labyrinth can stretch far beyond the walls of the Jewish district, as well as deeply into this structure, making a prison out of a seemingly safe hideout place. In addition, leaving the ghetto and trying to return to normal life under a new identity puts a lot of obstacles in the way of the characters. Also, the inability of leaving the labyrinth completely many years after the war, when the traumatic memories of the past refuse to be forgotten, is a phenomenon characteristic of the protagonists of the analyzed works.

In the **final chapter** ("Conclusions. Myth – Holocaust – children's literature"), the conclusions of the analyses are confronted with the issue of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the problem of its expression. The use of a universal formula of myth in literature indicates that the story of the Holocaust addressed to a child audience can be told by figures with a centuries-old tradition, and so the uniqueness is taken away from the Holocaust. Perhaps the stories for children are told on

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the basis of myths because this type of narration helps to understand the unclear reality of war and the Holocaust. Moreover, children's literature at the level of artistic solutions corresponds to the works of the victims and witnesses who also used ancient motifs. Myth also takes on a new meaning, becoming a story about Minos' military domination over the Athenians and regular destruction on a small scale.

The interpretation I have presented clearly contradicts the thesis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, although this should not be treated as a reproach. Despite the new forms and contexts in which this event is represented, the undoubted value of the works discussed is the very fact that the Holocaust is spoken about not only on an educational but also on a moral level.