

# Events of World War II in Slovak Children’s Literature: A Story for a Child of the Digital Age

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## ABSTRACT

Children’s and adolescent literature of recent decades is increasingly addressed to the events of the past and invites young readers to reflect on those periods of modern history that have become a kind of collective trauma. The article presents an overview of works of art that interpret the events of World War II and which are addressed to Czech and Slovak children and teenagers. The article considers the specifics of writers’ turn to historical discourse, describes how the figures of participants, contemporaries and heirs of historical events are represented in the works, and reveals the educational potential of books. Since the child reader exists today in the context of the digital environment and easily assimilates information from “different cultural channels”, the review includes not only literary texts, but also visual narratives close to modern children and adolescents (comics).

**Keywords:** *history, historical memory, second generation memory, children’s literature*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern children’s and adolescent literature is a stream of works that touch on a wide range of topics and problems. In recent decades, while maintaining an interest in such traditional topics as growing up, family relationships, friendship and love, and school life, European authors have increasingly turned to the events of the past and invite young readers to reflect on those periods of history that became a kind of collective trauma. For example, over the past fifteen years, the events of World War II in the former Czechoslovakia have served as the basis for the creation of a number of works of art. It should be noted that the space of Central Europe has always been a real multicultural crossroads, so it is extremely difficult to talk about a specific national interpretation of certain historical events in a work of art: individual stories often cross the borders of states, cultures and religions. The fact complicating the situation is that the writers in this case act as “guides” of history for the generation of grandchildren not only of the occupied, but also of the occupiers.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of the article is to give an overview of works of art that interpret the events of World War II and are addressed to Czech and Slovak children and adolescents; to analyze the specifics of writers’ turn to historical discourse, to consider how the figures of participants,

contemporaries and heirs of historical events are represented in the works.

Children’s literature today exists in the context of a digital environment, which, along with literature, cinema, animation, includes computer games and Internet technologies. The modern young reader is a “new type” reader who is used to reading quotes and assimilating information from “different cultural channels” [Maslinskaya 2011: 265]. Today publishers increasingly offer young readers texts of a synthetic nature, so the review will present not only literary texts, but also verbal and visual narratives (comics) that are close to modern children and teenagers.

## 3. METHODS OF RESEARCH

For modern science, it is obvious that ideas about the past are not uniform, they are constructed not only on the basis of scientific (for example, historical) data, but also on the basis of literary texts, cinematic works, memorial practices, and much more. When studying the problem of representation of historical memory in children’s literature, we rely on the ideas of P. Nora about “places of memory” (objects that received a special memorial load) [Nora et al., 1999], as well as on the concept of M. Hirsch on post-memory - the mechanism of mediated “transmission of traumatic memory” in the texts of writers of the “second generation”. [Hirsch 2008: 106]. At the same time, this

approach does not negate the use of methods of literary analysis of a literary text (ideological and thematic analysis of the plot and images of characters), as well as turn to the concepts of receptive aesthetics (“horizon of expectation”, “implicit reader”).

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The books presented in the review are mostly based on the “document”. This concept is widely understood in this case and includes memories of parents, grandparents (i.e. family memory), interviews, archives, museum exhibitions, etc. At the same time, none of the books can be considered documentaries - they are, of course, artistic statements that include real facts and events (M. Hirsch calls such narratives “hybrid” [Hirsch 2008: 105]).

A bright representative of the second generation of writers who write about the Holocaust, is a Slovak writer Marta Fartelova (Marta Fartelová), who released the artistic-documentary novel “The Boy with No Name” (Chlapec bez mena, 2018), the life story of a Jewish boy from Bratislava, who the events of the war separated from his parents and who, having found no shelter with rich relatives in Budapest, survived the horrors of Auschwitz. The documentary source for the novel was a real interview with the person whose fate became the plot basis for the novel, as well as information gathered in the Museum of Jewish culture. It is characteristic that the idea of the novel was proposed by the publisher as a fascinating and popular plot, which confirms the demand for a historical theme in children’s literature.

A personal view of events in post-war Czechoslovakia is demonstrated by Jiří Holub’s short story “I Was Just Forgotten” (“Jednoducho na mňa zabudli”, 2017). Jiří Holub is the author of children’s books mostly, but the story in question is intended for readers over the age of 12. This retrospectively told story takes readers back to the end of World War II. A young Prague family who lost their apartment during the bombing (at the end of the war, due to poor visibility, the allies several times mistook Prague for Dresden and bombed it), needs to find a new place to live in. The father of the family rejects the offers of his grandparents to move into the apartments of deported Jewish neighbors in the center of Prague. The final rejection of this idea was also influenced by the appearance of a neighbor who returned from a concentration camp. The father decides to get a job and sends his family to the Sudetenland, a territory occupied by Germans during the pre-war period and annexed to Germany on the basis of the Munich agreement on September 30, 1938. As a result of the war, in turn, the entire German population was deported to Germany without the right to property. And in this context, the child reader of the story will have to think together with the characters on important ethical issues. So, one of the vectors for reflection is set by the grandmother, who reproaches the father: “After the Germans you accept, and after the Jews you refuse!”.

An important image for the story is the image of the shadow: a neighbor from Prague, a Jew, who had survived all the horrors of the war, almost turned into a shadow; the father does not want to stay in Prague, populated by “shadows from the past”, but the new place of residence, the Sudetenland, is filled with long shadows of the past, which the heroes need to deal with. At the same time, the story demonstrates not only the fear of the past, but also the importance of attention to it: this is how the unusual friendship of the little heroine with an old German woman, who was simply forgotten when moving, is born.

Part of the Czechoslovak legacy about the horrors of the Holocaust are the English-language works of Kathy Kacer, a writer and child psychologist whose parents are originally from Czechoslovakia. Three of her works were translated into Slovakian in 2015: “The Secret of Gabi’s Dresser” (Tajomstvo príborníka, English edition -1999), “The Night Spies” (Noční špióni, English edition - 2003), “The Magician of Auschwitz” (Kúzelník z Auschwitzu, English edition - 2014). All the works are intended for teenagers, they artistically connect the past and present, reconstruct family history and to some extent become a way for the author to return to the homeland of their ancestors.

“The Secret of Gabi’s Dresser” (dedicated to the author’s mother) and “The Night Spies” (dedicated to the author’s grandmother) are stories about the fate of the writer’s mother and grandmother, their lives in Slovakia during World War II.

So, the story “The Secret of Gabi’s Dresser” begins with a fun and happy game of brother and sister - Vera and Paula, who frolic in the house of their grandmother Gabi somewhere in North America. A kind and attentive grandmother shows them the most important object of her life - an old sideboard. The grandmother’s story about the past takes the reader and the young heroes of the story to Eastern Slovakia after the beginning of World War II.

The story is told from the point of view of a thirteen-year-old Gabi. Being a Jew, the girl witnesses not only ridicule, but also physical violence against her Jewish classmates: “Several boys grabbed Armin, my classmate. They put him on the ground and beat him so that today he had bruises on his face. Herr Reich, who ran to the courtyard to help Armin, was one of the few teachers who was hindered by this hatred ... Most of the teachers didn’t seem to mind the beatings, some even seemed to like it - they turned away when something happened, pretending they didn’t see anything. I was confused by all this and began to be afraid. Why is it suddenly unacceptable to be a Jew?” [Kacer 2015a: 38-39]. The heroine realizes that even her good friends begin to treat her with restraint and avoid her. This story of the gradual advance of fascism, transmitted through the child’s consciousness, takes place against the background of a severe family loss: the heroine’s father, a loving defender, a guarantor of family security, dies. A mother and a frightened daughter are left without any help, with a huge farm that is beginning to fall into disrepair; it is increasingly difficult for them to exist in the conditions of the established regime. It is characteristic that Gabi calls her pursuers members of the Glinka guard, but the story

never mentions the Slovak state, which was a vassal of Germany.

Gradually, the Jewish population begins to disappear, educated relatives and acquaintances, transferring their assets to agents without any guarantees, take risky trips to Palestine and America. Neither Gabi nor her mother want to leave their home - as they think, a secluded and safe place. In addition, there is a grave of the father. However, their position changes under the influence of events: Jewish girls are deported from the neighboring city of Levocha, and many of Gabi's friends are forced to leave their homes.

During the terrible time of forced evictions, the sideboard becomes a refuge for Gabi and her mother: it is a "shelter" both physically (possible to hide in it) and emotionally (as a reminder of the past family happiness during the holidays - Shabbats). Hiding in the sideboard is difficult, besides, Gabi thinks that the hiding place cannot be reliable. When the guards actually invade the house and want to take Gabi away, she will experience a real horror sitting in the sideboard. However, after an acute attack of claustrophobia, the heroine suddenly feels relieved, feeling as if her late father is nearby: "Dad! His smell, his smile! From behind the sideboard door, I could hear the footsteps of the guards searching the house up and down, various objects were ringing, and at this moment I felt the warmth of my father's gaze on my face and began to calm down" [Kacer 2015a: 116]. In difficult times, it is the family and parents who represent peace and quiet for the child-hero. The mutual connection between the daughter and the father is very strong, they have common games and interests, they repeat common poems, prayers, and in the story Gabi's father remains the defender of the daughter even after death.

In the work of Kathy Kacer, as well as in the story of Jiří Holub, the reader is faced with the forced deprivation of property, the so-called occupation, which was allowed in the territory of the Slovak state by the anti-Jewish code. "Can you imagine what it was like when we came back after so long and our house no longer belonged to us? Many Jewish families faced this - strangers simply took over our homes. And the laws allowed them to do so" [Kacer 2015a: 134].

The continuation of the story of Gabi and her mother Judith is presented in the story "The Night Spies". The characters, along with Max, Gabi's younger cousin, take refuge in a mountain village in the border region of Eastern Slovakia. The dark period, accompanied by hunger, cold and boredom, is interrupted when the heroes come into contact with a partisan detachment. The plot presented in the story does not seem very probable, but it helps to raise questions that the author invites readers to think about. So, in a partisan unit, the children will encounter people who have different attitudes to the Jewish population and will understand that mother Judith was right when she said that they could not trust anyone. Characteristically, Kathy Kacer portrayed Judith as a woman of extraordinary internal discipline and strength, so her rare emotional statements draw the reader's attention to an extremely stressful life situation.

The strong message of this story is the desire of the characters to maintain common sense even in difficult conditions. In addition, scattered moments of happiness, included in the story along with the horrors of war, "illuminate" the story and encourage the reader to look for something positive in any period of life. This position can be perceived as a conscious, planned therapy for all potential readers of the author, a successful child psychologist.

Despite the fact that the story of Kathy Kacer is inspired by historical events, it is emphasized fictitiously: the dates are approximate, the calculation of military losses of participating countries is second-rate, the reader follows the inner life of the story of the characters. However, some parts of the book are too unambiguous or misleading and somewhat contradict the book's ethical guidelines. So, in the story there is a mention that Gabi is starving and suffers from the hostility of the mistress, with whom they are hiding. In our opinion, the book does not emphasize enough the fact that a significant part of the population lived in such circumstances, and in the case of possible detection of fugitives, the local people (hostess) would have paid with their own lives.

Misleading is the information dated October 1944: "The Germans began to pursue partisan detachments. Despite the fact that the US army also helped during the revolt, providing weapons with the help of aircraft, the Germans occupied the Eastern part of Slovakia until September 1944. German revenge came unexpectedly. Thousands of Slovakian civilians were killed in battle, and the last Jews were sent to camps. Russian soldiers were inactive in the mountains. The promised units never appeared" [Kacer 2015b: 165]. We believe that such misinformation (whether conscious or unconscious) lowers the dignity of the entire work, the intention of which was to openly and honestly tell about the events of the war.

Kathy Kacer's latest book, translated for a Slovak audience, is called the *Magician of Auschwitz*. The work is illustrated by Gillian Newland, and the visual appearance of the book is an important part of it. The storyline of the book is as follows: a fourteen-year-old Jewish boy finds himself without family, friends and relatives in the male part of a concentration camp. The evil of the Nazis is multiplied here by internal enemies - crooks, his cellmates. However, the boy Werner, now numbered A 1828, has a spark of hope - it's magic. During the nighttime visits of the Nazis, he discovers that his neighbor is a world-famous illusionist. Thanks to mutual kindness and wonderful magic, both cellmates will live to be released and will be able to start life anew across the ocean.

The works "The Secret of Gabi's Dresser", "The Night Spies" and "The Magician of Auschwitz" are based on real fates and refer to real historical conflicts. The "anchors" of reality here are photos included in the book, all the works are provided with prefaces and summaries of information about individual events of the Second World War on the territory of the former Czechoslovakia. "The works describe historically real places that are important both for the reader and for historical memory" [Urbanová 2012:

62]. The plots of all the books are related to the persecution of the Jewish population, which is seeking salvation in other countries, while the children - characters of these stories are trying to understand what could lead the world to such a wild anti-Semitism, how everything could change so quickly around them.

The message common to all the books is an attempt by the author, a child psychologist, to point out to the reader the possibility of reliving positive memories, which can support both children and adults in difficult moments of life. Kathy Kacer's books are not only useful reading for children and teenagers, but also an "educational window" for adults.

A special place in our review is occupied by the book of comics by Pavel Čech "Grandfathers", published in 2017. The book consists of nine separate stories, united by a common task, which is explained in the introduction. The author did not have the opportunity to meet his grandfathers, they died before his birth, but the writer would like to create an image of a man, his predecessor, who could have been his grandfather. In addition, this image of a person from the past could become, according to the author, a humanistic message to future generations: "During the Second World War, one of my grandfathers was a postman and hid letters addressed to the Gestapo in Brno in the basement. They mostly contained denunciations, and were said to be numerous. Who knows how many lives the undelivered letters saved" [Czech 2017:7].

There is no comic about the postman in the book, but there is a story entitled "Button", referring to the events of World War II. This is a short visual narrative, a story about a lonely old man. An old man wanders down a dark street in dirty weather, goes past a group of grim-faced people reading a public notice on the side of a building, and a car, possibly a patrol, is seen round the corner. When the old man arrives at his modest, abandoned home, he finds that he had lost a button, finds a new one in the box, and sews it by the light of a kerosene lamp. There is a light in the generally somber atmosphere of the old man's room - a portrait of a smiling young couple hanging on the wall in an oval frame. The emotional contrast of the hopeless present and the happy past is visually emphasized: the oval frame of the portrait contrasts with the sharp corners of the frame. The old man is alone, having finished his work, he puts out the kerosene lamp, and stays waiting at the table. The last picture shows a small hallway, where a suitcase is standing, and a repaired coat is hanging on a hanger. The brownish color of the entire composition, reminiscent of the color of old photos, in this final picture of the comic book is broken by a bright yellow accent - the Star of David sewn on the old man's coat - a symbol of racial discrimination of Jews under the rule of fascism. The story seems quite finished and complete: of course, the recipient understands what the old man expects (a frightening night knock), but in the context of the author's preface, this story can be read in a different way - less hopeless: perhaps this old man is one of the lucky ones who were forgotten in the Gestapo thanks to the letters hidden in the basement.

In general, the illustrated book of P. Čech assumes a certain reader's freedom. Children can leaf through the book, looking at sometimes funny, sometimes sad stories of grandfathers. In the hands of an adult recipient, the book is often interpreted differently, more multifaceted, as evidenced by the great popularity of the author and his works among adults. The beauty of images that everyone can understand is not in doubt, while the last pages of the collection of comics clearly define the group for which the author drew his stories. Probably, it is the writer's peers who recognize here the lovingly recreated details and signs of their childhood ("Lentilki" chocolates, ladybug-shaped hair clips, popular among Czechoslovak girls, the "Fish" knife, about which Czechoslovak children's poets wrote poems). As it seems, this way the author reminds the middle-aged reader that the "grandfather" from the comic book is the most ordinary grandfather, who could also be his (the reader's) ancestor. It is important that the visual narrative of P. Čech, while not imposing a rigid reading trajectory on recipients, states the commonality of historical memory, emphasizes the importance of the collective past, and makes us think about what the lifelines of future generations will be like.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Summing up, we note that in the "hybrid narratives" of the writers of the second generation, the witness of historical events is usually a child hero who will not only have to survive in difficult conditions, but also set a number of ethical questions and try to answer them. The authors of all these works are clearly aware of the educational potential of the problem, and their role is to be the keepers of stories from the past, which can become an occasion for important thoughts about the present and future. The same task is faced by the readers, so the books are not addressed to children or teenagers only, but also to a responsible adult.

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