



Migration among children – Polish authors about the young migrants

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Summary

The article discusses selected publications by Polish authors, referring to the experience of migration among children and adolescents and the migration-associated adaptation difficulties in the new cultural and linguistic surrounding.

Although the phenomenon of migration has been known to people of all time, it is becoming a topic which is increasingly frequently discussed in research papers. Migration, as a notion, affects numerous aspects which create various types of definitions of the presented notion. This is also associated with the interdisciplinarity of studies, which results in various exemplifications of this phenomenon, also in art, literature and other creative disciplines. Researchers attach increasing importance to “little migrants”, focusing their studies on the impact of migration on: the formation of identity, intercultural conflicts resulting from the change of the place of residence, adaptation problems and the cultural shock associated with them. The result of these phenomena are also the emerging reflections referring to the methods of supporting the children who live at the meeting point between different cultures. The literature for children and for the youth also does not remain indifferent in reference to these problems. Polish authors, following those from abroad, are also attempting to reflect the difficulties and concerns of life in emigration, indicating possibilities to counteract prejudice, isolation or aggression based on a cultural background. Texts of this type play

the role of support for both, the parents as well as the educators who want to form and improve intercultural competence, helping in the creation of a safe and open society.

As has already been mentioned, the diversity of studies related to migrations has resulted in a multitude of definitions, setting the phenomenon in the perspective of numerous disciplines. The general typology of the types of migration which I have presented below will allow for defining the general division of literature for children and adolescents which deals with the discussed topic. While classifying the types of migration, it is necessary to take the following factors into consideration: physical space (the distance covered by the migrating person), the decision-making process (the analysis of profits and losses resulting from the change of the place of residence), the time, the legal status of the migrant, the degree of voluntariness of the decision referring to the migration. Basing on the above, it is possible to differentiate, for example: migrations between a city and a village, national and international migrations, permanent and temporary migrations including short- and long-term migrations, legal and non-documented migrations, voluntary and forced migrations. A quite frequent criterion of division is also the reason for making the decision about the migration. Based on this reason, the following migrations are differentiated: migrations related to family matters, economic (labour) migrations, migrations associated with religion, with political matters, migrations related to nationality, touristic migrations. Moreover, migration movements also include remigration – return migration, repatriation – return after prior forced departure, and seasonal migration resulting from the nature of the performed work; seasonal migration belongs to the so-called incomplete migrations (Dariusz Niedźwiecki: 21–35). An element which is symptomatic for the countries of Eastern Europe is also the phenomenon referred to as *Euro-orphanhood*. It refers to situations in which one or both parents depart abroad as a result of labour migration, and leave a minor child in the country of birth. Most frequently, the child remains under the custody of the grandparents, aunts and uncles or (less frequently) friends of the family. Such migration aims at, above all, the quick solving of economic problems. Despite the fact that the child is not directly impacted by the experience of migration, the situation associated with being left by the parents

has got similar consequence as in case of a cultural shock resulting from moving to another country. Children experience difficulties in establishing and maintaining relations with peers, difficulties with studying, concentration problems. The studies referring to the consequences of migrations, which were carried out in 2008, clearly indicate the following results of migrations: the feeling of loneliness and the disruption of the emotional bond, an increase of self-reliance, a lack of control from the side of adults, an increase in risky behaviours – drinking alcohol, the deterioration of the health status. A parent's return to the country is also a big challenge because it is associated with the adaptation of the whole family to the new reality (Bogdan Więckiewicz: 11–21).

The fast pace of life and the changes taking place in the world result in the fact that even a few-month absence of a parent may significantly influence the disruption of communication with one's own child (B. Więckiewicz, p.21)

Polish authors on the topic of migration – selected examples

In the offer of the Polish publishing market we can find various images of migration. There are texts referring to topics such as refugeeism, labour migration, euro-orphanhood. It is worth to add that there are also texts focused on “migration from the past” – war migrations, forced resettlements, escapes. Each of these stories is different, individual in its own way, however, the element which is common for all of them is the reflection on alienation, fear, not being understood, intercultural conflicts. The main characters are children whose only desire is to find a safe place for themselves and for their families. Regardless of the motivation for the migration, each of them experiences an encounter with a new culture, a new language, a new society, and as a result, redefines themselves in reference to the new world which they know less, trying to find their place in it and build their identity anew.

At least 79.5 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 26 million refugees, around half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also millions of stateless people, who have

been denied a nationality and lack access to basic rights such as education, health care, employment and freedom of movement (<https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>).

Due to such a large scale of refugeeism and the terrifyingly high percentage of children escaping from war, literature is becoming a tool which makes readers aware of the difficult fate of refugees. By presenting the fate of the characters, the authors explain the reasons of refugeeism – they write about conflicts, the ongoing war, the condition of a given country as well as about traditions and culture which are the source of particular behaviours of the characters. One of the examples is the book by Renata Piątkowska entitled *Hebanowe serce (Ebony heart)* (2018) – a novel about a very dangerous escape from Libya to Europe. After the plunder and the complete destruction of the village, the main character – Omenka, and his family, decide to seek shelter on another continent. The boy's parents borrow money from many people to be able to pay for the journey. From the beginning, their journey is marked by dramatic events – they travel in a truck in which the crowded refugees barely survive after a gunfight. Despite the high cost of the journey, the driver does not ensure decent conditions for the passengers, some of them get wounded in the attack, the carrier leaves them half-dead in the desert. Subsequently, Omenka's family is supposed to, together, get on a boat to Europe, but the helmsman demands a much higher payment than the one agreed before, which is why Omenka's dad has to resign from the journey. The boy is left with his mum who is equally scared as him. They are miraculously saved by Italian police and they arrive to a centre for refugees at Lampedusa. The boy's journey is filled with fear, uncertainty of what he will face the next day. What helps the child survive this dangerous journey? For the whole time Omenka keeps tightly holding a figurine of the warrior, Ozyrion: "Tired with the heat, Omenka asked his mum for some water. He got a few sips, and when his mum was not looking, he poured a few drops onto his hand. He had to do that so that his invincible warrior could also drink a bit" (p. 13). The figurine is a symbol of courage, it also reminds the boy of his father: "Omenka's dad had sculpted the figurine of Ozyrion for him from a piece of ebony wood. For a long time, Omenka did not know how to name the figurine, but when he heard the fairy-tale about the brave Ozyrion, he understood that he would not find a better name than that" (p. 13). The book *Chłopiec*

z *Lampedusy* (*The Boy from Lampedusa*) by Rafał Witek refers to similar matters:

This story is made up. But a boy who is similar to its main character, really exists. In February 2015, together with other refugees from Eritrea, Tandżin arrived at the Italian island, Lampedusa. He was eleven years old back then. When the journalists asked Tandżin about his family, the boy replied: “*No mama. No papa. All alone*”. Because of these words, I could not stop thinking about Tandżin. And I have created this story. Partially – for him, and partially – for all the children who are in a similar situation – forced to leave their countries, exposed to the toils of the itinerancy, wandering around the world on their own, looking for a safe home. Rafał Witek (<https://www.wydawnictwoliteratura.pl/ksiazki/dla-dzieci/chlopiec-z-lampedusy>).

Both of these books are a part of the series *Wojny dorosłych – historie dzieci* (*Wars of Adults – Stories of Children*); these are books which discuss difficult stories. They are tales of the experiences of the war – they relate to both, historical events as well as contemporary conflicts. Currently the series includes 27 volumes. Another of these books is the novel by Barbara Gawryluk, *Teraz tu jest nasz dom* (*Now our home is here*) which tells the story of the migration of a Ukrainian family which, as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, decides to move to Poland. Romek and his siblings have to face the linguistic and cultural barrier, they have to understand why their grandparents decided to stay in the homeland, they have to cope with the longing for home and for the possessions they left behind. First the family arrives at a centre for refugees where the children learn Polish and go to school and kindergarten. Next, they move near Cracow. Romek and his siblings once again change their surroundings, which is why they have to once again adapt to the new space. Romek’s brother, Mikołaj, is really scared, he is afraid to say anything, and as a result, children think that the boy cannot speak. This clearly presents one of the difficulties associated with cultural shock – very frequently children retreat into themselves; it turns out that Mikołaj can speak Polish already, but he is afraid to say anything:

“He arrived from Ukraine with his parents and siblings”, the teacher explained. “In Ukraine there is war. Many people had to escape from there. In our country they find peace and a safe life. And we should help them do that. Mikołaj will speak Polish perfectly soon.”

“I can speak Polish already”, Mikołaj remarked silently. “But not everything yet, not as well as Roman. And my sister, Natałka, knows various rhymes, even though she is only three years old” (p. 43).

The persons who take care of forming intercultural competence and, thus, creating a safe atmosphere for the newly arrived children, are the teachers:

The teacher conducted a special lesson about Ukraine. He showed the country in the map, he told us about its history, but when he got to contemporary times, he thought I would like to tell something to the class. But I didn’t want to do it because they wouldn’t understand it at all anyway. I wouldn’t be able to tell them about what had been happening in our city (p. 5).

This fragment is really significant because it not only shows the important role of adults in the process of adaptation, but also the inability to speak about the difficult experiences – both, due to the linguistic barrier and as a result of the trauma accompanying the escape. This short novel clearly explains to children what is happening in Ukraine and why the people living there decide to migrate. The main characters – Ukrainian children – do not understand the reasons why they have to abandon their homeland, leave their home, their friends, their school. A similar situation often takes place on the other side – children in schools not always know the causes of the migration, they do not understand the reasons why new children join their classes. Therefore, it is worth to – at least on the example of the above mentioned texts – increase the awareness in this scope.

The book *Wędrówka Nabu* (*Nabu’s Journey*) by Jarosław Mikołajewski, is a slightly different text. The reader does not receive a story referring to a concrete place and a character assigned to it. It is a story which takes place in-between the real world and fantasy. As a result of unexplained events, Nabu and her family lose their house in a fire. After rebuilding the house and inhabiting it anew, fire breaks out again and this time the whole village becomes destroyed. The family sets out on a journey, Nabu wants to find a place “where houses do not get burnt”:

Nabu walked alone, ten days and nights. Her parents did not want to go and they forbid her brother to go. They also forbid Nabu, but when the wind scattered the branches which dad planned to use for building another house, she ran away from the home that did not exist (Mikołajewski).

Nabu makes an attempt to escape from the evil world, she sets off on a journey through the unknown. The child does not understand why soldiers, the police, customs officers are looking on her ominously, why she cannot find a safe place. When the girl wants to step into the lake, she hears that it is surrounded with barbed wire, but she comes closer and gets wounded, similarly in case of the wall – she does not see it but when she comes closer, she hits it. These situations demonstrate the permeation between the pure, semi-fantastic world without violence and real dangers that are threatening refugees during their escape. Nabu sees the world in a different way, she does not see the evil. The main character's journey is, in a way, an attempt to cope with the surrounding reality. It is also a metaphor of every escape, a metaphor of the attempt to break free from war, suffering, poverty. It is, in a way, closing oneself from everyday problems in a bubble of a fairy-tale world in which people are not being hurt. However, this world touches reality, which is why from time to time the girl “experiences” suffering.

Labour migration is a common phenomenon nowadays. Noone is surprised that a child is left under the care of persons other than parents, however, it is worth to remember that children left without parental care frequently feel lost, they long to the parents, they also require support because they have a specific experience of migration – the migration of their parents which is not indifferent to them. A book which refers to the experience of euro-orphanhood is *16:10 do Bergamo (04:10 PM to Bergamo)* by Piotr Rowicki. The main character, Lidka, lives with her grandfather. After the death of her dad, the family falls into financial trouble, so the girl's mum is forced to go to work in Italy, in the city mentioned in the title of the book – Bergamo. Being separated from the closest person very strongly influences the child's behaviour – the girl has problems with concentration during lessons, difficulties with relations with her peers, she is frequently frustrated, she does not understand the world surrounding her. She finds it hard to communicate with her grandfather who, despite strong efforts, is not fully able to build a relationship with his granddaughter. An element which is significant is that Lidka regularly keeps writing letters to her mum, in which she describes her adventures, emotions. Mum does not devote time to her, even when she is in Poland, she keeps settling various formalities, without paying attention to the girl. Lidka often does not

understand where her anger and apathy come from. The reply mum frequently uses in response to the girl's problems is "you're a big girl and you should understand it", although Lidka actually does not know what that means. A significant element is a letter which clearly shows how difficult the separation and the lack of the parent's attention is for the child:

Ms. mum,

I won't send this letter, I'll just write it because that's not what I think at all. I mean, it is what I think, but I don't want to think this way. I don't need you. (...) You don't have to come. Grandad is enough for me. (...) Generally, with grandad everything's so funny, it's hilarious all day. I don't know how to say "hilarious" in Italian, check it for yourself. Hilarious means very funny, like laughing until your tummy aches, without a reason. Do you get it? In the morning we laugh at breakfast, and at the fact that we have to get up so early, and that it's cold, and that it's raining. It's so funny that in Cebulówka for 300 days of the year it's cloudy, cold and gloomy. It's hilarious. School is even funnier. For example, my classmates say: "Shut up, you orphan!", or they just ask: "Where are your matches, Little Match Girl?" On the other hand, there are also funny misunderstandings, like when the teacher said: "I want one of your parents to come to school tomorrow". The whole class were splitting their sides" (Rowicki: 50–51).

After the mother's departure, the people surrounding the girl are welfare workers who control the grandfather, and the school psychologist. What is interesting is that Lidka's peers also experience Euro-orphanhood. This experience divides the children – they start to compete with one another and argue about whose parent has got a better job, which parent is closer to home. Lidka's only goal is moving to her mum, to Bergamo. The girl's departure is supposed to take place "soon", but the girl does not want to wait, that is why she sets off on a very dangerous journey to Italy, searching for her beloved mother. This book, which is full of fast action and interesting plot twists, actually discusses much more than just the story it presents – it talks about how lost are the children who are left in the homeland by their parents. It turns out that even though they do not experience migration directly, their problems are very similar to those experienced by migrating children.

In a short book by Justyna Zbroja, which is addressed to slightly younger readers, we meet *Matylda wyjeżdża* (*Mathilde is leaving*), a girl who leaves Poland and goes to live in a different country. Natu-

rally, Matylda is full of concern, she does not want to leave her home, but her parents are very excited about the migration, they perceive it as a chance for a better life – a good job, a decent salary:

When dad talks
about our great departure,
he keeps smiling.
Mum smiles much less and, even though she doesn't say it,
I think she's scared.
So I'm scared too (p. 12).

Matylda is afraid of the first day at school, the main character's greatest concern is the linguistic barrier. The girl wants to become friends with her peers, but she cannot talk with them and, in consequence, she cries.

You have to know why you want to learn.
And I know it well: I want to have a friend,
and I want to know what the teacher is reading to us.
Because I like interesting stories (p. 52–53).

The book also mentions the matter of cultural differences. For the party organized for Matylda's new friends, the girl wants to serve cucumber soup, but her mum advises her against that. Finally, they serve apple pie because "apples are known in whole Europe" (p. 21). The book is divided into 3 chapters: *Our great departure, Matylda learns the language, Matylda remembers where she comes from*. The author maintains balance between the adaptation to the new culture and remembering about one's origin, maintaining the identity:

Everyone's got their own story. It's important to remember who you are.
Thanks to that you can find happiness anywhere in the world.
You can tell others about your country, about your roots.
And cherish them so that you can breathe freely
wherever you are (p. 81).

Despite the fact that each of the works presents the experience of migration in a different way, pointing attention at various aspects of this experience, there are elements which are common for all of the stories. The feeling of alienation, isolation, the fear of encountering a new culture, the need to establish or maintain peer relationships.

The possibility for using literature discussing migration

At schools we meet children with various migration experiences and differentiated linguistic and cultural resources. Each of these experiences remains an individual experience process and, in its own way, situates a student in the adaptation to the new reality. Helping a migrating child in a new cultural environment is indispensable in order to reduce the negative effects of the change of the surroundings. The experience of migration among both, adults and children, may result in various difficulties in everyday functioning. Especially, if the migration is associated with a permanent change of the place of residence. This does not mean, however, that these difficulties will accompany the migrant forever, and that it is not possible to minimise them in any way, acting for the improvement of the wellbeing of the migrating person. Developing intercultural competence helps in both, coping in the situation of experiencing migration as well as in the moment when a person from a different culture joins a given community. In the school environment, there are various means of helping newly arrived migrants – psychological support, additional language classes, supporting the student in the scope of learning the language of school education. Teachers of language and literature may also form and improve intercultural competence through working with literature texts. Sensitising to the problems of Others, building on cultural awareness thanks to which it is possible to understand the essence of given behaviours or traditions.

The matters briefly presented above are becoming both, an inspiration and a need. Polish authors take up topics oscillating around migration in order to present the discussed phenomenon, to demonstrate the problems of migrants, to familiarize with their experiences, but also to present individual stories demonstrating that it is a phenomenon which is subject to many factors that impact the adaptation process.

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Migracja wśród dzieci – polscy autorzy o małych migrantach

Słowa kluczowe

literatura polska, migracja, adaptacja, izolacja, problemy migracyjne

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia wybrane pozycje polskich autorów dotyczące doświadczenia migracji wśród dzieci i młodzieży oraz związanymi z nią trudnościami adaptacyjnymi w nowej przestrzeni kulturowo-językowej.

