

THE LITERARY IMAGE OF SIBERIA IN POLISH YOUNG ADULT FICTIONAL PROSE

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Polish culture sees Siberia as a place of exile and mass deportation of the Poles from the 16th to the 20th century. Such labeling was preserved in Polish mentality by literature, painting and numerous letters, diaries and journals. It is stated that the post-war reality had a great impact on the image of this land, and literature for young adults represents these political, historical and social changes. Presented examples show that Polish literature modified the fixed image of Siberia as a place of enslavement, tortures and Polish martyrdom.

Keywords: Siberia, Polish literature for young adults.

“Siberia starts with the Vistula river”, writes Marquis de Custine in *Letters From Russia* [2, p. 48]. Geography denies such statement describing Siberia as a huge area between the Ural and the Caspian Sea in the West, that borders with China in the South and extends from the Arctic Ocean in the North. However, Custine’s thesis can be explained by history and culture. In the 20th century, the Vistula river delimited the Western border of the Russian Empire; from there began the territory under the tsarist rule. Sending into exile inside Russia was one of the main implements of the despotic authority. Possible tsarist courts’ sentences were: katorga – hard labour in Siberian woods or mines; exile – settlement with deprivation of any rights; residence – a status of eternal settler. Siberia was a gigantic fallow, a neglected area of captured lands that in the first place were used as an isolation place for dangerous individuals (similar to the British Australia in the beginning of the 18th century), later considered a space with a potential.

The beginnings of the Siberian exile of the Poles already took place in the 16th century, when Polish king Stefan Batory waged a war with the Grand Duchy of Moscow. Prisoners were treated as human material, helpful in settling of newly attached lands. Poles that had economic and cultural skills; essential for building fortresses and fortifications, and engaging in a warfare – so necessary for effective colonization – turned out very useful [5, p. 15]. In the 18th century, exiles began to have political character, aiming at separating individuals destructive for the empire interests from the rest of a society. A huge amount of Polish exiles flooded Siberia after the failure of the Bar Confederation in 1771 and after the Kosciusko Uprising which resulted in the Third Partition of Poland in 1795. Polish prisoners of war were sent into exile also during the Napoleonic Wars. The 20th century can be considered as commencement of a mass deportation of Poles. Especially after the January Uprising, between 1863–1867, about 25 200 Poles were sent into European Russia, Kavkaz and Siberia.

More than half of the prisoners had noble origin, 20% were middle-class and rustic [Cf.: 10, p. 5–6]. In the 20th century, Siberia was settled by inhabitants of Kresy (the area of today's Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus) which in 1939 was located in the control zone of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. People deported from Kresy between 1940–1946 were sent to the special colonies under NKVD's administration, being afterward directed to work in kolkhozes [Cf.: 10, p. 24–26]. Political prisoners and individuals considered socially undesirable were imprisoned in gulags, Soviet forced labour camps that started to appear at the beginning of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in a remote, sparsely populated places where important industrial and/or cargo-carrying objects were built, and the prisoners were used for a slave labour.

Millions of square meters of Siberia populated by millions of people of different nationalities, that have a rich history in the process of building a cultural image, are defined by a denotation that may have different connotations. In the case of vast territories behind the Ural, they have negative overtones. Polish culture sees Siberia as a place of enslavement, hard labour and Polish martyrdom. The biggest prison in the world, without walls and grates. Such labeling was preserved in Polish mentality by literature. The Siberian exiles were sanctified: in the narrative poems of Juliusz Słowacki: *Anhella* and *Beniowski*; in the works of Adam Mickiewicz: *Pan Tadeusz*, *Ustęp* and the third part of the *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)*; as well as in the poetry of Cyprian Kamil Norwid. The romantic rule of reducing reality to symbols furthered the creation of an image of ominous Siberia as: "...Mickiewicz's *Droga do Rosji* will take the effect of role-modelling, and what is unavoidable – of stereotyping..." [4, p. 107–108]. Such negative picture of Siberia will be used by Józef Ignacy Krasiński in the novel *My i oni*, Teofil Lenartowicz, Kornel Ujejski and Mieczysław Romanowski. Equally to literature, the topic of Polish exile was explored by painting. Additionally, it is necessary to mention numerous firsthand testimonies – letters, diaries and journals – written in Siberia by the exiles themselves.

In the 20th century the unfavourable image of Siberia was strengthened. Although without a romantic form, it did not lose its power. Labour camps described in the books as: Gustaw Herling Grudziński's *Inny Świat (A World Apart)*, Józef Czapski's *Na nieludzkiej ziemi*, Ryszard Rawicz's *Długi Marsz*, and *The Gulag Archipelago* by Russian writer Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, confirmed the belief about Siberia's hell. Polish political situation had not permit to publish these book earlier than in the 80's. Writing about Siberia cast in negative light Poland's allies of that time. But it is difficult not to mention the land that takes up quite a considerable part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. A new way of writing about Siberia was considered, so that Poles could discard the gloomy cliché that was present from centuries in their mentality. Such an attempt was made by a literature directed at a young reader, and I try to study this issue.

Future of the People's Republic of Poland was meant to be a conscious proletarian building a society based on work. Reorientation of the whole political, law and social system had to rest on a strong, mental foundation of a new citizen whose beliefs and inclinations were to be designed by authorities, his forefathers' historical prejudices to be erased. Mariusz Mazur in his work *O człowieku tendencyjnym* states that a new man was: "stereotypical, but this characteristic was not related to the already present routines, but to an eclectic model that was just arising" [7, p. 10].

Literature for young adults was to propagate a policy consistent with a new, political and social sense, referring to the deterministic concept of the philosophy of Karol Marx. Accompanying children from their earliest years, the literature stimulated their imagination and moulded their opinions that were compatible with the party's directions. Literature for youth has a certain asset that has turned out very useful – the assumption of its partiality, and as Wojciech Tomasik writes about this type of a post-war writing quoting Michał Głowiński's "Słownik terminów literackich": "the world presented and a type of narration are subordinated to author's (political) ideology, their aim being presenting its validity and popularizing the author's world view" [12, p. 18–19]. Bias based on dualistic system of values, and submitting a content to a definite purpose seem not to disturb the receivers. A young reader enjoys becoming absorbed in a simple literary world, where evil is easily recognizable, good always wins and a plot ends happily [Cf.: 6, p. 113–132]. Among numerous kinds of prose addressed to a young reader, novels of travel and adventure occupy a particular place. They put together literary attractiveness and cognitive-educational qualities. Most probably, such books satisfy the needs of a young age: lust for adventures and interest in far countries and lands [Cf.: 3, p. 164–201]. A novel of adventure exposes a motive of travel; combines exotic background with extraordinary action; creates heroes out of brave discoverers of new, unknown regions, that should be wise, active, resourceful and brave. Additionally, they ought to be distinguished by their noble attitude and apt choices in accordance with universally accepted moral values. The adventurers fight with wild nature, adversities and different types of evil. The genre that became important in the 19th century because of the trapper – Indian novels of James Fenimore Cooper, Jack London, and the piratical books of Robert Louis Stevenson, at first was called into question in the post-war Poland; especially questioned was its educational use. Re-editions of the classics were stopped, because they had featured solely: "different habits of Blacks and Indians <...> primitivism of their culture" [9, p. 319]. "In the categories of literary conventionality, it was not acceptable for 'savages' armed with bows and spears to be killed by bullets shot by White conquerors; the theory of cultural inferiority, based on serfdom and slavery, was rejected" [9, p. 319]. However, it turned out soon that the genre can be easily reformed and shaped ideologically. In this way, the Wild West or the Black Land appearing in the classics may be exchanged for Siberia; hacking through tundras and taigas competed with the Western prairie, cowboys and Indians were ousted by a Siberian pioneer and the natives from the Ob and Lena rivers. At last, the vast lands behind the Ural can be shown in different light, with exotic nature, and huge industrial and adventure potential in the foreground; since adventure is to be encountered everywhere in Siberia.

Jerzy Bohdan Rychliński's novel entitled "*Szlak rybiej kości*" was published in 1954. The action takes place between the Ural and the Arctic Ocean, in a time space that is half legendary, half historic, covering the epoch when dangerous lands of Siberia were being discovered by Russian pioneers, or by "land's runners" as they are described with a poetic hyperbole by the author. First five chapters cover over 70 years, the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th c.; the last, sixth, chapter reaches the mid-18 c. and as opposed to the previous ones which portray Siberia, it depicts Saint Petersburg. The first chapter introduces four of the five most important characters of the book. All of them are fictional, more or less voluntary members of a legendary trip of Cossack's war lord Jermak Timofiejewicz,

that had a defeat of the Tatar khanate in view, and aimed at incorporating Siberia into the control zone of the Moscow karat. Reader meets: cunning psalter Poltinnik who had been given a command from the Stroganow brothers (financing the trip) to control Jermak; scout and Siberian hunter Prochor Szczapa; and two impetuous youngsters, Jasza Bezimienny and Saim Białomorzanin. As a narrator states: “many went under compulsion, but all did it with a hope of freedom. Yet, such a breakneck expedition demands, after all, desperados using fire and cutting arms” [8, p. 7]. So each of them is exceptionally sly, brave and shrewd. All deal easily with hard conditions so when suddenly their leader Jerylo is killed during a clash with Tatars, everyone takes an opportunity and deserts from the group becoming a renegade.

The successive chapters take the reader more and more to the North-East, giving the impression of traveling across the enormous land: taiga, Mangasia, Jakutsk, the Kolyma River and the Bering Sea; a trip along the route of ‘fish’s bone’ [pl. *szlak rybiej kości*] – how precious tusks of a walrus were called by Siberian hunters. Seasons and landscape change, the territory remains the same, it is still impassable Siberia. The third chapter introduces another important hero who will be later described as a heir of the four remaining characters, a historic and legendary figure, Siemiejka Diezniow – a man that circumnavigated the Chukchi Peninsula being the first to conquer the Bering Strait. In the last chapter, a prominent, Russian scientist, Michail Lomonosow, will tell his student about the Diezniow’s travel, during playing chess that was made from the ‘fish’s bone’.

However, artistry of “*Szlak rybiej kości*” is contained mainly in the rarely static, descriptive parts so the reader is not bored. The author makes them lively, tries to catch momentary characteristics of the Siberian area the landscape of which is shown always in changes and motion – this is the reason why we feel that the land lives, as in the description of a winter’s day and night: “hardly had a January day dawned bloodily on a leaden horizon when it bowed to a returning night that followed thick on its heels” [8, p. 60]. There are also many very suggestive animizations (a stylistic means consisting in providing inanimate objects with the features of living beings): “an Eastern wind was humming and intensifying, sucking out the rest of humidity” [8, p. 10], and animalizations (a figure of speech that gives animals human traits and qualities): “Frost attacked human’s chest as a wild animal. It singed, stung, knocked out, and took one’s breath away” [8, p. 6], which give weather conditions a hostile character. So the heroes of Siberian tales – experienced hunters, fight not only with Cossacks, Tatars or rebellious tribes of Siberian nomads, but also they struggle with a predatory nature.

Showing Siberia, the author uses a panoramic view, which is understandable considering the fact that he tries to describe a vast and limitless territory. Alternately, Rychlinski juggles with terms intensifying this immensity: “boundless swamps”, “an icy desert”, “a complex maze”, “world’s/planet’s borders”. Siberia is equally dangerous and beautiful. It is a land of abundance, which is highlighted by the author constantly when he uses definitions referring to the names of metals and precious stones. A Siberian sky “is glaring brassily”, a Mangasia’s landscape resembles: “dark-grey, basaltic pillars under a sky’s dome that is unreached” [8, p. 31], with the addition of “lilac, phantom mountains of ice that have a diamond glitter on the brinks” [8, p. 31] extending around. In a different part of the text we encounter a night, winter scenery where: “An ice was glistening on edges and a snowy carpet of wavy tundra seemed to be made of a diamond dust” [8, p. 36]; or the description of an early, autumn

Sun which: “was circling low above the horizon, arousing a myriad of prickly sparks. As if it would wander over the world dotted with the diamond dust” [8, p. 83]. All these terms appear to accent uniqueness of the place. Incidentally, we admire it, like one of the episodic characters, an Englishman with a heart of stone – Mister Flinthard who is: “insensitive to a harsh beauty of this part of the world” [8, p. 35], and who states he sneaked into: “a vault of an everlasting winter”.

All the landscapes described unite during the reading and they head for the interpretive direction. It is hard not to yield the temptation of enriching such a place with some allegorical meanings. An open, limitless space will signify freedom but, at the same time, also loneliness. Language overflowing with adjectives draws attention to Siberia’s economic potential. Huge distances, on the one hand, will be associated with danger, but at the other, with adventure. The whole strategy aims at changing the mentally fixed image of Siberia. This is the reason why Rychlinski’s novel of travel and adventure, that was born in the beginning of the 50’s, will gain the missing, educational element and will saturate the classic model with a new, educational content. According to it, Siberia is a land of free people, almost utopian – a place outside the law, sheltered from the civilization by a distant and dangerous space, isolated, full of wealth that, similarly to Eldorado’s golden mud, is to be found at arm’s length.

Russia, but especially Siberia, crosses the pages of the Alfred Szklarski’s series for young adults like a ghost, and although it is not stated directly, it will not be an exaggeration to admit that the land determines the causative force of adventures of the main hero – Tomek Wilmowski. The action takes place in the first decade of the 20th century, the times when Poland was under the Partitions, the memory of the January uprising was still alive, and the first symptoms of big changes started to appear on the horizon, that were to emerge in a new century, starting from the revolution of 1905. The hero’s father, Andrzej Wilmowski, escaped from the occupied country avoiding an arrest for anti-Russian activity. His prototype was Andrzej Szklarski – the author’s father, an active member of the Polish Socialist Party – Revolutionary Fraction, who was also threatened with the Siberian exile. Orphaned by a mother, Tomek lives with the Karscy family in which an aunt Janina fears political conspiracies that are punished, she stresses, with the Siberian exile at most. Her anxiety is to no avail when her son Zbyszek is taken into custody for starting an academic sit-down in 1905, insisting on Polish teachers and lessons. In the fifth volume, Tomek’s cousin from Warsaw writes to him a letter about this school event. In the fourth volume, Tomek with his father and the company of boatswain Nowicki and Jan Smuga (each of them has suffered loss in combat with the possessive Russian karat) wander India and Tibet, searching for a treasure hidden by Smuga’s step brother – an exile who luckily fled, and throughout several years was extracting gold from the Altyn-Tagh mountains. After his death, some part of the hidden riches was to be meant for the exiles. Reaching a border with Russia, the group decides to help Zbyszek deported to Nerchinsk in the Zabaykalsky Krai. In this way, a rescue mission becomes the main topic of “*Tajemnicza wyprawa Tomka*” (Pl. Tomek’s secret expedition) during which Tomek and his company, posing as hunters of wild animals and hiding their real identity and nationality, traverse Siberia and the Russian Far East, under the watchful eye of tagent Pawlow assigned for them by the tsarist authorities.

“*Tajemnicza wyprawa Tomka*” was published in 1963, in the centenary anniversary of the January uprising, indeed being a homage to the Poles who spent most of their life on

exile. In the book, Szklarski stresses Polish deserts within the scope of Siberia's exploration and management, also reminding about the Polish participation in the building of the longest railway line of that time – Trans-Siberian. The author enlists many names and mentions the biographies of Polish activists in the footnotes. We can find: natural scientists Benedykt Dybowski and Wiktor Godlewski, social anthropologist Waław Sieroszewski, and engineers Stanisław Kierbedz and Adam Szydłowski.

Russian Siberia, so distant and wild, becomes more and more Polish during evolving of the plot, especially when we read a story of captain Niekrasow about his Polish companions from katorga, whom he had admired because: “from their first days of exile, they thought about the escape and the return to their country. They participated in protests, conspiracies, revolts, riots, and tried to escape, even though, a flight was cruelly punished with death” [11, p. 73]. The book mentions also Maurycy Beniowski and his famous escape from Siberia, that from over hundred years is a role model for Russian prisoners. However, the most emotional story evoked in the novel is a tale of engineer Krasucki, accidentally met in a train, about the Siberian Legion of Free Poles and an uprising provoked by them in Siberia. The former deportee claims that: “Lake Baikal is a specific, national souvenir for Poles <...> Many years ago, a group of Polish prisoners sparked off the uprising on the lake's banks. Such a forlorn attempt has been never made by other exiles of different nationalities. So every Pole, staying near the lake Baikal, recalls even mentally the heroes buried in taiga, in Miszycha, and those killed in Irkutsk!” [11, p. 164].

Thus, “*Tajemnicza wyprawa Tomka*” would be a beautiful tale about the Polish Siberia, or, as Zbigniew Bąk writes in his article, an only one known book for young adults: “...which topic were lots of Polish prisoners in Siberia. <...> It is the Szklarski's book that taught the youth about fight, freedom and tortures of the Poles in Siberia; curriculums and textbooks in schools did not do it” [1, p. 507]. Unfortunately, the past communist epoch has stamped its influence on the Szklarski's book that is full of many different historic distortions. The author submits to them when he identifies insurgents from 1863, whose aim was to liberate Poland from Russian reign, with revolutionaries aspiring to political changes. Among them, we can encounter Ludwik Waryński and his co-defendants, condemned in 1885, in a trial of members of the Proletarian party, and socialist activists deported for katorga to a prison in Kara, mentioned by captain Niekrasow. Szklarski judges them equally acknowledging fighting with karat as a common denominator of their heroism. Therefore, Tomek will declare: “My companions and I are enemies of czarism, still, we are friends with all the people aggrieved by a tsar” [11, p. 38–39]. Regarding the January uprising as a prelude to the Communist revolution is not anything new in that period. The similar point of view appears in the works of Stanisław Rembek or Igor Newerly. The reasons of such false belief can be explained with historical stereotypes imposed by propaganda or with efforts of satisfying a national publisher. But it appears to be an overstatement the assumption that all exiles, Poles and Russians alike, were innocent victims of karat – such an impression can have a reader encountering a description of prisoners working hard on railway tracks building near Nerchinsk: “Among a bunch of Siberian, bearded peasants <...> there was a contrasting group of workers wearing identical, worn out, grey kaftans and shirts, coarse trousers and foot-cloths tied to feet with straps. They were deportees sentenced to hard labour, with round caps without peaks on their

shaven heads and shackles on their legs; some of them were chained to wheelbarrows. <...> Such a horrific view was a meaningful proof of tortures and humiliation of thousands of exiles, which they were suffering for the heroic struggle for freedom of their homeland” [11, p. 159].

“*Tajemnicza wyprawa Tomka*” puts karat in the same negative light that the other novels of Szklarski depict colonizers and representatives of European countries, wanting to subordinate weaker countries and tribes at any price. In this way, imperialism of the West opposes Communist internationalism. One of the Szklarski’s footnotes states clearly that the situation of the Far-East Russia inhabitants has improved: “Tsarist authority was a heavy burden for the people of Siberia. Numerous uprisings were cruelly suppressed by a tsarist army. Only after the victory of the October revolution, the people of Siberia gained autonomy” [11, p. 159]. Szklarski’s Russia is a multinational country in which different peoples, races and religions coexist in harmony, and the inhabitants of its distant corners use universal Russian language, apart from their national languages. This ability, as Szklarski emphasizes repeatedly, seems to naturally consolidate the vast country which tranquillity is being destroyed by a ruthless, tsar’s power.

Only nature is free from any historic distortions and biased assumptions. The extensive land hides many secrets and surprises, being unpredictable, is equally scary and enchanting. Not always Szklarski’s descriptions of nature are successful, often he does a botanic or zoological list, or replaces literary landscape with an encyclopaedic note. Yet, from time to time, we encounter: an honest depiction of enormity of the intact taiga that: “inspires in people’s hearts fear of something unknown, hidden in its depth” [11, p. 19], an animalized portrayal of a storm where: “A gale was tearing taiga with claws, bending to a bow of subjection. Vehement rain was pulling out a ground under its (taiga’s) feet, and thunderbolts were searing with naked flames” [11, p. 55]. A Siberian Demon of Winter will be also recalled, that: “If it existed <...> it would have chosen the land for a kingdom, because winter here almost never ends” [11, p. 221]. ‘Old Gold’ – guide Nuczi that considers himself a taiga’s son, reveals some portion of lyricism: “He was born and raised there, taiga fed and sheltered him, so it is no wonder that he knew all its secrets and loved it like his own mother who sometimes is harsh but always shelters its children” [11, p. 21]. Nuczi is a follower of animism, believing that all natural physical entities possess a spiritual essence. He is convinced that it is possible to talk with dangerous tigers, he calls the river Amur his *batiuszka* (father), and when Tomek wants to pay him for his help Nuczi says broken Russian: “A favour for a friend, roubles – no! Mother taiga feeds her man” [11, p. 39]. To a large measure, this character is responsible for warming the image of Siberia in Szklarski’s novel. Nuczi becomes its ambassador. Attentive readers will learn a lot about the Russian Far East, familiarising with this hero. Similar to white hunters roaming the land on the book’s pages, he will admit surprised that he is bewitched by a lovely Siberian country which name had terrified him before.

In the examples quoted by me, it is clearly visible that Polish literature for youth, which plot takes place in Siberia, was to finally break with the fixed image of Siberia as a place of enslavement, tortures and Polish martyrdom, for which Russians were responsible. The vast territory behind the Ural, though dangerous, is full of hidden riches. A prison, in which putting in grates and erecting walls are needless, cause such an enormous space cannot be engulfed, for the same reasons becomes a place of free people. Here, it is easier to escape from the persecution of tsarist power.

Distancing itself from the tsarist Russia is symptomatic for a post-war propaganda. The old order is responsible for all evil that Poles experienced. A narrator in “*Szlak rybiej kości*” states: “Isn’t it sometimes necessary to look back on a road travelled for estimating how far one has reached? <...> the past was bad. But one has to know it in order to judge the present” [8, p. 6]. Finally, a new authority can exploit the potential of Siberia and appreciate the contribution of Siberian pioneers and Polish exiles. Szklarski highlights the achievements of Polish scientists, naturalists and explorers, that made this “barbarous land” domesticated. The author enlists the examples, according to which, Siberia should not be unfamiliar and ominous for us, but close. Adventure and the beauty of this intact land enchant a reader. Even today, perfectly constructed arguments of authors, would be convincing for many people, if there was no knowledge that we have about Russian Far East. In the whole, long history of Russian statehood, from its beginnings to the end of the 20th c., Siberia has been used as a place of isolation of political prisoners, of hard labour in kolkhozes, and as a direction of resettlement and forced colonization, about which it is hard to forget.

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ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЙ ОБРАЗ СИБИРИ В ПОЛЬСКОЙ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОЙ ПРОЗЕ ДЛЯ ЮНОШЕСТВА

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Польская культура видит Сибирь как место ссылки и массовой депортации поляков с 16-го до 20-го века. Такую маркировку сохраняет в польской ментальности литература, живопись и многочисленные письма, дневники и журналы. Утверждается, что послевоенная реальность оказала большое влияние на образ этой земли, и литература для юношества отражает политические, исторические и социальные изменения. Приведенные примеры показывают, что польская литература значительно модифицировала фиксированный образ Сибири как места порабощения, пыток и польского мученичества.

Ключевые слова: Сибирь, польская литература для юношества.

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Польська культура бачить Сибір як місце заслання і масової депортації поляків з 16-го по 20-те століття. Таке маркування зберігає в польській ментальності література, живопис і численні листи, щоденники та журнали. Стверджується, що післявоєнна реальність справила великий вплив на образ цієї землі, і література для юнацтва відображає політичні, історичні та соціальні зміни. Наведені приклади показують, що польська література значно модифікувала фіксований образ Сибіру як місця поневолення, тортур і польського мучеництва.

Ключові слова: Сибір, польська література для юнацтва.