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## “Canada is Where You Belong. Poland is the Past”: Images of Polish History and Culture in Heather Kirk’s *Warsaw Spring*

Memory and love have guided our nation from time immemorial.<sup>1</sup>

William Kurelek, a well-known artist and author of bestselling picture-books, dedicated his fifth and final series of paintings depicting the peoples who helped build multicultural Canada to Polish Canadians<sup>2</sup> who, together with other Central and Eastern European immigrants, largely contributed to taming – and *colonizing* – the prairies of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The decision of Kurelek, who was Ukrainian Canadian, to focus on Poles and their role in the nation-building process is noteworthy because this group of Slavs has been overshadowed in Canadian cultural memory by a more prominent one – Ukrainians. While Polish characters appear in

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<sup>1</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw Spring*, Toronto 2001, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kurelek, *Polish Canadians*, Montreal 1980. Kurelek’s picturebooks include *A Prairie Boy’s Summer* (1975) and *A Prairie Boy’s Winter* (1973).

Canadian mainstream<sup>3</sup> and children's literature<sup>4</sup> – usually in Second World War-themed novels – their portrayal tends to be one-dimensional, and they often function as either side characters or antagonists.<sup>5</sup> The fiction of Heather Kirk, discussed in this article, is a noteworthy exception. This Canadian writer, who spent two years in Warsaw in the late 1970s working as a lecturer at the University of Warsaw, devoted her first two young adult problem novels, *Warsaw Spring* (2001) and *A Drop of Rain* (2004), to

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, in Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner: A Tale of Saskatchewan* (1909) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976). More about the images of Poles and Eastern Europeans in Canadian literature see D. Drewniak, *Forgetful Recollections: Images of Central and Eastern Europe in Canadian Literature*, Poznań 2014; eadem, "[They] would say she was betraying Poland already": Major Themes in Contemporary Canadian Literature by Writers of Polish Origins, "Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies" 2018, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 150–164; G. J. Kozaczka, *Writing the Polish American Women in Postwar Ethnic Fiction*, Athens–Ohio 2019.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in Laura Langston's *Lesia's Dream* (2003), Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler* (2012), and Kathy Kacer's *The Diary of Laura's Twin* (2008). See M. Świełlicki, *Next-Generation Memory and Ukrainian Canadian Children's Historical Fiction: The Seeds of Memory*, New York–London 2023. A notable exception – published after I had written this article – is *My Baba's Garden* (2023), a picturebook by Canadian poet Jordan Scott illustrated by Sydney Smith, which explores the author's relationship with his Polish grandmother. It was named one of the best books of 2023 by *Kirkus Reviews*, *New York Public Library*, and *School Library Journal*.

<sup>5</sup> Authors of Polish origin rarely achieve mainstream popularity in Canada. Eva Stachniak, known for best-selling historical novels, is an exception. See D. Drewniak, *Figura domu. Szkice o najnowszej anglojęzycznej literaturze emigrantów z ziem polskich i ich potomków w Kanadzie*, Kraków 2022, pp. 177–196. While Sojka does not mention Stachniak as an example of a successful Polish Canadian writer, Stachniak's *The Winter Palace*, published two years after Sojka's essay, significantly boosted her status. E. Sojka, *Twórczość polskiej diaspory w Kanadzie a kanadyjski dyskurs literacki. Prolegomena do współczesnych badań*, [in:] *Państwo – naród – tożsamość w dyskursach kulturowych Kanady*, ed. by M. Buchholtz, E. Sojka, Kraków 2010, p. 284. All translations from Polish in this article – mine. Notably, in her essay on Polish Canadian literature Sojka does not mention a single children's literature author. While she compares the situation of Polish Canadian authors to that of their fellow Central and Eastern European colleagues, it is worth noting that some Ukrainian Canadian authors, particularly Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, have achieved mainstream success. More about Ukrainian Canadian literature see W. Suchacka, *'Za Hranetsiu' – 'Beyond the Border': Constructions of Identities in Ukrainian-Canadian Literature*, Wissner-Verlag 2019. For a survey of Polish Canadian literature for adult readers see E. Sojka, *Twórczość polskiej diaspory...*, pp. 292–296 and B. Czaykowski, *Polish Writing in Canada. A Preliminary Survey*, ed. by M. S. Batts, Ottawa 1988.

Polish Canadians and Polish history and culture.<sup>6</sup> Kirk was born in 1949 in London, Ontario, Canada, to Anglo-Canadian parents, and her interest in Polish history and culture stems from her stay in Warsaw. In Poland, Kirk witnessed many important events, most notably Pope John Paul II's first pastoral visit in 1979. The protagonists of her books are Eva<sup>7</sup> (*Warsaw Spring*) and Naomi Goralski (*A Drop of Rain*<sup>8</sup>), a mother and daughter, who

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<sup>6</sup> Kirk also authored *Be Not Afraid: The Polish (R)evolution, "Solidarity"* (2011), a young adult introduction to Polish history. The book was critically acclaimed, with Zachary G. Chauvin calling it "an excellent reference for 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish history" in a review for *Resource Links*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Eva struggles with her liminal Polish Canadian identity, visible already at the level of her first name. While she is introduced as Eva, her mother Magda calls the girl "Eve", and later in the novel it is revealed that her "name is really spelled with a w too: Ewa". H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 7, 157. Notably, Kirk does not use Polish special characters and spelling, and all of her characters have anglicized names like Eva, Mary, Mark, Elizabeth, and Johnny. While this may be explained by Kirk's wish to appear to mainstream Anglophone readers, who are not familiar with Polish grammar and culture, adjusting the characters' names is at least a questionable decision.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike *Warsaw Spring*, narrated solely by Eva, *A Drop of Rain*, set in the fictional town of Mapleville, Ontario, is focalized by her daughter Naomi, but narrated by a few characters – Naomi and Eva, their partners Joe and Curtis, and Mary Kowalski, a sixty-six-year-old Polish woman Naomi meets at work. Sometimes Kirk also uses a third-person narrator – "Naomi thinks her mother is jealous of her grandmother's love for Gord", H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 45. At times, this narrative technique makes the plot hard to follow. All of the main characters write journal entries for various reasons during the last seventeen weeks of 1999. Eva is trying to deal with the inevitable loss of Hanna, who is dying of cancer; Naomi is working on a school project; and Mary, a medical doctor, who "is working three jobs", including one as a cleaner, as "she can earn more money with minimum-wage jobs in Canada than she can earn with a doctor's job in Poland", *ibidem*, p. 87, wants to share her memories with the children and grandchildren she had to leave behind. By telling Naomi about her life experiences, Mary, who is "poor" but "always well dressed and attractive" becomes the girl's teacher of Polish culture, traditions, and history. In her narrative, Mary reconstructs her life story and inspires Naomi to learn more about Poland, *ibidem*, p. 59. After all, as Rothberg observes, "[m]emory's anachronistic quality – its bringing together of now and then, here and there – is actually the source of its powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones" M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford 2009, p. 5. Naomi decides to call her project "Mary's Story: An Example of How the Broad Forces of History Affect the Private Lives of Individuals" and "send a copy of it to [her] father to impress him, so he'll invite [her] to come and see him", H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 175; p. 63. Just like Eva, in

both seek to find their fathers and attempt to connect with their Polish heritage in 1979 and 1999 respectively. Moreover, the novels also discuss such social issues as teenage pregnancy, abortion, divorce, drug addiction, gang violence, rape, alcoholism, infidelity, the AIDS/HIV epidemic, and same-sex parenting.

In my reading of *Warsaw Spring*, I argue that Eva, its teenage protagonist, has to *experience* the history and culture of the country of her ancestors before she can incorporate it into her own transcultural repository of memory. Examining Kirk's first novel, I demonstrate how the experience of traveling to Poland and meeting with the representatives of the older generations, often survivors of the Second World War and the communist regime, influences the formation of Eva's Polish Canadian identity and cultural memory. After all, as Michael Rothberg notes, "memory is closely aligned with identity".<sup>9</sup> In *Warsaw Spring*, memory – individual, collective, and cultural – is crucial in the protagonist's process of becoming. In her search for belonging, Eva not only embraces her Polish heritage but also learns to appreciate being Canadian. As Eugenia Sojka notes referring to Margaret Atwood's 1972 *Survival*, "the problem of emigration, uprooting, loss, alienation and, above all, the search for identity in a world completely indifferent to human beings, are the unifying features of all Canadians except the Aboriginal population".<sup>10</sup> Bearing in mind this observation, I demonstrate that by exploring her Polish heritage and, at the same time, struggling with loss, emigration, and alienation, Kirk's protagonist symbolically becomes Polish *and* Canadian.<sup>11</sup> Finally, I show that despite Kirk's praiseworthy attempts to introduce young readers to Polish history, the

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getting to know her heritage, Naomi is trying to reconnect with her absent father. Although the father of Eva and Hanna dies before they can meet him, Naomi's dream can come true, as the antepenultimate chapter is written in the form of a letter from Mark to Naomi. More about *A Drop of Rain* see: M. Świetlicki, *The Entanglements of Polish Past and Canadian Present in Heather Kirk's A Drop of Rain (2004)*, [in:] *Political Transformations and Changes in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Children's Literature*, ed. by B. Kümmerling-Meibauer, F. Schulz, Heidelberg 2023, pp. 253-271.

<sup>9</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory...*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> E. Sojka, *Twórczość polskiej diaspory...*, p. 297. Also see M. Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Toronto 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Notably, already in the 1960s Northrop Frye argued that "in order to look for iden-

way she portrays Poland is problematic because the country emerges as an exotic, post-Second World War heritage site of memory for Eva, a Canadian teenager whom all of the novel's Poles seem to treat as superior.

The modest representation of Poles and Polish Canadian history and culture in Canadian literature and children's literature in particular is not surprising, considering that "during the period of the official policy of biculturalism, there was little interest in Canada in the work of minority groups".<sup>12</sup> Bohdan Bociurkiw concurs that the bicultural Lester B. Pearson's Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963) deprecated "other ethnic groups to an inferior, 'non-founding' status and their cultures to eventual submersion in one of two 'official cultures'" – English or French.<sup>13</sup> With the changes connected to the announcement of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's policy of multiculturalism in 1971<sup>14</sup> and the implementation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 (CMA), which introduced "an official vision of Canada in which immigrants [...] are encouraged to retain their heritage languages and ethnocultural traditions",<sup>15</sup> in the last few decades minority voices have been gradually appearing in the Canadian cultural landscape. Still, the image of Canada as an inclusive cultural mosaic, which implies that people of various ethnicities and cultures "co-exist harmoniously and equally, does not always reflect

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tivity in Canada, one has to confront the question 'Where is here?' which accompanies the other famous quandary 'Who am I?', D. Drewniak, *Forgetful Recollections...*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> E. Sojka, *Twórczość polskiej diaspory...*, p. 292.

<sup>13</sup> B. Bociurkiw, *The Federal Policy of Multiculturalism and the Ukrainian Canadian Community*, [in:] *Ukrainian Canadians, Multiculturalism, and Separatism: An Assessment*, ed. by M. Lupul, Edmonton 1978, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Trudeau declared that Canada is bilingual but not bicultural – "[f]or altogether there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly [...] National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help create this initial confidence" qtd. in S. V. Wilson, *The Tapestry Vision of Canadian Multiculturalism*, "Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique" 1993, vol. 26, no. 4, p. 655 – emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> G. Edwards, J. Saltman, *Picturing Canada: A History of Children's Illustrated Books and Publishing*, Toronto 2010, p. 192.

the reality of life in Canada for members of ethnic minorities”, especially Indigenous Peoples and immigrants of color.<sup>16</sup>

Children’s literature has played a significant role first in “civilizing” Slavic immigrants – who were culturally distant but white – and then in popularizing the metaphor of Canada as a cultural mosaic.<sup>17</sup> The first children’s library programs were organized by Lillian H. Smith in Toronto as early as 1912, and the development of Canadian children’s literature has always been closely linked to nationality politics, especially after the introduction of multiculturalism as the official policy of the country.<sup>18</sup> The practice of publishing books “from cultures other than Anglophone, Francophone, and First Nations” started already in the 1970s with Ukrainian Canadian texts for young readers.<sup>19</sup> Yet, individual Anglophone books for young people centered around immigrant experiences began appearing on the Canadian book market decades before the implementation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Most notably, Lyn Cooke’s first best-selling multicultural children’s novels, *The Bells on Finland Street* (1950) and *The Little Magic Fiddler* (1951), both feature prominent Slavic characters.<sup>20</sup>

Kirk’s *Warsaw Spring* is not only a novel focused on showing Canada as a multicultural country, but it also partially follows the home-away-(new)

<sup>16</sup> V. Howard, *Picturing Difference: Three Recent Picture Books Portray the Black Nova Scotian Community*, “Bookbird” 2013, vol. 51, no. 4, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> M. V. Richter, *Creating the National Mosaic: Multiculturalism in Canadian Children’s Literature from 1950 to 1993*, Amsterdam–New York 2011, p. xiv. Writing about Canadian children’s literature, Mirosława Buchholtz argues that “[s]tudies of Canadian children’s and youth literature tend to maintain clear linguistic and cultural divisions” See: M. Buchholtz, *O czerwonych liściach, młodych ludziach i ich książkach*, [in:] *Państwo – naród – tożsamość w dyskursach kulturowych Kanady*, ed. by M. Buchholtz, E. Sojka, Kraków 2010, p. 339.

<sup>18</sup> M. Davis, *Editorial: Politics and Our Anniversary*, “Canadian Children’s Literature” 1990, vol. 100–101, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> M. Buchholtz, *O czerwonych liściach...*, p. 344.

<sup>20</sup> In the last few decades, the romanticized image of Canada “as a vertical mosaic in which ethnocultural groups collaborate in Canadian society while simultaneously preserving their distinctive cultural character had deeply influenced Canadian children’s literature” G. Edwards, J. Saltman, *Picturing Canada...*, p. 192. Importantly, as Miriam Verena Richter notes, “identification with literary characters whose origins lie in a different culture also prepares the readers for encounters with people of foreign cultures in everyday life” M. V. Richter, *Creating the National Mosaic...*, p. 25.

home trope, which Mavis Reimer has called "[t]he most valued story in English-Language Canadian children's literature".<sup>21</sup> In such a story, the young protagonist, "pushed out of an original home by the decisions or behavior of powerful adults, journeys to an alien place and, after a series of vicissitudes that occupy most of the tale, chooses to claim the unfamiliar space as a new home".<sup>22</sup> When Eva, a sensitive and shy eighteen-year-old, is mistakenly accused of being a drug dealer and then sexually abused by her boss, the owner of a local bar, she spontaneously decides to go to Poland to meet her father's family. There she encounters Hanna, her mysterious half-sister, who is twenty years older. Hanna, an art historian and a librarian, gradually introduces Eva to the richness of Polish history and culture. Although in Canada Eva struggles to communicate with her *assimilated* mother and *ethnic* grandmother,<sup>23</sup> eventually she finds a mother figure in her half-sister. Eva also learns from Hanna about their family's traumatic fate during and after the Second World War. Notably, as Michael Rothberg observes, "[o]ur relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly, and never without unexpected or even unwanted consequences that bind us to those whom we consider the other".<sup>24</sup> At first, Eva treats Hanna as the other; yet, she unexpectedly learns that her half-sister's past – which she was not familiar with living in Canada – directly influences her present. Although eventually Eva claims Poland as her new home, she returns to her old home, Canada, which only then does she start appreciating.

In the late 1970s, Polishness in Canada was "associated with a simplified folkloristic version of culture, limited to Polish cuisine, sausage, danc-

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<sup>21</sup> M. Reimer, *Homing and Unhoming: The Ideological Work of Canadian Children's Literature*, [in:] *Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature in Canada*, ed. by M. Reimer, Waterloo, ON 2008, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> In this aspect, *Warsaw Spring* is similar to Ukrainian Canadian literature where "young, female protagonists [are] engaged in complex cultural and personal negotiations with their babas" are common. L. Ledohowski, *Little Ukraine on the Prairie. 'Baba' in English-Language Ukrainian-Canadian Literature*, [in:] *Place and Replace: Essays on Western Canada*, ed. by A. Perry, E. W. Jones, L. Morton, Winnipeg 2013, p. 191. See more: M. Świetlicki, *Next-Generation Memory...*, p. 105-132.

<sup>24</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory...*, p. 5.



es, songs, and Catholicism, a version of Polishness promoted at cultural festivals funded by government programs that support the cultivation of ethnicity”.<sup>25</sup> Eva’s knowledge of Poland before going to Warsaw is limited and quite folkloristic. However, during her visit to Warsaw she experiences a radically different image of Poles and Polishness. The family members and new friends she meets there, such as Aunt Janina, Dr. Zosia and, most importantly, Hanna, are educated and well-spoken. Moreover, they all seem broken and traumatized by the experiences of the Second World War and communism, issues Eva knows little about. Although at school, Eva learns that “most of the bad stuff in the North American press about the Soviet Union is just propaganda” because “there’s no juvenile delinquency there, no unemployment, no slums, no drugs, no gangs” and “in many ways life in communist countries is better than in capitalist countries”, she progressively realizes how wrong her teacher is as she notices the difficulty of life under communism.<sup>26</sup> She first-hand experiences what her daughter is told twenty years later in *A Drop of Rain*: “[c]ommunism is good in theory [...] But communism is not good in practice”.<sup>27</sup>

Eva grows up without her father and has a difficult relationship with Magda, her glamorous and assimilated mother. Unlike Magda, Eva is “chubby” and “not beautiful”, yet “unique, unbreakable and dignified”, hence more similar to Hanna, her half-sister and mother figure, than to Magda.<sup>28</sup> Eva was raised by *Babka*, her maternal grandmother, because for most of the girl’s life, her biological mother claimed to be Eva’s sister. Magda, who uses the anglicized name Maggie, was born in Canada and wants to detach herself from Poland and her Polish mother: “I was born here in Canada. I’m not Polish. I never was. You live a dream world, Eva. That old place – Poland – is dead and gone”, Magda tells Eva, who suspects her assimilated

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<sup>25</sup> E. Sojka, *Twórczość polskiej diaspory...*, p. 303.

<sup>26</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 177. Interestingly, in the second novel, Kirk’s characters grow increasingly disenchanted with capitalism, which Hanna believes to be “as bad as Nazism”. *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 224. More about Kirk’s problematic depiction of Eva’s body see: M. Świetlicki, *The Entanglements of...*, p. 255.



mother is ashamed of her non-Anglo-Canadian heritage.<sup>29</sup> The protagonist also believes that she "didn't bring joy to Magda" and "would have ruined her life if she hadn't ditched [her] and married George".<sup>30</sup>

Magda's Anglo-Canadian husband George does not like Eva, who was raised by Babka. When he mistakenly accuses the protagonist of being "involved in a motorcycle gang that sells drugs", he simply tells Eva "I know your type", without listening to her explanation.<sup>31</sup> Eva understands that by saying so, he refers to her Slavic background. After her return from Poland, George tells Eva that he also believes that Magda is "ashamed of her background" but "she shouldn't be", adding that "because [his] family is English and better off than her family, [he] never thought of her for one moment as inferior".<sup>32</sup> Eva does not believe George and informs him that she wants to sell an article "about Poland's cultural heritage" to *Edmonton Journal* which she wrote during her trip.<sup>33</sup> The man seems surprised: "Was it that Poland has a 'cultural heritage' or that I can write the English language?", wonders Eva.<sup>34</sup> George's reaction recalls a typical anti-Slavic attitude shared by many Anglo-Canadians at that time. Poles and other Slavs were accused of primitivism and backwardness even after the post-Second World War wave of immigration, often falling victim to "the so-called Polish jokes, which still in the 1960s and 1970s were a tool for ridiculing the Polish group, and Polish Catholics in particular became the ethnic scapegoats of the dominant society".<sup>35</sup> George's – and at first also Eva's – knowledge of Poland and Polishness is limited to what he knows from his mother-in-law.

Eva's grandmother, Babka Goralski, is a simple Polish *Góralka* or highlander from the Carpathian Mountains, who during the Second World War

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 197. Notably, although Naomi does bring joy to Eva, she is initially more similar to the assimilated Magda, who spoils the girl, than to her mother.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 225.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 226. She succeeds as in *A Drop of Rain* Naomi finds "a yellow article about Poland that Mom published in the "Edmonton Journal" a long time ago". H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 226.

<sup>35</sup> E. Sojka, *Twórczość polskiej diaspory...*, p. 301.

worked as an Ostarbeiter (Eastern worker) in Germany and came to Canada with her partisan husband as displaced persons. Babka, who works as a cleaner at the University of Alberta, barely speaks English, is Roman Catholic, fiercely anti-communist, and different from the Anglo-Canadian grandmothers of Eva's classmates. An uneducated woman wearing a colorful kerchief, a visible marker of her ethnic otherness, Babka believes that Eva's father, an educated translator, was an aristocrat. Traumatized by the Second World War, she does not want Eva to visit Poland and warns her that her homeland

[is] no good place. Get shot. Get murdered. Everybody in my family killed in war. I seen them killed right in front o' me. I seein' this when I was young woman. Your age now. And before war we all starvin'. After war I never goin' back. Never. And them commies just as bad as Nazis. Maybe worse. My friend's cousins in Ukraine all starvin' to death with this Stalin.<sup>36</sup>

Babka, a modest Galician woman, seems to echo the archetype of the Ukrainian *baba*, who emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as “the god and head of the household” and became “the spiritual and physical link to peasant pioneer heritage” helping new generations to “understood themselves as both Canadians and Ukrainians”.<sup>37</sup> While Babka looks and behaves like a Ukrainian Canadian *baba*, a relic of the pioneer past, the woman is Polish Canadian and came to Canada after the Second World War. Yet, in *Warsaw Spring* she becomes Eva's first direct link to Poland. Notably, with her lack of sophistication and education, she does not become the giver of memories to her granddaughter.

Whereas in Canada Babka emerges as an outsider, in Poland, Eva finally encounters a woman looking like her grandmother

An old woman in a long dress and brightly coloured kerchief was sitting in one of the pews – not preying, just sitting. **She reminded me a lot of Babka Goralski, except she didn't look strange and out of place.** I guess it was her

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<sup>36</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> F. Swyrypa, *Wedded to Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity 1891-1991*, Toronto 1993, pp. 250, 216.

traditional clothing and the fact that her people have lived here for generations and **she's not surrounded by a society where she doesn't fit in.**<sup>38</sup>

Seeing the woman, who unlike her Babka seems to be in her element, Eva for the first time realizes that "*Grandpa and Grandma Goralski came from a totally different world from Canada!*" and thinks that instead of wearing "Canadian" clothes, "*Babka would look a lot better in the women's costume of a long, colourful skirt and white blouse with bright embroidery decorations*".<sup>39</sup> Eva's words seem to be further *othering* her Polish Canadian grandmother and positioning her as an outsider in multicultural Canada.

Before going to Poland, Eva feels lost, misunderstood, and is suicidal. She often asks herself: "Why do I bother to exist?".<sup>40</sup> While she attributes her misery to "missing a proper family [...] a mother or a father", she is also "missing meaning" and has not "figured out lots of things – here and in Canada", hence, she has "no confidence in [her]self".<sup>41</sup> Importantly, no sooner she learns about Polish culture and history than she starts to change: "I feel as though – I don't know – as though I'm being slowly completed [...] The completing is happening deep down inside. I don't think I can describe what is happening. I guess it has something to do with what has been missing", she confesses.<sup>42</sup> Only in Poland does she realize that

So much of life in Canada seemed **meaningless** – school, the TV and radio programs, the advertisements, the people – it was so hard to know what was important. Like, I wanted to know how life really work and it was impossible to figure out, so I had this feeling of no feeling. **I could feel only the emptiness.**<sup>43</sup>

The feeling of emptiness and the association of Canada with meaninglessness begin to disappear when Eva connects with Hanna, learns about her roots, and meets Pope John Paul II.

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<sup>38</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 174. Emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 176.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194. Emphasis mine.

When Eva first arrives in Poland, she is warmly welcomed by her half-sister Hanna, who cooks *pierogi*, but seems disappointed as she quickly notices that the grass is “not as green as Canadian grass [...] It looks sort of tired, like how I feel [...] The sky is blue [...] But it isn’t. It’s grey”. “Is it always like this?”, she asks.<sup>44</sup> Wandering around Warsaw, Eva thinks that “*people all look so tired*” and learns to appreciate life in Canada.<sup>45</sup> Raised by her poor grandmother in relative comfort, Eva is surprised at her educated half-sister’s poverty and loneliness. Despite having two university degrees, Hanna has no refrigerator, no stove, no cupboards, “no nothing”.<sup>46</sup> Eva gradually starts realizing that her other family members and neighbors are wealthier and that Polish society is not classless. She encounters both wealth and shortages of food and initially “*think[s] that life in Canada is absurd and trivial compared to life in Poland*”.<sup>47</sup> While at first Eva only notices the negative aspects of life in Poland, eventually, observing the crowds during John Paul II’s first papal visit to Warsaw, she starts to see different colors and positive aspects of Poland

The descending sun catches the spire on the Palace of Culture and Science, and makes it glow orange. A cold burning [...] like ancient pagan bonfires through the mists of time. The fires of the Wends, the Slavs and the Polonians. The fires of Mieszko’s country. Of the thousand-year-old Polish people. The Polish people have gathered. And Moscow, perhaps, will burn.<sup>48</sup>

Eva knows about “*the thousand-year-old Polish people*” because throughout the novel Hanna constantly teaches her about art and culture. Brought up by her simple Babka and oblivious, assimilated mother, Eva is surprised to see the cultural sophistication of Poles who are not peasants in sheepskins but elegant intellectuals standing in a long line to enter an art exhibition: “In Canada there would be a line-up like this only for tickets to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 64.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 87. Her ignorant and superficial opinion contradicts the pessimistic portrayal of Canadian social problems in Kirk’s *A Drop of Rain*.

<sup>48</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 216.

a special hockey game or a major rock concert", Eva observes.<sup>49</sup> Hanna introduces her younger half-sister to the achievements of Polish literature, such as Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and the poetry of Maria Konopnicka; theater, most notably Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding*; the music of Chopin and Krzysztof Penderecki; "painting[s] by Jan Matejko" depicting "Queen Jadwiga" and "Young Copernicus",<sup>50</sup> and the achievements of Polish science. At the exhibition "arranged in chronological order, from the one-thousand-old Tyniec Sacrament to a handmade book of poems by the young Krzysztof [sic!] Kamil Baczyński, killed in 1944 in the Warsaw Uprising",<sup>51</sup> which she attends with Hanna, its co-organizer, Eva learns that "Henryk Sienkiewicz won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1905", to which she reacts "Way to go, Henryk! Sorry I've never heard of you before", suggesting that the novel's implied readers may also not be familiar with any achievements of Polish culture, even Sienkiewicz's novel and its several film adaptations.<sup>52</sup> Hanna also tells her half-sister about important events from Polish history, including the Battle of Westerplatte,<sup>53</sup> the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,<sup>54</sup> and the Warsaw Uprising. From other characters, most notably Mrs. Szymanowska, Eva also learns about unofficial history not found in any Polish books at that time, including the Katyń massacre

in the Katyn Forest in Russia, thousands of Polish officers were all shot (murdered) and buried in a mass grave. [...] the Soviets did this, of course, but never admitted it. They claimed it was the Nazis. But some escaped and told people the truth. Then she started talking about the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. She said that the Soviets were sitting in their tanks on the Praga side of the Vistula River just waiting for us Poles to destroy ourselves, not firing a shot to help us against the Nazis. No wonder the Poles hate the Soviets.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 183.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 188.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 184.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 186.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 210.

Mrs. Szymanowska is also the first one to introduce the metaphor of Poland as “*the Christ of nations*”, attributing it to Winston Churchill and Adam Mickiewicz – “*the suffering here in Poland has certainly been enormous*”, thinks Eva after hearing about the untold history of Poland.<sup>56</sup>

On the 241 pages of *Warsaw Spring*, Eva not only learns of numerous important names and events but also visits Kraków, Sopot, and Auschwitz. The last trip is particularly traumatizing, as she vomits afterward<sup>57</sup> and clearly remembers it twenty years later.<sup>58</sup> Eva also goes to Rabka, where Hanna tells her about her experience of meeting Karol Wojtyła, whose first visit to Poland in 1979 Eva experiences at the end of her Polish trip. When Hanna was Eva’s age, he “used to come to the village and lead young people on hiking trips on the mountains [...] Father Wojtyła also led discussion groups about religion while they hiked, and sometimes the whole group would drop into a church to pray”.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, throughout the novel, Kirk highlights the importance of the Roman Catholic church, especially Pope John Paul II, in the Polish fight against communism. As Mark, Eva’s love interest and Naomi’s father, says: “Here in Poland, the Catholic Church has political as well as religious significance [...] Rebellion against the Soviet regime is now led by Pope John Paul II in the Vatican”.<sup>60</sup> Although Poles had protested against communist before the papal visit and Solidarity (Solidarność) was a social movement led by members of a free trade union, Kirk wants to highlight the Pope’s refinement and socio-political importance. While Kirk writes about Lech Wałęsa, she does not mention

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<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 211.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 193.

<sup>58</sup> In *A Drop of Rain* Eva reminisces a “fluff [...] carrying seed from the poplar trees” and thinking “of this fluff as millions of torn souls, clumped together”. H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 168.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 207. This opinion appears again in *A Drop of Rain*. It is Mary Kowalski who says that “Solidarity is not led by the uneducated electrician, Lech Walesa. It is led by Pope John Paul II. Karol Wojtyła was a cardinal in Krakow and a professor of ethics in the Lublin Catholic University before he became Pope. Our Polish pope knows many languages. He has two doctorates. He is well educated”. It is not coincidental that these words come from Mary, an educated woman. H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 17.

other Solidarity activists and leaves the readers with the wrong impression that the direct leader of the movement was John Paul II.

The readers may be surprised with the one-dimensional and overly positive portrayal of John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church in *Warsaw Spring*,<sup>61</sup> especially considering the Church's involvement in pedophilia scandals and Canadian Indian residential school system, which became a matter of controversy in the 1990s.<sup>62</sup> However, Hanna explains to Eva and contemporary Canadian young readers the allegedly special relationship between Poles and the Church: "By chance and by choice, Poland has become homogenously Catholic. Poles at all levels of society, at all levels of education, are united by the Catholic Church in their opposition to totalitarian Soviet communism".<sup>63</sup> Eva witnesses this union first-hand during the papal visit. She also gains "respect for the Catholic tradition" and "understand[s] that the pope is leading a political as well as spiritual revolution".<sup>64</sup>

It is during the papal visit when Eva's Polish identity is finally established. Hearing him talk about the "special lesson which Christian Poland has to teach the world, and the special responsibility which has been laid on the present generation of Poles", Eva starts identifying with Polishness

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<sup>61</sup> Despite some criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, in *A Drop of Rain* the Pope is also idealized and his role in the Solidarity movement is exaggerated. The novel starts with a quote from Pope John Paul II - "Human life is not just an abstraction; human life is the concrete reality of a being that lives, that acts, that grows and developed; human life is the concrete reality of a being that is capable of love, and of service to humanity" (n.p.).

<sup>62</sup> I agree with Sara L. Schwebel that "[h]istorical novels are always products of a particular historical context. As a result, their characters and historical arguments reflect the knowledge, politics, and worldview of authors at a particular moment in time", S. L. Schwebel, *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms*, Nashville 2011, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 199. Notably, the only person critical of the Pope is the assimilated Magda, who says "the pope doesn't like women - that's for sure. And being against abortion is so old-fashioned". Her statement is cut short by Eva, who asks "So, do you wish you had had an abortion and got rid of me?", *ibidem*, p. 234. Interestingly, Magda is also the only person who believes that Eva should report her former employer's abuse: "Magda thinks I should tell the police what Joe Stalin did, but Babka says 'better not tellin' nobody', and I say I just want to forget the whole thing, so that's what we decide to do, although of course we actually won't forget it", *ibidem*, p. 233.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 233.



and for the first time thinks: “*That generation is me!*”.<sup>65</sup> Afraid of potential violence, at first Eva wants “*to go home [...] back to Canada!*”, but eventually understands that she is safe in Warsaw as “*there will be no riot!*”.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, she realizes that being in Poland during the papal visit she is not a passive bystander<sup>67</sup> but a witness to an important event: “*I too am a Pole. I question, yet I also believe [...] I know what I believe!*”, she says after listening to John Paul II.<sup>68</sup> Bearing witness and directly experiencing such an important event in Polish history cement Eva’s feeling of Polishness and make her miss Canada. As it turns out in *A Drop of Rain*, Eva’s direct memories of her trip to Poland become the basis of her daughter’s second-generation memory.<sup>69</sup>

During her visit to Warsaw, Eva not only embraces her Polish heritage but also starts appreciating Canada and her previously “meaningless” life. When Babka gets sick, it is Hanna, Eva’s newly-found mother figure, who encourages her to return home

**Canada is where you belong [...]** You were raised there, and you are well suited to the life there, I am sure. **Poland is the past. It is history and culture and family.** There is no future for you here. You will have **a better life in Canada. Far more opportunities.**<sup>70</sup>

Hanna promises to join Eva and move to Canada. After all, she believes that “Poland is the past”.<sup>71</sup> When Eva returns to Edmonton, she notices

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, p. 213.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p. 214.

<sup>67</sup> See R. Sendyka, *Bystanders as Visual Subjects: Onlookers, Spectators, Observers, Gawkers in Occupied Poland*, [in:] *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. by C. Morina, K. Thijs, New York 2019, pp. 52–71.

<sup>68</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, pp. 217–218.

<sup>69</sup> Anastasia Ulanowicz argues that this type of memory in particular “involves narrative emplotment; thus, like all narrative, it is subject to interpretive acts informed by the specific material and political circumstances in which they occur”. A. Ulanowicz, *Second-Generation Memory and Contemporary Children’s Literature: Ghost Images*, New York–London 2013, p. 124. While Eva directly experiences being in Poland, Naomi, after reading history books and hearing Mary’s and Eva’s stories, has to adjust these narratives to her own circumstances before she can include them in her mnemonic repertoire.

<sup>70</sup> H. Kirk, *Warsaw...*, p. 221. Emphasis mine.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 221.

the freshness of the Canadian air and thinks: "I love Canada too!"<sup>72</sup> After spending some time in Poland she begins to see Canada differently, noticing the similarities and differences between Warsaw and Edmonton. For instance, the neighborhood of Babka reminds her of the Poniatowski Bridge area in Warsaw: "[o]nly here in Edmonton, there's no shadowy cavernous barrier between people and the wide sky, which is almost always blue [...] And anyway the owner isn't afraid that there will be another war soon, and bombs dropping and tans rumbling".<sup>73</sup> Hence, visiting Poland, meeting Hanna, and witnessing the papal visit make Eva more at ease with her Polish heritage and inspire her to appreciate Canada and its blue sky.<sup>74</sup>

In an interview with *Something About the Author*, Kirk, who is not of Polish heritage, explains why she decided to write about Poland: "I wrote the novels *Warsaw Spring* and *A Drop of Rain* because I admire modern Poland. The Polish solidarity uprising was one of the greatest passive-resistance movements of the twentieth century, if not the greatest!"<sup>75</sup> In her Polish-themed novels, Kirk combines various genres, most notably coming-of-age, problem novel, school novel, romance, and historical fiction. Historical fiction is of an extraordinary mnemonic potential because it "has the capacity to play a significant role in [young readers'] ethical development and may promote their ability to create recognizable and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p. 239.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 228.

<sup>74</sup> This romanticized image of Canada is partially challenged in *A Drop of Rain* as I argue elsewhere. See M. Świetlicki, *The Entanglements of Polish...*, pp. 253-271. In *A Drop of Rain* Hanna's illness and inevitable death provoke Eva to reminisce the time she spent in Poland and once again re-think her present. Hanna leaves Eva a "photograph album that Hanna once called 'as precious as life itself'" (ibidem, p. 20), with pictures taken in the late 1930s, during, and after the Second World War. Looking at the photographs Eva reconstructs Hanna's life tries to locate the moment she lost her will to live. The album also contains pictures of Eva's and Hanna's father – her only physical link to him. Yet Eva has another photo album filled with pictures from her 1979 trip with "only one photograph of Hanna in Poland" (ibidem, p. 52), which inspires her to reflect on Hanna's immigrant experiences in Canada.

<sup>75</sup> KIRK, Heather 1949-, "Something About the Author" 2006, vol. 166, p. 112. An almost identical opinion is voiced by in *A Drop of Rain* where Eva's partner Joe notes that Solidarity was "the greatest of the four great passive-resistance movements of the second half of the twentieth century". H. Kirk, *A Drop of Rain...*, p. 188.

grievable lives from previous unacknowledged populations”.<sup>76</sup> Because such literature is usually schematic and follows fixed narrative patterns, only few authors succeed in making their novels interesting, historically accurate, and approachable for the young readers. I concur with Richter that young readers need to be *captivated* before they can identify with the characters in a book.<sup>77</sup> While *Warsaw Spring* focuses on the quest for identity and contains countless mechanical references to Polish history and culture, its potential to captivate young Canadian readers and enable the transfer of next-generation memory<sup>78</sup> seems limited. After all, Poland is not a place where Kirk’s characters can live, it is only “history and culture and family”.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> R. Dean-Ruzicka, *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature: Engaging Difference and Identity*, New York 2017, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> M. V. Richter, *Creating the National Mosaic...*, p. 19.

<sup>78</sup> M. Świetlicki, *Next-Generation...*, p. 3–4.

<sup>79</sup> Twenty years later, Eva’s daughter Naomi in *A Drop of Rain* also starts associating Poland with art, culture, and traumatic history.

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### Streszczenie

#### „KANADA JEST TWOIM MIEJSCEM. POLSKA JEST PRZESZŁOŚCIĄ”: OBRAZY POLSKIEJ HISTORII I KULTURY W POWIEŚCI *WARSAW SPRING* HEATHER KIRK

Pierwsza fala polskiej imigracji do Kanady nastąpiła już w drugiej połowie XIX w., jednak w rodzimej świadomości społecznej ten kraj, w przeciwieństwie do swojego południowego sąsiada, rzadko bywa utożsamiany z Polonią. Literatura dziecięca odegrała szczególnie istotną rolę w tworzeniu kanadyjskiej kulturowej mozaiki. Biorąc pod uwagę powyższe, uboga reprezentacja polskiej historii i kultury w kanadyjskiej literaturze dla dzieci może zaskakiwać. Chociaż polscy bohaterowie występują w powieściach takich autorek jak Kathy Kacer, Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch czy Laura Langston, pełnią w nich rolę postaci pobocznych lub antagonistów, a kwestie polskiej kultury i polsko-kanadyjskiej tożsamości nie są w tych utworach poruszane. Wyjątek stanowi proza Heather Kirk, pisarki, która pod koniec lat 70. XX w. spędziła dwa lata w Warszawie i to właśnie problematyce rodzimej historii i kultury poświęciła dwie powieści dla młodego czytelnika – *Warsaw Spring* (2001) i *A Drop of Rain* (2004) – częściowo wypełniając lukę w reprezentacji polskiej kultury w kanadyjskim dyskursie literatury dla najmłodszych. Bohaterki powieści, których akcja dzieje się odpowiednio pod koniec lat 70. i 90., to kanadyjskie nastolatki polskiego pochodzenia, mierzące się z problemami wynikającymi z rozdwojonej, polsko-kanadyjskiej przynależności kulturowej. Na kartach powieści odkrywają historię kraju swoich przodków i bogactwo ich kultury, włączając je do własnego, transkulturowego repozytorium pamięci. Celem niniejszego ar-

tykułu jest analiza pierwszej polskiej powieści Kirk i pokazanie, w jaki sposób doświadczenie podróży do Polski lub rozmów z przedstawicielami starszego pokolenia, często ofiarami drugiej wojny światowej i komunizmu, wpływa na kształtowanie się wielokulturowej tożsamości bohaterki, jak również ukazanie pozatekstowego, mnemonicznego potencjału utworów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kanada, Polska, literatura kanadyjska, literatura dziecięca, powieść młodzieżowa, pamięć, wielokulturowość, tożsamość