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# *Functions of a Fairy Tale in the Auschwitz Camp Memories of Zofia Posmysz*

## *Funkcje bajki we wspomnieniach obozowych Zofii Posmysz*

During the occupation, from 30 May 1942 to 2 May 1945, the Cracow-born Zofia Posmysz (1923–2022), a writer, author of film scripts and television shows, was a prisoner of German Nazi concentration camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe.<sup>1</sup> After the liberation, she moved to Warsaw, where she studied Polish philology and made her debut in 1945 in the “Głos Ludu” with her camp memoirs *Znam katów z Belsen...* (Posmysz 2017b). From 1952, she was associated with the Polish Radio. Popularity came to her with her novel *Pasażerka* (1962), translated into many languages, in which Posmysz took up the theme of a complicated relationship between two women: an SS functionary and a Polish inmate of a concentration camp, and analysed the psychology of a torturer (Burska 1992: 465). She also focused on themes related to German camps in, among others, *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* (Posmysz 2005), a novel first published in 1970 and considered to be a glorification of camp friendship, as well as the extended interview entitled *Królestwo za mgłą* (Posmysz 2017a), which she gave to the journalist and historian Michał Wójcik (Urbaś 1985; Kaczyński 2010). In addition, Posmysz was also actively involved in, and cooperated with, institutions showing concentration camps in new perspectives and serving to testify “for good against evil” (Potocka 2021: 10), such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the POLIN

1 On this period in Posmysz's life, see Potocka 2021.

Museum of the History of Polish Jews, or the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Her life work can be summed up by the words *pokonać nienawiść*, “to overcome hatred”.<sup>2</sup>

The last published work by Zofia Posmysz, the extended interview of 2017, begins with the words of the interviewer, Michał Wójcik, “A long, long time ago...”, which she takes up, continuing the sentence following the model of the classic opening formula of the Polish folk tale: “...beyond seven rivers, beyond seven mountains, there lay the Empire of the Knights of the Dead Man’s Skull” (Kr 15<sup>3</sup>). This draws the folklorist’s attention to aspects of the fairy tale, encouraging an in-depth analysis. It also indirectly refers to the novel *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem*, where the author tells of her concentration camp experiences – and she had survived three years in the hell of a concentration camp, with medical experiments, a death march, typhus, *durchfall* (starvation diarrhoea), work in the fields, knee-deep in water, and in the food warehouse as a scribe, the loss of camp friends, etc. – **through a fairy tale**. Posmysz used this stylisation to construct the camp narrative in those passages in the novel where the memories of the protagonist, a Polish woman – the author’s *alter ego* – transport her from a sunny beach on the Adriatic to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, where she appears as the Secretary (in Polish: *Sekretarka*, an unmistakably female form), from whose point of view the narrative is told. In these passages, the novel tells the story of the friendship between two camp inmates, Birdie (in Polish: *Ptaszka*, also a female form) and the Secretary. The two women differ in their outlook on life and approach to survival in the camp. Years later, her novel was called “absolutely pioneering. Today unjustly forgotten. No one had written about the camp in this way before. (...) On so many levels, tiers of narration. And in this convention, too” (Wójcik 2017: 8). In view of the above, the aim of my analysis is to try to determine what functions the fairy tale plays in the context of a narrative concerning a concentration camp experience.

The material basis for my analysis is provided by two books by Zofia Posmysz: the novel *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* and the extended interview as a self-commentary to this novel. The novel reveals that in the camp, the person who used to tell fairy tales to her fellow inmates was Birdie (Wa 125–129<sup>4</sup>). This is an authentic figure, about whom Posmysz says: “Zosia Jachimczak. Number 7546. Sweet Birdie. She was older

2 *Pokonać nienawiść* was the title of one of the debates in which Posmysz took part after a showing of the film *Szrajberka z Auschwitz* (2017) directed by Grzegorz Gajewski, of which she is the protagonist. Unless otherwise indicated, all the citations from Polish-language works have been translated for the purpose of the current article.

3 Posmysz 2017a, *Królestwo za mgłą*, henceforward referred to by the abbreviation Kr followed by a page number. All citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present article.

4 Posmysz 2005, *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem*, henceforward referred to by the abbreviation Wa followed by a page number.

than me. Having graduated from the music academy, she came to the SK<sup>5</sup> in Budy. (...) Skinny, petite, delicate. We became friends" (Kr 143). Posmysz gave her the camp nickname "Birdie" while they were still in Birkenau (Kr 143–144). And "Birdie knew so well how to tell stories, when it rained on a Sunday we would sometimes be left in the Colony and there we were, sitting with Birdie on a shelf, picking lice out of the seams of dresses" (Wa 126). In *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem*, the Secretary quotes Birdie's words and her tale of Piotrowin<sup>6</sup>: "There lived a wise king, above measure bold, but impious, and a very saintly bishop" (Wa 125). This makes it clear that there was a place for fairy tales in a concentration camp, as evidenced at least by reprint publications: *Bajki z Auschwitz* (Pinderska-Lech, Mensfelt 2009; cf. Kulasza 2002) and Halina Banasiak's *Bajki* (Banasiak 2012). The first is a reprint of six lavishly illustrated fairy tales of various types, which were made illegally, under threat of losing their lives, by Auschwitz inmates and smuggled out of the camp, passed to their own children and to a girl in the neighbourhood whose mother was helping the inmates. Banasiak, in turn, wrote down rhymes, dedicating them to her own children, whom she was never to see again: transported to the camp in the late 1943, she died there. Even if the prisoners could not read or tell these fairy tales or rhymes to their children, they wrote them down and illustrated them with the children in mind. In turn, the oral transmission of fairy tales took place – in a manner similar to the case of Jachimczak and Posmysz – also in Soviet prisons and gulags, as recalled by Beata Obertyńska (Obertyńska 2005).<sup>7</sup> Such examples confirm that it is appropriate to analyse camp stories in the context of a fairy tale, and supply the first dimension of the relationship between a camp and a fairy tale.

The second dimension of that relationship is Posmysz's stylisation of the concentration camp as presented in the novel into a folktale of the "magic fairy tale" variety, also known as a fable in folklore studies (Ługowska 1981: 12; cf. Wróblewska 2003: 24–27). In doing so, Posmysz does not use the typical themes of folk prose, but rather individual motifs, freely combining the real world with the fantastic, fairy-tale, mythological and oneiric one. In the architextual perspective, the relationship between the magic fairy tale and Posmysz's writing operates at the level of convention. At the same time, this stylisation can be seen most clearly in such dimensions of the depicted world as space, time, characters and magical objects, as well as in the morphology, plot, metamorphoses, wording and comic quality (Smyk 2023).<sup>8</sup>

5 SK – German: Strafkompagnie, a penal sub-camp.

6 Protagonist of an 11<sup>th</sup>-century hagiographic legend: a man brought back from the dead by Bishop Stanislaus of Szczepanów (future Saint Stanislaus) to testify to the truth of the bishop's words (translator's note).

7 In her memoirs, Obertyńska describes how she or other inmates told fairy tales, how inmates would meet in one cell for those storytelling sessions, and in what way they thanked her for telling fairy tales: Obertyńska 2005: 56–57, 64, 74, 77, 107, 129, 134, 172–173.

8 A review of further fairy-tale elements present in Posmysz's novel, such as the morphology, plot, metamorphoses, wording and comic quality, is beyond the capacity of this essay.

Posmysz leaves no doubt that the “copyright” to such a literary solution belongs to Zofia Jachimczak, stating: “I borrowed the idea (...). Auschwitz as a fairy tale. (...) Is it precursory? I don’t know. But it belongs to Birdie, let’s write this clearly” (Kr 146). And she adds:

And she was the first to understand that Auschwitz was not a world that could be grasped by the human mind. One day she said: “Kingdom”. That the camp was a kingdom from a fable. From a terrible and strange fable, one not from our world. And the SS-men were knights from a fable. This was her vision. Order of the Knights of the Dead Man’s Skull. She created this allegory, and I must admit that even then – before the end of 1942– it... well, fascinated me (Kr 143).

Further on, Posmysz comments that Jachimczak

“[f]antasised. Look, Look, here comes Brunhild! – she would grab my hand and show me some SS-woman. Or when Mandl [Maria Mandl, an SS overseer – K.S.] rode her horse (...), Birdie immediately recognised her as the Great She-Knight. Then, excited, she would tell tales of the Kingdom. I owe this idea to her. A way to express Auschwitz” (Kr 144; cf. Wa 127).

The first fairy tale, therefore, was told by Zofia Jachimczak – Birdie, and she can be named the source author and source narrator. She shared her fairy tales with her fellow inmates in the camp, while Zofia Posmysz tells them to us – outside the camp. Thus, we are dealing here with two differing models of a communicative situation<sup>9</sup>: the intra-camp one and the post- or extra-camp one. At the same time, the source variant of Birdie’s camp fairy tale remains unknown, as too many communicative circumstances have changed, the first one being that the sender of the primary oral communication is dead. What occurs here, therefore, is a re-contextualisation (cf. Głowiński 1986: 86), as a result of which Birdie’s story is mediated to today’s recipients by Posmysz’s writing in two variants, by means of two channels: the novel and the commentary found in the extended interview. The figure of Birdie ties the three variants together and allows them to be considered comprehensively as a camp fairy tale.<sup>10</sup> In the following section, I undertake an analysis of the functions of the fairy tale as conceived in this way in the writings and memoirs of Zofia Posmysz.

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<sup>9</sup> A folk fairy tale and a literary fable were inscribed into the communicative scheme by Jolanta Ługowska (Ługowska 1981: 8–11, 31–33).

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek’s idea for a concentration camp comedy as a separate film sub-genre (Žižek 2004; Ubertowska 2008: 58–59) prompts us to define anew variant of fairy tale: the concentration camp fairy tale. For more on the defining traits of this variant, see Smyk 2023.

## Functions of a concentration camp fairy tale: interpretational perspectives

Interpretation of Zofia Posmysz's camp fairy tale can be conducted in two ways: (I) by making use of the findings of folklorists, or (II) by supporting the analysis with research in the field of literary studies. Each of these approaches invites deeper analysis, which the capacity of this essay does not allow; let us, therefore, limit ourselves to considering the most important issues.

### I. A folkloristic perspective in the study of the camp fairy tale

The material under analysis, namely: Jachimczak's intra-camp narrative practice and Posmysz's post-camp literary statements, can be approached through folklore studies, more specifically: through the functions of the fairy tale and the relation of a story to trauma. In terms of functions (cf. Grochowski 2018), the camp fairy tale fulfils the following:

(1) socio-integrative functions – owing to the fairy tale, a relationship was built between two female inmates, Jachimczak and Posmysz, in the performative act of telling/listening to a fairy tale. Also, a fairy tale belongs to the universal language of Polish culture and of many cultures in general;<sup>11</sup> therefore, applied in Posmysz's literary work, it can contribute to an effective communication with the readers, who are members of a communicative community which uses the fairy tale as the language of its cultural universe.

(2) aesthetic functions – important to folk tale tellers especially in the transmission of magical fairy tales (Grochowski 2018: 25) – in Posmysz's literary work should be regarded as being in the foreground. However, the focus on aesthetics does not obscure the informative function of a camp fairy tale perceived as focused on narrating the camp experience. With such an approach, aesthetic functions can therefore be considered secondary.

The apotropaic and ludic functions were (or are) realised less strongly through this type of fairy tale, whereas (3) the moralising (didactic/educational) functions related to the ethical aspect, essential for the folk tale, effected by "demonstrations of patterns of behaviour" (Kasjan 1994: 69–70; Przybyła-Dumin 2014: 56) manifest themselves more strongly.

The most strongly manifested functions – in the case of both a fairy tale told in the concentration camp context and one used for artistic stylisation – are (4) the compensatory and cathartic ones, served by the fairy-tale idealisation of reality. Grochowski points out, in reference to old fairy tales: "These were narratives which both depicted a perfect reality and allowed listeners to identify with idealised heroes" (Grochowski 2018: 26).

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<sup>11</sup> For fairy tale as the *langue* of culture, see Ługowska 1981: 21.

Fairy tales, and therefore camp fairy tales as well, became a substitute form of dream fulfillment for listeners and story-tellers alike, "who at least in the imagination and in the story born from it could achieve a change of fortune" (Przybyła-Dumin 2014: 56); a change which the inmates of Birkenau wished for themselves as well.

Janina Hajduk-Nijakowska has described the role of folklore in the process of trauma management (2005), including the role of a reminiscence story (2016<sup>12</sup>); and the narrative by Posmysz can be considered to be precisely that: a reminiscence story about her friend telling a camp tale, constructed using fairy tale motifs. According to Hajduk-Nijakowska, a victim has "a natural need to tell about the tragedy that occurred" (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 169<sup>13</sup>) and to verbalise his/her experiences; this is a necessary condition for shedding the role of the victim (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 207–209). Such a condition was the writing of poems following the 1997 flood in the Opole region (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 219) as well as – to draw a parallel – the writing of fairy tales following the concentration camp experience. This is because what Hajduk-Nijakowska has described are narrative mechanisms for mastering anxiety and for finding answers to questions that trouble an uneasy mind (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 225). Hence the notion of the therapeutic function of folklore, which allows us to assume that a camp fairy tale as "a shared cultural tradition helps to manage trauma and, drawing on the folklore tradition, reinforces the value of social support" (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 226<sup>14</sup>). A former inmate of Auschwitz pointed to the indelibility of the experience: "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. (...) One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. It is *fear* that henceforth reigns over him" (Améry 1986: 40). Zofia Jachimczak and Zofia Posmysz had to contend with a similar fear; the latter, leaving the confines of the camp's wire fencing after the liberation, took it with her and tried to tame it by her writing (cf. Połuszny 2014: 103–105).<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that the fairy tale referred to in *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* somehow allowed Posmysz to come to "feel at home in the world". Posmysz herself described the therapeutic function of a camp fairy tale in the following words:

Maybe this defused the horror, maybe it was easier for her [Birdie – K.S.] to tame this camp reality. (...) the tales we tell the children are cruel. Murder upon murder, corpse

12 See esp. the chapter on labour camps set up after the Second World War by the Bureau of Security, which in the memoirs of Silesians are described in a similar way to concentration camps; Hajduk-Nijakowska 2016: 147–262.

13 Hajduk-Nijakowska made use of the findings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Jackson Ong and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir.

14 Cf. chapter II, entitled *Autonarracja jako sposób osławiania rzeczywistości* [Self-narrative as a method of taming reality] (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2016: 55–81).

15 Cf. strategies for depicting the horror of war and working through the trauma of the Warsaw Uprising by referring to characters and motifs from Andersen's fairy tales; Kostecka 2017.

upon corpse, decapitations, arson, kidnappings. Nevertheless, fairy tales defuse the horror of life. This is their function (Kr 146).

The process of verbalising individual experiences was described by folklorists through the sequence: "the emergence of a memorate, its transformation into a fabulate and finally into a reminiscence story" (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 227; Hajduk-Nijakowska 2016: 65). Zofia Posmysz's work seems to fit perfectly into this process: the camp experience and the need to talk about it were a *punctum* and the moment of the emergence of a memorate. In a traumatic and highly emotional situation such as the camp experience, this memorate was easily folklorised. It therefore transformed into a fabulate: a narrative told inside the camp, whose dominant structural feature turned out to be the folk tale. This fairy tale, in turn, survived in the final version of the reminiscence story: *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem*. Folklorists have established that during the process of transmission, texts not only undergo transformation (just like the fairy tale from *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* differs from the fairy tale found in the extended interview), but also a community version is created, conditioned by the social demand for such a variant of the story (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2016: 65). It is tempting to say that through Posmysz's literary statements, the camp fairy tale became a property shared by the community of all its recipients.

The status of the camp fairy tale as a fabulate is reinforced by the conviction of the Nazi, Joachim Wolf, a high official of the Birkenau camp, that no one would hold the Germans accountable for the concentration camps after the war; for he was certain, like other Nazis and the Führer himself, that even if any of the victims survived, "[n]oone would believe them" (Kr 155). The very same observation is the starting point for Primo Levi's analyses:

It is significant that the culprits themselves foresaw this rejection well in advance: many survivors (...) remember that the SS militiamen enjoyed cynically admonishing the prisoners: 'However the war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. (...) And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed' (Wiesenthal, cit. Levi 1989: 11–12).

The fact that this theme runs through the statements of former inmates justifies a question directly related to this analysis: Is a fairy tale believed? No; in fairytale prose, the content is not an object of belief (Grochowski 2018: 25). In a reminiscence story, however, it is. Zofia Posmysz's texts under analysis here come close to a reminiscence story in terms of their content and function in relation to memory, and to a folk fairy tale in terms of their form and value system.<sup>16</sup> Making use of a fairy-tale compositional

<sup>16</sup> The fairy tale used in the camp story is one of the actualisations of the process of mythicisation in the course of constructing a narrative (for other mythicisation strategies, see Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 159;

pattern weakens the power of the reminiscence, thereby making the camp experience unreal<sup>17</sup> and helping to relive it and to talk about it.

## II. Perspectives of literature studies in the analysis of the camp fairy tale

An approach supported by research in the field of literary studies would make it possible to define the role of the fairy tale as a material of artistic stylisation and literary strategies of describing the camp experience. The question of a survival strategy refers to the fairy tale told inside the camp, where the participants in the process of transmission are Zofia Jachimczak and Zofia Posmysz. The issue of fairy-tale artistic stylisation refers to the fairy tale functioning outside the camp and passed on by Posmysz to the readers of her novels, short stories and memoirs. The fairy tale – as concentration camp literature does in general – serves her to tell a story of adaptation in the “other world” (Burska 1992: 741) and turns out to be a good tool for presenting – again, as is characteristic of concentration camp literature – universal matters in the face of the breakdown of the civilisational course of cultural development and hitherto held worldviews. This is where the need of the authors of camp literature coincides with the traits of the fairy tale, which through details tells of universal truths, ones existing beyond the boundaries of time and space, like myth or archetype. In line with the poetics of concentration camp literature (Burska 1992: 742), in a camp fairy tale the torturers maintain the status of “supermen” (vide the King and his court in Posmysz’s works) and monsters, while the victims, Birdie and the Secretary, remain ideal and in their fight for their lives are guided by moral principles, honouring friendship as one of the highest values. Works categorised as concentration camp literature, on the other hand, “are characterised by the fact that they adopt the camp horizon of values and style of behaviour as the only one possible (...). What is shocking, both morally and artistically, is that the authors grant camp attitudes and behaviours the status of custom, the norm” (Burska 1992: 744). Her escape into the world of fairy tales and mythology serves Birdie to maintain contact with high principles and universal values – the extra- and pre-camp ones. With the help of the fairy tale, a world is created that is certainly modelled on the structure and norms of the camp,

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cf. Simonides 1981). It is tempting to move further along these lines and use the sociological categories posed by Hajduk-Nijakowska, namely those of ontological residua (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 195) and the need of a home (Hajduk-Nijakowska 2005: 202), in the analysis of Posmysz’s novel.

- 17 This is what Jean Améry says about the process of making the camp experience unreal: “First of all, the intellectual did not so easily acknowledge the unimaginable conditions as a given fact as did the non-intellectual. Long practice in **questioning the phenomena of everyday reality** [underline S.K.] prevented him from simply adjusting to the realities of the camp, because these stood in all-too-sharp a contrast to everything that he had regarded until then as possible and humanly acceptable” (Améry 1986: 10).



but at the same time these norms and structures are made unreal in this world and, by the same token, invalidated and transcended; the fairy-tale world enables survival.

Researchers of concentration camp literature point to two extremes between which the works in this genre are placed. The first extreme is the approach of presenting human misery and hopelessness (e.g. the Auschwitz short stories by Tadeusz Borowski). On the other extreme is the literature of the "solidarity of memory", in which the authors' belief in the persistence of humanistic values provides the foundation for the preservation of humanity in adverse conditions (Burska 1992: 743–744). Texts by Zofia Posmysz belong to the second category; the preservation of human dignity in an undignified camp is fostered by the memory of the permanent structures of life as contained in fairy tales.<sup>18</sup> They also reflect the order of the world, as they "preserve and expressively present elements of the folk worldview, including the anthropomorphic vision of the world, the idea of solidarity of life in nature, the idea of just behaviour and social bonds" (Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska 2007: 283).

Interpretative inspirations are provided in great abundance by the second wave of literature-oriented research on the Nazi exterminations and the Holocaust, the beginning of which is dated to 2002 (Głowiński 2002: 209; Ubertowska 2007: 10). These studies suggest, for example, that the concentration camp fairy tale by Zofia Posmysz can be analysed in terms of the strategies of women's writing about the Holocaust and the war. These strategies have been singled out by Aleksandra Ubertowska (2014: 135–150), who showed how survival tactics translate into the principles of text creation.<sup>19</sup> By telling a concentration-camp fairy tale, Jachimczak and Posmysz have chosen a non-egocentric perspective, focusing – similarly to many female authors of Holocaust memoirs (Ubertowska 2014: 138) – on describing the surrounding world (Jachimczak) and other people's suffering (Posmysz). Their narratives document the increasing loneliness, loss of successive friends and the emptiness growing around them (Ubertowska 2014: 140), which Jachimczak filled with Knights, She-Knights, Dog-Knights, as she called the male and female SS officers in her fairy tales. Posmysz shows this attitude in the literary variant of the fairy tale as the strenuous, repeated and ineffective attempts to save Birdie's life. Among women's Holocaust strategies, Ubertowska also points to the compulsion to change identity while hiding on the Aryan side and to adopt an instrumental identity (Ubertowska 2014: 142–143), which in the case of the fairy tales under consideration here may be understood metaphorically: Jachimczak decides that in the camp she would play the role of storyteller, whereas Posmysz personifies her friend Birdie, so to speak, in her literary fairy-tale stylisations.

<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, the stereotypical positive ending of a fairy tale: "And they lived happily ever after" takes on an additional deep and almost practical meaning in the face of the concentration camp hell.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the title of the chapter referred to herein: *Gender i Holocaust: strategie przetrwania, zasady tekstotwórcze* [Gender and the Holocaust: survival strategies, principles of text creation] (Ubertowska 2014: 135).

What is seen here is a play on identity patterns; one which serves the purpose of surviving in a concentration camp<sup>20</sup> and rescuing oneself from traumatic memories after the liberation. In addition, Ubertowska perceives a strong trait of emotionality present in women's literature (2014: 147), which is absent from a camp fairy tale: this tale presents a world obviously filled with fear, but fear that is not expressed explicitly. Related to this is the strategy of "semanticising silences", stemming from the "opacity" of the Holocaust experience (Ubertowska 2014: 150) which, in turn, became the foreground strategy formally organising the narrative: in the case under analysis, a fairy tale conceals the impossibility of making an account of the camp world and the camp experience. When you feel that words are impossible to utter, you can always – regardless of taboos – tell a fairy tale.

Regarding the axiological organisation of the camp fairy tale narrative, Ubertowska's comments on women's "culinary narratives", i.e. often elaborate stories "referring to the activity of preparing food, which is culturally ascribed to women" (Ubertowska 2014: 155), are worth noting. In this light, a concentration camp fairy tale would appear, similarly to a culinary narrative, to be a story with a "life-giving" function, "becoming the camp's 'counter-discourse' of survival: (...) a part of a strategy promoting a survival broader than mere physical survival. In this discursive game, at stake are the issues of identity, memory, moral order" (Ubertowska 2014: 155). It is in this truly humanistic and axiological light that the functions of Posmysz's camp fairy tale must be seen.

In addition, it is worthwhile to outline research perspectives opened by accepting that the statements provided by Posmysz can be considered testimonies (Agamben 1999; Levi 1989; Améry 1986; Czermińska 2000; Majewski 2007; Ubertowska 2008: 69–70). In this case, a concentration camp fairy tale must be perceived in the context of the Holocaust as an event sentenced "to be expelled from the world of myth and speech" (Ubertowska 2008: 69). Hence, many former inmates – philosophers, writers, literary scholars, artists – have succumbed to what Primo Levi saw as an obligation towards the dead: "We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned (...). We speak in their stead, by proxy" (Levi 1989: 83–85, esp. p. 84) and also an imperative of searching for a language to express the inexpressible, to talk about the "unsayable" (Agamben 1999: 157–158; Adorno 1986; Majewski 2007). The narratives of this search are described by Ubertowska as hollowed-out forms; forms that are "'negatives' of codified genres" (Ubertowska 2008: 84). It can be assumed that Posmysz found her own way of expressing the inexpressible: the fairy tale, which draws on the world of myth, is a primarily oral genre and operates on ready-made, petrified linguistic clichés, such as

<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g. John Boyne's novel about a camp friendship of two children *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne 2006) and the film on its basis under the same title. Another well-known example of a work involving a play with identity patterns is the comedy-drama film *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) directed by Roberto Benigni; for more on this topic, see Žižek 2004 and Ubertowska 2008: 58–59.

initial formulas. This, all things considered, might facilitate a “return to speech”. Bruno Bettelheim, a student of fairy tales and a former inmate of the Dachau and Buchenwald concentrations camps, writes:

Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings – came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality (...). [F]airy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind (Bettelheim 2010: 5–6).

Levi accuses the folklorist of making “approximate and simplified” interpretations (Levi 1989: 85) in his statements about the concentration camp; yet it is perhaps because of this higher level of abstraction that the fable can be seen as a “hollowed-out form”, i.e. as a culturally solidified and ordered structure into which any sense can be inserted; which, as a genre codified over the centuries, is ready by its very nature to accommodate – epoch after epoch, *punctum* after *punctum*, civilisation after civilisation – all universes and phenomena, and thus even those that are inexpressible. It allows a suffering and traumatised human being to keep a safe distance from these matters in the process of externalising them. But it also allows this form to be filled with positive, salutary content – with good things which give some hope that at some point in the future, the next time a fairy tale is told, this might happen. Such omnipotence of the fairy-tale genre, and the expression of the inexpressible as a function of a concentration camp fairy tale, seem salutary for former prisoners who, having “regained their voice” and their language, began to write. This is especially true of Jean Améry, who felt that “once a gloomy spell appeared to be broken by the writing of the essay on Auschwitz, suddenly everything demanded telling” (Amery 1986: xxiii), even though the camp had been a world that was “indecipherable: it did not conform to any model” (Levi 1989: 38). The fairy tale could therefore be interpreted in the terms of Holocaust literature as a handy “overall structure of meaning” (Ubertowska 2008: 155–157),<sup>21</sup> a ready-made constant form of description for the camp world and camp experience. In addition, words in the camp wished to reach beyond existence; whereas, as a former inmate put it, “nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real. In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy”; in Auschwitz, words “lost their transcendence” (Améry 1986: 19). Let it be noted that the proximity of the human world to the transcendent is peculiar to fairy-tale prose: “the earthly protagonists interact with the supernatural protagonists as equals, feeling neither a fear of them nor their alienness” (Kasjan 1994: 65). To sum up this part of the analysis, let it be said that the

21 And perhaps as a type of illusory “redemptive narrative” (Ubertowska 2008: 155–157).

concentration camp fairy tale seems to be a total fairy tale, encompassing innumerable cosmos and microcosms, if by means of its universalism Jachimczak and Posmysz could express Améry's "everything"; the life and the death; the "everything" that encompassed also Adorno's and Agamben's "inexpressible" and "unsayable".

\* \* \*

The folk tale not only ensured Zofia Posmysz's literary success, but was also a chance to survive in the concentration camp – in the case of Zofia Jachimczak, if not until its liberation, then at least for the next few quarters of an hour. In view of this, Posmysz's work is a strong argument in favour of the power of folklore and the strong position of the fairy tale in the Polish cultural universe. The question to ask is whether every fear, every memory, every trauma can be tamed by means of a fairy tale? In the extended interview, Posmysz recalled a situation when she stood in front of Block X: "I trembled, because this was a block where experiments were done on inmates. And I was twenty years old, do you understand me...? I screamed, God, how I screamed. I can't talk about it. I don't want to" (Kr 182). Thus, being **a total genre** and **an overall, omnipotent structure of meaning**, a fairy tale can achieve much; but it has yet to be tested whether its saving power can rescue a person in all areas of this world.

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## Summary

The article gives a multifaceted interpretation of the functions of a concentration camp fairy tale from the perspective of folklore studies (i.e. its socio-integrative, aesthetic, didactic/educational, compensatory/cathartic and trauma management functions) and literary studies (strategies of women's writing about the Holocaust and the war, and the camp testimony). The author analyses the novel *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* (1970) and an extended interview *Królestwo za mgłą* (2017) by Zofia Posmysz, an inmate of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe, who stylised her camp memories as a traditional folk tale, thus commemorating the fairy tales told by her camp friend Zofia Jachimczak, who did not survive Auschwitz. The author comes to the conclusion that a concentration camp fairy tale seems to be a complete genre and a comprehensive structure of meaning that makes it possible to express the inexpressible.

**Keywords:** folk tale, magic tale, concentration camp, Birkenau, Auschwitz, functions of folklore

## Streszczenie

Artykuł zarysowuje wieloaspektową interpretację funkcji bajki obozowej z perspektywy folklorystyki (funkcje społeczno-integracyjne, estetyczne, dydaktyczno-wychowawcze, kompensacyjno-katartyczne i opanowanie traumy) oraz literaturoznawstwa (strategie kobiecego pisania o Zagładzie i wojnie oraz kategoria świadectwa). Podstawę analizy stanowi powieść *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* (1970) i wywiad-rzeka *Królestwo za mgłą* (2017) Zofii Posmysz – więźniarki obozów koncentracyjnych Auschwitz, Ravensbrück i Neustadt-Glewe. Swoje wspomnienia obozowe wystylizowała na tradycyjną bajkę ludową, upamiętniając bajki opowiedane przez jej obozową przyjaciółkę Zofię Jachimczak, która nie przeżyła Auschwitz. Autorka dochodzi do wniosku, że bajka obozowa jawi się jako gatunek totalny i całościowa struktura sensu, pozwalająca wypowiedzieć niewypowiedziane.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bajka ludowa, bajka magiczna, obóz koncentracyjny, Birkenau, Auschwitz, funkcje folkloru

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