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A Boy Pretends To Be An Adult

Abstract: The article is devoted to the topos of *puer senex*, which brings together desired features of a child and features of an adult, found in Jerzy Przędziecki's, Zbigniew Liskowacki's, and Wiktor Zawada's war novels addressed to a young reader. Throughout centuries, writers often deployed the topos to persuasive aims. In children and young adult's literature, however, especially the 20th century-literature, the motif is rarely used. Though not devoid of ideological elements, an example of its deployment is the figures of boys in the war novels by Liskowacki and Zawada. In the case of the protagonist in Przędziecki's *The three of the black river*, the *puer senex* topos was used in a subtle way. The writer tells a story of eight-year old Wojtek against the background of the war that has just broken out with much psychological insight into the child's sensitivity and its psycho-physical abilities. Although only in the time of war vicissitudes, the protagonists in Liskowacki's and Zawada's novels assume the role of adults so strongly that it is difficult to differentiate between their soldier feats and feats of a regular army. The protagonists in the novels by Liskowacki and Zawada are true heroes. They successfully confront well-organized German troops during the Warsaw Uprising (Z. Liskowacki's *We, from Marymont*) or fight offensively the occupant's army along with the Uprising's soldiers in the surroundings of Zamość (W. Zawada's *The great war with the black flag*, *The Cacti of Green street*, *The wood school of Cactus the Rifleman*). The writers heroicise the boys by means of the *puer senex* topos. They try to balance fictive elements, which allow them to present unusual portraits of the children condemned to having to fight in the times of war, against historical details so that the presented stories may acquire documentary features.

Keywords: topos *puer senex*, World War II, Warsaw Uprising, pretending, adult

The *puer senex* topos (the boy/old man) dates back to antiquity. It was a popular hagiographical motif almost until the dawn of the modern era. According to Ernest R. Curtius, it was a desired balance between the elements of youth and maturity that made this motif persuasively attractive¹. Noticeable also beyond the confines of the European culture, it was widely used in portraying rulers, spiritual leaders and other figures as extraordinarily capable individuals. Chil-

¹ E. R. Curtius, *Literatura europejska i łacińskie średniowiecze*, transl. A. Borowski, Kraków 1997, p. 107-110. [E.R. Curtius, *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, transl. A. Borowski, Kraków 1997, pp. 107-110.]

dren who are intellectually capable in a way characteristic of sages can also be found in Polish folk culture, which only emphasizes the universal value of such anthropological depictions of people predestined to do things which are out of the ordinary².

The *puer senex* motif occurs rather rarely in children's literature, which does not make much use of this particular figure. This segment of literature promotes primarily the motif of a young man, with all the weaknesses and shortcomings of that particular age, in order to juxtapose this motif with mature characters, such as parents and their friends, relatives and teachers. There is, however, a group of texts written by authors who indirectly, and perhaps also unknowingly, make use of the *puer senex* theme. My concern here is with war literature addressed to young readers, which was particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s. In my paper I concentrate on selected novels by Wiktor Zawada, Ryszard Liskowacki and Jerzy Przeździecki, whose works today are largely forgotten.

The horrors of war, occupation and the Holocaust determined the way of portraying children as people who had to cope with the challenges of the time. These challenges often ruthlessly forced children to adopt certain social roles of adults. This is only one aspect of the phenomenon under discussion, which is perhaps less tragic than the fate of Jewish children. The latter is recorded in numerous documents, including literary memoirs with autobiographical overtones, which illustrate the brutal realities of the world engulfed by war. At this particular instance, one should mention the works by Henryk Grynberg, Michał Głowiński, Jerzy Kosiński and Ida Fink.³

Under these circumstances, the young characters, boys and girls alike, had to face certain death or witness the death of their nearest and dearest. To some extent, the idea of *make-believe*, a theory on children's *imaginative play* which unfolds on various levels of human activities, could prove to be of some use, given that war or any other moment of historic, social or cultural upheaval motivates one to make extraordinary efforts. This observation can also be referred to children, who on account of their cultural status were subject to other rules than adults. The writers felt compelled to seek an original profile for their juvenile characters due to a number of their specific features, such as their scant life experience, physical frailty and an insufficient ability to handle stress, all of which must have had a bearing on surviving war, revolution and other disasters. This profile was expected to combine the manifest features of a child with selected features of an adult. It gives some verisimilitude to the figures of

² T. Kalniuk, *Mityczni obcy. Dzieci i starcy w polskiej kulturze ludowej przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, Toruń 2014. [T. Kalniuk, *The mythical others. Children and old men in Polish folk culture at the turn of the 19th century*, Toruń 2014.]

³ J. Kowalska-Leder, *Dzieciństwo czasu Zagłady*, [in:] *Wojna. Doświadczenie i zapis. Nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze*, Kraków 2006, p. 308. [J. Kowalska-Leder, *The Childhood of the Holocaust*, [in:] *War. Experience and record. New sources, problems, research methods*, Cracow 2006, p. 308]

children who suffer the hardships of war, violence and other forms of evil. In my view, the young characters of war novels have to fight in combat with the enemy in order to survive. Despite the evident differences in potential represented by the figures of children and adults (e.g. German soldiers of World War II), the Polish writers weave the narrative in a way to demonstrate the victory of the former. In keeping with the realistic convention (enriched with historical detail) and with a view to obtain a persuasive effect, they make use of the fact observed in developmental psychology: children spend their time playing and the language of play is for them a fairly effective way of communicating with the world. It helps them master their fear, overcome their weaknesses or explain to themselves the inexplicable. The notion of play, divorced from reality, is an object of creative manipulation orchestrated by the writers. In doing so, they illustrate the transition from 'playing war games' to 'taking part in war', from pretending to be a soldier to actually being one:

The term 'make-believe play', as it is used in this book, denotes a genre of play which has been designated by various other names, such as 'imaginative play', 'fantasy play', 'symbolic play', 'pretend play', 'as if play', or 'sociodramatic play'. Many writers have referred to the concept of play in general and to that of make-believe, particularly as "illusive", "slippery" or "hard to define". To my mind, this verdict is unjustifiable. I believe that make-believe play can be defined exactly, in a way which clearly sets it apart from various different, superficially similar phenomena such as other forms of play, imitation, symbolization, pretending, fantasy, storytelling, drama, rituals and delusions⁴.

It has to be noted that the phenomenon described by Shlomo Ariel has two stages: animation comes as the first one and is followed by identification. Thus, the performative character of *make-believe* in this particular context is, in my view, crucially important, although its manifestation in literary texts dealing with war looks differently than in the actual psychological experiment of Ariel. The literature for children and young readers dealing with World War II can be treated primarily as a sort of two-tiered play.

The first of these tiers – I shall refer to it as 'textual' – is played out by writers who make references to historical events and construct the literary worlds based on their own memories or those of other people (also with some recourse to the sources). Owing to that, these texts evince distinctive documentary traces. Nevertheless, the juvenile figures are a projection, a sort of performative play of an adult person who makes use of the semantic signs of childhood in order to recount tragic events. A child in the texts under discussion usually mitigates the dramatic impact of war at the expense of authenticity. It is rare to find a writer who in depicting terrible situations would emphasize, using the literary figure of a child, the dramatic impact of war seen through the eyes of

⁴ S. Ariel, *Children's imaginative play. A visit to wonderland*, London 2002, s. 5.

a young person. It is so in the short stories by Henryk Grynberg and Ida Fink - but this is literature addressed to adult readers.

The second tier runs through the world portrayed by the authors who experienced war in their teens and later on, in the era of communist Poland, published their work, which to some extent resonated with the propaganda of the then communist authorities. They heroicised their characters in one way or another by referring to the *puer senex* topos. The very young characters, who are only about to grow into adolescence, face situations where they have to choose social behaviour which is normally ascribed to adults. Liskowacki and Zawada endowed their characters with such features as exceptional prudence, responsibility for oneself and others (including adults: parents, relatives, neighbours), heroicism, self-sacrifice, bravery, physical strength and psychic resilience. Przeździecki in his turn adopted a different solution: he stuck to the balance between the features characteristic of children and the positive features of adults. Wojtek, his eight-year old character from the novel *Troje nad czarnej rzeki* [*The three of the black river*], is more authentic than the characters of Liskowacki and Zawada. He does not fight with German soldiers, although his quality of being smart and cunning helps him save his friend from death.

The analysis will concentrate on the following works: the war trilogy by Zawada (*Kaktusy z Zielonej ulicy* [*The Cacti of Green street*], *Wielka wojna z czarną flagą* [*The great war against the black flag*], *Leśna szkoła strzelca Kaktusa* [*The wood school of Cactus the Rifleman*]), Liskowacki's novel *Z zielonych ulic na barykadę* [*From green streets onto the barricade*] and the series of nine short stories by the same author, initially published in separate fascicles under the common title *Historia dłuższa niż wojna* [*A history longer than war*] and, finally, the book by Przeździecki titled *Troje nad czarnej rzeki* [*The three of the black river*].

The last of these novels stands out of the rest on two accounts. Firstly, the action begins in the late 1930s and ends as the German troops seize Poland's territory. The war strand of the narrative complements the picture of Wojtek's life with his parents in Sosnowiec. Secondly, one has to note the way in which Przeździecki describes the war seen from a child's perspective. It is rid of gentle, child-like heroicism, which is so characteristic of the texts by Zawada and Liskowacki. In Przeździecki's prose, a child is a victim who does not attempt to fight, but only strives to understand, in the absence of parents, the reality of the world crushed by the forces of evil. The feeling of shock triggered by the entry of German troops to Sosnowiec, the absence of his father, who joins the Polish army, and the emotional distress of the mother - it all makes Wojtek look for rescue in compensatory activities. He plays war games in his imagination and defeats the forces of evil in a way that seems miraculous:

Oto on, Wojtek, wynajduje taki cudowny czołg, który nie boi się pocisków nawet największych armat. Jedzie tym czołgiem do Berlina. Po drodze wszyscy strzelają. Bombardują go samoloty, a on nic – wciąż jedzie. Jest już w Berlinie. Wybiega masa żołnierzy, a wszyscy strasznie do niego strzelają. Trach!Trach!

Trach!Trach! – odbijają się kule od zaczarowanego czołgu. I nagle patrzy, a tu, na tarasie ogromnego domu, w białym fotelu siedzi człowiek z wąsikami i pije herbatę – Hitler! Ostrzegają wszyscy Hitlera, że Wojtek jest najdzielniejszy. [...] Aż tu on, Wojtek, mówi: „Hitlerze, poddajesz się?” A ten, że nie, i nawet sięga po karabin. I wtedy Wojtek strzela i zabija Hitlera, i wojna jest skończona⁵. [Here is he, Wojtek, he invents such an amazing tank that is missile-proof and is resilient to even the heaviest artillery. He drives the tank to Berlin. Everybody is shooting all around. He is bombarded by planes, yet he keeps driving. He is already in Berlin. Troops of soldiers are attacking him and are fiercely shooting at him. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! - bullets are bouncing off the magical tank. And suddenly, on a terrace of an enormous building, he spots a man with a moustache, sitting in a white armchair and sipping tea – it's Hitler! Everyone warns Hitler that Wojtek is the bravest one. [...] And Wojtek asks him: “Do you surrender, Hitler?” He says ‘no’ and even tries to grab a rifle. And then Wojtek shoots Hitler dead, and the war is over.]

Wojtek is too weak to be able to oppose in any conceivable way the disastrous calamities of war. This is why he engages in ‘a fight’ in his imagination. Nevertheless, the justice meted out to Hitler, even though it is done only in play, illustrates the determination of the boy. At first, facing the perplexity of adults, Wojtek deals with the evil, and later on adopts the role of an adult as he rescues his Jewish friend, Abramek, who is shot by a German soldier. In this suggestive way, Przędziecki illustrates how an eight-year-old boy, experiencing the atrocities of war, is forced in a flash to make decisions which enable him to protect the vulnerable (weaker than himself, like Abramek). The realistic or naturalistic qualities of the key moments of Przędziecki's novels make the reader feel the atmosphere of war and demonstrate the ordeals which children have to confront. The innocent, carefree world falls into ruin and is replaced by an atrocious world. In these circumstances, all that counts is to save one's life at all costs. It is only possible thanks to the boy's ability to become an adult at least for a moment. It is best illustrated in the scene where the boy scavenges for food:

Ze śmietnika koło niemieckiej restauracji uciekły dwa szczury. Przemagając uczucie wstrętu i bojaźni, zagłębił rękę w ciemnej czeluści. [...] W kilku puszkach z przymkniętymi, blaszanymi denkami zostały resztki tłuszczu i mięsa. Widocznie szczury jeszcze do nich nie dotarły. Zbierał dłonią i jadł⁶. [Two rats escaped from the rubbish tip by the German restaurant. Overcoming repulsion and fear, he glided his hand into a dark opening. [...] There were some remnants of fat and meat in a few tins with half-closed lids. Apparently the rats didn't get the food. He took it out with his hand and ate it.]

This and several other scenes from Przędziecki's novel illustrating the survival of the boy make one think of the dramatic situation of the young people

⁵ J. Przędziecki, *Troje znad czarnej rzeki*, Warszawa 1975, s. 285. [J. Przędziecki, *The three of the black river*, Warsaw 1975, p. 285]

⁶ Tamże, s. 319.

who for various reasons were not evacuated from Leningrad.⁷ The heroicness of children, emphasised by the Soviet propaganda, involved something else than directly combatting the enemy. The preserved documents (diaries, photographs) demonstrate that children trapped in Leningrad, a city entrenched at the time like a fortress, could not avoid the evil experienced by adults. Daily confronted with the death of their dearest relatives and friends, they must have matched mature people in terms of psychic resilience. Perhaps they played the role of adults only in times of war; not because they were particularly willing to do so, but because they had to do this so as to save themselves and others. The documents from the siege of Leningrad quoted by Kirschenbaum demonstrate that the main cause of death of adults and children alike was hunger rather than fighting with the Germans. Thus, the phenomenon in question, so widespread in concentration camps and ghettos, determined the behaviour of all people, including the young.⁸

The characters in Zawada's and Liskowacki's novels are primarily communal in nature – young boys, usually still in their teens (Zawada includes also younger children), who engage in a direct fight with the enemy. The texts by Liskowacki are set in the Warsaw of the Warsaw Uprising, while Zawada places his war narrative in Zamość and the neighbouring forests controlled by groups of guerrilla soldiers. Despite the differences in historical detail, these two authors apply similar strategies of depicting the distinct traits of the young characters. In the first stages of the war they are portrayed as children who are not fully aware of the dramatic situation. The prolonged holidays, the general excitement and the vehement course of events – all of this encourage children to play. The war, in spite of the present German troops, still makes them think of a playground game. One of the first scenes of the novel *My, z Marymontu* [*We, from Marymont*] by Liskowacki presents the main character, possibly the author's alter ego, as he meets little boys playing war games in a courtyard. Despite the fact that Warsaw is now seized by the Germans, the children play a game which under these circumstances may seem entirely absurd. Apart from imitating the adults, they also decide the outcome of the war which has barely started. They take revenge on the actual enemies, i.e. German soldiers, by placing the figures who represent them in play in the position of the defeated.

The war vicissitudes of the Marymont boys end tragically during the Warsaw Uprising. It is the crucial moment in the story of the teenage boys who

⁷ L. A. Kirschenbaum, *Innocent victims and heroic defenders. Children and the siege of Leningrad*, [w:] [in:] *Children and war. A historical anthology*, ed. by J. Marten, New York 2001.

⁸ M. Wróblewski, *Głód – proza obozowa*, [w:] *Sensualność w kulturze polskiej*, red. W. Bolecki. Dostęp: 6.04.2016 <http://sensualnosc.bn.org.pl/pl/articles/glod-proza-obozowa-988/> [M. Wróblewski, *Hunger – concentration camp prose*, [in:] *Sensuality in Polish culture*, ed. by W. Bolecki. At <http://sensualnosc.bn.org.pl/pl/articles/glod-proza-obozowa-988/>]

make the rapid transition from play to the real combat, where the death of the closest relatives and friends happens almost every day and becomes an ordinary matter. Liskowacki heroicises his teenage characters by endowing them with features characteristic of adults. Not only can they overcome their fear, but also the grief over those who were killed in front of their very eyes; mostly adults and, more rarely, their peers:

Gdy kapral, zaniepokojony ciszą na strychu, pobiegł tam i zaraz przyniósł wiadomość, że „Kmicic” zabity, Michał tylko zęby zaciął. W gardle rósł mu jakiś skowyt, jęk, ale przemógł się i „Sosna” natychmiast zrozumiał, że trzeba tę śmierć właśnie ciszą uczcić⁹. [When the corporal, feeling uneasy about silence in the attic, ran there and was back at once, and told them that “Kmicic” was killed, Michał only clenched his teeth. He felt some howl build in his throat, some groan, but he overcame that and “Sosna” immediately understood that the death was to be honoured just by silence.]

For the most part they are extraordinarily brave, responsible, unflinchingly determined. Their resolve to fight is as firm as that of professional soldiers. As the narrative unfolds, the differences between the adults and children fighting in the Uprising become blurred. Only their appearance, their voices and the clumsy way of smoking cigarettes betray their tender age. They take upon themselves a great responsibility and care after the destitute women who, having lost their husbands and sons, expect the news about their closest relatives and friends engaged in the Uprising. In Liskowacki's novels, the boys imitate the parlance of adults and the military jargon as though fighting were their only work. Such scenes, to be found particularly midway through the whole series (in *Z zielonych ulic na barykady* [*From green streets onto barricades*]), exalt the young characters. It is also a sort of literary persuasion, which aims to endow the presented world with realistic features.

No, to my teraz z nimi podyskutujemy o wojnie. Chłopcy, robimy odskok pod tamte drzewa. Ja ich zachodzę z przodu, a wy czekacie w krzakach na moją serię. I będziecie kosić tych, którzy z boku, po skrzydełkach będziecie kosić, kapujecie?¹⁰ [Well, we are going to discuss some war with them now. Boys, we are heading for those trees. I will take them by surprise from the front, and you wait in the bushes for my shot. And you will be clipping the wings of those on the side, clipping their wings, all right?]

In spite of the dramatic experiences, the boys of Marymont who form the clandestine group 'Revenge' almost miraculously survive. They lose their contingent along the way and more than once face imminent death only to 'become' brave soldiers in the end. Liskowacki, in a way characteristic of propa-

⁹ R. Liskowacki, *Wracamy do domu. Powieść dla młodzieży*, Poznań 1978, s. 95. [R. Liskowacki, *We are returning to home. A novel for young adults*, Poznań 1978, p. 95.]

¹⁰ Tamże, s. 21. [*Ibidem*, p. 21]

ganda materials, describes the 'experiences' of his characters to glorify the boy who fight in the Uprising, accompanied by a girl playing the supporting role. The narrative is certainly not devoid of historical truth, given that the participation of children and young people in the Warsaw Uprising is a commonly stated fact observed by scholars. Nevertheless, the aggregation of adult features in a child to the extent proposed by Liskowacki can be seen as an example of a literary play with stereotypes (the brave young soldiers fighting in the Uprising) and the *puer senex* topos, used instrumentally for educational purposes.

Patrzył w milczeniu na swych kolegów siedzących na stertach wypalonych cegieł. Tyle spraw pięknych razem przeżyli, tyle lat łączyła ich przysięga złożona w dniu, w którym z ich woli, z ich dziecięcej nienawiści do wroga zrodziła się tajna grupa „Zemsta”. Później los ich rozdzielił, przyszli z Marymontu na Żoliborz, aby walczyć także za marymonckie uliczki. A teraz znowu są razem. Przez prawdziwe piekło przeszli i nikogo nie muszą opłakiwać. Żyje cała piątka i tylko Antek zostawił w Warszawie lewą dłoń¹¹. [He was looking in silence at his friends who were sitting on stacks of burned-out bricks. They lived together through so many beautiful things, their oath united them, the oath sworn on the day when, fed by the childish hatred of the enemy, they wilfully formed a secret group “Revenge”. Then, their fate separated them, they came from Marymont to Żoliborz in order to fight also for the Marymont streetlets. And now they are together again. They have lived through real hell and they do not need to mourn anyone. The whole five are alive, and only Antek has left his left hand in Warsaw.]

Wiktor Zawada in his projection of the 'war boys' has gone even further. He proposes a model of a child who possesses the features of an adult and a jester, the symbol of wisdom popular in the European culture. The series of his novels about the 'Cacti', the children of Zamość, scintillates with humour and wit, which mitigates the atrocities of war. The author does include in his narrative some cruel events, such as the death of doctor Gold and other Jewish inhabitants of Zamość as well as the ever-present hunger and the frequent instances of betrayal and denunciation, but for the most part the narrative revolves around the 'fight' of the 'Cacti' with 'the black flag' (as illustrated in the title of the middle part of the whole series). Despite their tender age, they behave as if they were adults, which can be seen in the key moments when they overcome their fear. In particular, one should note in this context the killings of the Jews:

Tymczasem pochód śmierci podpełza ku rampie kolejowej, ginąc wśród baraczków i między stertami skrzyń. Z wolna cichną strzały i krzyki. Na ulicy pozostają – jednakowo bezwładni – ludzie i ich rzeczy. Chłopcy niczego tak nie pragną, jak uciec od tych straszliwych obrazów, skryć się w zaciszu własnego domu i wypłakać w samotności lęk i grozę. Ale oto dostrzegają kilka postaci w brunatnych bluzach i czarnych spodenkach Hitlerjugend. Przechodzą spokojnie, jakby tuż obok nie leżały ciała pomordowanych, lecz mierzwa postawio-

¹¹ Tamże, s. 136. [*Ibidem*, p. 136]

na przez konie. Jedni patrzą przed siebie obojętnie, inni nieznacznie odwracają głowy na widok krwi¹². [Meanwhile, the march of death creeps towards a loading platform, and disappears among little barracks and piles of crates. Shots and shouts slowly subside. In the street there remain, equally immobile, people and their belongings. The boys wish to escape from the horrible sight for dear life, wish to hide in the quiet of their home and cry he tears of fear and horror in solitude. But then they spot a few figures wearing brown Hitlerjugend shirts and black shorts. They calmly pass by, as if there was lying matted horse straw, not the bodies of the murdered ones. Some are looking indifferently ahead, others slightly turn their heads away from the sight of blood.]

The shrewdness and cunning of the boys from the 'Cacti' group, confronted with the neatly organized and extremely well trained German soldiers, reveals the more 'light-hearted' aspect of World War II. The novelistic world of Zawada is studded with historical detail and presents a boy who under the circumstances not only takes over the features of his father, but proves his stamina in harrying the enemy with fairly subtle games. The author replaces the direct confrontation with childish pranks, which have substantial impact on the reality without losing the elements of spontaneity and improvisation. In this way, the invaders are ridiculed and portrayed as grotesque rather than menacing figures, devoid of their own will and without a hint of humanity. Zawada describes his German characters in a way which deprives them of all positive features. The hyperbolisation is applied with a view to present the 'Cacti' group against this background as an exceptional team, even though not entirely free from minor shortcomings (vanity, gluttony and talkativeness).

The boys from Zawada's novel can make their own choices as regards the tactic of harrying the enemy by means of various pranks. However, they also know how to make use of weapons. They do this in a playful manner:

Teraz Jasiak wpełznął pod stodołę i wyciągnął żołnierski plecak. [...] Rozpiął paski i otworzył klapę plecaka. Z wnętrza wydobył nowiuteńką maskę z pochłaniaczem, garść naboju karabinowych, ładownicę, pas i bagnet. Znowu sięgnął pod stodołę, wyciągając tym razem hełm, prawdziwą polską „donicę”¹³. [Now Jasiak crept under the barn and took out a soldier's backpack. [...] He undid the straps and opened it. He took out a brand new gas mask, a handful of rifle cartridges, a belt, and a bayonet. Again, he slid his hand under the barn, this time producing a helmet, a genuine Polish 'pot-helmet'.]

The numerous acts of courage exhibited by the boys who fought German soldiers often led to their arrest. In this situation, Jasiak, a ten-year-old member of the group, learns fairly quickly how to behave in order to survive. In the

¹² W. Zawada, *Wielka wojna z czarną flagą*, Lublin 1968, s. 94. [W. Zawada, *The great war with the black flag*, Lublin 1986, p. 94]

¹³ W. Zawada, *Kaktusy z Zielonej ulicy*, Lublin 1967, s. 45. [W. Zawada, *The Cacti of Green Street*, Lublin 1967, p. 45.]

numerous scenes presenting the direct confrontation of Polish children with German soldiers one can often observe a phenomenon which Zawada emphasised, namely that the ruthless adults disregarded the fact that they were dealing with children. In a similar way the author 'encouraged' his young characters to accept or play the roles of adults: they shoot at the Germans, destroy the means of military communication or steal their documents. At critical points, when there is a need to exhibit courage and bravery, they follow the example of their fathers. One boy from the group is portrayed saying the following words when facing a dramatic moment:

Nie! Nie! Nigdy nie będzie Niemcem. Choćby z nim uczynili nie wiadomo co, nie przejdzie na stronę tych zbirów. [...] to Niemcy aresztowali mu ojca, wysłali do straszliwego obozu w Majdanku. Za to właśnie, że nie chciał pójść na ich służbę. Nigdy, nigdy nie zdradzi swojego tatusia! Nie okaże się gorszy od niego¹⁴. [No! No! He will never be a German. No matter what they would do to him, he will not join the thugs. [...] It is the Germans who have arrested his father and sent him to a terrifying concentration camp in Majdanek. Because he refused to join them. He will never ever betray his daddy! He won't prove to be worse than him.]

Despite the painful and tragic experiences, the young characters of Zawada 'return' under the rein of their parents who survive the war and take up their interrupted school education. They return to the role of a child who is not entirely independent and requires care and attention from adults. The role of a mature person is thus discarded, even if not with full acceptance.

The boys portrayed in the novels by Przeździecki, Liskowacki and Zawada play the roles of adults, particularly of their fathers or uncles. Even though they were forced to do so due to the circumstances of war, they manage (except for Wojtek, the eight-year-old from the book by Przeździecki) to get their bearings in what seems to be a new world for them. The authors heroicise these boys and seek to find a balance between fiction, which portrays extraordinary juvenile figures forced to fight in war, with historical detail; this is with a view to give an air of a documentary to the proposed narrative. Certainly, the historical sources testify to the fact that children took part in the Warsaw Uprising and guerrilla warfare, but do not confirm that these children thought and behaved like adults.

¹⁴ W. Zawada, *Leśna szkoła strzelca Kaktusa. Powieść dla młodzieży*, Lublin 1969, s. 17. [W. Zawada, *The wood school of Cactus the Rifleman. A novel for young adults*, Lublin 1969, p. 17.]