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Stages of adaptation to disability in Jerzy Szczygieł's novel series about Tadek Różański

Etapy przystosowania do niepełnosprawności w cyklu powieściowym Jerzego Szczygła o Tadku Różańskim

Abstract

Introduction. The process of psychosocial adaptation to disability may be illustrated by biographical and autobiographical prose. In the case of Jerzy Szczygieł, the activation of the autobiographical attitude is noticeable. The analysis of the artistic legacy of this writer enables one to state that his prose was based on similar personal and professional experiences: as a young man, he lost his sight, chose to study Polish philology, began writing literature, and was active in the Polish Association of the Blind. He popularized the image of a blind person in literature, discovering various aspects of his or her functioning.

Aim. The aim of this text is to recall the figure and present the work of Jerzy Szczygieł (1932–1983), primarily in the context of his autobiographical attitude and adapta-

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tion to a difficult situation (loss of mobility).

Materials and methods. The subject of analysis and research reflection is a series of novels, including: *Blackthorns* (1960), *Earth without sun* (1968), *I'll never leave you* (1972), and *After the cats' heads* (1976). The theoretical framework for the considerations undertaken is the concept of Disability Studies, including the stages of adaptation to disability. I treat Małgorzata Czermińska's concept of autobiographical attitude as a methodological path, and I also take into account social and cultural phenomena (as part of an interdisciplinary approach).

Results and conclusion. J. Szczygieł's tetralogy about Tadek Różański shows the entire complexity of the psychological situation of young people in war and post-war times. A special place in it is occupied by the image of the main character of the series struggling with difficulties. J. Szczygieł builds his literary space by carrying out various types of transformations to the issue of vision loss. The novels also motivate a deeper examination of the author's work, also from the perspective of the blind person's workshop. The article emphasizes the thesis that visual impairment does not become an inhibitor in the selection of the topics of creativity, but it favours the authors' focusing on their own biography and life experiences.

Keywords: autobiographical attitude, prose, vision loss, disability, literary cycle.

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Ilustracją procesu psychospołecznego dostosowania do niepełnosprawności może stać się proza biograficzna i autobiograficzna. W przypadku Jerzego Szczygła da się dostrzec uaktywnienie się postawy autobiograficznej. Analiza spuścizny pisarza pozwala na stwierdzenie, że u podłoża jego prozy stały konkretne doświadczenia osobiste i zawodowe: jako młodziwiec stracił wzrok, za przedmiot studiów obrał polonistykę, zaczął uprawiać twórczość literacką, działał w Polskim Związku Niewidomych. W twórczości prozatorskiej upowszechniał wizerunek osoby niewidomej poprzez odkrywanie różnych aspektów jej funkcjonowania.

Cel. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest przypomnienie sylwetki i przybliżenie twórczości Jerzego Szczygła (1932–1983), przede wszystkim w kontekście postawy autobiograficznej i przystosowania do sytuacji trudnej (utrata sprawności).

Materiały i metody. Przedmiotem analizy i refleksji badawczej jest cykl powieści, do których należą: *Tarnina* (1960), *Ziemia bez słońca* (1968), *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* (1972), *Po kocich łbach* (1976). Ramą teoretyczną podjętych rozważań jest koncepcja Disability Studies, w tym etapowość przystosowania do niepełnosprawności. Ścieżką metodologiczną jest koncepcja postawy autobiograficznej Małgorzaty Czermińskiej, wzięto również pod uwagę wybrane zjawiska społeczne i kulturowe (w ramach podejścia interdyscyplinarnego).

Wyniki i wnioski. Tetrilogia J. Szczygła o Tadku Różańskim ukazuje całą złożoność psychologicznej sytuacji młodych ludzi w warunkach wojny i w czasach powojennych. Szczegółne miejsce zajmuje w niej obraz zmagania z trudnościami głównego bohatera cyklu. Autor buduje bowiem literacką przestrzeń poprzez różnego typu transformacje problematyki utraty wzroku. Powieści motywują również do głębszego zbadania twórczości autora, także pod kątem warsztatu pracy osoby niewidomej. Artykuł uwydatnia jednak tezę, że niepełnosprawność wzroku nie staje się inhibitorem w doborze tematyki twórczości, niemniej sprzyja koncentrowaniu się autorów na własnej biografii i swoich doświadczeniach życiowych.

Słowa kluczowe: postawa autobiograficzna, proza, utrata wzroku, niepełnosprawność, cykl literacki.

There is a fairly widespread perception that the work of most visually impaired authors is primarily poetry* (Czerwińska, 2012). The lyric allows the speaker to speak about the world in such a way as to share with the audience a subjective vision of reality in the context of his or her own experiences, thus revealing one's emotional state and uncovering a part of one's soul. In prose texts, it is somewhat different. Well, the attention of the storytelling subject is usually focused on reporting events, recording facts and presenting the state of affairs, *i.e.*, what is happening in the created space. This is not to say that prose works lack the factors that are present in verse works (*e.g.*, sharing experiences, thoughts, experiences, etc.). However, they are differently framed, differently intensified, and sometimes more diffuse. By its very nature, epic is also a more extensive work, requiring more voluminous texts, making use of various genres and conventions, and requiring visually impaired writers to organise their work appropriately (also technically). However, visual disability is not an inhibitor in the choice of subject matter for creative writing, although it does encourage authors to focus on their own biography and life experiences.

Noteworthy is the legacy and the determination in the work of the now somewhat forgotten but skilful writer and press editor Jerzy Szczygieł. This author lost his eyesight (and his left leg) shortly after the Second World War in 1945 as a result of a mine explosion, which did not prevent him from engaging in journalistic, writing

* In works in verse by blind people, attention is drawn to, among other things, the terminology used to describe dysfunction, the phenomenon of sensory compensation, the way surrogate imagery is captured and the privacy factor that may be associated with the choice of convention.

and social work (*cf.* *Klucz* [Key] Foundation). The theoretical framework for the reflections undertaken is the concept of Disability Studies (Hunt, 1966; Albrecht, 1976; Albrecht, Seelman, Bury, 2001; Linton, 1998; Vehmas, 2011; Urbanowicz, 2012; Żuraw, 2016; Twardowski, 2018), including the staging of adaptation to disability (Kowalewski, 1999). Małgorzata Czerwińska's concept of autobiographical attitude (Czerwińska, 2000) was chosen as the methodological pathway. This selection was primarily guided by the fact that the research-literature-centric approach allows mainly to indicate what the work contains, rather than, for example, the author's memory (Charon, 2006; Pekaniec, 2013). Nevertheless, according to the interdisciplinary approach (Corn, 1991; Błęszyński, 2011), social and cultural phenomena that influence the formation of the identity of a writer with visual impairment were also taken into account, including the exposure of the category of testimony and the relationship with autobiographical places (Czerwińska, 2000; Lis, 2006; Czerwińska, 2011).

Around the autobiographical attitude

The complex of signals, data and information that the author conveys to the reader, *i.e.*, the author's intentions related, among other things, to writing in the first person, to giving easily verifiable facts of life, Małgorzata Czerwińska recognised as an autobiographical attitude*. According to this paradigm, the writer assumes that his text can be read as autobiographical. Three elements usually interact here, known as the autobiographical triangle, comprising: confession (the author's inner world becomes a rudimentary value), testimony (with the dominance of elements from the external world), and finally challenge (the effect is important, including evoking a reaction in the reader).

In a certain simplification, we can assume that autobiographies are works whose subject is the author's own life, fate and experiences, events he witnessed, or the evolution of his attitudes towards the world (Czerwińska, 2012). Not all autobiographies focus on facts. There are also those whose essence is the presentation of inner experiences, a coherent conception of one's own life, spiritual development, the formation of philosophical beliefs, scientific ideas or artistic concepts (Smulski, 1988; Lis, 2006). It is worth looking at what shape J. Szczygieł's work has taken.

* The very intention to write about oneself can mean adopting this type of strategy (regardless of genre). This is particularly relevant in the case of authors with an acquired visual disability. This approach has been dictated by the observation that there is a lack of works addressing the issue of the work of visually impaired authors who speak explicitly about their attitude to their bodies after impairment.

J. Szczygiel's writings in brief

J. Szczygiel spent his childhood and youth in Puławy, where he was born on March 14, 1932. As a teenager, he found his way to Warsaw, where he spent the rest of his life and died on August 21, 1983. He was also buried there. His life was affected by an event from his youth. In 1945, in the minefields by the Vistula in Puławy, he had an accident, as a result of which he lost his sight. He first studied in Laski and then undertook studies in Polish philology at the University of Warsaw, graduating in 1957. In the same year, he accepted the position of editor-in-chief in the journal *Nasz Świat* [Our World], and in 1964 he became a journalist for the journal *Niewidomy Spółdzielca* [Blind Cooperative]. He also became involved in the activities of the Polish Association of the Blind. At the same time, he began to publish literary texts. His works in print include *Tarnina* (1960), *Milczenie* (1962), *Drogi rezygnacji* [Roads of resignation] (1962), *Dopalające się drzew* [Burning trees] (1965), *Sen o brzozowych buczkach* [Dream of birch wood beeches] (1968), *Szare rękawiczki* [Grey gloves] (1969), *Powódź* [Flood] (1970), *Jak trudno kochać* [How hard it is to love] (1976). The year 1976 brought him the Prime Minister's Award for lifetime achievement. In 1979 (International Year of the Child), his book *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* [I'll never leave you] was included in the H. Ch. Andersen Honours List*. On the other hand, she received the Scout Literary Award in 1973 (Wikipedia, *Scout Literary Award*).

As early as 1954 (while still studying), J. Szczygiel debuted in the "Sztandar Młodych [Youth Banner]." In 1960 he published the first part of the four-volume cycle of novels about Tadek Różański entitled *Tarnina*. The character of Tadek was equipped with autobiographical features (among others, he comes from Puławy, during the war he lost his father, brother and mother, as a teenager he was visually impaired, he took care of his younger brother and studied in the Institute for the Blind in Laski). In addition to *Tarnina* [Blackthorns], the series mentioned above includes: *Ziemia bez słońca* [Earth without sun] (1968), *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* [I'll never leave you] (1972) and *Po kocich łbach* [After the cats' heads/cobblestone] (1976). He also published other works in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Nie jesteś inny* [You are not different] (1978), *Poczekaj, błysnie! Poczekaj, otworzy się!* [Wait, it will shine! Wait, it will open!] (1983) (the latter of which was published in the year of the writer's death). He was a lover of logical games, hence among his writings was a book entitled *Szachy: krótki podręcznik do nauki gry* [Chess: a brief handbook for learning the game]. He also wrote film scripts and columns (he published over a thousand). He usually dictated his texts to trusted people, including his wife and selected editorial staff (Tomerska, 1973, 2013).

* The bound series of the H. Ch. Andersen Honours List Laureates (the so-called "series with a rose") was published by Nasza Księgarnia [Our Bookshop] in 1980.

J. Szczygieł's achievements are still scattered and unanalysed, touched upon only by selected researchers (Tomerska, 1973; Frycie, 1999; Czerwińska, 2012; Pamuła, 2017), not included in many dictionaries*, and it is worth taking a closer look at his works. What draws attention to J. Szczygieł's writing legacy is above all the introduction of the so-called "boy protagonist." The social and moral characterisation of most of his works means that these novels should be regarded as created in the spirit of realism. They are distinguished by their treatment of issues that are essentially contemporary to the author. The motivation for bringing the characters to life is also social, which influences, e.g., the way the characters are portrayed and the picture of social relations (motivation, e.g., political, economic, historical). Usually, the omniscient narrator tells of the everyday life of a particular environment and what shapes it** (e.g., capturing the living conditions, the characteristics of a particular group, and the process of change). J. Szczygieł's works can be included in this trend: *Poczekaj, błysnie!* *Poczekaj, otworzy się!* and *Zejsź z traktu* [Get off the track].

Tetralogy of Puławy

A particular and award-winning achievement is the four-part novel about the fate of the boys from Puławy. Well, a group of friends from the same town (the name does not yet appear in this part) create a world of characters in *Tarnina*. As Stanisław Frycie notes, J. Szczygieł brings closer and to some extent (in a literary way, through fiction) recreates the fate of the young generation during the war years and in the initial period after its end (Frycie, 1999). In the aforementioned *Tarnina*, he portrays the daily life of a group of boys who experience hunger and fear during the hard times of occupation, grow up quickly and take on responsibilities beyond their capabilities. A dugout built for fun, named Tarnina, hides a man pursued by the Germans. The novel exposes the harsh truth about times of horror and danger, moves and ponders, as well as invites reflection on times gone by. In *Ziemia bez słońca*, the writer depicts the fate of a family that has lost the roof over its head at the end of the war. The young protagonist's rebellion against human indifference

* The writer's name is missing from, for example, the dictionary *Literatura polska XX wieku: Przewodnik encyklopedyczny* [Polish literature of the 20th century: An Encyclopaedic guide] (Hutnikiewicz, Lam, 2000) or from Piotr Kuncewicz's monograph (Kuncewicz, 1994).

**Elements of the psychological novel and detective story can also be found in *Powódź* [Flood], in which one of the most important motifs is the theme of friendship. In a similar vein are the short stories for young people (*Gdzie jest twoje miejsce* [Where you place], *Ścieżka* [Path]).

and his struggle with difficult everyday life becomes the novel's plot axis. Tadek, already known from *Tarnina*, has to grow up quickly to take care of his mother and younger brother. The land loses its lustre when, as a result of the turmoil of war, the boys' mother dies and the two minors become orphans. In the third part of the story, entitled *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę*, Tadek loses his sight as a fourteen-year-old as a result of a tragic accident. This is all the more painful and difficult for him as he plays the role of head of the family. It is not only his disability that worries him, but also the situation of his brother, whom he takes care of alone after his mother's death. In difficult moments, he can count on the good heart of his friend and human kindness, of which there is a lot around him (quite unexpectedly, an uncle with whom the boys can live finds himself). The work *Po kocich łbach* (the final part of the tetralogy) deals with school problems and the adventures of Tadek Różański, who ends up in a complex of specialist institutions in Laski near Warsaw. The novel also conveys the climate of relations within the peer group and introduces the perspective of the protagonist's future career (among other things, it takes up the theme of the experiences of an adult with a disability who tries to find his place on the labour market and in everyday life, for example, thanks to the centre in Laski near Warsaw and the process of becoming independent).

The last two parts of the aforementioned story about Tadek Różański (*Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* and *Po kocich łbach*) are also a literary reflection of the phases of adjustment to disability from the moment a teenager afflicted by fate removes his post-operative bandage (*Nigdy cię nie opuszczę*):

He has already removed the bandage. There was still only the cotton wool left. He tried to pull it off, but a sharp pain penetrated him. He tried again. He jerked. The pain became unbearable. With an effort, he held back a scream. He touched his eyes. The bandage was gone. Everything seemed wet and rough. He tried to lift his eyelids but in vain. The same darkness surrounded him from everywhere (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 132).

The fact of becoming incapacitated is one of the most difficult experiences of the protagonist of J. Szczygieł's novel, as well as of the author himself, *Po kocich łbach*.

Adapting to disability in view of the series

It should be emphasised that most writers with visual disabilities (including J. Szczygieł) refer to the psychosocial process of adjustment to disability by pointing to four specific stages: experiencing disability, becoming aware of limitations, trying to function with disability, and full, actual acceptance of disability (Kowalewski, 1999; Błeszyński, 2011;

Pamuła, 2017). An illustration of the progression of phases within adjustment often becomes prose. In the case of J. Szczygieł, it primarily takes on the character of a testimony (Czermińska, 2000; Tomerska, 1973). This testimony is primarily set in specific environmental conditions and focuses on the strong personality of the protagonist.

First stage: Experience of disability

Loss of disability is associated with sudden and severe psychological shock and depersonalisation. Consequently, the acquired disability brings with it a disorientation of personality, which translates into somatic problems, including pain, physiological reactions and even deprivation of needs. Isolation from the family, social and professional environment often occurs. Finally, iatrogenic factors (as sequelae of the treatment unfavourable to the patient) may surface.

The motif of accident and incapacitation is taken up by the author in the third part of the tetralogy entitled *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* (1972)*. Towards the end of this volume, Tadek, the protagonist of the series, out of concern for his brother, follows him when he misses lessons and, in the course of a meeting with a group of his friends, discovers what teenagers do (teenagers find mines and sell them). The narrator states, “He hit it just in time. The boys were already there. Bags of books were lying on the sand, and they were bending over some object that Jasio Mróz was holding” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 127).

As a result of an unexploded mine, one of the boys loses his life, while Tadek is hospitalised. Initially, it is not known what damage the mine did to the young man. The narrator reports that Tadek “[...] woke up on some hard bedding. But despite his efforts, he could see nothing” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 128). He was informed that he was being prepared for surgery. After the operation, he discovered a bandage on his head that prevented him from seeing. He was instructed to wear it for several days. However, it bothered him that he could not see. He wanted to loosen the bandages a bit, so he started unrolling them. He learned from the doctor that he had a lacerated head and impaired vision. The matter of disability was not yet a foregone conclusion. Tadek believed that his “battered eyes” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 134) could be saved, although the doctor, in a rough manner, suggested to him that “[...] the blind also live in the world and are doing just fine” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 133). He did not tell him directly about the prognosis. He was only familiarised with the fact of his sight loss by a nurse with a warm voice.

* It is worth noting that the aforementioned part of the story of Tadek Różański was completed by J. Szczygieł 25 years after his accident. It took a quarter of a century for the writer to tackle the trauma of his youth in prose with an autobiographical thread. The novel *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* is dated “Warszawa, 16 December 1970.”

It seems that so-called “iatrogenic factors” may be relevant in this case (*cf. Jatrogenia – choroby wywołane przez lekarzy* [Jatrogenia – illnesses caused by doctors], 2016; *Czym są błędy jatrogenne?* [What are iatrogenic errors?], 2022) by which are meant actions and behaviours (as well as negligence) that affect the patient’s physical condition or mental state. In the following volume, *Po kocich łbach* (1976), we learn that if medical procedures had been correctly implemented, Tadek might have retained the remnants of his eyesight. In the fourth part of the story of Różanski, we read:

At the end of the summer holidays, his right eye suddenly became painful. He thought it was a minor thing and would go away after a few hours, but it became inflamed. Penicillin injections cleared it up, but only for a month. At the end of September, the story repeated itself. He was told that the only treatment was a minor surgical procedure to clear the eye of debris (Szczygieł, 1976, p. 179).

In the scientific medical literature, we can find information regarding situations in which medical actions or decisions are sometimes unfavourable or even harmful to the patient (so-called “iatrogenic errors”) (Domaradzki, 2013). Iatrogenic behaviours include lack of empathy on the part of the staff, inadequate communication, including overly hermetic, incomprehensible language, lack of precision in conveying information, disregard for the patient manifested by not providing information about his or her state of health, the administration of wrong drugs or their doses, and finally the development of concomitant disease, which as a new entity occurred in connection with the treatment of the primary condition, as well as ill-adapted therapy, surgical error, and judging the patient.

From reading the text, it appears that both the non-empathic behaviour of the doctor and the route of communication and how the victim was informed about his or her condition left much to be desired. It seems that the behaviour of the so-called “white staff” may have been iatrogenic.

Second stage: Awareness of limitations

Awareness of limitations contributes to a stiffening of the vulnerable person’s value system. The previous system of values and motivation breaks down, self-esteem is often lowered, anxiety disorders and depressive states may appear, and finally, the unmet need for affiliation may resurface and resistance to identifying with people with disabilities and disability itself may intensify (Fidowicz, 2020).

Experiencing unknown limitations begins for the affected 14-year-old in the hospital room and treatment room. Tadek discovers that there is darkness all around (Szczygieł,

1980). The doctor puts his hand on his shoulder and explains: “You must be extremely brave. I cannot give you much hope, but the blind also live in the world and are doing very well” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 133). The situation surprises and frightens the boy. He thinks about the fact that his life has lost its meaning, because “[...] virtually everything has ended for him” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 137). Tadek feels anger and resignation. A rebellion is born in him, a desire to cut himself off from reality and annihilate himself. In an internal dialogue with himself, he reproaches himself:

Why did he insist on staying in the hospital? He has long been fed up with the bed, the smell of the medicines, the awful moaning of the sick at night. He hates that room and those few metres of walking from the bed to the door (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 144).

Slowly, thanks to his brother’s visits, his uncle’s care and the kindness of other patients, he learns to explore his surroundings with senses other than sight. During one encounter with Jędrek, he decides to touch: “He leaned out and seized the air with his hands. He touched the rough clothing. He recognised immediately a sweatshirt made of green, thick cloth” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 135).

The boy is also gradually picking up new sounds from his surroundings that he has ignored until now: “He heard the clink of plates and spoons. He could sense the cheerfulness in everyone’s voices” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 131). Jędrek, like a group of his peers, unconsciously enters the role of therapist when he offers his brother help. He argues: “If you wanted, I could come over every day and read books to you,” said Jędrek after a pause “[...] Danka says that when you get out of the hospital, she will read to you too. And Gietek said so” (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 136). Tadek’s friend Halina also supports him in opening up to the world outside the hospital room. During visits, she takes him for a winter walk. She takes the opportunity to explain to him:

You have to get used to it and not pay attention to what people say. After all, you don’t meet blind people that often, and besides, everyone knows you and that’s why this and that person accosts you and asks you silly things (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 148).

Halina unintentionally begins to use the audio description* (Bolińska, 2021) and becomes a spatial orientation instructor when she describes the surroundings while guiding the boy:

I’m going to tell you what I see [...]. Everything has gone grey, but it’s white from the snow. Can you hear the birch branches ringing? The sky above us looks grey,

* Verbal description of the world (e.g., cultural texts, monuments) prepared for blind or partially sighted people.

but further out on the horizon, it is almost black. In places, the stars are already shining (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 151).

Thanks to her, Tadek discovers the vulnerability of the sense of taste: "He picked a couple of pins, smelled them, and then put them in his mouth [...]. How tart" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 153). Halina acts intuitively, and spontaneously, but with the gentleness of a kind friend. She refers to the visual impressions remembered by her friend and adds: "The city is left behind us. To the right stretches a birch grove, remember? To the left between the trees, you can see the smooth surface of the pond. It is already getting dusk. The air has turned almost blue" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 150). Tadek also reveals his thoughts and fears to his friend: "I'm just afraid to live. I am afraid of everything now: of walking, of people, of what will happen tomorrow [...]. I think I would rather not live" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 150). The girl's reaction is violent, and at the same time becomes a commitment. The teenager promises never to leave him. The scene of the walk triggers in Tadek a wave of feelings that the boy had suppressed for weeks: "He cried for the first time in many months. Suddenly everything inside him seemed to burst, to loosen up" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 150).

The turning point in the new situation becomes the death of a soldier on a neighbouring hospital bed. The boy realises that his life still has value and that he can function, and can learn to orient himself in all conditions because he is still alive. When he makes his first attempts to move around the hospital on his own, not everything works out for him. He stumbles over the bed, flails his arms clumsily, touches the walls in despair, bumps into doors, searches unsuccessfully for handles, cannot reach the handrails, and is afraid to descend the stairs. Eventually, navigated by his memory and hints from kind people, he gains some freedom to recognise his immediate surroundings. He practises at night when most patients are asleep and not watching his actions. He still experiences his situation and has mood swings, it upsets him when people in the neighbourhood talk about him, sympathise with him and treat him "as if he were a deaf-mute" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 144), but he does not give up in his fight for himself. He gradually widens the circle of his wanderings around the ward and exercises his ability to reach more and more remote corners of the hospital. He tries to be pragmatic in self-care activities. Becoming independent causes him to start making plans for the future. He wants to educate himself and fulfil himself artistically. He tells a relative about this, and the relative, wanting to comfort him and point out various possibilities of social usefulness, tells Tadek that "[...] maybe we can come up with some work for you. Blind people work too: they weave baskets, make brushes. And you will learn something" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 141). Tadek, however, does not want such a craft. He decides to become a singer. He informs his uncle Michał: "I will sing on stage and the radio. I will go to a special school for the blind. I have even already written there so that they will accept me" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 141).

His hope transforms into a plan that has a chance of being realised. He is soon admitted to the centre in Laski. Before that, however, he spends Christmas outside the hospital, with his uncle's family and his brother, among his friends, in a house built on the family's pre-war estate. Although returning to a familiar place is not the easiest thing to do, Tadek manages to take the first steps towards a new phase of his life: "He nearly fell over. He clumsily bumped into a chair. It collapsed with a noise on the floor. He stood ashamed and helpless" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 156). The kindness of family and friends offsets the awkwardness of the situation. The narrator states, "Now others were approaching, extending their hands. He couldn't immediately make out their hands. He did not recognise by their voices and was ashamed to ask who was who" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 156). He recognised only his uncle and his daughter Danka without any problem. His fears for the future, which "[...] in his thoughts were drawn as an idle and meaningless sitting at home" (Szczygieł, 1980, p. 157), were revived. However, the gloom began to dissipate as no one treated him differently than before.

Gradually, uncertainty and shock recede in favour of further challenges, although emotional lability will resurface in the boy many more times. Slowly, however, Tadek's hope of being able to enjoy ordinary everyday life revives, the thought of finding the meaning of existence returns and a sense of security sprouts. The teenager prepares for a new chapter in his life in Laski.

Third stage: Attempts to function with a disability

In the third stage, defence mechanisms (intrapsychic) are resurrected to help cope with trauma or other difficulties (Trempała, 2011).

Tadek, full of hope, arrives in Laski. It is not easy for him to acclimatise. It turns out that the visually impaired community functions like any other group of people. There are quarrels, mischief, punishments and rewards. You can meet friends, but also enemies. A teenager from Puławy quickly learns this. Although his studies are going quite well, his interpersonal contacts cause him much trouble. He notices that the tutors do not show tact and empathy. He first comes into conflict with his boarding school teacher, Mrs Numińska (over her violation of confidentiality of correspondence). Then he finds it difficult to communicate with his strict teacher Kozuba. It is only the appearance of Kazik Okoński – his new tutor – during a holiday trip to the seaside that allows the boy to overcome his isolation, behavioural loneliness and persistent silence, and contributes to overcoming his depressive state. The narrator states:

He no longer regretted coming to the seaside. The time when he felt isolated from others seemed very far away. In his mind, he referred to it as "going through bap-

tism.” Since the day he went to the beach with Kazik and dared to enter the roaring, rolling sea, something had relaxed in him, and his muscles had loosened. He felt that his movements were freer, his larynx was no longer clenched, and he spoke without that stammering, in a cheerful, low-toned voice that seemed pleasant to him (Szczygieł, 1976, p. 58).

Also, the acquaintance with the singing teacher Zofia Kozłowska, the Braille teacher Mr Mollin and the director of the establishment Henryk Ruszczyk is reflected in the teenager's attitude towards himself and the reality around him. The kindness of the educators encourages him to set goals for himself and strive to achieve them. This is how Tadek takes vocal lessons, starts writing poems and becomes the leader of a group of boys from the Laski centre. He also makes friends and starts helping others (*e.g.*, Lutek's story). He is also motivated to work on himself by his infatuation with Stenia Sarzyńska, a blind friend a few years older than him, who moves around so nimbly that it is hard to believe she cannot see. Eventually, Stenia marries the engineer Wasilewski, which Tadek accepts with a heavy heart on the one hand, but with understanding on the other. Reconciled to his fate, he enters the fourth phase.

Fourth stage: Acceptance of the situation

Acceptance of the situation allows disability to be integrated into the personality structure. It then becomes an integral component of the personality, which contributes, *e.g.*, to the modification of the value system, and changes in priorities and motivation, and this results in the stabilisation of self-esteem. In addition, adaptation to new circumstances and acceptance of social tasks related to integration or inclusion occur (Kowalewski, 1999).

Tadek is becoming more independent. He starts to function more and more freely not only in his immediate surroundings but also in the social world. He visits Kazik's aunt, rides a bicycle with an old friend, visits Zakopane, and goes on holiday by himself to his uncle's house in Puławy. During this trip, he meets a sailor, to whom he tells him about Laski:

This is a normal boarding school. We learn what we learn at a normal school, only there is different writing. We have special, convex maps. Instead of drawings – we model with clay. And the elderly learn brushmaking, massage, and piano tuning (Szczygieł, 1976, p. 185).

Finally, Tadek and his younger brother become part of Kazik Okoński's family. Jędrrek lives at the house of Kazik's aunt, while Tadek gains a friend and confidant. He no longer feels alone or lonely. He looks to the future with increasing courage. He plans

to continue his education. Influenced by his conversations with H. Ruszczyk, he thinks not only about secondary school but also about higher studies and work that will bring him income and satisfaction. He infects his colleagues with this attitude. Lutek, among others, admits that he wants to study further, just like Tadek. All of Tadek's colleagues leave the Laski plant without complexes and head out into a new, unknown world, confident that they will realise their dreams.

Conclusion

It is indisputable that J. Szczygieł's work belongs mainly to the epic genre. Among his works, one can also find textbook studies (*e.g.*, on chess) and numerous columns. The creative work of the author of *Ziemia bez słońca* evolved and broadened its range of functions: at first, it was a long-discovered vocation and a defence against despair, then a gradually mastered craft, then a chronicle of his fate, including his struggle with the limitations of his body, and finally a form of self-therapy. For this reason, his writing is particularly important in literary and tiflological studies, and this text is only a research reconnaissance on the legacy of this novelist.

This characterisation of J. Szczygieł's work, necessarily presented briefly, allows the first conclusions to be drawn, including the one that his prose is filled with autobiographical motifs and the subject matter of his works has been marked by the war (Fidowicz, 2020) and the author's personal feelings and experiences. In addition, the difficult historical time formed the attitude of the generation to which the writer in question also belonged (Frycie, 1999). J. Szczygieł's tetralogy on Tadek Różański alone shows the entire complexity of the psychological situation of young people in wartime conditions. A special place in it is occupied by the image of the struggles of the main protagonist of the series. The boy first loses his father and brother, then his mother, home and sight. The last two parts, *i.e.*, *Nigdy cię nie opuszczę* and *Po kocich łbach*, are an insightful study of coping with trauma (and disability) and coming to terms with the tragic consequences of an accident. They are also an eloquent example of the fact that even after losing sight life does not end, but changes, which is why it is worth fighting for the highest possible quality of life in ordinary everyday life (Bolińska, 2021).

The "Puławy" series motivates a deeper study of the author's work, also in terms of the workshop of a blind person. For it should be noted that J. Szczygieł builds his literary space through various types of transformations of the problems of tyflocommunication and tyfloeducation (Chrzanowska, 2021). He draws on his autopsy, on the biographies of blind artists, but also his extensive and objectified tyflogological knowledge. It focuses primarily on naming and describing visual impairment, on the specifics of the cognitive and emotional-motivational sphere, on presenting the determinants of social functioning

and the place of blind people in the family and society, and on the level of improvement and inclusion, especially within the framework of so-called “everyday rehabilitation”^{*}. He does this by describing both important and well-known places (e.g., Puławy, Warsaw) and personal themes and experiences. He thus mainly uses the strategy of testimony as part of an autobiographical stance.

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* At the time of J. Szczygieł's accident, there were many young people like him injured by shrapnel. He points this out, for example, in the novel *Po kocich łbach*, when he allows one of his characters to reflect on the fact that among the residents of the centre, many boys lost their sight and/or limbs in similar circumstances. The plight of wartime and post-war invalids concerned not only everyday matters but also the approach to people with disabilities, including in the field of education. At the time when Tadek (and his prototype, Jerzy) arrived at the centre in Laski, there were few opportunities for visually impaired people to develop. They were mainly offered manual activities and were equipped with handicraft skills, e.g. brush making, basket weaving, etc. They rarely received education in the field of education. Rarely were other talents trained, and occasionally higher education was undertaken. There were exceptions, however, such as Michał Kaziów or Jerzy Szczygieł. In the 1950s and 1960s, the labour market for people with special needs was just beginning to sprout, a social model of disability was gradually emerging in the world, and movements calling for equal treatment were slowly awakening. The situation for people with dysfunctions was not optimistic. Serious changes and solutions for recognising and meeting special developmental and educational needs did not begin until the second half of the 20th century and continue to this day.

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