

Who was Nicolaus Copernicus? The Copernican narrative in contemporary Polish-language children's literature

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study was to examine the portrayal of Nicolaus Copernicus in Polish-language children's literature and to identify the elements of the literary narrative that shape young readers' memory about Copernicus. Twelve children's books about Copernicus, published after the political transformation of 1989, were analyzed. Five elements that contribute to Copernicus' portrayal as a site of memory were identified: nationality, accomplishments, life in an era of discovery, imagined childhood, and characteristics of a superhero. The results of the analysis suggest that the national discourse which dominated the Copernican narrative in the 19th and 20th centuries is being replaced by a discussion about the astronomer's real achievements and personality traits as values that should be embraced by young people. As a result, the centuries-old portrayal of Copernicus as a Polish and German site of memory is being transformed into an "open", pan-European site of memory.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Nicolaus Copernicus; Children's literature; Collective memory; Place-based education; XIX-XX Centuries.

Introduction

The year 2023 marked the 550th birth anniversary and the 480th death anniversary of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543). To commemorate this event, the Senate of the Republic of Poland adopted a resolution proclaiming the year 2023 the Copernicus Year¹. In addition to an exhibition and a scientific conference dedicated to the astronomer, the central feature of the jubilee framework program involved the World Copernican Congress with a rich program. The Polish Senate also turned to universities, schools, social organizations, and the media with a request to popularize Nicolaus Copernicus², and this appeal gave rise to a series of initiatives dedicated to or inspired by the astronomer. The appeal also led to the publication of several books about Copernicus for children of various ages.

Nicolaus Copernicus was born in Toruń (Thorn) in the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland, and he remains a hugely symbolic figure for Polish national identity. According to Elisabeth Ritter, the anniversaries of Copernicus' birth and death were moments that crystallized the cultural memory³ about the astronomer. This article attempts to analyze Polish-language children's books about Copernicus from this perspective. The study involved twelve books published between 2009 and 2023. The article focuses on books that were published after the political transformation of 1989, a year that marked the beginning of a new chapter in all areas of Polish life. The aim of the study was to examine the portrayal of Nicolaus Copernicus in Polish-language children's literature and to identify the elements of the literary narrative that shape young readers' memory about Copernicus.

1. *Nicolaus Copernicus as a site of memory*

The analysis of the Copernican narrative in children's books was conducted in the spirit of research on cultural memory. This research perspective focuses on the process of reinforcing historical facts in collective memory, rather than on reconstructing past events. This shared pool of memories makes a specific reference to the identity⁴ of a society or a social group. Therefore, the «sites

¹ Polish Monitor, «Official Journal of the Republic of Poland», 28.11.2022, <<https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WMP20220001120/O/M20221120.pdf>> (last access: 14.12.2023).

² *Ibid.*

³ E. Ritter, *Mikołaj Kopernik. O obrotach narodowych dziełem wielkiego astronoma*, in R. Traba, H.H. Hahn (edd.), *Polsko – niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2015, Vol. I, p. 571.

⁴ J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität*

of memory» became the focal point in the research on national remembrance. The term «site of memory» [*lieu de memoire*] was coined by Pierre Nora and – in line with his expectations – it quickly evolved into a research concept⁵ that not only gave rise to an astounding number of publications examining sites of memory in national, regional, and European history⁶, but also, as Waldemar Czachur notes⁷, has been elevated to the status of one of the most important programs in the human sciences in recent decades. In view of the above, instead of making even the most casual reference to the scientific discourse on cultural memory, this article analyzes the definition of a memory site proposed by Hans-Henning Hahn and Robert Traba, the initiators of the research project entitled *Polish-German Realms of Memory*. The project makes a reference to *German Sites of Memory* by Etienne Francois and Hagen Schulze, who defined memory sites as points at which collective memory and identity are crystallized and play a permanent and constitutive role for many generations, represent social, cultural, and political habits, and evolve with changes in the perception, adoption, use, and transfer of these concepts⁸.

Hahn and Traba examined sites of memory in the context of the research done by Klaus Zernack, a precursor of the transcultural history of mutual interactions. In this approach, sites of memory can be defined as both real-world and imagined historical phenomena, including events, topographic locations, characters (real and imagined), artifacts, and symbols. The extent to which the presence of past events in the contemporary world affects the evolution and stabilization of identity is analyzed because research on memory sites investigates the complex history of memory, rather than the cultural memory that exists here and now⁹.

Traba and Hahn accentuate the polyphonic character of memory sites:

Therefore, it is not surprising that many sites of memory in a given society, where society is defined as a national discourse community, can be also encountered in neighboring communities, despite certain differences in their meaning, emotional connotations,

in frühen Hochkulturen, C.H. Beck, 1992; Polish translation: *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo UW, 2008, p. 55.

⁵ See P. Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, Berlin, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1990, p. 85.

⁶ See K. Kończal, *Miejsca pamięci. O niebywalej karierze pewnej koncepcji badawczej*, in R. Traba, H.H. Hahn (edd.), *Polsko – niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2013, Vol. IV, p. 77.

⁷ W. Czachur, *Lingwistyka pamięci. Założenia, zakres badań i metody analizy*, in W. Czachur (ed.), *Pamięć w ujęciu lingwistycznym. Zagadnienia teoretyczne i metodyczne*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwa UW, 2018, p. 7.

⁸ E. Francois, H. Schulze, *Einleitung*, in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, München, 2001, Vol. I, pp. 9-24, in partic. p. 18.

⁹ R. Traba, H.H. Hahn, *O czym (nie)opowiadają polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, in Traba, Hahn (edd.), *Polsko – niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, cit., pp. 9-44, in partic. p. 18.

or influence on identity¹⁰. The above applies particularly to interrupted countries¹¹, namely areas that had experienced territorial disruptions in the past, as was the case in the shared history of Poland and Germany.

Nicolaus Copernicus constitutes a polyphonic site of memory that is shared by Poland and Germany¹². The first volume of Traba's and Hahn's work (suggestively entitled *Shared/Separate*) deals with Copernicus. In a chapter dedicated to Copernicus, Elisabeth Ritter examined the processes by which collective memory about the famous astronomer was shaped (in parallel) in both countries. She noted that these memories differed among the Catholics and the Protestants¹³, but she focused mainly on the shared representation of Copernicus that defined the national identity:

At the national level, Copernicus became an identity-building figure in Germany and in Poland during the partitions of Poland and the Polish struggle for independence in the second half of the 19th century. The quest for asserting the astronomer's national identity became radicalized in the 20th century¹⁴.

Both sides focused their efforts on proving that Copernicus was "entirely Polish" or "entirely German" by cherry picking biographical elements that fit their narratives and reinforcing these constructs in the collective memory of both nations. Polish and German historians attempted to undermine the opponent's arguments in the ongoing dispute, which incidentally contributed to the discovery of valuable source materials¹⁵. The national discourse dominated the remembrance of Copernicus and pushed the significance of his scientific accomplishments into the background. Copernicus was "owned" at the national, regional, and local level, and partly reduced to the role of a political tool. The astronomer became «a site of memory by largely contributing to the process of building [...] the political identity»¹⁶. Ritter analyzed this phenomenon in a bilateral approach and concluded that Poland and Germany «invented parallel traditions» of remembering Copernicus, where Polish traditions were laden with symbolic acts (in terms of their number, diversity, and emotional

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ M. Maleszka, *Nostalgia bez pamięci. Spojrzenie na przestrzeń kulturową Warmii i Mazur*, «Studia Etnologiczne i Antropologiczne», n. 12, 2001, pp. 94-113, <<https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-issn-2353-9860-year-2012-volume-12-article-9062/c/9062-7020.pdf>> (last access: 15.12.2023).

¹² E. Grotek, *Miejsca pamięci a toruńska tożsamość zbiorowa w XIX wieku. Przypadek Kopernika*, in Czachur (ed.), *Pamięć w ujęciu lingwistycznym. Zagadnienia teoretyczne i metodyczne*, cit., pp. 159-187.

¹³ Ritter, *Mikołaj Kopernik. O obrotach narodowych dziełem wielkiego astronoma*, cit., p. 568.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

¹⁵ W. Thimm, *Rezensionen*, «Zeitschrift für die geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands», n. 36, 1972, pp. 123-134, p. 126.

¹⁶ Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, cit., p. 7.

charge)¹⁷. The political transformation of 1989 brought a notable change in this respect. The nationalist discourse on Copernicus became politically incorrect in the face of political changes and Poland's aspirations to join the European Union. Efforts were made to Europeanize Copernicus by naming international¹⁸ or national interdisciplinary scientific projects after the great astronomer (such as the Copernicus Science Center in Warsaw). According to Ritter, the official attempts to turn Copernicus into a «great European» aimed at by-passing the apparent dilemma concerning his nationality¹⁹, but they blurred the complexity of the relations. The extent to which these measures were successful in permanently modifying the memory of Copernicus in Polish and German societies is difficult to determine, but it appears doubtful. Ritter argued that in both Germany and Poland, certain groups are unable to deal with Copernicus' nationality without delving into a heated emotional debate. She cited the example of the former European Commissioner Günter Verheugen who sparked outrage in Poland by adopting the German spelling of the astronomer's name in the EU's Kopernikus project in 2008²⁰. The national discourse on Copernicus has been partly revived since the establishment of Poland's right-wing government. This trend culminated in Polish Senate's resolution proclaiming the year 2023 the Copernicus Year:

This resolution has been adopted by the Senate of the Republic of Poland on the 550th birth anniversary of this **Great Pole** [bold font introduced by the authors] to commemorate his work and achievements that have become a permanent feature of our collective consciousness. This act of remembrance aims to highlight Poland's and Poles' global contributions to science [...] ²¹.

The news that the dispute surrounding Copernicus' nationality had been ultimately resolved by Krzysztof Mikulski, a history professor, was widely promulgated in the media in June 2023. Citing Mikulski's research, the author of one of the articles (published on the website of a Polish public television channel) asserted that Nicolaus Copernicus clearly identified as a Pole despite the fact that his mother had been born in a family that relocated to Toruń from Germany, and his father's family originated from the region of Nysa²².

¹⁷ Ritter, *Mikołaj Kopernik*, cit., pp. 570-573.

¹⁸ Such as the *Copernicus Group*, a Polish-German expert forum created in 2000, or the Copernicus award of the Foundation for Polish Science and its German counterpart, Forschungsgemeinschaft.

¹⁹ Ritter, *Mikołaj Kopernik*, cit., p. 581.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

²¹ <<https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WMP20220001120>> (last access: 29.12.2023).

²² M.R.K., *Mikołaj Kopernik – wielki astronom i patriota dumny ze swojego pochodzenia*, <<https://polonia.tvp.pl/70871618/mikolaj-kopernik-wielki-astronom-i-patriota-dumny-ze-swojego-pochodzenia>> (last access: 29.12.2023).

2. *The educational potential of sites of memory*

According to the concept of place-based education, the unique features of a particular place play an educational role, can be associated with the pedagogical process, and incorporated into experiential learning²³. The “pedagogical” character of a place is manifested in the process of creating local actors in a community. Humans have a dialectic relationship with places by providing them with meaning, and these places create communities²⁴. The educators recognize the value of places in which and through which education takes place. A place can «seduce» and offer «limitless educational opportunities»²⁵, but it can also be «dangerous». The real fight is about places, «and places become occupied and owned [...]»²⁶. Places can be used as a currency in that fight, «and they can be both gained and lost [...]». The educational potential of sites of memory lies in the values they carry. These ideas, norms, and behavior patterns play an important role in the local community, and they can be used as a reference to a community’s past²⁷. Despite the fact that sites of memory are applied mainly in historical and civic education²⁸, these complex and multi-dimensional constructs can catalyze both formal, non-formal, and informal education addressed to all age groups²⁹. In a world where historical memory is shaped mainly by propaganda, education based upon sites of memory poses an ethical challenge and imposes a certain obligation on educators. The educators are expected to develop a dialogue with students and encourage students to express their ideas and self-reflect on the learning process³⁰. Sites of memory should be regarded as platforms for presenting the interpretations offered by members of various social groups, and representatives of different generations and nationalities. Diverse opinions can provide individuals with a better understanding of the heterogeneous and context-based nature of reality; they can encourage community members to verify the information they receive

²³ M. Mendel, *Pedagogika miejsca i animacja na miejsca wrażliwa*, in Id. (ed.), *Pedagogika miejsca*, Wrocław, Wydawnictwa Naukowe DSWE TWP, 2006, pp. 21-37, p. 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁶ M. Mendel, *Wstęp*, in Id., *Pedagogika miejsca*, Wrocław, Wydawnictwa Naukowe DSWE TWP, 2006, pp. 9-18, p. 10.

²⁷ A. Szpociński, *Miejsca pamięci [Lieux de memoire]*, «Teksty Drugie», n. 4, 2008, pp. 11-20, in partic. p. 15.

²⁸ K. Majchrzak, *Miejsca pamięci w edukacji obywatelskiej*, «Studia Edukacyjne», n. 42, 2016, pp. 251-262.

²⁹ Id., *Od miejsc pamięci narodowej do miejsc żywej pamięci – implikacje dla andragogiki*, «Rocznik Andragogiczny», 2013, pp. 301-312.

³⁰ M. Małowski, *Od nauczania do uczenia się. O paradygmatycznej zmianie w andragogice*, Wrocław, Wydawnictwa Naukowe DSWE TWP, 2010.

and acquire information from various sources – these achievements are the current goals of education³¹.

3. *Sites of memory in the literature*

The links between sites of memory, as the focal point of the research on cultural memory, and literature were studied by German researchers Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning³². They identified three possible associations between literature and memory: the memory of literature, memory in literature, and literature as a medium of memory. The present article makes a reference to the latter category, and it focuses on literature as a formative medium within cultural memory. The first research question analyzes the ways in which the existing concepts, including intertextuality, rhetoric, genre conventions, literary canons, and literary representation of memory, can increase the effectiveness of literature as a formative medium within cultural memory³³. This line of thought was further developed by the Polish researcher Elżbieta Rybicka who analyzed the contribution of literature to the creation of sites of memory. Rybicka concluded that literature is not only a carrier, but also an activator of collective memory. By describing, interpreting, reconstructing, fabricating, or mythologizing sites of memory, both fictitious and real, literary works not only act as topographical representations of history, but they also initiate a discussion with the past, present, and future³⁴.

In this article, children's books about Copernicus published after 1989 were analyzed to define the framework for reconceptualizing the astronomer's legacy as a site of memory in reference to Ritter's arguments.

³¹ D. Barwińska, *Kształcenie w miejscach pamięci a społeczeństwo wiedzy. Pedagogika miejsc pamięci (Gedenkstättenpädagogik)*, in W. Horyń, J. Maciejewski (edd.), *Nauczyciel an-dragog w społeczeństwie wiedzy*, Wrocław, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2007, pp. 260-267, in partic. p. 261.

³² A. Erll, A. Nunning, *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2005.

³³ J. Kałużny, *Kategoria pamięci zbiorowej w badaniach literaturoznawczych*, «Kultura Współczesna», n. 3, 2007, pp. 85-103, in partic. pp. 88-89.

³⁴ E. Rybicka, *Miejsce, pamięć, literatura (w perspektywie geopoetyki)*, «Teksty Drugie», n. 1/2, 2008, pp. 19-32, in partic. p. 23.

4. Book description and formal analysis

The analyzed books belong to different literary genres and are addressed to different age groups. Most of them are informative, rather than fictional, but some rely on literary devices to communicate scientific facts³⁵. In two books, Copernicus is one of the characters on the list of famous Poles. These books are *To właśnie Polacy* [*These Are Poles*] by Dorota Skwark and *12 wyjątkowych postaci* [*12 Extraordinary People*] by Agnieszka Frączek. Katarzyna Vanevska's short poem about Copernicus' achievements entitled *Kto to puka? Nauka* [*Knock knock. Who's there? Science*] is dedicated to famous scientists in the world. Agata Grzegorzczyk-Wosiek's *Spacer Pana Kopernika* [*Mr. Copernicus' Walk*] and Anna Czerwińska-Rydel's *Planety Pana Mikołaja* [*Mr. Nicolaus' Planets*] are also short books for younger readers. The first is a rhymed story about Copernicus who takes a stroll down the streets of contemporary Olsztyn, whereas the second book has been designed as reading material for 5- to 7-year-olds, and it highlights the words associated with the astronomer's life and achievements. In Grzegorzczyk-Wosiek's second book, entitled *365. Co się stało z kalendarzem?* [*365. What Happened to the Calendar?*], Copernicus appears under the name of *Mikoko* and participates in the calendar reform. Marcin Przewoźniak's books with nearly identical textual layers – *Mikołaj Kopernik. Chłopak, który sięgnął gwiazd* [*Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars*] and *Mikołaj Kopernik. Geniusz, który wstrzymał Słońce* [*Nicolaus Copernicus. The Genius Who Stopped the Sun*] – present the astronomer against the rich historical background of Medieval Europe. Błażej Kusztelski's and Bogusław Orliński's *Nazywam się Mikołaj Kopernik* [*My Name Is Nicolaus Copernicus*] was published as part of the *Nazywam się...* [*My Name Is...*] series which, according to the publisher, was designed to present children and adolescents with the biographies of famous people from various parts of the world who significantly advanced the progress of civilization³⁶. Justyna Styszyńska's *Idol. Mikołaj Kopernik* [*Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus*] also belongs to a series of books that familiarize readers with great men and women who made valuable contributions to the world of science³⁷. In turn, *Droga do gwiazd. Opowieść o Mikołaju Koperniku* [*The Road to the Stars. A Story About Nicolaus Copernicus*] is a work of biographical fiction. In the longest of the analyzed books, *Mikołaj i dziewczyna z gwiazd* [*Nicolaus and the Girl from the Stars*] by Sergiusz Pinkwart, Copernicus is a background character who becomes involved in the adventures of two contemporary teenagers.

³⁵ K. Rybak *et alii*, *Dziecięca książka informacyjna w Polsce. Wybrane problemy*, «Filoteknos», vol. 12, 2022, pp. 363-382.

³⁶ <<https://www.mediarodzina.pl/seria/nazywam-sie/>> (last access: 29.12.2023).

³⁷ J. Styszyńska, *Idol. Mikołaj Kopernik*, Piaseczno, Widnokrag, 2018, cover.

Most of the analyzed books are richly illustrated. Marcin Przewoźniak's books are particularly abundant in graphic content, including colorful illustrations representing various artistic styles, maps (such as a map of 16th-century Poland), plans (the Teutonic castle in Malbork and Medieval Toruń), diagrams (Copernicus' heliocentric model, an engineering diagram of a telescope), and photographs (historical figures, manuscripts, cities, works of art, architectural objects, museum exhibits). Some books feature interactive elements that "force" young readers to undertake other types of activities and expand their knowledge of the topic. Styszyńska's book contains a "spot the difference" exercise in which the readers have to compare two portraits of Copernicus, a maze activity in which children have to map Copernicus' path to a horse standing on the opposite side of the river, a drawing of a tenement house in Toruń for coloring in, an exercise in which the readers have to draw the defenders of the Olsztyn castle in an empty battle field with Teutonic knights, and many activities where colorful stickers have to be placed on designated areas to complete the picture. *Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars* ends with a Copernican quiz which tests the readers' knowledge about Copernicus' astronomical discoveries and astronomy. *Mr. Nicolas' Planets* contains reading comprehension questions, and children receive colorful stickers for reading the text independently and giving the correct answers. *Mr. Copernicus' Walk* features black and white illustrations that can be colored in based on the templates presented on the cover. Therefore, the reviewed books contain both reproducible and creative activities which have been designed to unleash the readers' curiosity, focus their attention, facilitate memorization, and consolidate the acquired knowledge.

The print runs and marketing of books about Copernicus play an important role in the popularization of the astronomer's achievements among Polish children. According to publisher data, the analyzed books had a print run of 3000 to 12,500 copies³⁸. Five books were first published before 2023, and new editions were released around 2023. Three books were published in 2022, i.e. directly before Copernicus' 550th birth anniversary, which suggests that they were written specifically for the occasion. *Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus* was co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, whereas *365. What Happened to the Calendar?* was published as part of the Ministry's scholarship program, and it was co-financed and widely promoted by the Olsztyn City Office. The author received an award from the Marshal of the Voivodeship of Warmia and Mazury for promoting Nicolaus Copernicus. Public readings of the book by the members of local cultural, scientific, artistic, and political communities were organized under the honorary patronage

³⁸ *Droga do gwiazd* had the largest print run of 12,500 copies, whereas *Kto to puka? Nauka* had the smallest print run of 3000 copies in two editions. Not all publishers responded to our request to provide print run data for the analyzed books.

of the Voivodeship Marshal and during a promotional campaign in Radio Olsztyn; workshop meetings with the author, Agata Grzegorzczuk-Wosiek, were also held. *The Road to the Stars* received the honorary patronage of the presidents of “Copernican” towns – Toruń and Olsztyn. Books dedicated entirely to Copernicus are popularized during promotional and educational campaigns (meetings with the authors, public readings, workshops, competitions) held mainly in schools, kindergartens, and children’s libraries.

5. *Nicolaus Copernicus – a Pole or a German?*

Six of the twelve analyzed books do not mention Copernicus’ nationality. A reference to the dispute can be found in three books. In two of these (with a nearly identical content), *Nicolaus Copernicus. The Genius Who Stopped the Sun* and *Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars*, an entire chapter (*The War for Toruń and Copernicus*) is dedicated to the dispute about Copernicus’ nationality. The author resorts to an interesting tactic by alleging that Polish and German scientists waged a dispute about the astronomer’s nationality during a great conference dedicated to Copernicus. Scientific arguments backing the assertion that Copernicus was Polish/German are presented in the form of paratext. On the one hand, the author establishes a dialogue with the readers by encouraging them to resolve the dispute on their own. On the other hand, in the main text, the author subtly reinforces the arguments that Copernicus was a Pole: «In addition, our hero dedicated all of his scientific works to the Polish king. European scientists who knew Copernicus also regarded him as a Polish astronomer»³⁹. In the older of the two books (*Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars*), Przewoźniak provides additional information about historical perceptions of nationality by giving examples of outstanding figures whose nationality has not been fully resolved (Wit Stwos, Arend Dickmann, Jan Matejko). A similar approach was used by Katarzyna Ziemnicka and Paweł Ziemnicki in *The Road to the Stars. A Story About Nicolaus Copernicus*:

The controversy over whether Nicolaus Copernicus was Polish or German has persisted for many years. In Copernicus’ times, nationality was defined in completely different terms. The late Middle Ages were a period of urban migration. According to the law, people who moved to a different territory were placed under the jurisdiction of the local ruler and had to acquire local citizenship. Nicolaus was loyal to Polish rulers all his life. He was born in Toruń, a city that had been a part of the Polish Royal Prussia for nineteen

³⁹ M. Przewoźniak, *Mikołaj Kopernik. Chłopak, który sięgnął do gwiazd*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa, 2010, p. 8.

years, which is why he is usually referred to as Nicolaus Copernicus – a resident of Toruń, a Prussian, or a German-speaking Pole⁴⁰.

Four of the examined books (*Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars*; *Nicolaus Copernicus. The Genius Who Stopped the Sun*; *These Are Poles*; *Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus*) cite the famous couplet: «He stopped the Sun and moved the Earth; a Polish tribe was the place of his birth»⁴¹. Styszyńska (*Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus*) and Kuztelski and Orliński (*My Name Is Nicolaus Copernicus*) also make a reference to the poem, but do not quote the second verse which alleges that Copernicus was Polish. Perhaps they regard Copernicus as a cosmopolitan figure and, similarly to the cited authors, they believe that the dispute cannot be resolved by relying on the contemporary definition of nationality. The couplet was immensely popular in Poland after World War II, and it remains unknown whether the full quote, without any additional explanations, was provided to emphasize Copernicus' nationality or merely to indicate that the astronomer has been ever-present in Polish culture.

Four books directly portray Nicolaus Copernicus as a Pole. His nationality is implied in the title (*These Are Poles*), or Poland is indicated as the astronomer's place of birth without additional explanations (*Knock, Knock. Who's There? Science*). Copernicus is described as a famous Pole in the introductory chapter of *12 Extraordinary People*, but his name is mentioned on the list of the world's most famous people on the cover of the book, which could be an attempt to "internationalize" the astronomer. In the last book in this group (*My Name Is Nicolaus Copernicus*), Copernicus makes a reference to his nationality by describing his place of birth: «During my childhood, Toruń was one of the largest Polish cities»⁴². However, the book also informs the reader that Toruń was annexed to Poland in 1454-1466. Without entering a debate about the astronomer's nationality, the author explains why Copernicus spoke German: «Latin was the official spoken and written language of educated people, wealthy burghers, and the nobility. [...]. German was also widely spoken, whereas Polish was the language of... commoners, people of low birth rank. Therefore, I have been speaking German since I was a little child, but I had an equally good command of the Polish language»⁴³.

⁴⁰ K. Ziemnicka, P. Ziemnicki, *Droga do Gwiazd. Opowieść o Mikołaju Koperniku*, Łódź, Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2021, p. 21.

⁴¹ In *These Are Poles*, Dorota Skwark writes that the couplet was popularized by an unknown author after Copernicus had presented the heliocentric theory (p. 8). However, we know that the couplet was written by Jan Nepomucen Kamiński and published in 1828 (see: E. Sternik, *Popularny dwuwiersz o Koperniku i jego zapomniany autor*, «Notatki Płockie. Kwartalnik Towarzystwa Naukowego Płockiego», vol. 18, n. 2 (71), 1973, pp. 34-35.

⁴² B. Kuztelski, B. Orliński, *Nazywam się ... Mikołaj Kopernik*, Poznań, Media Rodzina, 2022, p. 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

6. Copernicus' accomplishments – a Renaissance man

In the analyzed books, Copernicus is portrayed mainly through his scientific accomplishments. In addition to the book by Grzegorz Wosiek⁴⁴, other books also extensively discuss the astronomer's achievements, and separate parts of the text are dedicated to his expertise in different scientific fields. Justyna Styszyńska's *Idol. Nicolas Copernicus* features extensive descriptions of Copernicus' knowledge of medicine, economy, cartography, astronomy, and his «military skills». Marcin Przewoźniak portrays Copernicus as a medic, mathematician, economist, astronomer, cartographer, administrator, diplomat, poet, translator, and calendar reformer. Other books highlight Copernicus' linguistic and legal skills, as well as his church career (*Knock, Knock. Who's There? Science; My Name Is Nicolaus Copernicus*).

Due to his versatile interests and skills, Copernicus is depicted as a Renaissance man in some of the evaluated books (*Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus; Nicolaus Copernicus. The Genius Who Stopped the Sun; Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars*). Marcin Przewoźniak provides the following definition of a Renaissance man:

A Renaissance man not only had an interest in science, but he believed that knowledge and experience should, above all, serve mankind. Knowledge should improve mankind and make people stronger and happier [...]. Today, we use the term 'Renaissance man' to describe a person who has many interests and extensive knowledge in many areas. The same definition was used 500 years ago⁴⁵.

In several books, the narrative about Copernicus as a (future) scientist focuses solely on his interest in astronomy. Interestingly, this approach is found in books where Copernicus is depicted as a child. In the chapter entitled *Nicolaus Copernicus – How to Stop the Sun* in Agnieszka Frączek's *12 Extraordinary People*, little Nicolas looks up to the clouds and dreams about stopping the Sun. «This was only a child's dream, and as an adult, Copernicus would probably have admitted that it was a childish dream, but that dream triggered a series of events that changed the world»⁴⁶. In Pinkwart's *Nicolaus and the Girl from the Stars*, young Niko (Copernicus) discusses the laws of the universe with a traveler from the future, the teenage Wika, who convinces Copernicus that the Earth is not flat and is not the center of the universe. In Anna Czerwińska-Rydel's *Mr. Copernicus' Planets*, young Copernicus is fascinated

⁴⁴ *Mr. Copernicus' Walk* is a rhymed story in which where the astronomer takes the reader on a tour of contemporary Olsztyn. In turn, in *What Happened to the Calendar?*, Copernicus is portrayed only as one of the scientists who participated in the calendar reform.

⁴⁵ Przewoźniak, *Mikołaj Kopernik. Chłopak, który sięgnął do gwiazd*, cit., p. 18.

⁴⁶ A. Frączek, *Mikołaj Kopernik, czyli jak zatrzymać Słońce*, in A. Belter (ed.), *12 wyjątkowych postaci*, Poznań, Publicat, 2020, p. 10.

with the sky and has an interest in astronomy. The readers learn new words describing Copernicus' heliocentric theory (the Sun, revolve, theory, science, center).

In most books, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* is presented as Copernicus' greatest achievement. The authors dedicate more space and time to Copernicus' heliocentric theory than to his other accomplishments. Copernicus is portrayed as an astronomer already in the titles of the examined books, including *The Road to the Stars. A Story About Nicolaus Copernicus*, *Mr. Nicolaus' Planets*, and *Nicolaus Copernicus. The Genius Who Stopped the Sun*. The books by Przewoźniak, Styszyńska, Ziemnicki and Ziemnicka, Kuztelski and Orliński present the main tenets of the heliocentric theory and provide diagrams and illustrations to facilitate its understanding. The history and fate of Copernicus' seminal work are described in detail, and its importance is emphasized through the use of terms such as the *Copernican revolution*, *breakthrough*, *scientific revolution*, and *truth*. The significance of the heliocentric theory in Copernicus' career is reinforced by additional information and materials, including illustrated descriptions of scientific instruments and previous theories about the structure of the universe. References are also made to Copernicus' successors who developed his theory (Brache, Galileo, Kepler, Newton). The poem by Grzegorzcyk-Wosiek does not make a direct reference to Copernicus, but one of the stanzas emphasizes the groundbreaking character of his discovery:

Glass houses?!
Marble houses?
This is purely outrageous.

And they said
That the theory
Of planetary motion
Was too courageous!⁴⁷

7. Copernicus as a witness to history

In most of the examined books, the descriptions of Nicolaus Copernicus' life and achievements are accompanied by more or less extensive information about the period in which he lived. The only exceptions are *Mr. Nicolaus' Planets*, which has been designed mainly as a reading aid, and Grzegorzcyk-Wosiek's 365. *What Happened to the Calendar?*, which is based on

⁴⁷ A. Grzegorzcyk-Wosiek, *Spacer pana Kopernika*, Olsztyn, Pracownia Wydawnicza ElSet, 2009.

a fairy tale. *These Are Poles* and the short story about young Copernicus' dreams in *12 Extraordinary People* do not provide additional information about the Renaissance period, either. Some of the analyzed books give only a brief account of the era and places associated with the astronomer. In *Knock, Knock. Who's There? Science*, the only thing that the readers learn about Toruń is that the city is famous for its gingerbread cookies. *The Road to the Stars. A Story About Nicolaus Copernicus* is a piece of biographical fiction that contains only the most cursory information about Toruń and other cities where Copernicus lived and worked, such as Chełmno, Cracow, and Rome. In the book by Agata Grzegorzczak-Wosiek, *Mr. Copernicus* is a guide who takes the readers on a tour of contemporary and historical Olsztyn. Nicolaus Copernicus decides to leave his statue, and during his stroll, he compares Olsztyn's Old Town with his memories of the time when he resided in the Olsztyn castle. Pinkwart's book not only describes the topography of Medieval Toruń, but also provides extensive information about the role of the Church and social norms in the Middle Ages. The readers can learn about the daily life of burgher families in 15th-century Toruń. The book describes cultural and social phenomena, such as the witch hunt, as well as culinary traditions in burgher households. In the remaining books, Copernicus and his accomplishments are intentionally discussed in a broad historical context. *My Name Is Nicolaus Copernicus* opens with the following paragraph: «I was born in the beautiful city of Toruń, and I lived in an era of great discoveries. Columbus reached America (...), Magellan sailed around the Earth and proved that the Earth is round, and I discovered... the Solar System»⁴⁸. The timeline of Copernicus' life and a list of historical events, scientific discoveries, and artistic achievements in the Copernican era (divided into years) are presented in a table at the end of the book.

In Styszyńska's and Przewoźniak's books, the educational content is even more apparent, and Copernicus' life and work are presented in the context of his era, both in a local and a global approach. *Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus* describes buildings and households in Toruń, the history of universities where Copernicus studied, local payments, old handwriting styles, and the invention of the printing press in Europe. Similar information can be also found in Przewoźniak's books which contain detailed descriptions of local customs, wealthy households, children's games, and hygiene practices in Toruń. The readers also learn about fashion, table manners, modes of transport, history of Toruń, its population structure, and entertainment in the city. Przewoźniak introduces and explains difficult concepts such as city rights. His books also describe Poland's status on the political map of Europe, as well as the development of the arts and education during the Renaissance period in Poland. In

⁴⁸ Kuszelski, Orliński, *Nazywam się... Mikołaj Kopernik*, cit., p. 3.

the middle of the book, the section entitled *A Witness to History* presents a timeline of Copernicus' life together with the most important global events, including Columbus' and Magellan's discoveries, and Martin Luther's teachings. By learning about the major events in Copernicus' life, the readers gain a better insight into his era.

8. *Nicolaus Copernicus as a child*

The analyzed books are addressed to children, which is why most of the authors have decided to reconstruct Copernicus' childhood by basing their narrative largely on supposition and fictitious events. This approach is particularly evident in Agnieszka Frączek's book which is dedicated in its entirety to «little people who became Great (...). Before rising to fame, these great Poles were children, just like the readers of this book»⁴⁹. The remaining books (with a few exceptions) begin by describing Copernicus' childhood in an attempt to give a human face to the world-renowned scientist. Copernicus' relations with his parents, uncle, siblings, and school friends are often presented in a humorous way. His favorite games, clothes, foods, and school subjects are presented through stories and numerous illustrations (*Nicolaus Copernicus – How to Stop the Sun; The Road to the Stars. A Story About Nicolaus Copernicus; Mr. Nicolas' Planets; Nicolas and the Girl from the Stars; My Name Is Nicolaus Copernicus; Nicolaus Copernicus. The Boy Who Reached for the Stars; Nicolaus Copernicus. The Genius Who Stopped the Sun*). To promote a better understanding of the changes that had taken place in the key areas of children's lives since the Middle Ages, Przewoźniak describes the furniture in young Nicolas' room, the appearance of his classroom, the teaching methods applied at the time, the contents of a Medieval school bag, and a school timetable in both Polish and Latin. The introduction to *12 Extraordinary People* explains why Copernicus was depicted as a child:

Even the most famous people in the world were once children. The crumbs of childhood dreams helped to realize childhood plans, to pursue goals, to be invincible.

Dear adults! Pay attention to children's dreams, encourage children to talk about their dreams, and wisely support dreamers.

Dear children! Your dreams are important!⁵⁰

⁴⁹ A. Belter, *Wstęp*, in Id. (ed.), *12 wyjątkowych postaci*, cit., p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

9. *Nicolaus Copernicus – a superhero and a childhood idol*

Some authors invite young readers to look at Copernicus in an unconventional way, given the era in which he lived. This approach is motivated by a desire to present the astronomer as an interesting character, rather than a boring scientist from a bygone era. In the introductory chapters to his books, Przewoźniak writes:

We know that Nicolaus Copernicus was an astronomer, looked at the stars, and discovered that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and not the other way round, nearly five hundred years ago. Students yawn in boredom when they hear this story, and the famous scholar looks at them with a silent reproach from the portraits hanging in nearly every school⁵¹.

This silent reproach is a reaction to the fact that Copernicus' achievements in many fields of science have been often underestimated. The author addresses this issue by focusing on the astronomer's versatility, rather than presenting a dry list of events in his life. To make his character more attractive for the reader, Przewoźniak refers to him as a superhero already in the titles of the introductory chapters to both of his books. The concept of a superhero originated in pop culture, and it is associated by children mainly with Marvel characters who are endowed with extraordinary skills and powers and who lead the fight against evil for the good of mankind. Przewoźniak writes: «In the early 16th century, the idea that the Earth is not the navel of the universe, but rotates politely around the Sun was considered heretical and was even punishable by death»⁵². The title of the introductory chapter, *The man who was to become a merchant, but became a SUPERHERO* also suggests that uniqueness is not written in one's birth certificate, but evolves with time as a result of hard work on personal growth and self-improvement.

The title of Styszyńska's book *Idol. Nicolaus Copernicus* follows a similar train of thought. The book does not elaborate on the superhero concept, but as previously mentioned, it focuses on Copernicus' extraordinary versatility. The story ends by pointing to the direct link between the brilliant scientist's achievements and the modern options of studying the universe, and it concludes with the following paragraph: «You might want to think about Nicolaus Copernicus when gazing into the starry night sky. Think about Copernicus as a unique and versatile character and remember just how much we owe to his extraordinary talents, diligence and courage»⁵³.

⁵¹ Przewoźniak, *Mikołaj Kopernik. Chłopak, który sięgnął do gwiazd*, cit., p. 3; M. Przewoźniak, *Mikołaj Kopernik. Geniusz, który wstrzymał Słońce*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa, 2023, p. 4.

⁵² Przewoźniak, *Mikołaj Kopernik. Chłopak, który sięgnął do gwiazd*, cit., p. 3.

⁵³ Styszyńska, *Idol. Mikołaj Kopernik*, cit., p. 28.

Conclusions

The aim of the formal analysis and the content analysis of the reviewed books was to identify the ways in which Nicolaus Copernicus is portrayed in Polish-language children's literature. It was assumed that the most prominent elements of the portrayed image build a memory of Copernicus in young readers. Prominence does not imply the frequency with which certain motifs appear in the analyzed publications, but it characterizes the volume and complexity of the text, as well as the emotional connotations, which together constitute a tool for consolidating certain facts and perceptions related to the astronomer in the collective memory. Copernicus' nationality is one of the such "hot" topics in the reviewed books. Nearly half of the examined books ignore this issue, which could be largely attributed to the Copernicus Year campaign promoting the astronomer as the great Polish scientist, hence his nationality is seen as a given. This assumption is corroborated by the results of a public opinion survey entitled *Poles' attitudes towards Nicolas Copernicus*, which was conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) at the beginning of 2023. In the question concerning Copernicus' nationality, 76% of the respondents asserted that he was Polish⁵⁴. Based on an analysis of the books in which the astronomer is portrayed unequivocally as Pole, it can be concluded that Copernicus continues to play an important role in the process of stabilizing Polish national identity because he underscores the significance of «Poland's and Poles' worldwide contributions to science». Several authors examine the dispute over Copernicus' nationality in detail, without resolving it. In doing so, they point out (using scientific arguments adapted to the age of the reader) that this controversy is unfounded, which can be interpreted as a successful attempt to help children understand the context-based nature of reality. These efforts follow the trend observed by Ritter, namely that Copernicus is being Europeanized without avoiding a sensitive discussion about his nationality. This approach to portraying the astronomer is also manifested by placing Copernicus among prominent figures of international stature, such as Columbus, Magellan and Luther. By "mapping" European cities where the astronomer lived and worked, the authors contribute to the image of Copernicus as a «citizen of the world». However, the reviewed publications give greatest attention to Polish cities, in particular Toruń, where Copernicus spent his childhood. To make the astronomer a less monumental and distant figure, the authors invent a childhood world of Nicolaus that corresponds to the experiences of contemporary children. Facts are supplemented with hypotheses, imagined concepts, and fictionalized events to portray Copernicus in a manner that is more cognitively and emotionally accessible for children. This approach is consistent with

⁵⁴ <https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_017_23.PDF> (last access: 29.12.2023).

the principles of place-based education which «aims to immerse an individual in a familiar environment and provide the context for identity-building, provided that such an identity is not coherent or unique»⁵⁵.

Copernicus' versatility and love of science are also promoted as significant elements in the process of building collective memory. Although most books focus on his achievements in astronomy, they also list the multitude of scientific disciplines in which Copernicus scored significant success. The authors argue that the persistent pursuit of knowledge, constant drive for self-improvement, and the courage to follow dreams are the traits that elevated Copernicus to greatness. By emphasizing the scientist's lonely and "heroic" struggle against misconceptions about the nature of the universe, some authors equate Copernicus with pop culture superheroes and present him as a role model for children. The presented analysis of children's books suggests that the national discourse which dominated the Copernican narrative in the 19th and 20th centuries is being replaced by a discussion about the astronomer's real achievements and personality traits as values that should be embraced by young people. As a result, the centuries-old portrayal of Copernicus as a Polish and German site of memory is being transformed into an "open", pan-European site of memory.

At the same time, the analyzed elements indicate that the reviewed books have considerable educational potential because they not only teach facts in an attractive way (in terms of content and graphics), but also promote universal values. The attempts to offer different interpretations of Copernicus and his era (and such attempts have been made by many generations and nations) are particularly valuable because they promote the understanding that reality is context-based and make it possible for young readers to discover the contextuality of the world. However, to encourage children to personalize the content of books and to confront them with different interpretations, teachers and other adults should adopt an open, sensitive, and uncompromising approach and should be able to recognize and skillfully use a book's potential.

To accentuate the polyphonic character of Copernicus as a site of memory, the authors initially attempted to analyze also German-language children's books published in the same period and to compare the meanings and descriptions associated with the astronomer in the context of identity-building. However, the library search did not bring satisfactory results. The authors were unable to find contemporary German children's books about Copernicus; therefore, a comparative analysis of Copernicus as a subject that crystallizes collective memory and national identity was abandoned. Further research

⁵⁵ I. Copik, *Pedagogika miejsca – kultura lokalna a kształtowanie się tożsamości współczesnego człowieka*, «Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie», vol. XXII, 2013, pp. 179-189, in partic. p. 184.

is therefore needed to validate the hypothesis concerning the polyphonic character of Copernicus as a site of memory.

The analysis of children's literature revealed that interactive books play a particularly important role as carriers of collective memory about Copernicus. Interactive books are more attractive for the reader; they contribute to interdisciplinary education (astronomy, geography, history, and social sciences) in areas associated with Copernicus, and increase the impact of literature on cultural memory.

