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The Stigma of Euro-Orphanhood in the Book *Fánek the Starsailor* by Jana Šrámková

Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyze the artistic representation of the phenomenon of social euro-orphanhood in contemporary Czech children's and youth literature. The starting point for these considerations is the work *Fánek the Starsailor* by Czech author Jana Šrámková. This literary piece serves as a foundation for an in-depth reflection on labor migration as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing social, economic, and psychological aspects. The analysis focuses on showcasing literature as a space that enables a better understanding of the complexity of this issue. In this way, the article seeks to enrich the interdisciplinary debate on the social impacts of labor migration, emphasizing the importance of literature as a crucial element in reflecting on this subject.

Keywords: Jana Šrámková, *Fánek the Starsailor*, Czech literature, euro-orphanhood, labor migration

INTRODUCTION

The topic of migration and integration in the Czech Republic has undergone continuous development since its inception, influenced by (among other factors) significant changes in the political environment between 1990 and 1992, during which both the country's immigration and emigration isolation were broken (Drbohlav, 2010; Dohnalová, 2012). In the Czech Republic labor migration became a common practice after 2004, when the country joined the European Union, enabling the free movement of workers. As a result, the Czech Republic became one of the countries whose citizens emigrated to other EU nations, particularly the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands, in search of better working and living conditions (Barša, Baršová, 2005). Although precise data on the number of children affected by euro-orphanhood in the Czech Republic is difficult to determine, it is estimated to impact at least a few percent of the country's children. This phenomenon has had a particularly strong impact on smaller Czech communities, where many individuals left to work abroad, leaving their children behind (Vavrečková, Musil, Baštyř, 2007). Labor migration is

a particularly challenging experience for families, as it involves a series of losses felt by all members (Furdal, Wysoczański, 2006). This situation has a notably negative effect on the mental health of young people, as illustrated in literature through complex stories of children from transnational families whose members were separated as a result of labor migration (Walczak, 2016: 25–37).

The aim of this article is to analyze how the experience of euro-orphanhood is depicted, interpreted, and reimagined in the book *Fánek the Starsailor* (2022) by Czech author Jana Šrámková. This work serves as a significant source of reflection on the complexity of the issue, which has gained increasing attention in literature for children and adolescents, particularly in the context of parental labor migration from Central and Eastern European countries.¹

The theme of orphanhood has been a long-standing presence in world literature, deeply rooted in the traditions of folklore and folk tales, and extensively explored in the classics of various national literatures, including English and American traditions. As Tetiana Kachak writes:

The tradition of depicting orphans goes back to folklore, including folk tales, and is traced in the classics of English, American (Avery 1994) and other national literatures for children (Kimball 1999), and also in contemporary works of art addressed to young readers. The child-orphan appears in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1873), Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913), Betsy Byars's *The Pinballs* (1976), Katherine Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1978), Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1982), J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), and others/ (Kachak, 2022: 17)

This recurring motif has transcended time, serving as a vehicle for exploring themes of resilience, identity, and social integration, and continues to resonate with readers across generations. Claudia Mills argues that “novels about

¹ Among contemporary literary texts that address the themes of orphanhood and labor migration, it is worth highlighting selected examples from Polish literature, which constitute a significant contribution to the reflection on these phenomena: *Czarny młyn* (2015) by Marcin Szczygielski, *Samotni.pl* (2021) by Barbara Kosmowska, *Ma być czysto* (2016) and *Rozpływaj się* (2021) by Anna Cieplak, and *16:10 do Bergamo* (2017) by Piotr Rowicki. In these literary works, the authors primarily emphasize the negative aspect of labor migration. The cited examples indicate that contemporary Polish prose aimed at children and adolescents serves as an effective tool for “shaping the axiological awareness” of young readers. According to Dorota Michułka's thesis, this literature “not only provokes reflection on human existence but also familiarizes readers with the complexity of ethical issues, particularly visible during the period of adolescence” (Michułka, 2018: 33). The challenging social and existential issues presented in these texts address the problems of adolescence, supporting young people on their journey to adulthood, and helping them better understand their identity, values, and moral dilemmas.

orphaned children reveal a deeper truth about how our society views children and how it views itself.” (Mills, 1987: 237).

In the realm of artistic literature (including children’s and young adult literature), we encounter themes that can be divided into two categories: universal themes (of general significance) and unique (specific) themes. Zuzana Kováčová Švecová characterizes them with the following words:

Universal themes are current global issues for everyone (e.g., love, war, peace, heroism, good, evil, the cycle of life, life and survival, suffering and pain, deception, truth, adulthood, childhood, condemnation, morality). To these universally relevant topics, we can add others that concern contemporary life of the individual and society: for example, the topic of communication, environmental issues related to global environmental concerns, social issues, migration, poverty, wealth, and the blurring of boundaries of time and space. Unique, specific themes in children’s and young adult literature arise from universal themes and mainly concern the individual and their immediate surroundings. These are significant, even pivotal themes of a given moment in life, important events, and concrete issues related to family, a particular place, and the environment in which we live. (Kováčová Švecová, Šimanová, 2021: 18)²

Migration, as one of the key phenomena of the contemporary world, remains a topic of significant social and literary importance.³ The experience of close bonds with loved ones forms the basis for learning to establish interpersonal relationships and develop social skills (Klimowicz, 1988: 72). The phenomenon of euro-orphanhood impacts children’s lives on several levels: emotional, social, and educational (Zawisza-Masłyk, 2008: 40). Childhood is a crucial period for personality development, during which the foundations of a child’s identity are formed. During this time, typically within the family, a child absorbs values and principles for navigating daily life. The term “euro-orphan” is perceived differently in society:

On the one hand, an orphan or half-orphan is a child whose one or both parents have either passed away or abandoned them. Such children are viewed

² All quotes in this article were translated by Dorota Żygadło-Czopnik.

³ Dominik Borowski points to the civilizational changes in which contemporary children’s and young adult literature is situated. He identifies key motifs such as: reconstructed family, blended family, dysfunctional family, euro-orphanhood, addiction, suicide, sexual abuse, rape, sex, violence and aggression, illness, death, religious sects, and others. Borowski emphasizes that this type of literature presents the problems of the contemporary, dysfunctional world, which, on the one hand, allow young readers to identify with the protagonists of their favorite books, thereby fulfilling one of the fundamental functions of this literature. On the other hand, it shows that the breakdown of traditional values and human relationships has become an inseparable element of modern social norms, which children’s and young adult literature seeks to confront, engaging young readers in reflection regarding the contemporary world and the challenges they face (Borowski, 2022).

with compassion and a certain kindness. On the other hand, the prefix euro-implies certain positive associations, reinforced over the years by the media and pro-European institutions, embedding in society's consciousness the notion of something good and valuable. (Stańczyk, 2015: 32)

For many families, migration is a necessity – a survival strategy to support loved ones, invest in children's education, and generally cope with socio-economic challenges on local and national labor markets (Jaźwińska, Okólski, 2001).

Milena Šubrtová emphasizes that contemporary literature for children and young adults addresses all possible topics that children encounter in their daily lives (e.g., the role and place of humans in the world, the value of money and human beings, social and existential issues, migration, war, discrimination, racism, and xenophobia). It seems that introducing new topics to children and young people, thereby providing new stimuli for the development of thinking about sensitive and often controversial issues, is very beneficial. It has been noted that in older school age, a child can already share and assess difficult or borderline life situations (Šubrtová, 2004: 16).

In children's literature, representations of migrant children are appearing more and more, serving as symbolic figures reflecting broader social issues such as economic inequality, limited access to education, and the disintegration of traditional family structures. In these narratives, children are often portrayed as migrating alone or staying behind in their home country after their parents' departure, highlighting their experiences of separation and loneliness. Literature also offers depictions of children in various, often difficult life situations, such as living in refugee camps, being raised in foster families, or growing up under the care of grandparents, thus enriching the discourse on migration with the perspective of the youngest participants in these processes (Kachak, 2022).

This phenomenon, with its multifaceted impact on social, political, and cultural structures, has found reflection in the works of many authors, including Czech ones. Although it may seem surprising, Czech writers have demonstrated considerable productivity in addressing the topic of migration, thereby contributing to the expansion of the literary discourse on issues related to identity, integration, and survival in the context of a changing migratory reality (Zbudilová, 2022). Writers address this topic in various ways, depending on the target age group and type of publication.

In contemporary Czech literature, the topic of migrant children also appears as an important theme, reflecting global issues related to migration and its social consequences. In this literature, images of children in migratory situations are increasingly visible, becoming carriers of complex social issues such as migration-related trauma, identity problems, and the breakdown of traditional family structures. Several books addressing this topic have been published on the Czech market, including *Maja a Kim* (2017) by Iva Mrkvičková,

Smutno se musí vyšetpat (2021) by Lenka Rožnovská, *Hvězdy nad Ukrajinou* (2023) by Radka Zadinová, and *Klára a bubáci* (2014) by the Slovak author Petra Nagyová-Džerengová. The issue of social orphanhood in contemporary Czech literature is a topic of particular significance, as literary works addressing this issue reflect not only important contemporary social phenomena, but also the complex challenges and dilemmas associated with them. These works serve as carriers of moral, ethical, and ideological values, providing young Czech readers with guidance on social attitudes and behaviors, while also serving as a crucial tool for shaping their understanding of issues related to identity, social integration, and family. Highlighting the problematic aspects of social orphanhood allows these literary texts to engage young readers in reflection on the condition of contemporary families and society, while simultaneously outlining possible solutions to the challenges faced by individuals struggling with marginalization and loneliness.

In books for younger children, the phenomenon of euro-orphanhood is often presented through simple stories about longing and relationships with caregivers who step into parental roles. For older children and teenagers, this topic is usually portrayed in a more complex manner, addressing emotional challenges such as isolation, difficulties in building a sense of security and stability, and conflicts arising from feelings of misunderstanding (Zajac, 2023). In such literature, authors attempt to portray the situation of labor migration from the perspective of children affected by separation from their parents, as well as from the perspective of caregivers who take on parental roles, such as grandparents or other family members.

Fánek the Starsailor by Šrámková stands out as a remarkable work within the realm of children's literature addressing these themes, owing to its emotional and philosophical depth as well as its subtle use of fantastical elements. This work can be seen as an example of literature that transcends traditional genre boundaries, engaging young readers on multiple levels – not only through an intriguing plot but also by offering valuable reflections on growing up, friendship, identity formation, and the search for meaning in life.

AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

The writer, screenwriter and theologian Jana Šrámková explores the issue of euro-orphanhood and the impact of parental separation on children in her book *Fánek the Starsailor*. The book features poetic language and dreamy illustrations, making it a unique read for children aged six and up. For this work, she was awarded the prestigious Magnesia Litera literary prize in 2023 in the category of Children's and Young Adult Literature.⁴ Jitka Nešporová, in her re-

⁴ Magnesia Litera is a prestigious Czech literary award, presented annually since 2002. It is considered one of the most important literary distinctions in the Czech Republic.

view of Šrámková's book published on the iLiteratura.cz portal, highlights the multilayered nature of the text, describing it as sad, beautiful, and above all, immensely necessary. She also emphasizes that this work, although imbued with melancholy, represents an important voice in the literary dialogue, bringing to light universal values and issues that resonate with the reader in a deeply reflective way (Nešporová). The jury of the Magnesia Litera award, in its justification published on the official website of the award, highlights the precise structure of the text, where no part is superfluous or lacking. They emphasize Jana Šrámková's craftsmanship, evident in her meticulous choice of every word, which enables her to deliver a narrative of novelistic character in the form of captivating poetic prose (*Vítěz "Litera za knihu pro děti a mládež" v roce 2023*). Šrámková creates works for both children and adult readers. She debuted in 2008 with the «Icelandic novella» *Peardóttir*, intended for mature audiences, which earned her the Jiří Orten Award a year later.⁵ She also writes comic and film scripts, song lyrics, teaches creative writing, edits books, publishes reviews in magazines such as *Respekt* and *A2*, and her columns appear in publications like *Brána* and *Život víry*. In collaboration with other creators, Šrámková has contributed to numerous children's books, blending her literary skills with the talents of illustrators and co-authors such as Alžběta Skálová, Filip Pošivač, Andrea Tachezy, Tereza Šedivá, and Markéta Prachatická. For *Fánek the Starsailor*, she worked with Belarusian illustrator and graphic designer Margarita Khavanski, who currently resides in Prague. Khavanski is renowned for her illustrations with a distinctive, almost dreamlike style that perfectly captures the emotional depth of children's stories.

FAMILY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Contemporary Czech literature for children and young adults often explores social issues, serving as a literary reflection of the dynamically changing realities of family life. One of the key motifs present in this type of literature is the theme of incomplete or dysfunctional families, which significantly shapes the

The award was established by the Barrister & Principal publishing house and the *Litera* magazine, and is awarded in several categories. The aim of the award is to promote Czech literature and its creators, as well as to recognize the best books published in a given year. The winners gain the opportunity to achieve greater popularity both domestically and internationally (<https://www.magnesia-litera.cz/>).

⁵ Jiří Orten Award is a prestigious Czech literary distinction, awarded since 1987, aimed at honoring exceptional literary debuts by young authors. The award is named after Jiří Orten, a Czech poet who tragically died at a young age in 1941, and whose work remains a symbol of literary talent and boundless creative potential. Orten was one of the most outstanding Czech poets of his generation. The award is presented to authors who have not yet reached the age of 30, and whose debut book stands out for its originality and literary depth. The goal of the award is to support young creators and draw attention to their contribution to Czech literature (<https://www.cenajirihoortena.cz/>).

narrative and axiological structure of many works (Sladová, Lišovská, Hnidáková, 2014: 9). Zofia Kawczyńska-Butrym observes that when considering the conditions and consequences of migration, it is necessary to approach it from two perspectives: the macro-social perspective – encompassing the host country and the country permitting migration, and the micro-social perspective – focusing on individuals, families, and migrating groups (Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2008: 56). From the very first pages of Šrámková's text, we can observe the significant power and symbolism in the story about the effects of labor migration on a micro scale, as the author focuses her attention on children who remain in the country and passively participate in this process. The writer presents to the readers, in the form of poetic prose, the story of a family separated due to labor migration. Due to the father's departure, the family members must adapt to the newly created situation and function as an incomplete family. In the book, events are presented from a child's perspective, which gives them simplicity, innocence, and special sensitivity characteristic of a child's narrative. The child's point of view allows for presenting the world with authentic, unrefined honesty, as well as emphasizing the emotional depth of experiences.⁶

POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT: SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

The young boy, Fánek, comes from a family living on the brink of poverty, forced to face existential difficulties in a poor, grey reality. The narrative focuses on their struggle, where time passes without clear boundaries or defined rhythm, and space appears as an undefined and unknown place. The protagonist's hometown remains anonymous, depicted as abandoned and partially forgotten, which creates an atmosphere of isolation and alienation:

Many houses were abandoned, and I wasn't allowed into them either. That's why I preferred climbing trees along the old factory. No one had worked there for a long time, the windows were broken, and the plaster was peeling. (Šrámková, 2022: 12–13)

The author deliberately introduced the anonymity of the setting to universalize the action and give it a symbolic dimension. The technique of destabilizing time and space immerses the reader in a state of uncertainty, which reflects the internal chaos and frustration of the protagonist. In the literary depiction of the presented world, the grey everyday life and the lack of a clear perspective on the future become key elements shaping its structure, which, according to Zygmunt Bauman, reinforce the themes of poverty and social exclusion (Bauman, 2006).

⁶ Stanisław Kozak lists the typical psychological effects of being a euro-orphan as: disrupted mental health, aggression, low self-esteem, difficulties in establishing relationships with peers, and distrust (Kozak, 2010: 119).

THE DYNAMICS OF BONDS AND EMOTIONS

Parenting and communication with one's own child have always been a significant source of inspiration and have often been reflected in the ideological and thematic components of literary works (Šubrtová, 2009: 69). The text begins with a joyful memory of moments spent with the father, which forms the emotional foundation of the entire story. The narrator recalls:

When I was a little boy, my dad and I often looked at the same book. [...] It was large and in the pictures across the entire page, it had a golden color. We could never really read it because it was written in a foreign language, even in a strange, unknown alphabet. [...] We had plenty of time for it because Dad didn't have a job and used to stay home with me all day. (Šrámková, 2022: 4–5)

The boy's story about his beloved golden book with illustrations, which is part of an undeveloped prologue, marks the beginning of a narrative in which the protagonist's imagination plays a key role. Fantasy becomes a universal experience for him. The content of the reading is not specifically defined. The reader can only assume that it is the *Bible* or a text referring to the story of Noah's Ark. Fáneek and his father "read" the book primarily through the pictures and their own imagination, as it is written in a foreign language with an unfamiliar alphabet. Together, they name the animals entering the ark, discover mysterious colors, and invent an alternative ending to the story of a journey beyond the horizon, from which ships sail into the stars. The boy imagines what his journey on the ship would be like to the place where the horizon breaks, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the limits of imagination and the discovery of new worlds.

The book written in an unknown language becomes a symbol of the child's potential to create their own meanings, and the shared "reading" between father and son encourages the creation of new stories and the search for meaning. Therefore, the golden book functions as a symbol – it is both a precious, unique object and a place where magic and dreams are born. In the context of the protagonist's life, the book may also symbolize the spiritual wealth that he must find and understand. The time spent together and the mysterious story create a strong bond between father and son. This is where closeness and love are born, which in the years to come will be put to a hard test when the father leaves for a foreign country to seek work in the "land of happiness."

REVISION OF TRADITIONAL ROLES

The absence of a parent affects the fulfillment of their previous roles in the family, including controlling, emotional, and caregiving-educational functions (Mitula, 2009: 172–173). In the analyzed text, the protagonist's father, due to the necessity

of ensuring material livelihood (economic function), abandons these roles because the need for survival becomes dominant, causing the aforementioned functions to lose their significance. This narrative technique allows the author to highlight the dysfunctionality of families separated due to labor migration.

THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION AND REINTEGRATION:
THE MOMENT OF SEPARATION
AND RETURN OF A PARENT FROM EMIGRATION

According to Agata Jacewicz, a family separated due to labor migration experiences two key periods of intense stress. The first is the time of separation, which involves the necessity of adapting to a new situation, the absence of a close family member, and changes in existing family relationships. The second is the time of reunion, which, despite the joy it brings, may generate tensions related to readjusting to living together and rebuilding roles and family bonds. Jacewicz emphasizes that these critical moments can have a long-lasting impact on the functioning of the family, including its structure, emotionality, and ability to cope with challenges (Jacewicz, 2010: 202). Fánka's family, separated due to labor migration, goes through two periods of intense stress: the time of separation and the time of reunion. The protagonist remains uncertain about the moment and possibility of his father's return:

When my dad told me he had to leave, I couldn't imagine what he meant. He was always with me. [...] Dad tried to explain that he would be gone for a long time. But I didn't know what long meant, where it started or where it ended. The most important thing was that today Dad was still here, and I lacked nothing. It was mom who cried. That made me sad. (Šrámková, 2022: 8)

The simple yet emotionally charged narrative becomes a space where the child not only experiences personal loss but also begins to understand the complexity of human relationships and the dynamics of family bonds. During the farewell, the parent reminds the boy of what he had taught him during their shared moments with the golden book. He asks him not to forget the lessons he received at that time. The father emphasizes the importance of passing on knowledge and values through shared experience, which becomes not only a source of support but also a way to maintain emotional closeness despite physical separation. Therefore, the act of reminding him of these conversations is aimed at reinforcing in the boy the beliefs and attitudes that may help him in the future, particularly in the context of future challenges related to migration and family separation.

In this way, the father not only strengthens the emotional bond but also initiates a process of independent thinking that will accompany the child during difficult moments. The text reads:

From now on, you're the captain, Fánek. You must be patient, believe, look out, and never lose hope. You must always aim for the horizon. The horizon is the moment I return. We don't know exactly when we'll reach it, but we both know for sure that it's out there somewhere. And one day, you will sail to it. (Šrámková, 2022: 10)

Fánek builds a mental barrier separating him from reality, using the power of fantasy and dreams. His imagination, symbolized by the dream of the coastal water surface, becomes a space where he can briefly escape from loneliness and the hardships of daily life. In his dreams, he breaks the boundaries symbolized by the horizon, which separates the earthly world from the sky, embarking on a metaphorical journey among the stars, like the captain of a ship. According to Dorota Kubicka, such an imagined escapade not only emphasizes the child's ability to sublimate emotions and create an alternative reality, but also points to the role of imagination as a defense mechanism against the everyday experiences of separation and loneliness (Kubicka, 2003: 48). These kinds of defense mechanisms become particularly important in the context of the experiences of children separated due to labor migration, where longing for a parent can lead to a deep sense of isolation.

Therefore, crossing the horizon becomes not only a symbol of dreams of freedom but also a metaphor for overcoming the limitations of one's own psyche and opening up to new, unknown experiences. As Grzegorz Leszczyński notes, dreamlike visions in literature can serve a therapeutic function, acting as a tool that enables the protagonist to process difficult experiences (Leszczyński, 1990: 44). In the discussed novel, the Czech author employs this technique to help the longing boy gradually come to terms with the reality of life without his father, allowing him to emotionally adapt to the new situation. Additionally, they serve as a means of maintaining the bond and love for the father, who is abroad, enabling the protagonist to preserve this relationship despite the physical separation. The boy never stops believing that his father will someday return home.

THE FUNCTION OF MEMORY

Memory plays a crucial role in the process of building the protagonist's identity, especially in the context of lost contact with an important family member. Andrzej Szpociński emphasizes that memory is not only a record of the past but also a lasting emotional element that fills the void left by what has been lost (Szpociński, 2014: 21). In the context of the discussed text, a strong bond between father and son is evident, even though the father has been living abroad for years. His presence remains vivid in the boy's memory, who still feels an emotional connection to his parent despite the physical absence. The memory of the father becomes not only a reflection of past moments but also

an important element in the boy's identity formation. The image of the father, preserved in memory, serves as a symbol – representing not only recollections but also a longing for family stability and the parent's presence, making it a key element in the protagonist's emotional life. The motif of memory in this story shows how important it is as a mechanism that fills the void left by lost contact and serves as the foundation for the protagonist's emotional struggles.

PASSION AS SUPPORT IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST LONELINESS

The passion to which the protagonist devotes himself, in addition to creating an inner world, also becomes a form of escape from loneliness. Fáneš discovers books written in foreign languages in the school library, which becomes an impulse for him to learn foreign languages so he can understand them and absorb their content:

At school, they opened the library for us. [...] The only problem is that they are all in a foreign alphabet, just like my golden book. [...] I had to learn the whole strange language. Such learning is slow, but that doesn't matter when there's nothing else to do. The more words I know, the more interesting books I can read in the library. (Šrámková, 2022: 47)

The passion serves a compensatory function – it allows the protagonist to escape into new, unknown spaces that fill the emptiness he feels after his father's departure. It can be seen as a defense strategy against emotional isolation.⁷

THE DIFFICULT TIME OF GROWING UP

The story of the boy is a study of the difficulties associated with the process of growing up. The protagonist, despite his dreams of liberating journeys, confronts the painful experiences of numerous disappointments and losses. The everyday life of the lonely boy, without siblings and deeper friendships, consists of the necessity to fulfill many household duties, which further highlights his existential isolation. In the family home, there remains a sick, aging grandmother, a dying grandfather, and a constantly worried mother. In the life of the main character, an unexpected shift in social roles occurs. Fáneš becomes the caretaker of his loved ones, which mentally burdens him but ultimately leads to greater independence and contributes to building his sense of responsibility. In

⁷ Marzena Bukowska points to the existence of various strategies for defending against loneliness, among which she mentions forming interpersonal relationships, developing passions, enriching the inner world, and engaging in creative work, both professional and amateur. These strategies serve as adaptive mechanisms that help individuals cope with isolation, offering different forms of emotional and social compensation (Bukowska, 2007: 61–70).

the text, the author presents the psychological and emotional consequences of being a child left behind due to labor migration. The death of his grandfather was a blow that fate dealt him in a short time, plunging him into a state of deep sorrow and helplessness:

A long time ago, the ice melted, the snow melted, the vegetables started to sprout, and Grandpa was still here. He was here in the summer and the fall, and he died only the next winter. Mom cried a lot, and I cried even more. Grandma didn't cry, she just took out her teeth. She never wore them again. (Šrámková, 2022: 32)

In the context of changing roles within the family, a key element is the moment when children begin to play the role of support for adults. As Barbara Małecka points out, this shift represents a particular emotional and existential challenge, as children become caregivers for their loved ones who previously held this role (Małecka, 1997). In the case of Fánek, a protagonist struggling with adolescence, this transition not only changes the family dynamics but also impacts his perception of himself. As Fánek begins to take on the role of caregiver for his grandparents, his responsibilities shift, and so does the way he perceives his place within the family. This becomes even more pronounced in the context of his relationship with his grandmother, whose unexpected loss of a loved one becomes a traumatic experience. As a result of this event, the grandmother, engulfed in grief, unexpectedly seems to age, and her previous independence gives way to the need for support from her grandson. The narrator, witnessing this change, recognizes the importance of memory and caregiving in building family bonds in the face of emotional crises. This transformation is crucial for Fánek's emotional and existential development, as he, like other children facing the aging of their loved ones, must confront new and difficult challenges.

Fánek's close friendship with his schoolmates Marylka and her sister Duša, who experience labor migration, turns out to be a brief episode while waiting for his father's return, which also does not provide the expected support. Additionally, the boy loses hope of getting glasses for his friend, who struggles with vision problems, and her unexpected departure becomes a climactic moment, deepening his sense of helplessness and anger.

Faced with numerous adversities, the protagonist seeks solace in the plane tree's crown, a symbol of escape from reality, but his hopes are brutally shattered when the tree is cut down. To help his family, he tends a garden, hoping for crops that will provide them with food. Unfortunately, the boy's efforts are thwarted when an unknown person steals the fruits of his labor. Fánek encounters numerous difficulties and failures, which are an inseparable part of the process of socialization and the development of adaptive abilities in the face of life's challenges.

The separation caused by labor migration weakens family bonds. The boy feels that his father does not understand the difficulties the family left behind in the home country is facing, which deepens the gap between them, not only in spatial terms but also emotionally:

After a long time, I was once again looking forward to Dad calling. Most of the time, I didn't know what to say to him. There was so much he didn't know, didn't see, didn't experience with us, that I couldn't tell him anything without a long explanation. And there's no time for that on the phone. Only simple and important things can be said, and there aren't many of them. (Šrámková, 2022: 37)

The protagonist is left with only an illusion of closeness. Despite the support from his mother, the boy struggles with the feeling of "abandonment," which negatively affects his sense of security and self-worth. At first, Fánek cannot understand the reasons for his father's departure, interpreting the separation as an act directed against him. The stress and anxiety related to his father's absence during important family moments (birthdays, funerals) lead to somatic and behavioral reactions, such as hysterical crying and a high fever that forces him to stay in bed for several days. Fánek, experiencing longing for his beloved father, struggles with feelings of loneliness, rejection, difficulties in adaptation, and fear of losing contact.

THE IMPACT OF EURO-ORPHANHOOD ON SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL LIFE

The experience of child abandonment due to labor migration has a significant impact on the social and educational functioning of the young protagonists: Fánek, Marylka, and Duša. The stigma a term referring to children left behind due to economic migration affects not only the main character but also other peers at school, highlighting the widespread social issue that results from labor migration. In the school the narrator attends, euro-orphanhood becomes almost a universal experience, creating a specific community of shared fates, and the absence of parents takes on the character of a social norm: "That many children in the class have their dad or mom somewhere away. That someone stayed at home only with their grandmother" (Šrámková, 2022: 12). This situation deepens feelings of alienation, while at the same time becoming the foundation for a shared emotional language, allowing the children to form relationships based on similar experiences. At the same time, the portrayal of the school environment, where most of the students struggle with similar family instability, reflects broader social processes such as the disintegration of traditional family bonds and their impact on shaping the identity of the younger generation (Trusz, Kwiecińska, 2012). In Šrámková's text, this theme emphasizes both the individual and collective consequences of this phenomenon.

The emotional problems of Marylka and Duša manifest themselves in a lack of motivation to learn, reflecting their difficulties in adapting to the school reality. The situation is further complicated by the lack of a stable family environment: the girls' father has died, and their mother has gone abroad to seek work, leaving them under the care of their grandmother, who struggles with alcohol issues: "In the evening, she locks herself in the room, drinks, and screams, and then starts singing. Sings curses into the night, and people shout for her to close the window, and Marylka is unhappy about it" (Šrámková, 2022: 33). The absence of the mother contrasts with the motif of motherhood, which is often portrayed as a source of strength and protection. Grażyna Klimowicz notes that the presence of the mother determines the wellbeing of the children and influences their relationships with others (Klimowicz, 1988). The mother's absence, visiting the family only twice a year, becomes the cause of an internal crisis and a lack of security in the heroines. The children, deprived of this essential figure of care, are forced to cope with the lack of stability and love, which can lead to long-term emotional difficulties. The grandmother, instead of taking on the role of caregiver, is a burden to the girls, and her alcoholism reflects deeper family crises such as the disintegration of family structure, loss of intergenerational stability, and entanglement in a spiral of poverty, depression, and helplessness in changing one's fate. The elderly woman adopts a passive attitude toward her granddaughters, not reacting to their problems or offering them help. As Jadwiga Izdebska writes, the ongoing disintegration of the family environment is a significant element that highlights the dramatic impact of social changes on the individual (Izdebska, 2000). In this context, the disintegration of the family environment becomes not only an emotional challenge for children but also a key factor influencing their further development and adaptation in society.

According to Wioletta Danilewicz, in the absence of mothers, children more often experience a sense of missing a close person, longing, and loneliness (Danilewicz, 2006: 182). Duša expresses her frustration and stress through rebellion and aggression directed both at her peers and her older caregiver. The girl's longing for her mother to one day take her with her represents a child's yearning for closeness and family unity. This dream functions as a symbol of hope and emotional compensation in the face of loneliness and lack of maternal care. At the same time, it expresses the child's belief in the possibility of reversing her fate, which contrasts with the harsh reality of euro-orphanhood.

Marylka, on the other hand, reacts by withdrawing – she remains silent, has difficulty learning to read, and struggles with low self-esteem:

At school, she sits in the back row and says nothing. Neither to the children nor to the teacher. When someone talks to her, she lowers her eyes, and when she has to read something, she starts crying. Most of the children think she is completely dumb. Even Marylka thinks so. (Šrámková, 2022: 26–27)

The girl loses faith in herself. When Duša leaves, the younger sister suffers from insomnia, which manifests as a physical expression of her inner anxiety and loneliness. The protagonist's suffering is the result of an emotional void caused by the separation. In this difficult moment, Fáneek, offering her his golden book, not only gives her an object but also an expression of care and an attempt to comfort her. The boy, giving away something precious to him, expresses his willingness to sacrifice himself for another person, which can be a symbol of the development of empathy, altruism, and emotional maturity. The book, full of symbolic meanings, becomes a medium meant to alleviate the pain and help the girl find a sense of security during the separation.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH DISTANCE

Modern mass media play a key role in maintaining family bonds even under conditions of geographical separation (Szlendak, 2011). Their widespread availability and ease of use enable regular contact between members of the Fánka family. During phone conversations, the father shares stories about the prospects of a better life, which evoke both hope and ambivalent feelings in the boy, tied to dreams of a reunion. The son's imagined vision of his father's idealized life abroad serves an important narrative function, reflecting a child's attempt to understand and cope with the reality of separation. In Fáneek's visions, the father, existing in a distant, almost mythical space, leads a life of abundance and harmony, contrasting with the emotional void the child experiences in daily life:

I often imagined him walking among flowers or speeding in a car along a smooth road, crossing a river on a thin glowing bridge. I saw him as if I were floating above him in my ship, watching him smile and seeing the wind mess up his hair through the open window. (Šrámková, 2022: 15)

The idealization of the father's life abroad stems from feelings of longing and acts as a psychological mechanism to cope with the painful experience of being left behind. In this way, the narrative highlights not only the child's drama but also the social dimension of migration, which extends to family relationships and shapes perceptions of a "better life." The description of the boy's everyday struggles, such as carrying his father's old bag instead of a school backpack or wearing a repaired coat passed down from his grandfather, contrasts with the image of a better world portrayed by his father. The father's message about the "promised land," where job opportunities and prosperity seem attainable, creates tension between the idealization of migration and the harsh reality of the family's life back home. The father also points out that the "promised land," while full of hope, does not become a space of fulfillment for everyone, highlighting the complexity of the dream for a better future. It creates a contrast that emphasizes the pessimism and realism of everyday life.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE FAMILY

One of the positive aspects of the father's migration is the improvement in the material conditions of the family back home. Financial stability resulting from higher earnings allows the family to meet basic needs and elevate their standard of living: "For my birthday, Mom didn't just bake a thin cake, but an actual birthday cake. A real cake with icing! I couldn't believe it. That had never happened before" (Šrámková, 2022: 23). This simple yet emotional experience becomes a symbol of innocence and the first, pure pleasures, which for the child hold a value incomparable to anything else. In literature on labor migration, it is often emphasized that while separation brings emotional and social challenges, it simultaneously serves as a source of potential economic benefits. These benefits can translate into better opportunities for children and a greater sense of financial security for the entire family (Danielewicz, 2007: 162). This duality of migration's effects illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon and its multifaceted impact on the functioning of families in a socio-economic context.

THE FATHER'S RETURN: A NEW BEGINNING OR CONTINUATION?

Ewa Zawisza-Masłyk emphasizes that the father's absence from home, particularly in the context of the mother's professional activity, leads to weakened family bonds and can result in feelings of rejection in children. The researcher also notes that the father's return after a long absence may evoke disappointment when reality fails to meet the idealized vision of the "perfect homecoming." The clash with this reality leads to states such as anhedonia, apathy, and emotional emptiness in children (Zawisza-Masłyk, 2008). The father's return home becomes a crucial moment in which Fáneek, who has long been living in anticipation, experiences intense emotions – hope and uncertainty. Prolonged emotional tension depletes his psychological resources, and the sudden arrival of the father initially triggers feelings of rejection:

He returned, but I didn't recognize anything about him. [...] And then he said, 'Come, captain.' I didn't want to. I don't know where it came from, but suddenly I didn't want to go anywhere. I didn't have the strength. It was as if I had been holding on by a thread until now, and suddenly it snapped. I couldn't say anything, I couldn't cheer, nor could I make any expression. (Šrámková, 2022: 48–49)

In migration psychology, such an emotional state is often described as a post-migration adaptation crisis (Andrejuk, Winiarska, 2020). At the end of the book, the father takes the son on a shared journey by boat to the horizon, a moment that becomes symbolic of mutual forgiveness and understanding. The lake, as an element of the scenery, serves as a symbol of purification, while

the boat journey suggests a process of transformation. The boat, as a means of transport, symbolizes the transition between two worlds: the past and the future, childhood and growing up. This journey represents the process of rebuilding familial bonds, providing both father and son with the space to express their emotions, ultimately easing past tensions. The act of forgiveness allows them to reconnect, laying the groundwork for restoring their relationship after a prolonged separation.

A HARMONIOUS INTEGRATION OF TEXT AND IMAGE

The poetic nature of the narrative is enhanced by large-scale illustrations by Margarita Khavanski, which form an integral part of the story. The artist primarily employs a subtle color palette, seemingly inspired by the mysterious hues described in the golden book, further emphasizing the symbolism and metaphorical depth of the story. A striking contrast is created by the nocturnal scenes depicting the narrator's journeys among the stars, where the color scheme shifts to darker tones, and the text is printed in white, visually reflecting themes of transcendence and dreams. The visual tension is heightened by the juxtaposition of delicate, minimalist figurative illustrations with full-page compositions that dominate the pages, building an atmosphere of mystery and otherworldliness. Golden details, subtly illuminating each illustration, add an additional layer of symbolism, evoking dreams and the spiritual richness of the young protagonist. The illustrations, slightly melancholic yet imbued with mystery, create a space for the reader to immerse themselves in the narrative, sharing in Fáneš's dreams of stars and ships. As such, the illustrations become not merely decorative but also a tool for constructing a multi-layered artistic message.

CONCLUSION

The motif of euro-orphanhood in children's and young adult literature is an important research topic that allows for the understanding of the complex aspects of labor migration and its impact on the structure of the contemporary family (Mills, 1987; Mattson, 1997; Kimball, 1999; Sanders, 2008). The mentioned literary examples, including the works of Šrámková, indicate that contemporary prose for young readers is an effective tool for shaping their axiological awareness and supporting them in coping with emotional difficulties.

The Czech writer's work stands out with its multi-dimensional and empathetic approach to the theme of euro-orphanhood. The author presents migration as an ambivalent phenomenon – offering both the chance for a better life and significant emotional costs. Depicting deep family bonds that can endure despite physical separation allows Šrámková to emphasize the therapeutic function of literature, helping young readers better understand their

emotions and challenging life situations. At the same time, her work portrays euro-orphanhood as a social issue, requiring a broader perspective both from the individual and community, which distinguishes it from other literary texts. The use of the fantasy layer in Šrámková's *Fánek the Starsailor* aims to create a space where children affected by euro-orphanhood can safely process their emotions while seeking answers to questions about identity, family bonds, and the meaning of life. The fantastical elements not only help address the challenges of presenting difficult topics in a way that is accessible to young readers but also introduce a universal dimension that allows for a broader understanding of the issues of separation and longing present in the lives of migrant children.

Children's and young adult literature addressing euro-orphanhood not only teaches empathy and sensitivity to difficult experiences but also serves as a medium for reflection on the condition of contemporary families and the challenges associated with global migration processes. Texts such as Šrámková's, which combine emotional depth with social reflection, play a crucial role in shaping young readers' sensitivity, supporting their moral, emotional, and social development.

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