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Sybir-Poland. The image of woman-mother in memories and relations of Sybiraks

Abstract

Mothers take a special place in the memory of Sybiraks. Taken from their family home and deported to Sybir, they fought for the survival of their loved ones, often at the expense of their own health and even their lives. The identity of the Sybiraks' community, referring to their common heritage, builds its own, coherent image of the past, including the image of Sybirak mothers. This image, present in the memories and relations of their descendants, based on collective memory, takes on the characteristics of myth and glorification. The Sybirak mother becomes a heroic mother.

Keywords: mother, remembrance, identity, heritage, myth, memories, heroism, war, deportations, individualism, community

SYBIR-POLSKA. OBRAZ KOBIETY-MATKI WE WSPOMNIENIACH I RELACJACH SYBIRAKÓW

Streszczenie

Obraz matki zajmuje szczególne miejsce w pamięci Sybiraków. Wyrwane z domu rodzinnego i deportowane na Syberię lub do Kazachstanu, walczyły o przetrwanie swoich bliskich, często kosztem własnego zdrowia, a nawet życia. Tożsamość wspólnoty Sybiraków, odwołująca się do wspólnego dziedzictwa, buduje własny, spójny obraz przeszłości, w tym obraz matek Sybiraczek. Ten obraz, obecny w pamięci i relacjach potomków, oparty na pamięci zbiorowej, nabiera cech mitu i floryfikacji. Matka Sybiraczka staje się matką bohaterką.

Słowa kluczowe: matka, pamięć, tożsamość, dziedzictwo, mit, wspomnienia, bohaterstwo, wojna, deportacje, indywidualizm, wspólnota

Introduction

After the occupation of the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic by the Red Army in 1939, Stalin immediately began to implement plans to Sovietize the economy and society and removal of opponents of the new communist government. The basic method of the occupation policy of the Soviet authorities became arrests and mass deportations of Poles to Sybir. There was a principle of collective responsibility applied to the families of people considered hostile to the system. Entire families were deported regardless of gender, age or health condition. The carriages going to the East included mothers with small children, elderly people, and pregnant women. Among four mass deportations of 1940–1941, these groups constituted the largest percentage in the deportation of April 1940, approximately 65–70% of the transports.¹ At the same time, their husbands were murdered in Katyn, Kharkov and Kalinin. Although other mass deportations usually included entire families, the situation of mothers who were in the Soviet Union was slightly better only at the beginning. Working in places hundreds of kilometers away, arrests, the husband's death or joining the ranks of Anders' and Berling's armies forming in the USSR after 1941 meant that

¹ See more: Albin Głowacki, *W tajdze i w stepie. O deportacji obywateli polskich w głąb Związku Sowieckiego w latach 1940–1941*, (Białystok: Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy, 2022).

women became the only providers for their families. They were responsible for their loved ones, they had to be a rock and support for them.

The main aim of this article is to study the process of shaping the mythologized image of the mother-heroine in the collective memory of the descendants of deportees to the USSR in 1940–1941, based on materials collected in the resources of the Sybir Memorial Museum.² The authors wanted to reconstruct the image of the woman-mother by analyzing the mechanisms of transformation of individual memories into a coherent collective narrative, identifying elements of heroization in the descriptions of mothers, and determining the relationship between collective memory and the group identity of the Sybiraks community.

The specific objectives of the work include examining the process of mythologizing the mother figure in the memory of the deportees' descendants, analyzing the functioning of this image as a place of memory in the understanding of Pierre Nora, and determining the role of collective memory in building the group identity of the Sybirak women. The authors also focus on identifying the mechanisms of selection and glorification of specific elements of the past that contribute to the consolidation of the heroic image of the mother-Sybirak. An important aspect of the research is also the analysis of the ways in which individual traumatic experiences are transformed into elements building a positive group identity.

It is no wonder that in the memory of Sybiraks mothers are heroines and women ready to make the highest sacrifices. Being on their own in a foreign world, they gave children love and protection, a feeling of being safe and hope of returning to their homeland, often at the expense of their own health and even life.³ The person of the Sybirak mother becomes of a monumental importance and the attention about the memory of them is particularly paid in the Sybiraks' environment. Gratitude, the need of the heart and a sense of duty mean that monuments are built in cities in

² A significant part of the relations has already been digitalized and can be found on the website www.relacjezybiru.pl. There are also links to other websites containing similar relations, describing deportations and stays in Sybir or Kazakhstan from the perspective of women's fates. The authors have intentionally selected typical relations that enable understanding the mechanism of transformation of individual memory into collective memory.

³ Dorota Bazuń, Izabela Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, Magdalena Pokrzyńska, *Matki Sybiraczki – losy i pamięć. Polskie kobiety zesłane w głąb ZSRR*, (Zielona Góra: Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, 2012), 9–11.

their honor and they are commemorated in songs, poems, memories and notations. The image of the Sybirak mother shaped by collective memory also becomes the image of the mother functioning in the individual memories of Sybiraks.⁴ The mother becomes heroic, and motherhood enters the sphere of the sacred.

The source base of the article consists mainly of the memories of women exiled to Sybir and kept in the Sybir Memorial Museum. The authors also used written sources in the form of memoirs, including *Lost childhood. Memories from Kazakhstan (Zagubione dzieciństwo. Wspomnienia z Kazachstanu)* by Janina Kwiatkowska from 2019 or *Memories from 1939–1946 (Wspomnienia z lat 1939–1946)* by Zofia Wierzchowska from 1947. The relations and written memories are complemented by oral sources in the form of interviews conducted with Longin Glijer and Jadwiga Suchowierska in 2013 and with Leokadia Kacprzak-Nizioł in 2023. The used source base is characterized by significant temporal diversity, including accounts created immediately after the war and contemporary memories. The authenticity of this type of source has its characteristic limitations. The subjectivity of memories, which is natural for this type of material, may affect the objectivity of the analysis, as may the effect of the passage of time on memory, which may lead to reinterpretation of events.

The literature used in the article represents an interdisciplinary approach, combining the most important trends in contemporary research on collective memory. The theoretical basis is consisted of fundamental articles in the field of collective memory theory, including *How Societies Remember* by Paul Connerton, the concept of sites of memory by Pierre Nora and *Social Memory* by James Fentress and Chris Wickham, which provide tools for analyzing the relations between individual and collective memory. In terms of the theory of collective identity, the authors refer to the publications of Allan Megill on the relations between history, memory and identity, and *History – a Space of Dialogue (Historia – przestrzeń dialogu)* by Robert Traba, which is an important point of reference for Polish research on memory. Specialist research on the subject of Sybir is represented by the works of Albin Głowacki *In the Taiga and the Steppe (W tajdze i w stepie)*, which is an analysis of the deportations from 1940–1941, and *Sybiraks' Mothers (Matki Sybiraczki)* by Dorota Bazuń,

⁴ Katarzyna Kość, "To o Was, bezimienne. Przyczynek do rozważań o trudach macierzyństwa na zesłaniu", *Zesłaniec*, No. 13, 2003, 38–39.

Izabela Kaźmierczak-Kałużna and Magdalena Pokrzyńska. A significant supplement is the research by Małgorzata Ruchniewicz on the role of the mother in exile, which provides a direct context for the analyzed issues. The full expression of the used literature on the subject is placed at the end of the work.

Remembrance, identity, heritage

Memory has always been a key reference point in reference to which the image of present was built. Remembrance is tightly connected with the tradition and history. There is no community which can function without referring to the past.⁵ An appropriate vision of history stabilizes and justifies the self-image shaped by a particular group.⁶ And this is regardless of whether it is a negative or positive message. Having a common memory has always been an important element in building the unity of any community. Referring to history played a very important role in the processes of shaping the consciousness of particular groups. This is also the case with Sybiraks' communities.

Therefore, memory is not only a research problem regarding the past itself – understood as an appropriate description of history, but a real, almost everyday challenge with which particular citizens and entire societies coexist. "Memory is strongly connected to the process of constructing and expressing both individual and collective identities. It allows the individual to be 'located' in the community, and the community in a broader context of time and space – in a territory recognized as its own and related to a common history. The formation of collective (social) memory had a large and often direct impact on obtaining a common identity by individual members of a given social group. By accepting a given social order, we naturally adopt the memory shared within this order".⁷

⁵ See more about the social functions of history: Jerzy Szacki, *Tradycja*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011), 228–234.

⁶ Allan McGill, "History, memory, identity", *History of the Human Sciences*, No. 11, 1998, 40–61.

⁷ Paul Connerton, *Jak społeczeństwa pamiętają*, transl. Marcin Napiórkowski, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 34.

However, the sum of individual memories does not always make the collective memory in a direct way.⁸ In fact, they mix each other creating a conglomerate. It is a mutual relationship between the individual and the entire group, an act of communication consisting of the transfer of memory.⁹ However, in the case of the image of the Sybirak woman-mother, collective memory clearly dominates and the image of the mother-heroine has become more and more unified over time.

A common description of the past provides symbols, patterns of behavior and values with which the individual and the entire group can identify. Moving within the space accepted by a given group significantly consolidates it. A community of memory is being created, where the components are "awareness of common existence in time, common fate... It is also a common collection of symbolic signs into which social memory transforms events and figures from the past. This symbolic language is one of the distinguishing features of the group, it allows us to distinguish 'our people' from 'strangers'".¹⁰ By referring to the past and tradition, it is also easier to draw boundaries between particular communities.¹¹

The concept of memory is also related to the issue of identity. The issue of "identity" remains the main category, next to the issue of memory, needed to describe the self-awareness of particular individuals or groups. In this terms, collective identity is understood as a combination of terms and attributes related to a given social or national group, which are absorbed but may also undergo partial changes in the long term. According to the perspective currently dominant in research, identity is not a once-given phenomenon, but constantly constructed and transformed in intra- and extra-group interactions. In this approach, much attention is paid to the active role played by specific social groups or state institutions in shaping it. In our case, these will be Sybiraks' communities, which after 1989 began to unite within their own associations, strengthening the construction of their own common image of the past.

⁸ The supporters of the concept that a separate collective memory does not exist and it is only the sum of particular individual memories are Noa Gedi i Yigal Elam. See more: Noa Gedi, Yigal Elam, "Collective memory – what is it?", *History and Memory*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1996, 30–50.

⁹ Jacek Nowak, *Spoleczne reguły pamiętania. Antropologia pamięci zbiorowej*, (Kraków: Nomos, 2011), 54.

¹⁰ Robert Traba, *Historia – przestrzeń dialogu*, (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2006), 44.

¹¹ Radosław Poczykowski, *Lokalny wymiar pamięci. Pamięć zbiorowa i jej przemiany w północno-wschodniej Polsce*, (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2010), 82.

In this sense, collective identity is understood as a combination of terms and attributes related to a given social or national group, which are absorbed but may also change partially in the long term. According to the perspective currently dominant in research, identity is not a once-given phenomenon, but constantly constructed and transformed in interactions either within or outside the group. In this approach, much attention is paid to the active role played by particular social groups or state institutions in shaping it.¹² In our case, these will be Sybiraks' communities, which after 1989 began to unite within their own associations, strengthening the construction of their own common image of the past.

Their actions strengthen the typology of codes, including those related to memory, create the identity of a given group, which enables making the boundaries and the division into ours and others. Exposing one's own, separate message about the past promotes greater separation and isolation in one's own cultural circle. It emphasizes the uniqueness of personal experiences in which the image of mother from the time of exile becomes increasingly mythologized over time. In this approach, the collective identity:

is the result of classifying the world, distinguishing and defining oneself and surrounding objects as well as establishing relations between them. Due to this classification and the assignment of certain properties to one's own and other groups, an order is introduced in the universe of perception. A conceptual, symbolic model of the world is created which describes the relations between people, groups, natural phenomena that is the basis for thoughts and actions.¹³

When looking for connections as well as discrepancies, several of the most characteristic features are selected to build a coherent image of one's own group. In these activities, the ritual of repeating them is as important as the selection of content. Sometimes we put too much emphasis on the logic of the message, while the meaning of explaining why we remember something or identify with something, should be searched in ritualized actions.

¹² Irena Borowik, Katarzyna Leszczyńska, "Tożsamość jako przedmiot interdyscyplinarnej refleksji", in: Irena Borowik, Katarzyna Leszczyńska (ed.), *Wokół tożsamości: teorie, wymiary, ekspresje*, (Kraków: Nomos, 2007), 8–11.

¹³ Eliza Litak, *Pamięć a tożsamość. Rzymskokatolickie, greckokatolickie i prawosławne wspólnoty w południowo-wschodniej Polsce*, (Kraków: Nomos, 2014), 33.

As Leszek Kołakowski emphasized, “no nation can last without being aware that its existence extends into the past”.¹⁴ Historical awareness, especially the one related to indicating positive elements in history, is crucial for national identity.¹⁵ The fact of having own place in the world, the unique individuality, provides the essential material for the construction of one’s own identity.¹⁶

Among the various concepts regarding collective memory today, the most popular is undoubtedly the idea of *lieux de mémoire*, proposed by the French historian Pierre Nora.¹⁷ Initiated as a historical and political concept, it quickly found its continuators in other disciplines of social sciences and humanities. The above idea, translated and accepted in Poland as places of remembrance, is understood as places

where some communities – whatever they are – nation, family, ethnic group, party, keep their souvenirs or consider them an inseparable part of their personality: topographic places, such as archives, libraries or museums; places monuments – statues, cemeteries, architecture; symbolic places such as anniversaries, pilgrimages, commemorations; functional places – associations, autobiographies, textbooks.¹⁸

Memory places understood in this way are both products of material nature and immaterial phenomena. Especially in the other category, they are treated not as a completed, but as an element of a real, social, political or cultural space that is constantly modified, building the identity of a given nation. The concept of a Sybirak woman-mother fits very well into this idea.

Three basic elements take part in the creation of self-awareness processes: an individual’s memory of his or her own experiences, the collective memory of a given group and the communication about the past carried out by official national factors. In this work, due to the long time period and the selection of source material, the authors emphasize the second factor to the greatest

¹⁴ Lech Kołakowski, “O tożsamości zbiorowej”, in: Krzysztof Michalski (ed.), *Tożsamość w czasach zmiany. Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, (Kraków: Znak, 1995), 49.

¹⁵ Anna Wolff-Pawęska, *Pamięć – brzemie i uwolnienie. Niemcy wobec nazistowskiej przeszłości (1945–2010)*, (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka, 2011), 58.

¹⁶ Eliza Litak, *Pamięć a tożsamość*, 62.

¹⁷ *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past*, Vol. 1: *Conflicts and Divisions*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3–5.

¹⁸ Andrzej Szpociński, “Miejsca pamięci”, *Borussia*, No. 29, 2003, 21.

extent, so the creation of the official historical message by a given social group – the Sybiraks in this case.

However, it is worth to remember that in this approach, both individual people and the already formed collective memory, which determines the attitudes of particular individuals, can influence the appropriate creation of the historical message. We are rather dealing with the other case, so with a kind of group dictate over the memory of an individual.¹⁹ A person being in a given group considers it as a reference point and adapts various aspects of reality to the ideas and images created by it.²⁰ In this type of collective narrative, real events naturally blend with their mythical reflection, obtaining the image of a structured story about the past. Every memory, especially the one with a strong emotional form, such as the memory of a Sybirak woman-mother, is based on a selective choice of elements from the past, which was often combined with forced amnesia related to certain events and the glorification of others. The choice could be grassroots, made by citizens, or inspired in advance by the community. The other case concerns not so much the collective memory, but the politics of memory. Creating a policy of memory required from a given community to enter a higher level of self-organization related to creating a national or ideological community. It was related to the appropriate presentation of the historical process. In a specific political situation, depending on current needs, some elements of the history of a given community were exposed, other ones were marginalized or completely omitted. In addition to the issue of memory and identity, the term heritage is an important factor of the awareness of a given community. In this case, the level of acceptance depends on the strength with which a given citizen identifies with the current vision of history. The stronger the sense of community, the stronger the acceptance of the officially presented vision. The stronger and more coherent the image of the past, the more internally consolidated the society.²¹

The constructed message about common heritage is related to the concept of myth, which shaped and above all accepted by

¹⁹ James Fentress, Chris Wickham, *Social Memory*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 9.

²⁰ Paweł Ciołkiewicz, *Pamięć zbiorowa w dyskursie publicznym. Analiza polskiej debaty na temat wypędzeń Niemców po drugiej wojnie światowej*, (Warszawa: Sedno, 2012), 19.

²¹ Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 51.

society, plays a key role in the perception of the past.²² In Central and Eastern Europe, Jerzy Topolski dealt extensively with the issue of connecting myth with historical issues in his research.²³ Myth, which is a component of every collective memory, meets social needs and, in accordance with current needs, gives events from the past a simplified and often idealizing meaning, drawing attention only to selected facts and historical processes, ignoring those less convenient for a given community. A myth is fully rooted in collective memory when a member of a given community feels a strong, emotional connection with its message. Consolidation the myth strengthens the positive image of the group and increases national pride. A myth that is fully rooted in a given society does not enable critical historical analysis. The trials of analysis results in social resistance, perceived as an attack on collective sanctity. This issue is clearly present in the case of the description of a Sybirak woman-mother, in whose case negative criticism, from the point of view of the Sybiraks' community, is completely excluded. The image of a crystal-clear woman definitely dominates here. The Myth of the Sybirak Woman, the Heroine.

Mother in the Sybiraks' memories

The end of the war and the return from the Soviet Union to Poland caused facing new challenges to mothers. There was no opportunity or time to share memories, process the sense of injustice, cry and scream. The time to come to terms with the past usually comes years later. They did this by writing down their memories. Those who did not live to this point, were commemorated in the memories and accounts of their children, often being a tribute and a monument to the heroism of their mothers.²⁴

²² Томас Шерлок, "Исторические нарративы и политика в Советском Союзе и постсоветской России", (Москва: Политическая энциклопедия, 2014), 42.

²³ See more: Jerzy Topolski, "Historiografia jako tworzenie mitów i walka z nimi", w: Jerzy Topolski, Witold Molik, Krzysztof A. Makowski (ed.), *Ideologie, poglądy, mity w dziejach Polski i Europy XIX i XX wieku*, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1991); idem, "Mity a problem prawdy historycznej", w: Alina Barszczewska-Krupa (ed.), *Historia, mity, interpretacje*, (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1996).

²⁴ Małgorzata Ruchniewicz, "Przetrwać i wrócić. Rola matki na zesłańczym szlaku", *Zesłaniec*, No.

In the memories of Sybiraks, the mother appears in all crucial moments. We see her at the moment of arrest, during a train journey, working beyond her strength and trying to create a bit of Poland on inhuman land. She is the person, exhausted by many hours of work, who gives the children the only slice of bread, mends their torn clothes and teaches them to pray. Her every gesture and action is subordinated to the fight of saving the children.

This fight began when the NKVD soldiers entered into the house. The mother's reaction was the crucial factor which influenced the future fate of her relatives. However, the shock caused by the appearance of torturers in the house was often overwhelming. Not every woman was able to control herself, pack efficiently and think rationally, and take care of her children and prepare them for the journey into the unknown at the same time. Some of them, in despair, simply left the house as they were, others hurriedly packed everything at hand, others, often using help and hints, took specific items. Jan Szorc remembered his mother from the night of February 9–10, 1940:

Mother, humiliated and insulted and forcibly removed from her own home, not paying attention to the terror used by the executioners, tried to prepare us children for the trip as best as possible. When we left the house, each with only a handy bundle, she asked them for permission to take at least one duvet for the children. Surprised by this request, the executioners agreed.²⁵

Longin Glijer remembered the image of his mother, who rushed by the NKVD soldiers, fell into hysteria. She entered the bedroom, took down the painting of the Virgin Mary, Lord Jesus, the father's portrait and the cross from the wall, took two bottles of vodka from the cabinet, then hugged her children and said: "I am ready".²⁶ Traveling in dirty, crowded wagons, in conditions degrading human dignity, in hunger and with diseases spreading around is another stage of the Siberian hell which Sybiraks mention a lot in their memories. This journey was particularly difficult for mothers with babies. Desperate attempts to get any food, dry diapers on own body or reduce a dangerous fever did not always be effective.

²⁵ Jan Szorc, *Losy dzieci z Podlasia zesłanych na Sybir w czasie II wojny światowej oraz po ich powrocie do ojczyzny*, (Białystok: Partner Poligrafia, Andrzej Kardasz, 2016), 26.

²⁶ Conversation with Longin Glijer made in 2013, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/HM/173.

Desperate, hopeless mothers often did not want to give away their children's bodies. The image of a mother who did not want to separate from her dead child remains in Leokadia Kacprzak-Nizioł's memory: "I remember when a woman held her child, which was already dead, for fear of losing it. After two days the door was opened and the little corpse was thrown out".²⁷

They were forcibly separated from the bodies and pushed back into the wagon and had no opportunity to mourn with dignity and say goodbye to their children. However, the shock and pain had to quickly disappear in order to save other children and elderly family members. Depression was overcome by the instinct to live and... fight – one of the exiles summed up her moments of breakdown.²⁸

The basic goal to which the lives of mothers in exile were subordinated – ensuring the survival of the family, had to be combined with the obligation to work. Exhausting, physical work was a new experience for most of them. Additionally, the strict and difficult to fulfill standards, the mental and physical abuse of their tormentors, weakness and diseases that damage the body have influenced on their bodies and health. That is why the image of a mother – a heroine, working murderously from dawn to dusk in the memories of Sybiraks is combined with the image of an exhausted, sick and broken woman. Ewa Dęga's mother was employed at the Felt Boots and Saddle Pads Production Plant. For eight hours she has turned a flywheel which sheep's wool has been treated. When she finished work, she was unable to walk due to weakness and dizziness. Her daughters waited for her outside the building and helped her return to the barracks.²⁹ Zofia Wierzchowska remembered her mother as "a thin, haggard, toothless and gray old woman, although she was only 43 years old and suffered from malaria".³⁰ Janina Kwiatkowska wrote about her mother:

My mom had three of us to care and in order to feed relatives she had to dig ditches along the new road. They made all adults there to work, from dawn to dusk. It was also beyond the strength of our delicate and small mom... Mom came back inhumanly tired, bro-

²⁷ Conversation with Leokadia Kacprzak-Nizioł made by Beata Nizioł and Paulina Kozińska in 2023, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/93.

²⁸ Małgorzata Ruchniewicz, „Przetrwać i wrócić”, 50.

²⁹ Memories of Ewa Dęga, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/66.

³⁰ Zofia Wierzchowska, *Wspomnienia z lat 1939–1946*, (Gdynia, 1947), from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/143, 17.

ken, hungry and thirsty. She never worked physically, she went from salons and prosperity to complete poverty. Already after the first month of her being there, it had a visible impact on her.³¹

After hard work, mothers had to provide food, clothing for their children as well as modest living conditions. Thanks to barter, it was sometimes possible to have got potatoes, milk or grain. Handicraft skills turned out to be beneficial as they allowed them to earn money for food by embroidering, sewing and knitting. Sometimes, in order to obtain the necessary products or money, it was necessary to sell things taken from Poland. A particularly painful moment was having to part with items that had sentimental value for them: a wedding ring, an engagement ring or a souvenir of their husband. Longin Glijer remembered one of such exchanges:

Mom still had dad's uniform, Mrs. Durakowa had her husband's policeman uniform, she had her husband's army boots and one autumn they went to some village in the steppe to exchange something. The next day they entered the dugout and said "we have something, come out and see". We went out, we saw – a cow. For this uniform and shoes they got a cow, and it was our breadwinner.³²

However, in moments of complete helplessness, women had to overcome their shame and resistance. The only chance to survive was theft and begging.

From the memories of Sybiraks, the image of a mother undoubtedly emerges – a keeper of national and religious traditions, caring for the education and spiritual life of her children, wanting to protect them from denationalization. Polish children who went to Soviet schools easily adapted to Russification, they quickly assimilated in the new environment and forgot their native language. Mothers, aware of the threat of repression, nevertheless tried to provide their children with basic knowledge about Poland, teach them songs and poems of Polish poets. The more educated ones organized secret education, and when Polish schools began to be established in the Soviet Union after the amnesty, they helped to organize them. Jadwiga Suchowierska recalled:

³¹ Janina Kwiatkowska, *Zagubione dzieciństwo. Wspomnienia z Kazachstanu*, (Białystok, 2019), from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/158, 14.

³² Conversation with Longin Glijer made in 2013, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/HM/173.

My mom kept begging God to save us from death and let us return to Poland. Recalling the years of exile, I admire my mom for her heroism and for her caring for us. After returning home from work, she was very tired, but she was always able to talk to us, teach us the prayers and make sure we prayed. She often told us about Poland. She taught us the poem „Who are you, little Pole...”.³³

Although religious practices were strongly limited or even forbidden, women made sure to celebrate holidays at least symbolically, taught their children the prayers, and sometimes the only reading in Polish was a prayer book taken from home. In many accounts and memories, the motif of faith appears as something that gives strength and helps to bear the troubles of everyday life, and the mother appears as a person initiating and supporting all religious activities. Jadwiga Sulewska emphasized this in her memoirs: “When mommy left, she took the cross and hung it on the wall. This was all our hope and help. From an early age, my mother taught us prayers and strong faith in God”.³⁴

Mothers remembered by Sybiraks are also those who were not able to return to their homeland. Their death, described in the memoirs, often takes the form of a sacrifice, a kind of sacrifice in the name of saving and survival of the family. References to feelings, pain and mourning regarding the loss of a loved one give way to pathetic, emotional descriptions emphasizing the heroism of the deceased. Ewa Dęga wrote about the death of the woman from the next bunk:

The second experience that stuck in my memory is the moment when my sister and I are sitting on the bunk (mom is absent), and there is a Polish woman, Mrs. Błażejewska, on the next bunk and her two little sons are sitting and crying next to her. It's terribly cold in the room, Mrs. Błażejewska is hot and talking incoherently, and the boys, my friend Tadzio and his brother, are crying and asking – mom, don't die. Unfortunately, mom died in front of our eyes, and the boys were sent to an orphanage. It is not known what happened to them. Their mother died of pneumonia. She caught a cold by drying her sons' wet socks on her own chest!³⁵

³³ Conversation with Jadwiga Suchowierska made in 2013, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/HM/120.

³⁴ Memories of Jadwiga Sulewska, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/65.

³⁵ Memories of Ewa Dęga, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/66.

On the other hand, Marcin Kłos commented on his mother's death: "Later, in November, my mother died. It was winter already. My mother was brought from the hospital to the nursery, she was lying on a sleigh without clothes, in straw. I will never forget this sight! God".³⁶

Conclusion

Women-mothers who were deported to the East in 1940–1941 had to quickly adapt in the new reality, overcome their resistances and overcome their fears. Their image was clearly summed up by Małgorzata Ruchniewicz: "Shy – they had to learn to fight for what they wanted, quiet – to argue fiercely, proud – when they had to ask or even beg their enemies. Many... had to get used to their own uncertainty, shyness and fear. When there was a need of being a fierce defender of children".³⁷ It was their image which remained in the collective memory of Sybiraks. Heroic, brave, ready to make sacrifices. Due to their extraordinary efforts, cleverness and kindness, hundreds of thousands of children had a chance to return to their homeland. Some of them also returned, with endless sadness on their faces... While in exile, they directed all their strength to ensure the survival of their loved ones, they performed miracles, fighting for the lives of their children. However, there is no doubt that as the years passed, their image in children's memories became more and more mythologized, and this is also the case in today's Sybiraks' environment.

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³⁶ Memories of Marcin Kłos, (Warszawa, 1999), from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum: ADZiD/W/146.

³⁷ Małgorzata Ruchniewicz, „Przetrwac i wrócić”, 49.

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