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## Elements of kitsch in the wartime journals of teenagers Hanna Zach and Renia Spiegel<sup>1</sup>

### Elementy kiczu w dziennikach wojennych nastolatek Hanny Zach i Reni Spiegel

**Keywords:** war, extermination, kitsch, war journal, teenage girls

**Słowa kluczowe:** wojna, zagłada, kicz, dziennik wojenny, nastoletnie dziewczyny

#### Abstract

Present in all areas of art for many years, the image of war and the Holocaust also features in novels and non-fiction literature. As the knowledge and popularity of the subject grew, the possibility of shocking the reader with dramatic content decreased, which in turn led to the emergence of a new, disturbing phenomenon. Specifically, the authors tend to exploit the borderlines of what actually shocks the reader, while works based on the memories of war are reduced to simplified and distorted kitsch. Literary kitsch is sometimes associated with sentimentalism, mawkishness and mannerisms of style. All such qualities can be found in the diaries of teenagers growing up during the Second World War: Hanka Zach and Renia Spiegel. The young age of the authors seems to be the main reason why the memories they recorded gravitate towards kitsch; a defence mechanism aimed at repressing the most traumatic events from consciousness is involved as well.

The images of war and the Holocaust are found primarily in non-fiction literature, but they also serve as a theme in thoroughly fictional novels. However, while we feel discomfort coming across fictional elements in war novels,

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the discovery of kitsch in witness accounts or works based on their biographies elicits more complex feelings.

Embarking on a reflection concerning wartime diaries, it would be appropriate to establish a simple division of the written sources that prove helpful in learning about, researching, understanding and imagining the past, or its particular fragment, which in this context spans the years of the Second World War. Paweł Rodak lists four types of written sources:

- documents and archival material,
- press and ephemeral writings,
- literature,
- personal documents (diaries, letters, journals, memoirs, accounts) (Rodak 2005: 33).

The first two types are associated with the time in which they are produced and function in the context of past events. Such texts are not only a source of descriptions of war but also their creators to some extent. Specifically, they are an integral part of the process taking place, while the further course of the documented history is unavailable to their authors. The subsequent two types of sources can be produced during the war, as well as some time after the end of hostilities. It is important to note that, in this case, the pressure is due not so much to the presence of the wartime context but to the internal need in the wake of traumatic experience. Since the narrative is not confined to what is ongoing and whose end is unknown, it is possible to look at war from a different perspective (*ibid.*: 34). This study will thus focus on the diaries written by teenagers whose youth coincided with the years of occupation.

Paweł Rodak has suggested examining wartime diaries from the standpoint of a conception which approaches them more broadly than just as a text, i.e. as a written practice of everyday life that possesses at least three dimensions: existential-pragmatic, material and textual (*ibid.*). In each of these dimensions, war significantly affects the very shape of the practice of diary-keeping. I will now discuss them briefly.

The existential-pragmatic dimension of wartime diaries is linked to the author's desire to lend them greater significance in view of the reason for which the records were kept. First of all, they were more often written during the war rather than before and after. It is not just a question of figures, as these are difficult to verify since a large proportion of the wartime diaries have not survived. However, it is important that the diaries became particularly significant for their authors in that period. The very process of writing was a crucial existential act. A significant bond was established between the author's spiritual life and the text.

The material dimension involves a certain inimitable materiality of the diary. In the words of Paweł Rodak: “if notebooks of various sizes, sheets of paper and the texts written there can be destroyed or damaged, the very act of writing a diary is not subject to destruction. What threatens it is not destruction but oblivion” (ibid.).

For obvious reasons stemming from the very nature of literature, the third facet of wartime diaries, i.e. their textual dimension, raises the most questions. As we know, wartime diaries are also texts and, in this respect, two research attitudes are usually adopted: diary texts are treated either as historical sources or as a specific type of discourse that takes its shape under the influence of wartime experience. The discourse is studied using the categories which are characteristic of literary studies, occasionally using philosophical, anthropological and theological categories as well. It may be argued that both approaches—the latter in particular—involve the risk of excessive absolutisation of the category of the text itself and consequently obscuring the uniqueness of the wartime diaries.

Wartime diaries demonstrate how the expressive and communicative function of the word combines with the performative function. Seen in this fashion, diaries are not merely a textual record of experience but also a kind of word-based action that exerts an influence on reality, contemporary to the sender and the receiver alike. The author is nevertheless uncertain whether life will bring any future: “If my life comes to an end, what will my diary become?” (Rosenfeld 2003: 60). Discussed later in this article, the experiences noted down by the adolescent girls were certainly not recorded with the intention of giving historical testimony or re-creating contemporary reality for the future generations. The young women treated their diaries as exclusively their own, as an intimate place in which they adhered to the essence of diary writing in general.

In order to lucidly articulate the position I have adopted—which involves an attempt to treat the diaries holistically—I will draw on Jacek Leociak’s valuable book entitled *Tekst wobec Zagłady* (Leociak 1997: 97–129), in which the author discusses the context of the diaries written in the Warsaw Ghetto at great length. As he describes what can be called the existential-pragmatic and material dimensions of the diaries, he still approaches them “as an elaborate introduction and laying of the groundwork” (ibid.) for textological analyses and inquiries. Taken in its entirety, the diaristic practice involves the inseparable component of “broadly understood circumstances of writing” (ibid.), which may be vital for the text itself, determine its content, and even constitute “a prerequisite for the text to come into being” (ibid.: 37). It is, therefore, more fitting to speak of the textual dimension of the diaries as opposed to the text of a diary alone. I find Leociak’s

book to be an example of a certain, perhaps controversial, research methodology (Czapliński 2004: 11). These are important premises because they will permit me to discuss kitsch in the diaries of teenage girls in relation to the text whilst leaving aside any assessment of the attitudes of the authors, who are entitled (if only by virtue of their age) to the imagination, sensitivity and language that may bring kitsch to mind.

In studying kitsch in wartime literature, literary scholars are likely to draw attention to the complications and entanglements at the juncture of aesthetics and ethics (Ubertowska 2010: 23). The category of kitsch itself has an interesting provenance in the history of aesthetics; the description and analysis of the phenomenon in twentieth-century culture constitute a fairly clearly demarcated—albeit apparently marginal—field of the humanities. Kitsch as a concept is difficult to define; it is a connotative category whose meaning is established intuitively under the assumption that it represents a semantically undefined, arbitrary, and historically variable term (*ibid.*).

French sociologist Abraham Moles described the genesis and scope of the phenomenon with a fair degree of precision. This is because his analyses reveal two dimensions of the existence of “kitsch”: the aesthetic (or pragmatic) and the social (Moles 1978: 30). In the first, the essence of kitsch is seen as a “concession to the tastes of the audience” (*ibid.*), as a conformist endeavour to fall within the horizon of common expectations, which also implies the abandonment of creative exploration or the element of artistic risk. On the other hand, in its social dimension, kitsch is “a kind of relationship that one establishes with things” (*ibid.*), a “fetishism with respect to objects” (*ibid.*). This dimension of kitsch shows how strongly it is associated with the axiologically determined tenets prevailing in bourgeois society. This trope also offers a convenient point for reflecting on the origins of war and the forms of its representation. It turns out that kitsch not only provides a marker of important social, aesthetic or historical conflicts but also serves as a rendering tool which makes it possible to draw analogies between distinct disciplines of science and art (Ubertowska 2010: 24).

One can hardly resist the impression that “kitsch”, in the variety which is most equated with inferior quality and lack of sophistication, has situated itself in slightly different areas of personal documentary literature and in the proximity of differently understood forms of valuation. Let us consider the two authentic diaries of adolescent girls—Hanka Zach and Reni Spiegel—as examples of imperfections construed in that fashion. The feelings conveyed in the diaries are genuine, while the manner in which they are described is kitschy; all the same, kitsch is a defence mechanism. I have no intention of criticising the attitudes of

the young girls who have to come of age all too quickly, and instead, I will focus on how they describe the realities of war.

Hanka Zach started writing her diary at the age of fifteen. It was published as *My Enemy, My Love. A Girl's Diary from Occupied Warsaw*. Hanka's diary—or rather Halina Zach's—portrays the war and occupation, reflecting the perspective of a teenager entering adolescence. As Krzysztof Jaszczyński observes, these factors make it unique and simultaneously shocking (Zach 2016: 8). For the main character, life goes on as if the war did not exist at all. Every day, she meets up with her friends, goes for bike rides, and the people around her enjoy the theatre, cafés or the cinema. A contemporary reader who is unfamiliar with any major social unrest may find it surprising that Hanka often describes German soldiers or airmen as if they were a normal part of the landscape in occupied Warsaw. It is with them that the teenager goes on her first dates, and it is by them that she is adored. One of them happened to be her first love. Although she sometimes had doubts about whether she should meet Germans, she always justified herself with the notion that “I am young, I'm allowed everything”. Another statement by the teenager may also be shocking to the reader: “it doesn't matter to me who wins this war, I'm young and I want to play, I want to live” (ibid.). Analysing these words, one can discern both the immaturity and the triumph of youth, and the desire to celebrate it and have fun. This approach to life was instilled in Hanka by her uncle, who argued as follows:

Haneczka, don't forget that you are young and have the right to have fun and laugh, while the old can only talk about the miserable living conditions and the Germans. You can laugh because only you are allowed to do so. You can sing, even though there is national mourning, because whoever is 16, nothing is inappropriate (Zach 2016: 76).

Depending on the environment, or more precisely, the age of the people who make up a given community, the young girl's attitude is thus approved, or perhaps excused, by those close to her. Her behaviour is also at odds with the beliefs of the older generation, who, when faced with such difficult times, focused on criticising them and experiencing fear rather than enjoying the delights of life in the time they still had. Wanting to enjoy life without mulling over the threat of death, teenagers were guided by a contrary mindset and did just the opposite, which does not always correspond to our modern, tradition-hallowed notions of the need to perpetuate an attitude of commitment and responsibility for the war and the world.

The girl's immaturity and infantile behaviour is evinced in two passages which, although originating from the same diary, differ significantly: “I am

sometimes terribly angry with myself. I cannot make an indifferent face when the Germans chat me up. I just smile, and too sincerely at that, since they're the enemies. Where is my dignity? Starting tomorrow, I'm going stick out my tongue" (Zach 2016: 32).

However, Hanka's carefree lifestyle and undisguised enjoyment with the attentions of the German soldiers induce a certain sense of guilt in Hanka, given the community afflicted by war, the harm suffered by others, as well as her confidential relationship with a member of the occupying forces. The girl then attempts self-reflection and promises herself self-restraint, momentarily adopting the attitude of an adult woman. This is due to the realisation that the attitude of a teenage girl conflicts with what is expected of a Polish woman at that particular historical moment. Just a few pages further, a completely different attitude towards the Germans is apparent: "I was cold as ice to the come-ons of the Germans. I've had it up to here with that. Because of these morons we all suffer, and I can't dress up and have fun, and even worse, I can't learn English" (Zach 2016: 46).

This divergence of opinion is indicative not only of the infantility (sticking one's tongue out) but also of the emotional lability of the diary author. Such behaviour offers proof of the girl's immaturity. What caused the sudden change of approach in a teenage girl who had previously written about enjoying learning German? We can only guess that it was disappointment that may have involved not only her first love but also the steadily worsening situation in the country. As Hanka notes: "I like movement, I like change, adventures, events, crying, laughter. In general, I like to experience all feelings, except for jealousy and humiliation" (ibid.).

Another fragment of the memoirs attests that Hanka describes everyday life in her diary while seeking to avoid the truth and omitting the sad facts of wartime realities:

Yes, the weather today matches the whole framework of politics and the monotony of life, gloomy, cloudy and hopeless. However, I don't want to write about it. I don't want to experience this mood. I don't want to remember this unpleasant reality. All the better, because the longer I keep my thoughts on cheerful subjects, the longer I remain ignorant of the truth (ibid.).

The above excerpt features the aesthetic dimension of kitsch, as the author subconsciously rejects the truth and creates her own war-free vision of the world in which she would like to live. From a present-day perspective, it is difficult to assess Hanka's attitude in any unequivocal manner. The years in which the diary was written, 1941–1942, were a period of numerous German conquests and disbelief in Hitler's defeat. In a way, Hanka Zach's attitude suggests an attempt to

adapt to the circumstances of the occupation; after all, it was not only that particular teenager who tried to recover at least the remnants of a normal life, despite the realities of war. The streets of Warsaw would thus fill up with young people trying to come to terms with the harsh reality. Unfortunately, in 1943 the German terror intensified, and Poles were kept in increasing fear through more frequent round-ups or public executions (Zach 2016: 9). It is puzzling that at that point—perhaps frustrated with the situation in the capital, which did not improve in the least—Hanka stopped writing her diary and her notes transformed into short stories and brief descriptions of scenes, unrelated to the reality around her. It is likely that the girl no longer had time to write her diary, as she enrolled in clandestine medical studies during that period. One of the last entries suggests that she may have joined one of the underground organisations and had to keep further events secret. It is also possible that they were too difficult for a young adolescent girl, and she wished to drive them out of her mind. Such a conjecture may be supported by the fact that in a conversation with Krzysztof Jaszczynski, a well-known Varsavianist and researcher, the woman was eager to talk about her childhood in Łomża, her fate after the war and her travels. When asked about her diary and the time of the occupation, Zach limited herself to answering “I don’t remember.” One can debate whether the woman repressed the most difficult events of her life from her memory or whether she did not want to discuss them openly in front of a stranger. The exacerbating illness of the diary’s author, who died at the age of 86, should also be taken into account. Perhaps she had long since ceased to identify with her wartime notes or with herself as she was at the time. Perhaps she found it irksome having realised that her impressions, desires, degree of awareness and sensibility to the surrounding reality were kitschy.

As she wrote her diary, Hanka Zach probably sought—just as any teenager—to shed the burden of her inner, intimate experience, at least for a while. The impression one may have when reading the entries is that the author sometimes deliberately distorted the truth, whereas the memories transitioned into dreams and projections because not all the events described seemed real given the historical truth. Krzysztof Jaszczynski wonders whether the girl’s abduction to Germany can be believed (Zach 2016: 10). Although Hanka admitted that she was not very pretty, she described her amorous conquests and great success with the Germans every day. It can therefore be surmised that this is a product of her imagination or an attempt at literary skill. Even so, entries which refer to actual places and events constitute the majority. Hanka’s diary is, first and foremost, an expression of her desire for freedom and the ability to enjoy the privileges of youth, which is not alien to the kitschiness of perception.

The very title of the diary is also intriguing: *My Enemy, My Love*. Could it be that a teenage girl was constantly fluctuating between love and hatred for the Germans? Further on in the diary, a surprising passage may be found:

My attitude towards our greatest enemies was by no means ever hostile. On the contrary, I have always had a weak spot for them, especially after the outbreak of war. I realize that under such conditions, unless they change, I cannot be a good Pole. Only German literature interests me, only that which is German seems superior to me. How can this be explained? Maybe this is the call of the ancestral blood. Funny—I am trying to find Germanic traits in my race. Oh, there's one, the golden hair. I'm not going to go into details. All in all, I did not enjoy the subject I've addressed. I may tear out that sheet. With me, anything is possible. I would like a conclusively crystallised position. I can't take it much longer. I'm sorry to admit that I only feel pity for the lost German soldiers when I hear of some failure of theirs. My blood runs cold in my veins, and when my daddy once said that the Germans must fall, that they are beyond saving, I felt it going black and my heart started to beat so hard. I won't write anything more. And it wouldn't do any good if my scribbles fell into the hands of a Pole or a German, what they would think of Polish women (Zach 2016: 138–139).

The author of the diary is continually searching for a definite answer that would determine whether her attitude is good or bad; simultaneously, she is making repeated attempts at self-justification. She writes about herself that she is incapable of being a good Polish woman, which, articulated by a teenager, seems to be a rather theatrical statement, though, at the same time, it absolves her of the responsibility for potential unethical conduct. Why does the young girl side with the enemy? Perhaps she was aware that Germany, having recovered from the defeat of the First World War, had become an invincible power in the 1940s and that the chances of destabilising the Nazi machine were slim? Also, she may have been impressed with the aura of power, superiority and confidence of the German men. Based on teenage stereotypes, in which judgment of another person is often contingent on superficial traits, Hanka's idealised notions of the Germans are confronted with the painful reality. Her main allegation against the Germans is that she is unable to enjoy her youth and life in general. This kind of kitschiness derives from the girl's declared feelings. The kitschiness of the entries may only be assessed in the context of bourgeois culture or mores, which establish certain attitudes for the time of war, while failure to meet such expectations is regarded as indifference or, alternatively, kitschiness, immaturity, and infantility. The same is true when these notes are considered in the context of the present day. History has judged those times, evaluated the attitudes and the morals, and found that contrariness amounted to irresponsibility, childishness, immaturity, escapism: in other words, everything that makes up kitsch.



The other teenage girl whose work is worth recalling in the context discussed is Renia Spiegel, a girl of Jewish origin who lived with her grandparents in Przemysł. From 31 January 1939, she kept a diary of almost 700 pages, enriched by her first poetic attempts. Reni Spiegel's diary features two dimensions of kitsch, the aesthetic and the social. The excerpts provided below testify to the presence of the social dimension of kitsch: "Friendships are falling apart because everyone is preoccupied with the material aspect, but it's not strange at all if a goose costs 100 zloty and used to cost 4 zloty, and a litre of milk costs 3.5 zloty and used to cost 5 pennies" (Spiegel 2020: 58).

Here, the author considers the price of friendship; moreover, objectification, mercantile mindset and priority of profitable endeavours are evident. The kitschiness consists of the disproportionate juxtaposition between the critique of the material focus of life and compliance with such a requirement. Apparently, the girl utterly fails to appreciate the realities around her. With that lack of knowledge, the entries are immature, kitschy and ridiculous in the final assessment. Furthermore, the girl points out in the diary that one gets bread for manual labour, whereas she managed to get extra potatoes: "I won a victory in the field of provisioning" (Spiegel 2020: 88).

For obvious reasons, i.e. the famine which accompanied the war, the author was happy to have received extra food and to see that the efforts made for this purpose and her own work were effective. There is a grotesque component to the situation, black humour on the part of the author. The girl tries to turn unpleasant events into a joke. In another fragment of the diary, Renia and her friend make plans for the future, describing how they imagine life after the war. These are, of course, idyllic visions of setting up a happy family. The author goes as far as saying: "Our children will one day say that our daddy and mummy lived in the ghetto" (Spiegel 2020: 156).

Speaking of "our children", the author means those she and her boyfriend Zygmunt may have. Renia sees living in the ghetto as something to be told to future generations, something to recall with pride. From the standpoint of the present day, those events are judged differently, while the diary entries and the girl's overall awareness cause their content to sound somewhat "inappropriate" and too naïve given the seriousness of the situation in the world and in the country.

Certain passages in the diary also demonstrate the presence of the aesthetic dimension of kitsch. Not infrequently, the author's work features trite statements such as "May is beautiful, and one wants to live" (Spiegel 2020: 145). Among other things, Renia also observes that her mother only visits her occasionally and starves terribly. That sentence is itself an eclectic antithesis, an oxymoronic juxtaposition of two opposite pieces of information. One is positive, since the fact

that the mother visited her teenage daughter was good news, while the other is negative and evokes unpleasant emotions. The aesthetic dimension of kitsch is also present in the author's poems. Consider the following, for instance:

I lived among mirthful meadows  
 Among the sun-painted corn  
 And I smiled at the golden stars  
 To the dawning rosy daybreaks,  
 And I myself had a rosy life  
 Bright as those sunny days  
 I thought it would be like this forever  
 That I would be a joyful echo  
 Which resounds with silvery laughter  
 That bounces happily against the sky  
 Glad of everything in love with everything  
 I did not know how the heart aches  
 I did not know how the soul cries  
 And I did not know yet that it could be otherwise.  
 And today I just regret  
 Today, though I am so young  
 Looking back to a the recent past, I must  
 Say with tears: It's gone...such a pity... (Spiegel 2020: 205)

The poem itself is a symbolic farewell to childhood and deplors all too hasty entry into maturity, as well as evokes numerous emotions. Still, it is also replete in infantile phrases, characteristic of a teenager who is not well versed in the essence of poetry, e.g. "rosy life", "rosy daybreaks", "mirthful meadows" or "sun-painted corn". From the standpoint of a literary scholar, the stylistic devices employed in the poem are platitudinous and may thus be considered kitschy.

The following excerpt provides yet another example of the aesthetic dimension of kitsch:

Ah, how utterly stupid I am, and what has happened to me? After all, I was never like that, after all, I was considered clever. What an idiotic idea to be in love with a *komandir* [commander], to want to kiss him? Have I gone mad? How can one envision one's love in the shape of some *komandir*. I don't date boys, yes, it's true, I haven't made love either, but there'll be time for that too, at least that's what I believe. Although when I went to a party, I was sad that I didn't know anyone, and I left with Nora, while Belka and the others stayed. Belka, of all people, stayed, I was angry. But then Belka was jealous of me that I had left. She had no fun at all, she left angry, upset, I hardly consoled her any. Then I was angry in turn that one cutie turned his back on me, the very one that had managed to interest me a little. Ah, how awful and stupid it all is... (Spiegel 2020: 246).

The above fragment is an instance of logorrhoea from which nothing follows, sheer verbiage, a stream of associations. The text offers merely a haphazard, emotional, impetuous, shallow and ultimately pointless sequence of thoughts of a teenage girl. Abraham Moles demonstrates the underlying processing mechanism of such a text as it follows the path of the most widespread associations. Naturally, everyone may at times be carried away by such a flow of illogical, chronological thoughts – non-thoughts, but this is not how one communicates with others. If not a deliberate literary device, a record of such thoughts *in statu nascendi* amounts to kitsch.

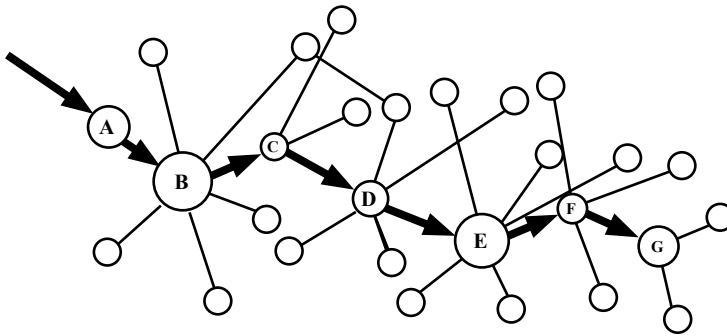


Fig. 1. A sequence with high associative potential across constellations of attributes.  
Moles 1978: 124.

This diagram aptly illustrates the transition from thoughts to words in the girl’s diary. The principal theme is “disrupted” by random associations, which are only loosely related to the idea with which the text sets out.

Another excerpt from the diary may also prompt one to consider the essence of kitsch:

Actually, I should have written a lot more. But then. You know...I couldn’t, then I didn’t want to and may write more tomorrow. Just know that a lot has changed in life, in friendships, well, and in that (I don’t know what to call it?). And the moods have changed, and maybe even... I have. Have I really changed? Or am I just pouring things out to myself and to You? Anyway, I’ll write all the poems now, as I’ve decided, at most I won’t show them to anyone. I was terribly angry yesterday when I was told once again that I was childish, so I declared to her that I am definitely mature now and I don’t want to hear it anymore. And tomorrow I’ll tell you something interesting, something really interesting, you’ll see. I was going to say it today, but no... tomorrow. You’ll help me, Bulús and You, God (Spiegel 2020: 289).

The author tenderly addresses the diary as “Buluś”, which means that she treats it as a friend and a confidant; it clearly possesses a very personal dimension for her. Importantly enough, the teenager had no intention of showing it to the world and, with this in mind, she included all her poems on its pages. This may justify the use of kitschy wording to which teenagers are entitled by virtue of their age. However, the question that arises here is whether the underage author was beginning to come of age when she wrote the final pages of her diary? Unfortunately, this question will remain unanswered because, unlike Hanka Zach, Reni was not given a chance to enter adulthood. The girl was shot in the street of Przemyśl, shortly after her eighteenth birthday, on 30 July 1942. The last sentence in her diary was written by her distraught beloved: “Three shots! Three lives lost! All I hear are shots, shots” (Spiegel 2020: 392).

As already noted, the personal diaries of Hanka Zach and Reni Spiegel may bear the hallmarks of kitsch but, growing up in the shadow of the Second World War, the girls had a right to write in such a fashion (although this does not change the fact that the authors describe the wartime realities differently than adults). This offers an interesting object of inquiry for the literary scholar, as it provides insights into how a teenage girl on the verge of adulthood perceived war and occupation. The process of growing up as such is difficult for girls, whereas the heroines of the diaries had to face twofold complexity of the concerns of adolescence, as the years of their youth coincided with the war. The kitsch encountered in those texts may be approached from yet another angle: it is a “truth” of the times, a kind of honesty with which one documents feelings and emotions, as well as a mindset and awareness that differed from the widespread notions. Not everyone espoused the official attitudes that society expected young people to demonstrate, e.g. commitment, willingness to fight the enemy or to oppose the presence of their culture in everyday life. In fact, such values were not at all self-evident; they required reflection, choices, and the moulding of one’s character, which was not at all inclined to embrace socially expected attitudes in an unquestioning and natural manner.

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