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# Culture

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## Exceptional Books

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# Elementarz

*Inside a Time Capsule*



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# Elementarz

Since 1910, *Elementarz* has been arguably the most read book in Poland. Written by Marian Falski, this elementary primer remains an unmatched reference. In Poland, "Ala ma kota" are three words loaded with childhood nostalgia.

*Elementarz* has a special place in the collective memory of the Poles. The texts are printed in hand writing letters and they integrate the grammar declension of the words.

In addition to the usual progressive teaching methodology, *Elementarz* has a very specific "watch and tell" approach. The number, variety and quality of illustrations is just amazing. They picture with much realistic

details the everyday environment of first grade children aged 5 to 6.

*Elementarz* is the longest serving primer in the world with some 80 editions, 20 million printed copies and more than 30 million readers over 4 generations. This textbook was used as a main primer in First Grade classes until 1983. *Elementarz* is also celebrated with a dedicated museum in Kuźnica Kraszowicka.

*Elementarz* is still widely circulating in Poland. Most bookstores sell the reprinted version of the 1971 edition with the illustrations of Janusz Grabiański. This modern version is completely different. We are lucky to have the **1960 edition**, probably the most popular.



## Elementarz

Over the last two decades, *Elementarz* has generated an abundant literature, critical essays and many articles. Experts comment the methodology, the contents, and the message of this unique textbook. Our purpose is not to duplicate previous studies but to share the perception of a non-Polish reader.

Our *Elementarz* reports with many details the environment of Poland during the late 1950s. Along the 170 pages, we visit villages and towns, we observe the seasons, we travel the country, we meet different professions. Without any pretention, we invites you in this amazing time capsule.



# Elementarz

## Soft Propaganda

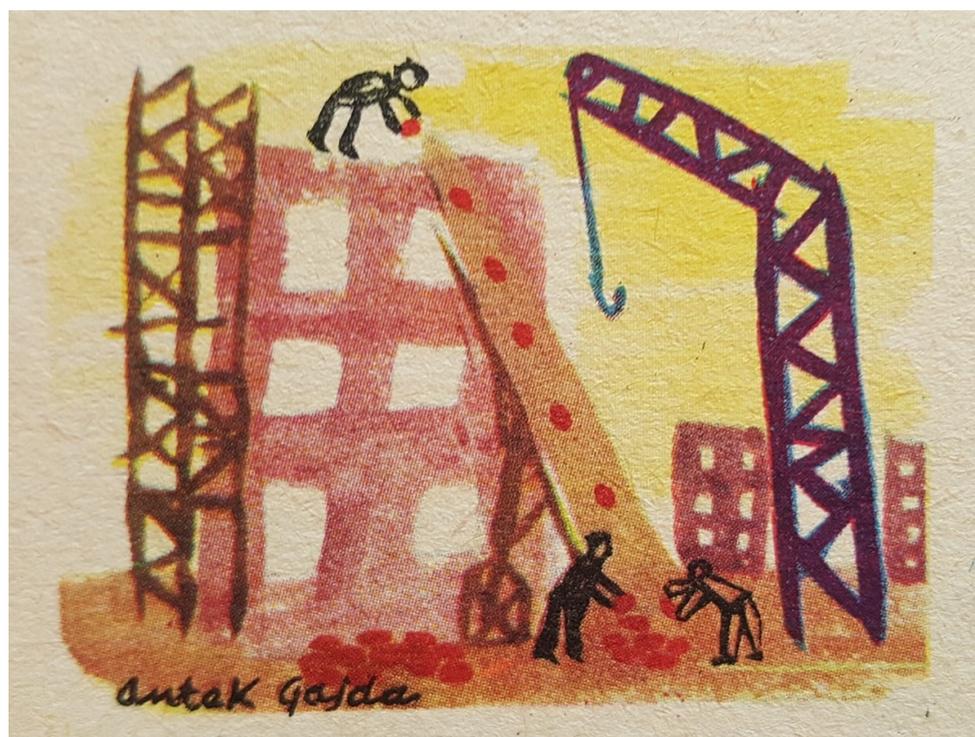
*Elementarz* echoes the propaganda of the time during the period of the PRL (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*). In the previous edition, during the Bierut era (1948-1956) this textbook had a strong orientation in support to the regime. The book translated the agenda of the ruling party for a children audience.

The 1960 edition is less engaged but remains aligned with the official message. A drawing competition is supposed to reflect the interest of First Graders. The book pictures post-war reconstruction, industries, pioneers girls, and a soldier with his rifle. The small picture of a destroyed building is the only reference to the war.

Another story shows a large crowd in an open place. Under giant flags, people are attending a military event. Two unarmed soldiers stand close to a family watching the air show. This proximity is sending a positive message of protective presence. After the war, the new Polish Army lacked legitimacy and was suspected of complicity with the Soviet NKVD in war crimes against the anti-communist resistance.



# Konkurs na rysunek



## Elementarz



## Elementarz

*Elementarz* also presents a group of children celebrating the 1st May.

This Socialist celebration of all workers was an opportunity for local events, impressive parades and openair picnics. Every year at school, there was an intense mobilization to prepare the 1st May. Special songs were intoned with fervour. *Ślubujemy!* (we are serving).

Before 1956, the 1st of May was also dedicated to praise the leadership of

Bolesław Bierut "nasz Wódz i Nauczyciel" (our chief and teacher). We note that in *Elementarz*, there is no official portrait although the Polish leader was omnipresent.

The text of *Elementarz* explains that the kids have no school on this day because their participation is important. The picture shows many red flags and the usual red roses bouquet that will be offered to a visiting official. The well-dressed kids are standing on a podium.



# Elementarz

## Post-war Reconstruction

*Elementarz* reflects the everyday environment of Poland after the first post-war decade. The illustrations of Jerzy Karolak picture a country in transition on the road to modernity. The drawings highlight a successful transformation with a flourishing agriculture, thriving industries, modern buildings, busy roads and comfortable housing.

At school, all the children are well dressed and equipped. There is no uniforms and this is quite amazing because school uniforms (a blouse in cheap fabric) were introduced in the early 1950s.

In *Elementarz*, one dad is an architect who contributes to the reconstruction of the country. Another dad is a specialized worker who tackles post-war ambitions. Both embody the model role of modern heroes.



# Elementarz



# Elementarz

## Busy Towns

At the end of the 1950s decade, less than 90,000 individual cars were circulating in Poland. With a motorization ratio of 0,30%, Poland aligned on the statistics of other Eastern countries.

The 1960 edition of *Elementarz* pictures busy roads and towns congested by traffic. The text insists on the number of cars in the street. We remark that trucks and professional vehicles are predominant in the countryside. In the picture below, the blue car seems to belong to some local officials.

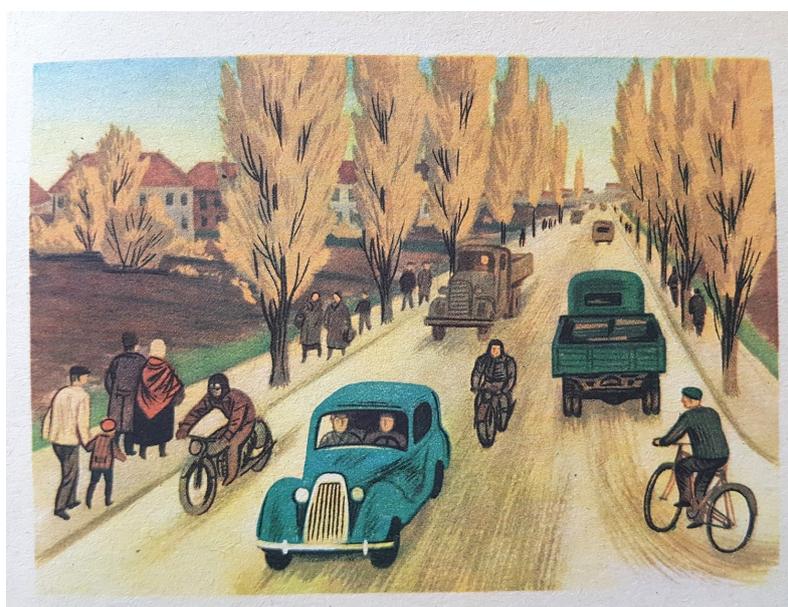


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## Elementarz



To ulica. Tam tyle aut.



Autka jada - ja stoje.  
Autka staje - ja idę.

## Elementarz

### Rural Transformation

*Elementarz* also reports change in the rural environment. In the late 1950s, agriculture contributed 70% of the GDP and employed 80% of the workforce. In 1960s, 51,7% of the Poles were living in the countryside. They were 63,1% a decade earlier.

In the book, tradition and modernity are overlapping. We can see several different generations of equipment for one single task: a scythe, a horse drawn mower and a combined harvester. Everywhere, horses are cohabiting with tractors. Many pictures show freshly ploughed fields, an allusion to a future of abundance and prosperity.

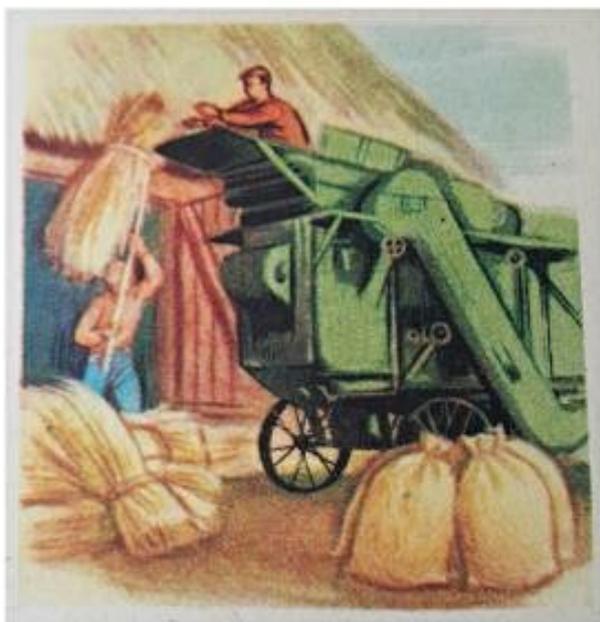
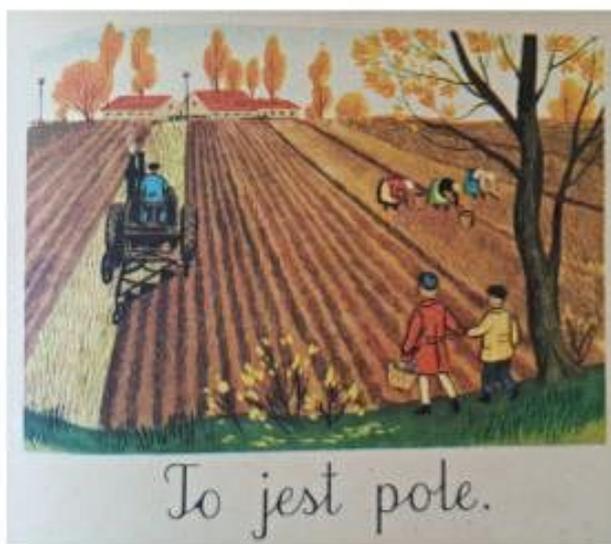
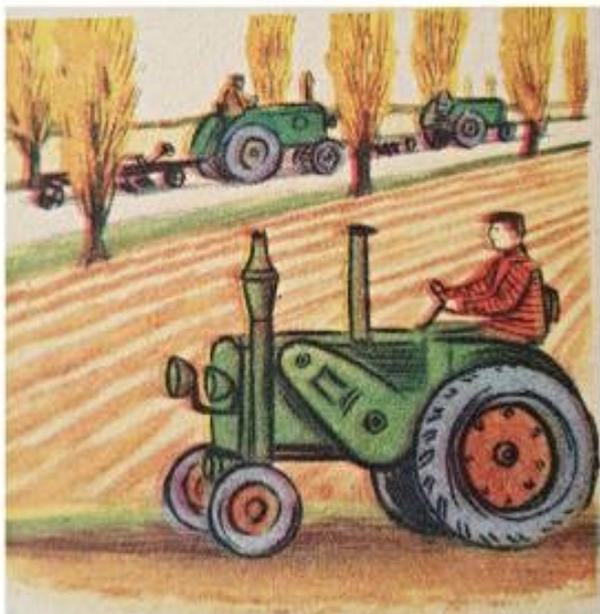


Kto tak kosi? - Tak kosi tato Olka.



A tak kosi tato Tomka.

# Elementarz





ORKA  
Można orać konikiem.  
Ale jest lepiej i prędzej,  
i lżej orać traktorem.



SIEW  
Można siać nawet ręką.  
Ale jest lepiej i prędzej,  
i lżej siać siewnikiem.



ŻNIWA  
Można kosić zboże kosą.  
Ale jest lepiej i prędzej,  
i lżej żąć żniwiarką.



MŁOCKA  
Można młócić kieratem.  
Ale jest lepiej i prędzej,  
i lżej młócić motorem.

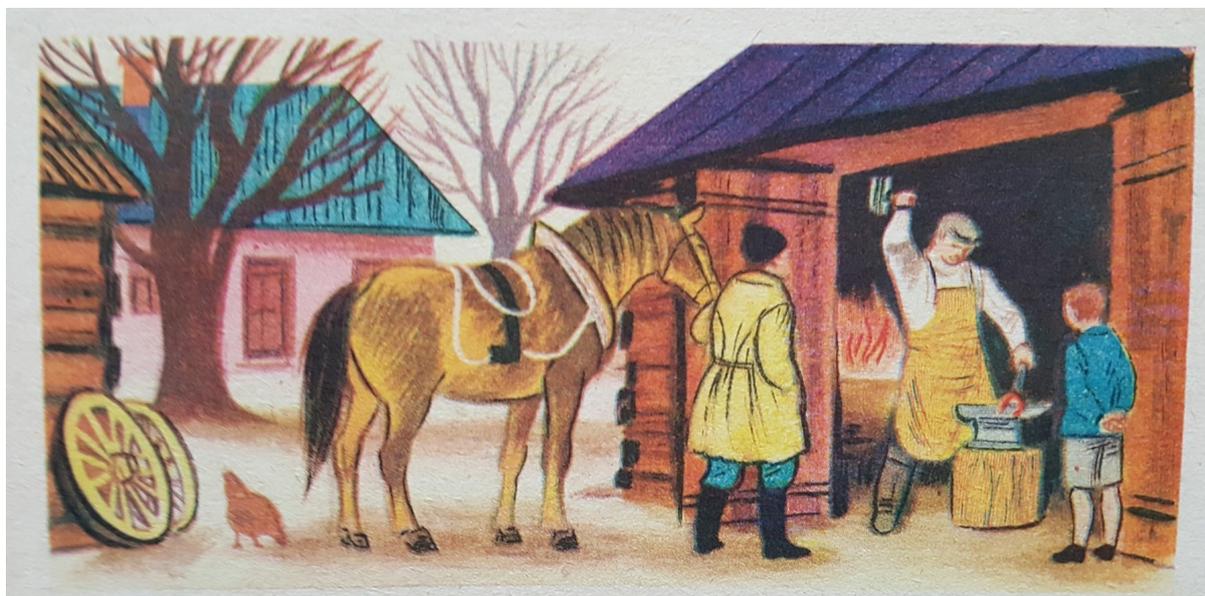
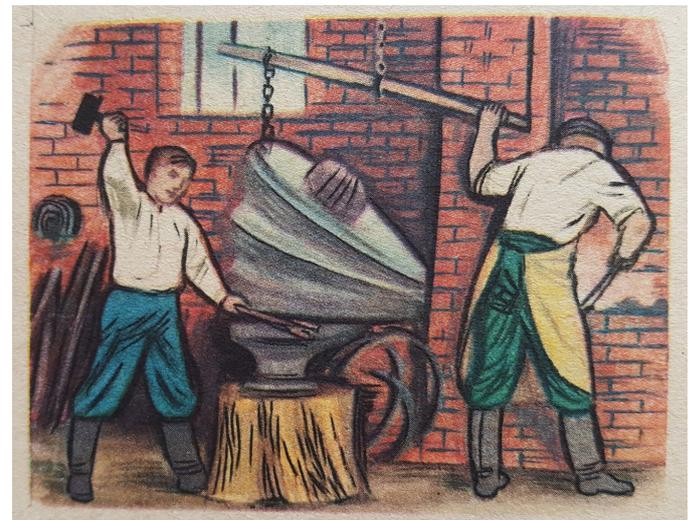


The full page above insists on the benefits of agriculture mechanization. The message implies that entering local cooperatives enables small farmers to access modern equipment, get additional inputs and increase the production.

There is no doubt that the intention of this page was to convince parents about the rationale of joining some form of social organization or collective farming.

## Elementarz

In *Elementarz*, many traditional trades are surviving. We meet a miller, a blacksmith, a chimney sweep, a wheelwright, and a shoemaker.



## Elementarz



Horse carts are a common view along the roads and in market squares. They transport people, animals, wheat bags, coal sacks and vegetables.



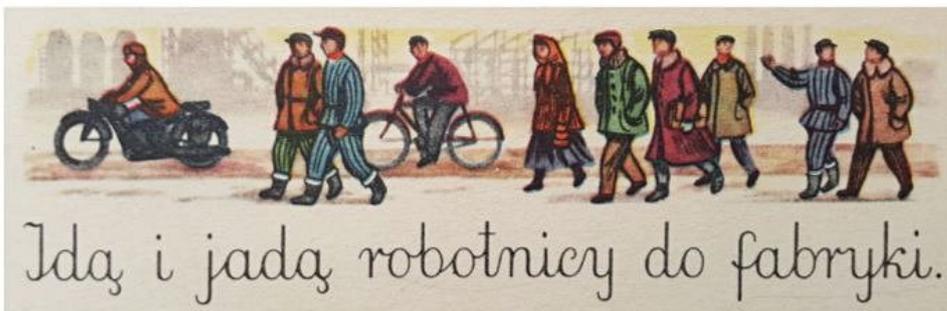
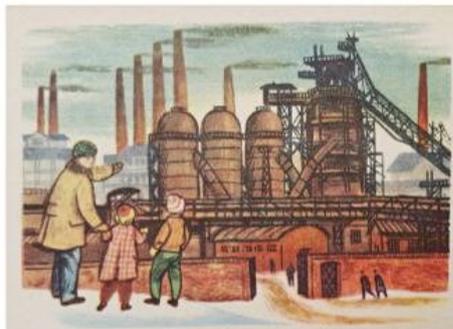
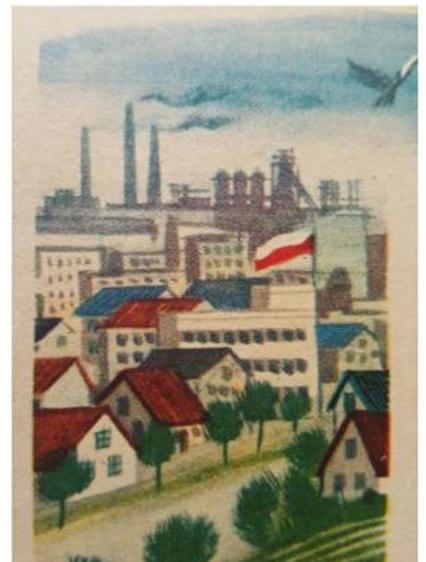
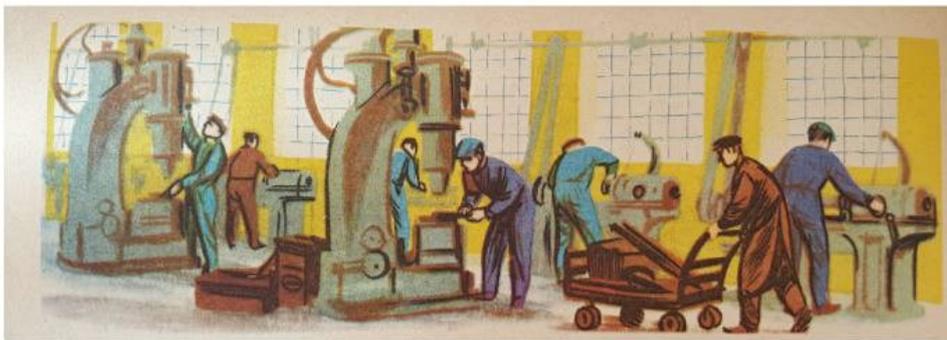
# Elementarz

## Thriving Industry

*Elementarz* heavily promotes the industrialization of the country in texts and illustrations. The book insists on the industry as the new power engine of the economy. The text values blue collars who are building prosperity and independence. Industrial activities seem to be centered on metallurgy and mechanical manufacturing.

A full page details production of the sector. The purpose is obviously to generate a discussion about the benefits modernization.

At this time, all movie theatres presented a news bulletin produced by official organizations such as WFDiF. Children were used to the rhetoric of *Aktualności* advertising the "mobilization of the people front" in factories and *kombinaty*.



Idą i jadą robotnicy do fabryki.



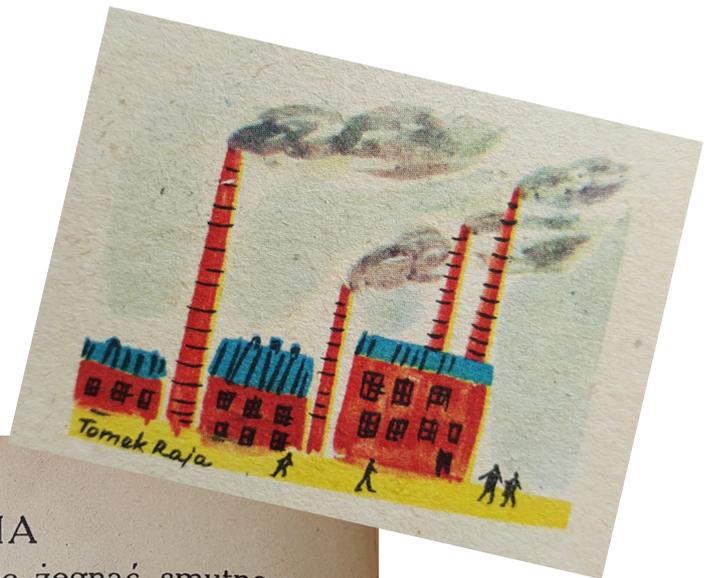
## Elementarz

Several times, the book refers to Nowa Huta, the model city inspired by Soviet industrial kombinats. Built between 1949 and 1960 near Krakow, this city was organizing working and social life around giant firms producing steel, cement and tobacco.

Interestingly in *Elementarz*, the two world of urban industry and rural agriculture are coexisting. This situation underlines a

progressive transition of the population from the field to the workshop.

In many pictures, companies' chimneys are expelling black and grey smokes unapologetically. Environmental concerns would only raise two decades later.



### NOWINA KAZIA

- Dziś jestem ostatni raz z wami - mówi Kazio do dzieci. - Przeprowadzamy się daleko, aż pod Kraków. Do Nowej Huty.

Kazio był taki z tego dumny, jakby się co najmniej wybierał w podróż naokoło świata.

Ale kiedy po lekcjach za-

czął się żegnać, smutno mu się zrobiło. Oni tu razem zostaną, a tylko jego tu nie będzie.

Nagle do Kazia podbiegł Jaś. - Masz to na pamiątkę - powiedział. Było to ulubione lustro Jasia, którym tak lubili z Kaziem puszczać zajęczki na ścianie.



prowodzi-przeprowadzi • mniej-najmniej • biegł-podbiegł

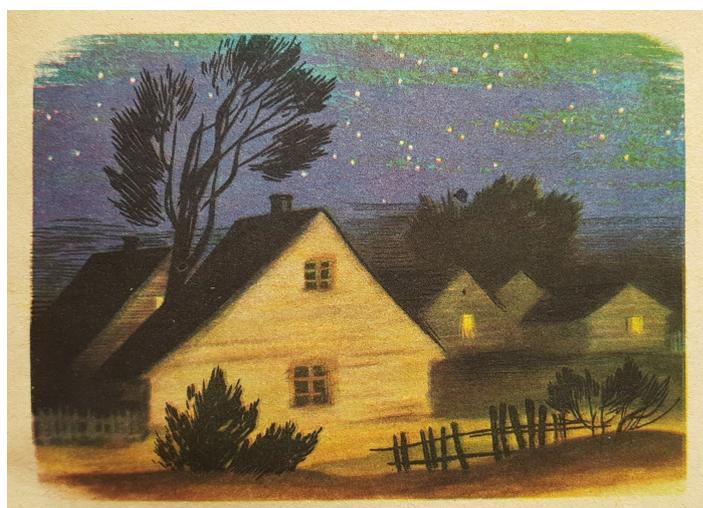
## Elementarz



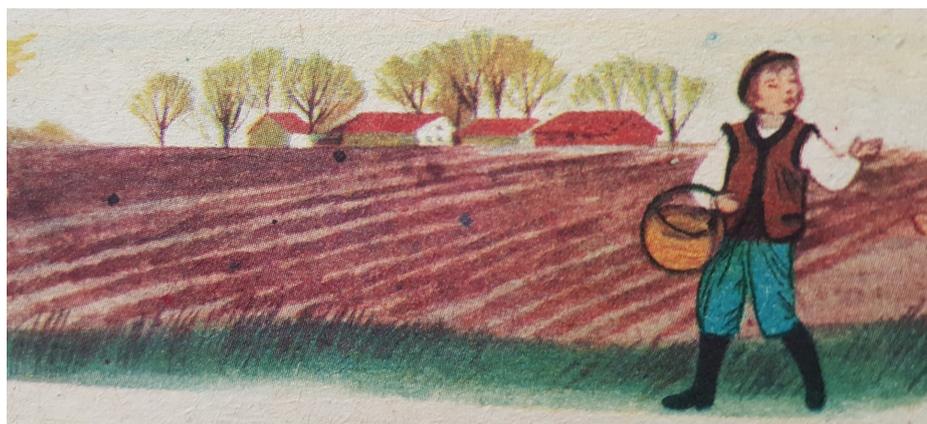
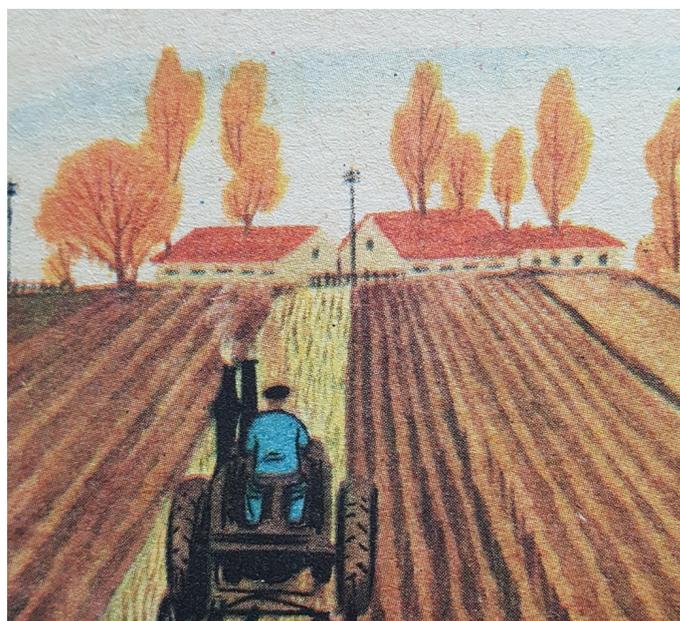
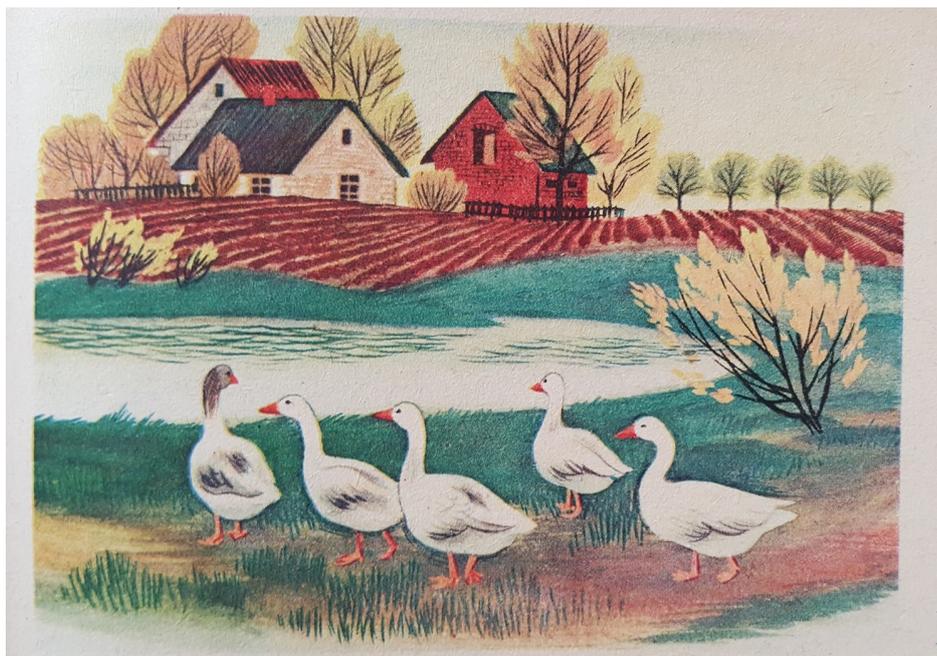
### Pretty Houses

House is a recurrent theme in *Elementarz*. One house is drawn on the classroom board. Another is drawn during the art lesson. Even dolls, dogs and birds have a house.

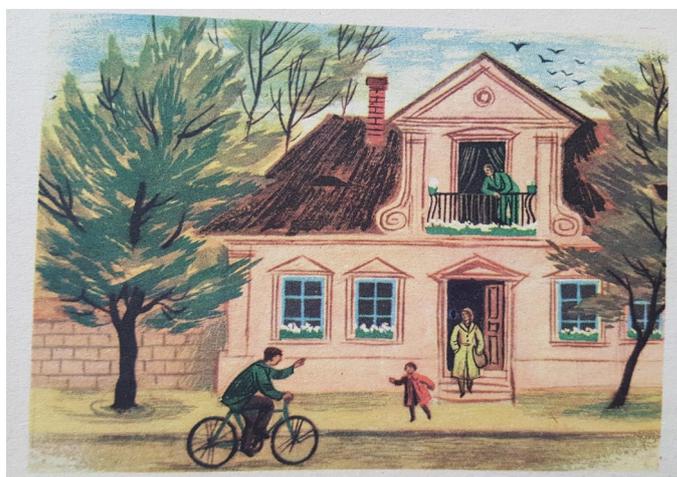
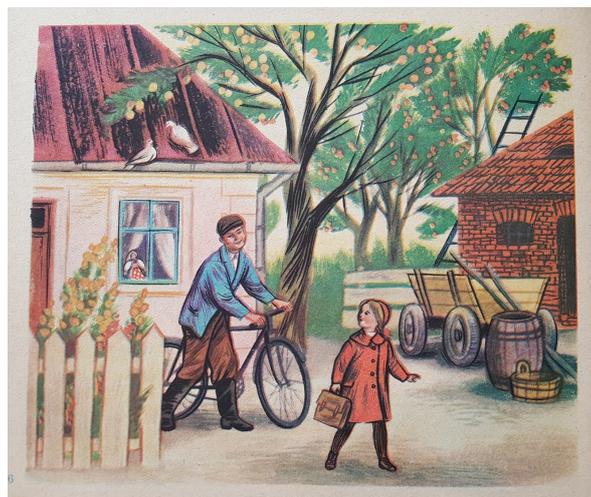
We remark that village houses are built the same way and could be anywhere, without any regional differentiation (there is an exception for Zakopane). None of these village houses has a thatched roof that was rather common until the early 1960s. Many pictures report large zinc plates on the roof. Some farm buildings have a tar tarpaulin, still used today in the countryside.



# Elementarz



# Elementarz



# Elementarz



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## Elementarz

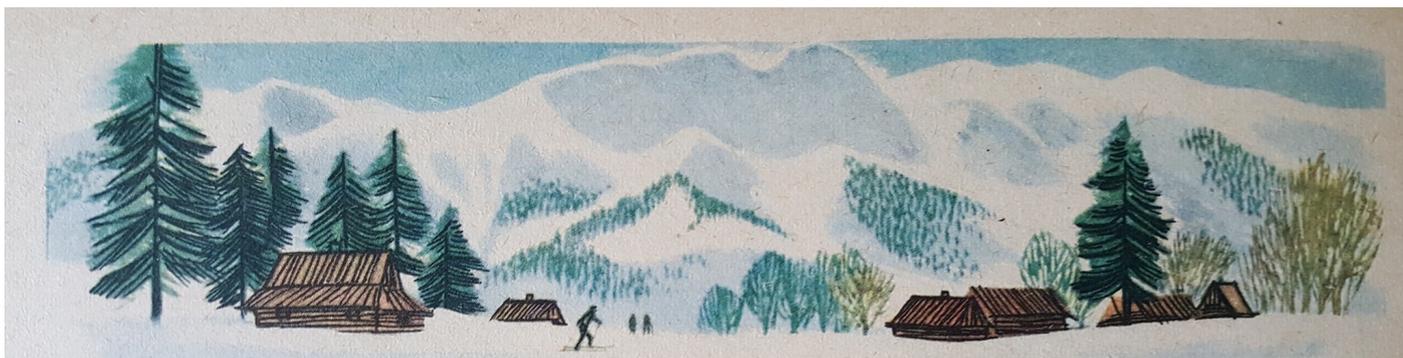
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Most illustrations in the countryside show single-family houses. The landscape above pictures multiple-family buildings. This is either a peri-urban area or the housing blocs of a collective farm. We can see the paving stones that covered many roads before asphalt generalization. The walkway is an artist fantasy: only few roads had such facility.

Contrary to a common belief in Western countries, after WWII the collectivization process failed in Poland and the land was not confiscated by authorities. During the mid 1950s, the private sector was predominant with small family farms, mostly turned to subsistence. However, small farmers had to deliver production quotas and they were subjects to administrative harassment and many red tapes. Collective farms (*Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne* - PGR) were present everywhere but mostly in the territories recovered after 1945.

## Elementarz



This winter landscape shows traditional houses in the Podhale Region of the Tatra Mountains (Southern Poland). The purpose is to introduce a notion of geography and to highlight the diversity of Polish regions.

The text mentions a letter sent from Zakopane, a famous ski resort. Before WWII, several European and world competitions were organized there. Zakopane was also the epicentre of a cultural and artistic movement during the late 19th century.



## Elementarz



In Poland, a popular belief states that storks protect against fire and bring good luck.

*Elementarz* pictures a group fly and a couple in a tree. Many others are certainly living nearby with nests built on chimneys or at the top of a special pole. *Idzie wiosna !* Spring is coming!

During the mid-1950s, there was some notion of environmental awareness in school programs. Children were taught that protecting storks, raptors and frogs was

important to preserve food chain and a natural balance of biodiversity. Destroying or looting birds nests was blameworthy.



Today, Poland hosts some 45,000 couples of storks, representing about 20% of the world population of these birds. Early in spring, the storks are coming from Central Africa Eastern Africa and Arab Peninsula. Many people lucky enough to have a stork nest volunteer to report activities to monitoring nonprofit organizations.

### Ideal World

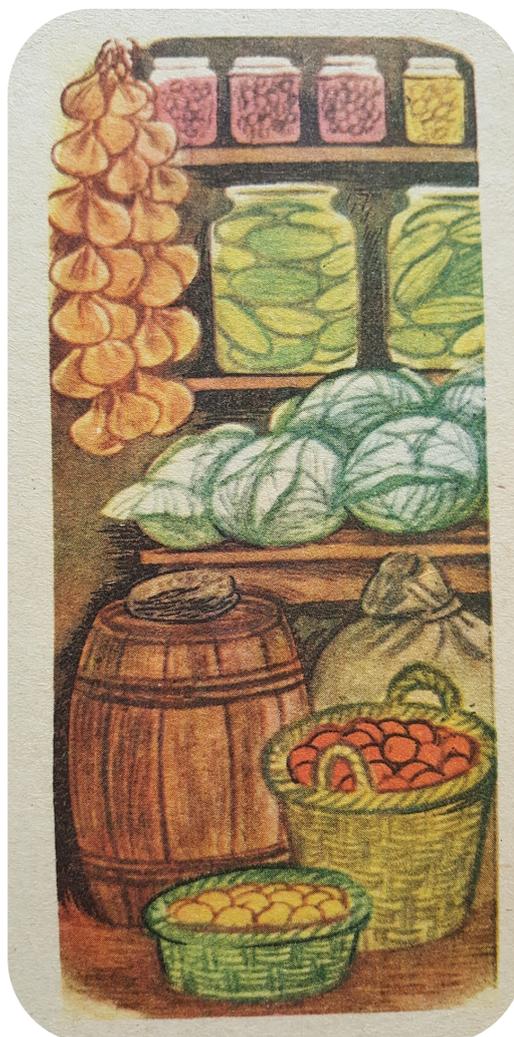
Aligned on the official message, *Elementarz* pictures an ideal world of home happiness and prosperity.

All the houses have nice pieces of furniture, and many decorative elements: vases, painting, curtains, green plants, books, and porcelain.

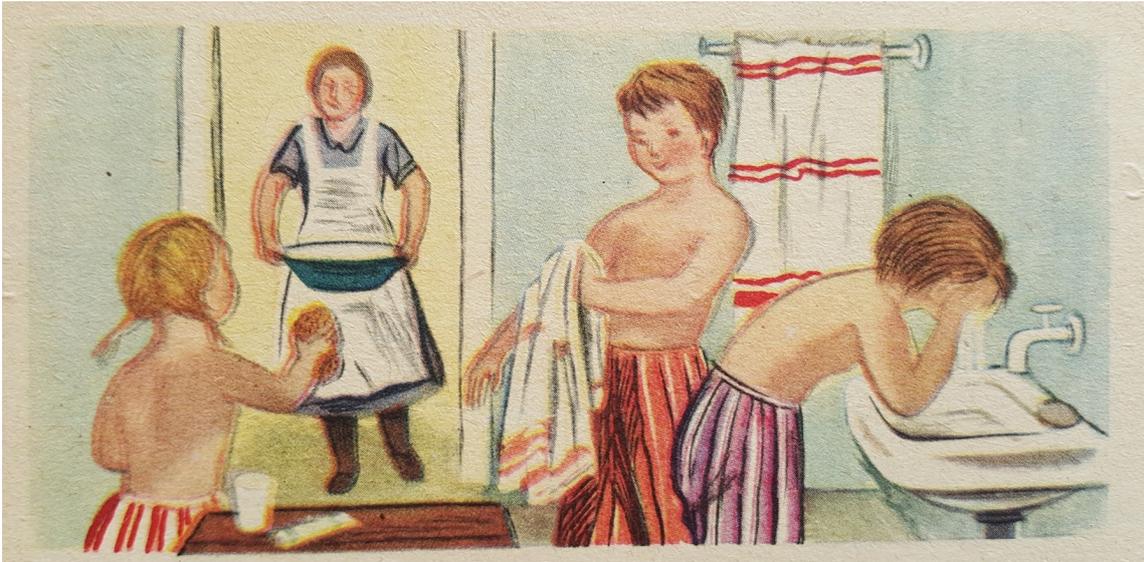


Obviously, there is electricity everywhere because there are no oil lamp on the tables. We remark nonetheless that power lines are missing in many pictures of rural landscapes.

There are preserves in the pantry and a freshly baked cakes in the kitchen. This image of domestic abundance is the visual signature of a post-war recovery. Preserves also suggest that the idea of sparing for rainy days - a deeply rooted reflex in the rural culture.



## Elementarz

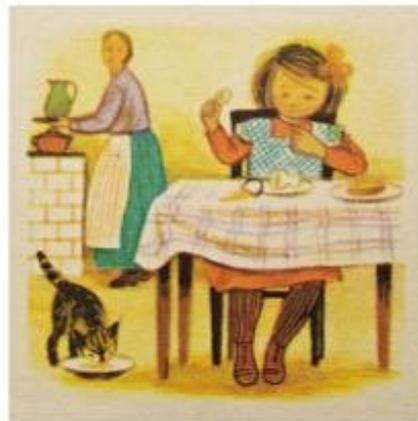


We can also notice running water at school and at home. However, sinks with a unique tap suggest that there is no hot water.

We can see a mother bringing a warm basin from the kitchen for the morning toilet. The presence of a bathroom in the house is quite uncertain.



## Elementarz



In *Elementarz*, the kitchens have many elements of modernity. The traditional stoves are not whitewashed but they are covered with white tiles. The enamelled kitchenware was a successful Polish production exported worldwide. Preserves are in hygienic glass jars. We also note a very popular domestic appliance: the meat grinder.

# Elementarz

## Toys Catalogue

In *Elementarz*, all the toys meet the dreams of children in late 1950s: a large wood plane, a bicycle, sledge and skis, small cars, a miniature train, a scooter, roller and ice skates, a bandoneon, coloured balls and balloons, a big real trumpet, ... Ala has a small sewing box with nothing missing inside. Janek has a DIY box with a complete set of

tools. These toys were very popular until the mid 1960s.

There is an amazing number of pictures with the dolls belonging to Ola and Ala, including a black one. Dolls have a special place in this book. They are full characters with their own personality. They also have their own house, small pieces of furniture, a pram, a bed and an impressive collection of clothes.



## Elementarz



*Elementarz* celebrates Christmas without any religious reference. The Christmas tree is a "fir from the forest" dressed like for "going to the ball". It is worth noting that Easter, the main Christian festivity in Poland is not mentioned in the book.

This magnificent tree captures the attention with plenty of traditional ornaments (paper

garlands, straw flowers and electric candles). The number of presents is impressive.

We suspect that the children will receive many toys and books. However, the book insists on the opportunity to exchange useful presents: new shoes, a pretty bag, a red beret.

## Elementarz



### Gender Gap

*Elementarz* clearly states gender difference. At school, boys and girls do not play together. Still, they have some common activities such as working in the school garden, picking mushrooms or skating during winter.

All the mothers and women are homemakers. Cooking, cleaning and sewing are their main activities. Some of them are working in the family farm. Little girls play doll to prepare their future role of wife and mother.

*Elementarz* organizes a continuity between playing and working. Little girls are happy to

help with small housework (cooking, sewing, cleaning, and washing).

The boys also have traditional gender-based toys and activities. With their friends, they make campfires, pick chestnuts, climb trees and play football. During the winter season, they sled and ski.



## Elementarz



Ala i mama.



To Ala.

# Elementarz

## Social Classes

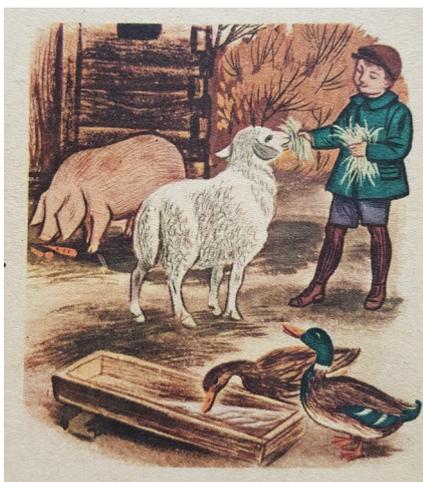
Still, beyond this social order, *Elementarz* suggests some differences. Cleverly, the book avoids a contrast between the urban and rural worlds because at school, all the children are supposed to be equal. This subtle evasion from reality encourage the identification of all the readers, whatever their personal environments.

Ala is a main character in the book. Her father is an architect for public projects. She has an elegant mother who takes her to the movie theatre. The family is living in a pre-war house with a beautiful architecture and *ganki* – the columns that frame the main entrance of manors in the countryside. Inside, we can spot old pieces of furniture and door mouldings. There is a nice old-time pergola in the garden. We suspect that the family has a car.

In these two pictures, we note the difference between patrician stone *ganki* (Ala's house) and modest wooden *ganki* (Agatka's house).



## Elementarz



### Working Kids

*Elementarz* emphasizes the work of children at the farm. None of the tasks described are hard work but we understand that they are repeated every day.

The children go to the field, feed the poultry, pick fruits, and watch after the cattle. Their garden is a farmyard with a stone well, barrels, wheelbarrows and horse carts.

This farm life is the environment of Julek, Agatka and Janek, Stach and Zocha or Cela and Lucek. None of these kids looks unhappy or poor and they are all dressed the same.

# Elementarz



## Elementarz



### Books Everywhere

In *Elementarz*, books are everywhere, including on the iconic cover (above). The first page shows a distribution of books to a group of children. The message is clear: books make happy. There is no doubt that this picture has left a footprint in the hearts and minds of little readers.

We also remark that there are books in all the houses, whatever the profession of the

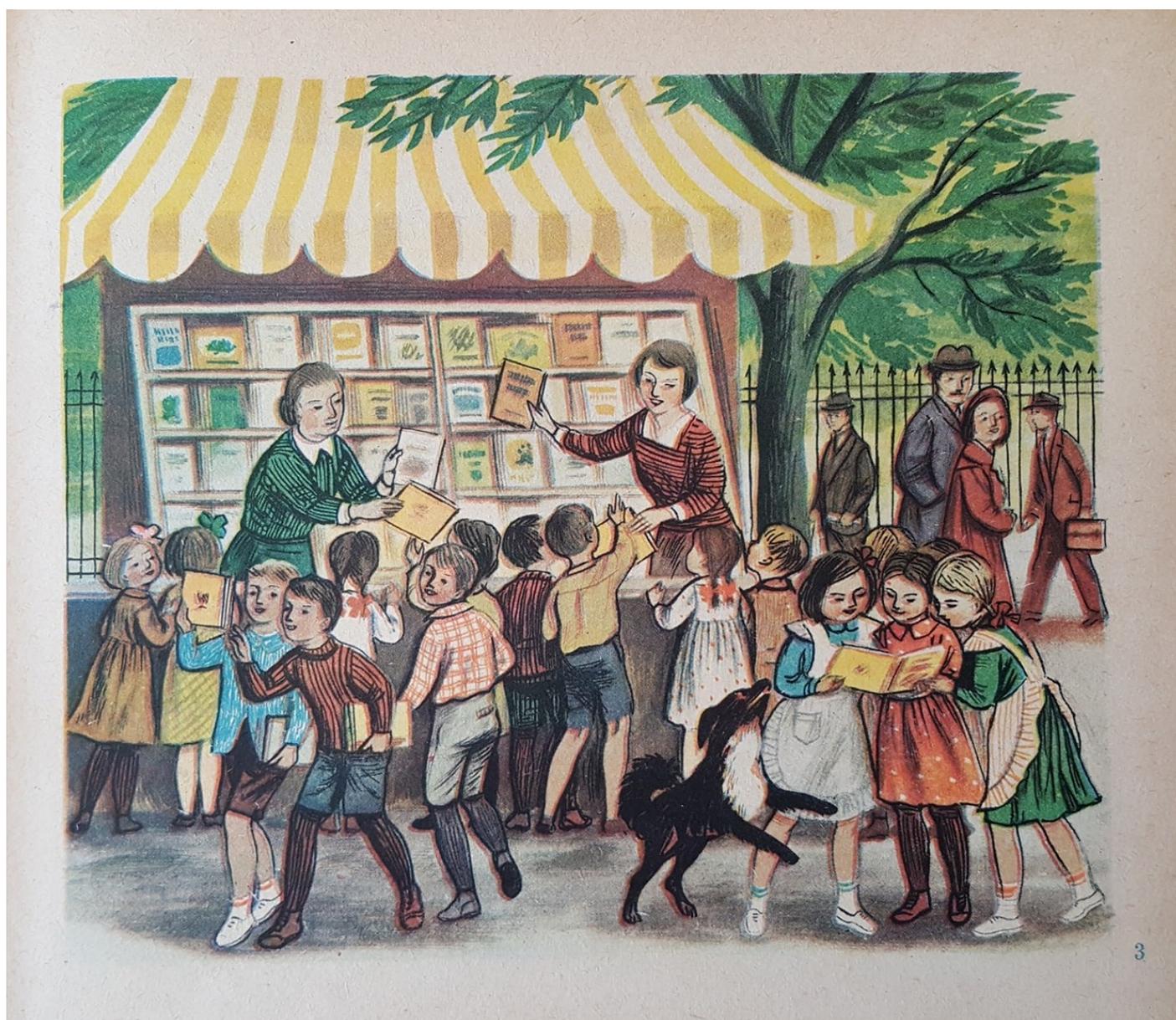
parents. They are open on a table or put on a chest of drawer. Books are part of the family life.

This presence confirms that during the PRL (1948-1989), education was the fertilizer to grow future Socialist citizens. Books were promoted as a vector of progress. Poland had a thriving publishing industry. Books were indeed accessible and cheap. The orientation of topics and the selection of authors can definitely be discussed.

## Elementarz

In *Elementarz*, there has some recurrent characters (Ala, Ola, Janek, Tomek) but the book mentions some 60 different first names. This diversity builds a strong appropriation by little readers. The stories told, the pictures seen are about them.

The picture below shows a book distribution near a public garden. This is a double statement. First, reading a book can bring more pleasure than playing. Second, when they are shared, books are a powerful link between all the children.





### NASI KOLEDZY

To są nasi bliźsi i dalsi koledzy z różnych krajów. My się jeszcze z nimi nie znamy. I mało o sobie wiemy. Ale jak się ze sobą poznamy, na pewno się pokochamy. Będziemy zgodnie się uczyć. Zgodnie będziemy pracować. Weźmiemy się wszyscy za ręce. Zrobimy wielkie koło. I bawić się będziemy zgodnie i wesoło.

#### Global Vision

Elementarz shares a very optimistic perspective regarding the rest of the world. In the countryside, a group of children is parading and waving flags of friendly countries: Hungary, Soviet Union, China, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Italia and France. One flag is not identified.

The children join hands to emphasize harmony and solidarity. They walk together happily in the same direction (to the left!).

The text reads: "*To są nasi bliźsi i dalsi koledzy z różnych krajów*". Even if the kids of the world don't know each other's and probably will never meet, they will work together for a better world.

### BAMBO

Murzynek Bambo w Afryce mieszka,  
Czarną ma skórę ten nasz koleżka.

Uczy się pilnie przez całe ranki  
Ze swej murzyńskiej pierwszej czytanki.

A gdy do domu ze szkoły wraca,  
Psoci, figluje - to jego praca.

Aż mama krzyczy: - Bambo, łobuzie.  
A Bambo czarną nadyma buzię.

Mama powiada: - napij się mleka.  
A on na drzewo mamie ucieka.

Mama powiada: - chodź do kąpieli.  
A on się boi, że się wybieli.

Lecz mama kocha swojego synka,  
Bo dobry chłopak z tego Murzynka.

Szkoda, że Bambo czarny, wesoły  
Nie chodzi razem z nami do szkoły.



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Murzyn-Murzynek • kolega-koleżka • czyta-czytanka

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This story is by all extent the most controversial of the book. *Elementarz* conveys a deriding vision of Africa with *Bambo*, a poem of Julian Tuwim. Little boy Bambo is a “murzynek” who lives in Africa – no country is mentioned. *Murzyn* is the Polish word for “nigger”.

The picture displays all the usual stereotypes

with a woman in coloured boubou, a thatched hut house and coconut trees. Bambo wears a loincloth and climbs a coconut. The two characters have no faces.

The text reads “*Too bad that black and joyful Bambo doesn’t go with us to school*”. In the 1950s, such picturing and reading were not offensive. Today, it would be unacceptable.

## Elementarz



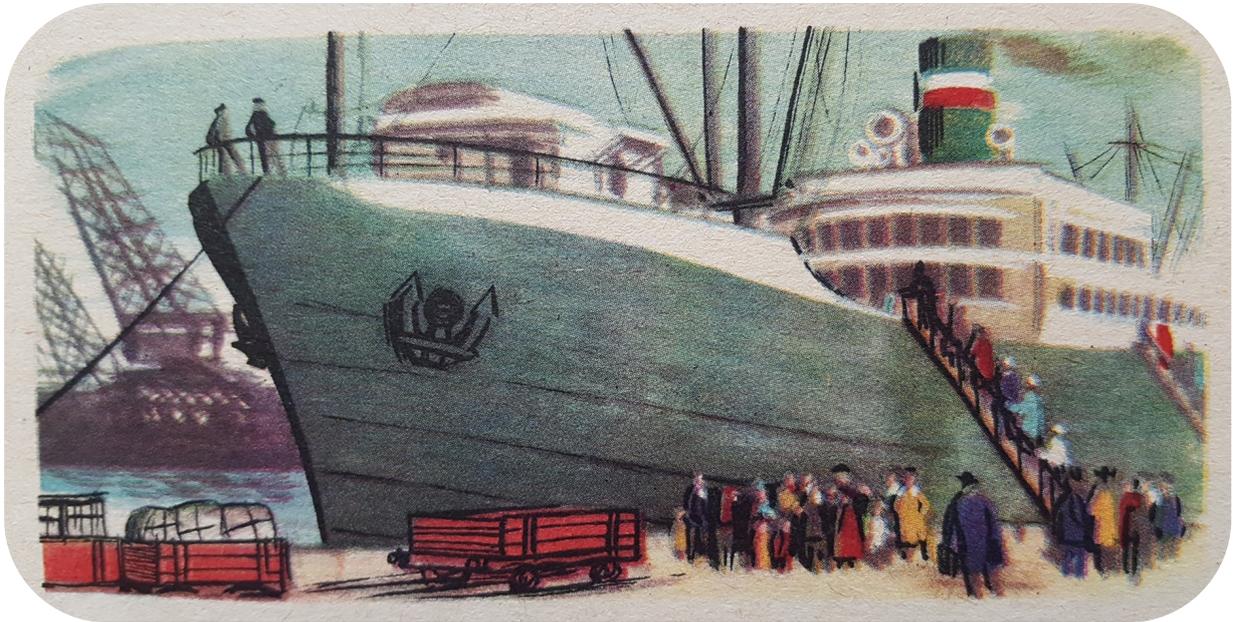
An unidentified little girl (possibly Ela) travels with her Mom by plane. The destination or provenance are not mentioned.

There is doubt that such story would strike the imagination of First Graders aged 5 to 6. The presence of a

butterfly makes this flying experience an everyday possibility.

The plane is an artist interpretation that mix elements of the Douglas DC-2 (USA) and Ilyushin Il-14 (Soviet Union). Two aircraft operated by the national carrier LOT in the mid-1950s.

## Elementarz



A big ship is ready to go. Passengers are hurrying to embark. Unidentified children are among them.

The text doesn't specify the location and the name of the ship. The text doesn't specify the destination either. The size of this ship hints a travel of several days. Here again, *Elementarz* leaves the details to the imagination of the reader.

In the mid-1950s, Gdynia was the main port for passengers traffic. However, the picture above doesn't report the suspended walkway of the Gdynia terminal. In the background, the view of giant cranes suggests that this port might be Gdansk.

The ship is an artist interpretation the MSS Sobieski (to be confirmed) with many elements of pre-war ships.

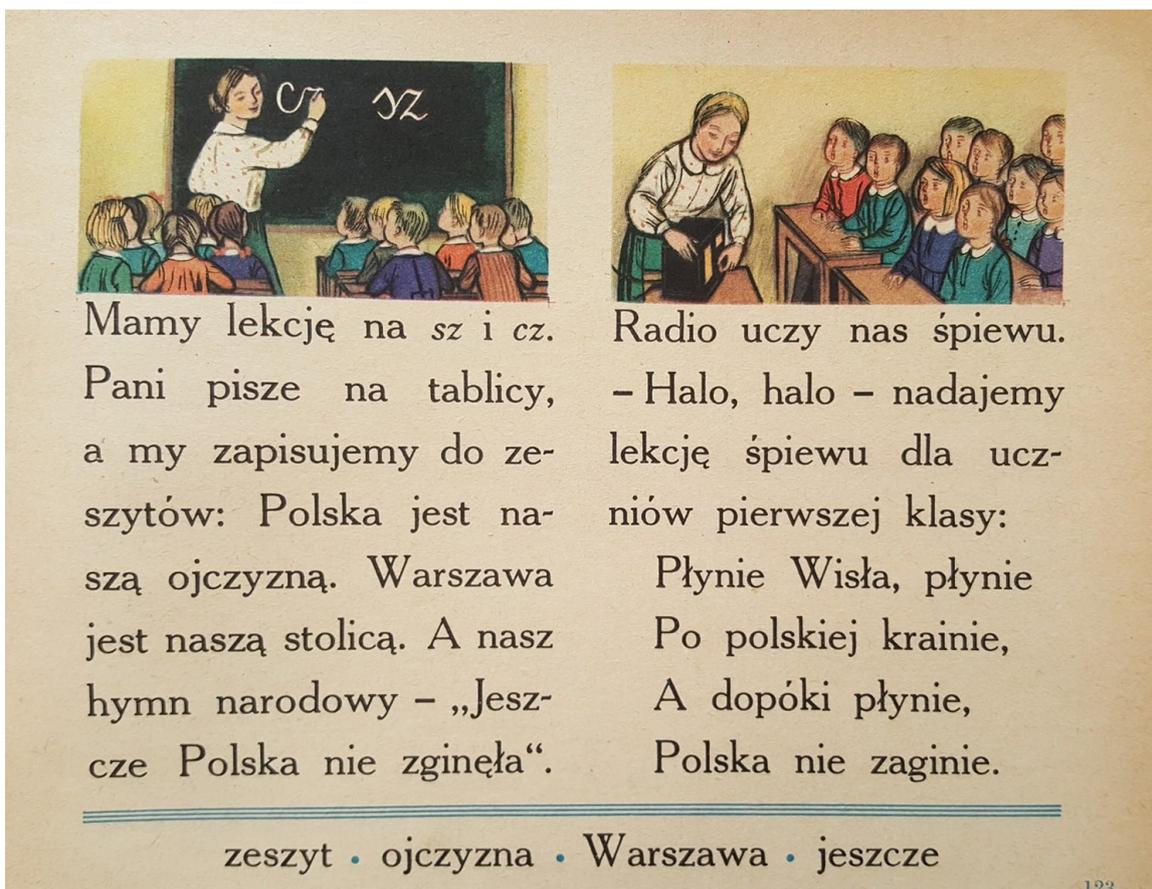
### Inspiring Patriotism

Unambiguously, *Elementarz* calls children to express patriotism. The flag of Poland is flying here and there. The lesson on sz and cz emphasizes the feeling of national identity: “Poland is our homeland. Warszawa is our capital. And our national anthem is Poland is not yet lost”.

The popular patriotic song *Flows Vistula, flows* echoes the statement about eternal

Poland. The children are singing during the music lesson on the radio. Warsaw is celebrated as the beating heart of the nation.

The book ends with “*Ojczyzna*”, a poem declaring pride and love for the homeland. This poem acknowledges that Poland is far from perfect but work and solidarity make life better. The last page is a map of Poland with main cities and rivers. Neighbouring countries are not mentioned.



## Elementarz



Jaka wielka jest Warszawa!  
Ile domów, ile ludzi!  
Ile dumy i radości  
W sercach nam stolica budzi.

Ile ulic, szkół, ogrodów,  
Placów, sklepów, ruchu, gwaru,  
Kin, teatrów, samochodów  
I spacerów, i obszaru.

Aż się stara Wisła cieszy,  
Że stolica tak urosła,  
Bo pamięta ją maleńką,  
A dziś taka jest dorosła.

spacer-spacerów • mała-maleńka • rosła-dorosła

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This poem of Julian Turwin pays a tribute to the resilience of Warsaw, a city that was destroyed by 80% during WWII. The text reads:

*How great is Warsaw!  
How many houses, how much people!  
How much pride and joy  
The capital raises us by our hearts!*

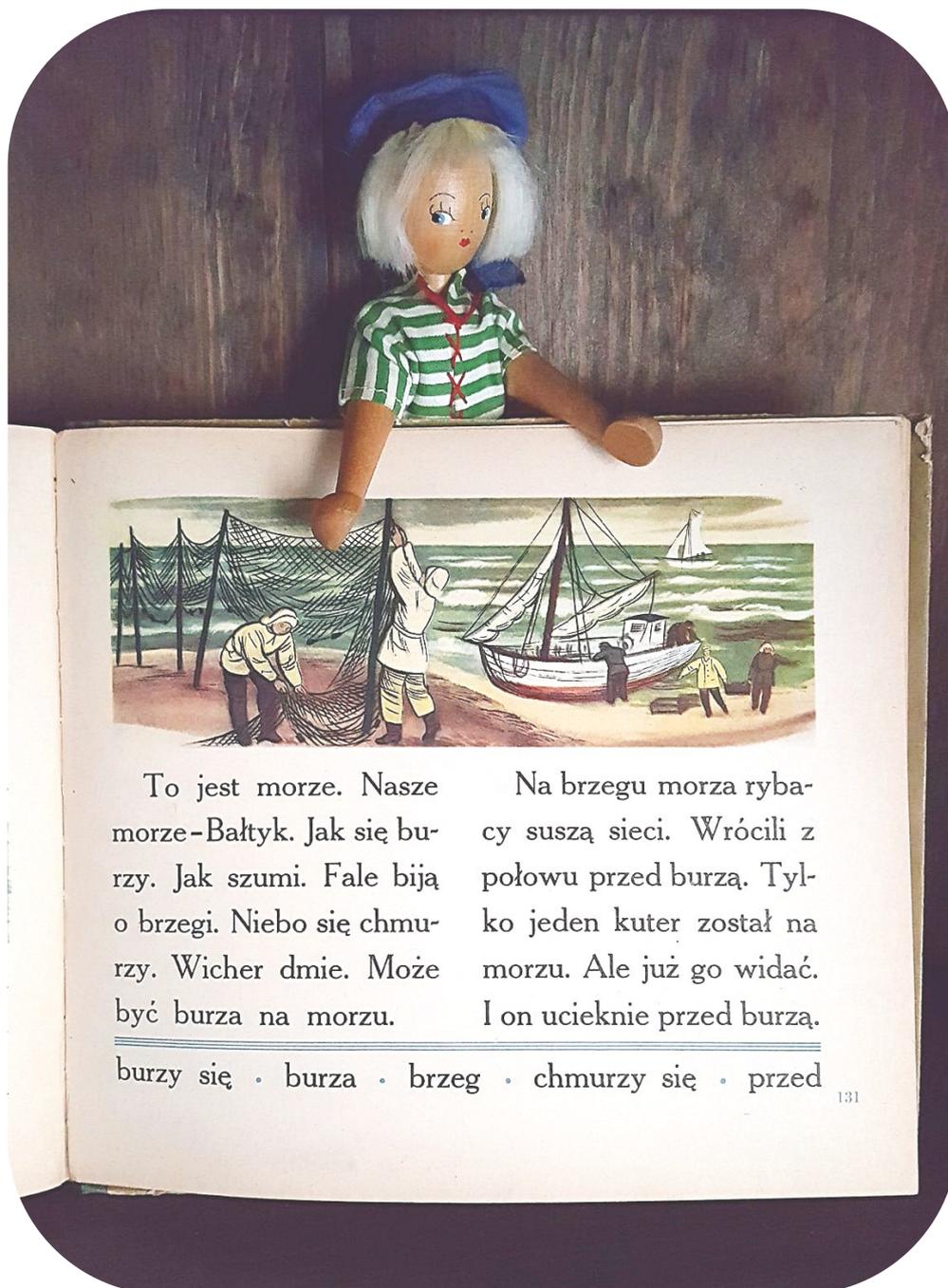
*How many streets, schools, gardens,  
Squares, shops, traffic, bustle,*

*Cinemas, theatres, cars  
And walks and places!*

*So happy is the old Vistula*

*That the capital has grown so much  
Because she remembers her a little one,  
And today she is such an adult.*

The picture above shows the Trasa W-Z (East-West Road), a major urban highway constructed during the immediate afterwar.



To jest morze. Nasze morze-Bałtyk. Jak się burzy. Jak szumi. Fale biją o brzegi. Niebo się chmurzy. Wicher dmie. Może być burza na morzu.

burzy się • burza • brzeg • chmurzy się • przed

Na brzegu morza rybacy suszą sieci. Wrócili z połowu przed burzą. Tylko jeden kuter został na morzu. Ale już go widać. I on ucieknie przed burzą.

The book also states that the Baltic Sea is “*nasze Morze*”, referring to past struggles to keep an access to the sea. The text reads that fishers are preparing to face a storm - this might be an allusion to WWII that began with the bombing of the Westerplatte peninsula on 1st September 1939.



### OJCZYŻNA

Są kraje, gdzie są smaczniejsze lody  
I domy większe, i samochody,  
Gdzie bułki bielsze od naszej bułki,  
Szkoły ładniejsze od naszej szkółki.

Są kraje większe, bogatsze kraje,  
Lecz nam się w domu lepiej wydaje.  
Choć mamy dla nich wiele przyjaźni,  
Lecz w domu zawsze jakoś jest różniej.

Niech więc pracują na swojej ziemi,  
A my wolimy żyć ze swoimi  
I sprawiedliwie dzielić się chlebem  
Pod wspólnym dachem - ojczystym niebem.

smaczne - smaczniejsze • ładne - ładniejsze

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*Są kraje, gdzie są smaczniejsze lody  
I domy większe, i samochody.  
Gdzie bułki bielsze od naszej bułki,  
Szkoły ładniejsze od naszej szkółki.*

There are countries where ice cream is tastier  
And houses and cars are bigger.  
Where the breads are whiter than our breads,  
Schools are prettier than our little schools.

*Są kraje większe, bogatsze kraje,  
Lecz nam się w domu lepiej wydaje.  
Choć mamy dla nich wiele przyjaźni,  
Lecz w domu zawsze jest jakoś różniej.*

There are larger countries, richer countries,  
But we feel better at home.  
Though we have many friendships for them,  
But it's always better at home.

*Niech więc pracują na swojej ziemi,  
A my wolimy żyć ze swoimi  
I sprawiedliwym dzielić się chlebem  
Pod wspólnym dachem - ojczystym niebem.*

So let them work on their land,  
And we prefer to live in our own  
And with an equal share the bread  
Under one single roof - the homeland sky.

## Elementarz



In this document, all the pictures are coming from the same book. Photographies were taken at different times and colours may differ. We apologize for this inconvenience and we strongly invite readers to check the amazing quality of the illustrations in a vintage copy of *Elementarz*.

# Elementarz

