



**TRADITIONS AND LITERARY INSPIRATIONS IN THE LOCAL
ACTIVITIES OF MARIA KONOPNICKA PUBLIC LIBRARY IN
SUWALKI: UNIVERSAL VALUES AS AN EFFECTIVE
KNOWLEDGE MEDIUM AND BUILDING BLOCK OF LOCAL
CONSCIOUSNESS**

Dr Jadwiga Nowacka

University in Bialystok, Poland
Public Library in Suwalki

INTRODUCTION

The year 1989 gave our country two, among others, fundamental legislative changes: free-market economy and local government, which influenced all aspects of social life. After forty five years of functioning in a planned economy, based on national centralism, it was not easy for institutions and citizens to find themselves in a new reality. However, the change of governments that followed, both left- and right-wing, showed the changes are lasting and one should acknowledge them together with their consequences.

The new situation requires every action to be strictly based on following an economic account. It is essential to leave the “it’ll be alright” thought, deeply rooted in the polish consciousness. In the previous system it was unthinkable for there to be no money for crucial (for various reasons) activities. Currently, as in a functional household, one needs not only finance every planned expense but in addition to that, it is principal to build up a reserve in case of unplanned circumstances occurring. The phrase: “I can only do as much as I can afford” sounds minimalistic, especially in context of the famous call of young romantics: „judge your strengths based on intentions not intentions on strengths”. In practice a difficulty arises when trying to reach a reasonable compromise between these two stances. As they formed through the years and one needs many more years to change them. We thus need to treat – closely tied with human stances – the process of shaping the identity and information exchange of one’s home region, seen and acted upon by a public library’s activities for the betterment of multicultural environments.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES AND „HUNGER FOR KNOWLEDGE” ON LOCAL TRADITIONS

Institutions tied to education and culture suffered the most after the new economic account's introduction. Already having to deal with an economic crisis, the changes only made matters worse. The self-government reform has also aroused various fears. Schooling as well as most cultural institutions were given over to the self-governments. New rules of functioning had to be devised as the previous ones no longer applied.

Maria Konopnicka Public Library has underwent all these changes twofold – after the crucial year of 1989, the year 1998 turned out to likewise be revolutionary in its consequences when the country's administrative division was changed. Suwalki stopped being a capital city of the voivodeship, which gave way to a flood of institutional changes. The library ended its role as a voivodeship institution and began to limit its activities to the city borders. It was not easy to come to terms with the degradation, which is what nearly everyone felt the situation to be. However, it was soon discovered that it gave new chances which merely needed to be noticed and used.

Governing oneself is equal to being open to local communities. It gives nigh unlimited possibilities for the appearance of a natural drive to activity. Acting for the benefit of the closest environment, in contract to the macro scale, they are visible and bring near instantaneous results. This is turn encourages to take further action. After all, we never complained about a lack of enthusiastic locals eternally loyal to their own little homelands. They gathered various remembrances, meaningless at first glance, but most important to them as they pertained to the earth that bore them. They could talk about events rarely read of in history course books for hours, so important to the area they took place in. It is because of such a need Suwalki became not only a mention in Maria Konopnicka's life but found its rightful place as the city of her childhood where the future author's sensitivity developed. Slowly, although with great effort, the city writes itself into the life of our Noble prize winner Czesław Miłosz. The poet's family settled here in the thirties, in fact, they grew into the city's life – the father worked in Powiat Starosty taking care of local roads while his brother Andrzej graduated from the local secondary school. Czesław Miłosz, by then a student at the Stefan Batory University in Wilno, used to visit his parents, an event which was imprinted on many a letter from Suwalki to his friends. Some poems, including one of the more well known *Wieczorem wiatr*, he wrote in the nearby Krasnogród where his aunts run a guesthouse. Years passed before he decided to visit the places „where youth wandered”, *Powrót*, surprisingly direct in its subject matter, joined these poems. We learned from it that in Krasnogród he nearly committed suicide because of the indifference of one chosen by his heart. Many similar facts await discovery or popularisation.

Maria Konopnicka Public Library can make a major contribution to this, as the local community has an interest in it while at the same time it benefits from the local government's goodwill. It went through major changes in recent years – which were



mentioned earlier – but it is just the beginning of a long trek leading to the development of a Library worthy of its time and social expectations.

THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN CHANGES

Poland's biggest challenge was entering the European Union together with other countries, including Lithuania, a direct neighbour and in many ways a partner of Suwalki's region. The largest and most closely tied group of Lithuanian ethnic minority in Poland is located on our soil. On one hand this demonstrates local colour and cultural richness, while on the other, in accordance with European standards, it applies additional duties on the self-government.

There is no need to unlock open doors to adjust our country to European requirements. Western European countries have already threaded this path and we should certainly learn from their experiences. The awareness of this accompanies Polish changes since the beginning, training courses, discussion meetings and science conferences all act as proof. Library environment also has a part in this, including Maria Konopnicka Public Library in Suwalki.

In 2003, an expanded and more up to date version of the IFLA and UNESCO Public libraries manifesto was published in its fourth edition. It did not contain any major changes that would significantly alter the role of libraries. However, in terms of countries which only now leave a centralised managing system, the very first sentence defining a public library made one think: „a public library is an organisation established, supported and financed by the community through local, regional or national authorities or other social institutions” [notes – J.N.] It is hard to create a clearer location for libraries in the community and stating once and for all who it should benefit.

Other phrases also seem obvious to local communities e.g., in the definition of a public library we read: „it is [...] available to all community members no matter their race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, health (disabled), economic or employment status nor education”. The mention of race and nationality would cause surprise in many areas of our country, especially considering their uniformity in that regard. However, the situation changes, foreigners appear everywhere and they are even – which until recently seemed unthinkable – democratically elected to lead local authorities.

THE MULTICULTURAL NATURE OF THE REGION OF SUWALKI

In Suwalki, a border city, this phrase makes one think of a seemingly obvious fact, although not upheld by all – the unity with Lithuanians living in the region of Suwalki for centuries. It is very important as due to a poor knowledge of Lithuanian among Poles, we know very little about our closest neighbours.



The presented concepts of a public library's functioning as a local institution I have based on contacts with the local governing body as well as on professional experiences stemming from years spent working in this Library which underwent many troubling times. It needs to be said that regionalism has been an important direction in our library's activities. All publications pertaining to the region of Suwalki were being gathered; we remembered of writers connected with it, while beginning with the eighties, local authors were given special care. Few literary environments found such kindness coming from an institution responsible for the culture of a region as came from Public Library in Suwalki.

It took mere twenty years (which in a culture is a blink of an eye) to speak, without being forced, about local authors, organise promotions of their next books, meetings with readers which garnered as much interest as the visits of well-known authors. It is not however the 'whole truth' about the region's literature, for a wider perspective one needs to reach for many scientific publications. In this vein, to resolve the regionalism issue it is required to look for the untapped potential of Suwalki's library. So as to not distract with incidental events, I will focus on authors already mentioned – Maria Konopnicka and Czesław Miłosz.

This comparison may cause various comments to appear, starting from a notable, old remark of our Noble Prize Winner, surprised by the atmosphere around expectations towards him he encountered during his first in many years visit to Poland, who said he ... is afraid to become the second Konopnicka. The environment's lack of an emotional reaction to these words can probably only be explained by the polish writer's highest award. Not many Noble Prize Winners were so loved by their compatriots like the not a Noble Prize winning Maria Konopnicka, even in these day there is an increase in voices asking for her rightful status in the national pantheon to be restored.

THE PATH TO KNOWLEDGE OF OUTSTANDING LOCAL AUTHORS

The Public Library in Suwalki's patron – Maria Konopnicka is the author of the most beautiful children's books! She joined together with Andersen and the heroes of their works ... the poetry saints by the decision of Rev. Jan Twardowski, a modern poet and dearly beloved in Poland:

*Holy Cinderella found in shadow
Holy Little Girl with dawn's Matches
orphan Maria saint Andersen
saint Maria Konopnicka*

*childhood has passed
the table burned
time a tired bee*



*Guardian Angel retired
Because the world went under¹*

I will return to the works of the greatest poet for young readers, here I would like to note the still unused opportunities for the region's culture tied with the part of Maria Konopnicka's biography pertaining to Suwałki's region.

Every step needs to be taken to make the fact that the author was born and raised in Suwałki became not only known but to create out of it a separate value as is the case with Nowogródek in Mickiewicz's biography. Nearly all those who write about Konopnicka merely mention her place of birth before swiftly transporting the future writer to Kalisz. Such is the case in the popular "encyclopaedic guide" Polish literature: "... born 23 V 1842 in Suwałki [...] She spent her childhood (from 1849) and youth in Kalisz". It is a known fact that early in childhood we experience the reality surrounding us with greatest depth, just like a child – with all of our skin. Similarly, the author of The Dictionary of Polish writers writes: „... born in Suwałki [...] she spent her youth in Kalisz”. While reading these generalisations one wants to ask the literature researchers if they have completely forgotten about Mickiewicz's confession of childhood years' homeland.

A detailed research needs to be conducted on the subject of the author's childhood, reconstructing the years she spent in Suwałki day by day. Life in a provincial – although a governorate – city was composed of the usual rituals. The few intellectuals were most likely closely knit together; they visited each other, uphold a social life, went to church, met on walks. It is possible they also raised their children in similar ways, for instance they recommended nannies or helper girls to each other.

As part of Days of Maria Konopnicka it might be useful to enliven the situation that took place between one hundred fifty-eight to one hundred sixty-five years ago, which should not be a problem as it is possible to reconstruct the area's topography in great detail, as it hardly changed, much like the landscape and the clouds ever flowing through the sky.

It is crucial to initiate new strictly literary research, as although there are many works on Konopnicka's poetry, there was no deep analyse of her metaphors and art of portrayal, central to our understand of important issues, such as answering the question what shaped her sensitivity and imagination as well as the poetic portrayal of knowledge about the childhood world.

How important are the landscapes remembered from childhood in portraying the poetic world, can be seen by looking into the poems made in Krasnogród by another poet of

¹ M. Konopnicka, *Willa Wolkonskich*, glosa Waldemar Smaszcz, Suwalki 1998.



Suwałki – Czesław Miłosz. The most well known poem Evening wind ... in its very title mentions the picture known to all who visited the region of Suwałki at least once:

*Evening wind. Driven out
of darkness, their heads rolling
in front of a chimney fire's shine.
A dog listening to shadows
thought stone with a mouth full of paws.
Above a cloud walked, and beyond
Herds of foam clouds run [...]*²

This part, preceding dangerous, catastrophic visions of the next part, is simply a poetical description of an evening in a living room. Behind the windows you can hear wind, the night falls, the fireplace is lit up and then the previously unseen characters – as we read – are „driven out of darkness, like children caught red handed.” The poem's space does not limit itself to a closed room. The titular evening wind leads the imagination into the infinity of space, beyond the heavens.

This portrayal is of course merely the backdrop to the poem's literary action but we are interested in it as a note of an actual time and place, changed into apocalyptic visions by the poet's strength of imagination.

The poet took out of places – let us repeat – where his „youth wandered” many remembered pictures. They accompanied him his whole life, even though he learned of new countries and continents. Those first impressions remained untouched and even, as he wrote in his poem Return – “identical”:

*I recognised the smells, the lines of post-glacial hills, oval bowls of lakes.
I forced my way through vines, where a park once was, but
I did not find the alley traces.*

*I stood near water and just like then, a wave gently wrinkled
Inconceivable identity, inconceivable divide. [...]*³

It is likely the elements of Suwałki's landscape can also be found in Maria Konopnicka's poetry, proving the poet used imagination formed in childhood. We can only regret that – I will repeat – it is an underexplored concept, in contrast to Czesław Miłosz's ties with Suwałki, even though it was not the land he was born on. The richness of these ties make it so that our Noble Prize Winner, a citizen of the world, can at the same time be accepted as one of the most important representatives of Suwałki's regional literature.

² Z. Faltynowicz, *Gdzie jeziora syte przestrzenią obłoków. Suwalszczyzna w poezji*, Suwałki 1998, s. 21.

³ Ibidem, s. 168-169.



It is proven both by his literary work and the fact from the author's biography. It should be noted that during his first visit to Poland in the historic 1981 year, the poet stopped at Suwalki while travelling from Lomża to Gdansk, where he was a guest at a literary session To be a poet. At the time people wrote that it was because of a longing for the beloved Wilno of his youth, which seemed to be gone once and for all. However, today after many unknown facts from his life came to light, we would say that he wanted to immerse himself in the landscape of his youth and first poems, which were also created on Suwalki's land.

Miłosz's presence among authors tied to Suwalki opens many prospects to the region's library. The interest in his work as well as his biography allows young and old readers and literature researchers to learn of the place that was imprinted on the poet's achievements. Therefore we should think about organising meetings on the subject of our Noble Prize Winner.

SUBJECT OF SPECIAL INTEREST – LITHUANIANS IN THE REGION OF SUWALKI

An important aspect of Suwalki's library as a local institution, due to the close location of Suwalki, is openness towards the Lithuanian ethnic minority and on their country. The Podlasie Voivodeship – in the context of Poland – is a mosaic varied in national, religious and cultural elements. Most of Podlasie is inhabited by the Orthodox Belarusian minority and a group of Islamic Polish Tartars. The region of Suwalki is different in that respect, the largest minority is that of Lithuanians who, like the vast majority of Poles, are Roman Catholic.

Relations with Lithuania, although not without problems, mainly stemming from historical events, are closest to European standards. The relations with Belarus were made difficult due to political situations, largely due to their leadership style. In Bialystok where the Belarussian minority is large enough to have its representatives in local government, working together on a local level are easier. Gathering information on the situation of polish Lithuanians is made more challenging due to the language barrier. Naturally, it is not cause to stop working in unity.

From this fact stem important goals in the Public Library's activities. Its offer, in accordance with democratic criteria, should represent a variety of knowledge, thoughts and opinions. However, a public library's task of providing equal accessibility of service to all readers is crucial. It quite often requires much effort on the institution's side. In recent years the main problem of disabled people were solved by installing access points and lifts. Even before that, thanks to library-buses, people living in small villages were given access to books. The sign of new times is caring for national minorities, making sure they have the means to retain their identity through a special library offer, not just in terms of borrowing books but also by subscribing to magazines



and organisation of meetings on the subject of various cultures. This offer must also include the translating of local literature into Lithuanian.

TRADITIONS OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH AND TRANSBORDER ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The biggest boon Maria Konopnicka Public Library has in following through with these activities is the existing for ten years organisational structures of Euroregion NIEMEN. An agreement called the Transborder Relationship was signed on the 6th June 1997 by representatives of the Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian sides in Augustow. Thanks to economic relations, prejudices were broken while direct relations between many environments, institutions and individuals were formed. At present, following the economy, many educational and cultural initiatives are in development.

The public library, enthusiastically reacting to all that takes place in local society, took initiative in areas important to both sides. With Lithuania – as is known – we are connected through history. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania gave birth to many famous Poles, Adam Mickiewicz – one of the most talented poets of Polish Renaissance began the national epic Pan Tadeusz thusly “Lithuania, my homeland ...” It is useful to mention here the Nowogródek born poet, who else would be better as the patron of Euroregion NIEMEN? He does not just unite three nations: Poland, Lithuania and Belarus, in his works he also indicated the Republic of Both Nations as an example of two people uniting without war or violence. In one of his earlier poems, entitled To Joachim Lelewel, he showed an incredible political and national awareness by writing:

*Thus you will turn, from each foot
that you from Niemien, a Pole,
European*

He emphasised his connection to the dearest homeland, that which shapes us from the beginning of our years; then he mentioned the political homeland, which history, religion, spirituality create a foundation for our national awareness; finally, he spoke of the highest European homeland which culture made us who we are.

Many have lived near Niemen, different nationalities, religions and cultures, even the mysterious ones, such as the Karaites – brought here by prince Witold of Crimea. The Republic of Both Nations respected their laws and provided freedoms unheard of anywhere else. It created a special multicultural tradition, further helping various activities. To this day The Grand Duchy of Lithuania’s phenomenon sparks interest in Europe, its heirs, such as Czesław Miłosz, cannot free themselves of – in the whole sense of the word – this “fatal force”.

The region of Suwalki and Lithuania – which I mentioned earlier while talking about Czesław Miłosz – is tied not only by a similar landscape but also by the traits of their



people and communities. Thus it is easier to overcome misunderstandings. The opinion crafting environments have watched the Polish path since the beginning of political changes, trying to take the most out of the experience.

Maria Konopnicka Pulic Library does not work in a vacuum, it can make decisions not only “for today”, but even ones dealing with the future. It is made important as Polish politics did not always take into account far reaching plans when it comes to Lithuania. At least a few years were if not wasted then severely underused. It is difficult to come to a cold opinion, considering the emotions for the east Reaches of the Republic of Poland, and especially Wilno.

Probably the better results in the field of culture are brought by direct - open relations with Lithuanians rather than – the noble – assisting merely in closed environments pertaining to Poland. It is likely such a mistake was made in respect to the Polish literary environment in Wilno. A great commotion was caused in the second half of the eighties when a group of poets writing passionately in Polish emerged. It appears that the first poetry volume in Poland was published in the poetical series of Suwalki. In the 1992 edition of *The little dictionary of polish authors in foreign lands*⁴, a separate category was included where a prominent place was taken by poets of Wilno. In respect to their determination in saving and enriching their native language, some of them travelled to this compendium definitely “by force”. Time verified those hurried choices, time and lately ... Lithuanian authors.

Not long ago two well made bilingual, Polish and Lithuanian, poetry volumes were published by authors: Zbigniew Herbert and Alicja Rybałko. For many it is a surprising combination – one of the most talented Polish poets next to one from Wilno, mentioned in many essays next to Romuald Mieczkowski, Henryk Mażula, Wojciech Piotrowicz, Józef Szostakowski. Lithuanians showed great care as Alicja Rybałko is truly a fine poet whose works cannot be transplanted into a Polish environment.

Maria Konopnicka Public Library should go that way – present authors not because they personify the Polish nature of Wilno but because of artistic merit. In addition it is worth to have Lithuanian authors next to Polish authors, thus getting to know each other and lead to translating each other’s poems. It is very important, especially since there are not many translators offering services into the Lithuanian language.

As Lithuanian education takes place in the region of Suwalki, initiating a student exchange as part of so called “green school” can be useful. It is the now studying youth that will without prejudice take actions to partner with our neighbours in the European Union.

While discussing Maria Konopnicka’s work, I noted I would come back to her work addressed to the youngest readers. Certainly, it is the liveliest part of it. Most polish kids

⁴ B. Klimaszczewski, E.R. Nowakowska, W. Wyskiel, *Mały słownik pisarzy polskich na obczyźnie*, Warszawa 1992.

were raised on stories such as *Orphan Marry and the dwarfs*, *Wandering Janko* as well as Berry picking. However, this part of her work was rarely given into a critical literary analysis, although (perhaps because) it is often repeated that for kids one writes like for adult only harder. On one of the meetings in Suwalki's library, the literary critic Waldemar Smaszcz presented interesting observations. In addition to presenting a book about Franciszek Karpiński he also pointed out Adam Mickiewicz's words on the famous idyll *Laura and Filon*: „*Everything here is national, Polish: the landscape, the evening music of dogs barking in every village, the forest closing the horizon, all the details and the raspberries and the plaited things, all of it taken from a common Polish life. The whole of Karpiński's work has this birthmark*⁵” [*underline - J.N.*].

After that the critic expanded his view of this portrayal as a metaphor in the introduction to the poetry volume *Fleeing horizons* by Borys Russki „*The experience of a horizon is one of the most intense experiences of one's youth. Probably each of us had at least once run with great determination to the line that promised so much – we could touch the sky, merely by running ... A lot of time had to pass before we understood that it may be the most beautiful illusion and the first metaphor of human life. [...] In our land [...] forests had for centuries closed the horizon. [...] A human entering a forest had the right to think he is passing through the border, he starts to immerse himself in the other side's reality. Thus he absorbed everything appearing before his eyes, defeating his own fear and ignoring all the obstacles*”⁶.

This statement „fits” with Maria Konopnicka's poems such as *Berry picking* as well as the tale *Orphan Marry and the dwarfs*. By using the horizon metaphor, we can read it in such a way so as to explain her world to children. A painter would most likely create a situation where the earth's line meets that of the sky but never touch each other as they are both buried in the forest. However, venturing through the forest, children would find themselves in a magical world, much like Alice on the other side of the mirror.

The tale *Orphan Marry and the dwarfs* brings forth another challenge come forth. Years ago a tome by Wił Huygen *Gnomes*⁷ was published; it included a detailed analysis of the titular characters. It seems that Maria Konopnicka's story provides at least two possibilities of popularising our gnomes not just among Polish children. Maybe it would be possible to create a land of gnomes in Suwalki, a Gnomeland of sorts which would act as a meeting place for young readers no matter their differences. Children can nearly instantly make friendships, play and take joy from all that is around them.

It is important mainly due to societies becoming alike, the expansion of Lego bricks and the longing after a visit to Legoland. Maria Konopnicka Public Library could offer children a trip to the wonderful land of dwarf tales, beings even smaller than the

⁵ A. Mickiewicz, *Literatura słowiańska. Kurs drugi*, [w:] A. Mickiewicz, *Dziela*, t.9, Warszawa 1997, s. 254.

⁶ W. Smaszcz, *W kręgu uciekającego horyzontu*, [w:] B. Russko, *Uciekające horyzonty*, Białowieża 2002, s. 5-6.

⁷ W. Huygen, *Skrzaty*, z franc. przeł. B. Durbajło, Warszawa 1991.



children themselves, inspiring the feelings of trust and compassion, even guardian instincts. It is one of many inspirations that are the subject of my presentation. After all, a library is not just a place to get books from. It is also a magical land which teaches the discovery and understanding of many phenomena, it often leads us through difficult paths of gaining knowledge ... into the horizon.