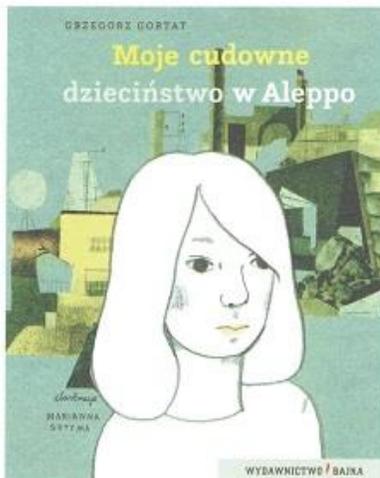


Instytut Książki Book Institute

My Wonderful Childhood in Aleppo

Now, when everyone around is saying so much about Syria, let's hear a voice from the very centre of the conflict – the voice of eight-year-old Jasmina from Aleppo. A voice tired of a war which is going on for yet another year. One surprised by this "dangerous adults' game" that affects children. Because after all children ought to be playing in real playgrounds. And play ball without being on crutches. A voice mature beyond its years, because children grow up much faster in wars, especially when they try to understand what adults are talking about and when younger brothers receive adult answers to their questions. We learn about situations and words no children should ever have to know. Stories like this should never have to happen – and yet they do, here and now, right beside us – thanks to Gortat's book we become stronger in the face of them.

Grzegorz Gortat (1957) – writer and translator. He writes for younger readers as well as adult ones. A three-time winner in competitions of the Polish Section of IBBY for *To the First Blood*, *Rats and Wolves* and *Ewelina and the Black Bird*. The novel *To the First Blood* received an award from the Polish Society of Book Publishers. His books are literarily sophisticated, deal with difficult and important issues and remain in the memory for a long time.



NOMINATION

IN THE COMPETITION OF THE POLISH SECTION OF IBBY FOR BOOK OF THE YEAR 2017

MOJE CUDOWNE DZIECIŃSTWO W ALEPPO

Grzegorz Gortat
Marianna Sztyma

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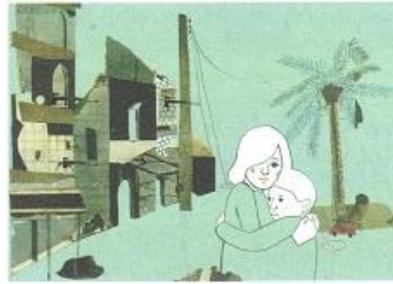
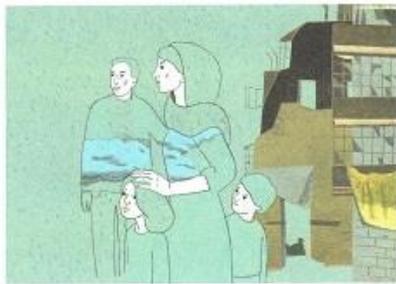
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Marianna Sztyma (1973) – painter and illustrator. A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań. She creates artwork for the print media, e.g. *Twój Styl*, *Charaktery* and *Newsweek* and illustrates children's books. She also draws comics and designs covers.



This is a children's book that every adult ought to read.

Janina Ochojska, Polish aid activist,
founder of the Polish Humanitarian Action



"I press my face against the cold wall. The surface riddled with bullet holes cools my forehead. I begin to count: "One... Two..." I draw out my words to give the other children more time. I'm thinking especially about Tariq. He's only three and runs slowly on his short legs. "Three..." I finish counting. I don't have to raise my voice. There's such a silence all round that if you listen out carefully you can hear the coughing of Mr Safiq from next door. I don't think there's a better place in the whole world to play hide and seek. You don't need to prepare anything special; wherever you look there are cracks, hollows and heaps of rubble. But when you run you have to look down so you don't tread on anything that could cause death. "Coming!" I slowly turn around and see Tariq's red shirt at once. He hadn't run far away but had crouched behind one of two surviving concrete pillars which had once held up the roof of the bus shelter. I pretend I can't see my little brother and I keep looking all around (...) Children play hide and seek like us all over the world. But we have an extra rule. An "iron rule" as my dad says – in a tone that can't be questioned. Under no circumstances can we move further than a hundred steps away from our house. When planes fly over we have to be able to get back in order to hide in the cellar."

+6

45

Grzegorz Gortat

My Wonderful Childhood in Aleppo

(Polish original: *Moje cudowne dzieciństwo w Aleppo*)

(A book for children every adult should read)

Summary

In a war-devastated Aleppo, one family is trying to live as normal a life as they possibly can. Jasmin is eight years old but she is much more mature than many of her peers in the world. Her brother Nabil, a boy of six, has hardly lived a day without the threat of air strikes and heavy shelling. Tariq is only three, one of the thousands of Syrian children who have not experienced living in a peaceful Syria.

Struggling hard to protect their children and provide them enough food and love to survive, the parents have their own secrets. Dad, who majored in American literature, regrets he did not use the time to learn something practical like how to bake bread when you have no flour. Mom stores white linen sheets at the bottom of the kitchen cupboard, making sure they are always clean and ironed and hoping she will never have to use them. In the condemned city, where former allies turn into enemies almost overnight, the family never knows whether the basement they hide in to seek protection from bombs will be their shelter or a grave.

Their neighbor Mr. Safik, once a university professor, has lost his own family. Harassed by “bandits” who want to force him out of the city, he refuses to give in. Knowledge, he tells Jasmin’s parents, is the most potent weapon every enemy fears. Even though emaciated and sick, he challenges his oppressors, a paragon to neighbors that dignity has no price.

In an environment that offers no certain future, children grow up fast. In order to protect her younger siblings, Jasmin pretends to believe her father’s assurances that corpses she sees in the street are mannequins from a nearby clothing store destroyed in last night’s air strike. Tariq hopes that those who drop bombs will one day run out of whatever bombs are made of. Nabil’s dream is to equal Hashim, a 13-year-old of unrivaled soccer skills. Hashim walks with crutches, and within days he sets up a team of one-legged soccer players like him. War may have mutilated the children of Aleppo, but it cannot deprive them of dreams. Like their peers across the globe, they have only one childhood to live.

1. A Big Playground

Dad told Mom, “It makes me sad children don’t even have a place to play.” I thought Dad was wrong. Just imagine, our entire neighborhood is like a playground. Actually, the whole city is like one big playground for children. All you need to have is a good idea. And we are in no shortage of good ideas.

Like building a house. It’s a lot of fun. Real bricks are all around. Not to mention sheet metal, plywood, iron rods, wire, pieces of wood, dishes of glass and aluminum. You can even find plastic furniture. It is a tiring job to bring all those things together but what fun you have then! Once the three of us, Nabil, Tariq, and I, built a real house. Well, almost a real house. You could get inside only on all fours, and the plastic roof would slip off if you tried to straighten up. Even Tariq had to crouch although he is only three years old. The bricks were loose and the whole building might cave in with one light push. It did not bother us. After all, it was not for real, just a play house.

In fact, the real homes, those built by adults, have turned out to be not much more lasting.

One day we set up a tower. It teetered from side to side but we were proud all the same because it was the tallest structure we had ever built. We were delighted as if it were the eighth wonder of the world. Soon, kids from the nearby ruins joined us. Hand in hand, we all danced around the tower, shouting as loud as we could.

All of a sudden, Dad came running, yelling at us and telling us to stop. “This heap of bricks might have collapsed and hurt you,” he argued. He was looking at the sky all the time, as if he wanted to make sure clouds were not gathering.

“Jasmin,” he continued to scold me as we headed home. “You should have been wiser than Nabil and Tariq. You are already eight years old.”

It occurred to me that it was something else that had scared him. A structure like this is easy to spot from the sky. A pilot flying high above a city could mistake a kid’s tower for a building where people live.

4. Mr. Safik's Silence

Mr. Safik paid us a visit. Just a few years back, Adil Safik was a professor at Aleppo University. He taught mathematics and physics. He lives in a neighboring tenement house – or rather in what is left of it.

In fact, it was my Dad who brought Mr. Safik to our house. Our guest is very old, he is at least fifty. He lives all alone because he lost his whole family in the second year of the war. Mom had long been persuading my Dad. “He’s all by himself,” she argued. “He has no one to speak to. And I’m sure he is starving.”

Mr. Safik stood in the doorway, holding the doorframe for support. He was tall and very thin. Since I last saw him, he had become thin like a stick. He made a move as if he wanted to retreat. He finally agreed to sit with us at the table. And immediately he started coughing. He is said to have some problem with his lungs. It must be something dangerous.

People very seldom visit each other these days, so the guest’s arrival was a great attraction for me. Nabil and Tariq also could not take their eyes off him. At first he was silent, nodding his head as our parents spoke. I was beginning to suspect he had become mute over the last few months. When he finally opened his mouth, I saw he had lost almost all his teeth. He would tear pancakes Mom made into small pieces, dip them in a lentil soup and put in his mouth with a face as if he were eating a roast lamb. He had twisted fingers and moved them with difficulty.

After dinner, Mom served coffee. We, children, were told to go to our room. I tried to stay as close as I could to the slightly open door, curious what they were going to talk about.

“And of what use is all my knowledge to me?” Dad complained.

“Stop it,” Mom interrupted him. “You would not say so if we lived in normal times.”

“Instead of studying American literature, I would do better by learning something practical.”

“Like what?” Mom said.

“How to bake bread without flour. Or how to warm the apartment when you run out of fuel. Or how to attach a board without nails and a hammer.”

“You are wrong,” Mr. Safik said.

“Am I? Tell me. What good is all the wisdom I got from books if I cannot feed my children?” Dad lowered his voice to a whisper but I could hear him say, “Or when THEY come?”

“I know perfectly well what you mean,” Mr. Safik said. “But I will stick to my point. Knowledge is our weapon. All they can do is wreak destruction. As long as we prevail over them with knowledge, they will never beat us.”

In the evening, when the guest was gone, I heard Nabil ask Dad, “What happened to Mr. Safik’s teeth?”

“They have fallen out because he is eating poorly. It’s because of vitamin deficiency,” Dad said and he quickly changed the subject.

It was the first time I caught Dad lying! Earlier he told Mom what really happened. Half a year ago bandits kidnapped Mr. Safik and took him to their neighborhood. They kept beating him till they broke his teeth. It was then that his problems with lungs and kidneys had also begun. They told him to leave the city and threatened next time he fell into their hands he would not get away with it.

At night I could not sleep. What happened to Mr. Safik kept coming back to me. And it made me uneasy to think Dad had lied to Nabil. But the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that if I were in Dad’s shoes, I would have done exactly as he did.

8. If God Had Better Sight

“Is God old?”

Dad looked at Nabil as someone being suddenly awakened from a deep sleep. “What do you mean?”

“Is he as old as Mr. Safik? Or maybe even older?”

We were preparing to go to bed and Nabil’s question left us all dumbfounded. Mom glanced at Dad as she finished dressing Tariq in his pajamas.

“Well, I do not know,” Dad stuttered. “God is timeless. We cannot determine his age.”

“So he must be very old,” Nabil concluded. “It is all clear now.”

“What is clear?”

“God is very old and thus he has poor sight and does not know what’s going on here. Good night.”

“Good night, son.”

14. Against All Facts

Our Dad led us to the destination. We were so impressed by what we saw that we were speechless. We stood agape and just looked. Seconds passed and none of us spoke for fear the spell might be gone.

Tariq gave a funny sigh. “A fairy mountain,” he said and pointed with his hand.

“What a pity Mom did not come,” Nabil said.

“It’s a pity,” Dad nodded in consent.

“A REAL WONDER!” was all I could say.

Daddy smiled. “I knew you, kids, would love it.”

He took Tariq in his arms to let him have a better view.

In the rays of the setting sun, the mountain sparkled like a huge crystal with uneven, ragged sides, studded with precious stones. In the sunlight, they shimmered a multitude of colors like real rubies, sapphires and topazes. The Diamond Mountain amid the ruins.

I could stand there and watch endlessly but suddenly Dad said in a tone that was hard to argue, “Let’s go. It’s getting late.”

After I took a few steps, I looked back. It was then that I understood why Dad urged us to go. The sun came down and the fairy mountain had again become what it really was: a heap of debris, glass, broken furniture, scrap metal, and shattered kitchen utensils.

And yet on my way home I thought it would be the fairytale image I would remember for the rest of my life. It will be with me like a talisman which brings good luck.

Mom greeted us with a sullen face. Dad had barely entered when she pounced on him. “Are you out of your mind? You’re taking a stroll with kids, wasting your time and putting their lives at risk?”

Mom could not control herself, screaming and sobbing alternately. Tariq clung to her and burst in tears too.

Dad put his finger to his mouth. It was a sign for us. He then hugged Mom and stroked her hair as if she were a baby.

“Look, Amina,” he said. “There is not much we can do for them. You know they will not have a normal childhood. No one will return them their lost years. It is not our fault, but a fact is a fact. Do you want to hear what I wish for them? I wish they’d preserve at least one beautiful

memory out of this whole nightmare. Something they will remember years later. Perhaps what they've seen today will prevail. And one day, against all facts, they will think: And yet I had a wonderful childhood.”