

# CONRAD'S NOBLE HERITAGE

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## 1

One of the most moving mementos of Conrad-Korzeniowski's childhood is a photograph showing him as a five-year-old boy wearing a braided jacket, tied with a broad belt, sitting on a tall chair so that his little feet cannot reach the floor. This little boy is a political prisoner. The picture was probably taken in 1863, during his and his parents' exile in Vologda, at the photographic studio of Stanisław Kraków. It is one of the earliest likenesses of the eminent English writer he was to become. But what is as interesting for us as this portrait is the text on its reverse. For there, a clumsy child's hand wrote the following dedication: "To my dear Granny, who helped me take cakes to my poor Daddy in prison. Your little grandson – Pole, Catholic and nobleman – KONRAD".<sup>1</sup> The dedication's addressee is Conrad's grandmother, Teofila Bobrowska.

This dedication, most probably dictated to little Konrad by one of his parents – his mother, Ewelina née Bobrowska, or his father, Apollo Korzeniowski – is the first attempt to determine the identity of the child in the photograph. This identity is understood here in three ways: national ("Pole"), religious ("Catholic") and social ("nobleman/*szlachcic*"). Such a manifestation in the case of someone born after the Partitions – in the borderland territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and belonging to a certain social class – was particularly significant, for it was an expression of the parents' educational efforts and a kind of declaration, which mattered all the more since it was made during their exile.

It is the third element of this declaration that will be of interest to us here: Conrad's membership of the social class called the *szlachta*, which in Polish means "the nobility".

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<sup>1</sup> A reproduction of this photograph and dedication can be found in Zdzisław Najder's book *Joseph Conrad. A Life*. Trans. Halina Najder. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2007, images 11 and 12; cf.: Zdzisław Najder. *Życie Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Gaudium, 2006, Vol. 1, images 8 and 9.

This will be all the more interesting since – as we can surmise – this was not an isolated affirmation, but the first display of one of the crucial elements of Conrad-Korzeniowski's personality. Thus the fundamental questions that we need to ask here are: what were the manifestations of Conrad's awareness of his membership of the *szlachta* and to what extent did this awareness shape his attitudes in his later life?

It is worth mentioning that declarations of his noble ancestry appear frequently in Conrad's correspondence as well as in those of his literary works which exhibit autobiographical elements. A few examples will demonstrate this. On 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1890, while on a journey to the Congo, Conrad wrote to his cousin Karol Zagórski, telling him about the difficult working conditions in this Belgian colony:

In a word, there are only 7 per cent who can do their three years' service. It's a fact! To tell the truth, they are French! [...] Yes! But a Polish nobleman, cased in British tar! What a concoction! *Nous verrons!* In any case I shall console myself by remembering – faithful to our national traditions – that I looked for this trouble myself.<sup>2</sup>

A few years later – in a kind of intensive course in the history of Polish literature (or rather culture) with elements of the intricacies of Polish noble genealogy – he informed his English friend Edward Garnett:

Then in the thirties of the 19th century (or forties) there was a novelist of about say – Trollope's rank (but not so good in his way) named Joseph Korzeniowski.

That is also my name but the family is different, my full name being Joseph Theodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski, the underlined word being the appellation of our trade mark as thus [SEAL HERE] = Nałęcz without which none are genuine. As a matter of fact I and Alfred Borys Konrad Korzeniowski are the only two of that particular brand of Korzeniowski in existence. There are other families whose arms are like mine but whose names are altogether different. This is a distinct bond – though not a relationship in any sense.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly afterwards he wrote to a librarian from the Jagiellonian Library, Dr Józef Korzeniowski, thanking him for sending him the *Memoirs* of his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. He addressed him courteously:

I hasten to acknowledge the receipt of the *Memoirs*, which reached me yesterday morning, and at the same time to thank you for your kindness in sending them.

Your so friendly letter, Sir, has given me the greatest pleasure. As we are bearers of the same name and have the same family crest there must surely be between us if not actual

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad to Karol Zagórski, 22 May 1890. *Conrad's Polish Background. Letters to and from Polish Friends*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Trans. Halina Carroll. London: Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 211–212; cf.: Joseph Conrad. *Listy*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Trans. Halina Carroll-Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1968, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Conrad to Edward Garnett, 20 January 1900. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 2: 1898–1902. Ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 244–245; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 174.

kinship at least an affinity, – this is a great honour to me and its mention, by you, dear Sir, has been most gratifying.<sup>4</sup>

However, Conrad's awareness of his noble heritage is also present in his literary works – the official side of his public activity. As we read in his autobiographical book, *A Personal Record*:

[...] for why should I, the son of a land which such men as these have turned up with their ploughshares and bedewed with their blood, undertake the pursuit of fantastic meals of salt junk and hard tack upon the wide seas?<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, it appears that Conrad's self-identification as a Polish nobleman did not wane with time and with his having acquired a high social position in England, but – on the contrary – grew stronger in his old age. This can be proved by two rather telling examples. In 1924 the British Prime Minister of the day, Ramsay MacDonald, offered Conrad a knighthood, but the author declined it in a most gracious, yet decisive manner. This is what he wrote to the British Prime Minister:

Sir.

It is with the deepest possible sense of the honour H. M. The King is graciously willing to confer on me on your recommendation, that I beg leave to decline the proffered knighthood.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, bearing the Nałęcz coat of arms was sufficient honour for Conrad. And now the second example: in 1923 one of the English publishing houses was preparing an edition of Conrad's complete works. In this connection Conrad wrote to his cousin, Aniela Zagórska:

My dear Anielcia,

[...] Could you, *ma chère amie*, send me a drawing of the Nałęcz coat of arms? I wish to emboss the crest on the cover of the latest edition of my works. Here, I only have a small seal, from which it is difficult to reproduce a copy. Publication will start in May. Do any Polish armorials exist which are smaller and less expensive than Niesiecki? If so, could you possibly buy me a copy, the cost of which I would then repay you. It is important that the drawings should be detailed and clearly reproduced.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Conrad to Józef Korzeniowski, 14 February 1901. *Conrad's Polish Background*, pp. 233–234; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder and J.H. Stape. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 43–44; cf.: Joseph Conrad. *Ze wspomnień*. Trans. Aniela Zagórska. [In:] J. Conrad. *Dziela*. Vol. 13. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Conrad to the Rt. Hon. Ramsay Macdonald, 27 May 1924. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 8: 1823–1924. Ed. Laurence Davies and Gene M. Moore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 365; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 472.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Conrad to Aniela Zagórska, 7 March 1923. *Conrad's Polish Background*, pp. 288–289; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 443.

A month later Conrad thanked his cousin for “the two volumes of *Coats of Arms*, which arrived just at the right moment.<sup>8</sup> This is how Wit Tarnawski, a Polish Conrad scholar who emigrated to Great Britain, commented on this:

If Conrad, who declined a title awarded by the English government, made an exception for his family coat of arms, this must have meant that it constituted a special honour for him – the only one he was ready to display publicly, and that he wanted to say, as it were, to his English readers: ‘Behold, I am a Polish Nałęcz’.<sup>9</sup>

## 2

However, what was much more important than Conrad’s demonstration of his being a representative of the Polish *szlachta*, was his sharing of this group’s ideological views. An additional explanation is required here. Conrad was not a nobleman in the sense of possessing an estate, which would have been his source of income. Like many Poles in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was a representative of the intelligentsia with a noble background – a man who practically earned his living by his own work (although until he was thirty he could count on the generous financial support of his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski), first as a sailor (officer and captain of the British Navy) and then as a writer. Nevertheless, despite his profession, he undoubtedly shared many of the views which were typical of his social class. Over half a century ago Czesław Miłosz made this telling observation:

I belong to a generation which still knew Conrad’s peers, but it is not age that matters here. Historical changes always push aside one civilisational group, replacing it with a new one. It does not often happen that one such group manages to survive beyond the time in which it can last in its pure state. A series of conditions must be met for it to solidify in its original shape. Yet this is what took place in the area where I spent my school years, i.e. in Vilnius and in Lithuania, understood as both the territory of the former Grand Duchy and one of the Baltic states. The type of the old nobleman, faithful to the style of his youth, survived there longer than anywhere else. [...] Thanks to his conservatism, this borderland *szlachcic* preserved the 19<sup>th</sup> century mode of thinking, and thus constituted a valuable specimen for someone who wanted to learn about living, not written, tradition. [...] for many reasons, more clearly than others, this nobleman represented the fundamental “leitmotifs” of the Polish, if I may say so, political sentiment, harking back to the former Polish Commonwealth.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Conrad to Aniela Zagórska, 11 April 1923. *Conrad’s Polish Background*, p. 291; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 445.

<sup>9</sup> Wit Tarnawski. *Conrad. Człowiek – pisarz – Polak*. London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1972, p. 269.

<sup>10</sup> Czesław Miłosz. “Stereotyp u Conrada”. [In:] *Conrad żywy*. Ed. Wit Tarnawski. London: B. Świdorski, 1957, pp. 92–93.

It appears that one of the ingredients of the *szlachta's* ideology was the idea of honour, which was assimilated by Conrad. This principle, deriving from the chivalric ethos, became an integral element of the noble axiology, and was later inherited by the intelligentsia who had a noble background, and to some extent by military circles in Poland. As Zdzisław Najder has aptly shown, this concept is crucial for an understanding of certain vital points in Conrad's biography, as well as certain important areas of his writing. Najder has pointed out that:

The view of life historically and philosophically associated with the idea of honour does not entail a belief in a universal and just order of things. On the contrary, it is essentially a tragic outlook – if only because it makes all value of a man's existence reside in his actions and the resulting reputation and consciousness, but at the same time commands man to throw away, at any moment of challenge or test, 'the dearest thing he ow'd/ As 'twere a careless trifle' (*Macbeth*). The more a man achieves, the greater he succeeds in becoming, the more we lose by his death; but to shun death means to destroy one's greatness.<sup>11</sup>

In choosing to become a professional mariner, Conrad followed the ethos of honour: "the decision to become a sailor [...], subject to a paramilitary code of behaviour, was in a sense quite consistent with Conrad's background."<sup>12</sup> Also the controversy surrounding the Marseilles troubles of the young Conrad can be explained with the help of this idea. If we are to believe Conrad's own confessions, he duelled with his rival for a woman in Marseilles. This version of events seems to be additionally confirmed by a literary account in the novel *The Arrow of Gold*. Yet probably the most credible and trustworthy account – a letter from Tadeusz Bobrowski to Stefan Buszczyński – proves that the young Conrad was wounded not in a duel, but in a (fortunately unsuccessful) suicide attempt. This is what Bobrowski wrote to a friend of Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski:

[Conrad] wishing to improve his finances, tries his luck in Monte Carlo and loses the 800 fr. he had borrowed. Having managed his affairs so excellently he returns to Marseilles and one fine evening invites his friend the creditor to tea, and before his arrival attempts to take his life with a revolver. (Let this detail remain between us, as I have been telling everyone that he was wounded in a duel. From you I neither wish to nor should keep it a secret.) The bullet goes durch und durch near his heart without damaging any vital organ.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Zdzisław Najder. "Conrad and the idea of honour". [In:] *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 159; cf.: Zdzisław Najder. "Conrad i tradycyjne pojęcie honoru". [In:] *Sztuka i wierność. Szkice o twórczości Josepha Conrada*. Trans. Halina Najder. Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2000, p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> Najder. "Conrad and the idea of honour", p. 160; cf. Najder. "Conrad i tradycyjne pojęcie honoru", p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> Tadeusz Bobrowski to Stefan Buszczyński, 12/24 March 1879. *Conrad's Polish Background*, p. 177; cf.: Tadeusz Bobrowski do Stefana Buszczyńskiego. *Conrad wśród swoich. Listy. Dokumenty. Wspomnienia*. With an introduction and footnotes by Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1996, p. 203.

What is the reason for this mystification propagated by Tadeusz Bobrowski among his acquaintances and by Conrad himself in his writing and – more importantly – in his private disclosures?<sup>14</sup> The answer is quite simple. In the light of the chivalric ethos a duel defending someone's honour was acceptable, while suicide was considered a disgrace.

Incidentally, this kind of duel was well known to Conrad from his own family history. His uncle, Stefan Bobrowski, one of the leaders of the January Uprising, duelled with his political opponent, Adam Grabowski. According to Andrzej Busza:

[...] Bobrowski was challenged to a duel by Count Adam Grabowski, a man of seedy reputation and an agent of the 'Whites'. At first, Bobrowski declined to accept the challenge, but then the ruling of a court of honour made him change his mind. Although Bobrowski knew that he could not come out of the duel alive, his sense of honour prevented him from disregarding the court's ruling. The odds were exceptionally uneven: Bobrowski was extremely short-sighted, while Grabowski was a renowned marksman. The duel took place on 12 April 1863 near Rawicz. Stefan Bobrowski was shot straight through the heart. Most of the historians of the Uprising agree that he was in effect assassinated.<sup>15</sup>

In Conrad's literary works the concept of honour plays a crucial role. As Zdzisław Najder observes:

This was the ethical tradition that Konrad Korzeniowski inherited. It is evident that the idea of honour was very important for Conrad as a person and stands at the heart of ethical problems that he raised in his books. [...] When Conrad deals with honour in its simple form, as in "The Duel", *Chance*, or *The Rescue*, there is little chance for misinterpretation. But whenever the problems raised become more intricate and a deeper comprehension of the whole ethos of which honour forms the centre is required confusion arises, for instance in interpretations of the final part of *Lord Jim*, or of the predicament of *Nostromo*.<sup>16</sup>

Very frequently these misunderstandings stem from a lack of familiarity with the chivalric ethos, whose rightful heir was Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski.

However, Conrad's sense of honour was stirred in him once more by the famous dispute concerning the "emigration of talent". A Polish writer, Eliza Orzeszkowa, had written in the Polish weekly *Kraj*, published in St. Petersburg:

Speaking of books, I must say that this gentleman, who writes popular and very lucrative novels in English, has almost caused me a nervous breakdown. [...] when it comes to

<sup>14</sup> Aniela Zagórska. "A Few Reminiscences of Conrad". [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Trans. Halina Carroll-Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 217; cf.: Aniela Zagórska. "Kilka wspomnień o Conradzie". [In:] *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*. Ed. Barbara Kocówna. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1963, p. 96; Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, pp. 62–67; cf. Najder. *Życie Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*, Vol. 1, pp. 102–108.

<sup>15</sup> Andrzej Busza. "Conrad and Polish history". *Con-texts* 2003, No. 4/5, pp. 14–15; cf.: Andrzej Busza. "Conrad a historia Polski". *Con-teksty* 2003, No. 4/5, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Najder. "Conrad and the idea of honour", p. 153; cf.: Najder. "Conrad i idea honoru", *Twórczość* 1974, No. 8.

fiction writing, which is part of literary creation, and since I belong to this particular guild and am familiar with its duties, *forts comme la mort* – I object most emphatically. Creative talent forms the very crown of the tree, the pinnacle of the tower, the life-blood of the nation. And to take away that flower, to remove that pinnacle, to drain away that life-blood from the nation in order to pass it on to the Anglo-Saxons (who anyway lie on a bed of roses) just because they pay better... It is even hard to think about it without shame.<sup>17</sup>

Putting things this way, the author of *Nad Niemnem* (On the banks of the Neman) had accused Conrad of conduct which was completely inconsistent with the principles of honour: of being motivated by a desire for financial gain at the expense of loyalty towards one's own country. In the light of the Polish noble ethos this was a crushing accusation. And what does it matter that it was largely unfounded? Suffice it to say that Conrad was struggling with serious financial problems at the time. He responded to Orzeszkowa's charge twice. The first answer was dignified and official and appeared in *A Personal Record*:

I have the conviction that there are men of unstained rectitude who are ready to murmur scornfully the word desertion. [...] The part of the inexplicable should be allowed for in appraising the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final. No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered. The appearances of this perishable life are deceptive, like everything that falls under the judgment of our imperfect senses. The inner voice may remain true enough in its secret counsel. The fidelity to a special tradition may last through the events of an unrelated existence, following faithfully too the traced way of an inexplicable impulse.<sup>18</sup>

From our perspective, "the emigration of talent" dispute also concerned the writer's honour. What Conrad really thought about Eliza Orzeszkowa's pronouncements is what he said in private to his cousin, Aniela Zagórska, during a stay in Zakopane in 1914. As she remembered:

I once offered to give Conrad a copy of *Nad Niemnem*, so that he could read it.  
 – Don't you dare! – he shouted.  
 – But Konrad, please...  
 – I don't want anything of hers – he interrupted furiously – you don't know what kind of letter she once wrote to me...<sup>19</sup>

However, in Conrad's consciousness there was at least one more idea derived from the arsenal of concepts that were typical of the Polish nobility. It was the concept of Poland

<sup>17</sup> Eliza Orzeszkowa. "The Emigration of Talent". [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, pp. 187–188; cf.: Eliza Orzeszkowa. "Emigracja zdolności". [In:] *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>18</sup> Conrad. *A Personal Record*, p. 44; cf.: Conrad. *Ze wspomnień*, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Zagórska. "A Few Reminiscences of Conrad", p. 214; cf.: Zagórska. "Kilka wspomnień o Conradzie", pp. 92–93; Józef Ujejski gives us a slightly different account. According to him Conrad said: "Don't bring me anything by that hag!" (Zagórska. "A Few Reminiscences of Conrad", p. 214; cf.: Józef Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Domu Książki Polskiej, 1936, p. 17).

as the *antemurale christianitatis*. This idea, dating back to the times of the Polish-Turkish wars, was initially significantly modified in Conrad's writing. There the role of this "bulwark of Christianity" was bestowed on Great Britain. As Czesław Miłosz pointed out:

Conrad's attachment to the British Empire and his strong sense of the borders of Western European civilisation are a transposition, as it were, of his faith in the Polish Commonwealth as the 'antemurale christianitatis'. In the consciousness of Poles, especially from Lithuania and the Ukraine, Islam and Byzantine Russia were the same enemy, an anticivilisational element which constantly strove to destroy Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Conrad presented this role fulfilled by England in the form of the symbolic ship in the ending of the novel *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*:

The dark land lay alone in the midst of waters, like a mighty ship bestarred with vigilant lights – a ship carrying the burden of millions of lives – a ship freighted with dross and with jewels, with gold and with steel. She towered up immense and strong, guarding priceless traditions and untold suffering, sheltering glorious memories and base forgetfulness, ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions. A great ship! For ages had the ocean battered in vain her enduring sides; she was there when the world was vaster and darker, when the sea was great and mysterious, and ready to surrender the prize of fame to audacious men. A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms! And anchored in the open sea.<sup>21</sup>

In time, however, Conrad traditionally ascribed the role of the bulwark of Western civilisation to Poland. In 1922 he wrote to George T. Keating:

Racially I belong to a group which has historically a political past, with a Western Roman culture derived at first from Italy and then from France; and a rather Southern temperament; an outpost of Westernism with a Roman tradition situated between Slavo-Tartar Byzantine barbarism on one side and the German tribes on the other; resisting both influences desperately and still remaining true to itself to this very day.<sup>22</sup>

Poland's role as the defender of the West was emphasised by Conrad particularly strongly during the Polish-Soviet war. On 24<sup>th</sup> March 1920, Conrad wrote to John Quinn:

I confess to some little gratification at the thought that the unbroken Polish front keeps Bolshevism off and that apparently the reborn State has one heart and one soul, one indomitable will, from the poorest peasant to the highest magnate. [...] The magic sense of independence is the cause of that union without reserves and regrets which enables that

<sup>20</sup> Miłosz. "Stereotyp u Conrada", p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Conrad. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'. A Tale of the Forecastle*. Canterbury Edition. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924, pp. 162–163; cf.: Joseph Conrad. *Murzyn z załogi „Narcyza”*. *Opowieść morską*. Trans. Bronisław Zieliński. [In:] J. Conrad. *Dziela*, Vol. 3. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1972, p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Conrad to George T. Keating, 14 December 1922. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 7: 1920–1922. Ed. Laurence Davies and J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 615; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 436.



three times devastated and impoverished country to put forth its physical strength and on the very morrow of rising from its grave to take up its old historical part of defender of civilization against the dangers of barbarism, once Tartar and Turkish, and now even worse [...]”<sup>23</sup>

Conrad addressed this subject shortly before his death, during a visit to the legation of the Polish Commonwealth in London, on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1924. The envoy of the Polish state, Konstanty Skirmunt, offered the writer the (relatively honorary) position of chairman of the English Society of Friends of Poland. Conrad declined politely, excusing himself on account of his poor health and his living far away from London. However, in his later conversation with Prof. Roman Dyboski Conrad revealed additional reasons for declining the offer. Namely, he believed that such propaganda action was unworthy of Polish honourable traditions.

It is all right – he said – for other nations which until recently lived in obscurity under foreign domination: for Serbs who were for hundreds of years slaves of Turkey, for Czechs encrusted with German influence for such a long time, but for us, who withstood the hundred years of slavery and emerged the same as we had been for nearly a thousand years, for us such exertions are superfluous; those who want to may always find us at the same outpost where we have always fought for Europe's civilization.<sup>24</sup>

Another trace of Conrad's Polish consciousness was his idealisation of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In his much discussed article, “The Crime of Partition”, he asserted:

The spirit of aggressiveness was absolutely foreign to the Polish temperament, to which the preservation of its institutions and its liberties was much more precious than any ideas of conquest. Polish wars were defensive, and they were mostly fought within Poland's own borders. And that those territories were often invaded was but a misfortune arising from its geographical position. Territorial expansion was never the master thought of Polish statesmen. The consolidation of the territories of the Sérénissime Republic, which made of it a power of the first rank for a time, was not accomplished by force. It was not the consequence of successful aggression but of a long and successful defence against the raiding neighbours from the East.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Conrad to John Quinn, March. 2nd 1920. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 7, p. 40. Gérard Jean-Aubry assigns to the letter the date of 24 March 1920 in: *Joseph Conrad. Life & Letters*, Vol. 2. London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1927, p. 237; cf.: Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Roman Dyboski. “My Encounter with Conrad”. [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, p. 265; cf.: Roman Dyboski. “Spotkanie z Conradem”. [In:] *Wspomnienia i studia*, p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Conrad. “The Crime of Partition”. [In:] *Notes on Life and Letters*. Ed. J.H. Stape with the assistance of Andrew Busza. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 97; cf.: Joseph Conrad. “Zbrodnia rozbiorów”. [In:] *Szkice polityczne*. Trans. Halina Najder and Wit Tarnawski. [In:] J. Conrad. *Dzieła*, Vol. 28. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, p. 49; cf.: Andrzej Busza. “The Rhetoric of Conrad's Non-Fictional Political Discourse”. *Annales de la Faculte des Lettres et Sciences humaines de Nice* 1978, No. 34.

Conrad, like many Polish noblemen, strongly stressed the relationship between Poland and Western Europe. This is what he wrote in 1924 to Charles Chassé, a French literary historian:

Polish temperament, at any rate, is far removed from Byzantine and Asiatic associations. Poland has absorbed Western ideas, adopted Western culture, sympathized with Western ideals and tendencies as much as it was possible, across the great distances and in the special conditions of its national and political life, whose main task was the struggle for life against Asiatic despotism at its door.<sup>26</sup>

In another letter, to George T. Keating, he expressed his personal feelings about the West:

I went out into the world before I was seventeen, to France and England, and in neither country did I feel myself a stranger for a moment: neither as regards ideas, sentiments, or institutions.<sup>27</sup>

Yet his fascination with the West had its flip side. Conrad could not forgive Western European countries for their acceptance of the Partitions of Poland – and in particular their alliance with Russia during World War I:

It would be good to remember that Polish independence as embodied in a Polish State is not the gift of any kind of journalism, neither is it the outcome even of some particularly benevolent idea or of any clearly apprehended sense of right. I am speaking of what I know when I say that the original and only formative idea in Europe was the idea of delivering the fate of Poland into the hands of Russian Tsarism. And, let us remember, it was assumed then to be a victorious Tsarism, at that.<sup>28</sup>

### 3

Conrad's noble heritage was also visible in his behaviour and lifestyle. Conrad invariably exhibited many qualities which were mostly seen as the distinctive features of the social class which he belonged to. As an adult, Conrad was well-mannered. During his stay in Marseilles, the young Konrad had prompted his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, to make the following remarks:

My study of the Individual has convinced me that he is not a bad boy, only one who is extremely sensitive, conceited, reserved, and in addition excitable. In short I found in

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Conrad to Charles Chassé, 31 January 1924. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 8, p. 291; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 464.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Conrad to George T. Keating, 14 December 1922. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 7, p. 615; cf. Conrad. *Listy*, p. 436.

<sup>28</sup> Conrad. "The Crime of Partition", p. 102; cf. Conrad. "Zbrodnia rozbiorów", p. 56.

him all the defects of the Nałęcz family. He is able and eloquent – he has forgotten nothing of his Polish although since he left Cracow I was the first person he conversed with in his native tongue. [...] In spite of watching him carefully I didn't detect any of the bad habits common among sailors – he drinks hardly anything except red wine – does not gamble (he said that himself and Mr. Fecht confirmed never having seen him gambling – the unfortunate incident in Monte Carlo sprang from the thought “first time lucky”). His manners are very good, as if he had never left drawing-rooms [...].<sup>29</sup>

And this is how Conrad-Korzeniowski, as a 31-year-old captain of the British Navy was characterised by his acquaintance from Mauritius, Paul Langlois:

Apart from his distinguished manners, the most striking thing about the captain of the ‘Otago’ was the contrast he presented with other skippers. [...] Unlike his colleagues, Captain Korzeniowski was always dressed with great elegance. I can still see him [...] arriving in my office almost every day dressed in a black or dark coat, a vest that was usually light in color, and fancy trousers; everything well cut and very stylish; on his head a black or gray derby tilted slightly to one side. He invariably wore gloves and carried a cane with a gold knob. [...] As to his moral character: a perfect education; very varied and interesting conversation – on the days when he felt communicative [...].<sup>30</sup>

In turn, Conrad the writer was remembered by Otolia Zubrzycka thus:

When I met Conrad he was already a respected English writer; international fame was soon to follow. [...] At once I was struck by his Polish looks, eyes, voice, borderland accent. [...] I was immediately taken by his great simplicity of manner, dignity and natural elegance, although he wore that day an outmoded grey coat and a large hat.<sup>31</sup>

Another quality frequently ascribed to Conrad by many people who knew him well was his hospitality. The writer enjoyed having guests at his home. He welcomed them cordially and gladly waited on them; also, he loved to engage in long conversations with them, sitting by the fireplace late into the night. As the writer's elder son, Borys recalled:

There were a number of visitors to the Pent in those early days, some of whom I remember clearly, but there were others whose images have become very blurred.

Edward Garnett for instance, whom I remember only as an ungainly and shaggy figure shambling across the fields from the station. The Ford Madox Hueffer of those days is equally shadowy although he must have been a frequent visitor while collaborating with

<sup>29</sup> Tadeusz Bobrowski to Stefan Buszczyński, 12/24 March 1879. *Conrad's Polish Background*, pp. 177–178; cf.: Tadeusz Bobrowski do Stefana Buszczyńskiego. *Conrad wśród swoich. Listy. Dokumenty. Wspomnienia*, pp. 203–204.

<sup>30</sup> Gérard Jean-Aubry. *The Sea Dreamer: A Definitive Biography of Joseph Conrad*. Trans. Helen Sebba. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957, p. 140; cf.: G. Jean-Aubry. *Życie Conrada*. Trans. Maria Kornilowiczówna. Warsaw 1958, pp. 186–187.

<sup>31</sup> Tola Zubrzycka. “A Son of Two Countries”. [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, pp. 202–203; cf.: Tola Zubrzycka. “Syn dwu ojczyzn”. [In:] *Conrad wśród swoich*, pp. 298–299.

my Father and, moreover, was the previous tenant of the Pent, and actually loaned us the house together with some of his furniture for a period until we took over the tenancy. [...] Most vividly I remember John Galsworthy – Uncle Jack to me [...].<sup>32</sup>

Hanna Peretiatkowicz, staying in Conrad's Oswalds House in 1923, described the visit as follows:

I remember a large table spread with cakes and fruit. Conrad, full of nervous energy and with typically Polish hospitality, kept passing me all kinds of delicacies, pressing me to eat; the ladies behaved with equally typical reserve.<sup>33</sup>

Otolia Zubrzycka, who was a frequent guest of the Conrad family, wrote:

We spent long evenings sitting near the fire. Conrad would liven up. Sometimes he talked about distant seas and ports but most likely about his early youth and family. He was also fond of talking about literature; his favourite authors were the French masters of the word whom he admired. On those occasions he liked to speak French. In English he always had a marked foreign accent. He spoke Polish clearly with a charming Ukrainian accent. Sometimes, unable to find some word, he would switch into French. We tended to forget about the time as the evening hours slipped by unnoticed.<sup>34</sup>

As Conrad's Polish guests agreed, in deciding on his place of abode, the writer selected those parts of England which resembled the Ukraine, where he was born. Conrad's cousin, Irena Rakowska-Luniewska, remembered how the author remarked to her:

– Tomorrow, my child – he suddenly said, as if summarizing his hitherto vague thoughts – if the weather is good I shall drive you to a nearby hill. You will see a view which strongly reminds me of the Ukraine. I go there quite often; I am fond of that distant horizon. [...]

After breakfast we went to visit the place he had mentioned the previous day. From the hill-top we could see green meadows interspersed with varicoloured fields, clumps of old trees here and there and a wide horizon merging with the sky. It reminded us of the Ukraine.<sup>35</sup>

Images of the interiors and surroundings of the manors where he spent his childhood flashed in Conrad's memories. For example, this is how he depicted the manor which belonged to his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, in Kazimierówka, in Podolia, in his book *A Personal Record*:

<sup>32</sup> Borys Conrad. *My Father: Joseph Conrad*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1970, p. 31; cf.: Borys Conrad. *Kronika rodzinna*. Trans. Irena Tarłowska. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1969, pp. 13–14.

<sup>33</sup> Hanna Peretiatkowicz. "From 'Back to Conrad'". [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, p. 258; cf.: Hanna Peretiatkowicz. "Powrót do Conrada". [In:] *Conrad wśród swoich*, p. 365.

<sup>34</sup> Zubrzycka. "A Son of Two Countries", p. 205; cf.: Zubrzycka. "Syn dwu ojczyzn", pp. 301–302.

<sup>35</sup> Irena Rakowska-Luniewska. "At the Home of Konrad Korzeniowski". [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, pp. 270–271; cf.: Irena Rakowska-Luniewska. "U Konrada Korzeniowskiego". [In:] *Conrad wśród swoich*, p. 372.

My uncle, lounging in the corner of a small couch, smoked his long Turkish *chibouk* in silence.

– This is an extremely nice writing-table you have got for my room – I remarked.

– It is really your property – he said, keeping his eyes on me, with an interested and wistful expression as he had done ever since I had entered the house. – Forty years ago your mother used to write at this very table. In our house in Oratow it stood in the little sitting-room which, by a tacit arrangement, was given up to the girls – I mean to your mother and her sister, who died so young.<sup>36</sup>

But we can find an excellent description of the surroundings of a borderland manor in Conrad's writing, more specifically in his short story "Prince Roman":

It was the dead of winter. The great lawn in front was as pure and smooth as an alpine snowfield, a white and feathery level sparkling under the sun as if sprinkled with diamond-dust, declining gently to the lake – a long, sinuous piece of frozen water looking bluish and more solid than the earth. A cold brilliant sun glided low above an undulating horizon of great folds of snow in which the villages of Ukrainian peasants remained out of sight, like clusters of boats hidden in the hollows of a running sea.<sup>37</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that Conrad always fashioned the interiors of the houses he happened to live in after the borderland nobility's residences. This became more evident towards the end of his life, after the writer had attained a certain material standing. What follows is a description of the drawing room in the Conrads' house, recorded in the memoirs of the author's cousin, Karola Zagórska:

It was a lovely room. White-and-blue Chippendale furniture, white-and-gold Empire-style pieces covered with yellow satin. Near the door leading to the garden a piano stood as if waiting to be played. Above the fireplace an old painting of the Dutch school; on each side of the large window oval mirrors in carved, gilt frames reflected the ceiling, furniture and an Aubusson carpet on the floor. There was an old desk and crystal vases full of narcissus in the spring, then tulips and later roses.<sup>38</sup>

Like the Polish nobleman he was, Conrad had a daredevil streak, which was reflected in the Marseilles rows, in the real or (as some would have it) alleged arms smuggling for the Spanish Carlists or for rebels in South America, in his risky undertakings such as the journey to the Belgian Congo, which proved detrimental to Conrad's health but

<sup>36</sup> Conrad. *A Personal Record*, p. 38; cf. Conrad. *Ze wspomnień*, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Conrad. "Prince Roman". [In:] *Tales of Hearsay*. The Concord Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1926, pp. 31–32; cf. Joseph Conrad. "Książę Roman". [In:] *Opowieści zasłyszane. Siostry*. Trans. Halina Carroll-Najder and Wit Tarnawski. [In:] J. Conrad. *Dziela*, Vol. 24. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974, p. 50; cf.: Kazimierz Wyka. "Wyspa na polskiej zatoce". [In:] K. Wyka. *Wędrując po tematach*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971, Vol. 2, pp. 53–54.

<sup>38</sup> Karola Zagórska. "Recollections of Conrad". [In:] *Conrad under Familial Eyes*, pp. 247–248; cf.: Karola Zagórska. "Ze wspomnień o Conradzie". [In:] *Conrad wśród swoich*, p. 359.

extremely significant for literature, or his service on an English Q-ship during World War I which hunted for German submarines.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Conrad also had certain faults which were typical of the Polish *szlachta*. One of them was a disdain for money and a tendency to squander it extravagantly. The surviving letters from Conrad's uncle, Bobrowski, admonishing his reckless nephew, provide more than convincing evidence of this. Let us cite but one characteristic excerpt:

Reflect, I pray, if you are still capable of doing it, on what mischief you have done this year? and answer for yourself if even from your own father you could expect such patience and indulgence as you get from me,— and whether this should not have reached its limit?

You were idling for nearly a whole year — you fell into debt, you deliberately shot yourself — and as a result of it all, at the worst time of the year, tired out and in spite of the most terrible rate of exchange — I hasten to you, pay, spend about 2000 roubles, I increase your allowance to meet your needs! All this is apparently not enough for you.<sup>40</sup>

It must be said that, having become a sailor and a captain, Conrad did not change radically in this respect. Like other captains, he attempted to carry out financial transactions. However, this is how Master Mariner Józef Miłobędzki described Conrad the sailor:

Let us consider this: when he was a sailor he had the best references from captains. As a captain he could not find work. Here is the synthesis: he was an excellent navigator, however, possessing absolutely no competence in rational management.<sup>41</sup>

It appears that even as a well-known and esteemed author, Conrad lived a little beyond his means. At home he employed two maids, a nurse for his sick wife and a chauffeur, although he could drive himself. When he was in London or travelling abroad, he always chose the most expensive hotels. He often lacked money. But how Polish and noble this was! Just as in the saying: “Zastaw się, a postaw się”.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Bolesław Pomian-Piątkowski. “Próba wierności shipmastera Conrada”. [In:] *Wspomnienia i studia*; Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, pp. 484–486; cf. Najder. *Życie Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*, Vol. 2, pp. 266–267.

<sup>40</sup> Tadeusz Bobrowski to Joseph Conrad, 26 June/8 July 1878. *Conrad's Polish Background*, p. 54; cf.: Tadeusz Bobrowski. *Listy do Conrada*. Ed. Róża Jabłkowska. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Cf.: Józef Miłobędzki. “Conrad w żeglarskiej kurcie”. [In:] *Conrad w żeglarskiej kurcie. Wybór publicystyki morskiej Josepha Conrada*. Translated, with an introduction and footnotes by J. Miłobędzki. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1972, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> The saying has no satisfactory equivalent in English. Literally it means “Run up debts in order to make a show of lavish hospitality” [translator's note].

Looking back, we can say that without the *Kresy* (the Polish Eastern Borderlands) the 19<sup>th</sup> and – to a large extent – the 20<sup>th</sup> century history and culture of Poland would have been entirely different. The greatest Poles came from noble families who lived there, both rich and poor: Mickiewicz from Novgorodok, Słowacki from Kremenets, Piłsudski from Zalavas, and Conrad-Korzeniowski from Berdyczów. History has decreed that these lands no longer belong to Poland. Yet the works of the authors who used to live there have forever entered the canon of Polish culture. Thanks to the medium of the English language, Conrad has earned a prominent place in world culture. And he has turned the most valuable elements of his noble heritage into universal values.

Translated by Ewa Kowal

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