



REMINISCENCES

Carol O'BRIEN (London)

I was surprised when Jerzy first told me that he had bought some land in Andalucia and was planning to build himself a house, but I should not have been. He felt himself to be, and indeed was, a true European and he was as completely at home in Spain as he was in Hampstead. He spoke excellent Spanish and loved its people and its literature — from Cervantes to Lorca — he enjoyed its café life, and liked nothing more than setting off to drive across the country. In parenthesis it has to be said that driving was scarcely his greatest accomplishment. It always amazed me that he actually survived the mammoth European odysseys he used to undertake in company with his wife Christine and Muriel Spark, stopping en route to write — each their own novel — in cafes across France, Austria, Italy, and beyond.

But happily, if at times alarmingly, he drove down through Spain, and once arrived in his beloved Nido Oculito he was home. One might have suspected that domesticity, along with driving, was hardly Jerzy's forte, but in El Nido he truly created a beautiful home in his own image: a simple house with an astonishing view, containing surprising, beautiful, symbolic things — mirrors made by his jeweller friend Jorge, a kilim from Iran, candles. Then he carefully planned and made a garden, with jasmine round the bedroom window for its scent, bougainvillea up the stairway, orange trees (and he was very proud of his orange harvests), painstakingly-gathered white stones arranged in mystical patterns; and finally the lovingly executed shrine to San Antonio in a cleft in the rock. With his books, conversation with his friends (not least with his dear friends Pepe & Antonio, the gardeners) and the sun, I think he felt himself in a kind of paradise.

Life there was idyllic. He would walk down to the beach through the flowering oleanders and read and swim and lunch on fish in a tiny restaurant on the beach. Fish was a new luxury — he had had very bad health as a young man and when first I knew him lived on an extraordinary diet consisting almost entirely of boiled potatoes and champagne.

I was staying with him there that summer of 1978 when Pope John Paul I died so unexpectedly. There was much discussion about his likely successor, bets laid, and when finally, against all the odds, a handsome, charismatic Polish pope was elected — the first non-Italian pope since the 1520s — we were all jubilant. It was really Jerzy who had been elected joked Antonio and Juan Cruz, and I think we all, even Jerzy

himself, half-believed it. So some years later it came as no surprise to me that — through contacts in the Vatican (which were slightly mysterious to me — but then Jerzy was always supremely good at keeping secrets) he was chosen as the translator of Karol Wojtyła's poems. There could not have been a better choice of poet/translator. He felt the work to be of deep importance and undertook it as a true labour of love — weighing each line, each phrase, each word with meticulous attention. And he was justly proud when the English poems were done.

As Jerzy's editor at Hutchinson, I was lucky enough to be invited with him to the Vatican for a private audience with the Pope to present a specially bound volume of *Easter Vigil and Other Poems*. The Pope, out of courtesy to me started, off speaking in English but the occasion was too much for them both, and they lapsed into Polish. It was an extraordinary moment — both men were clearly deeply moved by the meeting. They spoke, Jerzy told me afterwards, of the Poland in which they had both grown up and which under communism had all but disappeared, of friends and colleagues who had died trying to save it, of a seemingly vanished world they had both loved. And I realised that Jerzy, the widely read, widely travelled, deeply cultured European was of course, at heart, also a passionate Polish patriot.

As he got older Jerzy started thinking about what he would leave behind, and it is clear that it occupied his mind greatly. To me he wrote that he hoped that his books would be remembered — they were to him his children for posterity. He gave power of attorney to Lady Panufnik, and to her he expressed his fervent wish that any money he might leave should be spent on helping poor young Polish writers, such as he himself had been. He was not mega-rich; but considering that he had arrived in England as a young man with absolutely nothing, — not a suitcase, not a penny — he had done phenomenally. He had his beloved house in Spain with its magical views over the Mediterranean (and, true peasant that he was, he had proudly bought an extra plot of land next door) and his high Hampstead flat in London with the magical views over London.

So it was decided that a Trust should be set up to inherit the money and to make sure it went to the young writers Jerzy wanted to support.

Such things don't happen easily. The legalities are complicated and long-winded. And Jerzy became quite ill before they were completed. But Camilla nobly kept at it, until one remarkable day she and I found ourselves, completely by chance, together in Jerzy's room at the extraordinarily nice nursing home where he had been for some time on Kingston Hill. He was unconscious, breathing calmly and, as far as we could tell, quite unaware of our presence. But Camilla had news for him — they had worked out the final wording for the Will which would establish the Foundation and she told him 'the Jerzy Peterkiewicz Educational Foundation is to be set up. It is going to happen.' Jerzy's breathing altered — there is no question, he had heard, and was moved. How good, I said, that he knew it. Suddenly there was a different silence. He had died.

We both felt it was an incredible blessing that before he died he knew and was glad. It was 26 October 2007.