LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

From a Visit with Joseph Conrad

J. M.

INTRODUCTION AND
TRANSLATION
BY JEAN M. SZCZYPIEN

It was probably in the lobby of the prestigious Grand Hotel on 5 Sławkowska Street that the visit took place. Conrad arrived there on the evening of 28 July 1914 after an absence from Cracow of almost forty years, having left for Marseilles at the age of sixteen on 13 October 1874.[1] He returned to see preparations for war everywhere.[2]

The article that includes the interview was published on 26 August 1915 in *Kuryer Polski* (*The Polish Courier*), a Polish daily in Ostrawa, a small town then in Austrian Poland, now in the Czech Republic. But it was never translated or acknowledged as existing even by Zdzisław Najder in his definitive biography, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, probably because copies of the 1915 newspaper no longer exist in Poland after the devastations of two world wars. But copies are available at Stanford University in the Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

The Cracow interviewer signed his 1915 newspaper article "Z wizyty u Józefa Conrada" ("From a Visit with Joseph Conrad"), "J. M."[3] He tells us that the interview took place on 30 July, "the day before the announcement of mobilization." He is most likely J. Morski, a journalist who in 1927 arranged to have the ashes of Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49) brought from Paris to Cracow for burial in Wawel Cathedral alongside Polish kings and notables.[4] Morski also edited the memorial booklet "Nasi wielcy o Juljuszu Słowackim (głosy i myśli)" ("Our Great Ones on Juliusz Słowacki [Voices and Thoughts]"). Since Conrad had died in 1924, Morski took the liberty of conflating Conrad's accolades made in July 1914 in Cracow for the three major Polish Romantic poets and with some modifications had Conrad direct them only at Słowacki. Morski also cited the interview article of 1915 in this tribute, thus providing additional evidence that he himself most likely conducted the interview and then wrote the original article. Conrad's praise for Słowacki, enhanced by Morski, thus reads, "Całym pietyzmem otaczam dawne piśmiennictwo polskie. Poezje Słowackiego są dla mnie wszystkim! Wychowałem się i wykształciłem na nich. Twórczość swą wywodzę z ducha literatury polskiej" ("I have always shown great reverence toward old Polish writings. The poems of Słowacki

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are everything for me! I was raised and educated on this poetry. Its genius comes from the Polish literary spirit"; "Nasi wielcy").[5]

According to the 1915 article, Conrad actually made the following statements to J. M. about the Polish Romantic poets that he had read in childhood: "[O]taczam dawne polskie piśmiennictwo, Krasińskiego, Mickiewicza, Słowackiego, których słowo jest dla mnie wszystkim. Wychowałem się i wykształciłem na nich" ("I sacredly surround myself with the Polish literature of long ago, Krasiński's, Mickiewicz's, and Słowacki's. Their words are everything for me. I was raised and formed by them"). It was from his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, that Conrad came to know and appreciate these Polish poets. The avowals that Conrad presents here are an encomium for Apollo. Not only are they a rare disclosure, for Conrad almost never touched on his Polish past, but they are the most significant pronouncements that Conrad makes in this Cracow interview.

Morski's introduction to Conrad appears at the beginning of the interview and contains many factual errors about Conrad's life, which may have been commonly held views in 1914. Conrad was born not in Poland, as the interviewer claims, but in Ukraine, of Polish parents, on 3 December 1857 (Najder 10).[6] There is no evidence that he attended St. Anne's Gymnasium in Cracow (38–39). Nor did he write about India, as the interviewer maintains, most likely because he regarded it as Rudyard Kipling's domain, although Conrad did visit India twice.[7] Some of Morris's information is also garbled. When the interviewer refers to the short story "Janko Górnik" ("Johnny the Coalminer"), he is undoubtedly thinking of Conrad's short story "Amy Foster," where "a mountaineer of the eastern range of the Carpathians" called Yanko Goorall is washed ashore in England after a shipping disaster (121, 133).

The interviewer concludes his introduction by assuming Conrad is a member of the Polish War Relief Committee. In fact, in a telegram to Ignacy Paderewski on 27 March 1915, Conrad expresses regret that he cannot join the committee because "Russian names will appear" ("Telegram" 227).

The interviewer's last words are "Good-bye. . . . I would like to see you in Warsaw." Conrad responds, "In a free Warsaw." But it is not until 11 November 1918, when the partitioning powers are defeated, that Warsaw becomes free.

Notes

I thank Barbara Bułat, librarian at the Jagiellonian University Library in Cracow, for her gracious assistance.

1. When Conrad left Poland, he undoubtedly thought that he was completely grown up, but he came to realize years later that at sixteen one is still "quite a child," as he remarked about the age of a servant to James Brand Pinker, his literary agent, on 13 March 1907 (*Collected Letters* 3: 421).

2. Mobilization notices for Vienna and Budapest had already appeared in the Cracow newspaper *Czas* on the day before his arrival. Mobilization in Cracow began on 31 July, when "huge posters were put up on walls in Cracow" (Zabierowski 33).

3. J. M. is also the signature for this article when it was reprinted with a few modifications in 1924 in a new literary publication in Warsaw, *Wiadomości Literackie* (*Literary News*). Zabierowski claims that the interviewer was Józef Mondschein (1833–1961), a writer, poet and translator, but he provides no evidence for this identification and makes no reference to *Kuryer Polski* (31).

4. See also "Rites."

5. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

6. Although Najder's claim that Conrad was born in Berdyczów has become the generally accepted Western view, Voitkovska argues convincingly that Conrad's actual place of birth was Terekhove. The landowners in Ukraine were Polish. Ukraine had been a part of Poland until January 1667, when King Jan Kazimierz Vasa signed the Truce of Andusovo: "There was every confidence that it would be reversed. In fact, it proved to be permanent. The ceded territories were never recovered" (Davies 263).

7. He sailed on the *Riversdale*, arriving in Madras on 6 April 1884, and left Bombay on the *Narcissus* on 5 June. In his second voyage, he arrived in Calcutta on the *Tilkhurst* on 21 November 1885 and began his passage home on the same ship on 9 January 1886 (Najder 430).

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From a Visit with Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad (Konrad Korzeniowski) is the author of many famous works, including *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent*, *'Twixt Land and Sea*, and, most significantly, *Under Western Eyes*. Because this novel captures the tragic Russian soul and delineates the atrocities of the Russian government, it was translated into many languages and created a sensation in Europe.[1]

Contrary to the allegation of The New Free Press, the author is not Russian but Polish, born in Poland, the son of an insurgent who in 1863 was exiled to Russia. He attended St. Anne's Gymnasium in Cracow. When in Marseilles as a young man, he entered the maritime service. After completing his navigational schooling in England, he became a merchant marine and was ultimately appointed the captain of a ship.[2]

His novels contain long descriptions of life at sea, in foreign countries, and even in exotic places (like India). These writings have no equal even in English literature. In the short story "Janko Górnik," he describes the distress of a Polish emigrant.

After Conrad began writing the psychological novel, he became one of the outstanding leaders of contemporary literature in England. According to R. Dybowski, a university professor in Cracow, Conrad enriched the English language considerably and as a writer surpasses Kipling. Many of his expressions have entered everyday speech and have become proverbs.[3] Conrad also wrote *Some Reminiscences*, in which he explains that his creations come from the Polish literary spirit. He currently travels to London, where, papers report, he belongs to the Committee Helping War Victims in Poland.

Good fortune gave me the opportunity to visit and talk with the greatest novelist in England today, Joseph Conrad. The author is Polish, writing only in English and ranked among the outstanding English authors. A suitable name: Konrad Korzeniowski. Conrad stayed in Cracow for several days planning to visit relatives on the border of the kingdom. Then he returned to England, where he has spent the greater part of his adventurous life.

Informed of Conrad's stay in Cracow, I, an interpreter of many of his works, wanted to meet the author in person and to pay homage to his extraordinary talents.[4] He received me with extreme courtesy, at once establishing an atmosphere of sincerity and warmth. His appearance seemed somehow different from the portrayal given by Mr. M. Dąbrowski in a recent issue of *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*.[5] I noticed that Conrad looked older. When I learned that he was in Poland with his son Borys, our talk at first touched on personal matters. He had been invited after several years of absence from Poland.[6] Although his son unfortunately speaks poorly in Polish, Conrad wanted to show him his native land.

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"Now tell me, sir," began Conrad, "after so many years I decided to go to Poland, and I find her preparing for war. I was unable to leave Cracow to visit my relatives."

This was the day before the announcement of mobilization, when communication with the Congress Kingdom of Poland was already broken, and much dismal news came from abroad.

I asked him if the English are in any way interested in our affairs, or if they know anything about Poland.

"Very little. They are impervious to us. The English are misguided by the Germans. About us they only see that we love our sovereignty. This love of freedom from external control comes from the heroic struggles in 1831 and 1863, insurrections that to this day still impress the English. Except for that, they know little of us, for our materialistic world respects only those who pursue economic well-being. . . ."

I told him then that we had entered a new period of national development after the fall of the insurrections, that we live a very deep and intensive spiritual life, and that although we are not powerful, we are not as miserable as the materialistic continent thinks us. I told him about the heroic battles of the last revolution in the kingdom, of the tragic nature of its incredible history.[7] Conrad listened in a kind manner, with great interest.

I asked him if he was thinking of writing on a Polish topic. He responded by giving a grim and startling picture of the last revolution in Russia and illuminated it from an entirely new angle.[8]

"No," he said, "I am not thinking of writing a novel with a Polish background. I do not know Polish interests and attitudes. I know Russia even less. I knew a lot of Russians in Switzerland, where I lived for a long time."[9]

"Do you know Russian literature?"

"I know it from translations.[10] But it is spiritually unfamiliar to me. In my heart and in my bones I am European. I do not like Russian authors; they are foreign and strange to me in their outlook on life. Tolstoy is good, but for people still very young. There is his constant moralizing. . . . I have nothing against moralists, but if they are continually in every circumstance pushing their views down my throat—then I do not want them! But Dostoevsky. France makes him a modern! Europe will forget about him in ten years. He is only a fad. England is not interested in him. There are in truth certain admiring circles in universities, mostly among the young."

"And Turgenev?"

"Turgenev? Yes! I esteem him immensely. He is a great artist. Maybe not very deep, but an outstanding author. Nobody is such a faultless technician; nobody has such a style; nobody emanates so much love. By the way, I must say that England worships him equally; we have in the English language excellent translations of his work.[11] Extraordinarily beautiful."

"Do you, sir, know our contemporary literature?"

"Unfortunately, just a little. It was not possible for me to become acquainted with it.[12] Concerning this topic, I sacredly surround myself with the Polish literature of long ago, Krasiński's, Mickiewicz's, and Słowacki's. Their words are everything for me. I was raised and formed by them. I do not know modern authors at all. I read only Żeromski's *The Story of Sin* and *Ashes*.[13] *Ashes*—what a wonder! The power of the words and images! This is an exceptional author. I do, however, have a small complaint about Żeromski. He could have written dramatic works, which could be understood and acted in England. I would like accordingly to live to repay my debt to Poland at least in this way."[14]

"He did not write plays. There is a play not adaptable for the stage, *The Rose*, but this would be completely unintelligible to the English.[15] This play takes the reader to the last revolution in the kingdom with all its tragedy. Although there are works of other writers that you, sir, could translate into English, *Eros and Psyche*, for example, by Żuławski,[16] or *The Feast of Life*, by Dygasiński, a Polish masterpiece in prose."[17]

"I absolutely must become acquainted with these works."

"Are the works of Polish writers eagerly read in England? Of our writers, who do the English know?"

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"Mainly Sienkiewicz. His *Quo Vadis?* is one of the most popular books in England and in America—translated in a dreadful American jargon by Jeremiah Curtin. There are many other examples. These translations are now somewhat better."[18]

"Who of the English authors is your favorite?"

"Dickens. Nobody equals him. Maybe he doesn't have the genius of Sienkiewicz, but he is an extraordinary author. What a knowledge of life. And his humor! Dickens is blood and bones English. Dickens. That is all of England."

"Precisely. Now a complete edition of the works of Dickens is coming out in Poznan."[19]

"That's good. That's very good."

"And Thackeray. Do you esteem him as much?"

"Certainly, but then there is a difference. The warmheartedness that is in Dickens is not found in his work."

"What do you say about Shaw? In Cracow, Bernard Shaw has captured recognition for himself on the stage. On the other hand, your work and Meredith's are hardly known in Poland."

"Bernard Shaw? I do not esteem him very highly. He is not a profound writer. This perpetual standing on one's head is by now for him simply sport. He is a paradox. Were it not for the fact that he is very witty. . . . As far as I am concerned, the fact that I am acknowledged as one worthy of being read even in America is enough for me. To tell the truth, England gave me the reputation, but the best part of my income flows from America. In addition to the French, the Germans and the Russians are beginning to be interested in me.[20] It is too bad that the Russians publish me, but do not pay me. I do not yet have an assured livelihood. As a matter of fact, I am making money only recently."[21]

"Are all your works based on reality?"

"Not all. Many are only imagined and that includes many extraordinary elements. All of *The Secret Agent*, for example, is based on a small incident, which took place in London twenty odd years ago."[22]

"Sir, how do you create?"

"Very slowly. Every page is thought through ten times."

We were coming to the end of our talk, for various gentlemen were repeatedly approaching us. Still, I asked a few more questions.

"Do you know Warsaw?"

"I was only there a few hours, in traveling through. I sensed that life there is very lively and vigorous. I would like to come to know it. I see that Warsaw has a future. What of it? Russians kill everything that is good in us. . . ."

I threw him a few more words about the soul of Warsaw, about the titanic magnitude of her wars with czardom, of her present-day hopes. . . . Conrad listened to me carefully and a strange shiver crossed his courageous, distinctive face.[23]

"Good-bye," I said. "I would like to see you in Warsaw."

"In a free Warsaw," added Conrad.

J. M.

Translator's Notes

1. This is hyperbole. *Under Western Eyes* was translated into Russian in 1912 and into German in 1913, but it was translated into French only in 1920, into Spanish in 1925, and into Italian in 1928.

2. Conrad's "maritime service" in Marseilles took place from 1874 to 1878; he became a captain in the British Merchant Marine on 10 November 1886. His only command was of the *Otago*, from 24 January 1888 until the end of March 1889 (Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 48–67, 111, 132).

3. Roman Dybowski (1883–1945), a professor of English and American literature at Jagiellonian University, verges on inaccuracy, but "heart of darkness" had become a byword, and the Assistant Commissioner's proclamation in *The Secret Agent* "[T]his is an imperfect world" (Conrad, *Secret Agent* 139) has been quoted not infrequently.

4. No critical works by a J. M. that might be the interviewer have been found. It is possible that some of his essays appeared in *Kuryer Polski* and were not included in bibliographies, or he may just be referring to his personal reading.

5. The interviewer is referring to Marian Dąbrowski's interview in London, accompanied by a photograph of Conrad, published on 18 April 1914 in Warsaw in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (*Illustrated Weekly*), which Najder erroneously refers to as "the only interview Conrad gave in Polish and for a Polish periodical" (*Joseph Conrad* 458).

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6. The invitation to visit Poland came from the Retingers, a young Polish couple. Józef Retinger, who was introduced to Conrad by Arnold Bennett, managed the Polish Bureau in Granville House in London. His wife's mother had invited the Conrads to visit her estate on Russian terrain but near Cracow (Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 458). Conrad remarked in a letter to John Galsworthy, "This caused such an excitement in the household that if I had not accepted instantly I would have been torn to pieces by my own wife and children" (*Collected Letters* 5: 406–07).

7. The Revolution of 1905. Many strikes occurred in the kingdom of Poland immediately before and after Bloody Sunday, 22 January 1905, in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

8. Conrad, who was in Capri at the time, refers to the "events in Russia" in a 23 February 1905 letter to James Brand Pinker, where he tells of writing an article on "The Concord of Europe." The "theme" is described as "prominent in the closing pages of 'Autocracy and War'" (*Collected Letters* 3: 219n1). See also Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 351–54.

9. In addition to the young Konrad Korzeniowski's tour of Switzerland in 1873 with his tutor, Adam Marek Pulman, Conrad made three visits to Champel-les-Bains, a spa near Geneva. His first "water cure" occurred in 1891 from 21 May to 14 June, his second from 2 to 30 May 1895. During his third visit, from 23 May to 10 August 1907, he spent time in Geneva acquiring details that would be incorporated into *Under Western Eyes*, published on 5 October 1911 (see Conrad, *Personal Record* 37–41; Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 170, 203, 378, 387).

10. Critics who have written on Conrad's voracious reading of Russian authors include Lewitter; Najder ("Conrad"); Voitkovska; and Wheeler.

11. William Heinemann published many of Constance Garnett's translations of Turgenev, including *Sportsman's Sketches* (1895), *Fathers and Children* (now more familiar to English readers as *Fathers and Sons*; 1895), *On the Eve* (1895), *Smoke* (1896), *Virgin Soil* (1896), and *Torrents of Spring* (1897). In a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad affirms that he read *Smoke* in Polish "[a]s a boy" (*Collected Letters* 6: 77). This would most likely have been the 1871 translation published in Warsaw. Conrad may also have read *Fathers and Sons* in Polish; a translation appeared in Warsaw in 1870 (Trochimiak 110) and a second translation, by F. Blumenthal, appeared in 1871. He adds in the same letter that he read "the Gentlefolks in French." *Une nichée de gentilshommes: Moeurs de la vie de province en Russie* (*Home of the Nobility: The Customs of Provincial Life in Russia*), translated by Alphonse de Calonne and Vladimir Aleksandrovič Sollogub, was published by Hetzel in Paris in 1861.

12. But he would become familiar with contemporary Polish literature in Zakopane after fleeing military activity in Cracow on 2 August 1914. Aniela Zagórska (1881–1943), a distant relative and translator of Conrad into Polish, remarks, "During his two-month stay he devoured almost all that was worth reading in fiction and drama. 'Devoured' is the right word, for he read with unusual, unbelievable speed. I was constantly bringing him new books" (214).

13. Andrzej Wajda (1926–2016) adapted *Ashes* (*Popioły*) into a film in 1965; it is regarded as one of his finest achievements.

14. That is, by writing plays. Conrad wrote three plays, two based on short stories: *One Day More* (1904), based on "Tomorrow," in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford (Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 359), and *Laughing Anne* (1920), based on "Because of the Dollars." He also adapted *The Secret Agent* for the stage (1919), making many depreciating remarks about it in a letter of 11 November 1919 to Pinker and then heartily concluding, perhaps ironically, that producing a play a "is a great experience" (*Collected Letters* 6: 520). In 1917 B. Macdonald Hastings adapted *Victory* for the stage; in due course Conrad lost interest, but there were eighty-three performances (Najder, *Joseph Conrad* 513). *Under Western Eyes* was also fleetingly considered for dramatization (Conrad, *Collected Letters* 6: 157). Conrad's father was a successful playwright. Miłosz, in discussing two of his plays, quotes one of Korzeniowski's critics: "His wit bites to the bone; his irony kills; his laughter is similar to the growling of a dog followed by a deep sinking of teeth" (265).

15. *Róża* (1909) is a drama about the Revolution of 1905.

16. Jerzy Żuławski (1874–1915) was a "philosophical poet, a translator of old Hindu poetry and of some books of the Old Testament"; he was also a "brilliant essayist and playwright. The most important of his dramas is, perhaps, *Eros and Psyche* (1904), tracing the story of a couple's eternal love through many incarnations" (Miłosz 342).

17. Adolf Dygasiński (1839–1902) "[i]n his last work *The Feast of Life* (*Gody życia*, 1902), a kind of long prose poem in praise of nature's indominable élan, . . . employed an ornate, highly stylized, and strongly cadenced language for which he was applauded by the younger generation, the 'modernists'" (Miłosz 315).

18. Curtin's translation was published in 1897 by Little, Brown and Company. Other English translators of *Quo Vadis?* include S. A. Binion and S. Malevsky (Routledge, 1897) and C. J. Hogarth (J. M. Dent, 1914).

19. Volumes 1 through 5 of the *Selected Works of Charles Dickens* came out in Poznan in 1914, and volumes 6 and 7 came out in 1918. These books were translated and edited under the direction of Antoni Mazanowski.

20. Conrad may be referring to the Russian and German translations of *Under Western Eyes*. The Russian translator was E. Pimenovoj. The German translator was Ernst Wolfgang Günter, a pseudonym for Ernst Wolfgang Freissler, an Austrian-Silesian author who translated many of Conrad's other works, including "The Informer" (1912), *The Nigger of the* Narcissus (1912), and "The Duel" (1914).

21. About "financial matters," Conrad wrote to John Galsworthy on 5 May 1914, "You and only you saved me from going under. Tho' I feel frightfully shaken my head is now above water in a measure" (*Collected Letters* 5: 378).

22. Conrad is referring to the attempt at a bombing of the Greenwich Observatory on 15 February 1894; see Sherry. But Conrad does not mention that in *The Secret Agent* he is severely censuring London, his "monstrous town" (xii), for not providing solace for those in need like Winnie Verloc. Because of her pitiless

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culture, she is driven to murder and suicide. See Szczypien 119–35.

23. The interviewer's comments evidently roused tragic thoughts. As Conrad had remarked to Wincenty Lutosławski on 9 June 1897, "[M]y Father was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel and in the courtyard of this Citadel—characteristically for our nation—my childhood memories begin" (*Collected Letters* 1: 358).

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