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CONRAD AND PIŁSUDSKI

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Abstract: Although there would seem to be no apparent link between the English novelist Joseph Conrad and Marshal Józef Piłsudski, who restored the Polish State after World War I, they did in fact have much in common. Both hailed from the Polish eastern borderlands and both came from patriotic noble families. Both had been nurtured on the Polish Romantic poets – and Słowacki in particular. For both of them the failure of the 1863 January Uprising was a traumatic experience and both of them suffered exile in Russia. However, whereas Conrad did not believe that Poland would ever be able to regain her independence, Piłsudski led a successful armed struggle for the Polish cause, thus earning the writer's unstinting admiration. Piłsudski for his part took pleasure in reading Conrad's *Lord Jim*.

Keywords: Polish eastern borderlands, Conrad, Piłsudski, January Uprising, 1863 Uprising, Polish independence.

The idea of linking these two names would at first sight appear to be rather far-fetched. Could there have been any real connection between one of the greatest English novelists of the twentieth century and one of the main architects of the restoration of the State of Poland in 1918? Could the brilliant amateur military commander who masterminded the Bezdany mail train robbery of 1908 have had anything in common with the elegant English gentleman who penned *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*?

In actual fact, the differences were far fewer than the similarities and a closer examination of the latter can only enrich our understanding of these two exceptional people. Both Conrad and Piłsudski were born into noble families living in the Polish eastern borderlands. Conrad – who was ten years older – was born in Berdyczów / Berdichiv in central Ukraine, while Piłsudski was born in Zułów / Zalavas in Lithuania. Both had patriotic Polish backgrounds and both even as children suffered oppression at the hands of the Russians, who then ruled that part of the former Polish Commonwealth. Conrad Korzeniowski was still a child when he went into mourning for his parents. Earlier, he had accompanied his mother on her visits to the Warsaw Citadel, where – like Józef Piłsudski many years later – his father was being held prisoner in the infamous Tenth Pavilion. He had also accompanied his parents to Vologda in northern Russia, where they had been sent into exile. Piłsudski was

a medical student when he was arrested and sent into Siberian exile for his part in the attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander III. As young people, therefore, both Conrad and Piłsudski (known as Ziuk to his family and friends) became victims of the tsarist police state.

What, we may ask, were the sources of their Polish patriotism? There were several, no doubt, but those which immediately spring to mind were their family upbringing and their cultural ties with the tradition of Polish Romanticism. Conrad's father Apollo Korzeniowski was one of the people who masterminded the 1863 January Uprising. The clandestine "Movement Committee" (Komitet Ruchu) which he set up in Warsaw formed the basis for the future National Government (Rząd Narodowy). Piłsudski's father (who was also called Joseph) was the National Government's commissar in the Żmudź region of Lithuania.

Conrad's mother Ewa Korzeniowska brought up her son to be an ardent patriot. Before the January Uprising had even broken out, in a letter to her husband (who was in Warsaw), she wrote from Teterów / Teteriv (in Podolia):

> I'm tired. I've spent all day sewing a little mourning robe for Konrad. So many people are wearing black here – even the children – so the boy himself keeps asking for mourning clothes. I had to give him what he wanted. […] He's such a nice boy and becoming quite handsome.[1]

Józef Piłsudski for his part had the following memories of being schooled at home:

> Our mother, who was an uncompromising patriot, did not even try to hide from us the pain and disappointments which she felt on account of the failure of the Uprising. Indeed, in bringing us up she stressed the need to continue to fight our country's enemy. From our earliest childhood we were acquainted with the works of our national poets – and in particular with those that had been banned. We were taught Polish history and only Polish books were bought. This revolutionary patriotism did not have any particular social bias. Our mother's favourite poet was Krasiński. I myself – ever since I was a child – have always been captivated by Słowacki, who was also my first teacher of democratic principles.[2]

It is worth noting that Piłsudski's literary preferences were shared by Conrad, whose father Apollo Korzeniowski was "the last of the Romantic playwrights". Speaking to a Polish journalist in 1914, Condrad gave the following account of his literary education as a boy:

> English critics – and after all I am an English writer – whenever they speak of me they add that there is in me something incomprehensible, inconceivable, elusive. Only you can grasp this elusiveness, and comprehend what is incomprehensible. That is Polishness. Polishness which I took from Mickiewicz and Słowacki. My father read *Pan Tadeusz* aloud to me and made me

[1] E. Korzeniowska to her husband [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder and Joanna Skolik. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Gaudium, 2006, vol. I, p. 122.

[2] J. Piłsudski. "Jak stałem się socjalistą (How I became a socialist)" [In:] *Idem. Wybór pism*. Ed. W. Suleja. Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Ossolineum, 1999, BN I, № 274, p. 20.

> read it aloud. Not just once or twice. I used to prefer *Konrad Wallenrod*, *Grażyna*. Later I liked Słowacki better. You know why Słowacki? II est l'âme de toute la Pologne, lui.[3]

Piłsudski was particularly fond of Słowacki and often said so in public. The eulogy delivered by the marshal on 28th June 1927 at the Wawel castle in Cracow – on the occasion of the transfer of the poet's remains to a tomb in the crypt of the Royal Cathedral – is the fullest expression of his admiration for the man and the poet:

> Now that I know, seeing his coffin, as do all of us gathered here together, that Słowacki has arrived, I know too that his journey ends in a place where our path is marked by heavy stones – names that bear well-nigh chronological witness to our past. He comes to join those who were called Vladislas or Sigismund, John or Boleslaus. He comes not with his Christian name, but with his family name, bearing witness to the magnitude of Poland's labours and the greatness of the Polish spirit. He comes to prolong his life, not only in order to be with our generation, but also with those to come. He comes as the Kingly Spirit.[4]

The January Uprising of 1863 exerted a singular influence on the development of the personalities of Conrad and Piłsudski, both of whom may be considered to be "children of the Uprising". As Conrad himself recollected:

> […] the last armed rising in 1863, an event which affected the future of all my generation and has coloured my earliest impressions.[5]

It was above all in his correspondence with other Poles that Conrad stressed the fact that many of his closest relatives had been involved in clandestine preparations for the uprising. In a letter to the philosopher Wincenty Lutosławski he writes:

> In 1856 my father Apollo married Ewelina Bobrowska, who was the daughter of a landowner in the Ukraine and the sister of Stefan Bobrowski, whose name you know, no doubt. I was born in the countryside, but towards the end of 1860 my parents moved to Warsaw, where my father intended to start a fortnightly literary magazine. After the demonstrations and civil unrest which broke out at that time (on account of conscription into the [Russian] army), my father was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel and my childhood memories – a normal thing for our nation – begin in the courtyard of that Citadel.[6]

In a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski we read:

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[3] *Conrad under familial eyes*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Texts translated by Halina Carroll-Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 199.

[4] J. Piłsudski. "Przemówienie przy składaniu prochów Słowackiego do grobów wawelskich" [In:] *Idem.* Pisma zbiorowe. Warszawa 1937, vol. IX, p. 76: "Gdy teraz, patrząc na trumnę, wiem, tak jak wszyscy zebrani, że Słowacki idzie, to wiem, że idzie tam, gdzie głazy na naszym gościńcu stoją, świadcząc nieledwie chronologicznie przez imiona o naszej przeszłości. Idzie między Władysławy i Zygmunty, idzie między Jany i Bolesławy. Idzie nie z imieniem, lecz z nazwiskiem, świadcząc także o wielkości pracy i wielkości ducha Polski. Idzie, by przedłużyć swe życie, by być nie tylko z naszym pokoleniem, lecz i z tymi, którzy nadejdą. Idzie jako Król Duch".

[5] J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder and J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 60.

[6] J. Conrad to W. Lutosławski, 9th June 1897 [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*. Ed. Z. Najder and J. Skolik. Lublin: Gaudium, 2006, vol. 2, pp. 40–41.

> I was born in December 1857. My parents later moved to Warsaw. In 1862 my father was imprisoned in the Warsaw fortress and a few months later was sent to Vologda. I accompanied my parents in their exile. Later they were moved to Czernichów, where my mother died. I can barely remember her, but from what I heard and from the letters she wrote to her brothers – which I read later – I know that she was a woman of exceptional mind and spirit. Her younger brother Stefan Bobrowski was a well-known personage in 1863.[7]

Writing to Aleksander M. Jasieński a couple of years later, he said:

> My mother – neé Bobrowska (from Oratów in the Ukraine) – was the sister of Stefan Bobrowski, who as a member of the National Government played quite a significant role in Warsaw in 1862/3.[8]

As these statements show, Conrad Korzeniowski was not only proud of the part played by some of his closest relatives in the patriotic activities associated with the January Uprising, but also had the greatest respect for the sacrifices which they made.

The 1863 Uprising was also a key event in the life of Józef Piłsudski, who saw it as a turning point in the history of the Polish nation. In 1924 he wrote:

> The year 1863 was a watershed in our history: the old Poland died and a new Poland was born. This stupendous event – our nation rising up in a prolonged and bloody armed struggle that ravaged the entire country – marked a turning point. The events of 1863 ushered in our modern social system. A huge wall went up, separating generation from generation, opening up new life and closing the old – a wall on which the numbers 1, 8, 6 and 3 were written in fire. Unknown to all, but seen by those who could think, these numbers continued to burn, creating and moulding the soul of the new post-uprising Pole – a soul that had new recesses and different nerves, feeling and reacting in a completely different way. The events of 1863 gave birth to a different Poland, with a different outlook on life and its tasks.[9]

However, our two heroes reacted differently to the seemingly tragic consequences of the failed uprising. When Conrad grew up, he decided to go abroad and leave Poland for ever. First he went to France and then to Britain. Living in western Europe, he no doubt realized how hopeless the Polish cause was, especially after the failure of the January Uprising and France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Respectful though he was of Poland's past, he was convinced that his native land had for ever been erased from the map of modern Europe. In a letter to Spirydion Kliszczewski – one of his Polish friends in Britain – he wrote:

> Recent developments cast a shadow which, though fairly contorted, is nevertheless dark enough to evoke ominous images of battlefields in the not too distant future. Yet all these portents of great and decisive events leave me in a state of despairing indifference, for whatever may change in the lot of living nations, there is neither hope nor salvation for the dead. We have already passed through the gate bearing the inscription – written in fire and blood – 'lasciate

[7] J. Conrad to K. Waliszewski [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*, *ed. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 74.

[8] J. Conrad to A.M. Jasieński [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*, *ed. cit.*, vol. I, p. 83.

[9] J. Piłsudski. "Rok 1863" [In:] *Idem*. *Rok 1863*. Ed. S. Kieniewicz. Warszawa 1989, pp. 138-139.

> ogni speranza'. Now that gate is closed to the light of hope and all that awaits us is the darkness of oblivion.[10]

There is no doubt that Conrad's lack of faith in the idea that Poland might one day regain her independence had been reinforced by the influence of his uncle and long-standing guardian Tadeusz Bobrowski, who – contemptuous as he was of Poland's Russian occupiers – was of the opinion that armed conflict with Russia was sheer madness. Bobrowski was therefore adamantly opposed to all conspiratorial activity. As he wrote to his nephew:

> In the meantime, as 'pariahs' who have been deprived of their political existence and their right to self-determination, we must preserve our separate identity and stand by our own position until such time as our endeavours towards self-improvement give the Nemesis of history some basis for according us the right to exist as a real national (or even broader) entity.[11]

In his posthumously published memoirs entitled *Pamiętnik mojego życia (A Memoir of My Life)* Tadeusz Bobrowski gives the following assessment of the January Uprising:

> Without exaggeration one can say that the movement of 1861-1863 – which, like every illusion, however noble, was conceived as a deception – came into being as a deception, spread as a deception and came to an end in deception, throwing up all manner of dreamers, adventurers and people with great ambitions, who – having been routed in a defeat that cost the noblest hearts their lives – promptly fled the country, leaving the task of reconstructing what they had turned into ruins to those whom they had previously looked down upon with patronizing contempt from the lofty heights of their conceit and whom they had regarded as cowards and unworthy sons of Poland! […][12]

It is small wonder, then, that the authority of uncle Tadeusz – to whom Conrad owed so much and whom he greatly admired – exerted a considerable influence on the way in which he later viewed the fate of his Polish homeland. This pessimism is reflected not only in the writer's private correspondence, but also in his literary work, a good example being the following passage from *Prince Roman*, which is Conrad's most "Polish" work:

> The speaker was of Polish nationality, that nationality not so much alive as surviving, which persists in thinking, breathing, speaking, hoping, and suffering in its grave, railed in by a million of bayonets and triple-sealed with the seals of three great empires.[13]

In the spring of 1914, during an interview which he gave to a journalist working for the Warsaw "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" magazine, Conrad was asked what he

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[10] J. Conrad to S. Kliszczewski [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*, *ed. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 14-15.

[11] T. Bobrowski to K. Korzeniowski [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*, *ed. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 319-320.

[12] T. Bobrowski. *Pamiętnik mojego życia*. Ed. S. Kieniewicz. Warszawa 1979, vol. 2, p. 443.

[13] J. Conrad. *Prince Roman* [In:] *Idem*. *Selected Short Stories.* Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1997, p. 206.

thought the future might hold in store for Poland and the Polish nation. His answer was extremely pessimistic:

> When I start thinking about the present political situation, c'est affreux! I can't think too often about Poland, because it's painful. It makes me feel bad and bitter. I just wouldn't be able to live. Taking leave of people, the English say "Good luck!" I can't say that to you, but, in the midst of it all – and despite the threat of annihilation that lurks in the shadows – we continue to live.[14]

Piłsudski's attitude to the tradition of 1863 could not have been more different. He made a detailed study of the history of the uprising and drew conclusions which had a bearing on the present. Concluding a series of lectures which he gave on the subject in 1912 at the School of Social and Political Science in Cracow, he declared:

> I freely admit that my role has been a difficult one. I consoled myself with the thought that you would be good enough to understand my intentions – that you would be good enough to understand the sincerity of my desire to build a bridge between today's generation and the generation of 1863. And I think that if I were to stand in the presence of people from that time, they would say to me – as I often say to myself: "We did not die in vain. Our deaths may serve as a source of knowledge for you."[15]

Piłsudski's biographers have noted that his attitude towards the legacy of the January Uprising was in large measure influenced by his period of exile in Siberia. In the words of Wacław Jędrzejewicz:

> [In Tunka] living conditions were considerably better than in Kireńsk. First and foremost, [Piłsudski] [here] found other members of the Polish intelligentsia who had been exiled for their political activities – people such as the proletarian activists Michał Mancewicz and Stefan Juszczyński; also Bronisław Szwarce, who had been a member of the Central National Committee in 1863 and who had been arrested three weeks before the January Uprising broke out. These circles discussed the past and mused over an independent Poland of the future. Literature was also a contributing factor: much of it was sent to Piłsudski from home, including – at his request – the works of Słowacki.[16]

For Piłsudski, the failure of the 1863 Uprising was not a cause for despair. On the contrary, he saw that a close examination of the course of this armed insurrection offered him an opportunity to work on ways to successfully combat the armed might of the Russian occupying power. One of the pre-conditions for victory was the training of cadres for armed conflict. To begin with, Piłsudski did this under the auspices of the PPS workers' party. In Galicia, he later set up paramilitary groups which were the forerunners of the Polish Legions. These ideas were quickly put to the test after the outbreak of the First World War.

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[14] M. Dąbrowski. "Rozmowa z J. Conradem" [In:] M. Dąbrowska. *Szkice o Conradzie*. Ed. E. Korzeniewska. Warszawa 1974, p. 46.

[15] J. Piłsudski. "Zarys historii militarnej Powstania Styczniowego" [In:] *Idem*. *Rok 1863*, *ed. cit*., p. 74.

[16] W. Jędrzejewicz. *Józef Piłsudski, 1867-1935*. Wrocław 1989, p. 9.

As fate would have it, Conrad was in Cracow with his wife and two sons on the very day that war was declared. As he and his family were now enemy aliens, his Polish friends advised him to temporarily move to the relative safety of Zakopane. There the Conrad family stayed at the "Konstantynówka" guest-house which was owned and run by Conrad's cousin Aniela Zagórska and her daughter (also Aniela). Aniela Zagórska junior recorded the following account of Conrad's reactions to the events around him:

> I would like to add one more detail that concerns Conrad's attitude towards the events that took place in Poland during his stay in Zakopane. He had great respect and enthusiasm for the then commander-in-chief [i.e. Piłsudski, who commanded the First Brigade of the Polish Legions]. But he did not believe that the efforts of the Polish Legions would bring about positive results; he feared that more blood would be spilled unnecessarily. He came to Poland after more than twenty years to find himself amidst preparations for an armed attempt to regain independence and the circumstances could not but remind him of some childhood experiences (in 1863 Conrad was six years old), of defeat, mourning, hopelessness. Conrad's youth coincided with the post-insurrection atmosphere. His beloved guardian, Tadeusz Bobrowski, his mother's brother, was on the side of the Whites in 1863. He was a man of great kindness and intellect but a staunch opponent of the insurrection. It must have had an effect on Conrad: he did not believe it was possible to regain independence. All his childhood memories revived in that memorable summer of 1914. I shall never forget his expression when he looked at marching Legionaries or listened to their songs.[17]

In fact, Aniela Zagórska's assessment of Conrad's views was not entirely correct, for during his stay in Zakopane the writer did take part in political discussions, though not with people of the highest calibre. Before his return to Britain he even drew up a political memorandum which was intended to further the cause of Polish independence (*Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski's Memorandum on the Polish Question, October 1914*). However, the project came to nothing because of the changing international situation.[18] Indeed, once he was safely back home – having overcome all manner of obstacles that might have prevented his safe return to the British Isles – Conrad now found himself on the other side of the front line, as Britain – being an ally of France and Russia – was at war with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Given the fact that Piłsudski's Legions were fighting on the side of the Central Powers, one might be tempted to say that at that particular time there was very little common ground between Conrad and Piłsudski. However, this was not so. Conrad remained faithful to the promise he had made in Zakopane to work for the Polish cause once he was back on British soil. In a series of articles published in the British press in 1915 he described the tragic situation of his fellow Poles after the outbreak of the Great War:

> […] a whole people seeing the culmination of its misfortunes in a final catastrophe, unable to trust anyone, to appeal to anyone, to look for help from any quarter; deprived of all hope and even of its last illusions, and unable, in the trouble of minds and the unrest of consciences, to take refuge in stoical acceptance. I have seen all this. And I am glad I have not so many years

[17] Aniela Zagórska. "A Few Reminiscences of Conrad" [In:] *Conrad under familial eyes*, *ed. cit.*, p. 222.

[18] Cf. S. Zabierowski. *Polska misja Conrada*. Katowice 1984.

> left me to remember that appalling feeling of inexorable fate, tangible, palpable, come after so many cruel years, a figure of dread, murmuring with iron lips the final words: Ruin – and Extinction.[19]

This was not all. In 1916 Conrad paid a visit to the Foreign Office together with his young Polish friend and informal political adviser Józef Retinger, who had suggested that he submit a memorandum advocating the restoration of the Polish State as a protectorate of Britain and France. In the document submitted by Conrad we read:

> Through most of these years, and especially since 1830, Poland (I use this expression since Poland exists as a spiritual entity today as definitely as it ever existed in her past) has put her faith in the Western Powers. Politically it may have been nothing more than a consoling illusion, and the nation had a half-consciousness of this. But what Poland was looking for from the Western Powers without discouragement and with unbroken confidence was moral support.[20]

As we now know, Conrad's efforts were in vain, because at that time the British government supported the position of tsarist Russia on the Polish question.

Anxious to do his bit for the war effort, Conrad accepted an invitation from the Royal Navy to visit naval ports and at one point even took part in a risky expedition – on an armed brigantine disguised as a merchant vessel – to hunt for German submarines.[21]

The situation began to change in the following year. After the Tsar had been overthrown, the new Russian Provisional Government granted Poles the right to independence. This change in Russian policy led to a gradual modification of the positions of Britain and France. Accordingly, Conrad began to take part in pro-Polish events – ceremonies to commemorate Henryk Sienkiewicz and Tadeusz Kościuszko – that had been organized by Polish circles close to Piłsudski.[22] He also never ceased to keep track of the international situation, chiefly with regard to its bearing on Polish interests. His assessment was very pessimistic.

Piłsudski for his part was at that time single-mindedly engaged in highly risky activities and complicated political manoeuvres designed to further the Polish cause.

The First World War was nearing its end. At Versailles, the Great Powers recognized Poland's right to exist as an independent state. A major problem, however, was the question of demarcating the new country's borders. According to the testimony of relatives who visited him in Britain, Conrad was keenly interested in the fate of his Polish homeland. At the same time, however, he would seem to have experienced feelings of guilt at not having emulated the tremendous sacrifices which had been made for the Polish cause by his nearest and dearest. His cousin Karola Zagórska

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[19] J. Conrad. *Notes on Life and Letters*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

[20] J. Conrad. "A Note on the Polish Problem" [In:] *Idem*. *Notes on Life and Letters*. Ed. J.H. Stape with the assistance of A. Busza. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 108-113.

[21] Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad – a Life*. Transl. Halina Najder. Rochester–New York: Camden House, 2007, p. 485; B. Pomian Piatkowski. "Próba wierności shipmastera Conrada" [In:] *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*. Ed. B. Kocówna. Warszawa 1963, pp. 76-82.

[22] Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad – a Life*, *ed. cit.*, p. 494.

– a singer who often visited him in 1920 – recalled having the following conversation:

> "But you, Konrad," I protested, "are even more fortunate than me, beacause the lives of your parents are something really great and beautiful. They gave their country all they possibly could. As long as Poland lasts, every generation will venerate their memory. Just think of that, Konrad."
>
> Konrad suddenly shot a glance at me. His face was radiant and wonderful to behold, but then the radiance suddenly vanished and – before I knew what had happened – Konrad was no longer at my side.[23]

On another occasion, Karola Zagórska recalls the great impression made on Conrad by some propaganda photographs entitled *Schoolchildren plant a tree of freedom on the slopes of the Citadel on May 3rd 1919*. There were two photographs:

> The first photograph showed only a dense mass of heads flanked by ranks of soldiers, while the second showed in clear detail a frail, leafless sapling which had been planted in freshly dug earth, with a bareheaded Piłsudski standing in the foreground.[24]

Apparently, Conrad could not take his eyes away from the second photograph. This was hardly surprising, as he no doubt recalled those harrowing times when he and his mother used to go to that same Citadel to visit his father, who was one of the prisoners there. And he had lived to see the day when a reborn Poland – represented by the Head of State Józef Piłsudski and members of the youngest generation – was able to pay tribute to all those people who – like his father and the combatants of the January Uprising – had fought for the national cause.

It is small wonder, then, that Conrad was constantly concerned for the welfare of the newly created Polish State – and never more so than during the 1920 Polish-Soviet War, whose outcome was to determine Poland's eastern borders. It was with a sense of pride that he wrote to the American lawyer and patron of the arts 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 soul, one indominable will, from the poorest peasant to the highest magnate.[25]

On the whole, Conrad did not share these fears and concerns with people who were close to him. As Karola Zagórska recalls:

> We did not exchange a word about the news coming from Poland. I had no wish to talk about it and obviously neither did Konrad. Once, when we had left the dining room, he stopped in the hall and looked at a coloured woodcut by Jastrzębowski depicting Piłsudski mounted on

[23] K. Zagórska. "Pod dachem Konrada Korzeniowskiego (Josepha Conrada)" [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*, *ed. cit*., vol. II, p. 279.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 282.

[25] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. L. Davies and J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, vol. 7, p. 40; Cf. A. Busza. "The Rhetoric of Conrad's Non-Fictional Political Discourse". *Annales de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de Nice* 1978, № 34.

a horse. When we had sat down in his study, Konrad suddenly said, flicking through some magazine:

"He's the only great man who appeared on the world scene during the war."After a pause he added:

"In some respects, he's like Napoleon, but – as a human being – he stands higher, because Napoleon – apart from his genius – was like everybody else, whereas Piłsudski isn't like anybody else."[26]

It was not long before news came of Piłsudski's victory in the Battle of Warsaw. Conrad's expressions of admiration for Piłsudski were not confined to private conversations, however. He was, on the contrary, all too ready to publicly defend the marshal's policies, as in his extensive essay entitled *The Crime of Partition* – his most outstanding foray into political discourse – which was first published in "The Fortnightly Review" in May 1919. There we read:

Out of the mental and moral trouble into which the grouping of the Powers at the beginning of war had thrown the counsels of Poland there emerged at last the decision that the Polish Legions, a peace organisation in Galicia directed by Pilsudski (afterwards given the rank of General, and now apparently the Chief of the Government in Warsaw), should take the field against the Russians. In reality it did not matter against which partner in the "Crime" Polish resentment should be directed. There was little to choose between the methods of Russian barbarism, which were both crude and rotten, and the cultivated brutality tinged with contempt of Germany's superficial, grinding civilisation. There was nothing to choose between them. Both were hateful, and the direction of the Polish effort was naturally governed by Austria's tolerant attitude, which had connived for years at the semi-secret organisation of the Polish Legions. Besides, the material possibility pointed out the way. That Poland should have turned at first against the ally of Western Powers, to whose moral support she had been looking for so many years, is not a greater monstrosity than that alliance with Russia which had been entered into by England and France with rather less excuse and with a view to eventualities which could perhaps have been avoided by a firmer policy and by a greater resolution in the face of what plainly appeared unavoidable.[27]

Thus Conrad countered Western accusations that Piłsudski's troops were in effect fighting against the Entente. Coming from a loyal British citizen, this was certainly a display of nonconformity and Polish patriotism. As Józef Ujejski observes:

Such a rebuttal of the accusation had no doubt been least expected. However, it would seem that no discussion ensued, notwithstanding the author's name and the size of the magazine's circulation – no discussion, at least, that was of any significance.[28]

The authorities of the reborn Polish State were quick to see that Conrad's standing in Britain could be put to good use in more ways than one. The Polish ambassador in London Eustachy Sapieha wrote a letter to Conrad suggesting that he take part in setting up an Anglo-Polish Society that would further Polish interests in Britain:

[26] K. Zagórska. "Pod dachem Konrada Korzeniowskiego (Josepha Conrada)" [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Konrada-Korzeniowskiego*, *ed. cit.*, vol. II, p. 283.

[27] J. Conrad. "The Crime of Partition" [In:] *Idem*. *Notes on Life and Letters*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

[28] J. Ujejski. *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim*. Warszawa 1936, p. 58.

> Your position in English literature as the most distinguished of contemporary authors could be of inestimable service to our country if you undertook the task of setting up such a circle of friends of Poland.[29]

Politely – but firmly – Conrad refused, pleading ill health (which was true) and the relative paucity of his connections with people in high places (which was not altogether true).

The Polish authorities also came up with another proposition, which had been put forward to them by the British consul in Warsaw Frank Savery, who thought that Conrad might prepare a propaganda booklet – addressed to British readers – on the subject of Piłsudski. In a letter to Prof. Szymon Aszkenazy, Savery had written:

> If only Conrad could be persuaded to put his literary genius and his enormous prestige in England at the service first of his personal admiration for General Pilsudski and secondly of the patriotism which I believe him still to feel for the country of his birth, I really think we should be able to create a Pilsudski legend in England, and given the psychology of my fellow countrymen, I think that such a legend would be a great asset for Poland from the political point of view.[30]

As we know, nothing came of this project.[31]

It would seem that Conrad's admiration for Piłsudski was reciprocated, as – according to the marshal's biographers – the last book which he read before his death was Aniela Zagórska's translation of *Lord Jim*.[32]

If we now ask ourselves what these two prominent figures of the early twentieth century had in common, we shall find quite a lot of common ground. Both hailed from the eastern borderlands, which were a bastion of Polish culture. Piłsudski was born in Lithuania, while Conrad was born in central Ukraine. Both were born into Polish noble families and in their own ways were proud of their noble ancestry. Conrad was very attached to his Nałęcz coat of arms, while Piłsudski noted with a certain satisfaction:

> I was born in the countryside, into a noble family whose members, owing to their ancient ancestry and the amount of land which they owned, belonged to the ranks of those who were once called *bene nati et possessionati*.[33]

Not surprisingly, both had been nurtured on Polish Romantic literature since early childhood, as the impact of the writings of the Polish national poets was all the greater for having been banned by the Russian occupying power. Both had grown up in the shadow of the January Uprising, which seems to have been the swansong of political Romanticism. Conrad and his closest relatives had been victims of Russian repres-

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[29] E. Sapieha to J. Conrad [In:] T. Bobrowski. *Listy do Conrada*. Ed. R. Jabłkowska. Warszawa 1981, p. 254; Cf. the appendix edited by B. Koc [In:] *Ibid.*, pp. 237-251.

[30] Letter written on 14th November 1919 [In:] *Ibid.*, p. 261.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 243.

[32] W. Jędrzejewicz. *Kronika życia Józefa Piłsudskiego, 1867-1935*. Kraków 1988, vol. II, p. 376.

[33] J. Piłsudski. "Jak stałem się socjalistą (How I became a socialist)" [In:] *Idem*. *Wybór pism*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

sion both before and after the uprising, while Piłsudski could not forget the fate of Polish patriots in Lithuania when it was terrorized by "Muraviev the Hangman". The legend of the 1863 Uprising and its main actors pervaded their thoughts and lives. Conrad often reminisced about his uncle Stefan Bobrowski, whose memory was also revered by Piłsudski, as we read in one of his lectures on the uprising:

> O Greatness, where is thy name? There were others – the young Bobrowski immediately springs to mind. We see how – in no time at all – this young man acquired the grey-haired maturity of experience and work. Indeed, he was moved into a position of responsibility and became very influential. No sooner did he appear in Warsaw than he was called to the highest office and then … a scumbag killed him in a duel.[34]

For Conrad and Piłsudski, an independent Poland meant the "Commonwealth of Two Nations", which included all the borderlands stretching far to the east as its integral part. As Conrad argued in his essay entitled *The Crime of Partition*:

> 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. The lands of Lithuanian and Ruthenian speech were never conquered by Poland. These peoples were not compelled by a series of exhausting wars to seek safety in annexation. It was not the will of a prince or a political intrigue that brought about the union. Neither was it fear. The slowly-matured view of the economical and social necessities and, before all, the ripening moral sense of the masses were the motives that induced the forty-three representatives of Lithuanian and Ruthenian provinces, led by their paramount prince, to enter into a political combination unique in the history of the world, a spontaneous and complete union of sovereign States choosing deliberately the way of peace. Never was strict truth better expressed in a political instrument than in the preamble of the first Union Treaty (1413). It begins with the words: "This Union, being the outcome not of hatred, but of love" – words that Poles have not heard addressed to them politically by any nation for the last hundred and fifty years.[35]

Piłsudski shared this vision. He wrote:

> In 1863 there was a symbol which held sway over people and, indeed, often took possession of them. It was a seal – the Seal of the National Government.[36]

Let us recall that this seal was composed of three highly significant symbols: the Polish Eagle, the Lithuanian Mounted Knight and the Ruthenian (i.e. Ukrainian) St. Michael the Archangel. These were the emblems of the insurgents of 1863 who went into battle to fight – as their motto had it – "for your freedom and ours".

Although the memory of the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was undoubtedly cherished by Conrad and Piłsudski as something of great value, the manner in which each of them understood this value was conditioned by their attitude to the January Uprising. Conrad saw the failed 1863 Uprising as the swansong of the idea of Polish independence, for which there was no longer any hope whatsoever. Not

[34] J. Piłsudski. "Rok 1863" [In:] *Idem*. *Rok 1863*, *ed. cit.*, p. 147.

[35] J. Conrad. "The Crime of Partition" [In:] *Idem*. *Notes on Life and Letters*, *ed. cit.*, p. 97.

[36] J. Piłsudski. "Rok 1863" [In:] *Idem*. *Rok 1863*, *ed. cit.*, p. 148.

that he had lost any respect for that country which had been obliterated from the map of Europe. Amidst all his maritime and literary successes he never forgot about the noble Polish cause. As he wrote in 1883 to Stefan Buszczyński:

> I've been through sinkings and fires, but am well and in good heart, with a will to work and a liking for my profession. In that regard I always remember the advice you gave me as you took leave of me in Cracow: "Remember," you said, "wherever you sail, you're always sailing to Poland!"
>
> I haven't forgotten that and never will![37]

In a letter he wrote to Wincenty Lutosławski in 1897 we read:

> I've lived among foreigners, but not with them. On my travels round the world I've never left the 'Land of Memories'.[38]

Four years later, writing to his namesake Dr. Józef Korzeniowski, the custodian of the Jagiellonian Library, Conrad declared:

> At this juncture allow me to inform you (for you may well hear various things said about me) that, for the sake of success, I have renounced neither my nationality, nor the surname that we both have in common. It is quite clear to all who know me that I am a Pole, and that Józef Konrad are my two Christian names, the second of which I use in order that my surname not be distorted by the mouths of foreigners, which is something that I cannot bear.
>
> I do not think that I have betrayed my country by proving to the English that a Polish nobleman from the Ukraine can be as good a mariner as them and can even have something to say to them in their own tongue. It is from this point of view that I assess what esteem I have earned, placing it in silent tribute where it belongs.[39]

Conrad manifested his Polish patriotism not only in private letters, but also – albeit very rarely – in his literary work. In *Prince Roman* he speaks of Poland as:

> That country which demands to be loved as no other country has ever been loved, with the mournful affection one bears to the unforgotten dead and with the unextinguishable fire of a hopeless passion which only a living, breathing, warm ideal can kindle in our breasts for our pride, for our weariness, for our exultation, for our undoing.[40]

Conrad did not believe that there was any hope of bringing back the old Polish Commonwealth, but – to his mind – Poland was something of great value that deserved respect out of purely moral considerations. Although the armed struggle for Polish sovereignty had failed, it had been morally right.

Piłsudski's attitude to the January Uprising was different. He made a thorough analysis of its history in order to determine the reasons for its failure and to find out whether any of its aspects – such as the way it functioned as an underground State – had proved their worth. For the Piłsudski camp, the fiftieth anniversary of the out-

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[37] J. Conrad to S. Buszczyński [In:] *Polskie zaplecze Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego. Dokumenty rodzinne, listy, wspomnienia*, *ed. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 12-13.

[38] J. Conrad to W. Lutosławski [In:] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[39] J. Conrad to J. Korzeniowski [In:] *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

[40] J. Conrad. "Prince Roman" [In:] *Idem. Tales of Hearsay*, *ed. cit*., p. 51.

break of the 1863 Uprising (in 1913) was an opportunity to galvanize Polish Society into renewing the fight for freedom. As Kazimierz Wyka observes:

> An important indication of this was the year 1913 – the fiftieth anniversary of the January Uprising – when this same insurrectionist theme was taken up by representatives of two different generations – Żeromski in *Wierna rzeka* (*The Faithful River*) and Choynowski in *Kuźnia* (*The Forge*) – and when Józef Piłsudski in his lectures on the Uprising cited the armed struggle of the insurgents and the authority of the clandestine National Government as models for the fight for independence. Earlier Eliza Orzeszkowa had already cried out *Gloria victis*.[41]

Piłsudski's own revised version of the tradition of the 1863 January Uprising served to build up the morale of his legionaries. As Alina Kowalczykowa observes:

> This re-shaping of tradition and the stylization of the legions – the refurbishing of 'Poland's past glory' and the memory of the January Uprising in particular – was at that time a brilliant move, because it served to boost the morale and self-esteem of these men, who formed an elite as far as character was concerned, but were being given insufficient training and were being treated as inferior soldiers by the Austrian military authorities. The model of the splendid Polish tradition was exactly what Piłsudski now needed. It allowed the Polish soldier to maintain his proud sense of superiority, his sense of daring, reckless heroism and his sense of unstinting patriotism.[42]

Unlike the January Uprising, which ended in a crushing defeat, Piłsudski's epic military venture turned out to be a key element in the process that eventually led to the restoration of the Polish State and to the successful defence of its new borders. This must have made a great impression on Conrad, who even in his wildest dreams had never imagined that Poland would regain her independence after 123 years of foreign occupation. The fact that – like himself – Piłsudski was a nobleman from the eastern borderlands could only have enhanced Conrad's admiration for him as the supreme commander of Polish military forces and must have made it all the easier for him to identify himself with the reborn State.

As we have seen, the admiration was mutual. However, we must ask ourselves what the dying marshal could have enjoyed in *Lord Jim*, which had been translated two years earlier by his good acquaintance Aniela Zagórska.[43] To be sure, he was probably one of the relatively few people who would have read this novel in the light of the Romantic cultural code, with which he had been familiar since his early childhood. The concept of honour – which is central to the novel – would also have appealed to him, deriving as it does from the knightly tradition of the Polish nobility.[44]

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[41] K. Wyka. "O jedności i różności literatury polskiej XX wieku" [In:] *Idem*. *Nowe i dawne wędrówki po tematach*. Warszawa 1978, pp. 46-47.

[42] A. Kowalczykowa. *Piłsudski i tradycja*. Chotomów 1991, p. 80.

[43] Like many prominent figures of the 'Young Poland' period – such as Stefan Żeromski, Wacław Sieroszewski, Andrzej Strug and Leopold Staff – Piłsudski used to stay at the "Konstantynówka" guest house in Zakopane before the First World War. Cf. T. and W. Tatarkiewiczowie. *Wspomnienia*. Warszawa 1979, pp. 60-61.

[44] Cf. Z. Najder. "Conrad and the idea of honour" [In:] *Idem*. *Conrad in Perspective*. Cambridge 1997, pp. 153-164.

Konrad Korzeniowski from Berdyczów in the Ukraine and Józef Piłsudski from Zułów in Lithuania were examples of a curious fusion of Romanticism and realism in fields that were seemingly far apart: literature in the case of Conrad and military prowess in the case of Piłsudski. Another thing which they had in common was the fact that they were self-taught geniuses. Conrad did not complete his secondary-school education, while Piłsudski – who halted the westward advance of the Red Army in 1920 – had no formal military training. Both men were highly successful in their own particular fields. Lessons drawn from Polish history led Conrad to uphold an ethos that had a universal character, whereas in the case of Piłsudski they served as an incentive to fight for Polish sovereignty. Finally, we may add that the lives of both men – and, in a way, their achievements – have spawned legends that have coloured their biographies and given them a permanent place in Polish culture.[45]

Translated by R. E. Pypłacz

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[45] Cf. S. Zabierowski. "„Tu spocznij między nami wędrowcze zawiły". Legenda Josepha Conrada w Polsce". *Śląsk* 1998, № 3; Cf. W. Wójcik. *Legenda Piłsudskiego w polskiej literaturze międzywojennej*. Katowice 1986.

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