

CONRAD  
*under familial eyes*

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge*  
*London New York New Rochelle*  
*Melbourne Sydney*

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1983

First published 1983

Printed in Great Britain at  
the University Press, Cambridge

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 83-5187

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Conrad under familial eyes

1. Conrad, Joseph – Biography
2. Novelists, English – 20th century – Biography

I. Najder, Zdzisław

823.'912 PR6005.04z/

ISBN 0 521 25082 X

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The general shape of this book was worked out during my stay at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio; I am grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for enabling my wife and me to spend several weeks in exceptionally congenial surroundings, enjoying lavish hospitality and stimulating company.

Both my wife and I thank most cordially Mrs Catherine Mannings for her advice and help with the translations.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Dr Ugo Mursia, a distinguished Conradian and good friend, whose encouragement and patient interest made the realization of this project possible.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years interest in Joseph Conrad's cultural roots has grown considerably, and with it the awareness of the importance of the Polish aspects of his biography. The present volume supplies English-speaking students and admirers of Conrad with a collection of texts which not only supplements the contents of *Conrad's Polish Background*, published in 1964 and of *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (1983), but also considerably broadens and amplifies the picture of the great English writer's Polish connections. Very few of these texts so far have been available in English; several have never been published even in their original Polish.

To lend the collection an internal continuity of presentation, the texts are printed not in the order of their dating but rather according to the sequence of events and subjects they refer to. It has not been possible to do so always with strict consistency or to achieve a completeness of design. To attain that it would have been necessary to reprint many texts published in *Conrad's Polish Background*. And although the present book and this preface can be read separately and treated as self-contained pieces of scholarship, the reader, if he wants to get a fuller picture of Conrad's Polish links, is advised to become acquainted with both *Conrad's Polish Background* and *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*.

The texts included here fall, roughly speaking, into eight categories: (1) documents related to Conrad's parents; (2) documents related to his uncle and guardian, Tadeusz Bobrowski; (3) early documents of Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad); (4) letters to Konrad Korzeniowski; (5) Conrad's letters to Polish addressees, not included in *Conrad's Polish Background*; (6) reminiscences of Conrad, written by his Polish relatives and friends; (7) the interview Conrad gave to a Polish journalist in 1914; (8) two samples of the reaction to his work in his native country.

All these, I believe, are of much importance to everybody interested in Conrad's life and the cultural background of his work, but the first category is likely to have the greatest impact on what is being written about Conrad's family relationships and their psychological importance. It is not the object of this introduction to analyse various (and often wondrous) theories concerning Conrad's early experiences and

his attitude towards his parents and their memory. The present collection is intended as a documentary basis for future speculations on these subjects. But one cannot refrain from expressing surprise and regret that so many critics have ventured in this field unhampered by even a rudimentary knowledge of facts. None of the psychoanalytic interpreters of Conrad's attitude towards his father has acquainted himself with Apollo Korzeniowski's writings and letters; all assertions and hypotheses have been based on a few, by no means unambiguous, statements of Conrad and on a few out-of-context opinions of Tadeusz Bobrowski's about his brother-in-law. To formulate a biographical theory plausible within the framework of psychoanalysis, one ought to study the pertinent facts no less carefully than one has studied Freud. Even if what Conrad wrote about his parents were liable to only one interpretation, still we could not know what his relations with them might have been if we did not know what kind of people they were. It is not a matter of indifference whether Conrad's father was really a brooding, humourless fanatic, and his mother a 'cold' and 'austere' person (as some biographers imagine), or not. Making their letters available should at least put a stop to such irresponsibly fantastic statements.

Let it be clear, however, that this volume does not contain all documents, nor all the evidence which ought to be taken into consideration by Conrad's (and his parents') biographer. It is not intended to supplant research into Conrad's family background; that would have been an impossible undertaking. It is a collection of the most basic and typical texts, meant to serve as an assemblage beacon, illuminating and warning at the same time. For instance, Tadeusz Bobrowski's claim that Conrad's father Apollo Korzeniowski was a man of unclear principles and general mediocrity is easy to quote and remember. To verify this assessment, and ultimately to refute the charges, is a thing which cannot be done by quoting a counter-claim, by using another simple judgement. One has to ascertain Bobrowski's attitude and evaluate his veracity; to compare his sentiments with those of other contemporaries; and, above all, to study all relevant facts. Therefore, the opinions expressed in this preface are based not only on the evidence contained in the present volume. And lest I be suspected of the chauvinistic belief that only a Pole can understand another Pole, I shall point to a most interesting essay by Czesław Miłosz, 'Apollo N. Korzeniowski: Joseph Conrad's Father' (translated by Reuel K. Wilson, *Mosaic*, vi, 4, 1971/2), which, due simply to the fact that its author had no access to unpublished material (and, writing abroad, only limited access to the published), is marred not only by some factual errors, but by an evident slant in its presentation of Apollo Korzeniowski's personality.

Conrad's parents both came from Polish *szlachta*<sup>1</sup> families, who for many generations had owned estates in the central Ukraine. This part of the country had belonged to the Polish kingdom since the fourteenth century; it was annexed by Russia in the second partition of Poland (1793). The educated classes were almost entirely Polish, the administration predominantly Russian; most peasants spoke Ukrainian, but the latter began to exhibit marked feelings of a separate national identity only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Poles considered the country occupied by a foreign and tyrannical power. Although private Polish schools, theatres and publications were tolerated (while strictly censored) and often flourished, only people who professed themselves Russian and belonged to the Orthodox church had any chance of a public career. All mention of autonomous Polish social and political organizations was forbidden and contacts with ethnic Polish territories, even those also occupied by Russians, were carefully watched. By comparison, Poles in the two other 'zones' of partition, Austrian and Prussian, enjoyed considerably more freedom. Also, under the tzars Poles felt oppressed by a state completely alien to the Western civilization of which Poland had been a part since the tenth century, barbaric and hostile to all social and political reforms.

The lives of Conrad's parents and of his entire family were inexorably linked with the political events of the time, events determined on the one hand by the Russian official policy of suppressing Polish national sentiment, and on the other by the enduring power of Polish aspirations to independence.

Conrad's mother, Ewa, née Bobrowska (1831-65), was by all accounts everybody's favourite in the family. Daughter of a fairly well-off landowner, she was renowned for her beauty and also for her intelligence. Educated at home, she wanted to become a teacher – an unheard-of thing at that time for a girl with substantial dowry – which in itself shows her as an exceptional person. Calmly emotional, intensely loyal, deeply patriotic and religious, she commanded both respect and affection. For several years unable to obtain her father's permission to marry Apollo Korzeniowski, she resolutely stuck to her choice. Later she became a faithful companion of Apollo's conspiratorial enterprises; suggestions that she was only a passive accomplice

<sup>1</sup> The term has no precise equivalent in English. It encompasses both the nobility and the gentry; there were no legal distinctions within the *szlachta*, which in pre-partition Poland formed about 8-10% of the population and was the only politically and culturally active class. Any member of it could be elected to the Sejm (parliament) or, in theory at least, elected king.

are completely unfounded: on the contrary, all evidence shows her as a spontaneous and enthusiastic ally. There is every reason to consider her marriage a very happy one; all misfortunes came from outside.

The personality of Apollo Korzeniowski (1820–69) was not so well balanced. He was both proud – and painfully conscious of his inadequacies; ready for sacrifice – but with a touch of self-centredness; a born enthusiast – but sometimes opinionated. He had his fair share of enemies; most of them, however, seem to have been politically motivated, because nobody ever questioned his integrity, good intentions, and kindness of heart. Quite well educated, sociable, witty and emotional, he had two passions in life: literature and politics. As a poet he was mediocre, and he knew that; a late follower of the Romantic school, original neither in his imagery nor in his thought, he would express lofty visions and ideas in verse often banal and strained. I suspect that under the whole layer of pretentious verbiage he was hiding a concrete and empirical mind, obsessed and befuddled by conventions on which he had been nourished and which he was unable to shake off. He did better as a satirical comedy writer, and also as a translator from French (Vigny, Hugo) and English (Shakespeare, Dickens). His two plays, *Komedia* ('A Comedy', 1855 – based partly on Aleksandr Griboedov's *Gore ot uma*, though he refused to admit this) and *Dla milego grosza* ('For the Love of Money', 1859), are often staged even today and testify to the mordancy of his wit and expressiveness of his language.

Many of his poems remain unpublished and most of them deservedly so; however, several fragments are worthy of attention. There is among them an unfinished drama *Ojciec* ('The Father'), centred around the choice between fidelity and death versus betrayal and life, and presenting all the basic aspects of this choice: honour and happiness, shame and fear, reputation and care for others.

Although he was apt to put his poetic efforts to religious and political uses, he was by no means contemptuous of art which did not serve any practical purpose: witness his keen enjoyment and high praise of Shakespeare's comedies. Korzeniowski's criticism of Art for Art's sake was not (like Tolstoy's) general, but only occasional: he believed that there are circumstances in which 'the questions of art must give way to those of life', mainly social and national life. Ruefully, he realized that such an attitude resulted in 'sins against the indifferent heavens of Aesthetics'.

In politics he was an outspoken democrat and a fiery patriot,<sup>1</sup> a

<sup>1</sup> The term 'nationalist', though commonly used, is misleading, as it suggests exclusive preoccupation with Polish national interests. Apollo Korzeniowski, like most Polish political leaders of his time, wanted to liberate all nationalities of the old Polish Commonwealth: Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, etc., and did not consider that this precluded their future autonomy.

believer in social and national justice; often naive in his optimistic assessments of the possibilities for radical social change coupled with a restoration of pre-partition Poland; obviously simpleminded in his socioeconomic agrarianism. His political ideas, if not too well organized logically, were emotionally consistent and adhered to unswervingly. Korzeniowski was for the liberation of peasants and against capitalism, industrialism and the rule of money. While not a revolutionary in the sense of advocating violence, he was one in the sense of believing in equality and brotherhood of all men. But again, this was supposed to have been not a brotherhood of some proletarians without history, but one grounded in the traditional ideals of fidelity, honour, patriotism and piety; and equality not of privilege but of human dignity, conceived in the Christian sense.

If his political moralism sometimes seems pathetic to our jaded sensibilities, his organizational talents and energy have to be fully acknowledged. The stereotype of Apollo Korzeniowski as an impractical and indolent day-dreamer, which we owe to his brother-in-law, does not stand up to scrutiny. He did not, it is true, prosper as administrator of the estates he leased; but he was immensely bored by that job. There may also be some truth in Tadeusz Bobrowski's accusations that he badly mismanaged his personal finances – but only some: Korzeniowski saved enough money to join a publishing enterprise, and later to launch his planned periodical *Dwutygodnik*. He was certainly not a squanderer, nor was he devoid of practical capabilities in the sphere that interested him more than money-making: stirring up and organizing underground patriotic activities. Here he displayed both zest and skill.

Impatient and moody as he was, he showed perseverance in what he considered most important. In his secret and semi-secret political activities he seems to have been fairly prudent and took care to cover his tracks. That much we may gather from the fact that his most serious 'transgressions' remained unknown to the authorities. If he was 'foolhardy', as it is claimed, then he was no more so than anybody who rebels against an oppressive might.

Arrested in October 1861 in Warsaw and sentenced, together with his wife, to an unspecified period of exile in Russia under constant (and secret) police surveillance, Korzeniowski would impress not only other Polish and Ukrainian political exiles but also Russians with his uncompromising moral posture and aura of authority.

When today one reads his 'Song for the Day of Christening' written for 'my son born in the 85th year of Muscovite oppression' (one of several patriotic poems), one may perhaps wonder if the exalted phraseology is not a sign of affectation, or of some pathological strain in

their author's mind. Such suspicions serve to underpin some interpretations of Apollo's personality, but to me they seem entirely unjustified, resulting from lack of intuition and of a proper historical perspective. Apart from the banal truth that to sacrifice one's health and life for one's country is no more pathological than to drive oneself to breaking point by toiling to earn more money for the newest generation of gadgets, Apollo Korzeniowski's attitude was not at all exceptional; that is to say, the pattern of his behaviour was similar to that of tens if not hundreds of thousands of his contemporaries. Such names as Garibaldi or Petöfi epitomize the fact that in nineteenth-century Europe many people considered service to the national cause the lynchpin of the meaning of their lives. This surely did not make them 'death-oriented': they wanted to live, and very much so, but not on their knees. Poland, the biggest and most severely oppressed of the countries deprived of national independence, perhaps had a particularly large proportion of them, especially among the *szlachta* and the newly developing intelligentsia.<sup>1</sup> The fate of thousands of them was even more tragic than the fate of the Korzeniowskis.

Likewise, the fact that Apollo Korzeniowski broke down and despaired after the death of his beloved wife cannot be considered abnormal. And although he passed through periods of despondency, he managed to work quite hard: in spite of his own progressing illness (tuberculosis and heart disease) within the last four years of his life, he translated several books and wrote a number of essays. When reading his own descriptions of his morbid moods, half-mystical broodings, and days of total passivity, we also have to remember that they were written in a late Romantic convention which emphasized the unusual, emotional and sombre. If we ask whether he became philosophically despondent, whether he professed despondency, then the answer must be in the negative. In March 1867, two years after the death of his beloved wife, Korzeniowski wrote in his essay on Shakespeare: 'By the innate power of his spirit and his will, man often, if only momentarily, masters the events, and then he notices how they become even more sluggish and stubborn by the way he has compelled them to proceed. And in this struggle, finally, when his life is smashed to pieces, man perishes – but with that quality, with which God has endowed him for all time in the act of creation, still *intact*.' He saw the duty of a dramatist as giving 'the audience the feeling of man's moral greatness . . . which rises above man's struggle against fate'. These are words of heroic defiance, not of despondency.

<sup>1</sup> This term first came to be used in its modern sense in Poland in the 1820s; later it was adopted into Russian.

Tadeusz Bobrowski (1829–94), his brother-in-law, was a man of a completely different stripe. He prided himself on being a level-headed rationalist and openly disapproved of all anti-government activities. He was conscious of an urgent need for socioeconomic reforms and in the 1850s spent much time and energy taking part in debates on the best ways of implementing the long-overdue liberation of the serfs – not because he was particularly compassionate, but because such a position accorded with his principles, which stemmed from the traditions of the Enlightenment. Later, in his memoirs, he recorded these discussions, held in numerous committees convened by thousands of Polish landowners in the Ukraine; but although the fact that the immense effort of these committees was totally ignored by the tsarist authorities disenchanted him, it did not change his general attitude of political appeaser. Endowed with a sharp, critical mind and a caustic wit, self-righteous and not without a touch of malice, he would sometimes adjust facts so as to make them fit his theories and assessments better. In his private life he was not a happy man: he lost his wife very early and his only daughter died at the age of twelve after a protracted illness. Following the death of his father he must have felt isolated within his own family, since all its other members represented opposite political and emotional attitudes. This would at least partly account for his reputation of coldness in his personal relations. He was greatly prized as an adviser in financial, administrative and legal matters. Undoubtedly, his warmest and most attractive side was revealed in his relationship with the son of his beloved sister. On him he bestowed his money and advice, trying to steady him both physically and morally; to him he preached his gospel of perseverance and duty – which Joseph Conrad adopted, while converting Bobrowski's idea of duty as accepted in passive resignation into his own concept of duty as consciously and actively chosen.

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, son of Apollo and Ewa, was born on 3 December 1857 in Berdyczów. Eleven and half years later, when his father died in Cracow on 9 May 1869, he became an orphan. A son of political martyrs, he could be sure of some assistance financial and otherwise, even if members of his own family were not able to support him. He was, however, a Russian subject, and to return to Russia, where his parents had been political criminals, would mean risking a long military service. This was the reason for early, and unsuccessful, attempts to secure Austrian citizenship for him. The fact that for sixty-one of Joseph Conrad's almost sixty-seven years of life there was no Polish state and that all Poles were subjects of foreign powers has to be remembered when one attempts to answer the out-

wardly simple question: why did Konrad Korzeniowski leave Poland? Hundreds of thousands did the same for many reasons, of various kinds but usually connected with the political situation of their country.

Not many letters to Joseph Conrad have been preserved; of the early ones the most valuable are undoubtedly those of Tadeusz Bobrowski, published in *Conrad's Polish Background*, a veritable mine of information about his nephew's formative years of wandering. The sole surviving letter from Adam Pulman, short and inconspicuous, contains in fact valuable biographical data. Young Korzeniowski's difficulties with his school studies, his poor health, and his depressive tendencies are here unequivocally confirmed; we also learn that he was supposed to have left Poland a year later than he actually did. Reminiscences of a few ladies who knew him at that time do not have such a solid documentary value, but, with the help of a brief remembrance by his youthful friend Konstanty Buszczyński, let us form a general idea of what Conrad the teenager was like.

Konrad Korzeniowski left Poland in September 1874, going to Marseilles. After nearly four years in France and on French ships he decided to try his luck in the British merchant marine and for the next fifteen years served under the Red Ensign, with intermittent long periods ashore in London (and an abortive attempt to work in the Upper – later Belgian – Congo). His main contact with Poland was his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski, who supported him generously till he reached the age of thirty. (Conrad's letters to Bobrowski perished during the Revolution of 1917.) Conrad exchanged letters with several other members of his family and also with some friends, but only a few scattered relics of that correspondence have been preserved, and even fewer reminiscences.

All in all, available documents concerning Conrad's relations with his compatriots during the first twenty-five years after he left Poland present a very inadequate record of his Polish contacts: the most important and most intriguing items have been lost. They fare much better as a record of misunderstandings. Three factors made it gradually more difficult for his compatriots to understand Conrad: first, his wanderings which provided him with experiences hard even to imagine for landlubbers and finally made him a citizen of the most powerful and prosperous country in the world; second, his loss – under the influence of his uncle Bobrowski – of faith in the possibility of a restoration of Poland; third, his passionate rejection of an instrumental approach to art in general and novelistic fiction in particular.

A long article by Jan Perłowski, one of Tadeusz Bobrowski's many wards, recounting Conrad's visit to his homeland in 1890 (pp. 150–70), shows the two first factors at work. Perłowski was not a sympathetic

witness – he evidently did not care much for Conrad and his comments on ‘Amy Foster’ sound strangely peevish and obtuse – but his account of the lack of rapport between the local *szlachta* and Bobrowski’s sea-going nephew has a ring of truth. Forgetting that Conrad had spent half of his conscious life in foreign lands and was now coming to their backwaters from the teeming capitals of world trade and finance, they wished him to think like they did; he could not identify with them, and while trying to remain faithful to the memory of his parents and his country, he was exasperated by and resentful at attempts to dictate to him how that fidelity was to be attested. Any guilt he may have felt only exacerbated his anger and deepened his alienation.

Another confrontation took place a few years later in Cardiff, where well-intentioned Polish *émigrés*, the Kliszczewskis, exhorted Conrad to write about the ‘unhappiness of his native land’. We do not have to follow Witold Chwalewik in taking Conrad’s cynical retort (see below, p. 175) at face value. He did not care all that much about his public, as many of his letters and several of his books testify; but he would have been ashamed to appeal to their pity and would not condescend to use his work as a medium of any kind of propaganda.

The third and most momentous misunderstanding happened, in a different way and without Conrad’s direct involvement, in 1899, while he was working on *Lord Jim*. Wincenty Lutosławski, a Polish philosopher and eccentric, who had visited Conrad some time earlier, published an article on ‘The Emigration of Talent’ which contained grossly misleading information about Conrad’s literary career and opinions. Eliza Orzeszkowa, the *grande dame* of the Polish novel, who had unsparingly devoted her energy and considerable gifts to the service of a spiritually independent Polish culture, attacked Conrad–Korzeniowski fiercely for failing in his national duties. It is debatable whether she would have understood Conrad’s artistic and philosophical attitude; it is, however, quite certain that she would not have lashed out at him had she known the facts as they were. And, whatever we may think of the merits of her general standpoint, we have to say that she was later unjustly vilified by some defendants of Conrad, who did not remember that she had been acting on false information.

Conrad certainly read Orzeszkowa’s article and it made his attitude towards his motherland even more complex. Although he never repudiated his Polish national inheritance and professed fidelity to it (for instance, in his letters to Edward Garnett, Cunninghame Graham, Józef Korzeniowski and Kazimierz Waliszewski), he probably felt apprehensive lest other demands were made that he openly express his support for the Polish cause and officially declare his spiritual alle-

giance to Poland, while he considered that cause hopeless and wanted to be an English writer.

It seems that his relations with Poland and Poles were at their loosest during the decade 1904–14. Then, in 1914, a meeting with the young Retinger couple turned the tide: for the first time in several years he spoke Polish again, gave a revealing interview to a Polish journalist, and decided to spend his first non-working holiday in twenty years in Poland.

He never dreamt that the most important historical event of his lifetime, the outbreak of the First World War, would find him in Cracow. Although he had predicted that conflict in 1905 (in his 'Autocracy and War'), he had looked at it without visualizing what it would mean for his compatriots. In that summer of 1914, when talking politics – and nobody talked anything else then – with his Polish friends and acquaintances, he must have felt at the same time excited by their hopes and grand designs and alarmed by their illusions. He knew only too well (he had experienced it painfully, no doubt; it had been a major source for his political pessimism and his reluctance to write about Polish issues) that a rebirth of Poland did not interest any major power, that it was a dream no responsible Western politician would take seriously. This dichotomy of his reactions caused new misunderstandings; in the end, however, Conrad evidently let himself be carried away by the buoyancy of his compatriots' spirits and even planned to do some propaganda for the Polish cause when back in England.

It did not take him long to discover that he could do practically nothing. During the war he tried to assist his friend Retinger in his – not too successful – attempts to shore up the support of the British and French governments for Polish national aspirations. His experiences in dealing with British officials and watching H. M. Government's wary and half-hearted acknowledgements of Polish efforts to re-establish an independent state evoked much bitterness in him. Conrad had a complex attitude towards the restored Polish Republic: pride mixed with incredulity, and probably a feeling of shame about his own former excessive scepticism. And although after 1918 his contacts with Poland became much closer, although his correspondence with Poles increased remarkably and he even translated a play from his native tongue into English, there remained on Conrad's side a distinct element of reserve caused, I believe, by those mixed feelings of shyness based on shame and cautiousness grounded in the memory of painful misunderstandings and disagreements. This reserve must have been strengthened by the attitude taken by well-meaning but not too sensitive Poles like Dyboski, who would almost ostentatiously address Conrad in English

– apparently to make it easier for him to converse, but at the same time underscoring his foreignness.

Knotty as his attitude towards Poland was, there can be no doubt that he greatly enjoyed the fact of his popularity there and was sincerely interested in the quality of the translations of his works into Polish. He did not live long enough to see that in his motherland he became not only one of the most popular authors of fiction translated from a foreign language but also a very influential writer, one of the most powerful and deeply felt voices in modern Polish literature.

He reached the epitome of his spiritual influence in the darkest hours of Polish twentieth-century history, in the years 1939–44, after Poland had been again invaded by her neighbours, while millions of her citizens were ruthlessly exterminated. He then became one of the chief moral authorities for the young members of the Polish resistance.

The two articles that close this collection offer but a sample of what Conrad has meant for Polish literature within the last fifty years. Gombrowicz – one of the most brilliant Polish prose writers of this century – illustrates Conrad's constant presence as a living writer; and Jan Józef Szczepański testifies to his moral and ideological stature, which has not diminished substantially within the last twenty-five years.

The source of the text is given above every item. Unless identified as English in the original, all texts have been translated from Polish. All references to Conrad's works are to the Dent Collected Edition, and to the volume *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces* (Doubleday, New York 1977). Where the original author supplies a footnote, this is indicated by an asterisk, and appears above the numbered footnotes supplied by the editor.