

**Joanna Skolik**

**Opole University, Poland**

***Poland Revisited: A British citizen on the Polish problem.***

“Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning”.

In 1914 when Conrad was preparing for his trip to Poland he had some mixed feelings: on the one hand he must have remembered all the accusations concerning his life and letters, on the other he wanted to find out his past, to face his Polish heritage, to follow in his family footsteps. Before his visit to Poland, Conrad treated her in a sentimental way, for Conrad Poland was a matter of the Past, a “lost cause”, he did not believe that Poland could become an independent country.

At the same time, Conrad was a loyal British citizen. He had been living in Great Britain since 1878 and all the time “Conrad can be seen to have contributed towards the life of his adopted country”. He was naturalized in 1886, and the year before in one of his letters he wrote: “I understood and readily accepted your reference to 'Home'. When speaking, writing or thinking in English the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain”. I would say that Great Britain was Conrad's reality, while Poland belonged to his past: it was “the land of his childhood”, magical land.

Conrad had not been to Poland in over twenty years, he had not visited Cracow for forty years. When he last visited Poland “he had not been a writer, not settled, nor even quite English” in 1914 in his life everything was different, he was a British citizen, a British writer a husband and a father.

In Cracow Conrad had to face his own past and memories. I think that it was good that the Rettingers and Borys accompanied Conrad during his Cracow walks, because they kept him in touch with surrounding reality. It was time when Conrad was visiting his past and his past was haunting him.

While writing about his stay in Cracow, Conrad remains in a poetics of dream, everything seems to be unreal: “My eyes were turned to the past, not to the future [...] I felt more and more plainly that what I had started on was a journey in time, into the past; a fearful enough prospect”. Conrad describes his walk in Cracow at night, but it is a walk in

time, into his past: “It seemed to me that if I remained longer there in that narrow street I should become the helpless prey of the Shadows I had called up. There were crowding upon me, enigmatic and insistent, in their clinging air of grave that tasted of dust and of bitter vanity of old hopes”.

Although Conrad recollected his past, he did not have time for becoming “the helpless prey of the Shadows”. While waiting for clearing up the Austria-Hungarian and Serbian conflict, Conrad wanted to show Cracow to his elder son. In fact during his stay in Cracow Conrad learned that his father was highly esteemed and respected fifty years after his death, that he was really a great Pole found out and he got to know his father. Writing *Poland Revisited* Conrad “recounted his father's funeral with proud and sombre affection”. I am convinced that his visit to Cracow or “Cracow revisited” was a kind of *catharsis* for Conrad.

In Zakopane the Conrads finally stayed in “Konstantynówka” – Zagórska's pension. At that time Conrad was quite happy visiting cafés and socializing with Polish friends. He was an interesting person to talk to, because he was a famous English writer (although not widely known in Poland at that time), a sailor who had adventurous life and he was a Pole but from outside, a British citizen who could look at the Polish question from different perspective.

Staying in Poland at that time, Conrad realised that Polish hopes for independence did not belong to the past, that they were real and vibrant, that there, in Poland were people who thought about restoration of the state, and he also started to believe in such a possibility.

When the Conrads eventually managed to leave Poland and were travelling to Great Britain and stayed for a few days in Vienna, on their way to London, Conrad was discussing the Polish problem. He was enthusiastic about Polish question and wanted to convince English public that Europe or rather the idea of Europe could not survive without independent Poland. However, after Conrad's return to his adopted country he was gradually losing his optimistic attitude toward Polish cause. “In the five months after his return to England he wrote only one short essay 'Poland Revisited’”. What is strange, the mood of the essay when Conrad writes about Poland is gloomy, there is neither hope nor excitement which Conrad had experienced during his stay in Cracow.

The same mood can be found in Conrad's letters of that time. Conrad was disappointed with “the utter indifference to the question of Polish independence both in British official circles and in the public in general [...] Britain's foreign policy toward

Poland had traditionally been unsympathetic. As late as September 1914 His Majesty Government officially announced that it regarded Poland's future as Russia's internal affair". Independent Poland was not British priority. Conrad decided to write, again on Rettinger's persuasion, a memorandum on Polish question which was received at the Foreign Office in August 1916.

Head of the Foreign Office's War Department – George Russell Clerk met with Conrad and Rettinger in order to discuss the document. "Officials at the Foreign Office responded with varying degrees of scepticism. [...] Other officials found the memorandum 'impossible', 'impractical', and a 'hopeless solution...".

When the tsarist empire was overthrown by the Russian Revolution of 1917, this situation allowed to place "the Polish question in an international context". However, Conrad was sceptical: "The Russian proclamation is very fine but – 2/3rds of the Polish territory [...] are in German hands."

Conrad wrote to Sir Hugh Clifford: "Of course my concern is for England, which engages all my affection and all my thoughts. I look at all the problems and incertitudes of the day from that point of view and no other". He tried not to take the opposite view to the official opinion of the British government. With the only exception. "When he wrote 'The Crime of Partition' in December 1918, Conrad must have been aware that his views clashed with official British policy". He also did not want to have Soviet Russia at the peace conference. It seemed strange to him to discuss the shape of the partitioned country with the partitioning powers.

I think that such a tone of his letter is the result of clash of his loyalties, toward Poland and England, at that point he could not have accepted the decisions of the British government. Sceptical as he was as a British citizen, Conrad, as a Pole, must have observed with growing surprise that Poland not only regained its independence in 1918, but also managed to keep it during the Polish-Soviet war of 1920.