

IN MEMORIAM PROF. DR HAB. BARBARA KOC (1925-2013)

Stefan Zabierowski

The University of Silesia, Katowice

Polish literary historians – and Conrad scholars in particular – will be saddened to hear of the loss of Professor Barbara Koc, who died on 9th August 2013. She was one of the youngest members of the 1920s generation to be fascinated by Conrad's writing – and in particular by its moral import, which resonated with the Polish nation's long-standing aversion to autocracy and totalitarianism. She shared this fascination with older members of her generation, such as the writers Jan Józef Szczepański, Andrzej Braun and Leszek Prorok, as well as many people having maritime connections, to mention but Captain Józef Miłobędzki and Stanisław Ludwig.

The story of her life was very much like that of many of her contemporaries. She went to the well-known Klementyna Hoffman grammar school in Warsaw and belonged to the Second Warsaw Company of Girl Scouts. During the German occupation she was active in the ranks of the Polish clandestine scouting movement, as well as being a student of the underground University of Warsaw (having taken her school-leaving exams in the clandestine conditions that were made necessary by the closure of all secondary schools). After the war she graduated with an MA in Polish language and literature. Her university professors included renowned scholars such as Waław Borowy and Julian Krzyżanowski, who themselves had made important contributions to Conrad studies in Poland. Barbara's own first achievement in Conrad studies was the finding and publication (in 1959) of Conrad's letter to his namesake Dr. Józef Korzeniowski of the Jagiellonian University Library. In the letter – written in 1901 – Conrad affirms his ties with Poland:

A niech mi Łaskawy Pan pozwoli tu powiedzieć (bo może być, że to i owo o mnie usłyszysz), że ani narodowości, ani nazwiska naszego wspólnego nie zaparłem się bynajmniej dla powodzenia. Jest jasno wiadomym, że Polakiem jestem i że Józef Konrad są dwa chrzestne imiona, z których drugie używam, by mi mojego cudzoziemskie usta nie wykrzywiały – czego znieść nie mogę.

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.

This valuable discovery no doubt played an essential part in shaping Barbara's scholarly interests. In 1963 she published a 500-page collection of reminiscences and articles entitled *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie* (*Memoirs and studies on Conrad*), which has been of inestimable value to Polish Conrad scholars ever since, containing as it does thirty-two texts spanning the period from the end of the nineteenth-century to the nineteen-sixties. The great majority of these texts – dealing with Conrad's biography, the interpretation of his works and his vision of the world – had lain forgotten or had been almost inaccessible until they were published in this anthology. Barbara Koc reproduced fundamental texts connected with the famous 1899 controversy over the “emigration of talent” that raged between Wincenty Lutosławski and Eliza Orzeszkowa in the columns of the St. Petersburg “Kraj” magazine. She also included precious reminiscences of those people who had actually known Conrad and members of his family: Jadwiga (z Tokarskich) Kałuska and Tekla (z Syroczyńskich) Wojakowska, Aniela Zagórska, Jan Perłowski and Roman Dyboski. The collection included noteworthy interpretations of Conrad's works by scholars such as Stefan Kołaczkowski, Manfred Kridl, Waław Borowy, Julian Krzyżanowski, Józef Ujejski and Przemysław Mroczkowski. It also presented the results of important Polish research on key points of Conrad's biography carried out by Rafał Marcei Blueth, Witold Chwałewik and Zdzisław Najder. Pride of place in the collection goes to two excellent essays on Conrad by the Polish novelists Stefan Żeromski and Maria Dąbrowska.

Her next important achievement was the publication of a book entitled *Polskość Conrada* (*Conrad's Polishness*), which was based on a Ph.D. thesis – written at the University of Warsaw under the supervision of Prof. Julian Krzyżanowski – entitled *Conrad a Polska* (*Conrad and Poland*). One of the most interesting parts of this thesis deals with the question of Conrad the author's choice of language – a subject made even more intriguing by a comparison with the Polish writer Waław Sieroszewski, who was an almost exact contemporary of Conrad and who had also spent part of his life as an exile in Siberia.

Barbara's greatest achievement in the field of Polish Conrad studies was undoubtedly her “biographical tale” published in 1977 under the title *Conrad*. The writer Jan Koprowski described it thus:

This is a book for the general reader, and so can be of benefit to anyone, even if he or she has never heard of Conrad. [...] Koc has tried to put some order in what we now know about Conrad, showing how his life experiences had a bearing on his writing and vice versa – how writing and literature shaped his outlook and attitudes.

It so happened that this book was the third Polish monograph on Conrad, coming after Józef Ujejski's *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim* (*On Conrad Korzeniowski* – 1936) and Róża Jabłkowska's *Joseph Conrad* (1960). What distinguished Barbara Koc's book was its rich documentation. The author made ample use of Conrad's correspondence, which had then been made more accessible, and in particular the letters of Conrad's uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski. She also drew on Conrad's works, especially those of an autobiographical nature, as well as the analyses and interpretations of

other Conrad scholars and critics. In certain areas her monograph broke new ground, for instance in showing the reasons for Conrad's somewhat hurried departure from Poland in 1874 (in which he was by no means alone). Elsewhere, she preferred to reserve judgement on controversies such as Conrad's Marseilles escapade (duel or botched suicide?). By no means the least valuable part of the book is its extensive bibliography.

In 1989 Barbara Koc published yet another book on Conrad entitled *Joseph Conrad in the Male Portrety Literackie (Little Literary Portraits)* series. Another important book that deserves mention is the interpretation of *Lord Jim* written by her in 1969 for the *Biblioteka Analiz Literackich* series (read mainly by Polish school-children).

Conrad's correspondence with the Polish embassy in London was collected and carefully edited by Barbara Koc, who included it (together with her own admirable commentary) as an annexe to Bobrowski's *Letters to Conrad*, which were published in 1981.

Throughout her life, Prof. Koc was a very active member of the Polish community of Conrad scholars. She was the author of numerous articles devoted to problems of Conrad criticism and questions relating to the writer's biography. Her own Polish translation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* came out in the year 2000.

Barbara Koc was a kind and modest person who was always ready to help her younger academic colleagues. She was a great story-teller. Of late she had been working on a new interpretation of Conrad's *Victory* – which, alas, she was unable to finish. We shall all miss her very much indeed.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz