

“HE WAS ONE OF US” – JOSEPH CONRAD AS A HOME ARMY AUTHOR

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to show how Conrad’s fiction (and above all the novel *Lord Jim*) influenced the formation of the ethical attitudes and standards of the members of the Polish Home Army, which was the largest underground army in Nazi-occupied Europe. The core of this army was largely made up of young people who had been born around the year 1920 (i.e. after Poland had regained her independence in 1918) and who had had the opportunity to become acquainted with Conrad’s books during the interwar years. During the wartime occupation, Conrad became the favourite author of those who were actively engaged in fighting the Nazi regime, familiarizing young conspirators with the ethics of honour—the conviction that fighting in a just cause was a reward in itself, regardless of the outcome. The views of this generation of soldiers have been recorded by the writers who were among them: Jan Józef Szczepański, Andrzej Braun and Leszek Prorok.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, World War II, Poland, Polish Home Army, Home Army, Warsaw Uprising

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In order to fully understand the extraordinary role that Joseph Conrad’s novels played in forming the ethical attitudes and standards of those Poles who fought in the Home Army—which was the largest underground resistance army in Nazi-occupied Europe—we must go back to the interwar years, during which most of the members of the generation that was to form the core of the Home Army were born, for it was then that their personalities were formed and—perhaps above all—it was then that they acquired the particular ethos that they had in common. Indeed, it was then that Joseph Conrad’s image as an author matured in the eyes of the Polish reading public, as it was only then that translations of his main works became more accessible to the average reader. In addition to the publication of individual novels, there were two publications of Conrad’s collected works: *Pisma wybrane* (1922-1926) and *Pisma zbiorowe* (1928-1939), both of which carried a preface by the Polish novelist Stefan Żeromski, who set the tone for the Polish reception of Conrad for many years to come:

Every effort must be made to make the entire English writings of Joseph Conrad into Polish originals and every effort must be made to make this collected edition into a salutation—a salutation that is worthy of us Polish men of letters—sent to the great writer from the land in which he had his cradle.¹

Conrad's biography and literary output became the subjects of articles and studies which were published in the leading cultural journals of the day: *Wiadomości Literackie*, *Pion* and *Prosto z Mostu*, while regular lectures on his achievements were given by Stefan Kołaczkowski at the Jagiellonian University and Józef Ujejski at the University of Warsaw. The first Polish academic study of Conrad's work to be published during the interwar period was Ujejski's *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim* (*On Joseph Conrad* – 1936), which aroused great interest among intellectuals, as had Jean-Aubry's *Joseph Conrad. Life and Letters* (1927) and Gustav Morf's *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* (1930). This was no accident, as the novel which at that time had aroused the greatest interest of readers and critics alike was *Lord Jim*, which had come out in Aniela Zagórska's excellent translation in 1933.² In their books, Morf and (after him) Ujejski offered a symbolistic interpretation of the novel, which they suggested was a kind of manifesto on the subject of Conrad's attitude to the land of his birth. The fact that the poet Kazimierz Wierzyński wrote the following poem entitled *Lord Jim* (which he dedicated to Józef Ujejski) testifies to the great popularity of this particular novel in the Poland of the 1930s:

Przeszły mgły, przeszły wiatry, świt powstał nadranny,
Szumi puszcza, gra upał pustynnej sawanny,
Szumi pamięć, gra morze, ocean pogromu,
Płynie żagiel po wolność, dmie w śmierć po kryjomu.
W masztach sosny rozkwitły i szumią okrutnie,
Cała flota ruszyła i wiezie go w płótnie,
Przez wody tropikalne, przez obce południe
Daleko, do ojczyzny, do bratniej mogiły.

Tu spocznij, między nami, wędrowcze zawily.³

Gone are the mists, gone are the winds, the dawn has broken,
The forest whispers, the heat of the savanna desert beats down,
Memories whisper, the sea heaves, the ocean roars,
The sails glide towards freedom, hastening hidden death.
The pine trees in the masts are in bloom and creak relentlessly,
The whole fleet is in motion, taking him under its canvas,

¹ S. Żeromski, "Joseph Conrad – autor rodak" [in:] *idem, Pisma literackie i krytyczne*, ed. S. Pigoń, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1963, p. 149.

² Cf. S. Zabierowski, "Lord Jim w Polsce (1904-1939)", *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historycznoliterackie* 1968, 14, pp. 193-209.

³ K. Wierzyński, "Lord Jim" [in:] *W imię Conrada. Joseph Conrad w poezji polskiej*, ed. T. Skutnik, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1977, p. 55.

Across tropical waters, through an alien South,
Far, far away, to the land of his fathers, to a brother’s grave.

Meandering rambler, come hither and take your repose among us!
(Transl. R. E. P.)

This poem, from Wierzyński’s collection entitled *Kurhany* (*Burial Mounds* – 1938), assigned Conrad’s protagonist a permanent place in Poland’s national mythology.

It was this cultural context that shaped the younger generation in particular, meaning those who were born around the year 1920, i.e. those who grew up in an independent Poland and who were given the opportunity to get to know Conrad’s works. This is borne out by the testimony of some of that generation’s leading representatives. As Leszek Prorok (who was born in 1919) later recalled:

My first encounter with Conrad’s writing was quite fortuitous and dates back to my boyhood days. I’d gone down with some flu and had to stay at home for a few days. To pass away the time reading books, I had to have recourse to my father’s extensive home library, browsing half the time through encyclopaedias, novels and technical handbooks chosen at random and the other half of the time reading any more interesting text that I happened to come across. That is how *A Set of Six* came into my hands and how I came to read the first Conradian text that I ever got to know. It was the story of Gaspar Ruiz [...] And so—completely by accident—I made the acquaintance of Joseph Conrad. Familiarity came later—during the war—but by that time I had read several of Conrad’s longer works: *Almayer’s Folly*, *Lord Jim*, *Victory* and a few short stories.⁴

Leszek Prorok’s contemporary Jan Józef Szczepański recalled his own first encounter with *Lord Jim*:

I can’t give an exact account of my impression on that first reading. It must have been strong or in some way strange or disturbing, as I came back to the book again several times—always in difficult, abnormal circumstances and always with a particular sense of expectation, as if I suspected that I’d overlooked something important in it or that there was something that I hadn’t fully understood. The first time I was fifteen or sixteen, I think. At that age books don’t just tell stories, but begin to ask questions or tempt you with the hope of finding answers to questions that are more and more unexpected and more and more troubling.⁵

Another member of that generation—Andrzej Braun (born in 1923)—also recalls his first encounter with Conrad’s fiction:

Ever since my boyhood days, when, at the age of sixteen, I first read *Almayer’s Folly*—a ragged-edged, faded yellow book with a foreword by Stefan Żeromski—in a feverish trance and in the course of three afternoons (as I was never to be able to read again, forgetting about the next day’s trigonometry test and the Latin test which I was due to retake), I discovered literature the way other secondary-school pupils discovered music and—just as they would gather

⁴ L. Prorok, “Conrad w moim warsztacie pisarskim” [in:] *Studia Conradowskie*, ed. S. Zabierowski, Katowice: Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1976, pp. 183-184.

⁵ J. J. Szczepański, *Przed nieznanym trybunałem*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1975, p. 5.

round a wind-up gramophone in order to listen to Liszt—so did I try to “spread the word” about Conrad.⁶

2

Such was the literature of the day and it was with such a literary experience behind them that the younger generation of Poles lived through the years of wartime occupation. And it so happened that Conrad’s works were particularly widely read in Nazi-occupied Poland. Commenting on cultural life under German rule, Władysław Bartoszewski (who was born in 1922) recalls:

New and second-hand books that had been banned were [secretly] distributed on a large scale—above all in larger urban areas such as Warsaw and Cracow (though not only there). People loved to read this kind of literature—especially science books for the general reader and novels whose subjects were connected with the history of Poland. What they sought in them was not only knowledge or entertainment, but more often than not inspiration for moral attitudes exhibiting fortitude and a sense of responsibility. Looking at it in this light, the great rise in the popularity of books by Joseph Conrad, for example, was quite revealing.⁷

It was not only Conrad’s works that aroused the heightened interest of Polish readers, but also their interpretation by scholars and literary critics. As Andrzej Braun recalls:

It was during the war years that—in what was an occupied country—I first tried to build my own home library. Funnily enough, you could buy various valuable and rare volumes quite cheaply at second-hand bookshops and also from street vendors in Świętokrzyska Street and Mazowiecka Street in Warsaw, which was the result of human misfortune, as books were being sold in order to buy bread and were also being stolen from libraries, houses and flats. This was my first non-professional fascination with Conrad and my first search for anything that I could read about him. Apart from separate articles by Borowy, Kołaczkowski and Dyboski, I managed to buy two well-worn books: Ujejski’s *O Konradzie Korzeniowskim (On Joseph Conrad)* and an English version of Morf’s *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*.⁸

Students of Polish literature at the wartime Underground University of Warsaw also took a lively interest in Conrad’s writing. During the 1941/42 academic year, Prof. Waław Borowy analysed “The art of writing novels, with examples taken from the works of Joseph Conrad.”⁹ We must also not forget that Conrad’s books were read by informal self-education groups such as the one run by Karol Lipiński. As Lesław Bartelski (who was born in 1920) recalls:

⁶ A. Braun, *Śladami Conrada*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1972, p. 10.

⁷ W. Bartoszewski, “Oblicze kultury polskiej w konspiracji” [in:] *idem, Na drodze do niepodległości*, Paris: Editions Spotkania, 1987, pp. 146-147.

⁸ A. Braun, “O Gustawie Morfie” [in:] *Informacje Polskiego Klubu Conradowskiego (Gdańsk)*, Gdańsk, 1978, pp. 7-8.

⁹ “Z kronik uniwersyteckich 1818-1944” [in:] *Z dziejów polonistyki warszawskiej*, Warszawa: PIW, 1964, p. 98.

The writers who were particularly favoured by this group were Andrzej Strug, André Malraux, Stanisław Brzozowski and Joseph Conrad, who stressed the moral significance of actions in their works.¹⁰

It was not only the 1920 generation that looked up to Conrad as an authority, however. To a certain extent, the themes of his fiction brought together both the students and the lecturers of the Underground University of Warsaw. As one of the University’s most eminent academics Prof. Bogdan Suchodolski recalled:

Those personal intellectual experiences became the living core of our meetings. If I had to give a general account of the atmosphere of those meetings, I would need to invoke Conrad. He was our writer. Although his novels talked about an exotic world and times long past, he wrote about our times and about our fate. [...] For us—in those days—he was a writer who wrote about our fate and about our conscience.¹¹

3

Conrad’s influence was by no means limited to the reading of his books or the search for interpretations of them. It went deeper. As Jan Józef Szczepański wrote in one of his essays:

We were the first normal and psychologically healthy generation of Poles in the last couple of hundred years, so our battle colours had to be different. Other gestures and a different style of acting were called for on the stage of world history—hence Conrad, I suppose. Until then, he had barely come to our attention, being just one of the classics on the bookshelves (albeit always set apart, as it were, because he was a little more exotic than the others), but—it seemed—was so far away on his oceans and in his English skin. Then it suddenly dawned on us that he was more relevant than all the others taken together. It was as if he had been waiting for that moment in time, so that he could set a course for us on the map.¹²

First of all, let us recall some basic facts. The 1920 generation of Polish writers—commonly known as the “Kolumbowie” generation after the publication of a well-known novel by Roman Bratny (who was born in 1921)—were soldiers of the Home Army. They belonged to a generation which—in the opinion of Kazimierz Wyka—“found themselves brought together in three places: Warsaw, the partisans’ forest and the concentration camp.”¹³ To mention only those who were devotees of Conrad, we have Lesław Bartelski, Władysław Bartoszewski and Leszek Prorok, all of whom took part in the Warsaw Uprising, as well as Andrzej Braun, who took part in the assassination attempt which was carried out against the Nazi official Wilhelm Koppe in

¹⁰ L. M. Bartelski, *Pieśń niepodległa. Pisarze i wydarzenia 1939-1942*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1988, p. 429.

¹¹ B. Suchodolski, “Podwójne życie” [in:] *Żołnierz, poeta, czasu kurz... Wspomnienia o Krzysztofie Kamiliu Baczyńskim*, ed. Z. Wasilewski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1979, p. 216.

¹² J. J. Szczepański, *Przed nieznanym trybunałem*, op. cit., p. 8.

¹³ K. Wyka, *Krzysztof Baczyński (1921-1944)*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1961, p. 45.

Cracow. Braun later fought as a partisan in the Kielce region, where Szczepański served in a Home Army unit.

A knowledge of Conrad's novels—and *Lord Jim* in particular—provided role models for a confrontation with totalitarian reality. As Jan Józef Szczepański assured us in an important article entitled *Conrad mojego pokolenia* (*The Conrad of My Generation*), which was published on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Conrad's birth:

I knew a young lad whose death was the direct result of his having read *Lord Jim* (or rather the first volume of *Lord Jim*). The motif of that bulkhead which was about to give way—but which in the event held out longer than the nerves and courage of the wretched first mate of the “Patna”—became a veritable obsession with him. He was a highly strung and extremely sensitive person. [...] He would repeat Jim's famous sentence—“It is all in being ready.”—as if it were a magic spell or a lesson that had to be learnt by heart. And it was that very fear of his own moment of weakness that led this acquaintance of mine to commit an act of totally needless daring which cost him his life.¹⁴

Years later, Szczepański yet again recalled that friend of his in an entry which he made in his diary on 13th March 1974:

I'm finishing an essay on poor Jurek Ostaszewski and Conrad. I once wrote a story about Jurek's case (when I was in Małuszyn). I haven't even tried to find it. Perhaps that's how it is with being mature: rightly or wrongly, you think that you're looking at things from a perspective that gives you a greater chance of seeing them as they really are.¹⁵

In an essay entitled *W służbie Wielkiego Armatora* (*In the Service of the Great Shipowner*), which he published that same year in the Wrocław *Odra* magazine, Szczepański not only related the tragic fate of his old Katowice schoolfriend Jerzy Ostoja-Ostaszewski (who was a member of an elite Home Army unit), but also gave the fullest account of his own relationship with Conrad as well as that of his generation as a whole.

It is no surprise that it was Conrad who became the moral guide of the younger members of the Home Army, who needed strong motivation in order to adopt an appropriate moral stance in their fight against Nazi (and later Stalinist) totalitarianism. Thus Conrad came to be acknowledged as being one of the literary figures who inspired the Home Army's intellectual elite. As Leszek Prorok argued:

There is no lack of hard evidence to support the assertion that along with the Romantics, who dominated the pre-war school syllabus as far as literature was concerned, it was Conrad who exerted the greatest influence on the generation who took part in the Polish Resistance, with his ideal of fidelity to one's word (even in the most hopeless situations), his ideal of honour, his sense of duty and his sense of absolute obligation with regard to the moral rigours that one imposes on oneself. Although they were drawn from completely different situations (as well as the experiences and contaminations that were inherent in the fate of being a Pole), these imperatives were completely in keeping with the character of the underground struggle and the

¹⁴ J. J. Szczepański, “Conrad mojego pokolenia”, *Życie Literackie* 1957, no. 49.

¹⁵ J. J. Szczepański, *Dziennik*, vol. IV: 1973-1980, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2015, p. 102.

atmosphere which surrounded most of the wartime conspirators—and especially the younger members of the Home Army.¹⁶

Conrad would also seem to have had an influence on the ethical attitudes of Poles during the Warsaw Uprising, which was the culmination of the activities of the Home Army. As the British historian Norman Davies observes:

To the uninitiated, Joseph Conrad may not seem to have much in common with the Warsaw Rising. Yet to those familiar with inter-war intellectual trends, the connection was obvious. Conrad, the Polish seaman turned master of the English language, was one of the most popular and most translated authors of the day. The morality which he promoted of self-reliance, dignity and integrity under pressure was highly attractive to the educated youth of independent Poland. His ideal of ‘being true to oneself’ was their ideal too. It was not for nothing that the ‘Class of 1920’, which formed the most typical cohort of the insurgents, has been called ‘Conrad’s children’.¹⁷

It is worth noting that it was not only the younger generation of Polish readers that was inspired by the moral standards which are inherent in Conrad’s writing. Maria Młynarska—who belonged to the older generation and who took part in the Warsaw Uprising—at one point considered deserting her post during a Luftwaffe bombing raid on the field hospital where she was working as a medical orderly. Years later, she recalled those difficult moments:

[...] just at that moment Jim came. When it seemed that I was just no longer capable of coming to grips with my own fear, Jim suddenly stood at my side and simply asked if I would be able to endure what would inevitably be my fate after running away. He reminded me of his own misery and the price which he paid for a momentary lapse. I looked in horror at his various ordeals, which passed before my eyes as if conjured up by magic. I could not get away from these visions and I could not really distinguish between what was happening to him and what was happening to me. They terrified me more than everything that I was going through at that particular moment.¹⁸

There is therefore a lot of evidence to suggest that Conrad’s *Lord Jim* played a significant role in the formation of the ethos of the soldiers of the Home Army.

4

Things changed radically for the worse after 1945. Left-wing intellectuals who supported the new political system—based on the Stalinist version of Marxism—sought to discredit those who had supported the Polish Underground State, seeing them as the mainstay of the pre-war reactionary political system. This policy was

¹⁶ L. Prorok, “Wachta z Conradem” [in:] *idem, Szkice bałtyckie i inne*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1972, p. 146.

¹⁷ N. Davies, *Rising ’44*, London: Pan Books, 2004, p. 663.

¹⁸ M. Młynarska [M. Tarnawska], “Lord Jim w powstaniu warszawskim” [in:] *Conrad żywy*, ed. W. Tarnawski, London: B. Świdorski, 1957, p. 263.

symbolized by Włodzimierz Zakrzewski's infamous poster decrying members of the Home Army as being "filthy reactionary scum". As Jan Józef Szczepański recalls:

At the very beginning of this road, just after we had come out of the forest, we saw a symbolic image: a hero making a victorious dash and a loathsome little monster bearing the inscription "Home Army—filthy reactionary scum" on its abdomen. This poster, which presided over the desks of registration officers as we "came out into the open", must have stuck for ever in the memories of all of us.¹⁹

One of the elements of this campaign—waged by those left-wing intellectuals who supported the communist authorities—was the denigration of Joseph Conrad, who had been the Home Army's moral patron. A major role in this smear campaign was played by journalists connected with the "Kućnica" weekly, while the most significant text that criticized Conrad was Jan Kott's essay entitled *O laickim tragizmie* (*On the Secular Tragic*), in which he attempted to question the sense of the concepts of honour and fidelity, which were key elements of the Conradian ethos. Kott, who was a literary critic, argued thus:

And when we read in Conrad's books that the sole justification for heroism is the defence of honour and fidelity, we must ask—in the manner of Montesquieu—whether such an attitude serves the public good. An inner moral drama is played out in the real world—in a social world—and is always nothing more than the choice of one of the attitudes and standards that are imposed by communal life—the choice of one particular form of action. In reality—in the concrete reality of Society—Conradian fidelity to oneself is none other than obedience to the laws of the world, which privately one disdains. It is a rejection of one's right to rebel. Conradian fidelity to oneself is the fidelity of slaves, for he who obeys a master for whom he feels contempt and whose only care is his own private integrity is nothing but a slave. [...] From a social point of view, the blind obedience shown by Conrad's main characters to the great shipowners of this world poses a much greater threat than their inner pride and their spiritual solitude.²⁰

As we can see, Kott argued that moral truths are not absolute, but are conditioned by history and Society. Some of Kott's claims were later shown to have been inspired by those of Upton Sinclair—an American writer whose book entitled *Mammonart* portrayed Conrad as an author who used his literary talent to serve capitalists.²¹ Here we might add that Sinclair's chapter on Conrad was reprinted in the prewar Polish press.²²

Kott's critical assessment of Conrad gave rise to numerous polemics and was hotly disputed not only by journalists such as Hanna Malewska, Antoni Gołubiew and Stefan Kisielewski—who were connected with the *Tygodnik Powszechny* weekly—but also by the eminent sociologist Józef Chałasiński, whose political views

¹⁹ J. J. Szczepański, "Łuna za lasem" [in:] *idem, Rozłogi*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001, p. 38.

²⁰ J. Kott, "O laickim tragizmie", *Twórczość* 1945, z. 2, p. 160.

²¹ Z. Najder, "Conrad w Polsce w latach 1939-1957" [in:] *Conrad żywy, op. cit.*, p. 259.

²² Cf. "Conrad zdemaskowany", *Merkuryusz Polski Ordynaryjny* 1933, no. 1; U. Sinclair, "Nieubłagana Nemezis", *Sygnaly* (Lwów) 1936, no. 22.

were closer to those of Marx.²³ The most significant stand taken in this dispute—which is seen to have been a particularly important ideological confrontation in the immediate post-war years—was that of Maria Dąbrowska, whose polemic with Kott was of an ethical and political nature:

However, Conrad tries to make his main characters show (and indeed, does make them show) fidelity to something that is truly moral and worthy. The fact that what is truly moral and worthy is not in accordance with Marxist doctrine or fidelity to the Marxist Party is no argument for deprecating Conrad’s moral standpoint.²⁴

Maria Dąbrowska expressed herself even more bluntly with regard to the context of the current political situation in Poland:

As Kott takes to task Conrad’s “fidelity”—and in doing so takes to task the heroic “fidelity” of the Polish Resistance, which fought the Germans for five and a half years—I shall take the liberty of giving a few words of explanation in its defence. The soldiers of the Home Army and all those Poles who, with unparalleled courage, risked their lives or were killed—eventually going as far as to imperil the fate of their beloved capital city—were not fools who showed blind obedience to orders of one sort or another. Those many thousands of soldiers and civilians fought for a Poland that would be really free and really democratic.²⁵

In later years, Kott made the following comment on the post-war Conrad debate, in which he had played such a significant role:

It was a political dispute. I’d always been somehow fascinated by Conrad and it wasn’t about him. It was a dispute about the Home Army. Conrad advocated fidelity despite everything—until the very end. He glorified honour. On the whole, these were the values of the soldiers of the Home Army, who remained in the forests, as by then it was obvious that on a political plane they’d been defeated.²⁶

Worse was to come, however. As Zdzisław Najder recalled:

In 1950—i.e. during the second year of the ruthless “social realism” offensive—the “Nowa Kultura” magazine carried a very small but ominous note (signed with the initials “lbg”) which expressed outrage at the fact that the works of such a dubious author as Conrad were being published without any appropriate commentary. It was a sign of the times. Conrad duly disappeared from the Polish State publishing market for five whole years. However, he did not disappear from the memories of his readers, for any copies of his works that occasionally appeared in second-hand bookshops fetched fabulous prices.²⁷

²³ S. Zabierowski, “Polskie spory o Conrada w latach 1945-1949” [in:] *idem, Conrad w perspektywie odbioru*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1979, pp. 44-75.

²⁴ M. Dąbrowska, “Conradowskie pojęcie wierności”, *Warszawa* 1946, no. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ J. Kott, “Polityki się nie wybiera”, *Nagłos* 1991, 3(28), p. 88.

²⁷ Z. Najder, “Conrad w Polsce w latach 1939-1957”, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

5

Things radically improved after the October “Thaw” of 1956. The reason was twofold. Firstly, there was a change in the previously extremely hostile official attitude to former members of the Home Army, who were now being released from prison in their thousands. Secondly—in line with the “thaw” in the field of culture—that same year, the PIW State Publishers began work on a new collected edition of the works of Joseph Conrad, beginning with *Lord Jim*. Of particular significance were the celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of Conrad’s birth in 1957 and the fiftieth anniversary of the writer’s death in 1974. The latter would seem to have played an especially momentous role in establishing a lasting image of Conrad as a Home Army author in the minds of Polish readers—an image that was in large measure created by Jan Józef Szczepański.

It is worth recalling, however, that the 1970s were an exceptionally favourable period for Polish Conrad scholarship. The years 1972–1974 saw the publication of what was then the world’s most complete edition of Conrad’s collected works (overseen by Zdzisław Najder; *The Shadow Line* was translated by Jan Józef Szczepański). In 1972 an international Conrad conference was held in Warsaw, Cracow and Gdańsk. The participants included not only Conrad scholars such as Ian Watt, Eloise Knapp Hay, Norman Sherry and Gustav Morf, but also Polish scholars such as Zdzisław Najder. To their surprise, American and Western-European Conrad scholars more than once learnt from their Polish counterparts (and especially Leszek Prorok) that Conrad had played a very important role during the wartime occupation.

In 1974 the Polish Writers’ Union (Związek Literatów Polskich) organized a Conrad Day in Warsaw: a memorial plaque was unveiled on the walls of the house at 45, Nowy Świat Street (where Conrad lived with his parents before the outbreak of the 1863 Uprising), while a symposium was held at the Dom Literatury (The Home of Literature) and an exhibition was held at the Museum of Literature.

This renewed interest in Conrad would seem to have spurred Jan Józef Szczepański (in that same Conrad anniversary year) to write an essay entitled *W służbie Wielkiego Armatora* (*In the Service of the Great Shipowner*), which is the most eloquent testimony to the way in which the 1920 generation saw Conrad. Looking back, he observed:

My generation. I ought to beware of generalizations and mythologizing. Who are those people? Who are we? We are all well past middle age and old, if it comes to that. We have all settled down—for better or worse, but ... for good. Everything about us is out in the open. We are all now what we were destined to be: on the whole, nothing out of the ordinary. [...] So, when I say “my generation”, I think of the past. I think of a nation of twenty-year-olds whose plans for leading a normal life were disrupted and who were forced to make dramatic choices. I think of the years of wartime occupation, because they alone reveal the mark of our otherness and show us clearly as a separate wave in the river of history.²⁸

²⁸ J. J. Szczepański, *Przed nieznanym trybunałem*, op. cit., p. 7.

At the same time, Szczepański is very specific about the place which Conrad-Korzeniowski occupied in the consciousness of his generation—the 1920 generation:

“He was one of us”—for me and my contemporaries, those words once merely meant that a certain young man called Lord Jim was one of the mariners whose community at the turn of the century (i.e. in some other-world reality) included, as one of its members, Józef Konrad Korzeniowski—an officer in the British Merchant Marine and the son of a Polish insurgent. Then suddenly it turned out that he was one of us—in our own world. And it was thanks to him that Joseph Conrad also became one of us.²⁹

6

We may therefore ask: what were the common values that formed a bond between the works of Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski and those of his readers who were in the ranks of the Polish Home Army? The answer would seem to be honour and fidelity. The idea of honour, whose origins dated back to the ethos of the knight, was later adopted by the Polish nobility and—in time—by educated people of noble extraction, i.e. by people such as Conrad. As Zdzisław Najder observes:

By his frequent use of honour as a core ethical concept and by presenting its various aspects and complexities, Conrad enhanced the tradition of the knightly ethos in literature, endowing it with a social innovation of fundamental significance: he emancipated virtue from its class limitations.³⁰

Honour was also the bond that existed between regular and underground army units. It was especially valued by the soldiers of the Home Army—and, as we know, it was a key element of the Conradian ethos, which was based on the conviction that service in a just cause was a reward in itself, regardless of any outcome. It is the concept of honour that is the key to an understanding of the meaning of the novel *Lord Jim*. In the words of the French navy lieutenant who comes to the rescue of the “Patna”:

But the honour—the honour, monsieur! . . . The honour . . . that is real—that is! And what life may be worth when” . . . he got on his feet with a ponderous impetuosity, as a startled ox might scramble up from the grass . . . “when the honour is gone—ah ça! par exemple—I can offer no opinion. I can offer no opinion—because—monsieur—I know nothing of it.³¹

Another key element of Conradian ethics is the concept of fidelity. Towards the end of his preface to *Some Reminiscences*, Conrad himself offered the following explanation:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Z. Najder, “Conrad i tradycyjne pojęcie honoru” [in:] *idem, Sztuka i wierność. Szkice o twórczości Josepha Conrada*, transl. H. Najder, Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2000, p. 173.

³¹ J. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2002, p. 93.

Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, amongst others, on the idea of Fidelity.³²

As we know, the principle of fidelity is vital to any underground organization—and the Home Army was just such an organization.

These Conradian stances would seem to find their fullest expression in a poem written by Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998) bearing the title *Przesłanie Pana Cogito* (*The Message of Mr. Cogito*), of which the following lines will make a fitting end to the present article:

Idź dokąd poszli tamci do ciemnego kresu
po złote runo nicości twoją ostatnią nagrodę

idź wyprostowany wśród tych co na kolanach
wśród obróconych plecami i obalonych w proch

ocalałeś nie po to aby żyć
masz mało czasu trzeba dać świadectwo

[...]

idź bo tylko tak będziesz przyjęty do grona zimnych czaszek
do grona twoich przodków: Gilgamesza Hektora Rolanda
obrońców królestwa bez kresu i miasta popiołów

Bądź wierny Idź³³

Go where they went – to the dark brink
for the golden fleece of nothingness as your last reward

go forth upright among those on their knees
among those with their backs to you who are now reduced to dust

you did not survive in order to live
time is short and you must bear witness

[...]

Go, because only then can you join the cold skulls
of your ancestors: those of Gilgamesh Hector Roland
defenders of the boundless kingdom and the city of ashes

Go now, be faithful [Transl. R. E. P.]

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

³² J. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, eds. Z. Najder and J. H. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008, p. 17.

³³ Z. Herbert, “Przesłanie Pana Cogito” [in:] *idem, Wiersze zebrane*, ed. R. Krynicki, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo a5, 2008, p. 439.

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