

Joseph Conrad – Clash of National and Imperial

1. Building the National

1.1 Introduction

Joseph Conrad (born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski) is considered as one of the greatest novelists to write in English language. Writing at the moment when the British Empire was at its peak he was able to provide his readers with a unique point of view. His presence today in university courses testifies about his importance and centrality that his works have, even today.¹ The case of his homeland, whipped out of the political map, was always on his mind. He spent most of his childhood in an exile. From very young age he was a part of imperial battles fought between large empires. His everyday life was enormously influenced by the struggle of national and imperial. It is rather difficult to find a person that embodies such a struggle more than Joseph Conrad. His sympathy for the oppressed was drawn from his own background and his own sufferings. He was completely aware of true nature of colonialism and imperialism and he was adamant to show that to the readers.² His unique background gave future scholars an incredible insight into imperialism. Great interest in Conrad's work is easily seen in *Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets, and Broadsides on Joseph Conrad*.³

Our idea is to describe that battle between national and imperial. In the first part of this paper we will focus on his early years, his formation in an exile, death of his mother when Joseph Conrad was seven year old, his father passing away when Conrad was eleven and ultimately his decision to leave Poland and become a sailor. It is not possible to understand Conrad's writings without understanding his Polish background. Motifs in his work such as sacrifice, patriotism and exile are drawn from his own experience but also from classical Polish literature.⁴ Every literary piece has its public and private meaning. While public meaning of some piece can be, sometimes, quite clear, private meaning is often deeply rooted inside

¹J. H. Stape, Preface, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. by J. H. Stape, Cambridge 1996, i-ii.

²H. S. Zins, Joseph Conrad and British Critics of Colonialism, *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, vol. 12, nos. 1 & 2 (1998), 63.

³J. G. Peters, "Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets, and Broadsides on Joseph Conrad – Part 1: 1910-1979", *The Conradian* 36.1 (spring 2011), 98-118; ³J. G. Peters, "Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets, and Broadsides on Joseph Conrad – Part 2: 1980-2010", *The Conradian* 37.1 (spring 2012), 84-106.

⁴Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*, Cambridge 1997, 15.

author's biography.⁵ We will try to show his surrounding, struggles of his father and how history of Poland influenced one of the greatest writers. After that, in the second part this paper, we will focus on his work, trying to find that connection between nation and imperial.

1.2 The Heritage

It was the year 1795. and Poland was whipped out of the political map of Europe. Divided amongst three neighboring countries – central and eastern Polish territories were given to the Russia and western part of these territories became Kingdom of Poland where Russian tsar was titular king; southern part of Poland was given to Austrian Empire and western part of the land to Prussia. Foreign rule inspired numerous rebellions and almost every generation had an insurrection against foreign rule.

In such a difficult time for Poland and in time of great political struggle of Polish people Joseph Conrad was born on 3 December 1857 in Berdychiv. His birth town was part of Ukraine that belonged to Poland before 1793. However, at the time of his birth Berdychiv was part of Russian Empire. Complicated explanation of local history of his birth town shows just how deep was the national and the political struggle of generations before Conrad and his own generation.

He was the only child of Apollo Korzeniowski and his wife Ewa Bobrowska. Family of Conrad's father played significant role in Polish attempts to regain their independence. Conrad's paternal grandfather was part of Napoleon's Russian campaign and he also took part in Polish uprising of 1830. His son and Conrad's father, was part of "Red" political fraction and agitated strongly for re-establishment of pre-partition Poland. His father political activism caused family to move repeatedly.⁶ Protests in Warsaw in 1860. inspired Apollo and the rest of the Polish nation. Apollo wrote about it and soon he had realized that moving to Warsaw was the best solution for his fight for re-establishment of Poland.

In Warsaw he established biweekly modeled on *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Living in Warsaw allowed him greater role in resistance movement, where soon he became one of their leaders,

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, New York 2007, 5-16.

partially because he was around twenty year older than the rest of the group.⁷ He participated through written and spoken word and did that with great energy. He always wore black, as a sign of his mourn for the lost territory and independence of Poland. He was not alone in such act, soon all of the protestors started wearing black as sign of protest against foreign suppression.⁸ Apollo Korzeniowski was representative of Polish romantic political thought. For him political activity should not aim for power, but for implementation of general ethical principles.⁹ He insisted on resurrection of Poland, but also on social and economic reforms. Dream was an independent Poland in which all of its citizen would have the same rights.¹⁰

1.3 The Struggle

His persistent work in resistance movement led to his imprisonment in Pavilion X, for important political prisoners, of the Warsaw Citadel. Joseph Conrad visited father with his mother. The Charges against Korzeniowski were vague, but never the less sentence was severe – exile of Apollo and his family to Vologda, a place ill-known for its unhealthy climate. Even in the exile they were to be under strict police supervision.¹¹ Exile did not stop him from his political work. All other Polish political exiles soon started to gather around Apollo Korzeniowski who became their natural leader.¹² Their dream of independent Poland did not succumb to a harsh reality of living in an exile, on the Russian soil. His health began to deteriorate due to severe climate. On top of that being under constant police scrutiny did not help with his medical conditions. To make matters worse, Apollo's wife and Conrad's mother, Ewa, became ill when the family was on their way to Vologda. Family was denied request to postpone move to Vologda until Ewa recovered. Such situation, also, worried Korzeniowski.¹³

On the grounds of poor health, Apollo Korzeniowski was allowed, in January of 1863, a transfer to Chernikhov, a place about 8 miles north of Kiev. Two major events that had shaped Joseph Conrad and influenced his father greatly took place that year. First one was the

⁷ Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*, 29; N. Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland: Volume II: From 1795 to Present*, Oxford 2005, 259.

⁸ Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, 16.

⁹ Z. Najder, *Conrad in Perspective. Essays on Art and Fidelity*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, 21.

¹³ J. Meyers, *Joseph Conrad. A biography*, New York 2001, 15.

uprising of 1863 in Warsaw. Joseph Conrad's father saw his exile and tragic destiny of his family as a sacrifice that he had to take for the sake of his beloved motherland. No sacrifice was too great and he was dreaming of another rebellion. Another rebellion would have proved that his martyrdom was not in vain.¹⁴ Preparations for the uprising saw Korzeniowski in Vologda. Uprising failed, internal divisions amongst rebellions were as much to blame as external influence of Russian Empire. Second major event was far more personal for both Apollo Korzeniowski and his son Joseph Conrad. Ewa's health began to deteriorate.¹⁵ Thanks to connections of Ewa's family, her and young Joseph left Chernikhov for three months so that they could get medical treatment. Conrad describes this time in his life in his autobiographical work *A Personal Record*. He writes about that summer and how his mother obtained permission to leave Chernikhov. What is more important he remembers that summer of 1863 as summer when he started to remember his mother as more than "...mere loving, protective presence...".¹⁶ He recalls doctor's visits and realization that his mother's condition is quite serious.¹⁷ For Ewa's health that summer was point of no return. Her condition continued to deteriorate. In April 1865. she died of tuberculosis in Chernikhov at the age of thirty-two. The loss left a terrible impact on both father and the son. Apollo Korzeniowski blamed himself and firmly believed that his arrest and exile ultimately led to his wife passing away.¹⁸

Failure of uprising in 1863 and death of his beloved wife changed Apollo Korzeniowski. While he was exiled in Vologda no sacrifice was too great and his martyrdom was for the greater cause. The death of his wife changed him completely. His courage and his hope faded away and were replaced with despair and hopelessness. For a seven year old Joseph Conrad this was also a turning point even though he was probably unaware of the fact at that moment.¹⁹ One could say that his early childhood was symbolized by loss. Loss of his home while he was in exile with his family and his mother's passing away were crucial for him.

After the tragedy Apollo Korzeniowski focused himself on his son. He did everything to keep memory of Conrad's mother alive. He homeschooled his young son, terrified of sending him to public schools where he would be under Russian influence. His constant fight against

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ J. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, New York and London 1912,48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁸ J. Meyers, *op. cit.*, 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

Russian influence was hard on Conrad – he lived in constant isolation burrowed into books. Never the less Conrad’s homeschooling led to discovery of Victor Hugo’s *Les Travailleurs de la mer* and the works of William Shakespeare.²⁰ Hugo’s work was translated by Conrad’s own father, it was the work in which he discovered the activity that would mark his youth. Shakespeare, on the other hand led him into the world of English literature and Joseph Conrad grew out to be one of the greatest representative of English written words. His fragile health lead to him being torn away from his father while getting treatment in Kiev, Zhitomir and Novofastov from May 1866 until autumn 1867.²¹ In the summer of 1867 his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski took young Joseph Conrad to Odessa where, future sailor probably saw the sea for the first time in his life.²²

Things started to look better in December 1867 for Apollo and Joseph when, as a result of Apollo’s family effort, father and son were issued a permit to leave Chernikhov. It did not mean an end to exile, but it marked move from Russian held lands to Austrian held lands.

Austrian held Poland had certain degree of self-government and much greater internal freedom than Russian held Poland. For Apollo Krozeniowski that meant return of hope. Last two years of exile were torture for him. He lost his wife, he was separated from his son, he was in a constant fear his son’s health and fought a persistent battle for his mind trying to save him from Russian influence. He hoped that in Austria he will once again breathe freely amongst his countryman.²³ He dreamed about publishing without obstruction once again. His dreams were crushed upon arrival in Lvov.

Couple of weeks after arrival in Lvov, Korzeniowski moved with his son to Cracow and they settled there. He hoped that Cracow would allow his son a better education. Before arriving, Apollo feared for his son’s “soul” and was petrified on thought of his mind being Russified. Upon arrival on soil of Austrian held Poland Joseph Conrad had to start learning German so he could go to school.²⁴ Soon he realized that the Polish language was Germanized, and that Poles where busy with quarrels amongst themselves and that they were completely neglecting

²⁰ Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, 27.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 31.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ J. Meyers, *op. cit.*, 24.

national work and struggle.²⁵ It turned out that he had hoped and expected too much. His reactions were extreme. His life was marked by utmost sacrifice for Poland and Polish cause; his wife passed away; his son was ill, motherless and had spent almost all of his life in an exile and Korzeniowski believed that all of that was his fault.²⁶

Another tragedy was approaching to Joseph Conrad. Already a witness to his mother slow demise, upon settling in Cracow he was observer to his father's fading away. Apollo was ill and in the summer of 1868 it became clear that his end was near.

Joseph Conrad lost his father in the May of 1869. His father's funeral turned into a patriotic demonstration. To an eleven year old boy who had been left orphaned it did not mean a lot. His father influenced him greatly. Apollo Korzeniowski left to his son with, among other things, belief in democracy, sympathy for the oppressed, hatred for the invaders and an incredible amount of love for his country.²⁷ He was placed in the care of his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski. His uncle was different from Conrad's father. While his father an emotional man, Joseph Conrad's uncle was almost a perfect picture of an eighteen-century rationalist. Conrad soon started to sense a strong dislike that his uncle felt towards his late father. Apollo Korzeniowski and Tadeusz Bobrowski had differences of opinions in almost every important question, and especially regarding the question of uprising in 1863. Bobrowski was convinced that if it had not been for the uprising, that the liberal laws would have been implemented by the Tsar Alexander II.²⁸ Bobrowski was much moderated in his fight for Poland. He, too, had hoped for reunification of Poland, but he was not too happy with notion of social and economic reforms. Nationalism that was on the rise was just a new mean for a fight with foreign oppressor, but when it came to the rights and sharing those rights a line was drawn. At some point some of the privileges had to be shared, but it was crucial never to admit that the others were entitled to the same rights and privileges.²⁹ Latter in his life Joseph Conrad insisted on the importance of influence of his uncle and he described that influence as beneficial.

²⁵ Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36-38.

²⁹ P. Sugar, Nationalism in Eastern Europe, in: *Nationalism*, ed. by J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, Oxford 1994, 171.

1.4 *The Decisions*

It is hard to form a definitive picture about five years of Conrad's life between his father's death and his decision to leave Poland. At first he developed in a manner that Apollo Korzeniowski would have considered fit. He was looked after by a friend of his late father, who shared his father's liberal beliefs. He was placed in a pension that was run by one of the veterans of the uprising of 1863. Soon his grandmother joined him. It is very difficult to form a definitive picture about this important time in Joseph Conrad's life. He wrote about that in his autobiographical work, but he did not give precise and correct information. His grandmother spent most of the time with him until 1873, while Tadeusz Bobrowski provided money for Conrad's education. He was very worried about boy's health. Moving him back to his home town was out of question. As a child of political exiles he would have been subjected to harassment.³⁰

In 1871 Conrad declared his wish to become a sailor. Romantic appeal of exploration and discovery was very much alive at the time and Conrad dreamed about it.³¹ Optimism, technological development and faith in science were important part of the spirit of the second half of 19th century and Joseph Conrad was not immune to the feeling. He was not interested in school work, he was not a good student and with time his uncle understood that the best thing for the boy would be to chase his dream of becoming a sailor. Joseph Conrad was sixteen years old when his uncle had sent him to Marseilles where his career as a sailor could begin.

With Joseph Conrad leaving for Marseilles to become a sailor concludes the first part of his life. Sixteen years old he was still a boy, in a sense that he was dreaming about adventures and explorations. In every other sense he was ready for the next stage of his life. Losing his mother and after that his father, spending most of the time with uncle and other relatives which were rather different than his parents influenced him greatly. Every single person left some kind of a mark on him, and not just persons, but the history of Polish struggles and battles, as well, marked him for life. He left Poland to become a sailor, aware that that was just a temporary career move. He knew that he wanted to write from the time he had spent in Cracow with his father. In Cracow he stated that he writes because he does not know how to

³⁰ Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad. A Life*, 40-41.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

act and express himself in that way. On his way to Marseilles he was on his way to become one of the greatest writers in English language. Joseph Conrad's experience in French merchant navy and in merchant navy of Great Britain gave him, yet another, insight into true nature of imperialism. Insight that will provide future scholars with tremendously important works, among which *Heart of Darkness* stand as one of the most analyzed works in scholarly circles. Those images were just a buildup on what he saw as a child and a young boy in Russian-held and Austrian-held parts of Poland. On his way to France he was on his way on a journey that will create one of the greatest writers.

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