

IN MEMORY OF ANDRZEJ BRAUN

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Andrzej Braun, a poet, prose writer and reporter – one of the most outstanding Polish authors fascinated by the life and works of Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski, died on November 9th, 2008 in Warsaw. Andrzej Braun was born on August 19th, 1923 in Łódź. Both the date and the place of his birth were in many ways significant. His date of birth and his biography let us classify him as one of the “generation of Columbuses” (“pokolenie Kolumbów”). He was a younger friend of Krzysztof Baczyński, Tadeusz Borowski, Jan Strzelecki... At the same time, his home town of Łódź, a multinational and multicultural city, also determined his biography. As he said himself in one of his interviews:

I myself come from a family of Lodzermenschen,¹ as my grandfather was called Heinrich and was a Protestant, while my father had nothing to do with this milieu any more. My mother, née Żylińska, came from the nobility, from a family of former landowners. Our surname played a certain role, however, because in 1939, when Łódź was annexed by the Third Reich, we were all arrested on the eve of November 11th – mass arrests of the intelligentsia took place then; I had a teaching background – my father and many of my uncles were schoolteachers or headmasters.

The writer-to-be spent the occupation period, just like many of his peers, by learning and earning his living; he was also active in the Polish resistance movement, in units of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa). He took part, as a cover, in the assassination attempt against the Nazi official Friedrich Wilhelm Krüger in Krakow; then he was present in the Republic of Pińczów (Republika Pińczowska), the “temporary Republic” (“Rzeczpospolita chwilowa”), as he later called it.

Like many writers who were his peers, such as Jan Józef Szczepański or Leszek Prorok, he was enthralled by Conrad’s writing. In one of his interviews he said: “during the occupation I read Conrad passionately; this was our reading matter...” A certain – and probably not insignificant – role in the shaping of this fascination was played by

¹ “Lodzermensch” (from German) means a specific type of man shaped by the city of Łódź: hard-working, entrepreneurial, and persistent.

a book by Gustaw Morf: *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*, bought in occupied Warsaw at a second-hand stall in Świętokrzyska Street.

After the war, Andrzej Braun's biography became a little complicated. Initially, having witnessed the defeat of the political camp he identified himself with, he became a supporter of social realism and its philosophical background. The consequences of this reorientation were such poetical works as *Wiosna sześciolatki* or *Lewanty*. But soon he broke up with this movement and towards the end of the 1960s became a representative of the political opposition in Polish culture.

An important experience in Braun's biography was travelling to the Far East. He went to Korea with the Polish Red Cross hospital, to China as a *Trybuna Ludu* correspondent and he also visited Vietnam. His fascination with oriental cultures most likely sharpened his interest in Conrad's writing. In the late 1960s Braun followed in his favourite writer's footsteps by travelling to Japan, Indonesia, and Australia. This journey produced press reports, films and two books: the 1970 album *Conrad – dotknięcie Wschodu* (Conrad – the Touch of the East) and the 1972, 700-page *Śladami Conrada* (Following in Conrad's Footsteps).

Later, Braun continued to follow in the footsteps of the author of *Nostromo* in South America. In 1976 he visited Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador, Panama and the Caribbean Archipelago. These explorations brought the 1989 book *Kreacja Costaguany. Świat południowoamerykański Conrada* (The Creation of Costaguana. Conrad's South-American World). As Braun himself wrote in the book: "the author of the present volume continues the trail set by his previous book, *Śladami Conrada* [...], where he also tried to trace the process of the transformation of reality into an artistic work. But whereas there attention was paid to various works, here the focus is on one book only, whose scale, however, exceeds the other works". This book was Conrad's novel *Nostromo*. Braun also wrote essays and critical works, and among them the 1995 volume *Szkoła Conrada* (Conrad's School) deserves particular mention. In this collection Braun included his lesser, but by no means less significant studies dealing with such subjects as the role of Krakow in the future English writer's biography, Conrad's writing philosophy or Conrad the mariner. Also worthy of mention are the essays on authors representing "Conrad's school" – Ernest Hemingway and André Malraux – included in the collection.

However, Conrad was also present in Braun's own literary works. If we read his prose carefully, we can see that he used Conrad's narrative techniques, introducing a "teller" who helped the reader to penetrate the novel's reality – as, for example, in the 1975 novel *Próba ognia i wody* (Ordeal of Fire and Water); he also made references to Conrad's biography and his connections with the mysterious figure of Józef Hieronim Retinger, e.g. in his 1982 novel *Rzeczpospolita chwilowa*. But Braun's affinity with Conrad manifested itself most fully in the way he created his literary characters and their axiology, which was unanimously recognised by critics. The presence of Conrad's subject matter in Andrzej Braun's writing has, however, yet to be analysed.

Towards the end of his life, Braun took it upon himself to paint a literary portrait of his favourite writer. In the short story “Morze Północne” (The Northern Sea) in the 2003 volume *Apogeuum*, Braun depicted an important episode in the life of the author of *The Mirror of the Sea*: during World War I Joseph Conrad decided to serve on an English Q-ship, hunting for German submarines around the coast of the British Isles, which was extremely risky. This is how Braun reconstructed Conrad’s motives for doing so:

He, a sixty-year-old veteran of sailing ships, in this modern armoured war – was he not to take part in this endeavour on a sailing brigantine that had not been used for years? Could his experience be of any use? After all, it mattered, it mattered a great deal. He, an old ex-smuggler of weapons for Don Carlos in Spain or for insurgents in Columbia, was he at this moment to reject such a chance and the permission of the Board of the Admiralty...

Among Andrzej Braun’s merits there was one more which we must not fail to mention: he was one of the main initiators of interest in the life and works of Joseph Conrad in Poland, especially on the Coast. When in 1975 the hitherto modest Conrad Section of the Society of Friends of the Polish Maritime Museum in Gdańsk was transformed into the Polish Conradian Club – Andrzej Braun was elected its chairman. He fulfilled this community service with complete devotion until 1995. It is to Braun’s great credit that the Club existed throughout these troubled times, practically without a break even during the period of martial law in Poland. The Club’s yearly periodical entitled *Informacje* was issued regularly in both Polish and English and enjoyed popularity among Conrad’s fans both in Poland and abroad. Braun published his own articles there and also personally prepared the bibliography of the Polish Conradiana. Later he took an active part in the meetings of the Joseph Conrad Society in Poland, which grew out of the Polish Conradian Club. His last official appearance was during the inauguration of the Joseph Conrad Year in February 2007 at the Royal Castle in Warsaw.

There can be no doubt that many decades of Joseph Conrad’s presence in Poland and people’s interest in this author across the world owe a great deal to the talent, passion and works of Andrzej Braun. We will miss him dearly. May he rest in peace!

Translated by Ewa Kowal

