

IN MEMORIAM ZDZISŁAW NAJDER (1930-2021)

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Zdzisław Najder left us at the beginning of 2021. His loss is immense for the Conradian community all over the world. To us non-Polish scholars who came across his friendly and courteous figure at conferences in France, England or Poland, his name was nearly impossible to pronounce – or we were too afraid of mispronouncing it. So we preferred to call this Lord of Conradian studies, simply and affectionately, Z.

Educated at Warsaw and then at St Anthony's College, Oxford (1959-1969), he got his doctoral degrees in philosophy and Polish literature. His interest as a researcher and a critic fell early on Conrad. As Edward Said put it, "Exile, the strong affinity with French and British culture, the sense of Poland as a place lost to Russian Power, the remorseless effort to keep working and writing in environments less than perfect – these things bind Mr Najder to Conrad [...]." ¹ In 1983, he published a definitive biography, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (Smithmark), and in 2007 a revised edition, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (Camden House), both hailed as a seminal work for whoever will venture in the crowded waters of Conrad studies. This was not the first biography on the Polish-born author, of course. But the very first to provide the Polish background needed to complete Conrad's portrait, with "the discrepancies and contradictions of fact, character and aesthetic laid out starkly, the impossibilities of situation left unadorned, the inexplicable vagaries of career and temperament encouraged to speak for themselves more powerfully than ever before."²

In addition to numerous other publications on Conrad, Najder produced another landmark volume, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity* (Cambridge University Press 1997). Chapter titles like "Lord Jim: a Romantic Tragedy of Honour," "Conrad and Rousseau: Concepts of Man and Society," "Joseph Conrad: a European Writer" suggest indeed the affinities between the critic and his author. For Najder was undoubtedly also a leading figure in the promotion of the idea of Europe throughout his life: at one time, as chief of the Polish language section for Radio Free Europe, and later on in his academic career, when he organised a memorable international conference on Conrad's Europe in Opole (2005). He was also awarded by the French government the high distinction of "Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur" (Knight of the Legion of Honour) in 2005.

There was indeed something knightly in his courtesy, his integrity and the energy with which he stood for his ideas. We admired him for all this, and also for his hu-

¹ Edward Said, "The Remaking of a Writer," *The New York Times*, 11 Dec. 1983.

² Said, "The Remaking of a Writer."

manity: for the simplicity, the sense of sharing, the humour which made him such a friendly colleague and such a jolly companion at conferences and meetings. We have lost you, dear Zdzisław, but for us you still stand, like Conrad's Jim, "at the heart of a vast enigma [...] a tiny white speck that seem[s] to catch all the light in a darkened world."³

³ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, Chapter XXXV.