


VERY DEAR TO ME, KAROL! OR, THE LOST LETTER OF CONRAD

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Abstract: Among the literary works of Joseph Conrad, his letters addressed to close relatives provide much insight into his personal life. These letters seem to be stripped of the embellishments and stylistic devices that would typically aim to shape the reader's image of the author according to certain expectations on part of the recipients. In the case of a letter to his cousin and friend, who had known Conrad since his childhood, there was no need to create a false persona. As a result, it is in these private letters that we are most likely to encounter Conrad, the living person.

Written in Sierra Leone on May 22, 1890, Joseph Conrad's letter to Karol Zagórski provides valuable insight into Conrad as both a man and a Pole. Although the original document is lost, its content is known through the English translation contained in *Joseph Conrad: Life & Letters* (1927) by Georges Jean-Aubry. Based on this letter and a French version in Jean-Aubry's archive, Halina Carroll-Najder re-translated the letter into Polish, published in 1968 by Zdzisław Najder. Carroll-Najder's translation aimed to reflect Conrad's writing style, influencing the fidelity to the original. This article introduces an unknown copy of the letter, discovered in the author's family collection, and examines its provenance, tracing its donation from Conrad's cousin to Jan Szwykowski, director of the publishing house that published Conrad's works. The paper concludes with a transcription of the letter.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Karol Zagórski, translation, lost letter, Congo

Amongst the rich legacy of Joseph Conrad, his letters addressed to close relatives provide certain insight into his personal life. These letters seem to be stripped of the embellishments and stylistic devices that would typically aim to shape the reader's image of the author. In the case of a letter to his cousin and friend, that is the person who had known Conrad since his childhood, there seemed to have been little need to create a false persona. As a result, it is in these private letters that we are most likely to encounter Conrad, the person.

A particularly noteworthy letter is that written at the beginning of his journey to Congo, dated May 22, 1890, in Freetown, and addressed to his cousin, Karol Zagórski. Conrad explains the reasons for his sudden departure from Lublin and describes the preparations for the voyage, expressing his anxiety about the upcoming expedition.

According to Conrad, due to unfavourable conditions and spreading diseases, only 7% of workers are able to complete the three-year contract with the company. Here, Conrad emphasizes that a Polish nobleman's word is a matter of honour, which he must fulfil, especially since he made the commitment willingly.

The end of the letter is particularly interesting since Conrad reveals the reasons behind writing it. The first reason was the pleasure he derived from the brief exchange with his cousin. The second, humorously presented, was the joy Karol would experience in knowing that such an important person had written to him. Conrad suggests that Karol should leave the letter to his children as an inheritance: "Future generations will read it with admiration (and, I hope, with benefit)." The letter concludes with traditional greetings to the close ones and a humorous complaint about a dying lamp.¹

The letter was found in the archive of Aniela and Karola Zagórski, the daughters of Karol Zagórski, the recipient of the letter. It was first published in an English translation in 1927.² In the 1968 collection *Conrad: Letters*, Zdzisław Najder included a second translation of the letter from English to Polish. The translation was done by Halina Carroll-Najder who, in addition to the known English version, also used a French version of the letter found in the archive of Georges Jean-Aubry. She asserts: "Based on the comparison of both the English and French documents, the translator attempted to reconstruct the Polish text, partly by imitating Conrad's style in other Polish letters."³

In 1952, Conrad's *Opowieści wybrane* (Selected Tales)⁴ volume was published by the PAX Publishing Institute, translated by Aniela Zagórska. The director of the publishing house at the time was Jan Szwykowski, a lover of literature and translator – his translations include the widely-known translation of *The Little Prince* – and an avid sailor. After the publication of *Opowieści Wybrane*, Szwykowski received a copy of the newly published book from Karola Zagórska with the following dedication: "To Mr. Jan Szwykowski, sailor, admirer of Conrad the artist and Conrad the man, I send this book with true pleasure. Karola Zagórska, Warsaw, February 1953."

For a long time, no one paid much attention to the book or the dedications. It was not until 2016 that I noticed that, in addition to the dedication, the book contained an inserted letter. Initially, it appeared as an illustration meant to be part of the publication, but the paper used and the careful yet unprofessional application of tape raised suspicions that it could be an original letter from Conrad. Unfortunately, a cursory examination of the handwriting suggests that it is merely a copy. The letter was also accompanied by a comment from Karola Zagórska, explaining the circumstances of the letter's writing and its connection to the content of *Heart of Darkness*.

¹ Joseph Conrad, letter from Freetown of 22.05.1890 to Karol Zagórski, transcript of the manuscript by Karola Zagórska, 1953, Przemysław Rey's family archive.

² Georges Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 126.

³ *Joseph Conrad. Listy*, ed. Zdzisław Najder, trans. Halina Carroll-Najder (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1968), p. 36.

⁴ Joseph Conrad, letter from Freetown of 22.05.1890 to Karol Zagórski, transcript of the manuscript by Karola Zagórska, included in Joseph Conrad, *Opowieści wybrane* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1952) and gifted to Jan Szwykowski. The copy is stored by Przemysław Rey in family archive.

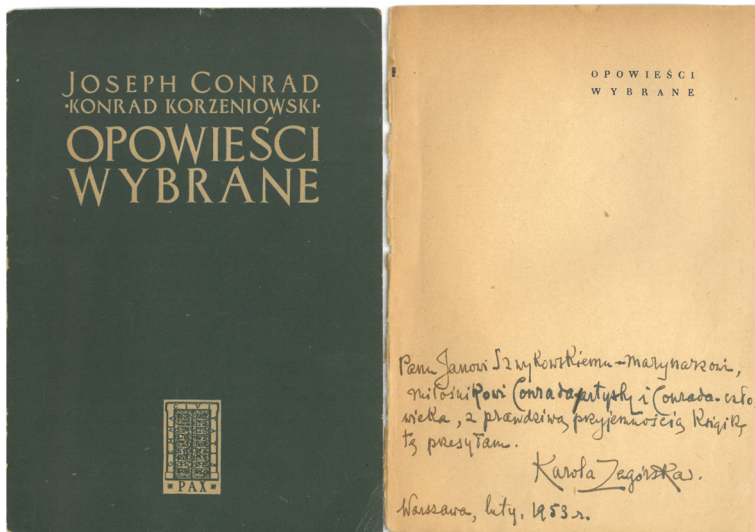


Fig. 1. Aniela Zagórska's dedication to Mr. Jan Szwykowski in: Joseph Conrad, *Opowieści wybrane*, trans. Aniela Zagórska and Anna Niklewicz (Warszawa: Pax, 1952). Przemysław Rey family archive

A few pages later, a note appears next to a photograph of Conrad. "This photograph was taken a few months after his return from Congo in 1891, when Conrad was 34."

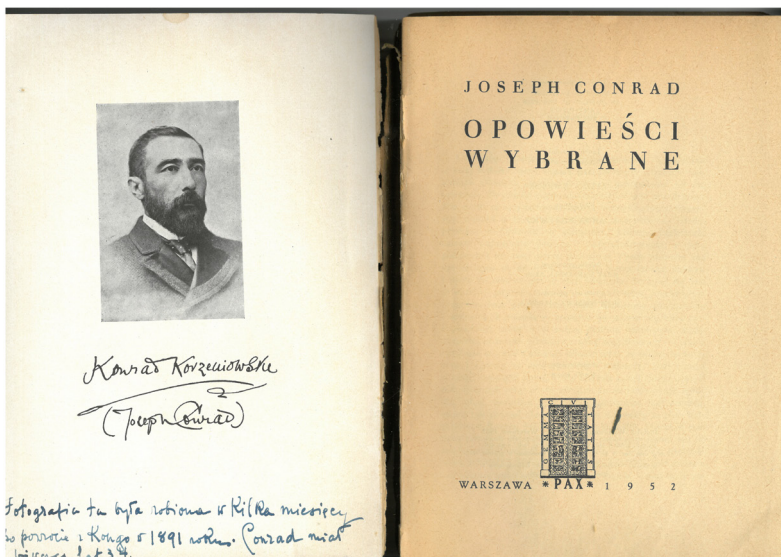


Fig. 2. The note next to a photograph of Conrad in: Conrad, *Opowieści wybrane*. Przemysław Rey family archive

Comparing both versions of the letter, that by Carroll-Najder and the other by Zagórska, it is clear that most differences in the content are of stylistic nature. For example, Carroll-Najder writes: “[...] considering the distinguished person of the undersigned,” which, in Zagórska’s version, reads: “[...] considering how distinguished the person is who writes this autograph.” In principle, the translation does not manage to recreate the exact wording and phrases used by Conrad, but the meaning of the statement has mostly been preserved. What is striking are some rhetorical intensifications that do not appear in either the English version or the presented copy, e.g., “[...] this perspective pleases me very much.” A complete surprise is a passage referring to the French: “In short, only 7% can endure three years of work. That’s a fact! To be honest, these are the French! Des nevroses. (C’est très chic d’être névrosé – one says it with a nasal voice and squints.) Yes, but a Polish nobleman immersed in English tar – that will be a problem! Nous verrons!”⁵ In Karola Zagórska’s version, the statement reads: “In short, it seems that only 7% of their people can uphold a three-year contract [...]. Yes. But in the skin of a British sailor, there lies a Polish nobleman! Nous Verrons!”⁶

This reference to the French does not appear in the English version from 1927. This difference likely stems from the use of the French manuscript by the translator, but the exact data of the contribution remains unclear.

This raises the question of the extent to which a translator’s role is to convey the author’s words as faithfully as possible, and to what degree the translation can be considered an independent work and a personal vision of what the original author intended to write. To some extent, this resembles the actions of the 19th-century French architect, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who sought to restore the original appearance of Gothic buildings. He was so dedicated to this ideal that he often destroyed the original Gothic elements he deemed to be insufficiently Gothic.

The letter has a very clear provenance, which allows it to be considered a reliable source. The fate of the original letter remains a mystery. Did it really disappear during the war? Has it survived only in the form of a copy, or might the manuscript have endured? It is certain that in 1953 Karola Zagórska possessed some version of this letter – either the original or a copy. But even here, further questions arise. What happened to the original letter after Karola Zagórska’s death in 1955? Why was it not included in its original form in the 1965 collection by Najder? One must hope that the letter has survived and will someday be found. Meanwhile, the copy remains, and its accidental discovery should help us better understand, appreciate, and, to some extent, fulfil Joseph Conrad’s wish expressed in the letter, in which he wrote: “I hope that future generations will read it with admiration (and Benefit).”

⁵ *Joseph Conrad. Listy*, p. 36.

⁶ Joseph Conrad, letter from Freetown of 22.05.1890 to Karol Zagórski, transcript of the manuscript by Karola Zagórska, 1953, Przemysław Rey’s family archive.

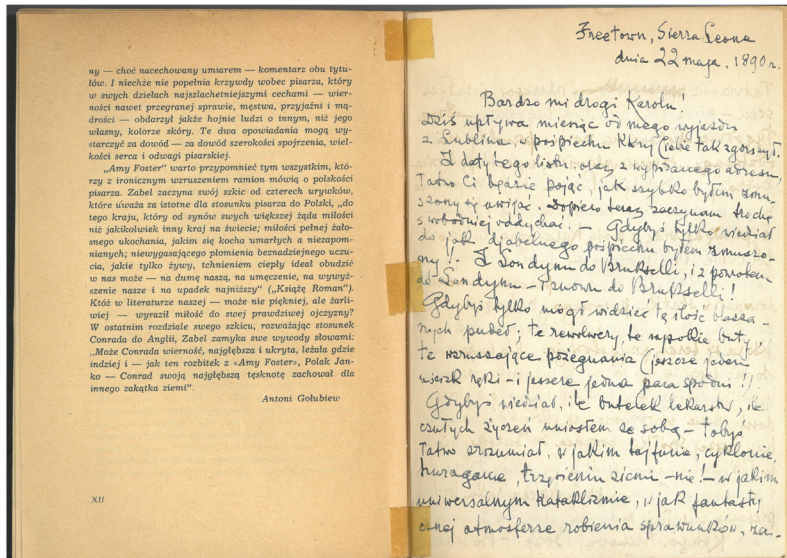


Fig. 3. The translation of Conrad's letter (part 1), in Conrad, *Opowieści wybrane*. Przemysław Rey family archive

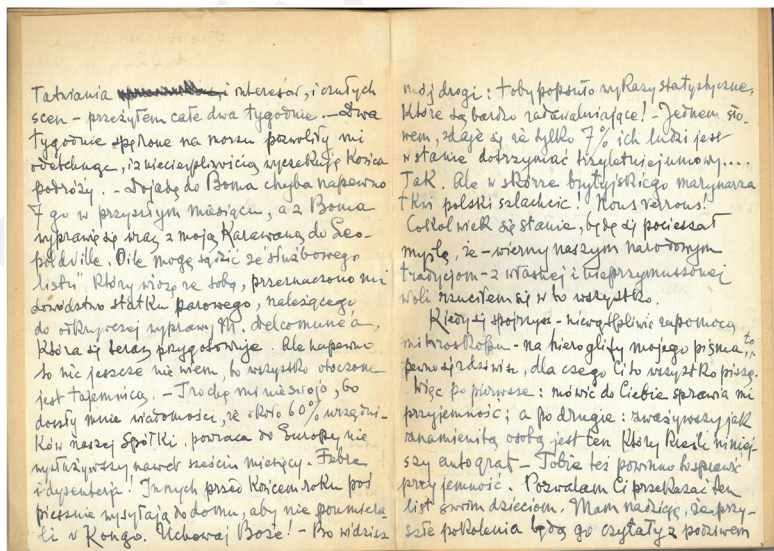


Fig. 4. The translation of Conrad's letter (part 2), in Conrad, *Opowieści wybrane*. Przemysław Rey family archive

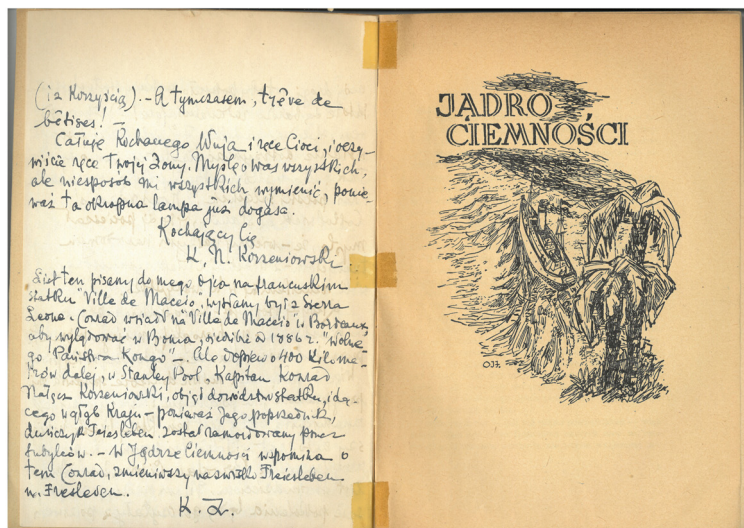


Fig. 5. The translation of Conrad's letter (part 3), in Conrad, *Opowieści wybrane*. Przemysław Rey family archive

The content of the letter transcribed from the handwritten copy by Karola Zagórska, preserving the original spelling, reads as follows:

Freetown, Sierra Leone
dnia 22 maja, 1890 r.

Bardzo mi drogi Karolu!

Dziś upływa miesiąc od mego wyjazdu z Lublina, w pośpiechu który Ciebie tak zgorszył.

Z daty tego listu, oraz z wypisanego adresu łatwo Ci będzie pojąć, jak szybko byłem zmuszony się uwijać. Dopiero teraz zaczynam trochę swobodniej oddychać. Gdybyś tylko wiedział do jak diabelnego pośpiechu byłem zmuszony. Z Londynu do Brukselli, i z powrotem do Londynu – i znowu do Brukselli!

Gdybyś tylko mógł widzieć tę ilość blaszanych pudeł, te rewolwery, te wysokie buty, te wruszające pożegnania (jeszcze jeden uścisk ręki – i jeszcze jedna para spodni!)

Gdybyś wiedział ile butelek lekarstw, ile czułych życzeń uniosłem ze sobą – tobyś łatwo zrozumiał w jakim tajfunie, cyklonie, huraganie, trzęsieniu ziemi – nie! – w jakim uniwersalnym kataklizmie, w jak fantastycznej atmosferze robienia sprawunków, załatwiania [sprawunków i – delectation] interesów, i czułych scen – przeżyłem całe dwa tygodnie. – Dwa tygodnie spędzone na morzu pozwoliły mi odetchnąć, i z niecierpliwością wyczekuje końca podróży. Dojadę do Boma 7 go w przyszłym miesiącu, a z Boma wyprawię się wraz z moją Karawaną do Leopoldville. O ile mogę

sądzić ze „służbowego listu” który wiozę ze sobą, przeznaczono mi dowództwo statku parowego, należącego do odkrywczej wyprawy M. Delecomune’a, która się teraz przygotowuje. Ale napewno to nic jeszcze nie wiem, bo wszystko otoczone jest tajemnicą. – Trochę mi nieswojo, bo doszły mnie wiadomości, że około 60% uczestników naszej spółki powraca do Europy nie odsłużwszy nawet sześciu miesięcy. Febra i dysenteria! Innych przed końcem roku pośpiesznie wysyłają do domu, aby nie poumierali w Kongo. Uchowaj Boże! – Bo widzisz mój drogi: toby popsulo wykazy statystyczne, które są bardzo zadawalające! – Jednym słowem, zdaje się, że tylko 7% ich ludzi jest w stanie dotrzymać trzyletniej umowy... .

Tak. Ale w skórce brytyjskiego marynarza, tkwi polski szlachcic! Nous Verrons! Cokolwiek się stanie, będę się pocieszał myślą, że – wierny naszym narodowym tradycjom – z własnej i nieprzymuszonej woli rzuciłem się w to wszystko.

Kiedy się spojrzysz, niewątpliwie zapomocą mikroskopu – na hieroglify mojego pisma, to pewno się zdziwisz, dla czego Ci to wszystko piszę. Więc po pierwsze: mówić do Ciebie sprawia mi przyjemność; a po drugie: zważywszy jak znamienitą osobą jest ten który kreśli niniejszy autograf – Tobie też powinno to sprawić przyjemność. Pozwalam Ci przekazać ten list swoim dzieciom. Mam nadzieję, że przyszłe pokolenia będą go czytały z podziwem (i z Korzyścią). A tymczasem, *treve de betises!*

Całuję kochanego Wuja i ręce Cioci, i oczywiście ręce Twojej Żony. Myślę o Was wszystkich, ale niesposób miwszystkich wymienić, ponieważ ta okropna lampa już dogasa.

Kochający Cię
K.N. Korzeniowski

List ten pisany do mego Ojca na francuskim statku “Ville de Maceio”, wysłany był z Sierra Leone. Conrad wsiadł na “Villa de Meceid” w Bordeaux, aby wylądować w Boma, siedzibie do 1886 r. “Wolnego Państwa Kongo”. Ale dopiero 400 kilometrów dalej, w Stanley Port, Kapitan Konrad Nałęcz-Korzeniowski, objął dowództwo statku idącego w głąb Kraju – ponieważ Jego poprzednik Duńczyk Freiesleben został zamordowany przez tubylców. – W Jądrze Ciemności wspomina o tem Conrad, zmieniając nazwisko Freiesleben na Fresleven.

K. Z.

In English, the letter reads as follows:

Freetown, Sierra Leone
May 22nd, 1890

Very dear to me Karol,

To-day marks a month since my departure from Lublin – an event accomplished, as you remember, in the haste that scandalized you so much. From the date inscribed above, and the address upon this letter, you will easily divine how relentlessly I have been driven. Only now do I begin to breathe with a measure of freedom. Ah, could

you but imagine the infernal hurry in which I was caught! From London to Brussels – and back again to London – then once more to Brussels!

Had you witnessed the multitude of tin boxes, the revolvers, the tall boots, the tender farewells (one more handshake – and, another pair of trousers!), you would have perceived the madness of those days. The bottles of medicine, the affectionate wishes pressed upon me at parting – all this would have revealed to you the typhoon, the cyclone, the earthquake – no! the universal cataclysm in which I lived for two entire weeks: a fantastic whirl of purchases, business arrangements, and sentimental scenes.

The two weeks spent at sea allowed me to breathe, and I eagerly await the end of the journey. I shall reach Boma on the seventh of next month, and thence proceed with my caravan to Leopoldville. As far as I can judge from the “official letter” which I carry with me, I have been assigned command of a steamship belonging to M. Delecomune’s exploratory expedition, which is now preparing. Yet nothing is certain, for all remains wrapped in secrecy.

I feel a bit uneasy, as I’ve heard rumours that around 60% of our Company’s men return to Europe without serving even six months. Fever and dysentery! The rest, it appears, are sent home in haste before the year is out – lest they die in the Congo and spoil the statistics, which, I am told, are most satisfactory! In short, it seems that scarcely 7% survive to fulfil the three years of their engagement.

Well then – within the skin of a British seaman there dwells a Polish noble! *Nous verrons!* Whatever may come, I shall comfort myself with the thought that, faithful to our national traditions, I have thrown myself into this venture of my own free will.

When you look – undoubtedly with the help of a microscope – at the hieroglyphs of my handwriting, you’ll surely wonder why I’m writing all this to you. First, because it gives me pleasure to speak with you; and secondly, because – considering the distinguished personage who traces this autograph – it ought to afford you some pleasure as well. I allow you to share this letter with your children. I hope that future generations will read it with admiration (and with profit). But meanwhile – *trêve de bêtises!*

I kiss my dear Uncle, the hands of my Aunt, and, naturally, the hands of your good Wife. I think of you all – though it is impossible to name everyone, for this miserable lamp is dying away.

Your affectionate,

K. N. Korzeniowski

This letter, written by Conrad to his father aboard the French steamer “Ville de Maceio,” was dispatched from Sierra Leone. Conrad had embarked at Bordeaux, bound for Boma – the seat, until 1886, of the Congo Free State. Some four hundred kilometres further inland, at Stanley Port, Captain Konrad Nałęcz-Korzeniowski took command of a steamer bound upriver, his predecessor, the Dane Freiesleben, having been murdered by the natives. Conrad refers to this incident in Heart of Darkness, disguising the name as Fresleven.

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