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‘OJCIEC JEST TUTAJ’

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*To the memory of Richard Curle
and friends of my father*

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(Unless otherwise stated the illustrations are from the author's private collection.)

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Preface

Soon after we arrived at the hotel in Vienna in the late afternoon of 9 October 1914 my father asked me to take a message to some Polish friends who were also staying there. He took me into the corridor and said, ‘When you have found their room, knock on the door and say, “Ojciec jest tutaj”’. Now don’t forget, “Ojciec jest tutaj” – it means “father is here”.’

I have not forgotten. The words themselves will not mean much to the many people who admire my father’s works, but over the years of writing down these memories they have acquired a special meaning for me, and I feel that I am in duty bound to include them as a subtitle.

To those who read these reminiscences, which are a true record of the last fifteen years of my father’s life, I can only hope that they will be aware of my father’s presence in these pages.

Neither my mother, my brother nor I ever learnt to speak Polish but I still remember the few words and sentences which my father taught me, and in those words are many recollections of the years that have passed. When I tell an anecdote to friends their response is always ‘Why don’t you write it down?’ Among my many friends, Richard Curle was the most insistent and whenever we met he took me to task, saying, ‘You really ought to write your reminiscences. Get them down on paper. They give a picture of your father that no other person can give. You owe it to your father; he would expect it of you.’

I can recall in my mind’s eye the picture of his room at West Coker, lit by a single bright bulb in a dark shade, as we talked far into the night. In the shadow his figure, reclining in a deep armchair, his face and eyes appearing every now and then when lit by the glow of his cigarette. For a while I was silent then said, ‘Dick, you may laugh at me but many years ago when I realised JC’s position in the world of letters, I decided that I would not intrude into that world. So many

people have written about his work that I feel that any contribution that I may make could well be superfluous.'

He said, leaning forward and gazing into the fire, 'It could be so but then your recollections would be personal, more authentic about your father. You know far more about him as a person and a father than anyone else because you seem to have spent more time in his company, especially in the later years. By time I mean the actual hours and minutes when you were together but of course in "years" you knew him for the shortest time. You have told me a lot about him that I did not know but which I had assumed, and although I knew him well I know him better now. I only knew the family life of a generous host who always made a fuss of me, but now the picture is complete. You know as well as I do that very few books have been written about your father himself. About his books, yes, and we must be very grateful that his work has created so much interest though some of the books, one suspects, were written more for their author's edification than to appraise JC's ability.'

Eventually he persuaded me that I ought to make the effort, and over the years I jotted down various recollections, but it was not until I gave a talk on my father that I cast aside the last lingering doubts. I had never promised JC, and nor had he asked me, to keep quiet. I am convinced that it never occurred to him, not seriously at any rate, that any of us would write about him. He encouraged my mother to write her cookery book but never tried to persuade me to write at any time.

A year or so later I sent my first effort to Richard Curle for criticism and received a long letter of valuable advice pointing out that I had hardly mentioned my father's friends and only referred to himself en passant. He wrote: 'You have chosen an apt title but you must realise that your father's friends are an important part of his life and, while I do not pretend to have influenced him, I am part of that life – an important part if what you have told me is true about your father's references to me.' Dear Dick, he forgave me but I felt even more inadequate for the task and time passed all too quickly. His sudden death in 1968 was a great shock and loss after a friendship which had lasted over fifty years. But time moves on and all that is history now.

A feeling of adventure mixed with trepidation was the sensation that I had when I first put pen to paper to record these recollections. One's inadequacy seems to hover over the blank page, anxiety

flickers on the horizon like summer lightning and doubt lurks in each full stop and comma. Have I the ability to do justice to the subject? Can I justify my father's trust in me?

It is so easy to embroider memories, but I shall try not to do so, from the earliest days in the cottage at Aldington through the years at Capel House, the brief period at Spring Grove and the last four years at Oswalds. I hope I shall be able to convey the interest shown and the companionship given by an understanding and, perhaps, over-generous father, who nevertheless impressed upon me at a very early age that 'I must justify my existence on this earth, be honest with myself and with all men, be confident but not conceited.'

Recalling some fifteen years of memories from the age of three to eighteen it seems logical to arrange them in defined periods of time but not strictly in chronological order within those periods. Also I found it easier to recall the past by dividing my reminiscences into the following intervals:

- Aldington, 1909–10, the infant
- Capel House, 1910–14, the child
- Capel House, 1914–19, the boy
- Spring Grove and Oswalds, 1919–24, the youth

Apart from checking dates in the *Life and Letters* edited by Jean Aubry (2 volumes, Heinemann, London, 1927) I have not read any books about my father's works for a number of years. Nor have I read my brother's book or those by my mother, as I want to record only the events which I remember personally. I shall call attention to events about which I was told in later years but otherwise I shall relate events as I remember them. For a fuller account of the life and work of my father I would refer the reader to Jocelyn Baines's book *Joseph Conrad: a critical biography* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1960), and to Norman Sherry's books, *Conrad's Eastern World* and *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge University Press, 1966 and 1971). From time to time I mention my grandparents and my father's dislike of Russians. The brief explanation is that my grandparents, along with my father, were exiled to Siberia for being involved in protests against the tyranny of the Tsars and the ruling classes, and that my father's mother was brutally forced to travel back to Siberia when she was obviously dying of consumption; orders were given that no mercy should be shown to her or my father and they were sent back to an area where there was no medical attention whatever. For

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further explanation the reader is referred to *Under Western Eyes*, and to two essays by my father 'Autocracy and War' and 'The Crime of Partition' (J. M. Dent and Sons, uniform edition, London, 1921).

I shall refer to my father as JC though I did not address him in this way until much later, about 1920, when we were living at Oswalds. As a child I called him 'Dada' when the need arose but never 'Dad' or 'Father'. My mother would tell me to take things to 'your father' but to me it never seemed a suitable form of address, not that he was aloof or distant (except when annoyed). He was a most approachable person but he expected good manners and had no time for anyone who butted in when other people were speaking.