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Joseph Conrad , Edited by Laurence Davies
Excerpt
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Letters

1861–1893

CHRONOLOGY 1857–1893

3 December (New Style) 1857	Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski, known in childhood as Konradek, born in Berdyczów, then in Russia, now Berdychiv in Ukraine. His parents are Ewa Korzeniowska (née Bobrowska) and Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski.
1859	The family moves to Żytomierz (Zhytomyr), where Apollo writes satirical plays and patriotic poems.
May 1861	Apollo moves to Warsaw to work clandestinely for land reform and Polish independence.
October 1861	Ewa and Konradek join him in Warsaw.
20 October 1861	Apollo arrested for conspiracy against the Russian authorities and imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel; Ewa interrogated about her own and her husband's activities.
9 May 1862	Konradek's parents sentenced to exile; family sent under guard to Vologda, 400 km north-northeast of Moscow.
January 1863	The family permitted to move to Chernikhov (Chernihiv), north of Kiev, where they hear that the insurrection against Russian rule has failed. Konradek starts to learn French and reads Polish Romantic poetry. Apollo works on literary translations from French and English.
18 April 1865 1866	Ewa Korzeniowska dies of tuberculosis. Konradek visits his maternal grandmother Teofila Bobrowska and falls ill; attacks of migraine and epileptic fits continue after his return to Chernikhov.
summer 1867	Konradek taken to Odessa, his first experience of the sea.

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December 1867	His health failing, Apollo granted a Russian exit permit.
February 1868 1869	Apollo and son settle in Lwów (Lviv). Father and son move to Cracow. Apollo dies there on 23 May. Headed by his son, the funeral procession is a show of Polish solidarity.
1870–73	Konrad living with his grandmother in Cracow; is privately tutored and attends St Anne's Gymnasium. His desire to go to sea alarms his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski.
May 1873	Konrad visits Switzerland with his tutor Adam Pulman.
August 1873– September 1874	Konrad back in Lwów.
September 1874	Konrad returns to Cracow; leaves for Marseilles on 13 November. Begins to learn the craft of sailing.
15 December 1874–23 May 1875	Voyage to Martinique in the <i>Mont-Blanc</i> .
25 June–23 December 1875	Now an apprentice in the <i>Mont-Blanc</i> , he sails to Haïti and the French Antilles. On the first or second voyage, visits the seaboard of Colombia and Venezuela.
first six months of 1876	Enjoys the pleasures of Marseilles; perhaps involved with gun-running at the very end of the Third Carlist War.
10 July 1876–15 February 1877 1877	Voyage to the Caribbean as steward in the <i>Saint-Antoine</i> . Konrad involved in one or more love affairs; meets artists and political enthusiasts of all persuasions.
January–March 1878	After gambling away his allowance, bungles a suicide attempt. Uncle Tadeusz travels to France, settles Konrad's debts, and gives out that he was hurt in a duel.
24 April 1878	Konrad ships as a novice seaman in the <i>Mavis</i> , a British steamer bound for the Sea of Azov. Liable for Russian military service, he cannot

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- go ashore. He begins to learn colloquial English.
- 10 June 1878 Makes his first English landfall at Lowestoft; registers at a local hotel as Konrad de Korzeniowski.
- 11 July–23 September 1878 Three coastal voyages to Newcastle as ordinary seaman in the *Skimmer of the Sea*.
- 15 October 1878–19 October 1879 Sails to and from Australia in the *Duke of Sutherland*, spends five months in Sydney as ship's watchman.
- 12 December 1879–30 January 1880 To the Mediterranean and back in the *Europa*.
- 13 January–22 August 1880 Lodges in north London and studies for second mate's certificate, awarded 28 May. Meets Fountaine Hope and Adolf Krieger.
- 22 August 1880–25 April 1881 Ships to Sydney and back as third mate of the *Loch Etive*.
- 19 September 1881–3 April 1883 Second mate of the *Palestine*, a disaster-prone vessel. On March 1883, coal-gas in the hold explodes. The crew take to the boats and reach Bangka Island, off Sumatra.
- late May 1883 JC back in London. In late July, meets his uncle in Marienbad.
- 13 September 1883 Sails as second mate of the *Riversdale* to Madras.
- 15 April 1884 JC discharged in Madras after a set-to with the captain.
- 28 April–16 October 1884 JC second mate of the *Narcissus*, Bombay to Dunkirk.
- 17 November 1884 Fails examination for first mate.
- 3 December 1884 Retakes the exam and passes.
- 27 April 1885–16 June 1886 Second mate of the *Tilkhurst*: sails from Hull to Calcutta and Singapore, loading coal at Penarth, near Cardiff, where he meets the Spiridions; to Dundee on return voyage.
- early summer 1886 Writes a now lost version of 'The Black Mate' for a competition in *Tit-Bits* magazine.

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| 28 July 1886 | Fails the examination for master's certificate. Resits and passes, 10 November. |
| 19 August 1886 | JC becomes a British subject. |
| 28 December 1886–2 January 1887 | Second mate of the <i>Falconhurst</i> ; signs off at Penarth. |
| 18 February–1 July 1887 | First mate of the <i>Highland Forest</i> , Amsterdam to Java; hurt by falling spar and goes to Singapore for treatment. |
| 20? August 1887–4 January 1888 | First mate of the <i>Vidar</i> ; makes four voyages out of Singapore to small ports in Borneo and Celebes (Sulawesi), including Berau, the model for the fictional Sambir. |
| 19 January 1888–late March 1889 | Appointed master of the <i>Otago</i> : travels from Singapore to Bangkok to take command. Voyages to New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Mauritius, where he woos Eugénie Renouf. |
| 14 May 1889 | Back in London; lodges in Pimlico. |
| autumn 1889 | Begins <i>Almayer's Folly</i> . |
| November 1889 | Interviewed in Brussels for a post in the Upper Congo Company's fleet of river steamers. |
| February–April 1890 | JC visits his uncle. Passing through Brussels, sees his dying cousin Aleksander Poradowski and his wife, Marguerite. |
| February 1890 | Mme Poradowska widowed on the 7th. JC begins a correspondence with her from Ukraine. |
| 10 May 1890 | JC sails from Bordeaux for Africa. |
| c. 13 June 1890 | Meets Roger Casement at Matadi. |
| 4 August–14 September 1890 | Serves in the <i>Roi des Belges</i> as first mate and temporary master. Spends four months in all in the Congo. |
| 1 September 1890 | Arrives at Stanley Falls and is stricken with dysentery. |
| January 1891 | Back in London; treated at the German Hospital, Dalston, for malaria, rheumatism, and neuralgia. |
| 21 May–14 June 1891 | In Champel-les-Bains, outside Geneva, for spa treatments. |

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- 21 November 1891–26 July 1893 Two return voyages to Australia as first mate in the clipper *Torrens*. Meets W. H. Jacques, who reads an MS draft of *Almayer's Folly*. On second voyage, meets 'Ted' Sanderson and John Galsworthy.
- August–September 1893 Another visit to his uncle in Ukraine.
- 27 November 1893 JC signs on as second mate of the *Adowa*. From 4 December to 10 January, the ship is docked at Rouen awaiting non-existent orders.

To Apollo Korzeniowski

Letters 1, 3

[23 May 1861]
 [Terechowa]¹

Daddy,

I am fine here, I run about the garden – but I don't like it much when the mosquitos bite. As soon as the rain stops I will come to you. Olutek has sent me a beautiful little whip. Please Daddy dear lend me a few pennies and buy something for Olutek in Warsaw.²

Have you been to see this Bozia, which Granny [told me about]?³

Konrad.⁴

¹ The estate of Conrad's maternal grandmother, Teofila Bobrowska, in the village of Terekhove, near Berdychiv, in present-day Ukraine (the Polish names are Terechowa and Berdyczów). The house itself is now a primary school; next to it is a Conrad museum, started by collective farmers more than half a century ago.

² Apollo Korzeniowski was organising clandestine support for the Red faction of the Polish Nationalists; its members backed land reform as well as independence. Olutek is a diminutive of Aleksander.

³ *Bozia* means 'little God', perhaps referring to a famous crucifix in Warsaw cathedral.

⁴ Because the name evoked patriotic characters in Adam Mickiewicz's narrative poem *Konrad Wallenrod* and his verse drama *Forefathers' Eve*, the family called the boy Konrad (diminutive Konradek) rather than using his other given names, Józef and Teodor. Translated by Najder, this note forms part of a letter from Ewa Korzeniowska (née Bobrowska, 1831–65) to her husband. Since her son was only age 3½, she guided his hand. In 1862, when Apollo Korzeniowski was released after seven months as a prisoner in the Warsaw Citadel, he and his family were sent into exile in Vologda, north-west Russia. While there, another Polish exile photographed Konradek. On the back of the photograph, the boy wrote: 'To my beloved Grandma who helped me send cakes to my poor Daddy in prison – grandson, Pole, Catholic, *szlachcic* – 6 July 1863 – Konrad' (Najder 1964, p. 8). A *szlachcic* is a member of the *szlachta*, a caste of gentry equal with each other not in wealth but pride of ancestry and, before the extinction of Poland as a country, political privilege. In the formerly Polish and

To Stefan Buszczyński*Letters 1, 7*

14th August, 1883.
 Teplitz.

Dear and Honourable Sir,

We had hoped – Uncle Tadeusz¹ and I – that we would be able to meet you here, in Teplitz; but we have learned upon our arrival of your departure.

Therefore, being unable personally to remind you of myself and to obtain your indulgence for all my faults, I hasten to do so in writing, enclosing my photograph, in the hopes that in memory of the friendship for the father the son will find a friendly remembrance, and for his letter – even after such a long silence – a kind reception.

Although I have been long away from my country and apparently forgetful of those whose favour I once experienced, I have never, in fact, forgotten either the country, the family, or those who were so kind to me – amongst whom, dear Sir, my guardian when I was orphaned, you must take the first place.

I, therefore, permit myself to ask you to remember me to dear Kostuś² – if I may venture to call him thus. True! I have given him every reason to forget the friendly relations between us in Cracow: – I shall never forget them although they seem so long ago! Perhaps he too will be good enough to remember those old days, and will accept from me my heartfelt good wishes and a friendly embrace.

I am leaving here for London in a few days; from there I do not know where fate will take me. During the last few years – that is since my first examination,³ I have not been too happy in my journeyings. I was nearly drowned, nearly got burned,⁴ but generally my health is good, I am not short of courage or of the will to work or of love for my profession; and I always remember what you said when I was leaving

Lithuanian lands of Central and Eastern Europe, about 10 per cent of the population belonged to this class (Najder 2007, pp. 3–4).

¹ Tadeusz Bobrowski (1829–94), Conrad's maternal uncle, guardian, and benefactor. They were spending a month at the spas of Teplitz and Marienbad (in Czech, Teplice and Karlovy Vary).

² Stefan Buszczyński's son Konstanty, who was one year older than Conrad.

³ For second mate, on 1 June 1880.

⁴ Conrad's wretched stint as second mate of the *Palestine* ended when her cargo of coal caught fire off Sumatra; on 14 March 1883 the crew had to abandon ship. He based 'Youth' on this experience.

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Cracow: ‘Remember’ – you said – ‘wherever you may sail you are sailing towards Poland!’

That I have never forgotten, and never will forget!

In the hope that my sins will be forgiven me, and commending myself to your kind memory, I remain, with affection, gratitude, and the highest regards,

Your humble servant,
 Konrad N. Korzeniowski.

To Józef Spiridion

Letters 1, 12

13th Oct^{er} 1885.
 Singapore –

My Dear Sir.

I need not tell you with what great pleasure I received Your kind and friendly letter. I am exceedingly glad to know that your father, Yourself, and your family are all well – and that Your holiday was a success. –

I also gratefully acknowledge the receipt of the “Daily Telegraph.” The Liberal gov^t was defeated on the budget vote a day or so before our departure from Penarth; as soon as we arrived here I looked anxiously t[h]rough the papers expecting great things.¹ Although somewhat disappointed, I saw with pleasure the evidence of improved relations with Germany; the only Power with whom an Anti-Russian alliance would be useful – and even possible – for Great Britain. – No wonder that in this unsettled state of affairs politics – at least foreign politics – are slightly dull. Events are casting shadows – more or less distorted – shadows deep enough to suggest the lurid light of battle-fields somewhere in the near future, but all those portents of great and decisive doings leave me in a state of despairing indifference; for, whatever may be the changes in the fortunes of living nations, for the dead there is no hope and no salvation! We have passed t[h]rough the gates where “*lasciate ogni speranza*”² is written in letters of blood and fire, and now the gate is shut on the light of hope and nothing remains for us but the darkness of oblivion. In the presence of such national

¹ Gladstone’s Liberal government was defeated on 9 June, but a general election could not be held until November. Conrad hoped for a Conservative victory, as did Spiridion, who lived in Cardiff, just a few miles from the great coal docks of Penarth.

² ‘Abandon all hope [you who enter here]’: words inscribed on the gates of Dante’s Hell (*Inferno*, III, 9). Though Welsh-born, Spiridion shared Conrad’s grief over the condition of Poland, divided as it was among three empires.

misfortune, personal happiness is impossible in its absolute form of general contentment and peace of heart. Yet I agree with you that in a free and hospitable land even the most persecuted of our race may find relative peace and a certain amount of happiness – materially at least; consequently I understood and readily accepted your reference to “Home.” When speaking, writing or thinking in English the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain. –

We are almost discharged but our loading port is as yet uncertain. At any rate I hope to be in England some time in July, when You may depend – I shall gladly avail myself of your kindness and run down to Cardiff to see You all. As soon as my exam: is over I shall be at liberty.¹ I had a letter from my uncle, but he does not say if we could arrange an interview in Germany next year as we contemplated. –

Accept a hearty handshake with many thanks for your kindness, and believe me my dear Sir,

Yours very faithfully,

Conrad N. Korzeniowski

To your father my dutiful respects. I am so glad to hear of His better health. My compliments for Mme Kliszczewska² and greetings for the boys. –

We are ordered to Calcutta. Agents: Finlay, Muir and C^o We leave in 10 days and shall arrive there about end Nov^{er}.

To Józef Spiridion

Letters 1, 15

19th December, 1885

Calcutta.

My Dear Sir:

I received your kind and welcome letter yesterday, and to-day being Sunday, I feel that I could not make better use of my leisure hours than in answering your missive.

¹ Conrad took (and failed) an examination for his master's certificate on 28 July 1886; he succeeded at a second attempt, on 10 November 1886.

² His father was Władysław Spiridion Kliszczewski (for his eventful life, see Conrad's Correspondents under JÓZEF SPIRIDION); Józef's wife is called here by her Polish married name. The family had adopted the baptismal name Spiridion, less likely to baffle their neighbours and the customers at their clock-making and regalia business in Cardiff.

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By this time, you, I and the rest of the “right thinking” have been grievously disappointed by the result of the General Election.¹ The newly enfranchised idiots have satisfied the yearnings of Mr. Chamberlain’s herd by cooking the national goose according to his recipe.² The next culinary operation will be a pretty kettle of fish of an international character. Joy reigns in St. Petersburg, no doubt, and profound disgust in Berlin: the International Socialist Association are triumphant, and every disreputable ragamuffin in Europe feels that the day of universal brotherhood, despoliation and disorder is coming apace, and nurses day-dreams of well-plenished pockets amongst the ruin of all that is respectable, venerable and holy. The great British Empire went over the edge, and yet on to the inclined plane of social progress and radical reform. The downward movement is hardly perceptible yet, and the clever men who started it may flatter themselves with the progress; but they will soon find that the fate of the nation is out of their hands now! The Alpine avalanche rolls quicker and quicker as it nears the abyss – its ultimate destination! Where’s the man to stop the crashing avalanche?

Where’s the man to stop the rush of social-democratic ideas? The opportunity and the day have come and are gone! Believe me: gone for ever! For the sun is set and the last barrier removed. England was the only barrier to the pressure of infernal doctrines born in continental back-slums. Now, there is nothing! The destiny of this nation and of all nations is to be accomplished in darkness amidst much weeping and gnashing of teeth, to pass through robbery, equality, anarchy and misery under the iron rule of a militarism* despotism! Such is the lesson of common sense logic.³

¹ Liberals 335, Conservatives 249, Irish Nationalist Party (Parnellites) 86: the Parnellites, who had been playing the two British parties against each other, thus held the balance of power.

² In 1885, the year before he deserted the Liberals, Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) had, as president of the Board of Trade, steered the Third Reform Bill through Parliament. Passage of the bill ensured the principle of one man, one vote; it also enfranchised two million new voters in Great Britain and half a million in Ireland, bringing the total electorate to over four million. The language of this letter echoes Thomas Carlyle’s essay ‘Shooting Niagara: And After?’, his belligerent response to the Second Reform Bill, 1867.

³ The Conservatives formed a minority government; Gladstone led the Liberals; the two Socialist candidates in London constituencies scraped together 59 votes between them.