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# Introduction

Let me start from the very beginning, or *ab ovo*, to explain how fate decided that I would become an English scholar. The study of the English language (and culture) was not, in the King Batory grammar school in Warsaw, my favourite subject. During the first two years, English was taught by an elderly lady, brought up and educated in the United States, but she was not a linguist and knew little about the methods of teaching a foreign language. She strictly followed the textbook and loved teaching us English and American songs. We sang *Jingle Bells* and *If I had a Hammer* with gusto: we thought it was better than memorizing the forms of irregular verbs. My favourite subjects in that school were Polish, history, and very attractive arts classes conducted by a charismatic scholar, Tadeusz Szadeberg, creator of the statue of King Batory which graces the courtyard of our school. Luckily, in our third year, English classes were taken over by a strict but wonderful teacher, Wanda Rutkowska, author of many English textbooks and a great expert in the field of ToEFL. Remember, it all happened in the 1960s, before well designed and nicely illustrated British and American textbooks became available in Poland, before English courses developed, and before texts recorded by native speakers appeared on Polish television. Even LPs with language courses were hard to get. But it is important to remember the attraction of the 1960s, when teenagers raved about the pop music and pop groups of those years: The Animals, The Beatles, Cream, The Doors, The Rolling Stones. We learnt the lyrics by heart, and some of us even tried to play and sing them. Needless to say, there was an ongoing battle between us students and the teachers about hairstyles and fashions.

I now need to take a step back to the time I was fifteen and my elder brother Witek was seventeen. He was getting ready for his entrance examinations to the Department of Architecture. His choice was in a sense a natural one: he was good at maths, and could draw and paint beautifully. It wasn't easy to get a place at the Department of Architecture in those days. There were entrance exams in drawing and maths, and candidates were expected to submit a portfolio of their designs and watercolours. There were more than a dozen candidates for each place. Our father was an architect, and most of his friends were interior designers, builders and architects. Our aunt Hania was also an architect and interior designer. We loved her because she was an excellent skier and often took

us skiing. Her boyfriend Jerzy Chylewski was also an architect and painter. Later on, when Witek was already a student of architecture, he met his future wife, Bożenna, who also studied there: we were a family of architects! The only exception was my mother, Seweryna Szmaglewska, who was a writer. She wrote several books about her experiences during the Second World War, including *Smoke over Birkenau*, but she was also quite successful as a writer of books for kids, for instance *Black Feet*.

So here I am, 16 years old and quite uncertain what I'd like to be in future. It was important to get ready for entrance exams, to take extra courses and take part in competitions. One day over Sunday breakfast my parents asked me about my preferences: 'What subject would you like to study, Jacek?' Without a second thought I said, 'architecture,' and they exclaimed, 'No! We have too many architects in this family already, you must choose something else!' A few days later my brother brought a booklet which alphabetically listed all the universities and all possible subjects. Before *Architecture* there was *Anglistyka (English Studies)*, and everybody exclaimed, "Right! This is just right for you, you are good at English, you like Polish and history!" But I wasn't sure: it's one thing to get good grades in English (after just two years of study at school) and quite another to read English and American literature in the original, to attend lectures, classes and seminars, all conducted in English. All the semester papers and then the MA paper had to be written in English. Some of the students had attended schools abroad; they were like native speakers. I hesitated...

Fortunately, during summer holidays in Yugoslavia when I was 16, I met Lizzie, a lovely English girl, red-haired and freckled. We played volleyball together, went for long swims in the sea and long walks along the beach, talking all the time. She and her elder brother were wonderful pals for me and my brother. It all happened because Lizzie's father, an ex-officer in the Royal Air Force who trained Polish pilots during the war, recognized the Polish language and encouraged his kids to make friends with a couple of rather bored Polish boys. She, a pupil at a good grammar school in Oxford, turned out to be a wonderful and patient teacher. We became pen friends, and over the next two years we exchanged hundreds of long letters about anything and everything. For me it was an easy way to improve my English while getting ready for entrance exams (which were both written and oral). What may seem incredible is that, after more than half a century, we are still in touch, writing letters and meeting quite regularly in Poland or in Scotland, where she now lives with her family. My children and grandchildren are friends with her children and grandchildren, we have the same hobbies (travelling, bird watching and ecology), we love the same games (scrabble, crossword puzzles, and bananas), and writing limericks. From time to time we are guests in her cottage on Shieldaig Bay on the north-west coast of Scotland, and they come to stay in our cottage on the Bug River. If I passed the entrance exams with flying colours two years later, it was all her doing.

I can't remember the exam itself. There must have been tests of grammar, some listening comprehension and some reading comprehension. I went on to the oral exam

in which the strict Head of the Department, Professor Grzegorz Sinko, asked me about the Battle of Britain. Arkady Fiedler's books, fragments of Winston Churchill's *History of the Second World War*, which we read with Mrs Rutkowska, and Lizzie's father's tales about Polish pilots from squadrons 303 and 307 proved enough—the professor nodded his head, and I felt I had done quite well. It took quite a long time to get the final results: the system of extra points for kids from working-class families complicated the procedure immensely. So, with a few friends I went to the seaside, and on the very day of my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday I received a telegram from home, with congratulations.

In the summer of 1967, the Institute of English Studies was moving from its temporary premises at Traugutt Street, which is next door to the Holy Cross Church, to a fairly small but very attractive old building called the Czetwertyński residence, close to the main entrance to the university campus. The move was supervised by Professor Sinko himself. In the first few days of September all the students were invited to arrive (with rucksacks!) to help transfer the Institute's book collection to the new library. Ms Basia, the head librarian, was in charge at the Traugutt Street end, and the Czetwertyński end was run by Ms Marysia (called Myszka, or 'little mouse' by all the students—she was such a lovely, friendly lady). We went round and round, carrying all those dictionaries, anthologies of English and American literature, and loads of rather tired textbooks, while Basia and Myszka were trying to make sure that all those precious sources of academic knowledge found their place on the library shelves, A to Z. We carried hundreds of books, wondering if we were supposed to read them all in five years of study.

I can't remember my first inauguration day in October 1967. There were so many later academic ceremonies when I was a student, then a Ph.D. student, and then a teacher for almost half a century (several years as Dean of the Department of Modern Languages). There must have been the President's address in the huge hall of Auditorium Maximum, professors and deans with sceptres and chains, wearing black gowns and mortarboards, as well as *Gaudeamus* and *Gaude Mater Polonia*, sung beautifully by the University choir. There were the first meetings with colleagues, most of them girls—in those years English studies were supposed to be attractive to women who wanted to become teachers. Each student group had only one or two boys. Student books (little booklets listing all the courses, and all our credits and grades—this explanation is addressed to students born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!) were ceremoniously handed to us all in the very modern but very ugly building of the Department of Modern Languages in Browarna Street, close to the river. Last year this eyesore was replaced by a functional and rather pretty, green and yellow edifice, 40.000 square metres, where (after years of wandering) all the sections of the Department, including English studies, found their place. I am happy to say that the new building had been designed by my partner and soul mate, Professor Ewa Kuryłowicz.

It was great fun to be a student during the sixties and the early seventies. All our classes and seminars were taught in the Czetwertyński building, main University campus, while

for the lectures we just had to walk a hundred paces across the campus to Auditorium Maximum. Between lectures and classes we often spent time together in Harenda, a nice coffee bar close to University, and very close to the famous statue of Copernicus. From time to time we could also afford coffee and cake at the Bristol Hotel—it seems impossible today, with their prices, but fifty years ago students of English could earn decent money teaching English courses or giving private lessons. It is perhaps hard to imagine it today, but in those years everybody or almost everybody was a smoker! The stench of cigarette smoke surrounded us everywhere, not only in bars, cafes and restaurants, but also in the corridors and staircases of university buildings. Once a week all the male students, dressed up in ancient-looking green uniforms, had to take part in military training—we were supposed to rise to the rank of second lieutenants before we graduated.

What I remember best are lectures in the history of English literature conducted by Professor Sinko. At his disposal he only had a lectern, a blackboard and some chalk—no PowerPoint or Prezi—but he managed to take us on magical mystery tours of Shakespeare's theatre in 16<sup>th</sup> century London, or Dickens's Victorian England. He had something that we often called yeast: he inspired us with his knowledge, and after each lecture we rushed to the University library, or the marvellous library of the British Institute, hoping to study all the sources which he recommended: texts, critical commentaries and books of essays before the next lecture in seven days' time. I also remember excellent history of Britain lectures taught by Professor Jan Kieniewicz, and American literature courses taught by his sister, Doctor Teresa Kieniewicz. I was not very keen on courses in linguistics, methodology or teacher training, but with a little bit of help from my colleagues and their lecture notes, I was able to make it.

The M.A. seminar in English literature, four semesters in our fourth and fifth years of study, was conducted by our favourite teacher, Professor Sinko. Working with him was a privilege and a pleasure, but he surprised us all in our first meeting when he said that this time, instead of poetry, fiction or drama, we were all going to examine several somewhat neglected genres of non-fiction writing, often referred to by theoreticians of literature Czesław Nideziński and Roch Sulima as literature of fact. So, instead of poems, plays, short stories or novels, we were going to focus on genres of writing which are less often analysed but still terribly important in English literature: chronicles, travel writing, reportage, memoirs, diaries, collections of letters, autobiographies, even histories, biographies and newspaper columns. We were not very happy about it, but in our next meeting we were given a list of subjects to choose from, for instance: Lord Byron's letters; William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* as a political pamphlet; Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*; Winston Churchill as the author of historical books, parliamentary speeches and journalism; Elizabeth Gaskell as the author of biographies; George Orwell as a political and social writer in books like *The Road to Wigan Pier* and as a war correspondent in *Homage to Catalonia*; T.E. Lawrence as a war correspondent and memoirist

in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; Virginia Woolf as an essay writer, and so on; the list seemed to have no end. A good friend of mine ended up writing his M.A. paper on Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* as a philosophical essay. In the end I was assigned Axel Munthe's famous book *The Story of San Michele*, a huge international bestseller, translated into 25 languages. Munthe, physician to the Swedish royal family and one of the early practitioners of psychoanalysis, fused elements of autobiography with essays about psychology, essays about natural history, anecdotes about famous people he met, philosophical prose in the shape of his dialogues with himself, and concluded with the story of his summer residence on the island of Capri. Professor Sinko helped me with the logical and lucid arrangement of the whole apparently chaotic matter, with defining all the diverse sub-genres, and answering the difficult question of how Munthe's interesting and remarkable life story had been converted into a fascinating work of literature.

After graduation I faced the choice of becoming a teacher of English in one of the grammar schools in Warsaw or discovering some alternative, for instance working for one of the publishing firms, Czytelnik or PIW, which specialised in publishing foreign fiction in translation. I finished a course in editing organized by the Association of Polish Publishers, and a course for translators of literature organized by Polish Writers' Union, conducted by eminent Polish translators Bronisław Zieliński, Anna Przedpeńska-Trzeciakowska, Jerzy Sito, Maciej Słomczyński and many others. One of the participants was the late Anna Kołyszko, my colleague from the Institute of English Studies, who went on to become one of the very best translators of the younger generation. There was a series of lectures on the theory and practice of literary translation, and translation workshops. I suppose we learnt most from Waclawa Komarnicka, who was at that time working on her translation of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles. She asked us to translate several passages in the novel, and then we compared our versions. Her critical comments highlighted silly errors, awkward phrases and fairly frequent cases of guesswork and conjecture, but she also encouraged us to comment on her own translations. Even after the course was officially over, she made her home in Mokotów a sort of consultation centre for young translators. Years later, when I was translating critical essays and other stuff for the literary monthly *Literatura na świecie*, I often asked her to look through and improve my texts.

The first year after graduation was a time of hesitation and uncertainty for me, but fortunately just a couple of months after my M.A. exam, the University started recruiting for three-year Ph.D. courses, and I applied immediately. The stipend was very modest, but with a little help from my parents and some extra money from teaching English courses, I was able to make ends meet. I did not mention this before, but three times during my studies I managed to spend my long summer holidays, July to September, in London. I always stayed with my very special friends, Harry and Cindy, who had a large flat in the Irish district of Kilburn. Another friend, Geoff, a Ph.D. student at University College,

London, was somehow always able to find me lucrative employment, working for his parents' friends. Most often I worked as a decorator and carpenter. From Kilburn, via the famous Abbey Road and passing the famous recording studio, I could reach Hampstead, Belsize Park and other attractive NW3 districts in about fifteen minutes. A hard-working Polish decorator could easily earn quite a lot of money in a short time, so that the rest of the holiday, August and September, was spent sightseeing and travelling. I often went to Oxford, where Lizzie's parents had a lovely house in Boars Hill, or to Northumberland, where I had friends, English musicians and painters and weavers who studied in Warsaw in the 1970s, or to Eastbourne, a resort on the south coast, where I visited families of Polish veterans of the Battle of Britain.

My Ph.D. studies started in 1973, half a century ago. There were half a dozen linguists and half a dozen literature people. The seminars in literature were conducted by two eminent professors, Irena Dobrzycka (an expert on the Victorian novel) and Wanda Krajewska (English poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). They both published important work on Dickens, and also on Byron and other English romantic poets, as well as William Butler Yeats. We were surprised when they encouraged us to choose our own topics for our dissertations. I expressed my interest in books written by participants of the Great War: Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Frederic Manning, Richard Aldington and several others, and they both encouraged me to go ahead with my research. I managed to get in touch with British experts in this field and study their seminal publications: Bernard Bergonzi (*Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*), Jon Stallworthy (editor of *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*), and Jon Silkin (*Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*). I had the honour of meeting them in person and asking their advice during my summer sojourns in England. They all became, later in my academic life, great friends and mentors. To my great surprise, Bergonzi even agreed to send parcels of books (from Warwick University Library!) to Warsaw, but I had to give my word of honour that they would all be returned without fail.

Ph.D. seminars and consultations with our professors was one thing, but we were also encouraged to attend lectures in philosophy (Professor Tadeusz Płuzański), structural linguistics (Professor Adam Weinsberg) and history (Professor Henryk Samsonowicz). What I remember best is a wonderful series of lectures (with slides and tours of the National Gallery) conducted by Professor Jan Białostocki. Whenever and wherever I travel, whether it is one of the European capitals, or cities like New York, San Francisco or Kansas City, I always remember to visit their galleries and museums, looking for the masterpieces which Professor Białostocki chose for his analyses.

During my third year of Ph. D. studies my supervisor whispered in my ear that if I was seriously thinking about becoming a lecturer or assistant in the English literature section, I should finish writing my dissertation before the summer holidays, and that I should try to gain some teaching experience. I took part in literature exams, and my

good colleagues in the Institute, Wanda Rulewicz, Marylka Jędrzejkiewicz and Andrzej Weseliński invited me to attend and then teach some of the courses. I enjoyed that very much. The only obstacle was that in Poland before the fall of communism all employment, even in academia, was controlled by the state. By happy chance, a colleague from the literature section, on a scholarship in Britain, chose not to return, and so one opening was waiting for me!

I loved working with students, teaching courses in British literature, and then MA seminars. Several of my best students went on to write their Ph.D. dissertations, and today they are young professors in several Polish universities. In the 1990s there emerged considerable new freedom in academic curricula, allowing us to teach selective courses in subjects which interested both the instructor and the students. I was particularly fond of lecturing in the history of English literature (15 lectures in every semester), and I was the first teacher in the Institute to make the most of PowerPoint presentations: each 90-minute lecture was accompanied by a considerable number of slide shows with important definitions, fragments of analysed texts, quotations from eminent critics, portraits of famous writers, reproductions of paintings—all this was meant to animate the lecture and to keep the lecturer from digressing too much! Before each examination period my students gained access to the presentations, including my remarks and annotations which conveyed the gist of each lecture.

After ten years of work as assistant lecturer there came the time for my post-doctoral dissertation. It was a fairly large work (well over 300 pages long), entitled *Mars and the Muse: Attitudes to War and Peace in 20<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature*, including sections on the Great War, the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. I mostly wrote it during my two research sojourns in Britain and the States, conferring with eminent critics, Bergonzi, Silkin and Stallworthy. At Princeton University I attended a course of lectures on the subject of war literature offered by a leading expert in the field, Professor Samuel Hynes, who became one of the reviewers of my book, published by Warsaw University Press in 1988. A kind of by-product of my ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) scholarship was a collection of essays, *The Great Crusade: American Literature of the First World War*, 1995.

The subject of war literature kept my attention over those years around the beginning of the new millennium. My next book, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2009, was a detailed study (350 pages long!) of the life and work of Edward Thomas, literary critic, nature writer and poet, who died, as a Royal Artillery officer, in the spring of 1917, on the very first day of the Arras offensive. The book, entitled *Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England*, was spruced up (after all, it was going to be published in Britain) by a very good friend of mine, Professor Desmond Graham of Newcastle University, poet and translator of Polish poetry into English, so I want to take this opportunity and acknowledge his generous help.

The subject of war literature is fascinating, but in the end it proved to be rather depressing, so in the last few years I decided to move back in time, more or less 200 years. I focused on the amazing biography and oeuvre of a forgotten Romantic poet, John Clare, who enjoyed his first and rather stunning success with the publication of his first two volumes of poetry, entitled *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, 1820, and *Village Minstrel*, 1821. What is amazing about Clare is that he was born into a family of very simple, poor and illiterate landless peasants. All the very basic education he received was just a few years in the local Sunday school, but he went on to educate himself by reading the most important English poets, from Shakespeare to Milton to the great 18<sup>th</sup> century poets like Thomas Gray, James Thomson and Edward Young. He went on to write a tremendous number, thousands, of beautiful poems, but fame was short-lived, and he ended up, when he was only 44 years old, in a lunatic asylum where he spent more than a quarter of a century, but he went on writing! My first publication on Clare was an introductory essay for *Literatura na świecie*, 2012, in a double issue devoted to English Romanticism. The editor in chief of the monthly, Piotr Sommer, persuaded me to write my study of Clare's poetry in Polish, since there is quite a lot about him by English, American and even Canadian critics, but nothing in Polish. I said fine, I will, but there is the obvious difficulty: there are just a few poems by Clare translated by Zygmunt Kubiak and Juliusz Żuławski, one or two more by Stanisław Barańczak, and fifteen more translated beautifully by Zbigniew Machej for *Literatura na świecie*. I ended up translating more than a dozen poems myself, including the marvellous *Badger*, which are presented and analysed in my book. Entitled *John Clare: an unknown romantic poet*, it is ready for the printing press, provided that the Polish Science Foundation finds it acceptable, so fingers crossed!

I want to end this rather chaotic commentary on my half-century as an English scholar (counting from the time I graduated from the Institute of English Studies) by sending a warm greeting to all my former students and colleagues at Warsaw University and SWPS University. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023 English studies at Warsaw University celebrated its one hundred years anniversary. We met in a brand-new building of the Department of Modern Languages. We met old colleagues and new students. We heard the Rector's address and talked about the past. We enjoyed a concert of English Baroque Music and took part in a celebratory banquet. I am sure English studies have a wonderful future in Polish universities.

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## **Major publications:**

1. *Mars and the Muse: Attitudes to War and Peace in 20th Century English Literature*, a post-doctoral dissertation, Warsaw University Press, 1990.
2. *The Great Crusade: American Literature of the First World War*, Warsaw University Press, 1995.
3. *Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
4. *The Poetry of John Clare*, work in progress, ready for publication in 2023.