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Organon 31, 286-293

2002

Artykuł umieszczony jest w kolekcji cyfrowej Bazhum, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych tworzonej przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego.

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie ze środków specjalnych MNiSW dzięki Wydziałowi Historycznemu Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

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Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski (U. S. A.)

ON HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ'S AMERICAN TRAIL

America has always attracted enterprising people. Some have come here looking for freedom, some – for bread, quite a few motivated by their intellectual curiosity. British, Irish, French, Italian, Polish, Czech and many others, all of them flocked to those shores with hope, and only a few left disappointed. Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), who was just about to become Poland's most popular novelist, spent two happy and carefree years in this country, between March 1876 and March 1878, travelling, exploring, hunting, and of course, writing. In a letter to a friend, dated Santa Ana Mountains in November 1876, he said: *All I can tell you is that I am feeling so well here that if I were given a promise of eternal life I wouldn't spend it anywhere but here.* More than twenty years later, in April 1898, he wrote to his American translator Jeremiah Curtin: *After finishing The Teutonic Knights I will rest for a year, and occupy myself entirely with correspondence dealing with America, for I have a true and deep feeling for that country and its people.* The American episode left indelible impression on his creative mind, a legacy certainly worth closer investigation.

That episode started in Warsaw, a city totally subjugated to the cruel Russian rule: there were no Polish schools but heavy political censorship – an atmosphere of gloom and despair prevailed after the suppression of the 1863 uprising against the Russians, brutally smashed by the tsarist authorities. The most famous actress of that period, Helena Modrzejewska, and a group of creative people in her company, conceived of the idea of emigrating to the United States and establishing there an artistic colony modeled on a famous Brook Farm community in New England fifty years before. Sienkiewicz, a promising young reporter, decided to go first, allegedly to cover the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia for his newspaper *Gazeta Polska*, but in fact scouting for the entire group of would-be pioneers. Once in the United States, he did not even bother to go to the *City of Brotherly Love*, and set out on a trip West as soon as he arrived. His goal was a small town of Anaheim, California (the site of Disneyland today) where they decided to follow the successful example of some German colonists (*Campo Aleman*, as the locals called it), and to start the Polish colony on the Pacific. He rented a fairly large house, and when the entire party joined him in late September 1876, everybody seemed to be ready for an American adventure. Fortunately or not, it turned

out that none of them was made for farming, and the project faltered shortly after it had begun. Mrs. Modrzejewska, determined to remain on stage, joined an American theatrical company, and as Helena Modjeska ruled the American theatrical scene for the next twenty years. Sienkiewicz went on writing, sending his journalistic reports, called *Letters from Travels in America* to his paper, and working on some fiction; others decided to return to Poland and their previous artistic careers. But those two years in California were a bonus for both, the American stage, and Polish literature respectively. This period has become the subject of a recent novel *In America* (1999), written by Susan Sontag, unfortunately with some major distortions of facts and malicious presentations of some characters, thinly disguised under fictitious names.

My interest in Sienkiewicz began quite early – as a boy I read his historical Trilogy many times over, and I knew it almost by heart. It was a fascination typical for many Polish teen-agers of my generation that found in Sienkiewicz's writings not only patriotic inspiration, but also many role models to follow, as later on, during World War II, they did. When imprisoned in a Soviet P. O. W. camp in 1944 I happened to have on me a pocket edition of *With Fire and Sword*, and for the next three years it was a favorite reading of some five hundred Polish officers for whom it was more than just a novel. It truly *uplifted human hearts*, as Sienkiewicz phrased it, becoming *a sacred book*, to use an expression of the American writer, James A. Mitchener. After the war, I was fortunate enough to help my father, Professor Julian Krzyżanowski, to prepare a Collected Works edition in 60 vols. of Sienkiewicz's oeuvre; it was published between 1948 and 1955. It was an excellent practice in scholarship for both, myself and my wife, who diligently typed countless letters by Sienkiewicz, preparing them ready for publication.

I came to the United States in 1959 to teach at the University of California at Berkeley, and considered myself lucky to start on Sienkiewicz's American trail eighty years after his journey to the West Coast. My father, who had spent the academic year 1957–1958 teaching at Columbia University, alerted me to the fact that the trail hardly ever been explored, and that it was full of promising possibilities for somebody with interest in literary research. I decided to follow his advice from the very beginning of my own American career.

My arrival was one among very few in those years following the political *thaw* in Poland in October 1956. Shortly after I settled down in Berkeley, the Polish–American Club of Oakland, California, invited me for a lecture about the situation in Poland, but I chose a different topic, much closer to my own interest: I decided to speak on Sienkiewicz in California, focusing on his letters to Julian Horain, a Polish journalist residing in San Francisco in the 1870s. Those letters, presently published in the new edition of Sienkiewicz's works, were not only informative but also full of ribald humor, and provided the audience not only with some new insights into the history of their community, but also some relevant views on Poland in the past and present *I don't know what's going on back at home*, wrote Sienkiewicz to his friend in 1877. *Have they already started an uprising or perhaps not yet. Maybe they only visit churches asking the Good Lord for their country and freedom! I can*

imagine He just listens munching on peanuts. But it doesn't matter any way. Those letters have also become a subject of an article of mine *O kawalerskich dowcipach Sienkiewicza*, published many years later in *Nowy Dziennik* (New York, XXXIII, 8689, 2003).

My presentation was well received, and afterwards a distinguished member of the audience, Professor Waclaw Lednicki, one of the founders of modern Slavic studies in this country, and a true authority on Sienkiewicz and California, came over and congratulated me warmly. He was delicate enough to listen to my speech in an adjacent room in order not to embarrass the speaker who happened to be much younger and much less experienced than that senior scholar of my father's generation. Later on we became close friends and when my wife joined me in the States, he often invited us to his beautiful residence on Grizzly Peak, overlooking San Francisco Bay and its magnificent scenery. When I mentioned a rumor about a suitcase full of Sienkiewicz's letters allegedly stocked somewhere in The Polish Home in San Francisco, Professor only laughed and informed me that dozens of scholars and Sienkiewicz admirers had looked for that hidden treasure to no avail. It was just a rumor, nothing more. Indeed, when a few months later I lectured at that institution, my exploration of the premises confirmed Professor Lednicki's opinion.

When later on we bought a car, our trips along the Sienkiewicz trail became more efficient. Not only were we able to visit places mentioned in his journalism and his private letters, but we were also lucky enough to find a house in San Francisco where he had lived in March 1877 for a while. That old house at 619 Minna Street, in an older section of downtown, was still standing, miraculously surviving the destruction of the 1906 earthquake, and we took quite a few pictures, sending prints to my father in Warsaw as a proof of our *field research* during that first year in the United States. We were less fortunate though trying to locate some places in Sebastopol, California, a town where Sienkiewicz lived in March 1877 with his two friends, Captains Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski and Franciszek Wojciechowski, who were to become models for Zagłoba and Longinus Podbipięta respectively in the Trilogy. Everything had changed beyond recognition, and only some landscapes remained as spectacular as eighty years before – we climbed, for instance, the rattlesnake infested Mount Diablo, which Sienkiewicz visited with Captain Kazimierz Bielawski in May 1877, mentioning it later as *a trip of several days, very pleasant, joyful, and full of various things*. As we discovered, in modern times, there was nothing either pleasant or joyful there – just a really infernal panormana of black rocks and desert stretching into the distance.

Neither were we able to locate some hunting grounds of Sienkiewicz on the narrow passes of Sierra Nevada – we crossed them several times – or to pin-point a store in Los Angeles where he worked for a while as a clerk; all those locations had changed so much that it was impossible to track down places and names of eighty years before. The only solid link with the past seemed to be the impressive Bay Bridge built in 1936 by Modjeska's son, Ralph, connecting not only Oakland with San Francisco, but for us, symbolically, also the past and the present. We drove over it many times over,

enjoying the spectacular view of San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge on the horizon. Many years later I tried to recall Sienkiewicz's footsteps in an article *Na kalifornijskim szlaku Sienkiewicza* published in a prestigious Polish literary journal *Pamiętnik Literacki* (XCIV, 2, 2003).

That much for the field research and its results.

But with the trails of Sienkiewicz and Korwin Piotrowski growing cold in reality, they happened to be still alive in literature. Searching for their tracks I found an almost forgotten volume titled *Newton Booth of California. His Speeches and Addresses* (1894), containing not only the political legacy of the one-time governor of California, but also some literary ventures of his. One of them, a story written in 1869, and titled *After Dark*, tells about a conversation between the author-narrator and a person identified only as *The Captain* in whom I was able to recognize quite easily our old friend, Rudolf Korwin-Piotrowski. In Booth's story he dwells upon his earlier experiences in spiritism, namely an encounter with a person endowed with supernatural powers who managed to heal a mentally ill patient. That person happened to be the infamous Andrzej Towiański, his patient – Adam Mickiewicz's wife, Celina, and the scene – the Polish community in Paris in the 1830s, where Korwin-Piotrowski resided for several years before coming to America. I translated the story into Polish and with a critical introduction published it first in the Paris-based Polish monthly *Kultura* (1966), and later reprinted it in my collection of critical essays *Legenda Somozierry i inne prace krytyczne* (1987). I provided it with a rather paradoxical title *Amerykański Zagłoba o Mickiewiczu*, trying to link history with literature as they have been linked in real life. One should add here that Sienkiewicz used Korwin-Piotrowski as a protagonist in his well-known short story *Across the Steppes*, subtitled *The Story of Captain R.*, translated into English together with his other stories and published by Marion M. Coleman as *Western septet: seven stories of the American West* (1973). Sienkiewicz corresponded with the Captain during those California years, and when a few years later Piotrowski left for France, he most probably took those letters with him. He died in the Polish St. Casimir Hospice in Paris in 1883, but when I went there in 1965, I was told that all records have been destroyed by fire, and no personal papers had been preserved. One must assume that those letters perished with all the rest of them.

Two weeks have not passed yet, Sienkiewicz wrote to Horain in September 1877, i. e. half a year after he had arrived in California, since I sent Selim Mirza, a fairly long piece; thus staying in Anaheim I have done so far: 1. Five journalistic reports, compactly written, each six pages long; 2. A five-act drama By Force; 3. Selim Mirza; 4. Charcoal Sketches. That means more than during a two-year period in Warsaw. Well, that's how it is when one doesn't lose time writing little pieces of petty journalism (...). What I have accomplished in Anaheim would suffice for some sort of a shitty reputation. Keeping that in mind, I continued searching for the background of those writings as well as for his private letters as a source for biographical information with emphasis on his creative writing. As it turned out, the California period provided Sienkiewicz with a lot of inspiration to be used in the nearest future, when almost immediately upon his return to Poland, he started writing

his masterpiece Trilogy.

My next job offer came from The University of Michigan, and we decided to cross the Great Plains by car, following Sienkiewicz's footsteps in reverse, but always with his writings in mind. As a result I was able to produce an article *Znaczenie Listów z podróży do Ameryki*, and to publish it in a volume of collected criticism *Sienkiewicz żywy* (1967). I tried to point out that the American landscapes provided the novelist with some imagery he initially introduced in his journalism, and later on, stylistically embellished, in his Trilogy, particularly in the descriptions of the Ukraine he had never seen. He also used some scenes from American life, like e. g. Custer's last stand, for the presentation of the Polish-Cossack fightings, as in a battle between Pan Skrzetuski and the Cossaks on the shores of Hortytza in *With Fire and Sword* (Chapter Eight). Much later, after spending a year teaching at The University of Colorado in Boulder, I tried, I guess successfully, to prove that the description of his allegedly actual hunting trip to Wyoming was factitious, for he had never taken part in any such adventure. That article published in *Pamiętnik Literacki* (LXXXVII, 4, 1996) I titled *Sienkiewicz in Wyoming czyli trick or trip?* It seemed to confirm a jocular promise given by Sienkiewicz to Horain at the outset of his American journey, when in June 1876 he wrote, speaking of himself in the third person: *In the next correspondences he will be lying twice as much – you will be reading the descriptions of steppes, bears, bisons, hunting trips and adventures that happened to him, in short a whole romance in which, except for the geographical and nautical basis, everything is made up, and only embellished with some appearance of truth. Nothing special, by the way – everybody's doing it.*

While in Michigan I established a close working relationship with Ms. Marion M. Coleman, a Sienkiewicz scholar and translator of his works, who, together with her husband, Professor Arthur Prudden Coleman, had just published a charming little narrative *Wanderers Twain. Modjeska and Sienkiewicz: a view from California* (1964). Presently she was working on her *opus vitae*, a monograph entitled *Fair Rosalind. The American Career of Helena Modjeska* (1969), the ultimate biography of the actress during her American period; it makes an impressive volume of research amounting to 1020 printed pages! Ms. Coleman shared with me quite a few useful hints on Sienkiewicz research – unfortunately none of them bore any results.

The original idea of searching for Sienkiewicz's letters never left my mind. He had written some 15,000 letters in his lifetime, and in spite of the terrible toll two world wars took in devastating Polish archives, libraries, and collections, there must have been some letters left elsewhere, I believed. Finally, while on my next job, a teaching position at the University of Kansas, I was able to locate the last living member of the family of Sienkiewicz's American foremost translator, Jeremiah Curtin. Mr. Jeremiah Curtin Cardell was kind enough to send to me, at my request, the original letters written by the novelist to Curtin as well as a copy of Ms. Alma Curtin's memoirs. It happened to be a unique find, for it contained, among others, some letters written by Sienkiewicz in English. I published those letters with my introduction in an academic journal *The Polish Review* (X, 3, 1965), an official

organ of The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America. Later on, they were reprinted in an edition of Collected Letters of the novelist (Sienkiewicz., *Listy*, vol. I, pt. 1, 1997), giving the scholars in Poland some new insights into the writer's reaction to the American translations of his works. *The interesting article you wrote*, commented Mr. Cardell in his response to my sending him a copy of the publication, *using the letters for a base, makes me feel greatly rewarded for having kept these letters for so many years.*

I was also fortunate enough to discover in the archives of the Polish Museum in America in Chicago a letter Sienkiewicz had written to Ignacy Paderewski, and elsewhere, from the same period of their cooperation for the relief of the Polish victims of World War I, a series of letters to a Philadelphia attorney Robert von Moschzisker who contributed to the relief fund. I published those letter also in *The Polish Review* (XV, 3, 1970, and XL, 1, 1995 respectively).

Those and many more of Sienkiewicz's letters are being published in the edition of his Collected Letters, which has begun in 1977, edited by Maria Bokszczanin. When I reviewed volume 2 of that Collection (*563 listy Sienkiewicza* in: *Nowy Dziennik*, XXVI, 6954, 1997) I tried to emphasize the importance of such a major publishing venture, particularly difficult under the present economic conditions in Poland.

The period of World War I, when Sienkiewicz and Paderewski cooperated on the Polish Relief Committee, resulted, among other things, in the last article Sienkiewicz ever wrote, this time for the *American Red Cross Magazine* (November, 1916). I was able to locate and translate it, publishing its Polish version in *Kultura* (Paris, 10/598, 1996), while an accompanying photograph of the author I identified in *Nowy Dziennik* (XXVI, 7098, 1997). In the same article I published my discovery of a letter Sienkiewicz wrote to his Austrian translator, Ludmila Frydmann in 1895; the same paper also printed a copy of an hitherto unknown drawing made by Sienkiewicz while in California (XXV, 6726, 1996). On the whole *Nowy Dziennik* proved to be quite helpful in popularizing Sienkiewicz's work by publishing a number of my contributions on that topic. Similarly, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, a London-based publication of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad, helped in that endeavor, and one of my articles on the American criticism of the Trilogy was later reprinted a volume of critical studies, *Henryk Sienkiewicz. Biografia, twórczość, recepcja*, published in Poland in 1998.

In 1967 I accepted a professorial position at the Ohio State University where I met Professor Charles Morley, the translator and editor of a selection of Sienkiewicz's journalism from the United States, entitled *Portrait of America* (1959). Another colleague of mine in Ohio, Professor Jerzy Maciuszko, included a special appendix on one of Sienkiewicz's short stories in his bibliographical study *The Polish Short Story in English* (1968). With a number of other academic duties and activities eventually I managed to get involved in a major publishing venture – a new English translation of the Trilogy. The offer to collaborate on the project came from a well-known American writer, W. S. Kuniczak with whom I had established a close friendship in the 1970s. He became an one-man institution – translator, editor, publisher, PR-man and a

book-seller, working under the auspices of the Copernicus Society of America. During the eight years period he was able to produce a manuscript of the translation of all three novels by Sienkiewicz, amounting to 6,278 pages! When the first volume of the Trilogy, *With Fire and Sword*, was ready for publication Kuniczak asked me to provide it with an introduction, and I was happy to oblige. The hard-cover edition appeared on the market in 1991, in a handsome dust-cover depicting a painting by Józef Brandt *Lisowszczycy*. Two more paintings by the same artist were selected for the subsequent volumes of the Trilogy – *Ein Gefecht* for *The Deluge*, and *Freeing of the Captives* for *Fire in the Steppe*.

There is an interesting story connected with one of those paintings. While *Lisowszczycy* comes from the Kosciuszko Foundation collection in New York, and *Freeing of the Captives* from the National Museum in Warsaw, the third painting is located in a small, provincial Telfair Mansion and Museum in Savannah, Georgia, where it has been listed under its German title. As my investigation revealed, a local lady, who had inherited some funds in the 1880s, decided to establish a museum in her hometown. She went to Germany, and – naturally – to Munich, the artistic center of Bavaria at that time. There she found an impressive painting by an artist with a German-sounding name, Brandt, and with help of the artist's namesake, Karl Brandt, she purchased it in 1888, later on making it a centerpiece of the museum exhibition. When one enters the museum's rather small central room, Brandt's magnificent, huge painting hangs right in front of the entrance, capturing the viewer's attention not only by its very size, ca. 3 yards wide, but primarily by its colorful vision of a vivid depiction of a battle scene between two large groups of mounted, armored soldiers, coming clearly from a distant past. For a person familiar with Sienkiewicz's *The Deluge* there cannot be any doubt about the subject matter. Suffice it to recall one of the most memorable scenes of that novel, when the Polish Life Guard Regiment encounters the Swedes at a small village of Rudnik. As it turns out, King Charles Gustav is among them, and Pan Roch Kowalski is just about to start a wild chase trying to capture *Carolus himself*, unfortunately to no avail. On Brandt's painting we see the beginning of the skirmish presented with such an exactness that one can fairly easily locate the Polish officer preparing for his historic feat. Curiously enough, that painting, which Brandt considered his best, has escaped the attention of Polish art historians, but now, with its copies permanently displayed on the novel's cover, it should become better known. Trying to call the public attention to its existence I wrote an essay *Tu walczył Roch Kowalski* and published it in *Nowy Dziennik* (XXIV, 6279, 1995). One should add that by a strange coincidence, that the painting is located in a town where Kazimierz Pułaski, one of the most famous American cavalrymen and a hero of the Revolutionary War, died fighting for freedom.

The publication of *With Fire and Sword* was generally well received, and a well-known British historian, Norman Davis, welcomed it with a review titled *Smile When You Say Skshetuski!* (*New York Times Book Review*, 1991). But there were more problems than just Polish names confusing many critics. Some of them demonstrated a total misunderstanding of the scenery and its

historical background in their by and large favorable reviews of the novel. To remedy the situation we decided to provide the reading public with a tool for a better understanding of those aspects in the forthcoming parts of the Trilogy, by preparing a book *The Trilogy Companion. A Reader's Guide to the Trilogy of Henryk Sienkiewicz* (1991), with the above-mentioned Brandt's painting on its cover. I edited and published it as a collection of several essays on the historical setting, the art of translation, a survey of Sienkiewicz's translations, and Kuniczak's own comment on his work. On top of that it contained reprinted introductions to all three novels, glossaries of principal characters, geographical names, linguistic and historical terms, as well as a map of territories and military events described in the Trilogy. Copies of *The Trilogy Companion* were provided for those buyers who purchased a set of the three novels, and were also sold separately. I was pleasantly surprised to find its copy in a Warsaw bookstore in the year 2000.

The publication of the entire Trilogy – *The Deluge* came out in 1991, and *Fire in the Steppe* in 1992 – was well coordinated with the appearance of an extensive biographical essay on Sienkiewicz I wrote for *Contemporary Authors* (vol. 134, 1991), a bio-bibliographical journal reaching all public libraries in the United States. Hence the reading public was well served with information about the author and his work. The entire publishing project was badly needed, too. Teaching courses in Polish literature I often encountered major problems when it came to Sienkiewicz – prior to 1991 the translations of his novels were obsolete, poorly done, and, in most cases, not available after they had initially appeared almost a hundred years ago. The students simply could not share my enthusiasm for the Trilogy since they could not comprehend it, and even less enjoy reading it. With the new, modern translation those problems have been solved, since it was the publisher's goal to keep it on the bookstore shelves permanently as a literary classic. Life seems to confirm these expectations – in a just few years more than 100,000 copies were sold, and one can find the Trilogy almost everywhere in the United States. And more recently, with a successful movie production of *With Fire and Sword* (1999), available on videotape in the U. S., the public appetite for reading the text of the novel should increase with time.

My research and work on Sienkiewicz was not totally overlooked. The Henryk Sienkiewicz Society in Lublin made me its honorary member in 1990, and ten years later I received a diploma and medal awarded by The Sienkiewicz Foundation in Warsaw. Most important, however, it a feeling that I contributed somehow to the better knowledge and understanding of work of the great novelist who won his Nobel Prize back in 1905 but whose writing is a relevant today as it was a hundred years ago.

