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Loneliness over a Piece of Paper. Maria Dąbrowska as an Epistolographer¹

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Abstract: The article discusses Maria Dąbrowska's vast correspondence, which complete, in a way, her *Dzienniki* [Journals], constituting very valuable biographical material, so far published only in selected fragments. Among many of her sets of letters, the most interesting ones are those exchanged with her husband, Marian Dąbrowski, her partner, Stanisław Stempowski, and later on with his son, Jerzy, as well as with her very close friend and partner, Anna Kowalska. This article discusses the most important sets of letters from and to Dąbrowska, indicating their historical value and biographical significance.

Keywords: Dąbrowska Maria, epistolography – 20th century, editing

Maria Dąbrowska's childhood and adolescence were spent in a way typical for young Polish people coming from the intelligentsia living at the turn of the 20th century, during the times of the country's partition. Born in 1889, she was educated at home at the primary level, and later sent to a private boarding schools for girls, also briefly attending a Russian public school. From 1912 she studied abroad, in Lausanne and Brussels. The years 1910-1914 were the times of her first creative attempts; she wrote reports for domestic newspapers, essays on social issues, translations of poetry, short stories for children, and rather few, uncertain samples of fiction. She considered an autobiographical short story titled *Janek*, published in 1914 in *Prawda* magazine, as her debut proper (she included it years later in her most important work, *Noce i dnie*). In 1920-1921, persuaded by her friend from her college years, Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, she started to publish in instalments her novel devoted to the Polish-Soviet war, titled *Łuna* [Afterglow], in the magazine *Żołnierz Polski*, which Kaden-Bandrowski was

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the editor of, but she stopped at instalment episode 207, never completing the text that she rightly considered as very weak. Nevertheless, in 1925 a volume of memoirs titled *Uśmiech dzieciństwa* (1923) [A Smile of Childhood] received an award from the Association of Publishers, and a volume of short stories published in December of the same year, *Ludzie stamtąd* [People from Elsewhere], surprised the critics with its maturity and creative originality. It turned out to be a literary masterpiece and made Dąbrowska unexpectedly famous and popular with readers. “Greater critical attention should be drawn to this talent – so independent, so original, so truly meta-physical. She is a star” – Adam Uziembło wrote about her in the first ever review of the volume (*Kurier Polski* 1925, December 20 issue). However, it was the tetralogy titled *Noce i dnie* [*Nights and Days*] (1931-1934) that ultimately proved her exceptional talent as a writer. It is worth remembering that in 1939 the German translation of the first two volumes of the novel became the grounds for Professor Sten Bodvar Liljegren, a Swedish Slavic studies scholar, to propose Dąbrowska as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature. After the war, even though her position as a classic writer of contemporary literature (what a contradiction!) was unquestionable, she was rarely published. She wrote a new novel, fragments of which appeared in the press, but her readers were disappointed by them, as they were later on with the novel itself, titled *Przygody człowieka myślącego* [Adventures of a man thinking], published posthumously as an unfinished work. After the writer’s death, the curators of her literary legacy discovered, to their utter surprise, that she had left extensive *Dzienniki* [Journals], written from 1914 nearly to the day of her death in May 1965. Published twice by Tadeusz Drewnowski (in 7 volumes) in the years 1988 and 1997–2000, they overshadowed *Noce i dnie* and others of Dąbrowska’s works. Since then they have been read as the most exquisite record of the Polish reality of those years (in 2009 Drewnowski published 300 copies of them in full, without editing; that publication is designed for scientific studies of various kinds, but in the future the material should be published together with some literary criticism).

The journals were not the last surprise – in the collection of Dąbrowska’s documents, constituting, besides Iwaszkiewicz’s manuscripts in Stawisko, the largest archival collection of contemporary literature, there were also immense collections of letters. It turned out that each period of Dąbrowska’s life was accompanied by numerous letters that she wrote and received: from and to her loved ones, family and friends. Her generation would often visit one another, but they also wrote letters. In her letters, Dąbrowska shared her private problems and most secret thoughts with her loved ones, to whom she wrote most earnestly: to Marian Dąbrowski, later to Stanisław Stempowski, Jerzy Stempowski, and Anna Kowalska. A letter replaced an everyday conversation, gave an impression of the bond being intact despite separation, created an illusion of presence and tamed loneliness via a piece of paper.

In the Manuscripts Section of the University Library, in 13 files, there are about 2300 preserved letters to Maria Dąbrowska, and at the Museum of Literature in Warsaw several times more, over ten thousand. Most likely, there were as many responses from the writer. Detailed calculations are difficult because the works on cataloguing Dąbrowska's archives at the Museum of Literature are ongoing.² Those estimated numbers only approximately present the extension of the writer's epistolary activity, reaching back to her studies abroad, with the last letters coming from 1965. The data concerning her correspondence with her husband, Marian Dąbrowski, a socialist activist and a political refugee from Congress Poland, whom she married in Brussels in 1911, give us an idea of the scale of the correspondence. Dąbrowska estimated that their exchange included over two thousand letters and postcards, out of which 470 manuscripts have been preserved.

Dąbrowska was a very conscientious correspondent, following the rules of good manners. She answered each letter, rarely perfunctorily. What is more, she usually noted on the envelope the date of her answer, and the letters she received were neatly stored in boxes with labels indicating groups of correspondents: Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances, From Abroad, Business. This may be the reason why, despite the passage of time, so many of the valuable letters have survived. The orderly manner of their storage made it easier for the archivists and researchers to identify many of the senders. Some of those sets, e.g. the correspondence with her husband, prematurely deceased due to a heart condition, were so important to her that during the bombing of Warsaw and the Warsaw uprising she took them with her to the cellar which functioned then as a provisional shelter, to save them from destruction. After the uprising had been ended, she took that keepsake, most important for her, with her when leaving Warsaw, despite her right hand being broken.

Out of the thousands of letters that constitute Dąbrowska's correspondence with hundreds of people and institutions, a few sets deserve particular attention, i.e. the abovementioned correspondence with her husband,³ with Stanisław Stempowski and his son Jerzy, known in the émigré press under the penname Hostowiec (that part of the correspondence was published in 2010 by Andrzej S. Kowalczyk), and last but not least – with her very close friend, Anna Kowalska (in the years 1943–1964; 3170 letters in total). Besides some occasional correspondence with Polish writers, there are a number of very interesting, although not that extensive, groups of letters, exchanged

² In 2017 *Katalog rękopisów Muzeum Literatury im. Adama Mickiewicza w Warszawie* [The Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw] was published, volume 5, edited by Wiesława Kordaczuk, which includes the archives of Maria Dąbrowska (nearly half of the volume) as well as of Anna Kowalska and Stanisław Stempowski.

³ *Ich noce i dnie. Korespondencja Marii i Mariana Dąbrowskich 1909–1925*, introduced and edited by E. Głębička, Warszawa: Iskry, 2005, p. 784.

with some of the writers who after World War II remained abroad: with Tadeusz Sułkowski (56 letters; published in 2007) and Kazimierz Wierzyński – a group coming from the years 1926–1965, consisting of nearly 300 letters. What is interesting, there are letters from Kowalska to Wierzyński from the years 1961–1967, concerning mainly issues connected with Dąbrowska, including the question of her last will and legacy, which constitute a special supplement to that last block, as a side commentary.

The specificity of the letters, when compared with the journal entries, is marked by their fragmentariness and absence – the author of the letters describes events that the addressee could not witness, since the letters refer to periods of their separation. The reality reconstructed on their basis is divided into clear sequences, not being a full, chronological description of the writer's life. This is the situation of two correspondents, who were separated for some time. It is different when the correspondents have been separated for years by borders and political systems, as it was in the case of Dąbrowska's correspondence with émigré writers: Sułkowski, Jerzy Stempowski, and Wierzyński. In those cases the reports on individual lives create a peculiar narrative, constituting a more coherent biographical whole which can be reconstructed, although the correspondence had its limitations, for example, that of censorship.

An editor of private notes, frequently containing numerous intimate details from private life, always faces the question of whether he or she has the right to have them published. In the case of Maria and Marian Dąbrowski's letters, the consent for publication came from the writer herself. In her *Dzienniki*, dated January 10, 1944, she wrote about those letters: "I would like to save them so that one day – maybe hundreds of years from now – people could see, illuminated, how in Poland people loved" When preparing copies of her own and her husband's letters, Dąbrowska included the following commentary on the manuscript:

I am copying those letters, miraculously saved after the destruction of Warsaw, so that in case of some new war catastrophe, once again, somewhere, the only keepsake of our love survives. I am rewriting them in two copies. Maria Dąbrowska. Zduńska Wola by Łowicz, dated December 13, 1944.⁴

Undoubtedly, both notes are directed towards the future editor of her correspondence with her husband. Keeping the potential third party in mind, Dąbrowska introduced in the letters several significant changes and corrections. Those measures confirm the conviction that she not only took into consideration making the correspondence public, but actually prepared it for publication. Some of the corrections introduced are stylistic, instinctual and superficial, but there are also some that are more significant. In many cases colloquial words and expressions were removed and replaced

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7. All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Elżbieta Rokosz.

by expressions less loaded, e.g. she replaced in one of her letters a very crude phrase *byle jucha* (“any dirtbag”) with *byle kto* (“every Tom, Dick and Harry”). When rewriting a letter from the front, including a reference to the reclaiming of the church in Leśna, she omitted – most certainly on purpose – a whole sentence in which Dąbrowski mentions the burning of the Orthodox cross on his orders. On some of the manuscripts of her husband’s letters, Dąbrowska commented, on the margins, on statements that moved her, and sometimes she added the last name of a person appearing under their first name only or under a pseudonym. Having finished the rewriting of the preserved correspondence with her husband on January 29, 1945, Dąbrowska included the following explanation on the typed manuscript:

Those letters, accidentally preserved, are a fraction of our correspondence, which consisted of thousands of letters and postcards, as there were periods when we were writing to each other every day, and sometimes, especially in our youth, twice a day. Living in stormy and turbulent times, we have lost most of those letters in the numerous peregrinations and adventures of our lives.⁵

Fragments of those letters have been used in *Noce i dnie* as letters by Marcin Śniadowski, with some modifications of literary nature introduced – Dąbrowska removed overly emotional and “boyish” phrases, as well as exalted tirades written in the manner of “Young Poland.”

As a widow, Dąbrowska befriended her husband’s older friend, Stanisław Stempowski, well known and recognised in Poland of the inter-war period. Nearly twenty-years her senior, in his youth a social activist connected with the Polish Socialist Party, a collaborator of Aleksander Świętochowski’s *Prawda*, a co-founder of the socialist *Ogniwo*, after 1920 the minister of agriculture and health in the Ukrainian People’s Republic, a free-mason, the Grand Master of the National Grand Lodge of Poland, he introduced Dąbrowska to the very interesting environment of the leftist Polish intelligentsia. Stempowski’s extraordinary, warm and wise personality, his great erudition and – what is not without significance – sense of humour, were for Dąbrowska an antidote for the trauma connected with the death of her husband, whom she loved deeply, although she could not remain faithful to him. She fell in love with Stempowski, who for years had been living separated from his wife, and in 1927 they started living together. They never married, in public they spoke to each other formally using the *pan* (Sir), *pani* (Madam) forms – hence in the correspondence and in her journal the humorous nickname *Paneczek* appears, which she used to address her life companion. They lived together for a quarter of a century, Stempowski died in 1952 at Maria’s side. They travelled a lot separately – he visited his family and friends in the eastern Borderland: his wife and son Hubert in Zarzecze, his friend, Henryk Józewski, in Łuck and Juliusz Poniatowski, a secondary school superintendent in Kremenets at that time, and she went

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

to Jaworze, where she stayed for months, writing, among others, several chapters of *Noce i dnie*, and abroad, for vacations and visiting her relatives and friends. All the trips resulted in correspondence, out of the urge to write, when they could not be together. That set of letters is very personal – it is a testimony first of friendship, then love and attachment, and most of all, of the extraordinary intellectual bond built between the two exceptional artistic personalities. In 1930 Stempowski wrote:

[...] strange matter, which is and goes on between us, and whose veil of secrecy you have lifted in your postcard. It seems to me that for that phase, which we are going through at present, you have found the right term: adoration, but mutual. Our life together would be then – to use the formula of old Krzemiński – an association for adoration. Most certainly there is no irresponsible fervency of the spring, neither the voraciousness of the summer, but there is the quiet silence of the pensive autumn. Gusts of winter and grey days only stress and make us appreciate the fleeting smiles of the autumn sun – of adoration.⁶

Stempowski was the first reader, advisor and strict reviewer of *Noce i dnie*, which was then being created; the letters show how much the writer owed him: not only whole phrases put into the protagonists' mouths, being taken directly from the letters, but also suggestions for abbreviations, the order in the novel's plan, the names of the characters. The question that the writer asks in volume V of *Noce i dnie*, about what the life of "a poor man" on earth is, if it is "an echelon of the aims of Providence, or a transient flash between nothingness and nothingness, the happiness of home, a triumph of extensive activities – or a road taken through the dark night, through conflagration, into the unknown," is in fact a question Stempowski asked. The term "a poor man" can be found in his letters, e.g. that of September 24, 1930: "the constant issue of a poor man, who loses his eyes when staring into the sun, and can and has to be a man in half-shade," or of May 20, 1931:

Some time ago I sent a letter, and today I have received the first one. Nothing evoked in me greater poignancy than the nightingale's song, affirming life, and sung over the sad lot of a poor man. This poignancy penetrated me for the first time when I was leaving the cottage of a forester, whose child was dying – 40 years ago. May is the time the cruellest for a man, if a man himself is not possessed by Schopenhauer's will and blinded by it.⁷

In the correspondence, we can find reports on the books that they were reading (they both read a lot, including in foreign languages, quoting extensively the fragments they considered important). When Iwazskiewicz's new novel appeared in print in 1938, Dąbrowska wrote from her vacation at the seaside:

I have read here Iwazskiewicz's *Młyn nad Utratą*. It is a beautiful thing, I have not actually thought of him as such a good novelist, he has really refined himself. No flashiness, great simplicity, and discretion in depicting the tragedy of human life, somehow effortlessly. It was such a surprise ...⁸

⁶ The letter of 22.10.1930, Museum of Literature, catalogue number 2071, Vol. II, c. 88–89.

⁷ Museum of Literature, catalogue number 2071, Vol. II, c. 80, 107.

⁸ The letter of 20 VIII 1938, Museum of Literature, catalogue number 2050, Vol. V, c. 39–40.

The letters also provided space for ethical consideration, as well as for those on the essence of artistic creation, commentaries on contemporary literary life, gossip about writers and information on family matters. When Dąbrowska was away from home, in nearly every letter Stempowski would send “A little chronicle from Polna street life,” and was reporting with equal engagement on his struggle with the housemaid, making jam, all the guests who visited him and the visits he paid, and, most of all, on the course and the subject matter of their conversations. Those letters became a platform for discussing politics, sometimes for continuing disputes that had commenced before one of the correspondents had left. After the assassination of Bolesław Pieracki on June 15, 1934, Dąbrowska reported reactions of her friends to the event:

Henryk [Józewski] was sitting with me for quite a while, he drank some tea, ate some jam – we did not smoke cigarettes [emphasis M.D.] – and the conversation went on as you can imagine. He was wearing a crepe, while Wacek [Dąbrowski, the writer’s brother-in-law] had his in his pocket. You can see more and more of those crepes in the street. Two legends grow about the character and the person; one – private, consistent among those who were the closest, even among collaborators, and the other official – celebratory. Isn’t that whole story in a way a lie? Or maybe a lie is the truth and the other way round? And we are walking upside down?⁹

The current press publications were also discussed.

I am sending *Wiadomości Literackie* to you – Dąbrowska wrote – quite vacuous, although in a certain aspect quite interesting. On the front page, you can find Broniewski’s article on Dnieproges – a pack of naive lies, which even those less intelligent supporters of the Soviets, would have a laugh at. [...] a typical mentally minor Polish *bourgeois* is astounded when watching for the first time blast furnaces and describes with great wordiness things, which can be found in Poland, without going even as far as Jaworze! It is worth reading! If only was he admiring the very foundations of those enterprises, not their functioning. Iron, as we all know, melts in open-hearth furnaces in any system – a capitalist or a socialist one the same. On page two you can find ... apologia for absolute power by Jan Parandowski. *Mr Jovial* in reverse. It proves, straightforwardly, that the emperors considered insane were in fact entirely good rulers and historical accounts were simply written down by their libellers. There are plenty of very clear allusions to the present times. And finally, read in that issue the confessions of Rev. Rzewuski, a figure interesting in psychological, if not psychiatric terms, judging from the article.¹⁰

⁹ In her *Dzienniki*, Dąbrowska was writing much more openly: “This time they have killed Pieracki. Disgusting figure he was, a clericalist and bigot, and an abhorrent man and public varmint – I am familiar with him, because St[anisław Stempowski] went through an ordeal because of him, and found the situation outrageous. The government is making a national hero out of him now – orders week-long mourning for clerks – writes panegyrics. At the funeral, bishop Gawlina made a morally atrocious speech. I have deposited it at ‘the museum of grubbiness.’ Today, also in *Bluszcz* I have read an equally atrocious poem written by Hłakowiczówna, about a ‘water nymph who did not want to wear linen’ and whom people denounce to the local authorities, and when that does not help, to the general. It is not an apotheosis of a policeman anymore, the way Stpiczyński dreams about it, but an apotheosis of denunciation leaks into the unconsciousness of writers even, The government announced 100 000 zł as a reward for finding Pieracki’s assassin. What a whirlpool of human swamp moves at such a pace.” (*Dzienniki*, a note of June 18, 1934).

¹⁰ *Wiadomości Literackie* 1934, No. 27 of July 1: W. Broniewski, “Kombinat Dnieprogesu i Dniepropietrowsk. 50 dni w ZSRR,” p. 1; Jan Parandowski, “Szaleństwo Cezarów,” p. 2;

In that way Dąbrowska's correspondence constitutes a current parallel to her *Dzienniki*, in a way completing them. The years 1939–45 were for her the time that broke her life. As Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk wrote:

Dąbrowska's world was annihilated by the war, her generation was killed on the battlefields, died in concentration camps and prisons, in gas chambers, on the grassland of Kazakhstan, in Siberian forests and mines. The social formation the writer was so closely connected with, practically disappeared, eighty percent of the antebellum Polish intelligentsia did not make it through the war years. And a large segment of those who survived emigrated.¹¹

"I am dying of loneliness – Dąbrowska noted in *Dzienniki* on December 28, 1947 – but I miss not the living ones, but the dead. It is impossible to bear so many close deaths and not to get with some part of oneself onto the other side, too." Her letters written after 1945 are marked by the occupation experience and losses. Her urge to contact somebody from the old, pre-war times, might have been one of the reasons for the years-long correspondence with Jerzy Stempowski (Hostowiec), Stanisław's son. The letters, until recently known only in fragments, for years had been shrouded in legends, and in 2010 Andrzej S. Kowalczyk eventually published them.

Although the beginnings of the Dąbrowska–Hostowiec dialogue reach back to 1926, i.e. the times when Maria and his father's life together had its beginning, initially these letters were occasional, exchanged infrequently. When Jerzy left Poland after the outbreak of the war, and then remained abroad, he contacted Dąbrowska in 1942, but the correspondence was centred around Stanisław Stempowski. It was after his death that the exchange of letters between the writer and the émigré journalist fully developed, eventually turning into one of the most interesting intellectual discourses in Polish epistolography. The three-volume edition includes 329 letters (not all could be found, some were stolen from the Library in Bern, where they had been deposited), frequently resembling more an extensive literary or philosophical treatise than a letter. We will not find in that correspondence too many intimate plots – both writers stuck to the principles of discretion and good manners, although over time more and more space was taken by passages concerning health problems and different types of treatments (Stempowski, despite not having any formal medical education, was an exquisite, natural expert in medical problems). At the emotional level, part of that correspondence can be read as a type of "a therapy against death."¹² The long-term dialogue between Dąbrowska and Hostowiec remaining abroad, rarely concerned politics, although both were very interested in it, which is confirmed in Dąbrowska's *Dzienniki*. Refraining from that subject

"O uniwersalizmie katolickim i unii. Rozmowa z ks. P.T. Rzewuskim," Kazimierz Bukowski, pp. 7–8.

¹¹ A.S. Kowalczyk, "Wstęp," in: M. Dąbrowska, J. Stempowski, *Listy 1926–1953*, Warszawa: Instytut Dokumentacji i Studiów nad Literaturą Polską. Oddział Muzeum Literatury im. Adama Mickiewicza, Towarzystwo "Więź," 2010, p. 34.

¹² Such a thread has been noticed by A.S. Kowalczyk, see *ibid.*, p. 34.

resulted from her conviction that it is impossible, or in fact pointless, to start this kind of discussion with emigrants, whom she denied the right to judge those Poles who had remained in Poland under the burden of the totalitarian system. We can also observe that motif of reluctance and feeling of superiority towards the environment of the Polish diaspora in her letters to other writers from behind the iron curtain. Due to that – unlike Melchior Wańkowicz, seeking publicity – she decided not to have her 1964 speech, in which she defended “the Letter of 34” and its signatories, published.¹³ Stempowski’s letters, as well as his essays, suggest that he shared Dąbrowska’s stand and he saw the role of émigrés consisting in creating and promoting Polish culture and literature.

The letters of Jerzy Stempowski constitute a closed narrative about the intellectual adventures of their sender, an extraordinary intellectual, erudite, conversant equally with the territory of world literature and with philosophy. Hostowiec’s statement, recollected by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, is worth remembering here, since he admitted that if not for the necessity to earn his living, he would not write for print, because the only reasonable form of filling up pages was, in his opinion, writing letters to his friends.¹⁴ For Dąbrowska those letters were most certainly a refreshing gasp of free thought, while her reports were for Stempowski, first of all, a source of information about his family, as well as about literary and cultural events taking place in Poland he was still very interested in. They also exchanged opinions on their own works, although we have to admit that those opinions are rather perfunctory. It seems that appreciating each other as partners in the intellectual discussion, they located each other’s literary works on the margins of the literary friendship which developed through their correspondence. A good example is Jerzy Stempowski’s introduction to the French translation of Dąbrowska’s short story *Klara i Angelika* (*Preuwers* 1961, No. 120 vol. II), in which he stated that “many features of her character bring her close to the type of woman that developed in Poland in the 19th century” (which Dąbrowska was outraged by).

When in March 1965 Stempowski learnt about Dąbrowska’s serious health condition and the possibility of her imminent death, he did not envision himself as the author of an obituary in the émigré press. Writing about that issue to Jerzy Giedroyc on March 21 he suggested Wierzyński as the person who should take up that task. Giedroyc picked up the idea and when replying to the letter of May 23, 1965, he added that he turned to Miłosz in that respect as well. Eventually, the obituaries written by Wierzyński, as well as by Herling-Grudziński and Tadeusz Nowakowski, appeared under one title, *Pani Maria odeszła*, in the *Na Antenie* supplement to the London

¹³ The first printing of Dąbrowska’s speech titled “Naiwniacy i cwaniacy?” [the title provided by the editors] can be found in *Polityka* 1994, No. 10, pp. 7–12.

¹⁴ G. Herling-Grudziński, “Pisarz ‘czysto prywatny,’” in: Z. Hertz, *Listy do Czesława Miłosza 1952–1979*. Paryż: Instytut Literacki, 1992, pp. 7, 8.

Wiadomości (1965, No. 27/28).¹⁵ In 1966, Stempowski, on the other hand, published in the Parisian *Kultura* (No. 5) a rather unfortunate essay titled *Niezdecydowanie pani Barbary* [Hesitation of Ms. Barbara], suggesting that *Noce i dnie* did not really speak to him.¹⁶

The initially rather perfunctory exchange between Dąbrowska and Kazimierz Wierzyński dates back to 1926, but it began to flourish in 1947, when the poet's wife, Halina, started to send parcels to Dąbrowska from London. The writer was sending back Polish literary periodicals, *Warszawa*, *Twórczość*, *Zeszyty Wrocławskie*, among others. Expressing her gratitude for the delicacies, which she, by the way, shared with others in need, she presented the atmosphere of life in Poland in a rather enigmatic way, writing:

Oh, I wish I could write a letter one-hundred-mile long, a letter that would describe the world, which hit us like a missile and smashed us so much that we cannot pull ourselves together, a letter in Mickiewicz-Słowacki style, which could be read for days and "nights in the sky remote." A letter, whose one page would be one-hundred-page thick and could be read like a medieval palimpsest, out of which we can decipher the dark and scary history at the bottom of the centuries. (The letter of March 31, 1947)¹⁷

The letters written to Wierzyński in the later period contain, among others, subtle signals suggesting that the cultural decision-makers were withdrawing from the ideological postulates of social realism in literature. Hence, when in 1958 "upon consistent requests" of the editorial board of *Życie Warszawy* she published in the Christmas special issue her short story *Nic o ptakach* [Nothing about the birds] (No. 307/308), which was enthusiastically received by the readers, she wrote to Wierzyński:

The publication was unexpectedly well-received by the readers as if it had been a "work" much awaited. It seems the time has come to write about things unquestionable, that is, humbly, about birds, dogs and people close to nature. (The letter of February 4, 1959)¹⁸

The letters are also evidence of the writer's doubts about whether the time was finally right for accepting proposals coming from Western European institutions of literary life. It was so in 1959, when she was invited by the German PEN Club for the congress in Frankfurt and Heidelberg as an honorary guest.

For the first time – she was writing to Wierzyński – the hosts of the Pen-Club Congress (apparently there is something they care about) invited as many as four writers from Poland as honorary guests. So far, it was only Jasio [Parandowski] that went there in that character.

¹⁵ J. Giedroyc, J. Stempowski, *Listy 1946–1969*, Part 2, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1998, pp. 305–306.

¹⁶ A reprint of Stempowski's *Szkice literackie*, Vol. 2, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1988.

¹⁷ The letters of Dąbrowska to Wierzyński (76, from the years 1947–1965) have been deposited at the Polish Library in London, in his archives. There are also photocopies of Wierzyński's letters to Dąbrowska there (103, from the years 1926–1965), prepared probably upon the request of Halina Wierzyńska from the originals remaining in Poland. Copies of the whole collection have been brought to Poland by Beata Dorosz, with the intention of having them published.

¹⁸ *Kultura* 1978, No. 4, p. 13.

We have been discussing that [i.e. S. Stempowski and A. Kowalska] thoroughly and decided to accept the invitation. (The letter of May 18, 1959)

Dąbrowska's letters to Wierzyński also express the great admiration she felt for the poet's works. In her letter of January 3, 1960, she wrote under the strong impression of the reread volume *Korzec maku* [A bushel of poppy seeds] (London 1951)¹⁹:

I have been reading it the whole night, from the beginning to the end, and again from the beginning to the end. I was not reading, I was absorbing, drinking the way one does from a spring in the desert. [...] I hang on to the book, like others – to the Bible. [...] How much is lost by those, who are alive, but cannot read that, take the poems in, learn them by heart! [...] I have been blinded and quieted by those poems for the whole ending of my life.

She sent him her *Szkice o Conradzie* [Essays on Conrad], published at the end of 1959 by PIW.²⁰ When she learnt that on January 2, 1960, Wierzyński devoted to her a programme on London Radio, and finished it by saying that “Dąbrowska has been given to us like a lucky charm,”²¹ she protested against the tone of that presentation:

Thank you, but Kaziu, do not say such things about me, please. I suffocate from panegyrics, even if they come from the most sincere feelings. And I am not what everybody (or rather some people coming from different sides) consider me to be. And I have not been trying to please the émigrés either, I do not care about their attention. The other way round, if I could, I would tell the harsh truths to all governments, all nations and all internal and external migrants. And in all “the above mentioned” I would search for something good over time. But since I cannot tell everybody everything, I do not talk at all, or very little.²²

In *Dzienniki* she commented on that issue in a less elegant, but more significant way, revealing in that way, that her friendship with Wierzyński prevented her from expressing herself openly in that respect:

What a pack of oversimplifications and misunderstandings! I hate panegyrics, even if they result from the most sincere feelings. I squirm under them as if trampled on – more than under reproach. Besides – I have never tried to ingratiate myself to the émigré environment, never cared for their acceptance. Most willingly I would tell the so-called “harsh truths” not only to our government, but our society as well, and our émigrés. I cannot tell it to the government, so I am silent in the face of the society and émigrés. That is the whole secret of my alleged lucky charm. Not to mention the fact that such a programme does not do me a favour here, in Poland. This is something that émigrés, especially the distinguished ones, share with the distinguished Jews who during the occupation, gave themselves and their Polish “shelter-providers” away, because their self-love did not let them hide the fact that they were so distinguished. A pathetic case. (*Dzienniki*, entry of January 4, 1960)

¹⁹ Dąbrowska received the volume in the middle of 1956, with a dedication: “For my dear Ms Maryjka – most sincerely, with the friendship more faithful than dogs – devoted Kazimierz Wierzyński.”

²⁰ A fragment in *Przebity światłem. Pożegnanie z Kazimierzem Wierzyńskim*, London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1969, pp. 7–8. For the whole letter see; *Kultura*, [Warszawa] 1978, No. 4, p. 13.

²¹ “Pogadanka nr 51.” Printed in: K. Wierzyński, *Pamiętnik poety*, Warszawa: Interim, 1991, pp. 232–236.

²² The letter of January 4, 1960. Printed in *Kultura* 1978, No. 4, p. 3.

A juxtaposition of the two quotations shows that a letter, even to a friend, even if being seemingly “an earnest confession,” might be a form of auto-creation and forces its reader to recognise what in the correspondence is, and what is not, the writer’s strategy, serving the creation of a “flattering” self-portrait.

Scarce information about the situation in Poland, fished out of Dąbrowska’s letters to Wierzyński, usually circulated in the émigré environment. Hence, in January 1961 Andrzej Bobkowski passed to Giedroyc the news he heard from Wierzyński that censorship had confiscated several of Dąbrowska’s texts and concluded that “grandma Dąbrowska, not being able to publish the short stories at home, should use *Kultura* for it.”²³

Dąbrowska and Wierzyński met (for the first time since 1939) as late as in 1960. Taking advantage of the fact that Anna Kowalska in December 1959 received the Ernest Hemingway prize, Dąbrowska was staying with her and her daughter, Maria (Tula) in Paris from April 14 to May 14.²⁴ She met Juliusz Żuławski, Czesław Miłosz and the Wierzyńskis there. They met again in October 1963 in Rome, when Kowalska and Dąbrowska went to Italy. Wierzyński came by plane from the United States, where he lived at that time, specifically for that meeting. Dąbrowska wrote to him after her return home:

Did we manage to tell each other anything of value during those three proper days in that ancient city invaded by hordes of cars – banging – roaring – howling – plastic teaspoons from Coppa Olimpia ice cream on the narrow streets with no pavements? Is there any substantial conversation possible in that world at all? We are monologuing incoherently from the two sides of the gap that divides us – of years, experience, so difficult to communicate in words, maybe in written ones, maybe in poetry, maybe before “the century passes.” (The letter of October 24, 1963)²⁵

However, that correspondence, despite being much more personal than with Hostowiec, is, first of all, intellectual discourse and evidence of the friendship of the two writers. It is also an expression of mutual adoration of each other’s works, with some megalomaniac undertones, however. In one of the letters, written after reading Wierzyński’s poems published in 1961 in the Parisian *Kultura*, Dąbrowska wrote:

²³ Giedroyc J., A. Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, Warszawa: “Czytelnik,” 1997, pp. 678, 680.

²⁴ A. Kowalska, *Opowiadania greckie*, Warszawa: “Czytelnik,” 1949, 2nd edition, *ibid.* 1956. – The prize was also received by Jan Józef Szczepański for his novel *Polska jesień* (Cracow 1955). The prize was awarded by the jury selected by the PEN Club and the Polish Writers Union, which included, among others: J. Zawieyski, M. Jastrun, A. Słonimski, B. Zieliński. The award for the best Polish prose writer was the total of the remuneration for Hemingway’s books published in Poland plus an extra 1000 USD. Although Jan Maria Gisges did apply on behalf of the Polish Writers Union (ZLP) to Polish Airlines LOT for three seats to be booked on the plane to Paris for April 13, 1960, Dąbrowska explicitly stated in her application to ZLP of February 5 II, 1960 (sent to the International Office of the Ministry of Culture and Arts), that she would cover the travel expenses herself.

²⁵ *Kultura*, Warszawa 1978, No. 6, p. 13.

That is true poetry, capable of moving in a time of life and era when it seems that nothing can surprise me movingly anymore. And it really is astonishing, original, your own, unlike anybody else's. [...] My dear, keep writing like that, and no more novels of mine (that you keep asking for) will be necessary to give appropriate greatness to the Polish literature of our century – at least so it seems to me. (The letter of August 29, 1961)²⁶

That correspondence is not known as a whole. Very few fragments of Dąbrowska's letters to Wierzyński were published in the émigré press (in *Wiadomości*, *Orzeł Biały*, and *Na Antenie*) and in the Warsaw *Kultura*, selected by Wiesława Kordaczuk, while fragments of Wierzyński's letters to Dąbrowska were published by Paweł Kądziera in the New York *Przegląd Polski* (a supplement to *Nowy Dziennik*). All those letters, divided between the Museum of Literature in Warsaw and the London Polish Library, are waiting to be edited and published.

Little is known of Dąbrowska's epistolary friendship with Tadeusz Sułkowski.²⁷ Dąbrowska called that twenty-year acquaintance with the excellent, unjustly forgotten, poet "strange." They corresponded for sixteen years, but the exchange includes only 56 letters. They met in 1937 when the writer was invited to Skierniewice by the local Artistic Association, and on May 6 she gave a lecture on Eliza Orzeszkowa. She was introduced by an unknown to her young Polish teacher and the beginner poet, Sułkowski. They met one more time – nineteen years later, i.e. in 1956 in London. Their closer correspondence began in April 1943, when Sułkowski wrote to Dąbrowska from Oflag VII A in Murnau, where he was from the spring of 1941.

In my imprisonment, I have come across your books. So, when life got really bitter, I was learning from Bogumił, as I used to, how to find peace and from Niechcicowa the joy of watching the clouds. And it really helped and still it does. I have been collecting materials on your work. I have already written a paper and delivered it twice to my colleagues. I would like to expand it and with such a gift for you, return one day to Poland.

Sułkowski's strong fascination with the philosophy of life included in Dąbrowska's works could be seen in his letters, full of admiration. Although surrounded by his friends, he felt extremely lonely. The basic issues for him were those of the ethical order of the world and finding solace for the soul. Despite the seemingly serene tone of the letters, a shadow of desperation can be felt in them. Before March 1944 he sent his essay on Dąbrowska, titled *Ethical temporality*, to a YMCA literary competition announced in Switzerland for prisoners of war and he won the first prize. He reported that to her, stressing that writing the essay was a form of gratitude "for everything." He was brave enough to send her one of his prison camp poems titled "At night." Dąbrowska's evaluation of it was perfunctory, and she

²⁶ Quoted after *Wiadomości*, London 1969, No. 26/27, p. 1.

²⁷ *Tadeusz Sułkowski – Maria Dąbrowska. Listy 1943–1959*, editing, introduction and footnotes E. Głębigka, Skierniewice: Miejska Biblioteka Publiczna im. Władysława Stanisława Reymonta, 2007, p. 91.

seemed to pay much more attention to giving him advice on how to cook dry pasta. It must have hurt the poet, because he never sent her another poem again; the writer did not ask him for any more of his works, either. If she had treated seriously that gesture of trust of the young artist, their correspondence, or maybe his life as well, could have developed differently. The letters Dąbrowska wrote to Sułkowski during the years of occupation are friendly and warm, but also to-the-point and short, usually taking not more than half of a typed page. Sułkowski, however, feeling helpless, tortured by complexes connected, among others, with his sexual orientation, needed evidence of friendship and support in his daily struggles, which for him seemed harder than for others. That is why he kept contacting her at the moments that were for him the hardest. At the end of his life, he understood that the tragedy of one's life is a personal experience. He died in 1960 feeling that he had failed, disheartened and disappointed with friendships which did not meet his emotional expectations.

Not very many of Dąbrowska's readers are aware of the existence of one more interesting group of her letters – those exchanged with Anna Kowalska. They started to correspond in June 1940, when Dąbrowska returned to Warsaw from L'viv, where she found herself after the outbreak of the war. That collection is impressive – it contains 3170 letters, and is an extraordinary document of the writers' personal lives. Two distinct sets can be distinguished in it, connected with the changing nature of the two friends' contacts: initially, they were reporting to each other on the war situations of their new acquaintances: Jerzy Kowalski, Stanisław Stempowski and their own, while from the autumn of 1943 they focused on the intimate relationship which connected Dąbrowska and Kowalska. The letters are dramatic – on the one hand, they provide evidence for the crossing of the borderline of the socially acceptable relationship between two women, surprising for both that it did happen, and a record of its difficult consequences, on the other – it is an intriguing picture of Polish people's lives after 1939. The correspondence excellently completes the two writers' journals (a selected collection of Kowalska's journals was published by Paweł Kądziała in 2008)²⁸. The most interesting of them concern the years of occupation – they give us information about Dąbrowska's life in the period from which the journal entries are incomplete or missing, explain a lot of her decisions, show a great deal of unknown details from war life in Warsaw and in L'viv, as well as provide information about the situation their friends found themselves in. Of course, the letters were written in full awareness of the censorship and threats from the occupiers – reading them with no explanatory commentary is difficult and incomplete. The writers passed to each other encrypted information about the threats, understandable to them only. Sometimes they were writing directly, like Kowalska,

²⁸ A. Kowalska, *Dzienniki 1927–1969*, selected, edited from the manuscripts and completed with footnotes P. Kądziała, Warszawa: Iskry, 2008, p. 579.

when she reported: “A train from Volhynia arrived: Polish children with their hands chopped off” (The letter of September 10–11, 1943), and in another letter, she added: “In L’viv we can observe situations similar to those in Volhynia. People are afraid of going out in the evening” (The letter of September 14–15, 1943). Another time, information about friends and acquaintances was encrypted: “she died where Sirko lived” – Kowalska informed about the place of Iza Glinko’s death (The letter of February 17, 1941), indicating the location to which Waclaw Sieroszewski had been exiled. Similarly, referring to the reader’s knowledge, the living circumstances of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński in L’viv are mentioned: “Marysieńka’s admirer is also highly affluent; he has exchanged IPS for a champagne bar” (A. Kowalska’s letter of September 24, 1940). In the writers’ letters there were also such encrypted notes, in the face of which not only an average reader, but also a well-prepared editor is sometimes helpless, as e.g. in Anna Kowalska’s letter of September 24, 1940: “a change [of the situation in L’viv] took place, because Mr Stanisław’s pupils from the lower grades prepared a concert with your stepfather; they played well, but interpreted Beethoven’s symphony with too high temperament.”

Dąbrowska was also describing the reality of Warsaw under the German occupation and her friends’ lives:

While coming back from the post office, I met Mrs. Leonard Tur today (she visited us once, a tall one, scrawny, with a low voice). She was extremely sad and complained that if she did not sell a shirt or bed sheets, she would not have money to make dinner for her children. She would like Mr. Stanisław to help her somehow ... (The letter of September 3, 1943)

In Dąbrowska’s letters there are numerous references to, and questions about, Stanisława Blumenfeld (the prototype of Maria Ersztynowa in *Przygody człowieka myślącego*), whom she encountered in 1938, and with whom she developed an intimate friendship during her stay in L’viv at the end of 1939 and the beginning of 1940. Dąbrowska followed her whereabouts until December 1942, when Mrs. Blumenfeld was killed by the Gestapo. In one of the entries in *Dzienniki* coming from the first years of the German occupation, Dąbrowska called her the last love of her life, not knowing that soon she would develop a similar relationship with Anna Kowalska. Later letters reveal the moving truth about the difficult relationship between the two writers and its emotional and life consequences. The beauty and subtlety of those texts are reflected, for example, in such a paragraph from Anna Kowalska’s letter:

Staśka brought your letters in the morning. [...] I understood that you are not here. I can hear your voice, I can see you, alive, more alive than those present around me, that is the only award of my love, snatched from the physical laws, but you are not here, and I am becoming less and less capable of living. I miss your breath, your movement, that life which is in you, that mysterious, hidden power. The two days before the departure were so unbearable, like the fear an epileptic feels before an attack, before he feels the bliss of the epileptic aura. Going to the station was the longest one can experience, from what one desires, to what one imposes on himself. The night on the train, just like nights in illness, was unmercifully long.

It was two o'clock all the time, and when after a long empty time I asked Miss Przewłocka what time it was, it was ten after two. And it is like that all the time. Now, I am waiting for a letter. The sight of the envelope works like morphine. I cannot feel anything for a moment. Then I get absorbed in the letter (Zosia says: you are like Maj. Maj is a local madman). In the chapel, I suffered that I cannot explain anything to you. I cannot, neither in live words, not in written ones introduce you, to explain once and for good, how it is, so that we could be together forever, so that the differences in personalities, natures or emotions did not jeopardise that very feeling that outgrows it all. It seems to me that I have said everything that can possibly be told to another human being, without exaggeration and sin. But you'd frequently rather not hear, not see, not remember, you refuse to understand. And for whom can it be easier to understand things most contradictory and kept secret?²⁹

The relationship between the two writers gained a dramatic dimension when Kowalska became pregnant. Dąbrowska's letters from that period are a moving testimony of a futile attempt to understand the situation she was in; they illustrate the condition of the "desperate madness" which she experienced:

My dear, you want to have it all, the house, the husband, the child, and the lover. I have been making superhuman efforts, with all that's the best in me, to guarantee all of that to you. Somewhere underneath, in the subconscious, I was bothered by a mindless hope that the ecstasy of my "generosity" would lead to some kind of a miracle I was waiting for, I do not know why, but I was waiting. I know today, that in vain. [...] I cannot understand your making light of what happened, just as you, my dear, will never comprehend the degree of debasement, negligence and humiliation that my love experienced, or that in the history of the world there couldn't have been a lover, who would victoriously overcome that "little obstacle" that a child in his lover's belly is, somebody else's child, conceived carelessly during the period of the greatest intensity of the love between the two. I would like you, for a moment, to imagine yourself in my situation today, you receiving a letter from me with the news that, although without love, I did give myself to somebody and will have a child by him. Certainly, I know, you are much more elegant than me and no matter how much you suffered, you would turn back, suffering in silence, and in silence, you would leave me. You would not react if the man who impregnated me was called by me *Josephus castus*³⁰ and expressed my supposition that he would "probably" stay that way. I was fighting like mad, shameless in showing my suffering. Why I flailed so shamelessly, I do not know, I could not do otherwise. It would have been more elegant to accept the defeat in silence, since I have accepted with enthusiasm your u l t i m a t u m: either you will accept me the way I am, living and making love to both, or I will stay with him.

[...] You did not want to leave your husband and reject your home with him; I did not want to leave my "home." Both of us did not dare to give up everything and go together into the future. But those things, which we could not give up, turned out to be for us greater than our so great, and so undoubtedly existing love [...]. So, we must suffer, although that suffering is such nonsense of our life.³¹

Due to the intimate nature of the collection, it had been withheld from publication, but in 2012 the inheritors of Dąbrowska's estate decided to have it published in an unabridged version. The edition of the first part of the correspondence, including the war years, is the subject of Sylwia Chwedorczuk's doctoral dissertation, at the Institute of Literary Studies (IBL).

²⁹ The letter of April 7, 1944, the Museum of Literature, catalogue number 2063, Vol. I, c. 69.

³⁰ *Josephus castus* (Latin) virtuous Joseph.

³¹ The letter of January 26, 1946. Museum of Literature, catalogue number 2153, vol. II, c. 115, 116.

A critical edition of all the six volumes is a challenging task, and it has been planned for the years 2016–2022³². That project would be a continuation of the series that began with the publication in *Więź* of Dąbrowska's and Hostowiec's *Listy* [Letters] 1926–1953, and continued at present by the author of this article, with reference to the correspondence of Dąbrowska with Stanisław Stempowski.³³ Editorial plans also include the abovementioned correspondence with Kazimierz Wierzyński. There are still a few smaller sets of correspondence (e.g. with both Polish and émigré writers), which are undoubtedly worth publication.

Maria Dąbrowska's epistolography, so interesting and hiding many surprises, although a few of its blocks have already been published, is only beginning to enter reading circulation. Her letters excellently complement knowledge about the writer's life and work, revealing not only details and stages of her literary work, but also some secret private matters. When comparing the letters with the entries made in the journals, we can frequently see differences in the opinions presented in the two sources, which indicates different strategies based on personal contacts. Additionally, if we take into consideration the fact that Dąbrowska, while putting in order and rewriting both the journals and the letters to and from her husband and Stanisław Stempowski, edited them thoroughly (she did not manage to do that with the letters exchanged with Kowalska), we can assume that we are dealing in this case with a situation in which the author no longer treats her correspondence as personal documents, but approaches them as a literary work, close to the formula of the epistolary novel. Hence, Maria Dąbrowska's correspondence is an area open for wide-range biographical, historical and theoretical literary studies.

Translated by Elżbieta Rokosz

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³² In 2019, due to the intimate nature of the letters, Dąbrowska's inheritor withdrew his consent for publication of the whole collection, agreeing only to the publication of selected letters. However, the Council of NPRH did not agree to that type of edition being financed from the grant. In the justification of the decision, it was stated that such selection of the letters to be published would be perceived as a form of moral censorship. In 2020 the inheritors finally gave their consent to have the complete correspondence published.

³³ A three-volume edition of 1050 letters is planned for publication in 2022 by Wydawnictwo IBL PAN in cooperation with the Museum of Literature in Warsaw.

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