

Zygmunt Mycielski's Blues, or How Some Testimonies Related to Queer History Simply Vanish into Thin Air

Izabela Morska

Abstract: In 1908, a new collection of short stories by Joseph Conrad, *A Set of Six*, is sent to the printer's. One of them, titled "Il Conde," appears to be the portrait of a factual Polish nobleman, Count Zygmunt Szembek. In 1981, Szembek's grandson, Zygmunt Mycielski, a composer and a suave oppositionist in the communist Poland, sends a letter to Conrad's biographer, Zdzisław Najder, revealing that "Il Conde" is clearly based on his grandfather's homosexual adventures in Naples at the beginning of the 20th century. By today's standards this revelation is an act of sheer courage and defiance (Mycielski, too, was gay), but the letter never sees the light of day until it appears, in English translation, in Keith Carabine's essay, "A Very Charming Old Gentleman': Conrad, Count Szembek, and 'Il Conde'" in 2005. Mycielski's diaries, published after his death, can be deciphered today as a blueprint for survival. Mycielski preserves his dignity and clarity of vision, while his talent for maintaining non-heteronormative family structures in adverse circumstances defined by a repressive regime deserves further exploration.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, "Il Conde," Zygmunt Szembek, Zygmunt Mycielski, Chinua Achebe, Zdzisław Najder, Keith Carabine.

We might as well begin with a few facts:

Count Zygmunt Szembek died on August 13, 1907.

His grandson Zygmunt Mycielski was born on August 17, 1907.

To commemorate a recent loss, Mycielski's parents decided to pass on to him his grandfather's first name.

Perhaps later this choice was considered an ill-fated decision by some.

It seemed to be no secret that the model for the first-plan character in Joseph Conrad's story "Il Conde" was Count Zygmunt Szembek.¹

Conrad met Szembek during his stay on Capri from January to May 1905. He travelled there, for all intents and purposes, for his wife's health. Following an unpleasant accident, she was in need of a mild climate and relaxation. Szembek lived not far from Villa di Maria where the Conrads stayed. Jessie Conrad later remembered Szembek as "one of the most charming gentlemen I met" (*Joseph Conrad and His Circle* qtd. in Carabine 58). Six letters from Conrad to Count Szembek survived, later published in G. Jean Aubrey, *Lettres francaises* (1929). These letters were reprinted in Zdzisław Najder's collection *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends* (1964) (but not all of them) and in *Collected Letters 3* (1988). They were also, as Keith Carabine notes, completely ignored by biographers and critics.²

"Il Conde," subtitled "A Pathetic Tale", had its debut in the *Cassell's Magazine* in London in 1908. The publication in *A Set of Six*, a collection of short stories, followed in the same year.

"Il Conde" features a charming and cultured older man, endowed with comfortable income, without apparent family obligations, who takes residence in one of Naples' hotels. One evening he attends a music concert in a public garden. There he notices a certain type of man, "the South Italian type of young man, with a colourless, clear complexion, red lips, jet-black little moustache and liquid black eyes so wonderfully effective in leering or scowling." The Count shares a small table with such a young man, "sitting moodily before an empty glass," while the Count is sipping his lemonade. Later in the crowd their eyes meet. Following that, the Count leaves the crowded garden party and, to take some air, goes for a stroll in a dark alley. There he notices the same man sitting on a bench. As the Count proceeds further towards the end of the alley, an unpleasant occurrence takes place: he is robbed at knifepoint. His dignity injured, his other losses are minor, since he left his expensive watch at the hotel and is wearing only a cheap one and, conveniently, has only a few lira in his wallet. He is left unhurt and his attacker mysteriously disappears.

Then, in an instant, the Count makes an odd decision. Instead of taking a horse-drawn cab back to his hotel, he goes by tram to a restaurant in the vicinity, just one mile from the concert where, by an odd chance, he sees his attacker again. He also learns that

1 Zygmunt Szembek is mentioned by name in association with "Il Conde" in the Index to G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (1927).

2 On the theme of same-sex attraction in Conrad's works, several books have already appeared: Andrew Michael Roberts, *Conrad and Masculinity* (2000); Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel, *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature* (2003); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad* (1997); Jeremy Hawthorn, *Sexuality and the Erotic in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (2007), and Richard J. Ruppel, *Homosexuality in the Life and Work of Joseph Conrad: Love Between the Lines* (2008). The subject is not, by any means, exhausted.

the young man comes from a good Neapolitan family and, if this was not enough, he is also in the Camorra, a local mafia. The Count's hopes for a restoring bowl of risotto are ruined when his former attacker approaches and insults him. He must have been observing the Count taking out a golden coin from his pocket, a coin he had forgotten entirely, seen there many years earlier, as if in preparation for an unspecified and unpleasant occurrence. The uncanny and finally violent encounter with the attacker sours the Count's mood to the point that he decides to leave not only Naples but Italy, even though he finds the climate unparalleled in its effect upon his health. The seemingly naive narrator sees him off to the railroad station where the count takes a train bound for Vienna.

1975 is the year when, on February 19, Chinua Achebe, still in the aftershock following the collapse of Biafra, despite the two years of his ardent advocacy in the West and the US,³ delivers a Chancellor's lecture at Amherst: "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." In there he proceeds to demolish the wishy-washy white men's darling, the sensitive and nonchalant Conrad, in a manner that appears to insinuate that Conrad shares a set of uncanny character traits with his lead character, Marlow, including an uncanny attraction to one's own sex, lurking underneath internalized racism. Achebe's charge that Conrad's fascination with whiteness is tinged with homosexuality is based on the memory of then fourteen-year-old Korzeniowski ogling an Englishman and feeling "dazzled" by his splendid calves, their ivory-like quality a signal of the teenager's desire documented in *A Personal Record*. This sole event serves as an exhibit as to how "irrational love" commingles with "irrational hate" in adult Conrad's "tormented" psyche [10].⁴ White male readers, if unhinged by the passage when Conrad is compared to Hitler, are eventually soothed: "irrational love" is an abstract term to be applied to someone else, a foreigner in their midst, a writer who was always a bit detached and alien.⁵

1975 is also the year when two essays appear in the same issue of *Conradiana* 7.1 (1975): Douglas A. Hughes, "Conrad's 'Il Conde': A Deucedly Queer Story" and Theo Steinmann, "Il Conde's Uncensored Story: Conrad's 'Il Conde'." We can safely assume that these two articles must have been submitted at least one year earlier, both interpreters aiming at the same conclusion. Steinmann observes that the Count "had taken certain precautions

3 The Biafra war ended on January 15, 1970. During the siege, two million Biafran civilians died from starvation.

4 See also Morska, *Glorious Outlaws: Debt as a Tool in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction*, 197-222.

5 In the state of Massachusetts, the 1805 Act Against Sodomy reduced the penalty for „crime against nature" from capital punishment to 1-10 years in prison. The 1947 Massachusetts Acts advised indefinite civil commitment for persons whose „habitual misconduct" proves "inability to control 'sexual impulses'; in 1974, the same law was amended to exclude consensual activities (Escribde 394-5). We can assume that the general public in the state of Massachusetts remained well informed of all the unsavory details of homosexual behavior all throughout the 1974.

as though he envisaged that kind of adventure, preferably without the intervention of a knife," which is why he "had deposited his money at the hotel" and "had only the cheap watch" with him (85). These precautions, however, did not protect him against the robber's "contempt" and thus a possibility that "the robber had discovered his basic inclination and could blackmail him" (86). It appears that underneath all the comings and goings Conrad is writing another story, a grand joke, perhaps, for those in the know.

In the end, Hughes proposes, "the Count is telling an elaborate, even artful, lie" (18) via a narrator who "accepts everything about the Count at face value, [while] the author subtly encourages the reader to question the narrator's credulity" (19). The reader's task is thus to test the credibility of the narrator and to uncover the makings of this lie. Hughes then proceeds to call a spade a spade while concluding that the chatty narrator in "Il Conde" only pretends to be unaware that a visit to "the Villa Nazionale alone to hear a concert" is apparently no more than a cover for "what homosexuals call 'cruising,' searching for a pick up" (20). The narrator and the Count meet for the first time, after all, in the National Museum of Naples, ogling ("looking at side by side") the figure of a melancholy naked boy, his shapely penis at ease, discretely exposed, the sculpture appropriately called Resting Hermes.

Contrary to the previous interpreters of this story who safely if routinely weaved their interpretations around the themes of undefined guilt and self-discovery, false delicacy, the *fin de siècle* fantasy of ivory tower, and the foreshadowing of WWI, Hughes and Steinmann aim at interpreting the Count's story in accordance with what Sedgwick calls "vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail" (89). This vulnerability comes forth the first time when the Count is robbed at knifepoint and the second time when he is mistreated and slapped in a café; in both cases he resigns himself to not calling for help.

On March 12, 1981, evidently carried away by the spirit of revolutionary exuberance and for once in his adult life enthusiastic, Zygmunt Mycielski, the grandson of Count Zygmunt Szembek, sends a letter concerning some personal details of his grandfather's pastimes in Naples. This is the spring when the stakes are raising high, as the Solidarity movement solidifies in its aim to overturn the communist rule. These hopes will end with the imposition of martial law on December 13, 1981.

In his letter, Mycielski reveals that Conrad's "Il Conde" is modelled on his grandfather's habit of accosting young men in Capri. He might even be willing to tell more stories because his letter ends with an exclamation: "So here you have the first ever description of my family secrets—after so many years I have no scruples!" (59). The letter is in all likelihood addressed to Andrzej Biernacki, a Warsaw historian, to be passed on to Zdzisław Najder, a visiting scholar at Oxford University, completing his main oeuvre. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, will be first published by Smithmark in 1983 and taken on

by Cambridge University Press in 1984, to be praised by Edward Said and to launch Najder's career as a renown Conrad scholar.⁶

Years pass. In the early aughts, Najder responds to a direct inquiry from Keith Carabine, a British scholar. Carabine admits that his “fondness for the story stimulated [his] curiosity about the model for *il Conde*, the original ‘very charming old gentleman’” (58). He contacts Najder, having just discovered that the last letter of Conrad to Szembek, dated December 8, 1906, was written only four days following the completion of “*Il Conde*.” He is surprised that Conrad’s letter foregoes mentioning the existence of a fictionalized account of Szembek’s adventure. He reflects on the strangeness of this omission, considering that “it is the only fiction [written by Conrad] based upon a single source and written while the source was still alive” (58). Carabine thus addresses Najder as a fellow researcher, inquiring about “any more information about Count Szembek other than the few details in his fine chronicle of Conrad’s life” (58). In response, Najder promptly finds the letter in his archive and engages his wife, Halina Najder, to translate it.

In this letter, Mycielski, the Count’s grandson, not only admits that Szembek, who died in his parents’ house at Przeworsk on August 14, 1907, was “indeed an active homosexual” (58) (Carabine quotes Mycielski directly, saying: “Quite clearly *il conte* accosted the boy in one of the dark alleys of the Chiaja gardens” [58]), but also suggests that Conrad found himself somewhat besotted with the count:

He is fascinated by the illustrious nobleman whom he has met, by his upbringing and manners, by his fear of scandal, by his perfunctory and yet quite authentic culture – inborn – instilled through upbringing, by his social “polish,” by the discreet elegance of his clothes, and ABOVE all this is a homosexual “adventure”!

Moreover, Mycielski implies that Szembek was not the first homosexual Conrad had met, although his grandfather must have been unique.

In his travels Conrad must have come across many homosexuals and their world but obviously he has not met such a specimen before ... My grandfather played

6 Keith Carabine in his 2005 essay on “*Il Conde*” states that the letter was addressed to Zdzisław Najder and was never published (58). We have to reason to doubt that Najder, an Oxford scholar and the former director of the Polish section in Radio Free Europe, was clear in regard to the letter’s port of call in his communication with Carabine. But Najder was not living in Warsaw in 1981. The letter most likely was meant to reach him via Andrzej Biernacki, an editor and a nineteenth-century historian whom the authorities would not suspect of passing contraband. Following Carabine’s publication, Najder’s *Życie Josepha Conrada Korzeniowskiego*, a two-volume narrative on Conrad’s life, third edition, appears in Polish in 2006, mentioning Mycielski’s letter as addressed to Biernacki, but not to Najder, in footnote 144 (vol. 2, 424). There is no reason, however, why Mycielski would want to be so breezy and ebullient, or why he would want to announce to Biernacki, who was not a Conrad scholar, that his grandfather was gay. In the fourth edition of 2014, footnote 144 disappears, although the publisher, Jagiellonian University Press, advertises this edition as “much expanded.” Najder’s statement that Szembek was “homosexual without a doubt” on page 626 of the 2014 edition is presented without a footnote or parenthetical citation, although it begs for one of Mycielski’s jaunty comments. Incidentally, Tomasiak’s *Homobiografie*, presenting, among other Polish notable nonheteronormative writers and composers, Mycielski’s profile, was also published in 2014.

the piano beautifully ... his father, Joseph Szembek ... used to take piano lessons from Chopin (whose signature is in my great-grandfather's album). When my grandfather played by the open window on Capri he would reap applause and calls of "bravo conte" (59).

The scene above testifies to the ongoing interest in music in the Szembek family. One is bound to find it ironic that Mycielski's letter might have not appeared in print at all, and when it did, it needed to be corralled in *Conradiana*, away from the prying eyes of Polish gender studies scholars, demurely translated into English.

Zygmunt Mycielski grew up not to be an ascetic, but he ended his life as a recluse. He was a trained musician and composer, but he is best remembered for his multi-volume diary, titled *Quasi-journal* and written in the years 1950–1987 (ending in the year he died).

Born in 1907, taking after his grandfather perhaps, Mycielski had shown a predilection for music at an early age. First he studied with Karol Szymanowski, a composer and an openly gay man, an oddity in the interwar era. In this milieu, the myths of antiquity reverberated. Mycielski as a young man, as we see him in old photographs, must have embodied the ideal of the ephebe. He then went on to study at *École Normale de Musique* in Paris. As an army officer, he took part in the hapless September 1939 campaign against the fascist army. Escaping to France, he was detained. He spent the rest of WWII first as a prisoner of war and then as a slave worker for a German farmer. Having returned to Poland, once the communists seized power, he lost all legal claims to his family estate.

In the years following the war he, too, became a composer and a music critic, as well as the editor of several magazines devoted to classical music in post-war Poland. His friendship with Nadia Boulanger, his former teacher from *École Normale*, proved lasting. Thanks to her recommendation, he was invited to serve on the jury of the Prince Pierre de Monaco Music Prize, an important music competition. The invitation would allow him to claim his passport and to spend two months a year travelling to Vienna, Monaco, Paris, and other prime locations, only to return to his excruciating poverty, which he wore with extreme dignity. His career could never take flight due to his uncompromisingly adverse response to the communists in power, but his insistence on remaining in the shadow might be linked to his awareness that his intimate relationships with men were bound to make him vulnerable to blackmail, if not violence, the fear of the latter apparent in his diaries (Tomasik 130).

Several other topics in his diaries prove current.

He writes about how a lie repeated by the state television becomes exceedingly more convincing than an individual testimony (today we call this phenomenon "fake news").

He takes note of the discomfort arising whenever he observes that anyone featured on the pages of his diary can be traced, scapegoated, and fired from his or her job by sheer virtue of association with him.

On the eve of his travel to Monaco he fantasizes of the world-famous composer, Penderecki, buying his old chair, the purchase of which would have assured his survival for a month. (His music was neither performed nor promoted.)

While watching the country officials on TV, he is taken aback by their blank faces, their primitive (in his words) eyes and features, their ultimate lack of polish and their utmost ignorance of any kind of governance.

He suspects that people submit to abusive power the way they submit to an impulse to run always in the same direction. He notes that he would always run in an opposite direction: he did it even under bombardment during the siege of Warsaw, which was just as well, since no one knew where the bomb was going to fall.

When the Solidarity movement takes shape, he does not gush over it. In his view, Wałęsa's task in 1981 was to contain and curb the revolutionary spirit. He writes:

The church, KOR with Kuroń, Wałęsa with top "solidarity" leaders attempt to put out the fires ignited by the workers' and farmers' movement; we are sitting on a powder keg (2012, 41).

Mycielski tests the patience of the system and the limits of his own courage when incessantly signing virtually every letter of protest against the subjugation of Poland to the Soviet Union that has ever been drafted. In 1968, he protests against the armies of the Warsaw Pact entering Czechoslovakia. In 1975, together with other Polish intellectuals, he signs a group letter protesting the changes to the Polish constitution to be made by the Communist party. He uses defiance to mount a protective shield around himself. His "disappearance" would not have passed unnoticed.

Mycielski's diaries position his narrator as an outsider, a sharp and distanced "queer eye," never wavering or altering his gaze, his pronouncements even more relevant at present when conservative pundits in the former communist countries insist on associating the LGBT movement with the "communism plague." Judiciously and prudently, Mycielski was an ardent critic of both communism and the populist roots of the anti-communist opposition. At times he would remember his grandfather and his family home nostalgically. Because he chose not to live in the closet, the authorities apparently did not dare to present him with an offer to sign a "declaration of collaboration." Highly respected in the Warsaw anti-communist opposition circles, if he chose not to take up a leading position, it was not for the lack of courage. The grandson of a philanderer, he refused to share the fate of his grandfather, while he appeared to be learning from his experience. Or else he just preferred to remain in the shadow.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1978, pp. 1-15. *JSTOR*. Accessed 4 Apr. 2010.
- Carabine, Keith. "A Very Charming Old Gentleman': Conrad, Count Szembek, and 'Il Conde.'" *Conradiana*, vol. 37, no. 1-2, 2005, pp. 57-77.
- Conrad, Joseph. "Il Conde." *A Set of Six*. N.p. n.d. *Project Gutenberg*. Accessed 24 Aug. 2019.
- Eskridge, William N. *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America 1861-2003*. Viking, 2008.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. *Sexuality and the Erotic in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*. Continuum, 2007.
- Hughes, Douglas A. "Conrad's 'Il Conde': A Deucedly Queer Story." *Conradiana*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1975, pp. 17-25.
- Jean-Aubry, Georges. *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, vol. 1, 2. Doubleday, 1927.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*. Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991. *Google Books*. Accessed 6 Jan. 2015.
- Mycielski, Zygmunt. *Dziennik 1950-1959*. Iskry 1999.
- Mycielski, Zygmunt. *Dziennik 1960-1969*. Iskry 2001.
- Mycielski, Zygmunt. *Niby-dziennik ostatni: 1981-1987*. Iskry 2012.
- Najder, Zdzisław. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. Trans. Halina Carroll-Najder. Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- Najder, Zdzisław. *Życie Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*, vol. 2. Gaudium, 2006.
- Najder, Zdzisław. *Życie Josepha Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*, vol. 2. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2014.
- Morska, Izabela. *Glorious Outlaws: Debt as a Tool in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2016.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Ed. Heilbrun Carolyn G. and Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Steinmann, Theo. "Il Conde's Uncensored Story." *Conradiana*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1975, pp. 83-86.
- Ruppel, Richard J., *Homosexuality in the Life and Work of Joseph Conrad: Love Between the Lines*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Tomasik, Krzysztof. *Homobiografie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014.