



**The Nights Draw In
Noc Nadchodzi**

Suwatki, December 11th —

Dear Geoffrey,

Again I write with news of strange activities and idiosyncrasies encountered unwittingly along the treacherous roads that we must sometimes tread.

I have rallied after my initial disappointment in discovering that the famous decorative designs of porches and shutters of this region are well and truly a thing of the past. Instead, in recent weeks I have used the opportunity to explore far and wide, uncovering odd nooks and crannies in former parts of Ruthenia and Livonia previously unknown to my colleagues.

Late one afternoon, I found myself aimlessly browsing the shelves of the Borderland library here in Sejny. My dear and constant companion had not yet returned from her study trip to Holny Lake and so I was a little disconsolate. It so happened that I came upon the most interesting book, which is a considerable accolade amid the many fascinating tomes that have captured my attention this last week. It is a wonderful cornucopia that I recommend you do one day visit, though I know how loathe you are to leave the home comforts of Knoll Tower. Within the nooks and crannies of this quite unique collection, you may find over ten thousand books, five thousand copies of magazines, over two thousand films, music recordings, old postcards, documents, lithographs, photographs, and maps originating from all over Central and Eastern Europe!

Placed amongst this treasure trove of knowledge, on the highest shelf, with cloth bound as dark as night and vivid red inscription, this volume was boldly entitled 'Wampir', a *biografia symboliczna* by Maria Janion, a Professor of The Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences – perhaps you are familiar with her work? I found this impossible to put down, closely examining the text - even though it was in Polish, a dense and foreign tongue that is quite incomprehensible to me - until the light finally crept away from the tall attic window where I sat. It was not simply the lavish illustrations of blonde women barely clothed and slashed necks that held my attention but something less defined.

As I finally closed the book and returned it to its original location, I chanced to look out of the window and found myself staring across the alleyway into the kitchen of the house opposite. Here I could look upon a common domestic scene in these rural parts,

a woman preparing bigos in her kitchen. I was surprised to find I could see every detail with a remarkable clarity. Yes, somehow my vision seemed preternaturally enhanced, even penetrating the mist of this horribly damp evening. I have been told that this delicious concoction is well known for its strong 'vision generating' quality. A person overfed on this can feel quite peculiar indeed. However, it must be said that only portions of Lithuanian pancakes had passed my lips this day.

I gazed upon this scene for some time, as this unknown family gathered and consumed their lovingly crafted supper, until within the Borderland house I found only an utter silence. All the inhabitants had left their desks long since. I worried that I had been inadvertently locked within the premises and furthermore I realised that I had no idea of who to telephone for assistance should this actually prove to be required. I quickly walked down several sets of steps to find the front door firmly locked. I paused for a moment and recalled that there was more than one entrance and exit - downstairs at one end of the cavernous cellars there were two doors which led to an enclosed rear garden. I held onto the belief that one of these doors was only locked from the inside with large iron bolts. I followed another set of stairs down to the cellar area, with some trepidation as the light switch did not appear to be working. It was then that I heard a most strange slithering sound. That is the only way I can describe it. I felt suddenly faint and knew no more until I awoke to a friendly voice.

"Don't worry," I heard them say, "you have had a bad fall and gashed your head."

"The doctor is here," said a second voice, in the distance, soothing and reassuring.

This is just the beginning of my odd story. The remaining events that have occurred in this far flung part of Eastern Europe may be too shocking to commit to paper at this time. I take the train to Warsawza on the morn and will be back in dear old England as soon as is humanly possible. My dear friend, please have a warm fire and a stiff drink awaiting my arrival.

As ever,
with sincerest regards,

Bronisław Jackowski
The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades

Warsawza, December 18th —

Dear Anna Marie,

I have written personally to your husband on these matters, but as I no longer have faith in the overland mail service I must retell my tale via the telegraph service, which I trust will convey my thoughts faithfully and accurately. I dare not tarry any longer as I understand that you plan to travel soon to these parts. May I urge you to cancel your trip! It is no longer safe. If you cannot do this, I pray that you will not succumb to those unseen forces that dog our tracks. My advice to you, though often inconstant, would be: remain on the Isle of Wight. I trust that your loved ones are safe and sound and do not venture out after night fall.

Madame has gone ahead to book passage by ship to Tilbury. While she remains in good health, I shall assure you that - once we are back in the bosom of Mother Britannia - she will not venture further than the Brackengate Marshes. You may recall at this time last year she fell victim to pleurisy and was plagued by a series of associated ailments - which I believe were brought on by a surfeit of these foreign excursions. At that time, I recognised a beautiful vulnerability in her, a particular look that so attracted the Pre-Raphaelite painters and their followers.

This particular country can be quite impossible, even though my ancient ancestry lies within its reaches. And they say forewarned is forearmed! I have vowed to never leave the reliable and leafy shores of England ever again! After an unbearable series of delays, the reasons for which I cannot myself fully comprehend at this point, finally I have arrived, sans luggage, in the capital city of Warsawza. Perhaps all will become clear in the course of time, but I cannot guarantee that these conundrums will have any logical explanation.

I am fortunate in that the estimable Dr. Kurz has found me modest accommodation in the old quarter and furnished me with the essentials a gentleman traveler requires – a shaving kit, a bottle of hair oil, a hip flask which contained a delightful herbal tonic called *wódka żołądkowa gorzka* and a well thumbed copy of Fodor's 1927 Guide to Polonia. I cannot claim to be Sherlock Holmes and she a Dr. Watson, but I believe we may yet make a good team! She has a fine intellect and a sharp wit. Please extend an official invitation for her to visit the Institute – it is the least we can do. I am sure she will go far in the arcane academic practices she pursues at the University here – which,

incidentally, has some surprisingly excellent architectural features worthy of that great Victorian, Lewis Cubitt.

The strange experiences at the fringes of civilisation at the borderlands seem now quite distant. My leg is healing quite well, all things considered, and I am more than capable of undertaking a daily constitutional in Park Praski, despite its close proximity to the quite evil smelling river. Unfortunately, the zoological garden is closed at this time.

However, I must confess that I am in quite a feverous and turbulent state. Perhaps you will think this quite unbecoming. Tonight I will again dine with the Countess Báthory. What a happy coincidence that I should find myself in the same city at the same time! After the days spent on the country estate near Wilno in her presence I had thought that it unlikely I would encounter her like ever again – though I must confess I did unreasonably long for this very thing. She is the most delightful company, her beauty a veritable beacon of pale golden light amidst those dark and dank forests. I found her to be the perfect host on many of the seemingly unending winter nights in those barren parts.

The Countess is traveling with the most unlikely companion, a Bulgarian clairvoyant prone to unreasonable outbursts of vitriol, though she is able to utterly silence him with the merest gesture extending from one of her fine porcelain-white hands. I have privately advised her to dismiss him from her service, but she simply laughs at my suggestion and it is impossible to hear this sound and find oneself in disagreement with her for a moment longer.

You may think, dear friend, that I am quite smitten, and perhaps this is not far from the truth. She is well educated for a young woman with such an aristocratic pedigree, with a surprisingly deep knowledge of Renaissance painting though it has to be said that she has little time for my treatises on the peculiarities of medieval wall murals found in some Romanian Churches. She has a taste for the finest of red wines and for meat so rare that it does not seem cooked to my palate. Still, when in Rome!!

We sit long into the night, almost until dawn, in the most animated conversation – and this in the privacy of her apartments! This I know would not be the done thing in London society, but customs are quite different in these lands. I can hear you say, “Thank God for the Channel!” but this lengthy trip has opened my eyes to new ways.

I am, perhaps, a changed man – or at least not as fusty as I used to be. And not before time!

Nevertheless, I look forward to my return and sharing the full detail of my adventures with you over a good glass of port.

As ever, with fond regards,

Bronisław Jackowski

The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades

Szczecin, December 26th —

Dear Anna Marie,

As I have not heard from you, I trust that you have stayed the faithful course in dear old Blighty. As for myself, my travels must continue. On Christmas Eve I took the first available train from Centralna Station. Dr. Kurz was kind enough to accompany me at this bleary-eyed hour, despite my genuine protestations. She claims to rise before the dawn to attend to her piles of correspondence and assured me that surmounting the formidable obstacles at the ticket desk and the catacomb-like interior of the sunken platforms was but a small matter to her, though it was of immense relief to me. I greatly welcomed her assistance and I trust that I will see her again and provide in equal measure.

She gave me a copy of Norman Davis's 'White Eagle Red Star, The Polish Soviet War 1919-20', which I readily devoured on the train. She has promised to invite Professor Davis to lunch the next time I am in the capital – which may be some time away, I fear. I have grown fond of this old dour city, despite its likeness to Manchester.

I have spent some days exploring the Stare Miasto. Unfortunately, this was not in the company of the Countess, who perhaps has now finally tired of me. The less said of this the better, as it may turn my mood fouler than the weather. I last saw her four nights ago. She had agreed to accompany me for a pleasant walk along the old city walls, which have been admirably restored of late and may be comparable to those of York. I am pleased to say that the Bulgarian clairvoyant was nowhere to be seen. However, the enforced seasonal festivities and somewhat lascivious commercial nature of Plac Zamkowy and the surrounding streets seemed to cause her some

offence. She seemed to find the whole affair to be in very bad taste indeed. A few half-starved Varsovians were selling Christmas trinkets from suitcases at every turn and I determined to purchase a Nativity scene in a snow globe for a handful of groszy. A little while after this, she expressed to feel a chill in her bones and insisted I flag down a cab to return her to her apartments.

The following morning, the 23rd, there was a note under my door, apparently delivered by one of her maids. Or so the concierge told me – he seemed unwilling to speak of the matter in any detail. In quite brusque terms the note informed me that the Countess had decided to return early to Wilno and she must renege on our further plans. After several rapturous nights in her company, I felt drained by this unexpected news. She wished that I correspond further with her in the New Year – a small token of affection I cling to. Casting propriety aside, I hurried to her apartments but found them already vacated. It was as if she had never been there. An odd old woman, whom I had never seen before, insisted that I had no business on the premises and threatened to call a police officer. When I later related this turn of events to Dr. Kurz, she gave me a look as if to say: “This is only to be expected.” I believe she has no time for the foibles of the aristocracy and their imitators and acolytes.

I soldiered on, as I must. It turned out to be a gloriously bright winters day. As a staunch socialist I had no desire to visit the apartments of Prince Stanisław Poniatowski, so walked on to the Cathedral of St. John and pondered for some time its famous 16th century crucifix from Nurnberg, with its proclaimed real head of hair. I have to trust that this was not simply a myth as it was not possible to examine at close quarters due to the crowds of rowdy worshippers. Having dutifully studied the interments of various distinguished Poles, I took in the austerity of the adjacent church. I was offered the opportunity by a kindly Jesuit to mount the bell tower - the highest locally - they say you can see as far as Treblinka on a clear day - but I declined the offer as my knees were a little too weak. In the dark passage between Ulica Piwna and Ulica Świętojanska, I had the most strange sensation of being followed – I did wonder again about the whereabouts of the Bulgarian. Though this particular alleyway was quite empty, it seemed to hold a presence I could not readily explain. Of course, they say in Warsawza that ghosts are ever present, tremulations of past events forcing themselves into the present.

I write to you now from Szczecin, a bustling city built of dark stone, gothic architecture and grand squares, a place of much commercial and industrial activity. I am surprised to find it a significant maritime port, despite being 40 miles from the sea. It was my intention to rendezvous here with Madame, but I have found that she has already taken ship to England. Rumours of my dalliance with the Countess, innocent though it was, may have reached her ears. As there are no berths available for several days, I find myself again relying on the hospitality of strangers. You may have been anticipating some kind of announcement upon our return, but this is unlikely given recent circumstances dictate an uncertain future. Commitments, real or assumed, may have to be broken.

I had considered disembarking at Poznań and making progress toward Malbork, the ancient fortress of the Teutonic Knights, where I might seek temporary refuge in the chapel of St. John amidst the tombs of eleven Grand Masters. I am told the attractions of both sanctuary and the fried fish stalls of the Wisła estuary are indeed powerful. Nevertheless, something drew me on to Western Pomerania. I had also fallen into a deep sleep, the like of which I have not known for several weeks now. The undulating countryside of Wielkopolska passed by unnoticed, even the scribblings of Professor Davis unable to command my attention for the full duration of the journey. I finally arrived at a ramshackle unheated station near the banks of the Odra. My guidebook informed me that the forest and river scenery of the neighbourhood of Szczecin is picturesque, but the low level and swampy nature of the soil render the climate bleak and unhealthy. Though only mid-afternoon, it was already dark and quite dismal. I could see little through the driving sleet, nothing much of notes other than crane bridges, dockside paraphernalia, oily patches of water and unlit blocks of flats.

Relief was fortunately at hand. Dr. Kurz had kindly telephoned ahead and a young gentleman was awaiting my arrival, standing at a pre-arranged point beneath a large mosaic mural of the region, which I noticed featured an unseemly proliferation of electricity pylons marching in unison in all directions. Michał quickly explained that we should not linger in the station precincts due to the strong possibility of being accosted by individuals purporting to represent East European recruitment agencies, who attempted to lure desperate and gormless young people to work long hours in the catering or building trade with promises of a life of riches in Camden Town. An

even greater danger was posed, he said, by the Military Police patrols, who were checking identity cards. “In case you are deserting...” he stated, indicating his short back and sides. “My haircut, you see...” I expressed the opinion that I did not think I would qualify for assessment, but he told me they did not like people with long hair either and enjoyed to lock them up for the night or two and beat them a little, especially if they were also suspected of trying to leave the country.

Without further ado, we drove to the outskirts of the city. And so, on this Christmas Eve, I found myself the esteemed guest of the Bas family, who proved to be the most excellent company. I must say, Christmas Eve supper is a marvelous invention! In between much drinking of various kinds of sweet wódka, we tucked into the traditional 12 dishes, none with any meat content. These reflect the number of the Apostles. I refrained from arguing the logic of this point, given contemporary thinking on the Gospels. One and all, they were shocked to hear that the Eve of the birth of the Saviour was not considered a celebratory event in England. With some shame I explained it more likely these days to find people marking the Winter Solstice. While we worked through dishes of delicious soup and dumplings, cabbage and fish, nuts and cakes, I passed conversation in stuttering poor Polish with the inhabitants of the household trying to decipher the increasing popularity of these ceremonies at stone circles such as our wonderful Stonehenge and the more impressive megaliths at Avebury Ring. I found it difficult to expiate the intentions of pagan revivalists in England. Why, even my dear cousin Mark has been afflicted by this fashion! Ever since spending time at a festival in Glastonbury, he has expressed his preference to be called Mabon in future.

While they were quite happy to lift their glasses and shout “TO THE STONES” these dear people expressed bafflement at the idea of anyone but a priest wishing to go dressing in flowing robes. It must be said, though, that the younger elements present professed their liking for heavy metal music, which for many is but one step away from solstice worship. To an academic, it is clear that unleavened bread or wafer, honey, poppy seeds and mushrooms are all foods whose symbolic use date back to pagan times, but it was not at all obvious to this table. I am afraid to say that the family were unable to benefit fully from the expression of my meagre knowledge as the power of speech quickly failed me. The Father of the house refilled my glass

with various spirits for countless more toasts and the Grandmother added more food to my plate until I passed out, as is the tradition in these parts.

Indeed, as Konrad Bercovici wrote: “I shall leave to be much bolder in my next life.”

My regards to your dear brothers and upstanding husband.

May I wish you all a belated Christmas,

Na zdrowie!

Bronisław Jackowski

The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades

Szczecin, December 31st —

Dear Nicholas,

It is clear these thoughts also plague your days and nights. You ask me if there is anything I miss about dear old England? Perhaps you are referring to the increasing infantilism of our great cultural institutions? Or the immodest displays of flesh in every city centre bar? Perhaps the latest scandal in Parliament or the enforced bonhomie of strangers on the terrible public transport? Maybe you refer to the perfidious climate of denial and deceit within public bodies, or to the mounds of litter and chewing gum cast contemptuously upon the street?

Dare I mention the petty wars sapping the moral fibre of the nation? The threats of anarchists and bomb-makers? The hordes of people rushing to the sales to buy more possessions ‘on the never never’? Do I miss a society that sucks vigour from your very being, that denies the imagination of the young, that debases itself with the worship of celebrity?

There are some good things of course, though mostly from the past it has to be said. How I wish I had a copy of John Lane’s Yellow Book to share with my new acquaintances! How delightful it would be to discuss Beardsley’s profoundly disturbing drawings, or perhaps to then leaf through an original copy of Blake’s bonfire of profanities. Of course, I do miss the revival of burlesque – it is not something

popular in these parts – though I will concede that this too is merely a clever confection, yet another veil drawn across the search for truth and beauty. Oh, how unbearable it must be these days to be young, patriotic, angry and restless - a dangerous cocktail for our times.

I must tell you, though, I am completely distraught at missing the Clash of Titans! I speak, of course, of the outcome of the Boxing Day football match between Oxford United and Woking! I know you will be more concerned with, and rightly so, the progress of your own team, the Baggies, whose star has not been in the ascendant.

Nevertheless, in myself I feel mightily refreshed. Both in body and soul. I do not look as pale and gaunt in the shaving mirror as on previous days. Some colour is returning to my cheeks. I had not realised how exhausting my trip to the Eastern borderlands was and how little time I had allowed in Warsawza to recuperate. The bruises on my head have receded, the remaining gash on my neck is itching persistently, a sign of healing - though the wound still looks fresh to my eye, despite rigorous application of the prescribed ointments.

Michał, who is not much older than yourself, has turned out to be a most helpful companion and guide. He suggested a nine hour hike in the vicinity of the Emerald Lake – this is a local beauty spot, an immense old chalk quarry flooded back in the 1920's, beyond the fringes of Zdroje where his family resides. I explained that my delicate English constitution was not as it ought to be, given my recent accident. "I understand, we will walk for only five hours instead," he offered.

It was a fine expedition through a stunning monochromatic winter landscape. We took the path to one side of the frozen lake, around some ruined buildings where several people stood looking at a set of new windows stacked up on the icy ground, rubbing their hands together and blowing on them theatrically. It did not seem a good day to be installing windows. Michał explained that there is a group here wanting to restore these buildings - the old firefighters station - and make a historical museum. "It's busy here in the summer," he said, "they have a fire burning outside the café and sell beer and sausages on a stick for you to roast." There was no fire today, when indeed it would have been most welcome. We trudged up and down the snow covered hills, following trails through the woods, around the lake, up and down. I haven't seen snow in England for such a long time, at least snow that stays on the ground for more than two days. The frozen surface of the lake glinted through the dense line of black trees

ahead. “Here are sledging routes we used as children,” he told me. “We called this one Death Curve!” It was a precarious route indeed, one hundred foot above the lake, not to my taste. From the viewpoint, a line of pylons marched off through the woods, a railway line struck out from East to West below the heights, a German built autostrada could be seen and beyond that the grey mass of the city, barely visible in the mist and fog. Later, as we drove back along that highway to the north of the suburbs, the skies cleared a little and for a brief moment we saw the huge pale orange orb of the sun dropping into the muddy wetlands of the lower Odra valley.

Before returning me safely to my accommodation, we adjourned for sustenance to Michał’s apartment near the tram tracks, where a small group of his colleagues from student days gathered to socialize. As wódka glasses were filled and toasts made, Michał introduced me to a marvelous book of photographs and postcards in his possession – which revealed Szczecin in its commercial heyday in the decades prior to the Great War. The old city of more than a century ago was clearly associated with prosperity, orderliness and progress. This invaluable documentation - which had survived plague, riots, fire, air bombardment and marauding armies – was a proud depiction of the determinedly industrious nature of this place. Apart from the warships produced in the famous Vulcan shipyards, locomotives, boilers and machinery of all kinds were made here, alongside the production of clothing, cement, bricks, motor-cars, soap, paper, beer, sugar, spirits and cycles. I suspect that an Englishman with a fine appreciation of the work ethic of previous generations might well feel at home here!

Sea-borne commerce seemed of scarcely less importance than this industrial might. Cargoes of grain, wood, chemicals, spirits, sugar, herrings and coal were pictured, in immense quantities, filling up all available space at the docksides of the island Łastownia, ready to pack aboard the hundreds of ships waiting in the canals, channels and islets. Other photographs showed multifarious passenger ships from far flung ports moored under Castle Hill. What a splendid panorama indeed it must have been, worthy of a Fleet Review at Portsmouth! A sequence of slightly retouched photographs – to exaggerate the pyrotechnical effects - showed wonderful firework displays and elaborate electrical illuminations strung out on the boats for the annual maritime festival.

One particular photograph caught my eye. It showed a crowd of people celebrating outside the town hall, a line of carriages unloading their passengers, distinguished guests arriving for a Grand Celebratory Ball. The caption dated the event as *New Years Eve 1899*. A shiver went down my spine as I realised that one of the figures disembarking, though captured in profile and slightly blurred, bore a remarkable resemblance to the Countess Báthory!

I pondered the uncanny likeness for a while but Michał thought little of it and explained it away as follows. “The Great-Grandmother of the present Countess!” he stated. “This would not surprise me. Yes, of course, the Báthory family were one of the oldest and richest merchant families, who could trace their lineage back to the days of the Hanseatic League. Very beautiful women. Some say they were related to Catherine, Empress of Russia, who was borne here, a throw of the stone from the Duke’s castle. You as a scholar would know this! Perhaps you would like to see this place tomorrow?”

I nodded. “Yes, there are many beautiful women,” I found myself whispering over the photograph. “So languorous. So Polish. Their complexions wan and white, lips full and ruby red.” I felt suddenly faint. In the background of the photograph was another familiar figure.

“Hey, what’s got into you?” he asked. I closed the book and returned it to the bookshelf, knowing that the vision of her would be more difficult to dismiss. The Báthorys, once all powerful, had fled in ruination beyond East Prussia, as terrible and ruthless wars engulfed the region. I did not give any indication that I had some prior knowledge of this genealogy – it was too strange a tale to recount.

To regain my composure I studied other books of interest on his bookshelf, such as ‘Safety of Unknown Cities’ by Lucy Taylor, ‘The Art of John Bolton,’ a cult artist by any standards, ‘Image of the Beast’ by Philip Jose Farmer, ‘I Am Legend’ by Richard Matheson and ‘Howards End’ by E.M. Forster. I expressed specialist interest in Michał’s copy of ‘The Art of Fencing, The Use of the Small Sword’ by Monsieur L’Abbat, Master of That Art at the Academy of Toulouse - which contains two marvelous quotes I must relate to you, those being:

‘Though there are People of a bad Taste in every Art or Science, there are more in that of Fencing than in other...’

and

‘Courage and Skill being often of little Use without a good Weapon, I think it necessary, before I lay down Rules for using it, to shew how to chuse a good Blade, and how it ought to be mounted.’

Please remember these. I believe them to be most pertinent in this day and age!

Though Michał seems a well-balanced sort of fellow, I noticed that there were also several volumes relating to occult practices - including a 1959 edition of ‘The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology’ by none other than Russell Hope Robbins, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, some of whose classes I was fortunate to attend as an under-graduate. I expressed amazement at this coincidence. Curious, I engaged him in the subject. I will try to record this conversation verbatim as it may give a clue to understanding what is happening.

“These are things that should interest all young Polish men these days,” said Michał unashamedly. “Vampires, ghouls, spirits, shamanism or the music of Behemoth. Is this not a deeply religious country?” Of course, he then insisted on quoting Gombrowicz, who - when asked about Catholicism in Poland - described the nation as like a piece of stale bread which breaks into two halves with a snap, the believers and the non-believers.

His friend Staszek said we should not speak of these things after dark, but after we opened a second bottle of local Szambelan, his mood lifted somewhat. “What the hell!” he shouted. “*Scared* and *sacred* are so nearly the same, are they not? Na zdrowie!”

“Na zdrowie!” they all chorused.

“Did not Mickiewicz write about the dead returning in ‘The Bride of Corinth’?” asked Marcin, his English now a little slurred.

The alcohol getting the better of me, I gently corrected him. “Surely that was Goethe, dear fellow! I do apologise, but we English know about these things. In 1652 it was Dr Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, who published ‘The Antidote Against Atheism’ - which conclusively tells of ghosts, witches and vampires. He even tells of a vampire tormenting a poor priest in Silesia. ‘Skin fresh and ruddy, the nails grown long and evilly crooked’ - such was its appearance, was it not?”

Marcin shrugged. Everyone raised their glasses. “Na zdrowie!”

Michał jumped up. “I must disagree with you!” he cried out. “The soul of our people knows these things also! Our people came from the East, to be forced into the bosom of the West. I know you will find this a hard scene before your eyes, but there are many people who still follow the old ways, before the Goths or the Romans or Christ, long before. I myself have heard of people who wish to undertake occult practices, who relish, yes, that is the English word I think, who... *relish* the thought!”

No doubt a fascinating evening ensued. Unfortunately, I cannot recall much else of what transpired except there was a good deal more of “Na zdrowie!”

I must conclude this lengthy correspondence and splash some more cold water on my face before going down and attempting breakfast - of which I expect there will be a great deal on offer. My hosts are most gracious and generous folk. I can hear the bells of the many churches ringing out across the city, calling the faithful to Mass this morning and I have no wish to delay the devotions of these dear folk.

I must also take some painkillers – the fleshy parts of my gums are uncommonly sore! Madam Bas, who is a dentist by profession, has offered to attend to the matter. After giving my mouth a thorough inspection, she suggested that I might wish to ameliorate the effects of the rather long canine teeth I possess, which in her opinion are causing the lesions on the inner gum. She suggests wearing a special mouth guard when I sleep. She has also supplied me with a mouthwash of her own concoction which will reduce any inflammation. I trust that I will have to think no further on the matter.

May I wish you, despite the dark forces that are abroad in the world, a Happy New Year.

As ever,
your friend,

Bronisław Jackowski
The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades

Szczecin, January 4th —

Dearest Monika,

I today received an interesting postcard forwarded to me from Miss Ptak, who is - as you will be aware - currently undertaking research with regard to various collective processes espoused by Engels in the Manchester Metropolitan University Library. No doubt she will find all the information she requires in back copies of the Guardian. She related the not unexpected news of more rioting and violence in those blighted northern towns. It is well that you remain within the comparative calm of the Swedish archipelago, my dear friend!

I also received an invitation to attend a conference in the Midlands, the date of which has long passed. I felt it was necessary to pen a response nonetheless. I have attached a copy for your amusement.

I felt rather unwell on New Years Eve - *Sylvestre* as they call it here - and did not stay the course till the midnight hour. Foolhardy fellow that I am, I refused the offer of a cab and resolved to walk back - I reasoned the fresh air would do me some good. The night was cold, but not unbearably so, and the dark streets were empty as the hour approached. A few solitary fireworks were being let off prematurely. I walked on gingerly, unsure of my footing on the icebound paving stones. I don't know where my thoughts were leading me, but I must have inadvertently taken a wrong turn at one of the traffic circles as I found myself walking along a path at the edge of an unfamiliar park. Though I soon realised it was not a city park, but rather the outskirts of a graveyard, overgrown in places and well-used in others. Despite the time of year, the gravestones and tombs were adorned with cuttings of fresh flowers and a thousand lights flickered through the falling snow, slow burning candles securely held inside coloured glass containers. I choose not to linger in graveyards, though I have visited both Highgate and Pere-Lachais in my time. My senses, dulled by the cold, suddenly sprang to life. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up - and a most peculiar feeling that is. I paused, listening carefully and looking around for any movement. I strained to hear a pack of dogs barking in the distance, the creaking of branches heavy with snow, or a far-flung reverberation of music - but the sound of my heart thumping powerfully in my chest drowned out all else. I turned and peered at the path behind me, to find my footprints already obliterated in the eddying snow. I wondered for

how long had I been standing here, a human statue stiffened by snow? My hands began to shake uncontrollably. I felt weak at the knees and slid to the ground in some kind of faint. How can I put this? I was conscious and yet the world around me seemed to be disintegrating and then I seemed to be lifted high into the air above, floating effortlessly, looking down on the shape of myself amidst the flurries of snow. And then I was falling, no.. swooping down from the frosty darkness above. I found myself stumbling out of the necropolis, in some kind of fearful terror, heedless of the branches and sharp thorns tearing at my clothes.

When I arrived back at my lodging, I knew I looked awful. My coat was muddied and torn and I had lost my hat. How can I explain these wild imaginings and the ravishing of phantasms? The wound on my neck had reopened and I only just managed to hide this fact by pressing my scarf tightly to my throat. I hurriedly gave my apologies, blaming the wódka. They laughed heartily of course, saying that this is surely why the English must delicately sip their spirits and not down them in one as is the Polish way and as all men should do. Or so they have incessantly told me! I refrain to mention that we Englishmen built the largest Empire in history, often in the most unpromising of climates, comprising a quarter of the globe and a quarter of its population. Instead, I retreated to my bed where I stayed for a full two days. My hosts were, as ever, solicitous but left me to my own devices as requested – though they kindly left mineral water, fruit and cakes at my door at regular intervals. I suffered the most feverish and turbulent dreams, which seemed to further enfeeble me. I am feeling much better now. I still cannot explain this nocturnal incident. Perhaps I was not lying when I said it was the wódka as I cannot claim to have drunk small amounts that evening. It is a difficult custom to desist in this country. However, I tell you, it is nothing that a full English breakfast and a brisk walk would not put right!

Breakfast was not an option, as I had rose at an extraordinarily late hour. The day was overcast, the sky charcoal grey. Upon finding there was a message from Michał, asking to meet in the late afternoon this day, I telephoned him to confirm this arrangement and assured him that I was well. As lunchtime was upon me, I chose to visit a *bar mleczny*. These are strange little cafes which, as a visitor, one has to work hard to seek out – they tend to be in back alleys and poorly advertised, though their locations must be well-known as trade within

is bustling. As you enter you must approach the owner – who, in this instance, was sitting in a glass kiosk - and pay for your meal in advance. You then enter the main body of the premises and collect your food from the kitchen counter and find an empty table - if you can! Michał called this place his *kopytka* – I have no idea why. I sat amidst the crowd and admired the stuffed birds and wild boar skins that adorned the walls of this establishment while I enjoyed *Zurek*, a creamy soup made from fermented rye flour, and then a dish of potatoes, sauerkraut and fried fish. I have thus far stayed clear of the local delicacy - lard sandwiches - though my hosts have highly recommended them.

I walked through the copious snow gathered along Ulica Wały Chrobrego, the restored terrace above the Odra, looking out over the tram tracks and recalling how it was in the old photographs. There are some still some charming remnants of the old city to be found, traces left by the Germans, Dutch, Polish, Swedes and Slavs who had lived here, but I determined that today was not the day to be out and about, given the biting cold. There were few other people to be found on the street and the city now seemed deathly quiet. Perhaps the beginning of a New Year is always this way... all is in abeyance and, like Sleeping Beauty, we await the kiss of life! Putting these thoughts aside, I hurried towards the Castle of the Pomeranian Dukes, designated meeting point with my faithful guide. The castle, constructed and modified over several hundred years, attained the shape of a closed quadrilateral in the 16th century, and is now used as a cultural centre. Here take place chamber, classical and choral concerts, as well as exhibitions of some worth. It also has a cinema housed in one wing. I did not think I would be climbing its famous Bell Tower on such a glacial and dark afternoon as this.

Michał was waiting, as he had promised, in the castle café. I ordered and quickly drained a strong coffee. We were the only customers, the two bar staff remaining huddled in a warm corner, chain smoking and comatose. He excitedly discussed a possible summer trip by bicycle to see the legendary ruins of the 14th century Drahim Castle in the Pomeranian Lakeland. I readily agreed to his proposal, eager to plan a return visit. (You see, I have got over my initial hesitation about this country – this despite the mishaps and maladies!) We sensibly decided to stay indoors, and after browsing the castle museum that occupies the vaults, we went to view what was on offer in the cinema hall. This turned out to be somewhat salacious -

two short documentary films followed by a feature about the Marquis De Sade. I was not entirely surprised that this latter item proved to be a popular entertainment choice for Michał. It purported to be an ‘inferno of black magic, torture and sexual depravity’ but it turned out to be utter nonsense. There was an awful lot of hysterical baring of ample breasts, people laughing hysterically and spanking each other in various obscure European locations. God knows how or why it was ever made! With music attributed to Billy Strange and cinematography to Richard Angst it was an oddity indeed – quite, quite forgettable. I have to admit that I dozed off more than once during this epic and found myself dreaming of the Countess again – leaning over me, coming so close I could feel an animal warmth radiating from within her, her lips trembling, the licks of dark hair that frame her face falling forward, brushing my skin...

I shuddered awake as the credits rolled, my neck aching. “You find this boring!” said Michał. As this seemed a statement rather than a question, I explained that I did indeed find the the preceding documentary programme to be more meritorious. One was a film about hidden eroticism in Lithuanian folk songs and the other an investigation of Russian mysticism, complete with faith healers, bell-ringers, reincarnations of Jesus, and nomads searching for lost drowned cities.

I assured him, as I can reassure you, that I have no intention of going in search for lost cities or women to whip. I have better things to occupy my time!

I am tired after the exertions of the day and must retire early. On the morrow, I seek passage to England. I feel I have delayed unnecessarily. With all the attention lavished on me, I have become quite indolent and unproductive. I need a good laxative!

Yours, with deep regard,

Bronisław Jackowski

The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades

(Attached)

Szczecin, January 3rd —

Dear Miss Luton,

May I thank you for the invitation to your recent conference, *The Way Forward*. Unfortunately, as you may have realised, I was unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances with regard to foreign business commitments.

This is regrettable but when considering again the conference abstract I must firmly state that there is, in my humble opinion, no longer a way forward and no useful contribution to be made to this polemic. The way is already determined, and this is only backward, It must have come to your attention that in the mire of the English counties we debate, we digress and we divest as the ship flounders in the swamp. We open our arms only to welcome disaster!

Only radical reform will suffice and it may be too late for that. Can you not see that the poor are getting poorer and social and economic pressures are eroding the morality of the nation? There are malevolent forces at large that are best left undiscussed, undisturbed and should never see the light of day in your leafy suburbs! Surely this is not beyond your understanding. I would recommend you and your colleagues drown your sorrows in the local Gin Palace. You would do best to flee now, while you can,

With deepest remorse,

Bronisław Jackowski

The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades

Birmingham, January 31st ———

Dear Sir,

I write to you with sad news and attach this correspondence. I am afraid I do not have any answers at this time and have decided to take leave of this sorry land. I take passage to the Americas this very day,

Sincerely,

Pela

(Attached)

Tilbury, January 17th ———

Dear Madame,

As requested, I forward a copy of this correspondence to you in the hope it may shed some light on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Percy Williams

Harbour Master, Tilbury Dock, East London.

(Attached)

Incident 23/45/67/15-07

Preliminary Assessment

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency reported launch to assistance of *Falcon*, a merchant ship of the Blue Funnel line, sending *Mayday* near to NE Maplin Buoy. Resources dispatched include two lifeboats and Rescue Helicopter 125 was also tasked. Thames CG had heard the Ship calling for assistance on Channel 16, followed by the word *Mayday*. VHF bearings by the coastguard had established an approximate position. The casualty, en route from Szczecin to Tilbury Dock, ran aground on Foulness Sand in the Estuary this last Saturday night (13th January) at approximately 00.20 hours, beached itself near Holliwell Point 13 miles SSW of Walton Pier.

The Master of the Ship, Wolfgang Schultze, reported a terrible storm coming upon them suddenly in the Channel, before they had sighted the lightship at Barrow Deep – and this was attested to by all the crew, save one, a Mazurian seaman with no English at this time. (I am awaiting a translator.) However, I must report that the MRCC Thames Coastguard reported no such meteorological conditions in force that evening and indeed commented on the stillness of the night – this is also backed up by the Met Office reports we have consulted. (Appended)

Nonetheless, whatever the cause - unidentified as of the time of this report - the Ship broke upon the shoreline with sufficient strength to shatter the prow entirely beyond repair, spilling and dispersing various cargoes from the front compartments into the high tide. Locals attending a charity event at Deal Hall, two miles away, reported hearing a crack of thunder and some reported a bolt of lightning striking the ship as it came aground, though there were confusing reports of the lightning itself emanating from within the ship, as though there were some kind of explosion on board. While there was evidence of minor fire damage to the engine area, there does not appear to have been any ignition of combustible material on board. Nor is there a record of any such items in the manifest of the Ship. (Copied and appended)

Unfortunately, Mr. Jackowski was not found amongst the crew or the three remaining passengers. Officials are investigating the possibility as to whether he disembarked at Rotterdam, where the Ship made a short stop to load materials and various containers. However, one crew member, Stoker Sam Raikes, reported seeing Mr. Jackowski pacing on deck as the ship passed Maasvlakte – this being as the Ship entered the North Sea on the *final leg of the journey* to Tilbury – and stated that Mr. Jackowski was talking to himself in an agitated manner. Crew members were unhappy about the purported hearing of animal-like noises from within the hull and claimed the journey from the Baltic had been dogged by 'bad luck' throughout. They declined to define this further. One passenger, Mr. Haverstoke, complained to the Chief Steward that there was a large dog loose at night on the quarterdeck. It should be noted that the Chief Steward had asked the Master of the Ship to record in the Complaints Register that Mr. Haverstoke had left several empty bottles of whiskey in his rooms and had been consistent in verbal abuse of crew members.

As for Mr. Jackowski, his belongings were found to be wholly intact on the Ship, in the same cabin which he was allocated on boarding at Szczecin, apparently undisturbed or 'untouched' as a reliable source has informed me. I have passed on a series of handwritten notebooks found amongst his bags to the local C.I.D. A cursory glance at these suggests potential mental health issues, but I am not best placed to comment further on this at this time due to the weight of other case work.

Signed,

Chief Inspector P. Solly,
Essex Police Marine Unit, Burnham on Crouch.

(Attached)

Sejny, January 25th ———

Dear Madame,

If I understand your Polish correctly, Mr. Jackowski has not been at his desk at the Institute for several weeks.

I have news that I do not know how to write correctly. Please forgive my English.

The caretaker at Grasnudo has reported seeing a solitary figure at the lakeside on several occasions, this being just after the twilight, but when he approaches to ask his business, the figure disappears like a wraith in the mist. I have, I must first tell you, put this down to his solitary habits and supply of bimer – the home-made alcohol for which he would serve many years in prison if found out - but then I myself have now caught sight of this very same apparition without the aid of any drinking! Tall, slightly stooped, shoulder length hair, wearing a blue hat and a frock coat. I called out his name and thought that, for a moment, the figure paused in its movement and half-turned. As it did, a shiver went down my spine and I have to say I suddenly did not want the figure to entirely turn and face to me. I did not want to see its dreadful eyes. This frightful feeling lasted for some time, as the figure, not turning, hurried off into the woods.

Old Believers in these parts, who speak of nightwalkers and tell stories of Baba Jaga and many others beyond comprehension, say there is another world, a mere curtain of light or dark away. I do not know what to make of this but, my friend, stay strong in your belief.

Your truly,

Zina,

The House of the Borderland

Mansion Chambers
13, Stoney Street
Clerkenwell
London

To: Mr Joseph Ponsonby
Director
The Institute of Distinguished Artistic Practice & Allied Trades
Allenby Road
Oxford

July 2nd ———

Dear Sir,

Please find attached copies of the correspondence which I have gathered now in its entirety. This, along with facsimiles of the journals released by the police, give some indication of the movements of Mr. Jackowski and his state of mind.

As far I possible, I have established the versimilitude of their content. I have contacted the individuals concerned and can confirm the relative facts with regard to his movements abroad. The one individual I have found impossible to communicate with – and this I believe to be significant – is this Countess mentioned in his letters. I am unable to locate any living person who goes under this name and title in Poland or Lithuania, although considerable resources have been expended. As you know, Belorussian authorities and records have proved more difficult to access. It may, of course, prove to be some kind of alias or codename that Mr. Jackowski used for his own unknown purposes. While Mr. Jackowski remains ‘missing’ we can only speculate.

As several months have now passed since Mr. Jackowski left these shores, I think it unlikely that he will return in the near future, should he be in any position to do so. He has, for want of a better expression, ‘disappeared off the map’. We must consider the possibility that Mr. Jackowski never intended to return to Oxford and has therefore set up some kind of elaborate cover story. The fantastical – or absolute nonsensical, depending on your spiritual beliefs - nature of the drawings and notes in the journals lead me to favour this theory.

I am sorry I could not have been of more assistance in this matter.

Yours Faithfully,

Benjamin Kelly
Private Investigations



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