

Letter #15: Henryk Sienkiewicz¹ to Julian Horain²

Exiles, Adventurers, Artists: Letters from Polish California, 1836-1901
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Sebastopol: April 9, 1877

I am unable to express to you how your last letter delighted me; hence I'm answering it immediately even though I also gave the butcher³ a letter back to you today. This will be the third already. You report to me that all are in good health –

UNITED STATES MAIL.

POST-OFFICE DEPARTMENT,
WASHINGTON, December 1, 1874. }
Proposals will be received at the Contract Office of this Department until 3 o'clock P. M. of March 1, 1875 (to be decided by the 20th), for carrying the mails of the United States from July 1, 1875, to June 30, 1878, on the following routes in the State of California, and by the schedule of departures and arrivals herein specified, viz:
Service July 1, 1875, to June 30, 1878.
46273—From San Francisco to San Quentin, 12 miles and back, daily, in suitable and safe steamboats, with a schedule satisfactory to the Postmaster at San Quentin. Bond required with bid, \$600.
46274—From Sacramento city, by Cosumnes, to Michigan Bar, 27 miles and back, three times a week.
Leave Sacramento city Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 8 a m;
Arrive at Michigan Bar by 4 p m;
Leave Michigan Bar Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 8 a m;

meaning, therefore, also *Pani*⁴ Helena,⁵ who was not well when I left, giving me here no sense of calm. Doubtless the improvement of her health has had such a redemptive influence on the humor of her spouse that you have even noted it. I see too from the description of the anecdote with Mr. Bednawski⁶ that all are in good cheer, including *Pani* Helena. Praise God for that as well. I'd be truly jealous of you if I had only myself in mind and were it not for the fact that, in the absence of other causes to rejoice, there remains to me at least the solace of others being merry rather than

mournful. Likewise you have no cause to envy me this rebounding merriment; thus everything has turned out delightfully, even extremely so.

¹ Polish journalist and author; awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1905;

see: <http://culture.pl/en/artist/henryk-sienkiewicz>

² Julian Florian Horain, Polish journalist; see: <http://www.polishclubsf.org/Horain.pdf>

³ Michigan Bar was a goldmining town northeast of Sebastopol. The nearest post office to Sebastopol was located in Michigan Bar, Cosumnes Township, Sacramento County. The town butcher may have delivered mail, or Sienkiewicz may have nicknamed the mail carrier "the butcher" because he "felt butchered" when he failed to receive letters from his Polish friends in San Francisco.

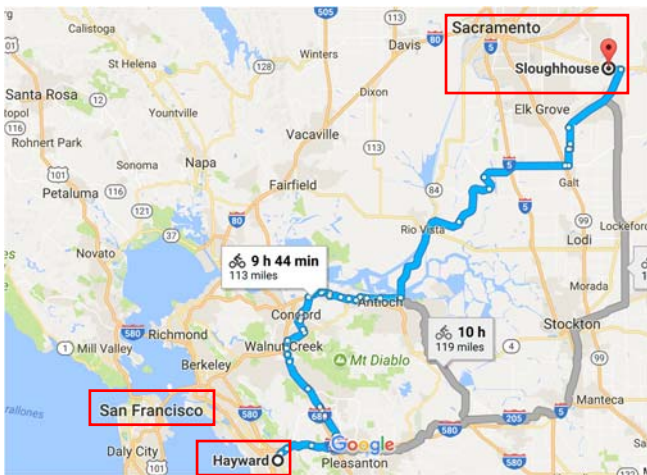
⁴ *Pan* and *Pani* are Polish titles of respect, and are roughly equivalent to Sir and Ma'am.

⁵ Helena Modrzejewska (Modjeska); see: <http://culture.pl/en/artist/helena-modrzejewska-modjeska>

⁶ Aleksander Bednawski; see: <http://www.polishclubsf.org/Bednawski%20addresses.pdf>

I thank you once more for the letter. Enjoy yourselves there, and if you've got a bit of time left over, write to me, about whatever you wish, even about trifles, even about the ever rosier spirits of Misters Chłapowski,⁷ Zachert⁸ or Bednawski.

Excuse me for writing so many letters – this pushiness arises from a yearning for news; yet if because of this, should things turn out in such a way that I leave for Europe, then I'll desist from vexing you for a long time, surely for a very long time. I don't know when this will happen; a man is not subject to himself⁹ – so on the strength of that principle, as new as it is philosophical, my departure is not subject to my will. If I should by chance go crazy, or get married to a woman with a large dowry, well then I'll stay here forever. I still don't know which of the two is more likely. It's said that many things happen suddenly and unexpectedly, a thought that's been inspired in me by Hamlet¹⁰ – which I was reading at the time I got your letter – who could not have imagined that a month after the death of old Hamlet, Queen Gertrude would have already forgotten him and given her hand to his brother?¹¹



Sebastopol was located near today's Soughhouse.

⁷ Karol Chłapowski, husband of Helena Modjeska

⁸ Jan Zachert; see: <http://www.polishclubsf.org/Zachert.pdf>

⁹ A man is not his own master, but a pawn of fate.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

¹¹ In William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, Gertrude is Hamlet's mother and Queen of Denmark. Her relationship with Hamlet is somewhat turbulent, since Hamlet resents her marrying her husband's brother Claudius after he murdered the King (young Hamlet's father).

Regarding me, I only know that both Captain Piotrowski¹² and I will probably leave Sebastopol to settle in Heywards¹³ – where in quiet and solitude I shall finish my play,¹⁴ which is worthless in itself but invaluable to me for the principle: “Know thyself!” since I know from it that I’d do better splitting wood someplace than

roaming further on the literary field.

Anyway, it’s nothing new. Captain Piotrowski just went to Miss Plumer’s¹⁵ to flirt with her while I, like a good buddy, stayed at home, so as not to bother him. All of this is ever so jolly.

Plummer Oliver P.	M	16	51
— Mary L.	W	F	40
— Mary E.	W	F	21
— Anna	W	F	17
— Harry W.	W	16	19

I thank you once again for your letter

– and for the good news about everyone’s health. Please extend my salutations to all. Please kiss *Pani* Helena’s hands with the deepest honor and respect, but with nothing added on your part. You cannot understand – nor would such a thing be proper – what it means to find oneself near the circle of her who is the pride and glory of her entire nation, its unrivaled greatness, the personal expression of its national genius, goodness, truth and beauty. If you understood this rightly – you’d ask yourself various questions, as I do, walking through the Sebastopol garden, more than once having spoken to myself: “How is it? – Oh, clown! – that you, who are nothing, have dared to speak to Her in any way but on your knees?” Be that as it may, I am less troubled than others by my conscience, for I’ve told *Pani* Helena more than once that she’s too good, too successful, both for me and for everyone. Please draw no inference, from these my words, in your preferans¹⁶ circle. This acknowledgement of greatness comes from someone who is nothing. I share these thoughts with you as a man of letters, also as one who inhabits the land of ideals, so there’s nothing strange about my not wanting what for us is plainly

¹² Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski; born in Poland; lived in the former mining town Sebastopol, Sacramento County and in San Francisco; founder of the Polish Society of California; served as Commissioner of Immigration; see:

<http://www.polishclubsf.org/Piotrowski%20in%20City%20Directories.pdf>

¹³ A California town known variously as "Hayward's," "Haywood, "Haywards" (since 1876), and "Hayward" (since 1911)

¹⁴ “*American drama*” (*Dramat amerykański*) described by Sienkiewicz as a “critical-satirical-sentimental” play; written for Helena Modrzejewska (Modjeska); the featured character, “Helena Steven,” is modelled after Modjeska. Modjeska translated the play into English. This handwritten play is lost to history.

¹⁵ Oliver Plummer’s family lived near Capt. Franciszek [Francis Michel] Wojciechowski in Cosumnes Township

¹⁶ Preferans is a Russian card game that became popular in the 1830s.

spoken to be misinterpreted and sent out on the wagging tongues of narrow-minded fools. I flatter myself that you understand me. Anyway, this is not about me personally. As I've mentioned before, it looks like I probably won't be staying in America much longer, and once I've left, this place here behind me will grow cold and its memory fade away.

Everything here is now likely. It's been good to be among you, and still is, but again I repeat that a man is not subject to himself. So speak of my plans to no one. It could just as well happen that I won't be leaving – and my personal wish, were that to be the deciding factor – would dictate that I remain here forever. I've taken a liking to America and to all Americans with the exception of California aristocrats and others who strike me as masses of bumpkins, regarding which I think that Gray¹⁷ is right: SLAUGHTER THEM.¹⁸ But never mind that. I tell you seriously that my state of mind is very bleak. The only thought that gives me comfort is that we're moving to Heywards. Closer to you, for whom my friendship is more sincere than you think – closer at last to San Francisco. – You ask why I left, inasmuch as I was happy there. Don't ask me! Now a sad perversity requires that I remain at least until I finish this play.

It's unlikely that both captains will arrive on the 17th of April (how's that for a date?). Cap(tain) Piotrowski might be there because he has an appointment with Salomon¹⁹ on the 20th, but *Pan* Franciszek²⁰ is not well – he probably won't last long. You wouldn't believe how he's aged. His nose is turning white and it's grown sharper – his eyes are filming over²¹ – which puts him in a constant fury. Because of this he may soon be at peace, more deeply and unceasingly at peace than any of us have ever been in life.



Edward S. Salomon

¹⁷ American botanist Asa Gray (1810-1888); his *Darwiniana* was considered an important reconciliation of religion and science. Quoted as saying: *I am sufficiently convinced already that the members of a profession know their own calling better than anyone else can know it. AND I expect rather the charitable judgment than the full assent of those whose approbation I could most wish to win.*

¹⁸ "Piererezat" - a Russian word meaning to cut, to lance, to slit, to saw, to traverse

¹⁹ General Edward Selig Salomon (1836-1913), the governor of Washington Territory and a California legislator; an acquaintance of Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski who was sympathetic to the Polish cause

²⁰ Franciszek Michał Wojciechowski (Francis Michel); see:

<http://www.polishclubsf.org/Franciszek%20Michal.pdf>

²¹ Literally "His eyes are going behind a sheet [as in 'sheet metal']." Likely ocular cataracts, the most common cause of vision loss in people over age 40

There would be something in this for us to envy, were it not that this good fortune will overtake us too – but who knows, perhaps you, who are younger, or I, who am young, will meet with it earlier. Sometimes I wish for this – sometimes not. More often not, for I have a great, great faith in life. Especially at present; I don't know how it will be later. Meanwhile, the trick is not to poison oneself with bad ideas, doubts, etc. – to do something anyway, though the rabble-thoughts sometimes drag my head down so that it's impossible to fend them off.

But truly I'm gladdened to know that all of you there are joyful and optimistic. By all of you I mean you personally and *Pani* Helena, as the others leave me neither warm nor cold. To those who are sympathetic, I wish well; the unsympathetic I would send to hell, and that's the long and short of it. I would like to contribute to your joyfulness – if then, when I write a letter that's cheerful and amusing, not greasy, then read it, when you have a chance, to *Pani* Helena. Maybe it will bring a smile to her lips. This one, which I'm writing now, you'd better not read. However little I might mean to her, I know she is so good my soul's acidity would cast a shadow on her happiness. I would rather take on any other sin than one like this. Bow to her, kiss her hands, tell her that I'm healthy, happy, enchanted with nature and grateful for the various Watson and Plumer girls and other Sebastopol frumps – that will be *all right*. I likewise promise in future letters to be rather more Wilkonski-an²² than Byronic.²³

Give Paweł²⁴ a hug from me. The little shaver, pickle, button, tad. I dreamed of him once (I myself don't know why) as the owner of an enormous stock of cigars. Maybe it's a prophetic dream. Did you send Tadzio²⁵ to my old apartment to see if there are any letters for me? If there is something from Dyniewicz²⁶ don't send it until I've written again, because we might be moving soon to Heywards. In any event, the rest of the letters should still come to me –

4	Juliusz H. Horain	47				+ Russia
5	Thaddeus	9				
6	Ludwig	7				
7	Michael	6				
8	Wladislaw	3				
9	Paul		3			
	Marie von Horain	35		4		Germany
	Julia	5				+ Russia
	Delphine	58				

HORAIN family 1871
 Delphine (mother), Julian, Marie (wife)
 Thaddeus, Julia, Ludwig, Michael, Ladislaus, Paul (6 children)
 [Lucy was born in New Jersey in 1874, bringing the total to 7 children]

²² August Wilkoński (1805-1852); author of humorous tales depicting the lives and customs of rural folk

²³ George Gordon Byron, commonly known as Lord Byron, was an English poet, peer, politician, and a leading figure in the Romantic movement.

²⁴ Paweł (Paul) Horain, Julian's son

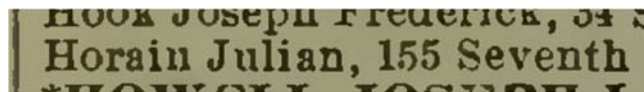
²⁵ A diminutive of Tadeusz (Thaddeus), son of Julian Horain

²⁶ Władysław Dyniewicz, Chicago editor of *Gazeta Polska*

the newspapers too. I tell you, it's so dull and lonesome here that sometimes I just want to lose my mind. I hug you – I kiss *Pani's*²⁷ hands. Kiss our Lady's hands from me. Believe me, I gain nothing through such a deputation as it's only a deputation. Excuse me once again for the lengthy scrawl. Be well.

Henryk S.

Envelope: M. Jules Horain, 155 Seventh Street, San Francisco, Cal.



Postmarked: Cosumnes, April 9 Cal[ifornia].

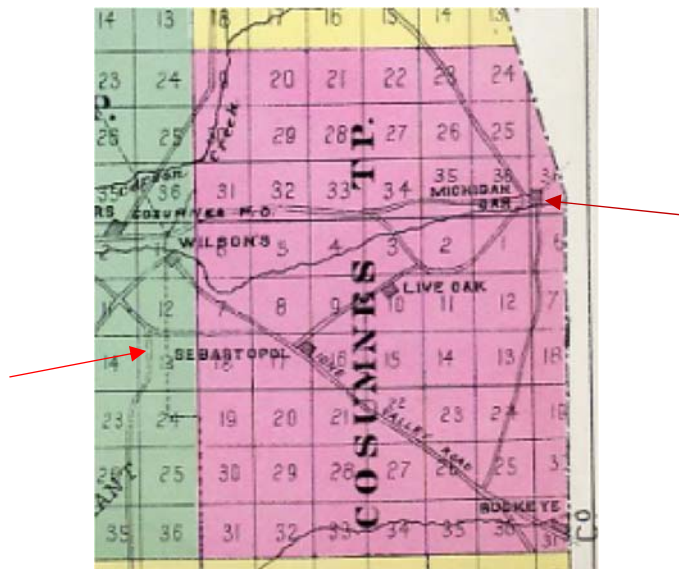
SOURCE:

Letter from Henryk Sienkiewicz to Julian Horain.

Letter number 15, in: Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Listy*. Tom 1, Cześć 2 . Warszawa 1977; referenced online: <http://www.henryk-sienkiewicz.eu/index.php?id=listy&r=1877&akcja=pokaz>

NOTE: The editors and translator have revised or augmented some of Maria Bokszczanin's original footnotes.

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²⁷ Madame Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska)