


Letter #20: Henryk Sienkiewicz¹ to Julian Horain²

Exiles, Adventurers, Artists: Letters from Polish California, 1836-1901
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1877³

*Carissime et reverendissime amice!*⁴

I am again sending you a letter to Our Lady,⁵ which you are to deliver under those very same conditions as before, which is to say amidst four eyes  only, and that for the very, ultra, and most supremely important reason that in my letter, about *him*,⁶ i.e., the unmentioned, I ask her and I plead for her kindness regarding the translation of my drama⁷ into the English language, that she not listen to one suggestion, or take any pointers from her spouse, who likes to meddle in everything, speaks English like a cow, and knows literature like a goat knows pepper. Of course no such delicate matter, which ought to be handled with kid gloves,⁸ could be communicated through your lips on my instructions, nor would it do to mail the letter normally, as it would no doubt be read by the spouse who so thoughtfully watches over his spouse's correspondence. And so, writing in this manner, I had to pick my words like a Jew gets picky over fish, writing openly about the intellectual attributes of the mister, in such a way as not to insult the missus herself! But I think that, somehow, it'll go over. As far as you're concerned – this is the last time now that I'll disturb your idleness, rather not your idleness but the awkwardness attending such consignments. Because there have been many others; but, but... I wouldn't want to stir up a demonic suspicion, which

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 Written in 1877 in Haywards, California; known variously as "Hayward's," "Haywood," "Haywards" (since 1876), and "Hayward" (since 1911); Sinkwitz and Czarnecki lived in Haywoods (see Letter #19)

⁴ Latin: "Dearest and most revered friend;" vocative case in Polish translation – direct form of address, poetic tone, somewhat less used today

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

⁶ Modjeska's husband

⁷ "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.

⁸ Literally, "wonderfully [strangely] wrapped in cotton": *dziwnie owijać bawełną*

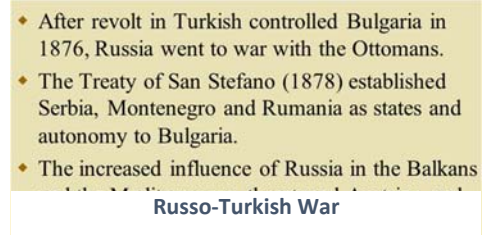
would arise should Lady Helena show this letter to you,⁹ amidst verses bespeaking honor, adoration and friendship, there calls out something (O Lady Benefactress!) like a counter-chorus, or fervent prayers strung out longer than a forty-hour devotional.

Now what was it I wanted to say? Aha! I am revising this drama¹⁰ in Polish, which I hope will assure me unceasing immortality in the milieu of current graduates from the Academy of the Patronesses of Polish Literary Drama, whence the following:

“For my Christmas carol strain,
Perhaps some recompense I shall obtain”¹¹

May it be so. Amen! All joking aside, if this bit of literary trash should reach her through his hands,¹² then at the very least I’d have a mortal enemy, and she’d have a great deal of unpleasantness, owing to how anyone would dare write to her that he¹³ is not a brilliant dramatist, with a scholarly grounding in English. I assert that to cause her any displeasure, or rather to increase the already not inconsiderable number of her displeasures, I would look upon as the greatest sin I’d ever committed.

So, we have a war, do we?¹⁴ Or, to put it differently, the world is beginning to polarize; the brutes are bashing one another. May there be something in this for us – and surely there will, but



- ♦ After revolt in Turkish controlled Bulgaria in 1876, Russia went to war with the Ottomans.
- ♦ The Treaty of San Stefano (1878) established Serbia, Montenegro and Rumania as states and autonomy to Bulgaria.
- ♦ The increased influence of Russia in the Balkans

Russo-Turkish War

⁹ Possibilities: 1) If Helena shows the letter to Horain, the latter will know more than he should, and inevitably, Helena’s husband will suspect collusion, thus provoking “demonic suspicion;” 2) Sienkiewicz knows that Horain knows that Sienkiewicz is in love with Modrzejewska, in which case this passage reflects self-irony on Sienkiewicz’s part; Sienkiewicz is mocking his own abject, lovelorn condition; 3) Modjeska’s husband would immediately suspect a romantic attachment between Sienkiewicz and Modjeska were he to discover a secret correspondence.

¹⁰ Sienkiewicz’s play

¹¹ An allusion (in Polish) to Modrzejewska’s maiden name, Będówna [whose first three letters reflect the first three letters of the future tense helping verb, *będe* – pronounced exactly like “*bende*” (not a word) – with which the little rhyme concludes in Polish]

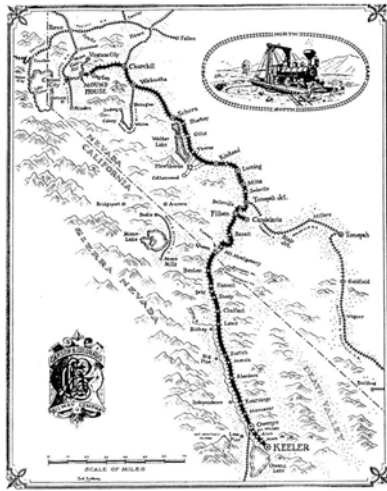
¹² Sienkiewicz does not want Modrzejewska’s husband, Chłapowski, to see the letter.

¹³ Modrzejewska’s husband, Chłapowski

¹⁴ The Russo-Turkish war: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russo-Turkish_War_\(1877%E2%80%931878\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russo-Turkish_War_(1877%E2%80%931878))

whether it's to be something better or not, only God knows. The thought that the Prussians could grab the right bank of the Vistula troubles me seriously at times.

I watch for the Captain¹⁵ with impatience, in the first place because I enjoy his company, and in the second place because the newspapers arrive when he does. Anyway! Be so good and gracious as to ask Bielawski¹⁶ to indicate clearly



Railroad Map, Eastern California Museum

where, that is, from what town, the California desert begins, the one that the train to Los Angeles crosses, also where this desert ends, and in addition ask him to what species belong those palm trees that grow there.¹⁷

I am writing a description of it, which of course no one will read because of the war. – One more thing. As a good and true friend – I entreat you, don't read more than is



written there into my mention of Leo¹⁸ in my [last] letter to you. You mustn't let it enter your head that they'd¹⁹ like to be cordially relieved of you.²⁰ I swear to

¹⁵ Captain Rudolf Piotrowski; born in Poland; lived in 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>

¹⁶ Kazimierz Bielawski; surveyor; co-founder of the Polish Society of California in San Francisco; see: <http://www.PolishClubSF.org/Bielawski.pdf>


¹⁷ Apparently the information from Bielawski did not reach Sienkiewicz on time, as his Travel Letters (*Listy z Podróży*) do not mention the names of those towns on the edge of the Mojave Desert. Wiktor Kwast, who in 1971 retraced Sienkiewicz's course through California, has established that the author made mistakes in designating the desert's location relative to the mountains and to the Pacific Ocean; this made it much harder to find the places where he stayed. Nor did Sienkiewicz demonstrate much understanding of the botanical realm, another consequence of Bielawski's input not arriving. The palm trees in question – judging from how they're described – belong to a genus of very large shrubs known as Joshua trees, but they have no relation at all to palm trees (W. Kwast, *Szukam umarłego lasu* (In search of a forest that's passed away). *Wiadomości* Numbers 1318, 1319, 1971, pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ A Sienkiewicz literary contact; Leo Tolstoy ?

¹⁹ Presumably, literary contacts in Warsaw who send money to both Horain and Sienkiewicz

²⁰ During 1877, Julian Horain systematically printed Sienkiewicz's *Letters from California* (*Listy z Kalifornii*). Horain also edited a San Francisco Polish newspaper, and his letters and other work were published in Poland. Sienkiewicz is reassuring Horain that two Polish correspondents in San Francisco need not be rivals, and that both can be supported by Warsaw.

you that this is not the case. You are more necessary to them than they are to you. I've known this for a long time, and it's an absolute certainty. My



corresp[ondence], though likewise from California, has no role in this, since these are descriptions from my travels – not a steady American correspondence – and secondly, I'm here today, there tomorrow, one day busy with Klaudyna,²¹ another day with Ludwik;²² hence, they are neither able nor willing to rely on me. At last I wrote to them, saying I may go to Arizona, that I certainly would go, were they, instead of 200 dollars, to send me 1200, or still better, 2200. Tell me, what are we going to do if the war prevents them from sending me money? *I don't know!*²³ Before that happens I need to buy myself a bootblack's pedestal (*pour passer le temps*)²⁴ in San Francisco. I'll tell my friends it's for my health, just a way of exercising²⁵ in the Summer.

Hugs.

Your Henryk

SOURCE:

Letter from Henryk Sienkiewicz to Julian Horain.

Letter number 20, 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 of this English translation have revised and augmented some of the original footnotes by Maria Bokszczanin. Some footnotes are our own.

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²¹ Unknown

²² Julian Horain's eldest son

²³ Sienkiewicz wrote this exclamation in English

²⁴ "To pass the time" (French). The original footnote translates this into "for killing time" – *dla zabicia czasu*

²⁵ Sienkiewicz uses a Latin term here – *agitatio* – which the original footnote identifies as meaning "*ruchu*," or "movement," indicating physical exercise (not, e.g., political "agitation").