

# A Citizen of the World: Count Leon Skórzewski<sup>1</sup>

**Ryszard Nowicki**

Faculty of Administration and Social Sciences, Scientific Information and Library Studies, Kazimierz Wielki University

Ogińskiego 16, 85-601 Bydgoszcz, Polska/Poland

Email: nowickiryszard@interia.pl

**Abstract** After World War II, Count Leon Skórzewski settled in Australia. He is a unique Pole living on this distant continent. He was born in 1933 in Czerniejewo into a family of landowners. His parents were Count Zygmunt Skórzewski and Princess Leontyna of Radziwiłł. In 1940 they fled from the occupied country. During World War II, Count Skórzewski stayed in Romania, France, Spain and Italy, where his parents were arrested. In 1945 in Poland the landowners were destroyed as a result of political and structural changes. After the war, the Skórzewski family's extensive fortune, with palaces in Czerniejewo and Lubostroń, was nationalized. Leon Skórzewski remained in exile. He worked in Corsica, Canada, Singapore and Australia. He has never ceased to be a Pole, though he neither maintained any contacts with the Polish community nor gave any interviews; he has never contacted the media. In Australia, he belongs to a small group of people from the European aristocracy. This paper is based on a historical and librarian research, connected with the access to the private family archive, conducted by the author in 2008 in Australia, and a series of extensive interviews with Count Skórzewski.

**Keywords** Leon Skórzewski; Poles abroad-Australia; Minorities

Leon Skórzewski, who lives in Australia, belongs to a small group of people from the European aristocracy. He is without doubt an exceptional Pole living on this remote continent whose fate, until recently, remained unknown. In 2008 I made a research trip to Australia. I am the first person who interviewed Leon Skórzewski and who had access to his private archive. Two years later, i.e. in 2010, my book entitled *Count Skórzewski's Search for a Place on Earth. The Diary of a Journey to Australia* was published by University of Bydgoszcz. I presented there extremely interesting events connected with the life of a man who, over a period of several decades, became a citizen of the world.

Leon Skórzewski was born in a family of landowners in Czerniejewo in

1933, several kilometres from Gniezno, the first capital city of Polish. His parents were Count Zygmunt Skórzewski and Maria of Radziwill Skórzewska. It is worth mentioning that his grandmother, Marie de Benardaky, was the object of Marcel Proust's youthful affections, as Céleste Albaret mentioned in her diary (*Pan Proust [Monsieur Proust]*, the memoirs were written down by Georges Belmont [226-7]). Marcel Proust was said to be 'crazy' for Marie de Benardaky. She was the archer of Gilberte Swann in the autobiographical novel cycle *In Search of Lost Time* (or *Remembrance of Things Past*, French title: *À la recherche du temps perdu*).

Leon Skórzewski's parents had extensive properties in Greater Poland and two palaces: in Czerniejewo and Lubostroń. A few-year-old son, who was to become the heir to the family fortune, initially studied English and French. He barely knew Polish then. His home education was abruptly interrupted in 1939. A few weeks before the expected outbreak of World War II, Leon's parents took their children to Ołyki to a relative, Prince Janusz Radziwill. In September 1939, Zygmunt Skórzewski and his wife had to flee from the Germans. For his initial support of the insurgents in Greater Poland the Count was threatened with death. The family reached Ołyki on September 17, 1939, on the day of the Soviet aggression on Poland. Leon Skórzewski remembers that his father, as a sign of mourning, broke his sword and buried it before the walls of the castle in Ołyki. The whole Skórzewski family was temporarily deprived of their freedom by the Russians and then consequently evicted. In the winter of 1940, they illegally crossed the Polish-Romanian border near the town of Kolomyya. A few-year-old Leon recalls that they fled in a small group and before crossing the Cheremosh border river they covered themselves with sheets. In Romania, the Polish consulate issued two passports: for the father and the mother photographed with three children. This was the first foreign country to which the little boy arrived in unusual circumstances. Leon was a gifted child. In a short period of time he began to speak Romanian. In May 1940, the whole Skórzewski family went to France. In Paris, Zygmunt Skórzewski volunteered for the Polish Army. He was soon sent on a mission to Spain. In Madrid, his son began to attend a school and learnt Spanish. It did not last long, however, as the Count was given another important task to perform, this time in Italy.

Zygmunt Skórzewski, in January 1941, was sent to Italy as a representative of the Polish government in London. Before leaving Madrid, he personally informed of his mission the British Ambassador Samuel Hoare. The English diplomat asked the Count to examine the situation and check if there were chances of reaching an agreement with Italy, namely the transition of Italy to the Allies. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary in Winston Churchill's wartime Cabinet, knew about the top-secret mission of Zygmunt Skórzewski.

The trip was organized with the help of European aristocratic families. In order for the departure not to cause any suspicions and look reliable, Zygmunt Skórzewski wrote a letter which was sent by his wife, Leontyna Skórzewska, to one of her aunts, who served as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elena of Italy, the wife of Victor Emmanuel III. These attempts proved to be successful. The whole Skórzewski family received, within a short period of time, permission to stay in Italy.

Zygmunt Skórzewski, during this difficult period, conducted talks regarding the conclusion of peace between Italy and the Allies. The task was not easy and safe due to the fact that Benito Mussolini was an ally of Adolf Hitler. Contacts with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were facilitated by Carlo Sallier De la Tour, a relative of Leontyna Skórzewska. The Count also informed Pope Pius XII, during a private audience, of the crimes committed by the Nazis on Polish and Jewish nations in occupied Poland.

Zygmunt Skórzewski's dangerous mission did not end in a success. Under pressure from the Germans, the Italian secret police arrested, in 1942 in Terminillo, Zygmunt and Leontyna Skórzewski. They were locked up in a Roman prisons—Regina Coeli for men and Mantellate for women. The orphaned children were taken care of by the workers of the Embassy of Poland in the Holy See in Rome, especially by ambassador Kazimierz Papée. Pope Pius XII and Queen Helena of Italy were informed about the imprisonment of the couple. A year later, Zygmunt and Leontyna Skórzewski were deported by the Gestapo to Berlin. The International Red Cross and Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, later Pope Paul VI, solicited their release.

Leon Skórzewski was one of a few Polish boys residing in Rome during the war. He attended a school in Mondragone and learnt another language, Italian. He was not aware of the importance of the actions taken by his parents. For long months he did not have any news about them. During the occupation, thanks to the nuns, he also learnt Polish. It is amazing that despite a short period of learning this language he has not forgotten Polish to this day. It is worth emphasizing that, for over sixty years, living away from the home country, he has not been using the language of his ancestors.

The war had a unique impact on the psyche of the boy. As he recalls, he regarded bombings as something normal, peace was unusual for him. This is characteristic of many, especially young, people who survived World War II. He did not realize the impending danger. At the end of the war he witnessed, among others, the Allied bombing of the headquarters of Gen. Albert Kesselring, Frascati, a small village near Mondragone. During the bombings, he did not go with others to a shelter. He used to stay in his room in the attic and with the carefree, childlike curiosity he watched exploding bombs, incoming planes, anti-aircraft headlights. After the raid, the

Mondragone school was closed. He then started to attend another one in Rome. The World War II period was particularly difficult for the young boy, though he was not aware of it. Deprived of their freedom and facing a pending trial, his parents did not have any possibility to contact their children. Leon found friends among adult men, including Polish soldiers from the army of General Władysław Anders.

The family reunion took place in Rome in 1945. Skórzewski was released from prison by the Germans just before the end of the war. The nephew of King Gustav V of Sweden, Count Folke Bernadotte, the vice president of the Swedish Red Cross, who had negotiated with Heinrich Himmler the end of the war, drove the couple to a safe place. Then they sailed from Lübeck to Sweden. Through England they reached Rome and returned to their children. They had to make a very difficult decision—where to live. The return to Poland was impossible. The country was under the influence of the Soviet Union. For political reasons, the gentry in 1945 ceased to exist. They suffered numerous hardships, they were persecuted and imprisoned, they were not allowed to return to their estates and even live near former private properties. False press releases were published about them. Multigenerational family residences, which survived the Nazi occupation and were not destroyed by the Russians, were nationalized. And so it happened with the Skórzewski's estate. In exile, they had no means of support. Before the war, all the accumulated savings of the father of Leon Skórzewski were allocated for homeland defence purposes. They only managed to buy, in 1947, a piece of land in Corsica. They lived very modestly. They had no financial means to educate their children. Sending Leon Skórzewski to a hotel school in Switzerland was a major financial effort.

For several years Leon Skórzewski worked hard as a farmer on the island of Corsica. He befriended local shepherds and learnt their language. After graduating from the hotel school in Lausanne in 1965, he took up employment on a vessel sailing between Italy and Greece. In 1968 he moved to Canada where he was working at the international exhibition for six months. After marrying Ulrike Skórzewski, they went to Singapore. For over a year he worked as a director of one of the restaurants. In 1970, he decided to go to Australia.

Poles have been living in Australia for two centuries; they are the nation's minority population. The first came in the late eighteenth century. During the next century, after the fall of the November Uprising and the Spring of Nations political exiles arrived. However, few Poles lived there—in 1947 only 6000. Increased inflow took place after World War II and after 1989. At the end of the 1980s, there were more than 130 thousand citizens of Polish origin in a country with the population of over 17 million people. The Australian populace was created mainly due to immigration; with the majority of British origin. Numerous Polish organizations are operating on the

continent, but Leon Skórzewski, not even for a while, has been a member of any of them.

Hotel education gained in Lausanne gave Leon Skórzewski and his wife hope of finding a job quickly. But the reality proved to be different. Upon arrival, during the first few months, they were staying in a transit camp. Then they went to Sydney. Leon Skórzewski had been working in Australia until his retirement. He has Polish citizenship, which he has never expatriated, as well as French and Australian. His only son, Thomas, was born in Australia. Together with his wife, Leon Skórzewski decided to bring up a child who would be looking into the future and not the past, especially since the past was very painful. For years Leon Skórzewski had no hope that the return to Poland would be possible. He did not maintain contact with the Polish community and any societies in Australia. Referring to the motto of his family “Semper recte”, which means always justly, dignified and noble, he decided to bring Thomas up in new conditions as a free man who would not be burdened with the baggage of the past.

Although he settled several thousand kilometres from the family nest, he has never renounced being a Pole. He studied the rich history of Poland and Polish language. He owes this knowledge primarily to nuns, parents, relatives and a few other people who took care of him during World War II. In his home he keeps precious souvenirs connected with Poland. The collection includes, e.g., a graphics depicting the last Polish king Stanisław August Poniatowski. He knows well the history of Polish sovereign, including the conqueror of the Turks, the victorious king of Vienna, 1683, John III Sobieski, whose miniature he carefully stores. A few photographs survived from the Polish period, among them a portrait of a carefree little boy pictured in front of palaces in Czarniejewo, where he was born, and in Lubostroń. The relationship with other European royal and aristocratic families is proven by, e.g., an invitation to a party from King Edward VII, which Leon's ancestors, Michal and Maria Radziwill, received in the early twentieth century. To particularly precious souvenirs one may include a copy of an original book by Tadeusz Stryjeński, *Pałace i dwory z czasów saskich, Stanisława Augusta i Księstwa Warszawskiego w województwie poznańskim. Na podstawie podróży odbytej w lipcu 1926 roku*, published in 1929. From the once rich collection of books from Lubostroń and Czarniejewo, amounting before the outbreak of World War II to a total of about 70 thousand items, in a private collection of Leon Skórzewski just one volume has survived. This copy has a symbolic meaning. It also shows the tragedy that struck one of many aristocratic families in Poland and their book collections. Skórzewski's library collections belonged to the largest private collections in the country.

During numerous trips, Leon Skórzewski has visited the whole world. He

worked in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia. It is worth emphasizing that everywhere he feels good. He says that if he lived in France he would feel as a French, in Italy—as an Italian, in Spain—as a Spanish. Now he lives in Australia, so he feels as an Australian. He believes that this is a fantastic country and the people are wonderful. His life, full of fascinating experiences, depicts the process of becoming a citizen of the world. Events connected with World War II, on which he did not have the slightest influence, made it necessary for him to wander through Europe and the world. First, following the decision of his parents—and later, in the adult life, of his own accord.

He lives on the Gold Coast, a few dozen kilometres from the capital of Queensland - Brisbane, the most easterly region of Australia. Years ago he bought a piece of land, within walking distance of Surfers Paradise. Earlier this place had been only a pasture with just one tree growing. He built a house and created a garden where he planted palm trees, fruit trees and ornamental shrubs. A one-storey building is surrounded by exotic plants. This extremely friendly garden is frequently visited by various species of parrots, kangaroos and koalas. A snake named Fred in the attic lives. For many Europeans this image may be downright heavenly. Leon Skórzewski befriended the animal world to the extent that he feeds wild birds from his hand. He knows numerous interesting stories about the fascinating flora and fauna of Australia, which he eagerly tells. He appreciates the value and the importance of protecting the natural world both on a local and global scale.

The distinctiveness of Leon Skórzewski lies in the fact that he belongs to a small group of the descendants of the European aristocracy living in Australia. He has never felt as an emigrant. Owing to his parents, he has felt as a citizen of the world. He is a Pole by birth and he has never ceased to be one. All the knowledge about the rich past of his family he drew almost entirely from the oral tradition handed down by his parents and relatives during family gatherings. He is a living history, the last heir to the centuries-old tradition of an aristocratic Polish family, related by blood to the European aristocracy, living on a distant continent. When World War II broke out, he was barely 6 years old. He did not even know Polish well. After the war his parents worked hard to survive. On Corsica, Leon Skórzewski, plowing with mules the soil and collecting olives for several years, experienced hard work. He rightly believes that parentage does not matter. He is proud of his noble origins and the title of Count, at the same time considering it as obsolete. He states that the title of Count should be earned, not inherited. He is convinced that his ancestors lived in line with the family motto “*Semper recte*”. He decided to raise his only son, Thomas, in accordance with this maxim. As stated by Leon Skórzewski, the most important in life is the future, not looking back. That is why, after arriving in Australia, his most important decision

was that his descendant was to become an Australian, a free and honest man. He has never told his son about the noble titles and their lineage because of the fact that the Polish nobility ended with World War II. He is very proud of the history of his lineage and of his parents who demonstrated profound patriotism and heroism during the war. He perfectly remembers about his aristocratic origins and Polish roots but he has never given interviews and he has not maintained any contact with the media or any societies. The memories are very painful to him. He is a citizen of the world who believes that all people should be treated equally, regardless of origin, skin colour, nationality, religion or profession. He is convinced that the world would be much better if everyone acted in accordance with the Skórzewski's motto: "Semper recte".

### Note

1. This paper is translated by Marta Nowicka.

### Works Cited

- Albaret, Céleste. *Pan Proust*. Wspomnienia spisał Georges Belmont. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czytelnik, 1976.
- Nowicki, Ryszard. *Hrabiego Skórzewskiego poszukiwania miejsca na ziemi. Dziennik podróży do Australii*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2010.
- Strzałka, Krzysztof. *Między przyjaźnią a wrogością. Z dziejów stosunków polsko-włoskich (1939-1945)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2001.

责任编辑：柏 灵