

Volume 07

Cross-Roads.

Polish Studies in Culture,
Literary Theory, and History

Edited by Ryszard Nycz
and Teresa Walas

Włodzimierz Bolecki

A World Apart
by Gustaw Herling

Introduction

A World Apart by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński became essential reading in Poland shortly after the political transformations of 1989 and after the abolition of censorship in April 1990. But even when the first official edition (1989) was being prepared for publication in Poland, it was hardly unknown. In a 1981 poll in the monthly *Res Publica* it was voted among the most important Polish books of the twentieth century, enormously influential in shaping attitudes among the Polish intelligentsia, and throughout the 1980s it was printed and reprinted by a large variety of underground presses. In spite of this, the first official print runs reached several hundred thousand copies, making *A World Apart* not only one of the most important works of modern Polish literature, but also a bestseller.

The present book, written in 1993 and later expanded, has only one goal: to assist teachers and students in their reading of *A World Apart* as a work of literature and as historical testimony, with attention to both its literary and historical aspects, as well as to Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's life, closely bound up as it is with the book's subject matter.

In view of this aim, I decided, despite the nature of this book, which is that of a mini-monograph, not to include any in-depth editorial, biographical, textual or historical analysis or detailed interpretation, which I shall leave for another occasion.

Chapter I

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński: A Short Biography

1. Childhood

We know very little about Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's childhood and early years. All the references to his early life in his many autobiographical writings, memoirs and reminiscences are full of gaps and things passed over in silence; again and again, when we try to reconstruct this period of his life, we come up against unanswered questions. There is still much archival research to be done. One of the things we know least about is the question of Herling's Jewish roots, tackled for the first time only very recently by Irena Furnal.¹

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was born on May 20th, 1919, the youngest of four children of Józef and Dorota Bryczkowska.

The event took place in the hamlet of Daleszyce on July 17th, 1919, at 1 pm. Jakób-Josek Herling, aka Grudziński, 47 years of age, a merchant temporarily residing in the village of Skrzelczyce, in the Szczecno district, and a permanent resident of the city of Kielce, came to us in person, and in the presence of witnesses Chaim Miodecki, a clerk in the Jewish community's board of administration, 49 years of age, and Dawid Nawarski, shopkeeper, 50 years of age, both residing in the hamlet of Daleszyce, registered a male child, declaring it to have been born in the village of Skrzelczyce, in the Szczecno district, on May 20th of that year, at 7 am, to his wife Dobrysia, née Bryczkowska, 39 years of age. During the religious ceremony the child was given the name of Gecel, aka Gustaw.²

Herling himself, however, always insisted that he was born in Kielce. This is also the version given in 1991 by his sister Łucja in a conversation with Furnal, who

-
- 1 I. Furnal, "Skrzelczyce czy Kielce", in: *Teraz. Świętokrzyski Miesięcznik Kulturalny* 2009 no. 5 (65).
 - 2 Gustaw Herling's birth certificate, an abbreviated version of which is quoted in I. Furnal, op.cit. It was Irena Furnal who found the birth certificate. I quote here from document no. 30 in the 1919 archives of the Registry of Marriages, Births and Deaths of the Jewish Community of the Daleszyn District. This is a copy, made by the Kielce district governor on January 17th, 1925, of 47 birth certificates registered in 1919. I am grateful to Mirosław Wójcik for helping me to obtain access to this document.

considers the “family legend” more likely to be true than the official version from the public records office.

The latter, however, also tallies with local legend. By all accounts, Jakób-Josek Herling ran the farm while his wife Dorota lived in Kielce with the children; according to local lore, Mrs Herling and the children spent their summers in Skrzelczyce, and Gustaw was born there in the summer of 1919.

But the legend is dismissed as false by Herling’s sister Łucja Utnik, who says that her mother “never came to Skrzelczyce; she was very much a city person, she didn’t like the country”.³ Herling’s father put down Skrzelczyce as Gustaw’s birthplace because that was officially his temporary place of residence (which the birth certificate confirms). His mother was at this time busy raising the children and “sending them off to school one by one” (Eugenia finished school in 1920 and Maurice in 1921, while Łucja started high school in 1923).

We have very little choice but to accept this “family legend”, but there is much that remains unclear. Mrs Herling may not have run the farm in Skrzelczyce with her husband, but it is surely not inconceivable that she sometimes came down with the children from Kielce, especially in the summer. Moreover – as Furnal points out in her article – the Herlings’ eldest son, Maurice, often came down to Skrzelczyce to help his father on the farm, so his elder sister Eugenia must surely also have visited from time to time. And it is hard to believe that Łucja, who was four when Gustaw was born, was never taken there.

The farm in Skrzelczyce was known in the family as “the land of plenty”; Gustaw’s father cannot have been the sole source of such tales – the farm must have been familiar to the whole family. According to various accounts, the Herlings did indeed spend their summers together there.⁴ This does not mean that they lived or stayed there at other times of the year, but Gustaw’s birth in Skrzelczyce in May 1919 cannot be ruled out.

Apart from the fact that the official “Daleszyn” version is the local legend, the explanation it provides seems simple and coherent. The village of Skrzelczyce is about 15 km away from the hamlet of Daleszyce (today a town). And in 1919, it was the closest Jewish community for the inhabitants of Skrzelczyce.⁵

If Gustaw had been born in Kielce, why would his father have travelled to the registry in Daleszyce (about 20 km away from Kielce) to register his birth? The Jewish community’s registry in Kielce would have been the natural place to

3 Quoted in Furnal, op. cit.

4 See: *Wspomnienia Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego. Chłopiec z Kielecczynny*. Collected and edited by Z. Kudelski. The text is unauthorized. *Rzeczpospolita*, July 27, 2002.

5 The Jewish community in Daleszyce dates from 1869; after WWI it comprised about 300 people and encompassed the town of Szczecno, of which Skrzelczyce was a part.

register the birth of a child born in Kielce – a child whose father, according to the birth certificate, was a “permanent resident” there.

On the other hand, if we accept the “Daleszyn” version, we must also accept that in 1919 the family’s departure from Kielce to Skrzelczyce “for the summer” took place rather early for a summer holiday: in the middle of spring. The lapse of time between the two dates given in the birth certificate – May 20th, when Gustaw was born, and July 17th, when his birth was registered in Daleszyce – is puzzling. Why did Jakób-Josek Herling aka Grudziński wait two whole months before registering the birth of his child? We do not know.

This fact may, of course, incline us towards the “family legend”, which holds that Gustaw was born in Kielce, the family left to “spend the summer” at the farm in Skrzelczyce a few weeks afterwards, and it was only then, on July 17th, that Gustaw’s father got around to registering his birth. And since the Jewish community of Daleszyce included Skrzelczyce and was closest to it, he went to Daleszyce.

In any event, we have two possible birthplaces for Gustaw Herling and two different accounts: the “official version”, according to which he was born in Daleszyn, and the “family legend”, which claims it was Kielce. We shall probably never know which of these is the truth.

The birth certificate concludes: “This document was read out to the registering party and the witnesses and signed by them and by us. [signed by] Roman Kapuściński, Registry Office archivist, the registering party being illit[erate], [and by] witnesses Chaim Miodecki, Dawid Nawarski.”⁶

It would appear, then, that the “registering party”, i.e. Jakób-Josek Herling aka Grudziński, was illiterate, which is why the registry official Roman Kapuściński, who was secretary to the Jewish community’s board of administration at the time and who made out the certificate, had to sign on his behalf. He was, incidentally, the grandfather of another future writer, Ryszard Kapuściński.

Gustaw’s mother Dorota (1880-1932) was Polish. Her family, the Bryczkowskis, probably came from the eastern Borderlands, in the vicinity of Grodno (today in Belarus).

According to Herling, his family, though Jewish, was entirely assimilated and did not observe any of the customs or religious or linguistic traditions of Polish Jews. They were thoroughly polonized and very patriotic.⁷

6 Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s birth certificate is now in the Daleszyce Town Registry, but was originally registered with the Jewish Community Registry in Daleszyce. See also Z. Kudelski, “Herling-Grudziński – wątek żydowski”, *Rzeczpospolita*, 5-6 July, 2003 (“Rzecz o książkach” no. 7).

7 See: G. Herling-Grudziński, *A Note About My Family*, in: Z. Kudelski, “Herling-Grudziński: wątek żydowski” [Herling-Grudziński: the Jewish question], in *Rzeczpospolita*, 5-6 July,

“The second half of my surname, Grudziński, was – according to family lore – due to the fact that my great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather was [i.e. fought] in Czachowski’s divisions in the forests around Kielce during the January [1863] Uprising, and that was where he was given this second name. But I have never found any traces of, or evidence for, this claim, so I must treat it as a legend, a sort of family myth.”⁸

The manor house in Skrzelczyce (today in the Pierzchnica district) must have been bought by Jakób’s parents – Gustaw’s grandparents – from Polish owners who had, like many other farmers in the region, fallen on hard times after the 1863 Uprising. These farms had once belonged to the Maleszycki demesne around Maleszów – a place of historical importance and rich in tradition (the great-grandson of Franciszka Krasińska, who was born there, was Victor Emmanuel II, the first king of united Italy).⁹

The manor house and farm formed a large and richly stocked estate, encompassing fish ponds, a garden, a larch forest and meadows. Nearby was a village and some farm labourers’ houses.

“As a child I would hear stories about [the farm in Skrzelczyce] as a place of extraordinary plenty and abundance. Everything about it was described as being vast, rich, huge, amazing. Mushrooms so big you couldn’t walk or even leap across them, fish that weighed several kilos. It was a legend, and these stories of the extraordinary abundance and richness of the little estate in Skrzelczyce were told and retold.”¹⁰ Furnal’s research reveals that about 60 people lived or worked on the farm, and of those who worked there, 11 were Jewish. People remembered them as Orthodox, some with *yarmulkes* or *peyos* (side curls), and they also recalled that Mr “Erllich” (Herling) spoke to them in Yiddish.

In 1921 the farm was sold and from then on the Herling-Grudziński family lived in Kielce and Suchedniów (about 70 km from Kielce), where Jakub Herling-Grudziński bought a great, imposing, modern mill, powered by water turbines, built in 1879-1891 by Nahman, a German settler. He also bought a house nearby, where he lived year round while his wife and family continued, as before, to live

2003 (“Rzecz o książkach”, no. 7). Herling-Grudziński rejected a question about his Jewish roots, saying that he did not have any: “There was no such tradition in my family, which was entirely assimilated. (...) – “Do you feel no connection at all to your Jewish roots?” – “No. My roots are Polish. That is what I feel and that’s just the way it is.” (Excerpt from an unpublished conversation with Herling-Grudziński by A. Bikont and J. Szczęsna, which the authors made available to me.) See also my analysis of Herling-Grudziński’s short story, “Death-knell for a Knell-Ringer” in: W. Bolecki, *Ciemna miłość: szkice do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Kraków 2004.

8 *Wspomnienia*, op. cit.

9 Furnal, op. cit.

10 *Wspomnienia*, op. cit.

in Kielce. This explains why Gustaw had no memory of the farm in Skrzelczyce – he was too young – and remembered only Suchedniów and Kielce.

The house and mill in Suchedniów came with hectares of land and a large pond surrounded by a dyke. At the end of the 1930s, just before the war, Jakub Herling-Grudziński added a small sawmill. The property was, as Jan Paławski writes, “historically connected to the Old Polish Industrial Region” and still bore its old name of “Berez Family Forge and Foundry”.¹¹ The part of Suchedniów where the Grudziński estate used to be is still known as Berezowo today.

After World War II, the estate was nationalized and the mill was taken over by the local Supply and Sales Cooperative, which used it as a warehouse. When the Cooperative was dissolved, the mill in Suchedniów stood abandoned, falling into increasing disrepair, until 2010, when a new owner restored it, retaining the old structure, and converted it into a hotel. Of the old surroundings, not much remains. The pond is gone, as is the dyke; the historic system of canals by the mill has also disappeared. Most importantly, the Grudziński family house, which used to be next to the mill and the sawmill, is gone.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński has always maintained that his family was polonized, but his birth certificate and Irena Furnal’s research both indicate otherwise: they show that in the Skrzelczyce period the Herling-Grudziński family was still cultivating Jewish traditions (we do not know whether Herling’s father officially belonged to the Jewish community, although he spoke Yiddish).¹² All the children must have been given Jewish names, though we know only of three: after Eugenia, the eldest, there was Avram Moshe (known as Mork), aka Maurice, Sara Miriam (known as Lunia), aka Łucja, and the youngest, Gecel, aka Gustaw, who

11 J. Paławski, “Gustaw Herling-Grudziński w Kielcach”, in: *O Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim. Materiały z sesji*, eds I. Furnal, J. Paławski, Kielce 1992, p. 7. Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information about Herling-Grudziński is from the following sources: J. Kudelski “Szkic do biogramu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego”, *Kresy* 1991, no 6; reprinted in: J. Kudelski, *Pielgrzym Świętokrzyski. Szkice o Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, Lublin 1991 and *Studia o Herlingu-Grudzińskim. Twórczość. Recepcja. Biografia*, Lublin 1998; W. Bolecki, “Szkic do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego”, in: *Ciemny Staw. Trzy szkice do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Warsaw 1991; *Ciemna miłość*, Kraków 2004; *Współcześni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury. Słownik biobibliograficzny*, eds J. Czachowska, A. Szalagan, Warsaw 1994; G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *Conversations in Dragonea* (recorded 1995, published 1997) and *Conversations in Naples* (2000).

12 In the Jewish community of Chmielnik, a town in the Świętokrzyski region, there was a merchant called Herling Szlama Drugnia. And in Wąchock there was a baker called F. Herling. They may have been relatives of Jakub’s.

was given his Jewish names “during a religious ceremony”.¹³ We might suppose, in light of what we know today, that Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s denial of any links with Jewish tradition in his family concerned religious traditions specifically. This is plausible, especially considering that the children were brought up by their mother. It seems, however – if we are to believe some undocumented local sources – that young Gustaw attended a Jewish school in Kielce near his house for two years before going to the local high school.¹⁴ And when his mother died of typhus in 1932, she was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Bodzentyn (about 30 km from Kielce).¹⁵

After the death of his mother, Herling-Grudziński moved into lodgings on the ground floor of the same house, at 52 Sienkiewicza street in Kielce. A plaque, unveiled on the 90th anniversary of his birth, on May 20th, 2009, commemorates his years there.

-
- 13 Gustaw’s elder sister, Eugenia, studied Polish literature at Warsaw University, but she did not complete her course of study. After the war she worked in the elementary and high schools administration in Warsaw. Gustaw’s elder brother Maurice (1903-1966) was a lawyer in Warsaw before the war. During the war he was active in the Organization of Aid to the Jews known as “Żegota” and was in charge of its largest cell, called “Felicja” (after his wife), where he was responsible for 600 Jews, many of them children, whom he hid, among other places, in the cellars of his house in Boernerowo (known as Bemowo today, it is part of the Wola district of Warsaw) – a fact which was not revealed until 1976 (Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City, The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940-1945*, 2002). Maurice also took part in the Warsaw Uprising and was wounded. After the Uprising he ended up in a POW camp in Germany. He returned to Warsaw after the war and continued to work as a lawyer, specializing in family law. He joined the [Communist] Party and was appointed to the Supreme Court. Gustaw’s younger sister Łucja (1915-1994) studied law but did not complete her studies. Until 1939, she worked as a secretary in her brother Maurice’s legal practice. During the war she survived the ghetto and fought in the Warsaw Uprising. When the war ended, she worked as a typist in the Polish embassy in London, where she met her future husband, colonel Marian Utnik. They returned to Poland as husband and wife in 1949 (Gustaw was an emigré in London at the time). Utnik was arrested by the communist authorities and sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment in the trial of General Tatar, as it was called. He was released after 8 years. Łucja spent a year in prison, without a charge or a sentence. The Utniks lived in the same house in Bemowo in which Maurice had lived during the war. Gustaw Herling stayed with them when he visited Warsaw in 1991, 1994 and 1997.
- 14 The source of this information is a local Kielce historian, Miriosław Wójcik. Nb. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was christened and received into the Catholic Church in 1944 in Nocera, in southern Italy, where he was in hospital at the time (see p. 49).
- 15 The cemetery dates from 1867. The last burial there took place in 1942. It was destroyed by the Germans during the war and restored in 2008 by the local Roman Catholic parish. Gustaw’s father, Jakub Herling-Grudziński (1872-1943), died in his house in Suchedniów.