

**“THE BULGARIAN IN PRISON” –
A FORGOTTEN POLISH POEM FROM 1877¹**

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***Abstract:** The paper presents the original text and a translation of the poem “The Bulgarian in Prison” (“Bulgar w więzieniu”), published in the popular Warsaw newspaper “Kłosy” (no 604 / 1877) by an unidentified author under the pseudonym of Lech-Wanda. The lyric work consists of nine eight-line stanzas and attracts scholarly interest due to its themes and imagery. It is a persuasive example of Polish sympathies towards the Bulgarian liberation cause, which in the same time reveals symbols and cultural concepts that are unusual for the Bulgarian literary context of the period. The paper comments on the most significant similarities and differences between this forgotten poem and Bulgarian pre-liberation poetry.*

***Keywords:** poetry, Polish literature, Bulgarian themes, national struggles, national martyrdom, 19th century.*

INTRODUCTION

Publication and authorship

On the 13th of January 1877 (no 604, p. 3 (51)) the Warsaw illustrated weekly paper “Kłosy” published a poem entitled “The Bulgarian in Prison” / “Bulgar w więzieniu” (Lech-Wanda 1877: 51). An acceptable translation of the title into Bulgarian could be „БЪЛГАРИН В ТЪМНИЦА“ / “The Bulgarian in the Dungeon”². The poem was signed by Lech-Wanda. Today it seems improbable to establish the author’s identity behind the pseudonym. There is no mention of Lech-Wanda in the notable “Dictionary of Pseudonyms and Cryptonyms of Polish Writers” (Bar, A., 1936). The only existing evidence of Lech-Wanda’s presence in Warsaw literary life is a preserved protocol of a meeting of “Kłosy”’s editorial staff. According to this document, the poem’s author is again not registered by his surname, however his male gender is suggested by the statement “this poet” / “tegoż poety” instead of using the common feminine form “poetka” (“poetess”).

It is also possible to assume that Lech-Wanda’s identity remained unknown even to the paper’s editorial team, which in May 1877 had decided to publish another poem of his (“In the Day of the Lord’s Transfiguration” / “W dzień Przemienienia Pańskiego”), while rejecting a third one (“Saint John” / “Ś[wię]ty Jan”). Subsequently, however, “Kłosy” did not publish the approved work, but only “The Bulgarian in Prison”.

Up-to-date, there are no credible references for confirming other works by Lech-Wanda. Judging by the style of the published work, it can be concluded with sufficient conviction that the author was not a distinguished poet. “The Bulgarian in Prison” however draws attention as a rare literary document expressing clear sympathy towards the suffering Balkan peoples.

The poem’s theme and imagery are of particular interest to the literary historian, although they are not uncommon for the Polish cultural scene during the second half of the 19th century. Works by Józef Bohdan Zaleski (on the Bulgarians’ willingness to conclude a church union with

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² It is worth noting that the original spelling of this ethnonym (*Bulgar*) does not conform with contemporary Polish orthography (*Bulgar*). It is however in accordance with the norm established by Samuel Linde’s Dictionary of the Polish Language (Linde, S. B., 1807: 194). During the second half of the 19th century both forms of the ethnonym were used competitively.

Rome) and Maria Konopnicka (on Petko R. Slaveykov) are dedicated to the Bulgarian National Revival and liberation struggles, while the next century will enrich the poetic image of this Balkan peoples by oeuvres on Paisius of Hilendar, Vasil Levski, Hristo Botev, the village of Batak, or the monasteries of Rila and Bachkovo.

At the same time it should be noted that “The Bulgarian in Prison” was not included in the anthology of Polish poetry on Bulgaria, collected by Stanisław Grabowski (1999). This fact is the most significant testimony that shortly after its publication Lech-Wanda’s poem was completely forgotten by readers and scholars. It has no further editions in collective volumes and has not been mentioned by researchers of the Polish-Bulgarian cultural dialogue.

THE POEM’S TEXT

The Polish original and translations into English and Bulgarian

I present the original text of the poem, along with a possible literal translation into contemporary Bulgarian language and into English. It should be noted that Lech-Wanda’s work is dedicated to the situation on the Balkans as an artistic reaction to the April Uprising of 1876, the Bulgarian insurrection against the Ottoman Empire. I have consequently avoided poetic formulas and archaic forms typical for the Bulgarian literature of the Late National Revival period. The sole exception in that regard concerns the poem’s title, which translation into contemporary Bulgarian should be “Българин в затвора”:

Bułgar w więzieniu

Szczałkami okien monaster stary
Spogląda w przestrzeń; zda się, że czeka,
Żali nie wstaną bułgarskie cary
Z mogił przeszłości? żali człowieka,
Coby krwią wraźą zgaśli pożary,
Nie zesze w pomoc Nieba opieka?
Nie wstają z mogił... nie widać męża...
Nie ma kto dźwignąć swobód oręża!

Po zrębach murów wiją się bluszcze, –
Wnętrze świątyni Turczyn plugawi:
Napędził dzikich żołdaków tłuszczę,
Co ołtarz rzezią dzieciątek krwawi,
Sąsiednie siola zamienia w puszcze, –
Tak, że Anglicy, wrażeń ciekawi,
Ciągna, jak ptaków wędrownych stada...
Ziemia niewoli! biada ci, biada!

Z podziemnych lochów zimnego łona,
Głuchej rozpacy jęk się przedziera,
Jak krzyk człowieka, co mu ramiona
Trumna żelaznym uściskiem zwiera,
A na niej zaspą ziemi wzniesiona,
A on z letargu oczy otwiera,
Z głodu pierś targa, dłoń kasa wściekle,
Jęczy, jak jęczą przekłęci w piekle.

W podziemnym lochu, kajdan ogniwa
Wpiły się w ciało więźnia Bułgara.
Już sześć miesięcy z górą upływa,
Jak mu powietrzem wilgotna para,
Co się z gnijących murów dobywa,
Jak towarzyszem – robactwa chmara,

Българин в тъмница

Through the remains of its windows an old monastery
is staring into space; it seems to be waiting
whether Bulgarian tsars won’t rise
from ancient mounds? whether a man
who would put out the fires with the enemy’s blood
won’t be sent in help by Heaven’s providence¹?
They won’t rise from the mounds... The man is not to be seen...
There’s nobody to lift the arms of freedom!

Ivy wriggles on the walls’ frameworks, –
a Turk is defiling the temple’s interior,
having hounded a horde of wild mercenaries
that bloods the altar with the slaughter of babies,
and turns the neighbouring villages into a desert, –
so that the Englishmen, eager for impressions,
be drawn like flocks of migratory birds...
Land of slavery, woe to you, woe!

From the cold womb of the underground dungeons
a groan of deaf despair is breaking through,
like a man’s cry, whose shoulders
are pressed by the iron grip of a tomb
with a heap of earth over it,
and he opens his eyes from lethargy,
and tears his breast in starvation, gnaws his palm in fury,
and groans, as groan the condemned in hell.

The chain links in the underground dungeon
are embedded in the body of the Bulgarian prisoner.
It is more than six months now
that he breathes the moist steam
extracted from the rotting walls,
that his companion is a swarm of warms,

¹ lit. *the protection of the Sky*

Jak pożywieniem – chleb zapleśniały,
Jak oczy blasku dnia nie widziały.

that his food is moldy bread,
that his eyes haven't seen the dayshine.

Lecz więzień mężnie dźwiga kajdany,
A tylko Niebu bluźnierstwem ciska,
Kiedy przypomni, jak tłum pijany
Dzikich Czerkiesów wpadł do ogniska
Praojców strzechy, na jatagany
Pochwyił dziatki, jak w rumowiska
Żywcem pogrzebał córkę zhańbioną,
I jak się wściekle pastwił nad żoną.

But the prisoner manfully lifts up his chains
and spews nothing but blasphemy to the Heaven,
when he remembers how a drunken crowd
of wild Circassians lunged into the fireplace
under his ancestors' roof, and with their yatagans
dragged the children, how into the ruins
they berried alive his defiled daughter
and how they furiously tormented his wife.

W lochu noc czarna, – lecz błyskawica
Wspomnień przedziera mroku oponę,
I więzień widzi skrwawione lica,
Drobne rączęta k'niemu zwrócone,
Widzi, jak błyska wrogów szablica,
Widzi, jak biją łuny czerwone, –
Czerkies na zgłiszczach obóz zakłada...
Ziemio niewoli! biada ci, biada!

Black is the night in the dungeon, – but the lightning
of memories is tearing the veil of darkness
and the prisoner sees bloodied faces,
small hands lifted towards him,
he sees how the enemies' sword flashes,
he sees how red glows volley, –
the Circassian sets a camp over the ashes...
Land of slavery, woe to you, woe!

Do lochu światła wpłynęła smuga,
Wszedł otoczony żołdactwem pasza,
Kat padyszacha i wierny sługa;
Więźniowi łaskę jego ogłasza,
Każe powrócić wolnym do pługą:
„Szczęśliwa, mówi, już ziemia wasza,
Zgasiły buntu skrę krwi kałuże –
Adres dziękczynny podpisz giaurze.”

A streak of lightness penetrated the dungeon,
surrounded by soldiers entered the pasha,
the padishah's executioner and loyal servant;
he announces his mercy on the prisoner
and commands his free return to the plow:
“Joyful again – he says – is your land,
puddles of blood quenched the spark of rebellion –
sign the thank you letter, you giaour.”

– „Oprawco dziątek! – więzień odpowie –
Nic mnie już z życiem wiązać nie może:
Ojca – nie wyjdą witać synowie,
Męża – grobowe wygląda łożę;
Kraj jednym zgłiszczem; legli druhowie, –
Wszak krwią ich wasze dymią się noże;
I ja mam u nóg czołgać się wroga?!
Nigdy! przysięgam na ojców Boga.”

“Torturer of children! – says the prisoner –
Nothing can bond me to life again:
the father's sons won't come out to welcome him,
the hero – a grave bed awaits him;
the country is in ruins; the companions fell, –
it is their blood on your fuming knives;
so am I to drag myself into the enemy's legs?!
Never! – I vow to the God of my fathers.”

Więc pasza skinął. Żołdactwo ryczy,
Na bezbronnego rącho uderza,
Jak sfera chartów, długo na smyczy
Trzymana, biegnie wolna na zwierza.
Sam Bóg morderczych ciosów nie zliczy,
Jeśli zabójcom karę wymierza.
Cisza... robactwo zwłoki obsiada...
Ziemio niewoli! biada ci, biada!

Then the pasha nodded. The mercenaries roar,
they are hitting the defenseless swiftly
like a pack of greyhounds, long held on a leash
runs free on the prey.
God Himself cannot count the murderous blows,
if He'd measure a punishment for the killers.
Silence... worms beset the corpse...
Land of slavery, woe to you, woe!

Contemporary Bulgarian: Българин в тъмница

От разбити прозорци стар манастир / се взира в простора; изглежда, че чака / дали
няма да се вдигнат българските царе / от давните могили? дали човек, / който би угасил
пожарите с вража кръв, / не ще изпрати на помощ Провидението? / Не ще се вдигнат от
могилите... не се вижда юнак... / Няма кой да вдигне оръжието на свободата!

По останките на зида се вие бръшлян, – / турчин безчести вътрешността на храма: /
насъскал орда диви делии, / която окървявява олтара със сеч на дечица, / а съседните села
обръща в пустиня, – / така, че англичаните, жадни за впечатления, / биват привлечени като
ята прелетни птици... / Земьо на робство, горко ти, горко!

От студената утроба на подземните тъмници / пролазва стон от глухо отчаяние, / като
вик на човек, чиито рамене / притиска ковчег с желязна хватка, / а над него пряспа пръст се

издига, / а той отваря очи сред летаргията си, / раздира от глад гръдта си, гризе едно дланта си, / стене, както стенат прокълнатите в пъкъла.

В подземната тъмница брънките на веригите / са се впили в тялото на затворника българин. / Вече минават повече от шест месеца, / откакто диша влажна пара, / извличаща се от гниещите зидове, / откак другар му е рояк червеи, / откак храна – плесенясал хляб, / откак очите не виждат дневния блясък.

Ала затворникът мъжествено повдига веригите / и само хули към Небето бълва, / когато си спомни, как пияна тълпа / от диви черкези се нахвърли върху огнището / на прародителската стряха, с ятагани / завлече дечица, как в развалините / жива погребва дъщеря му обезчестена / и как едно поруга жена му.

Черна е нощта в тъмницата, ала светкавицата / на спомените раздира булото на мрака / и затворникът вижда окървавени лица, / малки ръчички вдигнати към него, / вижда как блести сабята на враговете, / вижда как се сипят червени зарева – / черкезът над пожарището разполага стан... / Земьо на робство, горко ти, горко!

В тъмницата се прокрадна ивица светлина, / влезе, обграден от аскери, пашата – / палач и верен слуга на падишаха; / провъзглася милостта му над затворника, / повелява му да се върне свободен при плуга: / „Щастлива е – казва – земята ви вече, / локви от кръв угасиха искрата на бунта – / благодарствен адрес подпиши, гяуре.“

„Мъчителю на дечица! – отговаря затворникът – / Нищо с живота вече не може да ме свързва: / бащата – синове не ще излязат да го срещнат, / юнака – гробно чака го ложе; / страната е цяла развалина; паднаха другарите – / та нали от тяхната кръв димят вашите ножове; / и аз в краката на врага да се влача?! / Нивга! – кълна се в Бога на отците си.“

Тогава пашата кимна. Вие аскерът, / върху беззащитния удря чевръсто / както глутница хрътки, дълго на въже / държана, освободена търчи към плячката. / Сам Бог не ще изброи убийствените удари, / ако би отмервал наказание за убийците. / Тишина... червеи трупа превземат... / Земьо на робство, горко ти, горко!

The original text consists of nine eight-line stanzas revealing a high level of formal poetic skills. All verses bar none contain ten syllables each, having a regular caesura between the 5th and 6th syllable and exact rhyming (*abababcc*). On the other hand, the refrain “Land of slavery, woe to you, woe!” appears asymmetrically in three stanzas only (2nd, 6th and 9th). The utterance is dominated by abundant epithets and the high contrast of the axis *innocent victim – cruel tyrant*.

CONCLUSIONS

What is, therefore, the historical and literary value of this forgotten poetic work from 1877?

To begin with, the poem is a direct reaction to the suppression of the April uprising. It is a clear indication of the emotions the insurrection provoked in Polish society. While the Bulgarian is revealed as a poor, deprived peasant working *on the plow* – albeit with preserved memory that he is an heir of ancient *tsars*, all his tormentors belong to a strict system topped by the *padishah*, and beneath him equally oppressive roles are played by the *pasha* and his *askers* (soldiers)¹.

Secondly, it must be emphasized that the poem is a reflection of common *Polish attitudes and stereotypes* for Bulgarians, the Bulgarian lands and, in general, for the Balkan peoples under Ottoman rule in the 1860s and 70s of the 19th century. The Warsaw press of that period published various reports, travel notes and illustrations presenting the situation on the Peninsula according to the scheme *barbarian masters vs the rural population struggling for freedom*. In this context, stylization and melodramatism naturally displace factual accuracy and authentic points of view

¹ Although the term asker (askar), denoting a Turkish soldier, soldiers or army, is common in the Polish language of the period, the poem uses the contemptuous forms for (mostly hired) soldiers *żoldak* and *żoldactwo* (cf. Doroszewski, W., 1997).

towards the described phenomena, which often are not the consequence of the author's visit to the place of event, but a result of armchair activity.¹ This remark helps understanding the reason behind the *typical Polish symbols, terms and notions* in the poem that coexist with popular Balkan realia, such as *monastery, tsars, Turks and Circassians*.

Apart from stylization aiming to provide a Bulgarianesque context, the poem contains several concepts typical for the Polish historical situation and national culture. The most notable among them are the motive of *rising from the tomb mounds*, popular among the Polish romantic poets and uncommon in Bulgarian literature; the notion of Providence (heavenly protection) as a sign of God's presence in history; the bloodied altar²; the oath to *the God of the Fathers* as an unpopular bibleism in Bulgarian pre-modern culture. Perhaps the most characteristic polonism in the text's poetic imagery is the God-inspired messenger and people's leader, known as *mąź* (the providential man, leader, hero). The pathos contained in this Polish concept was perpetuated in Scene V of Adam Mickiewicz's poem "Forefathers' Eve", Part III with the connotations of a chosen individual as the peoples' saviour. This explains why any translation of the concept *mąź* into Bulgarian is problematic and would require some compromise.

Furthermore, as a direct consequence of the above considerations, "The Bulgarian in Prison" offers a challenge in the field of poetic translatology. The poem presents a case for the translatability not only of historical and national realia, but of typical expressions that have gained almost a sacred position in the Bulgarian lexis due to their firm relation to the heroic times of the National Revival and liberation struggles. In short: the poem raises a debate on a possible Bulgarian-Bulgarian translation and the modernization of 19th century texts, whose original record sounds archaic and becomes more and more incomprehensible to the non-specialized audience.

The brightest examples of such problematic areas call into question the very idea of *literal translation*. The title "Bulgarian in Prison", for instance, should be automatically translated as "Българин в затвора", if it were not for the Revival context which forced my translator's instinct to consciously prefer *тъмница* ('dungeon', 'jail', 'gaol') instead of the emotionally neutral *затвор*. A similar problem occurs with the aforementioned *man* (Polish *mąź*), synonymous in this particular case with *hero* or *leader* along with the typical 19th century Bulgarian concepts *юнак* (*yunak*, the South-Slavic epic hero) and *херой* (*heroy*, an early literary term for a hero or protagonist).

Another example of Bulgarian-Bulgarian translation difficulties is presented by the soldiery, appearing in the original text under the contemptuous qualifications *zoldak* and *zoldactwo*. The contemporary and neutral term *войник* ('soldier') is the direct corresponding lexem, however its adequacy is threatened by *аскер*, the most popular term for Turkish soldiers and armies in 19th century Bulgaria-related texts. The same dilemma concerns the concept *oprawca*, that could logically be translated as *мъчител*, *гнетител* or the archaic yet expected denotement for the oppressor *душманин*, *джелатин* (both covering negative connotations for 'tormentor', 'wrongdoer', 'executioner', 'villain', 'hostile agent').

Questions on the most adequate translation of such terms into the contemporary Bulgarian language surpass the context of poetic archaisation and stylization, as they directly tackle the sphere of present-day Bulgarian linguistic sensitivity. According to this sensitivity a certain number of expressions, notions and symbols correspond exclusively to the National Revival period with all subsequent consequences, such as the strong emotional division between lexems with 'patriotic', 'good', 'ethical' meanings, on one hand, and words signifying 'hostile', 'oppressive', 'unethical' notions, on the other. The usage of such lexems outside the National Revival context is automatically considered stylistically improper or, in any case, highly emotional.

¹ Cf. my paper "Two Unknown Bulgaria-Related Illustrations by Henryk Dębicki" (in Bulgarian). *Proglas* (ISSN 2367-8585), no 1 (2018), pp. 32–39.

² The church altar is not among the popular symbols in Bulgarian literature and culture. Instead of the altar, literary works and documents of the National Revival period emphasize on temples as a whole and their defilement.

Is it therefore possible for a translation into contemporary Bulgarian of a Polish text, written during the period of liberation struggles and dedicated to the same topic, to claim a sufficient degree of literality if it eliminates expressions and specific notions from this past epoch? Regardless of the answer, the question itself serves as evidence for the lexical and stylistic richness of the Bulgarian language, as well as for the hardened attitudes towards literature of the liberation period that seems destined to contain *yunaks*, *dushmans*, *askers*, *Circassians* and *tymnitsas* ('dungeons') in order to be accepted as genuine documents of the times.

In addition to all commented issues for translators and literary historians, "The Bulgarian in Prison" is a clear testimony that Polish society of the period was not familiar or did not accept the revolutionary ideologies and fighting stances of Bulgarian poets and thinkers such as Georgi Rakovski, Lyuben Karavelov, Hristo Botev and Ivan Vazov. In the absence of realia, such as the Balkan or the mountain forests, and while the liberation struggle is alluded only through its tragic outcome, the Bulgarian in the poem remains in his assigned role as an eternal victim of oppression – far from civilization, powerless and without hope of external help.

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