

HOMAGE TO CATALONIA


The
Orwell Society

Journal No.8
May 2016

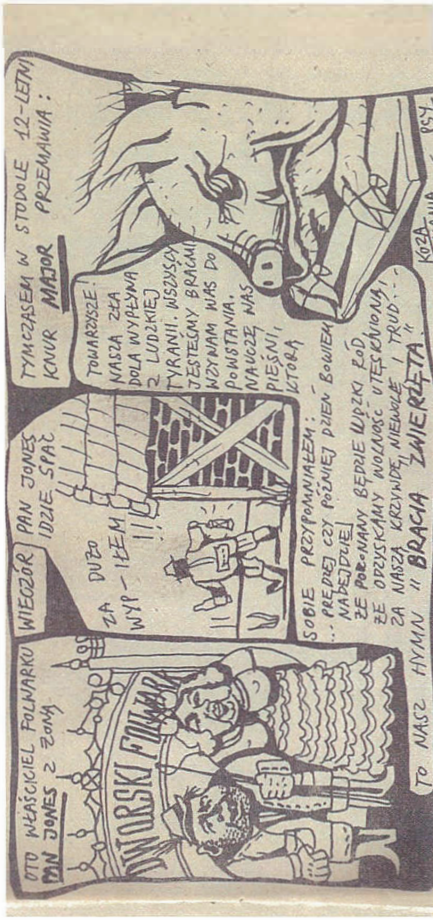
GEORGE ORWELL

AUTHOR OF "THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER" ETC



Orwell and the Poles:

The case of *Animal Farm* in Poland



All images here are illustrations found in the original Polish release of *Animal Farm*

Krystyna Wieszczyk explores the fascinating background to the publication of Orwell's famous novel behind the Iron Curtain.

Despite the growing body of Orwell scholarship, the subject of Orwell's contacts with the Poles and his interest in Polish matters seems rather under-studied.

The story behind the publication of *Animal Farm* in Polish, for example, reveals a great deal about Orwell's iconoclastic character, political conviction and generosity. Orwell observed Polish war-time tribulations closely and, unlike many of his left-wing colleagues, sympathetically. This is evident in some of his diary entries, conversations with Polish friends, and essays, reviews and columns that, passing war-time censorship, appeared in print. Polish émigré Bolesław Wierzbianski recalls Orwell telling him, in 1946 that the fate of Poland in the war influenced his political views (Radio Free

Europe, listen at: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/68/2461/Audio/325265,Program-specjalny>).

After the fall of Poland in September 1939, following the combined German and Soviet attack, Poles carried on fighting Hitler under the Allied arms abroad (250,000 servicemen as of 1945). Eventually, however, their continuous war effort which helped, for example, stave off the German invasion in the Battle of Britain and liberate other European countries from the German grip, did not result in their own country's liberation. Endeavouring to satisfy the growing demands of their new Eastern ally, the Soviet Union, Polish Western Allies left Poland in the Soviet sphere of influence, acquiescing to the

Soviet annexation of nearly half of its territory and to the introduction of Stalin's puppet government in the rest of the country. After the war, around 500,000 Poles in Western Europe who were given the choice decided not to return to their Soviet-occupied homeland. Many continued to fight for its freedom from abroad, collaborating and competing across borders, using the pen and the word rather than the sword.

Orwell's opinion on Stalin's, and sometimes the Allies', politics often aligned with that of many Poles. Concerns over Soviet atrocities could not be freely voiced at the time when British leaders were anxious not to let the publishing industry offend their Russian ally – outspokenness in such matters could lead even to a newspaper closure.

as happened to one of the most important Polish pre-war weeklies revived in Paris and then London, *Wiadomości Literackie* (*Literary News*). Orwell's censored texts still found a welcome audience amongst contemporary Poles. Many started to consider him a friend of Poland and the Polish struggle. *Animal Farm*, which would soon become one of the central texts of the US-led Cold-War “psychological warfare” but which had been rejected by four British publishers, mostly on political grounds, and published only at the end of the war after an 18-month delay, also caught the Polish mood exceptionally well. Teresa Jelenska, its Polish translator exiled in London who contacted Orwell just days after the book had come out, remembered: “The discovery of *Animal Farm* was a real

experience ... a report on the freshly published *Animal Farm* simply electrified me. ... That was it and how appropriate for us” (*Wiadomości*, 4 May 1968).

Although Orwell was “anxious” about publishing the fable in at least one Slavonic language and soon received a proposal also from its future Russian translator, Gleb Struve, he did not know how to go about having the book published in the languages of the countries fallen under Stalin's regime. While the Russian publication would take some years to materialise, Jelenska, a grand dame in Polish and European cultural circles before the war, took matters in her own hands. Not only did she pursue the publication in Polish, but also encouraged Orwell to have the fable made into a Disney production and – discovering that he still struggled to take it across the Atlantic – put him in contact with Marian Kister, of Roy Publishers, a Polish publisher in New York, to see if he would issue both the Polish and the English edition in the USA.

Orwell was very keen on that prospect, willing to accept even more modest terms than some other US publisher might offer in the future as long as Kister would take also the Polish translation (*The Complete Works of George Orwell*, edited by Davison, P. Vol. XVII: 286). The meeting of 7 September 1945, however, did not produce the desired results, since Kister thought that *Animal Farm* was too short to fit his publishing profile.





Undeterred, Jelenska continued the search for a Polish publisher. She held initial discussions with the publishers of the 2nd Polish Corps in Italy commanded by the legendary General Wladyslaw Anders, while Orwell was adamant that it seemed "too mean to take anything from these wretched exiles" in terms of royalties (*ibid.*).

In the meantime, Jelenska also approached Orwell with a successful request for a translation permission on behalf of the fable's Ukrainian translator, Ihor Szewczenko, a contact facilitated by Jelenska's son, the co-editor of the newspaper of the Normandy-seasoned General Stanislaw Maczek's 1st Polish Division in Germany. Jelenska also insisted that Orwell send *Animal Farm* to the Italian count Carlo Sforza with a view to publishing it in Italy, thinking that this could potentially help prevent Sforza, an anti-fascist, from falling into the communists' hands (Letter 9, November 1946, Orwell Archive, University College London).

The first Polish edition of *Animal Farm* was finally published at the turn of 1946

and 1947 by the World League of Poles Abroad, "Swiatpol", a pre-war governmental organisation aimed at keeping ties with the Poles around the world, then operating in exile in London. It probably had a print-run of 5,000 copies, quite a large run for the émigré conditions, especially if compared with the first English edition of 4,500.

Orwell tried to assist the translation and publishing process as best he could. Though busy and overworked, he met with the prospective Polish publishers and worked and corresponded with Jelenska, offering her explanations to the text when needed – a collaboration which ultimately resulted in their friendship. Orwell gave a pre-approval also to the book's illustrations by Wojciech Jastrzebowski, the pre-war vice-chancellor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, and was content with the Polish edition. Yet what most mattered to him was whether the book reached his most desired audience behind the Iron Curtain. As Wierzbianski, of Swiatpol, recalled: "[Orwell] kept asking whether at least part of it made it to Poland – it did!" (interview, Radio Free Europe).