

## Foreword

Bartłomiej Beniowski has long been a footnote to British labour history, as the only foreign refugee to play an identifiable role in early Chartism. But for British historians he has remained within the confines of that footnote, which refers at most to two of the thirty one years that he spent in London, energetically forwarding political ideas, social schemes and entrepreneurial endeavours. Nor has his life and work been of much interest to Polish historians, although for many years he was a prominent democratic member of the Great Emigration that followed the failed Polish Revolution of November 1830. In the 1930s, the historian, librarian and archivist Adam Lewak wrote an entry on Beniowski in the new Dictionary of National Biography<sup>1</sup>, referring to his “very active role in the Chartist movement which was working for radical constitutional and social change in England,” and outlining his early affiliations within Polish *émigré* politics, as well as his championing in London of mnemonics and printing innovations (“which won support and help from English capitalists”). Thereafter, Beniowski was largely ignored. Even during the period from 1945 to 1989, when the Polish People’s Republic foregrounded labour history, historians tended to focus on London Poles like Ludwik Oborski who were more evidently central to movements on the route to the First International. While the 20th-century *émigré* historians of Polish socialism, Adam and Lidia Ciołkosz, paid serious attention to some aspects of Beniowski’s contribution, he inevitably appears only *en passant* in their wide-ranging study.<sup>2</sup> And in the background to the general lack of interest was the lingering echo of the reputation bestowed on him in London in the 1830s by the Polish conservative *émigrés* associated with Prince Adam Czartoryski, who in retaliation for his outspoken political stance stigmatised him as a non-Pole and a spy. The term “real Pole” was already being used by the right wing in the 1830s to describe the Roman Catholic, mythically “Sarmatian,” landed gentleman who supported

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<sup>1</sup> *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, ed. Władysław Konopczyński, vol. 1, Kraków, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Lidia i Adam Ciołkoszowie, *Zarys dziejów socjalizmu polskiego*, vol. I, Londyn, 1966; vol. 2, Londyn, 1972.

the old social order, and Beniowski did not qualify as a real Pole on any of these grounds.

In order to settle personal or political grievances, his Polish opponents passed on as gospel truth to naive or ill-disposed Englishmen the insults (“Jew,” “Russian spy”) that were more or less background noise in the ideological infighting of the Polish *émigré* community. It should incidentally be emphasised that I can find no instance where Beniowski himself publicly indulged in the pastime of character assassination, being prepared to extend the benefit of the doubt even to the obnoxious David Urquhart, who in 1839–1840, on the basis of this Polish gossip, made outrageous allegations against him, and later dragged him through the courts for a hot-headed, non-verbal response to the libels. Echoes of these smears entered the contemporary British Chartist narrative and later historical studies, which considered the question of whether Beniowski engineered the Newport Rising as a Russian agent, or was the “betrayed of Frost.” This biography is undoubtedly in part an attempt finally to set the record straight and turn the man described by Peter Brock, following the conservative *émigré* press, as a “rather dubious adventurer”<sup>3</sup> into a rational if complex human being who operated within transnational frameworks of ideological conviction.

Rectifying the historical record, or making amends for old wrongs, is not however the only reason why Bartłomiej Beniowski’s life deserves exploration. When he died in 1867, his sentimental daughter – who had travelled from Wilno to London after his death and lived for two months at 8 Bow Street, Covent Garden among his papers and effects – described him as a great, unrecognised genius. This hyperbole can be excused as family bias, but Beniowski was certainly an extraordinary man. He did not on the surface accomplish much. He fought resolutely for political goals that were not to be achieved in his lifetime. He wrote and published relatively little. He emerged only sporadically onto the public stage. And yet his interventions in political and social processes were of telling significance, as he reached out to, and interacted with, the radical European movements of the first seven decades of the 19th century, and his life illustrates the multi-cultural backdrop to common European interests.

Beniowski arrived in Britain as a Polish refugee, but – like many other *émigrés* – had spent the first thirty years of his life in the Russian Empire as a Russian citizen. He was born in 1800 into the urban middle class in the distant marchlands of the old Polish Commonwealth, transferred seven years earlier to Russia by the second partition of Poland in 1793. He was brought up in Berdyczów in Volhynia [now Berdychiv in Ukraine], cast by accident of birth along fault lines between peoples and languages. This was a trading entrepôt where Poles, Russians and Jews mingled, and Beniowski was multi-lingual from childhood, although his first language was Polish. He attended a Polish school

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brock, “Polish Democrats and English Radicals, 1832–1862. A Chapter in the History of Anglo-Polish Relations,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 25, no. 2, June 1953, p. 147.

run by the Discalced Carmelites in Berdyczów and then the University of Wilno, founded as a Polish university at the heart of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and now one of the six universities of the Russian Empire, with a strong German influence in the medical faculty where he studied. Thereafter, to repay a government scholarship awarded during his degree course, he served, along with many other Poles, as a medical officer in the Lithuanian Corps of the Russian armed forces. Then in November 1830, an uprising took place in the Kingdom of Poland, the truncated Polish state set up under Russian suzerainty by the Congress of Vienna, and the army of Kingdom Poland took to the battlefield against the tsar. Leaving behind a young wife and newborn baby daughter, Beniowski entered Kingdom Poland with the Russian army, which in April 1831 he dramatically deserted to join the Poles.

Bartłomiej Beniowski carried with him throughout the rest of his life four pieces of carefully-folded and tattered paper, all dating from 1831–1833: the first was a cutting from *Kuryer Polski*, hailing him as a hero when he galloped across the front line through mortar fire to transfer his allegiance to the Polish army during the April 1831 battle of Kuflew; the second was a recommendation from Teodor Morawski, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, to General Kniaziewicz in Paris, dated 19 September 1831, which had probably been carried across Europe in his boot as he went into exile after the Polish defeat; the third was a letter of reference from the Marquis Delachasse de Vérigny, commandant of the *Ecole d'Etat Major* in Paris, where in 1832–1833 he completed a year's course of study; and the fourth was a testimonial from General Józef Dwernicki, signed in Paris in March 1833, just before Beniowski set off on a democratic Polish mission to Muhammad Ali's Egypt.<sup>4</sup> His reverential preservation of these documents points to the crucial significance in his life of the November Uprising and its immediate aftermath.

After 1831, Beniowski's cultural horizons and borderlines changed. As an exile in Paris, he nailed his colours firmly to the mast of democratic politics. He was involved with French Republican circles, the Carbonari movement and freemasonry, while cementing a lifelong loyalty to Joachim Lelewel, the doyen of the Polish left, and first publicly taking up the cause of Jewish civil rights. After his expedition as a democratic envoy to Egypt, he spent nearly two years in Clermont-Ferrand before in January 1836 heading for London, which had become a heartland for Polish revolutionary political groupings. In the "first industrial nation," he was faced with a welter of new lifestyles and approaches, harbingers of the changes that he anticipated in the 19th century. If he shared the despair at cultural displacement expressed by Adam Mickiewicz in *Forefather's Eve*, he gave little sign of it. The bard bemoaned his banishment because now no-one would understand his song: "my thought will be hatched enclosed in the

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<sup>4</sup> LMAVB F75–112, pp. 2–8; the cutting was from *Kuryer Polski*, no. 496, Warszawa, Niedziela 1 Maja r. 1831, p. 576.

darkness of my own soul / Like a diamond held in a dirty stone.”<sup>5</sup> Beniowski, on the contrary, set about learning English (one of the few European languages he had not yet mastered) and shared with the host community the ideas and aspirations that he propounded and developed in London Polish circles and democratic organisations, of which he was a committed and prominent member from early 1836. He was one of a very limited number of Polish *émigrés* who penetrated British society in London, and he also formed ties with the German, French and Italian political refugees who increasingly flocked to the British capital. His first British contacts were with the Marylebone Radicals, including later Chartist activists like Henry Vincent. His subsequent commitment to Chartism was a commitment to internationalism, but like other exiles, he lived – in a way that British educated middle class sympathisers were on the whole unable to do – on terms of intimacy with working class Londoners and was able to share their specific goals.

Energy, determination and insouciance marked his progress along this road. We know that he was tall and good-looking, at over 6 feet well above average height. He was impetuous and outspoken, and had no patience with what he described as “humbug,” a word that he claimed to have learned from London Chartists. Nor did he suffer fools gladly. He had a biting wit and a sense of humour which did not help to endear him to his political opponents. Indeed he made enemies on all sides of the political spectrum. But, along with a willingness to play on emotions, this made him a successful public orator in both Polish and English. In many ways, his ideas and behaviour belonged to a later era than his own, and his Polish contemporaries were often bitterly offended, particularly by his consistently hostile attitude to organised religion, for he was a rationalist and freethinker.

Beniowski’s London life also enables us to examine in detail some of the attitudes of mid-century Londoners to foreigners in general and refugees in particular, as well as obtaining an outsider’s view of social issues and political activity in the capital. Before the recriminations of 1840, he seems to have been unreservedly welcomed by his British working class associates and by many others, although the limits of tolerance are frequently exposed by establishment figures from Lord John Russell to *Times* journalists. But I think we must also accept that at the same time, as a foreigner, he was not taken entirely seriously – either by the Chartists or by officials of the state.

Beniowski’s later, post-Chartist life in London brought him brief fame in the 1840s as the creator of a mnemonics system, which he termed phrenotypics, and as the patentee of printing innovations, which brought him into contact with grander and more self-seeking politicians like the Right Hon. Thomas Milner Gibson M.P., or John Greene M.P. of the Independent Irish Party. He never however ceased to involve himself in Polish political movements. After a brief

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziady* [Forefathers’ Eve], part III, lines 143–144.

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flirtation with the Polish monarchists in the mid-1840s, when disillusion with republican prospects took many Polish democrats into Czartoryski's camp, Beniowski's political affiliations were increasingly revolutionary and clandestine. Intermittently associated with his old British Chartist allies, he suffered two further major disappointments in the failure of the 1848 and 1863 Polish revolutions. But – now a British citizen – to the end of his life, his belief in the possibility of social change continued to push him into new political alliances, in particular into membership in the late 1850s of the London Revolutionary Collective (*Gromada Rewolucyjna Londyn*), a socialist organisation where he worked with men like Zenon Świętosławski and Ludwik Oborski. Despite all his earlier political vicissitudes, by his death in 1867, he could with justification be viewed as a Grand Old Man of the Polish *émigré* Left.