

SHANE LESLIE AND THE IRISH SUPPORT FOR LANGUAGE STRUGGLE IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper tells a little known story of the collecting and delivery of signatures of Irish school children from the northern part of Ireland as an act of moral support for Polish students on strike in defense of the Polish language at schools in the Prussian partition of Poland, in the first decade of the 20th century (Plygawko 1991). The bound signatures are in the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow, Poland, but the information about the action has not been found in Irish sources, and the Polish signatures collected in response seem to be missing. The role of the organizer of the initiative, Shane Leslie, is emphasized in this paper. It describes the background of this exchange of sympathy, and discusses possible reasons why the story remains obscure.

Keywords: Irish-Polish relations, Prussian Poland, Shane Leslie, language activism, school-strike.

1. To the children of Poland

In the Princes Czartoryski Museum in Kraków there is a unique document of Irish sympathy for Poland from the pre-WWI era. According to the index written in 1911, there are 211 pages containing 5468 signatures of school children from four counties in the north of Ireland. The signatures are bound in a green cover embossed with a golden harp. It commences with a trilingual Address, in Polish, Irish and English:

It is with the greatest sorrow that we hear of the efforts being made to rob you of your land and language. We have seen with joy the heroic defense you have made

in your schools and we pray that you may soon enjoy the rights and liberties which we now enjoy and which our fathers fled to the mountains and wood rather than lose. God save Poland (*Adres dzieci irlandzkich „Do dzieci polskich” 1908 – [1911] w związku ze strajkiem szkolnym we Wrześni* [The Address of Irish children ‘to the children of Poland’ with regard to the school strike in Września]).

Attached to the document there is a letter from Shane Leslie [n.d] giving his address at that time at St. Saviour’s Priory, Dublin, and a letter from Hanna Kownacka (teacher and activist) who received the final tranche of signatures from London, via Franciszek Kotuła, the head of the Polish Catholic Mission in London, dated November 1911. The initial part of the address is completed by a quotation from Tennyson’s sonnet *Poland* from 1832, written after the failure of an uprising in the Russian partition of Poland: “The heart of Poland hath not ceased to quiver, tho’ her sacred blood doth drown the fields...”. It appears that the biggest batch of 4356 signatures arrived in Poland first in late 1907 and then in 1911 further 1112 were added. The collection began in Co. Monaghan and Co. Louth, and signatures from Co. Tyrone and some from Co. Donegal were added in 1911.

These signatures would appear to have a potential value for Irish researchers and even genealogists, as there is to be found a long list of full names of Irish people from 1908-1911, mostly school-children. A few people from Co. Monaghan and Louth I interviewed recognized their ancestors’ names on the lists, which was very interesting for me, as my ancestors participated in the Greater Poland school strikes, though probably most of them never heard of this act of sympathy. Many names appear in the Irish script, which may indicate that they were collected during Irish classes, which may also be of interest¹.

As the list of names had not been yet examined by Irish scholars, this modest discovery may be merely an indication of something more widespread. When researching a different subject in the Cardinal Ó Fiaich Memorial Library in Armagh, I have discussed and shown Tyrone signatures to the Librarian, Roddy Hegarty, who discovered the names of two teachers in Castlederg, Co. Tyrone – Maggie Sheedy from Dublin, married to a local man Arthur Mc Sorley, and Máire Ní Dhomhnaill (Mary O’Donnell), who was also an Irish teacher.

A thorough search was conducted in libraries and archives in Ireland (National Library of Ireland; R.I.A. Library; Trinity College Library; Castle Leslie Archives in Glaslough) and in Poland, but no letters or manuscripts pertaining to the collection of signatures were found. A meticulous search of

¹ The author of the article graduated in Polish Philology and does not speak Irish, yet she is able to search for keywords, so all references to Irish-language names and articles required the help of Irish friends.

digitized newspapers (British Library Newspaper Archive, Irish Newspaper Archive, and An Claidheamh Soluis – recently digitized by the Gaelic League), resulted in finding articles about Shane Leslie's lectures and pro-Polish statements, as well as extensive material on the situation in Poland as reflected in the Irish press. However, no information whatsoever about the collection of signatures was found. Unfortunately, I was not able to conduct research in the USA where plenty of Shane Leslie material can be found. As no database is complete and no archive is complete and perfectly organized, there is still hope that one day something more may be discovered.

2. To the children of Ireland

Unlike in Ireland, there were articles and mentions on Shane Leslie's initiative in the Polish press, mainly in Galicia (the part of Poland that belonged to the Habsburg Empire). However, I have not yet found anything from before 1911 when the Address was put on display in the Czartoryski Muzeum, and the story became famous. Most sources gave his name correctly, though there were articles stating that the signatures had been collected by Lord Tennyson (because of the poem quoted) or misspelled his name Ihane Leśli [sic]. Portraits of Shane Leslie were published, and information was given about the book of signatures that was put on display for the public. Some articles exaggerated the number of Irish signatures, stating that there were as many as 15 000 (or even 20 000) of them, or suggested that Irish children were also under persecution at that time (Pochodnia 1913: 6-7²; *Przyjacieł Ludu* 1913: 8). However, the number of signatures given in the MS is 5468 (*Adres dzieci irlandzkich*: 132). The exaggerated numbers were later repeated in literature, including academic writings (Healy 2017: 222). Later, an idea was conceived by *Straż Polska*, a local organization of Polish citizens, to gather signatures of Polish children as a reciprocal act of sympathy and gratitude (*Kurjer Warszawski* 1911: 5; J.B., *Głos Narodu* 1913: 1-2; *Zaranie* 1913: 1000)³. According to the articles mentioned, Polish teachers from Kraków (autonomous Austrian Partition with Polish schools) collected over 15 000 signatures of Polish children. The act of preparing the signatures to be sent to Ireland was laborious as the initiative organisers wished to prove them worthy of display in an Irish museum, as they optimistically hoped. The signatures were then bound in metal and wood embossed with the Polish eagle, and illustrated with watercolors by painter prof. Wincenty Wodzianowski. Additionally, a trilingual preface was added, with the

² Pochodnia's article provides photos of Shane Leslie and the Polish book.

³ *Kurjer Warszawski* gave the correct number of signatures as ca. 6000; *Zaranie*'s article included photos.

Irish language part reportedly taking most effort to produce (it is not explicitly stated who wrote the Irish version, but a linguist from the Jagiellonian University, Prof. Jan Rozwadowski, was consulted). The address ended with the line: “We wish Ireland liberty and luck”.

Though one needs to be cautious about the number of Polish signatures, the existence of the “book” is beyond doubt, especially since there are photographs of it in illustrated journals. These rather small photographs show blurred images, including the title page with two children dressed in folk costume of Polish peasants, two paintings above them on the wall, one with the Polish Eagle, another one with the Irish Harp, as well as children in the act of decorating the Harp with flowers.

It may be mentioned that one of Maria Konopnicka’s most famous poems *Robert Emmet’s Kiss* had been published in February 1908. That publication was followed by persecutions against the publisher in Russian Poland, as tsarist police already knew what the Polish writers meant when they had been writing about any freedom struggle. As there was censorship of the press at that time, we have no information about what inspired the poet. But the possibility that she learnt about Leslie’s initiative cannot be excluded. If she had learnt about it, it would have had to be through unofficial channels. I have not yet seen her unpublished correspondence from that time, and the published letters do not mention this. Even though it is a vague hypothesis as it stands, given the conditions under which Polish poets under tsarist regime lived, it seems to be worth mentioning anyway. Later in this article, Konopnicka’s attempt at a public letter protesting against Kaiser Wilhelm’s honours in England is mentioned. Finding just one press mention and one private MS mention of this long-lost and never published letter was sheer luck.

When the book was first published, it was put on display in a building of the Artists’ Union in Kraków, which no longer exists. As late as November 1914, it was to be shipped “in a few days” to Ireland (*Echo Literacko-Artystyczne* 1914: 1314). The fact that the war had already started was not necessarily an obstacle, because firstly, it was the very beginning of the war and, secondly, as in the case of the second batch of the collected Irish signatures, the book possibly travelled via Catholic Church channels that were at that time safe. However, no trace of it travelling this way has yet been found. Some hypotheses about what possibly could have happened to it and why there was no coverage of the whole story in Ireland, will be discussed in the closing section of this paper.

The exchange of Irish-Polish sympathy in the time before the Great War can be explained only against the background of Polish history of that time and in the context of the mutual friendship that existed between two nations which were stateless throughout the whole of the 19th century. But the exchange seemed to be later almost forgotten (with the exception of some scholars). The

fate of Poland and Ireland during the long 19th century had many similarities, but for the linguistic situation. As the language situation in Greater Poland was very different from that in Ireland, some explanation may be useful here.

3. The language policy in Prussian Poland

The Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania ceased to exist in 1795 after the third and final Partition between Russia, Prussia and Austria. As the Prussian partition is the main focus of the present contribution, the history of the linguistic situation in Russian and Austrian partitions are not discussed in detail. Suffice it to say that the position of the Polish language was not bad in the Habsburg Empire, especially from the second part of the 19th century onwards. Polish was taught in all schools in Austrian Poland, including universities, and was allowed in public life in the early 20th century. In contrast, in the Russian part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the position of Polish was gradually deteriorating over the 19th century. The situation was complex because Russia had different policies in central Poland where Poles were the majority, and in the East (Lithuania, modern-day Belarus and the Ukraine). But regardless of place and time, the State employed a more or less intensive policy of Russification of the Polish population. This is only a general assessment, as a background to the story, and it may explain why most efforts supporting the school strikes in Prussian partition took place in the Austrian part of the country.

The border between Poland and neighbouring German states had been changing in history, and the settlers from Germany in the west of the kingdom were not always invaders. Especially in the case of the so-called Bambergers, who were Roman Catholic economic migrants from the south of Germany and assimilated well with Poles. Therefore, generally the conflict did not seem imminent. There were no clashes similar to the 1724 Tumult of Toruń/Thorn in the north of Poland, where a combination of ethnic and sectarian aspects played a role. Since the Partitions, however, especially the third one, the influx of Prussian officials, soldiers and colonists from German-speaking territories was gradually changing the social and linguistic balance.

The Prussian authorities were rather tolerant in the early years, as the King of Prussia gave his guarantees for preserving the language of Poland. Yet, later the support for the language decreased, especially after the 1870 and the unification of Germany under the Prussian direction. The policy of complete cultural unification was adopted, which advocated elimination of all regional differences, with no regard for the Polish culture or language. Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* was another factor antagonizing Catholics and Protestants in the Empire, which in the case of Greater Poland emphasized the already existing

sectarian aspect of the growing Polish-German animosities. Bismarck's (and generally Prussian) fears of Polish Nationalism were not entirely unsubstantiated as the small Greater Poland region also witnessed a small 1848 insurrection as a consequence of Prussian authorities first boosting Polish hopes for more freedom and then dashing them abruptly.

A characteristic feature of the Greater Poland was social solidarity between classes. The food subsistence crisis in the mid-19th century was not as tragic as that in Ireland due to a combination of positive factors, from protective measures of the Prussian government (even if they were later labeled as not sufficient) to the efforts of Polish landowners (almost no absentees) and social activists (Łuczak 1955: 111-140). Networks of cooperatives and local businesses were built and all efforts of locals were focused on survival. There are a plethora of testimonials that Prussian Poles from the 1830s onwards looked at Ireland when building their own structures and strategies, especially the Daniel O'Connell Catholic emancipation movement, and then the Land League. In comparison, Polish ownership of land was increasing and the language was far from declining. Unfortunately, this in turn seemed to be a major issue with the Prussian officials.

Germany had no policy of bilingualism or, in more general terms, equality of ethnic groups inhabiting the Empire. This was obviously not unique in Europe, as Norman Davies once observed (Davies 1982: 132). In 1870 the use of the German language for all subjects (except religion) was introduced in high schools in Greater Poland (against the previous Royal guarantees), which diminished significantly the number of educated Poles in subsequent years. From 1887 there was no Polish as a subject in schools. From 1883 German was introduced as a language of instruction in high schools during religion classes for all schools with at least 50% of German students (Staniewski 1923: 6-8). Already at that time the press in Ireland became aware of the plight of Poland and nationalist papers linked it conveniently to familiar local issues, though land question and colonization were emphasized more than the language problem (*Dublin Weekly Nation* 1887: 9).

The last remaining Polish language element in education remained in religious instruction in grammar schools; and this too was scheduled for gradual removal from 1900 onwards, depending on local circumstances. The steady demise of Polish in schools despite more than half (60% to 80% in some areas) of students whose first and often most fluent language was Polish, raised regular and strong protests of Polish representatives in the Prussian Parliament. But for a long time there were no significant public demonstrations of discontent.

3.1. The beginning of the strikes

One can speculate as to why the strikes started in Buk and Września. Both locations are familiar to historians researching the local 1848 conflict as battles of peasant scythe men against Prussian army were fought near these places and their memory was kept alive in local oral folklore. Września is also close to Gniezno, the ecclesiastic Catholic capital of all Poland, and the Catholic religion played a significant role in the strikes. For many years local Poles defined themselves as Catholics, in contrast to Prussian colonists who were mostly Lutheran (Protestant). Sectarian tensions were inflamed first by Prussian confiscations of Catholic Church properties after 1795, later even more by the German *Kulturkampf* – a crucial element when trying to understand growing walls between Poles and Prussians. The religious aspect of the conflict was less visible in Greater Poland in the early 19th century, but it gradually increased in importance. It seems that the situation deteriorated on both sides, as Prussian Poland evolved from an autonomous province where authorities respected local culture to a subject area where the culture of the Empire was being introduced forcibly and where Prussian colonists were planted in growing numbers. The Catholic religion became ultimately a part of the indigenous Polish identity and any attack on any of the components of this identity was considered outrageous and insulting.

In 1901 the most famous Września strike started when children refused to accept new Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church printed in German. The teacher responded with corporal punishment and when that did not work, employed the tactics of keeping students in detention at school for many hours daily. The parents then started protesting. The situation escalated as the Poles refused to surrender easily, and the German educationists employed harsh measures. Prussian public school regulations permitted punishment of female students with up to four lashes on their palms; boys were punished by lashing their buttocks. This was the official policy. But as the realities overwhelmed teachers, many indulged themselves in indiscriminately beating children with fists and whatever could be used. Protesting parents were also punished by fines and custody. Severe repressions for adults followed, punishing parents whose children were on strike, and also punishing children by refusing them advancement to the next class. These measures were eventually effective as they were aimed at common working class people who did not have any means for private education. But before the strike ended it became famous (Kulczycki 1981).

Civil society in Prussian Poland was at work to resist Prussian oppression. In 1901 a local Polish owner of a photographic studio in Września came up with the idea of taking pictures of strikers, including drastic photos of children's

beating marks on their arms and back. The network of Polish activists later kept sending these to major newspapers home and abroad (*Daily Mirror* 1906: 1)⁴.

In 1905 the next strike began, and turned into a big one, after the German language was introduced to even more grammar schools. This time other parts of the Prussian Partition participated. After harsh repressions, ranging from financial measures to imprisonment for both parents and priests and, even worse, attempts to take children from their parents to state care, this strike ended as well between 1907 and 1908. Schools that went on strike achieved nothing. However, the process of introducing religion in German to new grammar schools was put on hold, so there still remained schools with classes conducted through the medium of Polish, even though one could not expect this to last for long. Prussian politicians viewed any compromise as a sign of weakness. They had an entrenched belief in the German culture as more developed and higher than Slavonic cultures, and they were not ashamed to force this attitude onto autochthonic tribes to “encourage Germandom”.

3.2. The international reception of the strikes

Poles from other Partitions took a variety of actions. Two famous writers, poet Maria Konopnicka and novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz wrote poems and public letters, which were also translated into French, German, Italian and English and published in many continental and British newspapers. In the meantime, Prussian colonization intensified and new laws discriminating the Polish ownership of land followed, but their reception abroad also helped to spread the knowledge about the language issue, spoiling the reputation of Prussia on the grounds of unequal treatment of its subjects. In 1907 a discussion started in the Prussian Parliament about the Expropriation Bill, which allowed for properties of Polish landowners to be forcibly purchased by the State, priced and then parceled for future colonization by mainland German subjects. This was against the Prussian Constitution but the argument was that all this increased Germany’s welfare (Trzeciakowski 2003: 422-450)⁵. Henryk Sienkiewicz responded with a Survey sent to many famous names, whose responses were later printed.

As a voice from afar, Bernard Shaw’s response was printed only after many years. The Irish-born author used the Survey to express his own opinions about the immorality of all forms of ownership, land included, based on his socialist principles. As to the problem of imposing imperial languages on autochthonic

⁴ A big photo of a girl’s bare arms with marks from beating.

⁵ Trzeciakowski discusses here the coverage of 1900-1914, with regard to both language and land issues that seemed to be inseparable at that time.

peoples, he made a remark that though he was Irish, he spoke and wrote in English, and was rather satisfied with that as it enabled him to have more readers. A certain sense of irony and paradox can in hindsight be perceived in this response, but that was probably lost in translation as Polish people struggled for the survival of their language and land. Most of the respondents, however, gave official support to the Polish minority in Prussia, and the letters made the situation even more widely publicized (Płygawko 1994: 112-114).

The action of Polish writers might have roused some interest of intellectuals of the world, but there was no immediate reaction, especially as governments were reluctant to interfere with what was perceived as a matter of internal policy in Prussia.

4. Echoes of the Polish situation in Ireland

Poland constantly featured in Irish Nationalist press, as Healy (2017) argued in her book⁶. One could add here that Irish non-Nationalist papers also spoke in a sympathetic tone about the oppression of Poland, and the same may be said about Scottish and English papers. The Irish Nationalists, however, linked it habitually to their own cause making striking comparisons as one of the “small, oppressed nations”. Other peoples’ history had often been used as a vehicle allowing Irish or Polish writers to express their own thoughts, sometimes as a proxy in the time of censorship, and sometimes as an argument about moral universal right. The British also sympathised with Poland, so it was a good way of reminding them about their own “Poland”, e.g. Ireland (Kucharski 2015: 99-110).

Browsing through Irish newspapers, one can observe a frequency of references to Poland in times of political upheaval, turmoil or any spectacular developments on the Vistula. At the same time, whenever censorship allowed, Polish newspapers were writing on Ireland when something was happening on the banks of Shannon. Sympathy for a faraway, suffering country did not require a detailed knowledge of the situation. When Ollamh Fodla published his poem on the decline of the Irish language, his strongest argument, near the end, was that “Russia’s great Czar ne’er stood secure o’er Poland’s shatter’d frame, Until he trampled from her heart the tongue that bore her name.” [Michael] Mullen⁷ probably imagined Poland as being in a rather similar situation to

6 The book, gathering an impressive collection from various authors who focused on particular issues, to create a wide panorama, was oriented particularly on political discourse (Healy 2017). I too have written about this in my book in Polish, with more emphasis on biographies and literature, and with a Polish perspective (Gmerek 2010).

7 Very little can be found about the poet, except for his name and his priestly vocation, given in an unsigned article where the author claimed that he knew him personally (*Plagiarism with a Vengeance* 1887: 696).

Ireland (Fodla 1854: 761). At the time of the 1863-1864 uprising against the Russians, *The Irishman*, edited by aging Young Irelanders, published long articles about the insurrection, this time more accurate, especially since one of the authors was William Smith O'Brien, who visited Poland and Lithuania in May 1863. Though one might expect better orientation in the Polish situation from a late 19th century journalist, a Polish reader is then confused by the words of Robert Ellis Thompson: "how is it that the Poles, more oppressed than the Irish, have better preserved their nationality than the Irish? The answer must be given – the Poles have preserved their language, and the Polish language has preserved Polish nationality" (Thompson 1899: 299).

From a Polish perspective it sounds like an unnecessary feeling of guilt – Ireland had been under foreign cultural influence for so long that some damage to the native language seemed inevitable. Was it merely a rhetoric concept used for propaganda purposes or did the author genuinely believe that Poland was without a state as long as Ireland? We do not know. One can only admit that Irish Nationalist journals at the turn of the century published similar statements quite frequently. As a leitmotiv, they expressed the idea that "Poland was held together by the bond of language" (An Claidheamh Soluis 1914a: 6.) or "the soul of that country survived (..) because that Nation had retained its own language"⁸ (An Claidheamh Soluis 1914b: 7).

At the turn of the century, *An Claidheamh Soluis*⁹ was regularly writing of the land and language situation in both Russian and Prussian Poland, both issues being entangled together. Maybe not the length, but the frequency of brief references, and also their tone, are striking for a Polish reader, who is impressed by a kindred spirit: "The Poles have their penal days at present under the Germans, for refusing to be Germanised" (Notes 1901: 616), "The Polish children were flogged into learning German, but they were flogged and yet did not learn the German" (ACS 1902a: 214; ACS 1902b: 878-879), "The story of the Polish children who are at this moment defying the might of the German Empire should be read once a week in every school in Ireland" (ACS 1906:7)¹⁰.

Other articles told stories about Polish economic struggle against German domination and colonization, where the methods of Poles resembled boycott and the "Ireland for the Irish" strategy. In his impressive commentary, Breathnach (1908) described efforts of the German authorities to destroy Poles economically and the powerful resistance of the inhabitants of the Prussian Partition that actually brought about the opposite result:

⁸ Words of Micheal Smidic.

⁹ *An Claidheamh Soluis* (1899-1930) was an Irish Nationalist newspaper published in the early 20th century by Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League), in English and Irish.

¹⁰ The title "To save the children" refers to Irish schoolchildren who, according to the anonymous author, should be saved from Anglicisation.

(...) The people are inspired and invigorated by the extent of their persecution. And the people who were formerly indifferent or afraid are now faithful and diligent, and working hard to restore the sovereignty of their country. The contest removes the rust from the blades. (...) They have founded a powerful association to strengthen and consolidate the industries of their own country. This movement is strongest in Posen. (...) They are combining in resistance by every means available to them. They will not buy so much as a farthing-worth of German produce.”

The allusion to the Irish situation was inevitable: “Let us help each other as the Poles do. Let us tie ourselves to each other with the cords of true friendship, and one day we will reach our goal” (Breathnach 1908: 5)¹¹. Breathnach lived at that time in Switzerland and, therefore, was fully informed of recent developments in Poland from the European press. Also, Henryk Sienkiewicz was in that country at the time, active in publicizing the plight of Prussian Poland. The Irish writer raised here two important matters: the successful economic struggle of the oppressed against the colonial state, and the impact of persecution on the national identity.

Breathnach did not write on the language question or about the impact of school-strikes. The protests failed in the shorter perspective, but they had produced a permanent and unbridgeable division between both sides. The Prussian stance was not easily changeable, but also the Polish community embraced their own nationalism (Poles would rather use the word patriotism) more than ever before as a result of strikes. When the Great War ended, a Polish state emerged but the allies initially, especially Lloyd George, were inclined to leave Greater Poland with Germany. However, a massive uprising started in December 1918 resulting eventually in returning most of the area to Poland.

5. Shane Leslie and his Polish connections

To explain how Shane Leslie might have initiated the idea of Irish support for Poland, one needs to examine first his family background, and then the Irish historical situation of his time. Shane Leslie (1885-1971) was a son of an Anglo-Irish aristocratic family, of Scottish descent, from Glaslough, Co. Monaghan. Converted early to Roman Catholicism and to Irish Nationalism, an Irish language enthusiast, he was at the same time a pacifist, a follower of Leo Tolstoy and a lover of ecology. His Irish patriotism collided inevitably with his paternal family’s British imperial ties, while his pacifism was not entirely agreeable to other Irish Nationalists. John Randolph changed his name first to

¹¹ Mícheál Breathnach, Ó’n domhan thoir (From the East), *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 04.01.1908. I am greatly indebted to Pat Muldowney for translation, and to Mark Ó Fionnain for consultation about this article.

Seaghán Óg, then to the more conventional Shane. In his life he tried diplomatic ways, went through many crises, and eventually became famous as a man of letters and commentator rather than as a politician. Assumed to be a harmless eccentric, until the end of his life he wore the Irish kilt every day and recited the rosary in Irish. His environmental interests helped in the re-afforestation of Ireland. The recent large biography by Otto Rauchbauer seeks to do justice to all the contradictory aspects of Leslie's personality and encompass all his enthusiasms. However, it barely mentions the Polish episode of his life (Rauchbauer 2009: 33).

In an interview in 1939 Leslie said: "Thirty years ago, I first visited Poland, and took the occasion of my visit to bring an address from the children of Ireland to the children of Poland. It was signed by several thousands of Irish children and written out in English, Polish and Irish bound in Dublin in green and gold leather." (Leslie 1939: 15). Regrettably, the above quote has been the only press coverage, other than the ones in the Polish language, of the collection of signatures that I managed to find. In the letter accompanying the signatures, Leslie wrote that if he had had any answer from Poland to his action, he would have written about this in the *Irish Rosary*. This was a journal of the Irish Dominicans, with whom Shane was closely connected at the time of writing his letter, as he lived for a while at St. Saviour in Dublin, toying with the idea of entering the Dominican Order. However, later his life changed utterly, as during his travels to America later in 1908 he met his future wife. In the years before WWI he spent much time in the USA and later lived in England. The article on Poland has not yet been found in the *Irish Rosary*. It is possible that the article about his collection of signatures and response from Poland was printed in another Roman Catholic journal, not covered yet by the more readily available searchable databases.

Leslie returned to this topics in his book *The Film of Memory* (1938), where he described his journey to Russia through Poland, where he spent about one week (Leslie 1938). He seemed to have visited only the Russian part of Poland, mentioning Częstochowa in the Vistula Land and Wilno/Vilnius in the Northwest Country (Russian designations). He had strong memories from Wilno/Vilnius, a mixed city that is today the capital of Lithuania, but which in 1908 had a majority of Polish speakers and a strong Polish educational underground. In Vilnius, as in the all so-called "Western Countries", Russians applied a different language policy than in Warsaw and the rest of the Vistula Country west of the Bug river. Polish was strictly forbidden in public life and in schools. Leslie was astonished to see what he described as the modern equivalent of Irish hedge schools, where the Polish language and history were taught in private homes by Polish teachers.

After coming back to Ireland, Leslie gave several lectures on Russia and Poland, speaking about political turmoil in Russia, but also the oppression of the Polish language and the forced departure of Bishop Edward Ropp from Vilnius. The last event happened on 19 October 1907 (of the Gregorian calendar, used in most western countries). As Shane claimed to have witnessed it, this fixes the approximate date of his travel through Poland (Jurkowski 1990: 264). Contrary to what Leslie said in the 1938 interview, the bishop had not been exiled to Siberia, but he was nevertheless removed by the tsar from his post, called to St. Petersburg for reprimand, and later forbidden from returning to the Vilnius area. The reason was his Polish nationalist activities (including criticism against Russian state schools). Shane compared Edward Ropp to the Irish archbishop John MacHale (1789-1880).

The book *Film of Memory* also depicts what was not mentioned in any other known source. After his journey to Poland, when investigating the life of Mrs Fitzherbert, mother of his ancestor from England, Georgina Seymour, Shane Leslie discovered his alleged illegitimate Polish ancestry. He spoke very cautiously about this, saying that the love affair happened once on one of his grandmother's side, and the father of one of his grandmas was "Count Zamoryski", a Polish Ambassador in London, in the first half of the 19th century (since the Polish State did not exist at that time, there was no Ambassador, at least no official one).

No hard evidence for that has been found yet. But maybe it could be mentioned here that in 1830-1840's, one of Leslie's great-grandmothers, Georgina Dawson-Damer, born Seymour, participated in pro-Polish activities of the English society. There was nothing unusual about this as the Polish cause was fashionable for a certain time in London. George Dawson-Damer, Georgina's husband, was a cousin to Lord Dudley Stuart, the head of the Literary Society of the Friends of Poland (Leslie C. Notes: n.d.). General Zamoyski, who might be labelled as the Polish unofficial Ambassador in the UK at that time, reportedly befriended Georgina and received important intelligence from her. Also, she was even supposedly lobbying the British Royalty for Poland (Zamoyska 1918: 327, 328, 459). There was also a Victorian tabloid publishing a few hints about Georgina and Count Zamoyski, including one very strange-sounding mention of a birth of a daughter to "the Hon. Mrs. Zamoyski Dawson-Damer" (*The Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times* 1843: 22). Constance, Shane Leslie's grandmother, was born, however, in 1836 (Constance Dawson Damer Baptism Certificate 1836). All this, therefore, seems to be merely gossip, and we cannot be sure. The story may be worth mentioning mainly because Shane Leslie believed it. He later claimed that when he had visited Poland in 1907, the images of the country of his ancestors subconsciously evoked strong empathy in him, even though he had not known

of the connection at that time. One can guess that it suited his imagination to find at least one non-British ancestor, a freedom fighter from another Catholic and oppressed country. At least, this discovery probably influenced his Polish chapter in the *Film of Memory* and his interest in Poland during the WWII.

Even though his Polish visit lasted merely about a week, after his return from Russia and Poland, Leslie frequently referred to it in his public orations. Already in February 1908 his article advocating the Irish national kilt contained an unexpected argument about Poland:

I do not think we can do better than imitate the Poles, whom I have been able recently to view at close quarters. Their national costume, one of great beauty and not more suitable than ours for day-to-day use, is always worn in the great religious and patriotic processions by the men, and in everyday life by their children (Leslaigh [Leslie] 1908: 11).

This may indicate that he held dear memories from Poland. At that time he was lecturing about his Eastern journey, and talking about the situation in Russia after the first 1905 Revolution, but Poland had a significant part in his talks, to the extent that newspaper titles reporting his lectures mentioned this. The lecture in Monaghan, where his name was given as Seagan Og Leslie [sic!], seemed to contain as much information about Poland as of Russia, including information on Prussian Poland (*Anglo-Celt* 1908: 4). Rev. Tierney from MacCartan Seminary summed up the lecture saying that Ireland was like Poland in many ways; the Poles were fighting for their language, so the Gaelic League and people who wanted to revive the Irish should take a lesson from the Poles. The event ended with Leslie's declaration that if there was an Irish Brigade available, he would join it and fight for Poland, an idealistic declaration, odd from a self-declared Pacifist, but strangely similar to what William Smith O'Brien said during his lecture after coming back from Poland and Lithuania in 1863 (Gmerek 2015: 121). Apart from that lecture in Monaghan Town, Leslie had probably more on the same subject. The author found another one, on the 24th of January, in the Forester's Hall in Armagh where he presented as John Leslie (*Irish News* and *Belfast Morning News* 1908: 7). There might be more of them, especially considering that the speaker was well-prepared, illustrating the speech with his own photos in the form of a "magic lantern". Unfortunately, no trace of these early slides has yet been found in the archives. Interestingly, the young convert to the Irish cause was at that time still in a transition phase with his identity (and changes of his names sometimes made my search for press coverage difficult). There is some indication that Leslie mentioned Poland also during other lectures, like the one for Newry's Christian Brothers in 1910 (where he was already named Shane Leslie), and also on other occasions.

One can see that his view on Poland, with its emphasis on the language struggle, was no different from the general point of view of the Gaelic Leaguers of that era, expressed many times in *An Claidheamh Soluis* as was demonstrated before. One question then remains: why was there no press coverage of the 1908 collecting of signatures in support of Polish children, if, as he declared later, he brought this proof of Irish support for Poland when visiting the country in November 1908?

6. Conclusions

As this article is almost completed, one can try to propose a few hypotheses to explain this lack of information. This absence of Irish sources was intriguing for me, and delayed writing this paper for years. Ultimately I realized there may be nothing to wait for. Additionally, writing it up may be the best way of publicizing the story, perhaps leading to feedback from Ireland. And if ever something is found, perhaps it may be an opportunity for another piece. At this stage all hypotheses are merely speculations.

It can be said quite safely that the collection of the Irish signatures, and especially the delayed sending of the Polish signatures, was carried out shortly before some highly significant developments in Irish history – WWI and 1916, followed by Civil War in Ireland. Big events easily overshadow smaller issues. A weakness of this hypothesis is, however, that it explains better why there is a lack of information on the Polish address sent in 1914. But during the Irish collection in 1907, there was no war and there was good coverage of Poland in Irish nationalist papers.

One cannot forget a certain individualism in Shane Leslie, who was an aristocrat and a fresh convert to the Cause, who possibly undertook the action on his own, and who might have received no official support from the Gaelic League, even though it is obvious that he had assistance from the grassroots' members, Irish teachers from the northern area where he lived. One can only ask what might have been the source of any disapproval or suspicion, except possibly, personal distrust of important people. A greater insight into the inner circles of the Gaelic League and other organizations of that time might be needed here.

The Irish sympathy for Poland, as one of many oppressed nations, was one of the recurring leitmotifs in the Irish 19th century press. It cannot be underestimated, but it also must not be overestimated, as Poland was only one country on that list. Others included Hungary, Italy before unification, India (where autochthonic people suffered under the same British rule as the Irish), and occasionally, more exotic examples like Circassia (McLean 2003). As demonstrated above, Irish writers did not always have detailed knowledge of

the realities of the situation of Poles and vice-versa (this paper is not dealing with the latter.). The political and cultural background also might not have always been helpful to the cause of Poland and pro-Polish activities were not always encouraged. Polish people were oppressed by imperial powers hostile to Britain. While Britain struggled with the oppressors of Poland, then, in the words of Daniel O’Connell, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. If enemy of my enemy is my friend, who then could be the enemy of my friend? This is a difficult question. Luckily for mutual friendship, such purely tactical alliances were usually short-lived and never thoroughly followed through. But this might have prevented the building of more stable and perhaps more substantial relations, such as long-lived organisations or serious publications by major authors. Therefore, Shane Leslie’s “Polish activity” might not have been widely understood or appreciated at the time.

One can observe the propaganda efforts of some German Celticists, for example Julius Pokorny, hardly a real Teuton himself, who once advised the Irish as follows:

The Hungarian people and Slavonic nations, peoples that have no great past, no great literature, peoples that are much inferior in culture to the Teutonic or Celtic races have *attended national independence as* to their language and education. (I don’t mean to say, that you should follow their often bad and disreputable means !) (Pokorny, ACS 1908: 7-9).

It does not seem, however, that the Irish were susceptible to this kind of German chauvinist propaganda¹² as it was not in tune with their own mentality. Another factor was the changing course of British policy, for a long time friendly towards Germany, then hostile. It cannot be argued that the British had always been hostile to Germany (so that Ireland should see that country as an ally from the times immemorial). Britain’s alliances were always pragmatic and changeable. But the British Royal dynasty is of German origin, and there have always been cordial ties because of that. In hindsight, it might seem that Germany and Britain had already been in conflict in the years leading to the Great War. However, at that time nothing was yet decided. In November and December of 1907 the Emperor Wilhelm II Hohenzollern visited his uncle, King Edward VII of Britain. During this official visit, when residing in Windsor, on the 15th of November 1908, the Kaiser received a deputation from the University of Oxford that conferred on him the honorary title of Doctor of Civil Law (Mouron and Millea, mail exchange: 2018)¹³. The protest of a famous

¹² For Prof. Heinrich Zimmer using his knowledge from the field of Celtic Philology advising how native languages like Polish can be erased, see Gmerek 2003.

¹³ The decision-making process was confidential, and we do not have an explanation of this gesture.

Polish poet, Maria Konopnicka, feeling justified to speak for all Polishwomen, against the legal title for Wilhelm, at a time when unconstitutional laws were being introduced against the Polish minority in Prussia, seemed to be quietly ignored and eagerly forgotten by the British and Germans alike (Orzeszkowa 1967: 217; 467-468)¹⁴. This episode seems to be worth mentioning, not only because it is now quite forgotten with only tiny traces of it in sources, despite the great reputation of the poet, but also to demonstrate, how complicated the political and cultural background of Leslie's collection of signatures was.

This article has been written against the inertia of history and time that overshadow the human solidarity between Irish and Polish people. The author received a very sympathetic response when interviewing the Irish about this. Special thanks should be expressed here to Samantha Leslie, the granddaughter of Shane and Yvonne Kelly, Cultural Heritage Manager of the Castle Leslie Archives; Roddy Hegarty, the Librarian of the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Library & Archive; Shane O'Byrne, local historian from Dundalk and Cuan Ó Seireadáin, Curator at Conradh na Gaeilge (Gaelic League). I am also truly grateful to Patrick Muldowney for help with both Irish and English.

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, some people found names of their relatives on the lists, e.g. three brothers Byrne of Dundalk, Co. Louth, who signed the Address. Among them was Felix MacHugh Byrne, whose double name indicated the nationalist sympathies of parents (from Feagh MacHugh, the 16th century Irish hero). All three brothers later joined the British Army to fight in WWI. They did it voluntarily, at a time when many Irishmen believed it to be a gesture of good will with regard to the future Home Rule. Tragically, Felix MacHugh was killed in action at the Somme, 1916¹⁵. It is sad to say that Polish conscripts from Greater Poland were at that time at the Somme, the author's grand uncle among them, on the opposite side. The nightmare of war when soldiers from colonial countries were fighting for their foreign empires eventually ended in 1918, and survivors returned home; in the case of Byrne brothers just one of them. Poles who were spared later deserted massively and in December 1918 joined the local uprising against Germany. Later in Versailles, most of Greater Poland was granted to the Polish State. The fates of Irish soldiers were sometimes similar, sometimes different, but this is not a place to discuss it.

This article is, therefore, dedicated to the memory of Shane Leslie, organizer of the signatures collection, and to all grassroots participants, the Irish schoolchildren and teachers whose signatures are left to us, and also to the

¹⁴ No trace of the protest in the OU Archives has been found, according to the e-mail exchange with Archivists (Mouron and Millea). The only information about the protest was found in the critical edition of Eliza Orzeszkowa's letters quoted here, with reference to the article in *Kuryer Litewski* 1907 Nr 262. The number is missing from Polish libraries nowadays.

¹⁵ Information about the fate of Byrne brothers thanks to Shaun O'Byrne of Dundalk.

memory of Polish children who went on strike 1901-1908 and the people who organized the Polish response to the Irish signatures.

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