



An East Central European “Sahib” in a Former Colony: Andrzej Bobkowski in Guatemala (1948–1961)

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The chapter focuses on the case of a Polish writer, Andrzej Bobkowski, who emigrated to Guatemala in 1948. On the one hand, he was deeply disappointed with the political and cultural weakness of Western Europe, which had consented to the new division of the world leaving Eastern and East Central Europe to the Soviets. On the other hand, being already in mid-forties, this well-educated cosmopolitan, who had been living in France since spring 1939, started to perceive East Central Europeanness as a second-class status. Given these circumstances, Bobkowski’s emigration to Guatemala presents itself as a compensatory experience, a way to deny the subordinate position of a Central European in the West during and immediately after World War II. The compensatory dimension of his emigration manifested itself in that he adopted a role of a “sahib” in Guatemala. According to the writer, a Central European is someone who was disregarded in the West, but here, in the former colony, being “white” can elevate his social position and earn him recognition unattainable to him in the West.

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The Polish writer Andrzej Bobkowski (1913–1961) posthumously gained undeniable fame and sympathy from his readers. This “rogue of freedom,” as he defined himself, who rode a bicycle along the Côte d’Azur and constructed aeroplane models in remote Guatemala, was indeed straightforward and charming as well as gifted with a considerable literary talent. However, following a wave of enthusiasm for the author and his writing, some scholars sought to look at his work more critically. One of the most notorious of such attempts was an article by Łukasz Mikołajewski revealing Bobkowski’s antisemitism. The researcher compared the most famous book by the writer, a wartime diary *Szkice piórkciem* [Sketches made with a stylus], with the manuscript written in France, and discovered that in the post-war edition from 1957 Bobkowski had removed excerpts that were downright anti-semitic (Mikołajewski 2011, 110–131).

Another thread of Bobkowski’s work, which requires the attention of literary historians and which I am going to explore in this chapter, is the image of Guatemala and its inhabitants presented in the writer’s diaries, short stories, and most notably, correspondence. Analysing these texts reveals how the author overtly or tacitly manifested the mentality of a nineteenth-century coloniser. Even though he truly loved Guatemala, where he had settled in 1948 and lived until his death, his perception of it was grounded in a belief in the superiority of the white man. Such a viewpoint, I intend to point out, resulted not only from a condescending attitude on the part of Bobkowski, who considered himself an emblematic European in relation to the non-European population. His own experience, gained in Western Europe, of being from a (supposedly) second-class world, i.e. East Central Europe, was another important factor determining his attitudes towards the inhabitants of Guatemala whom he tended to turn into non-European others. Thus, I will analyse a curious case of colonial othering manifested by Bobkowski, an immigrant who had come from Poland via France to Guatemala, once a Spanish colony. In a paradoxical manner, this immigrant, whose homeland—at that time a Soviet-dominated country—had experienced subjection to foreign rule since the end of the eighteenth century, took on the role of a white coloniser in another postcolonial space, at least in his attitudes and perceptions.

THE DECISION OF LIFE AND DEATH

Together with his wife, Barbara, Bobkowski arrived in France in March 1939, when he was not yet 26. The couple's stay was to have a temporary character. They were waiting for the completion of formalities and the onward journey to Buenos Aires where Bobkowski, a graduate of the Warsaw School of Economics, was going to take up a job adequate to his education. This plan misfired, and the outbreak of World War II found Andrzej and Barbara in Paris. They lived there for nine years and, after that period, in 1948, took a step which Bobkowski's acquaintance, literary critic Tymon Terlecki, called "the decision of life and death" (Terlecki 2006, 8). They packed their meagre belongings and on June 28 boarded the "Jagiello" bound for Guatemala, having no more than 100 dollars in their pockets, hardly knowing any Spanish or anything about living conditions in Central America.

There were several reasons why Bobkowski decided to make such a radical move from the place where he lived. Perhaps an important motivation was the writer's desire to experience an overseas adventure, which he signalled several times. Already before the war, he wrote to his wife's sister, Anna Seifert: "I am simply, humanly, pulled to another world, climate, people, nature. [...] There is something in me that tightens up and rises to the sun" (Zieliński 1984, 87). Three months before the journey he informed his uncle, Aleksander Bobkowski: "Well – one Bobkowski is going to conquer. I really have something of an adventurer in myself. It makes me happy" (Bobkowski 2013a, 43). Apparently, Bobkowski was eager to think about his decision in terms of an exciting, hazardous activity, much akin to adventure books for boys. In a letter to Jerzy Turowicz, the editor-in-chief of the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, a weekly for liberal Catholic intellectuals, he seemed proud to be "a wild one" (Bobkowski 2013b, 40), brave enough to take a leap of faith into the unknown.

Another reason why the author moved to Guatemala was his deep disappointment with Europe, which had started right after the beginning of the war and reached the level of complete rejection of the old continent in the late 1940s. In spring 1948, having planned the journey, Bobkowski wrote to his acquaintance, the famous writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz:

I am starting to write all my letters in a “testamentary” mood now. Simply because if nothing occurs, in the first half of May, probably on 13th,¹ I am sailing from Cannes to Cristobal in Panama. From there I am flying by plane to Guatemala. I am starting to bequeath something to everybody. To you I am bequeathing Europe. Actually, the worst thing I have left. It’s an embarrassing legacy. (Bobkowski 1986, 77)

Having regarded Europe as the worst, most embarrassing part of his heritage, the writer also depreciated qualities which had formed the basis for his psycho-intellectual disposition and hinted that he saw them as catastrophic. In his diaries, post-war journalism, and correspondence alike, Bobkowski found Europe, and especially Western Europe, degraded and humiliated, first, because it had succumbed to the aggressive politics of Nazi Germany, and second, because it had not resisted Stalin’s totalitarianism. As a result of passivity and indifference, the writer pointed out, Western Europe had lost its spiritual identity and revealed an axiological void in its place. It had become conformist and cowardly—the best proof of which was that after the war, it became complicit in allowing the Soviet Union to dominate the Central and Eastern part of the continent, succumbing to a convenient illusion that the Western scrap of the European mainland was the whole continent, and becoming dependent on the aid from the United States. Western Europe, Bobkowski summed up, ceased to be an inspiring, fertile ground. The only thing it was still able to deliver was a disgusting type of man, fleeing from freedom, melted in the mass, stripped of individualism, reduced to null.

Finally, Bobkowski decided to start a new life in Guatemala because, not wanting to stay in Western Europe, he also did not want to go back to Poland, which, after the war, was included in the Soviet zone of influence. He answered the question, “why?” in his fictional diptych “Pożegnanie” [“Farewell”] and “List” [“A letter”], both published in the Polish emigre monthly *Kultura*² [*Culture*] in 1948. The protagonist of the latter short story, talking to a friend who chose to return to Poland, says:

¹ The trip, initially planned for May 13, was ultimately shifted to June.

² *Kultura*, edited by Jerzy Giedroyc, was the most influential Polish-émigré journal published from 1947 to 2000 by the Literary Institute, initially in Rome, then Paris. Over years it printed and popularised works of many leading Polish intellectuals and writers living in the Polish People’s Republic and exiles, such as Witold Gombrowicz, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Juliusz Mieroszewski, Józef Czapski, Konstanty Jeleński and many others. Bobkowski published a lot in the series Library of *Kultura*.

I don't want, and I can't condemn myself to a lifetime of lying [...] On behalf of any system and any political orientation I can't be quiet when I know I should speak. [...] Here, the thoughts dictate my words, there, licensed words have started to dictate thoughts. (Bobkowski 1998, 65)

Bobkowski, like the protagonist of his short story, knew that there was no place for him in his homeland, which was steadily being converted into a totalitarian panopticon. He rejected Poland, already in the first stage of communist transformation, because he opposed political control over human life. His desire was to stay “a regular, ordinary man” living by his own rules, not an adherent of any political faith who was deprived of “the holy right not to believe” (Bobkowski 2009, 156).

In short, Bobkowski went to Guatemala to realise a boy's “dream of the jungle” he had had “from an early age,”³ but, first and foremost, to defend his own sense of individualism and dignity. From his perspective, escaping from Europe in general and Poland in particular, was a way to stay free from the petrified, fake pseudo-values of the old continent, which had not withstood the test of World War II.

TO BE A QUETZAL

Guatemala, a country with a colonial past, whose territory had been conquered by Spanish conquistadors in 1523, did not constitute a stable political unit in the late 40s and 50s of the twentieth century, when Andrzej and Barbara Bobkowski lived there. It was economically dependent on big Northern American concerns and notoriously torn by military upheavals. In 1949, the power of the Communists strengthened, and in 1950 the dictatorship of the leftist President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán—and terror no less than behind the Iron Curtain—began. The most acute was the coup spearheaded by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, supported by the CIA, in 1954. Bobkowski, who detested every form of communism, wrote at that time about the “liberation of Guatemala” and the “defeat of communism” that could have threatened all the territory between Panama and Mexico (Bobkowski 1955, 56–73). The revolution, however, did not

³ See: “The jungle! I was always dreaming about it! ... From an early age. And here it is!” These words of Bobkowski were noted by Aleksander Grobicki, who visited the writer in Guatemala, in 1959 (Grobicki 1961, 82). All translations from Bobkowski, if not otherwise indicated, are by the author.

assuade the country's internal conflicts. On the contrary, in 1960 the partisan struggle turned into a civil war lasting for decades, with two hundred thousand casualties, mostly civilians.

Despite these, Bobkowski not only became so attached to Guatemala that he called it “his second homeland” (Bobkowski 2013b, 108) and never considered going back to Europe, but he also perceived this country as a land of those who could “breathe freely” (Bobkowski 1998, 74), i.e. those who were internally free, faithful to their own principles, and able to appreciate the value of everyday life. A few months after his arrival, having struggled through starting his own business in manufacturing aeroplane models, he declared: “I am still facing long months of hard days. But these days I can always be in harmony with myself, free, independent, in a position ‘at ease’ with a cigarette in my mouth. Not at attention in the ‘*Europalager*’” (Bobkowski 1998, 83). Over time, after settling in Guatemala and getting through the “eye of the storm,” as the writer used to call gaining experience in model making, he became convinced that he truly lived only in that “pocket country” where “nobody was in the crowd,” feeling a sense of individualism and self-fulfilment. That conviction led him to the discovery of the constitutive properties of his subjectivity, properties that transformed a sense of alienation in a foreign world into a participatory experience lying at the heart of human identity: “I am an emblem of Guatemala, their bird, the quetzal. There existed only stuffed specimens, because caged, they die after a few days. And I do not want to die and to be seen stuffed” (Bobkowski 1986, 90). The excerpts cited above show that, for Bobkowski, living in Guatemala meant following an existential project of a highly ethical character, subordinated to the imperative: “to be a quetzal,” i.e. a free man, deciding for himself, and not being subjected to any ideology that does not care about the rights and needs of individuals.

Bobkowski, especially in the essays “Na tyłach” [“Behind the front”] (1949) and “Pytania dzikich ludzi” [“Savages’ questions”] (1951), often contrasted Europe with Guatemala or the whole of Central America, and Europeans with Latinos. In both texts, America is presented as a land of freedom, and its inhabitants, although “savage” in terms of erudition, are seen as authentic and sensible. Europeans, by contrast, are in the writer’s opinion hypocrites devoid of an elementary instinct of liberty and confusing abstract creations of their intellect with reality. Bobkowski assigned the qualities traditionally associated with the Old World— independence, rationality, and the ideal of authenticity—to the New World to

appreciate America and to prove a thesis that contemporary Europeans were primitive destroyers of their own heritage. “A European who does not want to be free, ceases to be a European. To stay one, I had to leave” (Bobkowski 1998, 77), the author commented, at one stroke defending his life decision and suggesting that “normal cultural Europe” could be found nowadays only far away from the old continent.

Interestingly, Bobkowski occasionally showed an awareness that representatives of the Old World perceived territories and dwellers of their former colonies in a deeply deprecating way. He commented:

The world, the new world, the third big world. We hardly talk about it, we mock Guatemalans, Costa Ricans, San Salvadorans, and Hondurans, but what do we know about them? It is an incredibly rich area, big and open, full of freedom and still yet in the best traditions of Europe. Who knows, maybe the spirit can survive right here and come to fruition again? I do not feel at all that I am in a small town, in a small country. I feel primarily a continent underfoot, vast, gorgeous, bursting with life. (Bobkowski 1998, 80)

Having asked such questions, Bobkowski not only thematised the problem of the existence of unfair colonial stereotypes, but also sought to argue with them. His letter to Turowicz provides a telling testimony to that fact: “The Spanish discovered these countries [of Central America – J.W.] and covered them with so many lies and humbug that they need to be re-discovered now” (Bobkowski 2013b, 49). In another letter, the writer unequivocally criticised the phenomenon of conquest. From his perspective, the conquistadors of Central America, *Hermán Cortés*, *Pedro de Alvarado*, and *Francisco Pizarro*, were “ordinary scoundrels” (Bobkowski 2013b, 78) who at the threshold of modernity sowed violence that resulted in some of the atrocities of the twentieth century (Bobkowski 2013b, 78).

On the surface, the writer’s existential project, and the vision of Guatemala subjected to it, do not raise any doubts. The fact that Bobkowski does not notice the inherent qualities of the New World besides the beauty of nature, and describes the New World by incessantly comparing it with his native continent, is of course striking. It proves undoubtedly that Europe remained for him the most important reference point and that, even after 1948, he was attached to the European mainland with strong feelings that revealed hurt and disappointed

love. Nevertheless, considering the aforementioned arguments, leaving Europe for America in order to remain European, at first glance seems a paradoxical but consistent life plan.

AMONG CABALLEROS

To investigate the complexity of the writer's vision of Guatemala, one needs to look more closely and critically at his writing focused on Guatemala, as well as his private correspondence with members of his family and his best friends, with whom Bobkowski was very frank. At the outset of such an investigation it is reasonable to ask the author's own question from the essay "Na tyłach": what did he really know about Guatemala when he was starting his new life there? To answer this question, we should keep in mind that one of Bobkowski's intellectual desires was to analyse the character of respective nations, a passion popular at that time as part and parcel of the pursuits of a learned traveller, but today considered a source of harmful stereotypes and rather out of vogue. Among his favourite books were *Letters from Russia* by the Marquis de Custine, Banville's and Michelet's works, but, first and foremost, *The Spectrum of Europe* by Hermann Keyserling, the writer's intellectual master. Bobkowski modelled his image of the Central American macro-region and its inhabitants on Keyserling's *South America Meditations: On Hell and Heaven in the Soul of Man* from 1932. In Keyserling's vision, the continent was still ruled by wild telluric powers that in Europe had already been annihilated, while its people were deprived of any entrepreneurial spirit and controlled by instincts, unconscious reflexes, and whimsical desires. It turns out that, although Bobkowski wanted to see Guatemala as a land of freedom, sensibility, and authenticity, and often represented the country as possessing these vital features, he was not really ready to reconsider Keyserling's views critically and he continued to fully identify with them, especially in his letters. Seven years after his arrival in Guatemala, the author wrote about this openly to Jerzy Giedroyć, the editor-in-chief of *Kultura*, his intimate friend with whom he exchanged many letters:

One thing is certain, namely what Keyserling wrote in his *Meditations Sudamericanes*: that it is a continent of the third day of creation (reptiles and amphibians), and that something of this came into the people. And that without understanding what is *gana*, something unpredictable in these people, you can't understand them. (Giedroyć and Bobkowski 1997, 302)

Such assessments did not hinder Bobkowski from appreciating and even adoring his second homeland. Privately, however, especially in difficult moments, e.g. during financial crises in his business or political upheavals, he made comments that undoubtedly starkly contradicted such essays as “Na tyłach” or “Pytania dzikich ludzi,” in which a positive image of Guatemala persisted. The writer was particularly critical towards Guatemalans, the vast majority of whom were the Ladino—descendants of the Maya, who had the blood of the Spanish conquistadors in their veins. Just like Keyserling, Bobkowski wrote at least a few diatribes against the Ladino *gana*. For him it was a fatal force that he, as a merchant and entrepreneur faithful to the bourgeois ethos (Kowalczyk 2011, 197–213), had to struggle with during the course of his whole stay in Guatemala. He sought to explain that phenomenon to Giedroyc as follows:

Only here I understood this term *gana* brilliantly picked up by Keyserling. In other words, *gana* is **desire** [*ochota*]. But our desire is after all more concrete and precise in comparison to *gana*. They say in Spanish: Yo tengo gana de bailar = as if I feel like dancing. This *gana* sprouts from everything here. (Giedroyc and Bobkowski 1997, 34)⁴

Surprisingly, Bobkowski combined comments of this kind with an argument in which Central America and Latinos gain characteristics like those of Europe and Europeans, yet—unlike in the essays quoted above—these features are far from positive. In such cases Guatemala, which was to be a space of self-realisation and authenticity, begins to embody that from which the writer had fled in 1948, but in an even more annoying version. According to his diary “Z notatek modelarza” [“From the modeller’s notes”], Guatemalans reveal “typically European” disadvantages and turn out to be laden with “a persisting inferiority complex, laziness, lack of will and initiative” (Bobkowski 2006, 144). Moreover, they transform from internally free people into playful “*caballeros*” who resolve problems with revolvers, hunt for sharks using machine guns, and rebel against the elementary principles of order. Such a deprecatory view of Guatemala by its metaphorical identification with post-war Europe and the hyperbolisation of its putative disorder is combined with the writer’s exaltation over Guatemalan reality. Unexpectedly, that exaltation is grounded in Bobkowski’s origin from ... the “old and good” Europe. Therefore,

⁴ The author’s emphasis. See also Giedroyc and Bobkowski (1997, 667–668).

Europeanness, degraded and devoid of value after the war, appears to be a very ambiguous frame of reference, whose positive or negative values function always as a defining principle for assessing the other.

Bobkowski also commented on the instability of Guatemalan political life. From the beginning of his stay in the country, he was a witness to subsequent riots and revolts resulting in a varying number of casualties, but he invariably considered them an nonserious grotesque, a tragicomic caricature of stable politics, in short: “an operetta.” The humoristic descriptions of those events can be found especially in Bobkowski’s correspondence with his mother (Bobkowski 2008) but they recur in some of his essays as well. “Powieść meteorologiczna” [“Meteorological fiction”], for example, a review of Michał Choromański’s novel, is dedicated not to the analysis of the novel, but to the semblance of this tiny country, Guatemala, to a dollhouse run by infantile politicians, with miniature wars, and populated by Guatemalans, the puppets who act as if in a theatre “with a full gamut of incredible phraseology and pathos” (Bobkowski 1959a, 202).⁵ Tracing the roots of the operetta-like politics in Central America, the writer finds it in the Spanish influences and colonial heritage of the continent. He persuaded Turowicz: “All of them [Spanish conquistadors – J.W.] wanted to be sovereign little kings [króliki].⁶ All of them had to cope with their compatriots’ conspiracies. [...] The conquest continues here. In lack of space,⁷ the lust for power has taken its place” (Bobkowski 2013b, 69). In a letter to his mother the author continued the topic:

This is a seed of Spanishness, a seed of incessant anarchy that is stuck in the soul of every Spaniard, mixed with a desire to be rich, a boiling ambition [...], and with a need to satisfy such desires by all means except for a regular job, a constructional and constructive consistency, which are typical for every so-called European. (Bobkowski 2008, 31)

These assertions represent the core ambiguity at work in Bobkowski’s writing. Not only did Bobkowski see the negative, long-lasting consequences of Central America’s subordination to the colonial rule of the

⁵ The text is a review of Michał Choromański’s work *Prolegomena do wszelkich nauk hermetycznych* [Prolegomena to any hermetic studies] (1958).

⁶ Untranslatable wordplay: “królik” (pol.) means “rabbit” and “little king.”

⁷ Bobkowski means the lack of space for further conquests.

Spanish (the consequences that made him perceive Latinos with a sense of superiority), he also manifested antipathy and contempt towards the Spanish themselves. Already on the board of “Jagiello” and then in Guatemala, the writer met a lot of Spanish people. He and his wife had been given shelter by one of them right after their arrival, before they rented a flat. Nevertheless, his opinions of that nation were always of a deeply derogatory character. “Russians are not Europeans, and neither are the Spanish,” is what the author wrote to Giedroyć after observing his host for four days, in July 1948. Statements that the Spanish are not Europeans would be constantly repeated in Bobkowski’s correspondence. Despite Bobkowski’s bitter rejection of what he saw as Europe in denial of its European ethos, it is Europe, in the end, which remains a model of civilisation understood as culture, behaviours, and attitudes. Bobkowski, a detractor of the exhaustion, passivity, and moral decline of the old continent, nevertheless resurfaces as an apologist of Europeanness.

Given Bobkowski’s hatred of communism, it is not surprising that what irritated him most in Guatemala was the spread of that ideology among its inhabitants. He compared Central America with “Sovietized Europe” but considered the former more endangered because, in his words, there, in that land of political children,⁸ “the red ideology” merged with “coloured racism” (Bobkowski 2006, 156–157). Bobkowski explained this entanglement in a letter to his friend, Szymon Konarski:

I wouldn’t be surprised if suddenly all over the so-called Latin mainland inhabitants and crossbreeds, so far counting proudly drops of white blood in their bodies and souls, suddenly began to count with pride quarts of coloured blood. This infernal game between dull embodied nationalism and communism has been already wreaking havoc here. All the more that they have as much to do with Western culture, i.e., the culture *par excellence* of white man, as the price of tea in China. [...] after more than four years of living here, I have to tell you that my views on the issue of race and so-called “colonialism” have undergone a radical transformation. (Bobkowski 1962, 4)

The direction of that transformation is surprising, because Bobkowski was able to distance himself from the colonising discourse, for his views

⁸ “We, old Europeans, with all our painful and inhuman past, cannot have a lot in common with them [Central Americans – J.W.]. [...] Even in comparison to the [Northern – J.W.] Americans they are children” (Bobkowski 2008, 72).

evolved exactly into that which he elsewhere called “supreme remarks” (Bobkowski 1959a, 204), i.e. remarks on the superiority of the European. Such remarks appear, among others, in “Z notatek modelarza” written by Bobkowski during Colonel Armas’s rebellion against Guatemalan communists in 1954. The text shows the effort of the author’s self-creation as “a white man,” “a builder of the whole Western civilisation” (Bobkowski 2006, 157). At a time of emergency, he feels authorised to take the lead of an armed group of “gullible” locals, as he is not a simple example of “one of two dozen of civilisations,” but a representative of Europeanness fostered as “something more that is worth defending because nothing of it is worn-out” (Bobkowski 2006, 164). Characterising himself in such a way, the writer seems to reach a feeling of dominating “the wild world.” According to his own parallel, he is like a protagonist of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *In Desert and Wilderness*, Staś, who, protecting and bossing around the African boy, Kali, sees that there is nothing in his eyes but the “brown jungle” (Bobkowski 2006, 164).⁹

The European man’s civilising mission out there recurs also in Bobkowski’s fiction creates a range of this type of protagonists in his “Guatemalan” short stories. Although, generally speaking, these protagonists discover the authenticity of life in active encounters with the Central American reality, sometimes, unexpectedly, they distance themselves from it and begin to perceive it from the location occupied by the author. For instance, one of the characters of Bobkowski’s best known short story *Coco de oro*, Merling, who proudly tells his Polish friend “We are the West” (Bobkowski 1998, 105), sees America as a kind of blank slate, where only after-images of European values become apparent. The unfinished novel *Zmierzch* [Twilight], whose completion was interrupted by Bobkowski’s death in 1961, is the most striking example in this regard. The protagonist, a Pole named Jerzy, a *porte-parole* of the author, recalls “his delightful breaking on through [to the other side] and rising to the surface of half a dollar daily rate” almost entirely in the style of colonisers. Feeling like a winner, he literally uses terms taken from the colonial vocabulary to describe his experience: “A method of conquistadors. I didn’t hide from myself that I was moving forward conquest-like” (Bobkowski 2007a, 108).

⁹ See also Bobkowski (1959a, 204).

Coco de oro and *Zmierzch* are works of fiction, but they also manifest the manner of self-understanding that Bobkowski willy-nilly succumbed to in some of his diaries and letters written in Guatemala. On the one hand, having adapted the image of the New World to suit his life project, he perceived that world as a better Europe, a land where true European values still made themselves felt. On the other hand, he attributed features to Central America that effectively contradicted this idealised image. Namely, he suggested that if America resembled Europe, it was equally as bad or worse than the prototype because it had been additionally degraded by “the coloured wiliness” (Bobkowski 2006, 143) of its inhabitants. He considered himself a representative of the old, almost squandered but invaluable culture and civilisation, which according to him “is the work of the white man and nothing can help it, whether one is a racist or not” (Bobkowski 2013a, 94). As a result, his conclusions turn out to be alarmingly close to racism. Here is yet another example.

One local guy rightly said that the only solution for these countries would be a purchase of a great number of old ships, loading all Indians and cross-breeds, submerging them in the sea and bringing Europeans. [...] Here, in these countries, two cardinal mistakes have their painful consequence: first, that the Spanish did not slaughter all Indians and second, that then no one exterminated the Spanish. (Bobkowski 2009, 76)

This is what Bobkowski wrote to his brother-in-law, Jan Birtus, irritated by the lack of the Guatemalans’ resistance to the spreading of communism in the 1950s. Three days later, in a letter to Giedroyć, he repeated that comment almost word for word and added an outrageous conclusion: “As a result of those mistakes, there are millions of [...] incurable ‘rasta’ of the despicable sort, with whom I don’t know what to do. The only way out is to have them by the short and curlies” (Giedroyć and Bobkowski 1997, 136–137). And this was suggested by the writer who simultaneously thought about himself: “I am a quetzal.”

A VIEW FROM THE TOP DRAWER

As can be seen, there is a gaping aporia emerging in the “Guatemalan” work of Bobkowski. One of his texts, if not exactly tackling that aporia, at least throws some light on it. In a letter to Aniela Mieczysławska, a Polish activist in exile and one of Bobkowski’s closest friends, the writer

admitted: “I left [France – J.W.] because I felt disgust, because I felt that I will be a pariah there again, a *sale étranger*. And here [in Guatemala – J.W.] they can hate me, but I am a sahib, a white man, for whom they have respect – here I am from the top drawer” (Bobkowski and Mieczysławska 2010, 163–164). Characterising himself, the author uses the word “sahib.” Simultaneously, he talks about Guatemalans, usually represented as an undifferentiated mass, with a sense of protectionism and paternalism, as befits a sahib. “And to show them some attention, that a man doesn’t feel better than they are, then they respect him twice, then such specimens are ennobled by a relationship with him and feel proud of it” (Bobkowski and Mieczysławska 2010, 164), the author continues in the letter. The second excerpt indicates that despite his declared intention, Bobkowski inadvertently unmasks his sense of superiority: he shows that maintaining relationships with Latinos and treating them as equals means doing them a kind of favour.

Without a deeper interpretation of the letter to Mieczysławska, one could conclude that Bobkowski simply occupies the condescending superior position of a white man and a European towards non-Europeans of a different race and different (lower, in his conviction) cultural and civilisational standards. Apart from the word “sahib” with respect to relationships with Latinos, the author uses the words “pariah” and “*sale étranger*,” i.e. “dirty foreigner,” to specify how he himself felt in France. After a suggestion that social contacts between Latinos and Europeans exalt the former, while not necessarily the latter, the author asks: “Which Frenchman or Englishman is proud of his friendship with a Pole? None” (Bobkowski and Mieczysławska 2010, 164).¹⁰ This is not a statement of a sahib, but of a subject perceiving himself as subaltern. Bobkowski not only suffered humiliations from the Germans during World War II in France, humiliations which to a considerable extent were shared by him with the whole French population. He also had a first-hand experience of Western orientalising practices towards the land that the West, at least since the Enlightenment, had regarded as Eastern Europe. Bobkowski seemed to be aware that East Central Europe’s ambiguous location, as Larry Wolff says, “within Europe but not fully European” (Wolff 1994,

¹⁰ In his diary written on board of “Jagiello,” shortly after leaving France, Bobkowski made a similar remark in an even more expressive tone: “Even for very intelligent Frenchmen we [Poles – J.W.] will always be a kind of Africa” (Bobkowski 2013c, 95).

11), let Westerners associate this part of the continent with backwardness and barbarism. Although he was an émigré, he realised very quickly, already in the mid-1940s, that East Central Europe, in the aftermath of World War II, would find itself in the Soviet bloc where Communist parties, licensed by Moscow, would establish mono-party totalitarian rule. He moreover saw that the West hypocritically accepted, justified, and even enforced the separation of the East behind the Iron Curtain (Wierzejska 2017, 239–262). The post-Yalta history of Eastern Europe, which ensued directly from the agreement of the Big Three and indirectly, among others, from the image of the macro-region as non-European enclave in the European map, so that history could make an Eastern European cry; and indeed, Bobkowski cried already in August 1944, during the liberation of Paris, because he foresaw that the forthcoming “liberation” of East Central Europe by the Red Army would be the beginning of its new subordination and further degradation.¹¹ In 1960, referring to his French experience in the 40s, he uses the words “pariah” and “*sale étranger*” in characterising his status in France and in this way to underscore that being from East Central Europe does not give a sense of comfort in Western Europe and can be hardly regarded as a reason to be proud.

Given the writer’s reasoning from his letter to Mieczysławska, his decision to settle down in Central America reveals motives beyond his existential project of living an authentic life in the land of freedom. For Bobkowski as an East Central European America appeared as a space of (almost) equal chances for all white people. He discovered that there was scarcely a difference between Eastern and Western Europeans in the American reality because it rewarded nothing but the light colour of the skin. With an attitude of racial othering he manifested towards the Latinos, Bobkowski could perceive himself as “a white man,” “a sahib,” and, thus, finally achieve the status of simply being European. Bobkowski develops an analogous case of othering in his drama “Czarny piasek” [“Black sand”], published in 1959. The protagonist of the play, Herman Rosenberg, although designed by the author as one of those who begins a new life in Central America after the war, in the eyes of the reader turns out to be a racist burdened with a complex of his Jewish origin. He is

¹¹ “And then great boundless joy is superseded by sadness. [...] An [American] girl is looking at me and asking in English, why I am crying.

-I am a Pole and I am thinking of Warsaw – I am asking quietly – They [French] can be happy, we [Poles] cannot” (Bobkowski 2007b, 540).

involved in a relationship with a Ladino, but disregards her at the same time, which he explains it as follows: “You know why I’m living with this Rosaria? [...] I am living with her because she doesn’t even know what it means – a Jew. [...] when she passes by a synagogue, she crosses herself, as in front of a church” (Bobkowski 1959b, 61). For Bobkowski and his literary projections, the fundamental difference of being a European, valorised higher than the locals in terms of race, virtually invalidates minor (at least in America) differences such as being Jewish or coming from what he perceives as second-class Europe. Therefore, living overseas had a compensatory dimension. He did not want to acknowledge, however, that this compensation was achieved through imposing the role of the Other on the Ladino, the same role, but with a stronger racist undertone, he had to suffer as an émigré in Western Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

How then to account for Bobkowski’s “Guatemalan” work with its confusing and troublesome ambiguity? Understanding the historical context of East Central European in-betweenness might explain the social and intellectual limitations of the time and place Bobkowski came from. Manifesting a patronising superiority towards Latinos was, sadly, a natural and obvious attitude for a man born in Europe in the 1910s, educated there in the interwar period, and who, after spending World War II in Western Europe, moved to Central America, disappointed with Europe’s indolence at the onset of the Cold War order. Looking at the problem from this perspective, one can risk a hypothesis that it was nothing but the writer’s cultural and intellectual formation that trapped him in espousing stereotypical opinions on the character of Latinos as allegedly passive in entrepreneurship and impetuous in emotions. Bobkowski was not interested in observing what was unique in the inhabitants of America and yet untranslatable into European categories. Although he was perceptive and had undeniable analytical abilities, he clearly could not help applying Eurocentric norms to the inhabitants of Central America while creating a sense of superiority on those grounds for himself. This may be the reason why, despite living in Guatemala for thirteen years, he did not see beyond the horizon designated by Keyserling in *Meditations*, and after

reading Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, he considered it the best analysis of the Latinos' nature.¹²

However, considering today's sensibilities, which are strongly affected by postcolonial knowledge, it would be pointless to defend Bobkowski against the charge of racist thinking or at least a colonial mentality in the nineteenth-century style. Drawing on Homi Bhabha, we can see that the “Guatemalan” work of the East Central European writer is penetrated by “the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 2004, 86). Bobkowski clearly does not go beyond the stereotypical perception of the Ladino difference and sees in it the lack of Europeaness. Therefore, his writing confirms and establishes rather than cancels the difference between Europeans and Central Americans, even if, or maybe especially if, the former had been influenced by European culture. The writer's representation of the Ladino—the Other—was strengthened by the fact that Bobkowski himself had been an object of othering in Western Europe. Having come from a country that experienced many forms of denied sovereignty and stereotyping of an Orientalising kind, he found Guatemala a suitable ground to compensate for his complex of being regarded a second-class European. The writer's correspondence proves that it was one of the important reasons why he appreciated his second homeland. “America is a different world, the world that a man can love with all his heart and be happy that he will die here, not in that European shit, not in that French or English snot,” Bobkowski wrote to Mieczysławska (Bobkowski and Mieczysławska 2010, 164). No matter, thus, how authentic he wanted to be in his gesture of breaking up with Europe and his encounters with the American reality, he remained a European, or, more specifically, an East Central European, who perceived Latinos through an analogous “lessening glass” that he had once used to take a look at himself. In his need to escape from the old continent, he somehow followed Arthur Rimbaud or Paul Gauguin. However, he resembled Adam Mickiewicz much more: a citizen of Russian Poland, banished to Central Russia for his political activities, who had captured the exotic atmosphere of his journey to the

¹² Bobkowski read *Nostromo* on Giedroyc's recommendation (Giedroyc and Bobkowski 1997, 608–609). Bobkowski expressed his opinion on Conrad's novel in an essay “Biografia wielkiego Kosmopolaka” (Bobkowski 1998, 239–253). On the postcolonial interpretation of Conrad's work see e.g., Achebe (1988, 251–261), Collits (2005), Hampson (2011, 1–46), and Vogel (2012, 97–112).

Crimea in *Sonetny krymskie* [The Crimea Sonnets] (1826). In one of the poems Mickiewicz immortalises the Oriental atmosphere of Bakhchysarai, the former capital of the Crimean Khanate, where “Heaven’s harem greets its star array” (Mickiewicz 1917, 11).¹³ Symptomatically, when Bobkowski uses the qualifier “exotic,” in reference to Guatemala Ciudad under the starry sky, he relies on the same Romantic classic, writing succinctly: “In general, Bakhchysarai by night” (Bobkowski 2013b, 89).

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¹³ On the postcolonial interpretation of *Sonnets from the Crimea* see: Skórczewski (2013, 221–245). On Poles’ Orientalising perception of Russia, marked by a sense of superiority, see: Janion (2016, 211–256).

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