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## Confession, testimony, reader – the autobiographical character of *Zapiski dla zjawy* by Jerzy Stempowski<sup>1</sup>

### Wyznanie, świadectwo, czytelnik – autobiograficzny charakter *Zapisków dla zjawy* Jerzego Stempowskiego

**Keywords:** emigration literature, journal, biography

**Słowa kluczowe:** literatura emigracyjna, dziennik, biografia

#### Abstract

This article is devoted to the process of transforming a personal narrative into a literary record. The analysis covers the attitudes of Jerzy Stempowski contained in the autobiographical journal entitled *Notes for the ghost*. It describes the relationship between the writer and the eponymous Zjawa, as well as the mourning process that followed her death. The main goal is to try to determine which of the attitudes is dominant. The problem of the recipient of the work as well as the intention with which it was written, is also raised.

*Methinks, I see... Where?*

*In my mind's eyes.*

W. Shakespeare

*Faith and love are more discerning*

*Than lenses or learning.*

A. Mickiewicz (translated by W. H. Auden)

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One should begin the deliberations concerning the autobiographical nature of *Zapiski dla zjawy* by sketching the relations connecting the author with the eponymous apparition, that is, Ludwika Rettingerowa, so the first part of this sketch is devoted to the history of their acquaintance. Presentation of the biographical background will allow for an in-depth interpretation of the journal, especially of its intimate parts. I am interested in the way a personal narrative can be transformed into a literary text, and I will focus on analysing the attitudes (testimonies, confessions and challenges) adopted by the author in an attempt to establish the dominant one. It will also be important to determine the work recipient.

Published in 2004 by the Noir Sur Blanc publishing house, *Zapiski dla zjawy* occupies a distinguished place among the literary work of Jerzy Stempowski. The “Unhurried passer-by”’s place in history is ensured as the author of essays, letters, reviews and diaries of journeys. The form of an intimate journal does not seem to fit his style and temperament. One could say that the author’s caution in writing about himself and his feelings became a characteristic feature of his work. *Zapiski dla zjawy* has a different, more private character. Like *Esej dla Kassandra*, this was devoted to Ludwika Rettingerowa, the author’s friend and the eponymous apparition, who died of cancer in 1939.

Ludwika was the wife of Mieczysław Rettinger, a woman with a frail figure, blond hair and a pale complexion. Janina Orynżyna recalls:

It was said about Wichuna that twenty centuries had contributed to her delicate features and slightly archaised mood. Fine features, slightly protruding green eyes and skin so thin that it revealed the veins like on marble – all this perfectly corresponded to her sensitive, discreet intelligence (Orynżyna 2005: 193).

The childless couple lived in Warsaw at ul. Flory 1. Owing to the kind relations with Stanisław Stempowski and his son, as well as with Maria Dąbrowska, he became a co-tenant in the 1930s (Głębicka 2017: 424). The writer’s knowledge of humanities, Rettinger’s intellect and the hostess’ charm helped to turn the Warsaw flat into an intelligentsia’s meeting place (Orynżyna 2005: 194).

The writer had special feelings for the woman, also known as Wichuna. She was not only the co-tenant and a confidant but also a woman for whom he wanted to live, whom he wanted to save from death. The bond connecting the writer and Ludwika was so special that many people regarded them as a couple.

Wacław Zbyszewski wrote this about their relationship:

This was not an erotic relationship, I cannot rule out that it was a totally platonic one, but never after that have I seen in Stempowski so much fondness, considerateness, I would use the Russian word: *niezhnost*, towards any woman. In fact, at the

time, Stempowski and Mrs Rettinger behaved like an old, loving married couple (Zbyszewski 2005: 113).

Stempowski cared about his friend's reputation and made efforts to prevent gossip. Iwan Seńkiw recalls that he accompanied them many times when they went to vernissages or to the theatre. He always had the impression that they had taken him as a chaperone (Seńkiw 2005: 274).

Using the medical knowledge that he had acquired during his studies in Munich, the writer struggled each day of life for his friend who was ill with cancer. In a letter to Krystyna Marek, he wrote about his responsibility for the life of the sick woman. He regarded keeping Ludwika alive for nearly 13 years as a masterpiece and an incredible feat (Sulikowski 2010: 10).

Their relationship was intellectual. Mrs Rettinger was an excellent listener and interlocutor. Due to her deteriorating health, Stempowski decided to move temporarily to Słoboda, where the house of his friends, Mr and Mrs Vincenzo, was situated. In his opinion, the peace and quiet and clean air would have a beneficial effect on Ludwika, who was fatigued from the disease. However, the events of September 1939 made him leave Słoboda and sick Ludwika. However, he did not expect that they would never see each other again. On 18 September, Stempowski and Stanisław Vincenzo crossed the Polish-Hungarian border. The difficult conditions in the mountains at this time of year made Vincenzo decide to go back. However, the "Unhurried passer-by" fell ill, was taken to hospital and then, while he was recovering, he hid in a smugglers' hideout, which he commemorated in *Księgozbiór przemytników*. During the period of his convalescence, when he was cut off from any news, Ludwika died (Kowalczyk 1997: 30).

*Zapiski dla zjawy*, as a literary work, is classified as a personal document.<sup>2</sup> Considering the short period of time covered by it, it is clear that it is affected by external factors, resulting from a considerable life change (Czermińska 2009: 13). It was written during an extremely difficult period for Stempowski, who lost his homeland, a person who was dear to him and he was forced to stay in a foreign land, among strangers. Additionally, to write in exile, he had to find a new language which he could use to establish contact with people around him and which would be suitable to freely express his thoughts, feelings and opinions and to convey the nature of his experiences faithfully. It proved to be a huge

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<sup>2</sup> Such literary texts are referred to as memoir literature in Polish history and literature history research. Recently, they started to be called ego-documents in German and Dutch literature. Cf. Szulakiewicz 2013: 66.

challenge to the author, who was in a state of a nervous breakdown (Karpiński 2004: 19–20).

Written at that time, *Zapiski dla zjawy* is a very private text, even an intimate one, marked with – typical of the “Unhurried passer-by” – the need to analyse and give an account of current events. The private threads were suppressed by a typical – particularly to the writer’s essays – documentarism, which intends to record the stages of the evolution of European civilisation (Rambowicz 2006: 404). The friends switch roles in the journal. Stempowski, who provided support to the sick woman until that time, brings her person back in his notes so that she could take over the role of a comforter who provides support during a difficult time of life.

The first entry in the journal is dated 28 August 1940. In it, the author explains what made him take up the enterprise, which he had regarded as something usually done by aunts in the previous era. As he himself admits, initially, he regarded keeping an intimate journal as something ridiculous and childish, but the current decision was affected by his wanting to stay in contact with the shadows of the deceased friend, so, for this reason, the writer decides not to attach too much importance to the order and the form of his notes. His declaration shows that the journal was intended as a source of entertainment for the apparition of Ludwika, who accompanied him, for example, when he was going for a walk. One can also assume that for Stempowski, it is also a way of coping with loneliness and explaining his mental state experienced during the period of mourning. According to the author, interrupting work is a sign of acceptance for the absence of the friend and of the definite separation from her soul (Stempowski 2004: 23–25).

In his first note, he clearly defines the strategy of the journal and the role to be played in it by the eponymous apparition. Wichuna becomes a companion for the “Unhurried passer-by”. As a person who is no longer a human being, she requires special treatment, which is why Stempowski addresses her in a mild, calm manner, suitable for contact with a “shadow”. He feels obligated to explain to Ludwika the things that are going on in his mind, and this also becomes the reason why he decides to start writing. The writer struggles with loneliness, about which he writes in the first entry.

Most of the journal entries can be classified into three thematic groups. The first one includes political reflections, diagnoses and forecasts. A considerable portion concerns World War II, as well as the consequences of the collapse of moral values. This topic seems to have been very important to the author, as it already appears in the second entry – concerning the Soviet assault. The entry shows that he realises perfectly well the presence of manifestation of aggression

towards the population of the country under occupation. He clearly expresses his concerns associated with the violation of the identity and unity of the European national community (Rambowicz 2006: 405).

In these fragments, Stempowski mutes the personal and starts to focus on the facts alone. One could say that he leaves the position of a witness and adopts one of a camera which records what is going on around. His autobiographical notes begin to take the form of an essay or non-fiction literature (Czermińska 2020: 20).

Another group of subjects are those associated with the emigrees' everyday lives. They include mentions of meetings with other people, information about current activities and descriptions of nature arising from observations made during lonely walks in the neighbourhood.

The third group of matters can be called philosophical intimistics. This includes all the journal parts in which the author focuses on his spirituality. These are the fragments in which the apparition with whom Stempowski converses appears the most frequently. Because of Ludwika's ghost passivity, it has a form of a monologue addressed to the deceased woman. Various reflections appear concerning love, literature, civilisational transformations and the forecast death of the author (Rambowicz 2006: 405–407).

In the entry dated 14–16 September, the writer mentions a three-day stay on the pastures of Blüemlisberg. The Alpine landscape, in particular, the mountain of Mythen, reminded him of Czywczyn in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains. The apparition of Ludwika accompanies him on walks in the area when the tourists were gone. She shows him a pink yarrow, similar to that growing on the eastern slope of the Baba. Stempowski goes back to the time of their lonely walks:

One day we were climbing on a steep slope, overgrown with weeds. You stepped lightly forward, tiny against the huge mountains. Bent under the heavy rucksack, scorched by the burning sun, I toiled, trying hard to control my breath and to march steadily, without straining myself and without stopping. Looking at you walking, lightly, fast and effortlessly, I thought about the movements of ghosts and angels. I asked myself, to what extent this ability to walk effortlessly stems from what is delicate and angel-like in you? You stopped, smiling mildly, and then, wanting to have a moment's rest, I showed you a pink yarrow, explaining that this variety occurred only above the altitude of twelve hundred metres (Stempowski 2004: 45).

In this reminiscence, Stempowski looks for an analogy to what occurred during a walk in Blüemlisberg, when Ludwika's shadow points to identical yarrows and whispers to his ear words whose meaning he cannot understand. The appearance of the apparition is not limited to visual impressions. It is accompanied by

a delicate touch and whisper, and the dream-like experience becomes a reality to the writer. He points out that the previous year was difficult emotionally; he heard a bothersome ringing which did not let him sleep. He took tranquilisers and sleeping pills to eliminate these symptoms. He has not been using medicines since he began to be accompanied by the apparition.

The notes are coherent despite the multitude of topics that are dealt with. The only exception is the fragment on the medical diagnosis of a young woman who managed to escape from occupied Warsaw. This entry reads like a testimony telling about the forms of the occupying forces' violence towards the population of Warsaw. Stempowski employs the poetics of the medical diagnosis, characterises the woman's ailments and describes the circumstances in which the deterioration of health occurred. Given Stempowski's autobiography and the events that forced him to leave the country, one can say that this fragment is a record of a situation which he may have witnessed. The author plays a subordinate role with respect to the experiences that he describes in this entry. Perhaps, by choosing this form of message, he wants to stress the importance of the events being presented. Stempowski's testimony clearly oscillates between a document and an autobiography.

According to Maria Delaperrière, a journal, a reportage, or an autobiography may be categorised as literature of testimony when they primarily aim to pass on an account of events in a way that makes it possible to get to know or experience them (Delaperrière 2006: 62). This is the role that should be assigned to this entry.

The multitude of threads in *Zapiski dla zjawy* shows that Stempowski skillfully balances between the attitudes of confession and of a witness, situated poles apart. There is the author's "self" opposite "the world" in the created narrative.

According to Małgorzata Krakowiak, Stempowski regarded *Zapiski dla zjawy* as a form of self-therapy (Krakowiak 2014: 255). It is difficult to disagree with this statement, if only due to the passage in which the author claims that the moment when he stops writing, his beloved apparition will disappear, which will be the moment when his mourning ends. An analysis of the dates of the entries allows for recreating the process of coping with the loss. Initially, Stempowski is full of vigour; he writes rather regularly, at several-day intervals, which shows that he needs contact with Ludwika. In the autumn, the entries appear much less frequently. On 19 October, he recalls his anniversary of leaving the smuggler's house in Łuhy, and there is a month-long silence after the 21 October entry, unbroken until 18 November. Similar breaks appear with certain regularity until 21 January, when the entries become more frequent again. They concern current events, meetings with important persons, and activities, and they show the process of recovering from an emotional crisis. The last entry is made on 10

February, it concerns the political situation, and it does not mention the deceased friend.

Given the author's biography, one can assume that the pauses are caused by temporary health deterioration or recurring episodes of depression. An analysis of the topics brought up by the author of *Zapiski...* in all the entries shows that he had been reconciled with Ludwika's death by 20 January 1941. According to Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, the role played by Mrs Rettinger in the essay author's life was later taken over by Maria Dąbrowska. He also trusted her greatly, and she was often idealised by Jerzy (Kowalczyk 1997: 127).

Completing the mourning period is associated with greater involvement in social and political life. Shifting the centre of importance from recollections and analysis of emotional states to the political scene at the times of Stempowski is done with a continuation of anecdotes from his private life. There are mentions of the lack of enthusiasm in contacts with women and a recollection of the first lover. When analysing his relations with the fair sex, the writer compares himself to a 60+ playboy. It is difficult to say clearly whether these passages are written out of the willingness to make a sincere confession or whether they are an intentional element, which is to make the journal even more authentic.

Piotr Rambowicz points to the threads associated with the coherence of the European society in *Zapiski dla zjawy*, and also – expressed by the author when faced by the axiological threat – forecasts about his future (Rambowicz 2006: 406). The journal contains a lot of information on the political and moral situation of Europe contemporary to Stempowski. However, one should not ignore the biographical context. The journal was written during the period when the author had to cope not only with the longing for the country, which is experienced by emigres but also with the loss of a loved one.

One should also take into consideration the fact that the journal written with a view to self-discovery, including self-therapy, is characterised by the MYSELF – MYSELF system. A journal created to commemorate something or someone is written in the MYSELF – HE system. In the case of *Zapiski dla zjawy*, it is Ludwika that is to be commemorated with the text (Czermińska 2020: 369). It is difficult to separate the fragments with the commemorative function from those serving self-discovery or self-therapy during the entry analysis. This is probably caused by the fact that these functions overlap. Therefore, one can assume that the entries were Stempowski's way of commemorating his deceased friend, a form of self-discovery and self-therapy.

Małgorzata Czermińska is of the opinion that writers' diaries are often written with their publication in mind. On the other hand, if writing for oneself is

the prime intention, it is difficult to assume that the journal will not be discovered and read in future (Czermińska 2020: 372). The intention to publish may be regarded as an external motive, whose aim is to change the future readers' attitude towards the author (Cieński 2002: 45). When it comes to *Zapiski dla zjawy*, Stempowski never expresses clearly the intention to publish it. However, one can suppose that he was considering the possibility. This is shown even by the language used in the entries. Like *Ziemia berneńska*, written from beginning to end with an intention to publish it, *Zapiski dla zjawy* is created in the French language, known well to the author as well as to contemporary European society.

Given the non-expressed intention to publish, the opposition of MYSELF – WORLD should be supplemented with the third element – the reader. The expert on the subject, Małgorzata Czermińska, points out: “between the intimacy of a personal journal and the public curiosity, there is the tension in which the game of sincerity, insincerity, spontaneity and posing is born” (Czermińska 2020: 375).

An analysis of the way in which Stempowski keeps his journal shows that he treats a potential reader with a certain distance. Despite choosing the form of an intimate journal, he is very cautious when writing about himself. Probably, including his individual reflections in the second entry on his appearance and his taste in women is purposeful, by which he tries to meet his obligations towards the selected genre. The issue of a future reader seems to be ignored by Stempowski and moved away to the background. This may be caused by his delayed decision to publish his notes.

It is also possible that – taking Maine de Braine's journal, mentioned in *Zapiski dla zjawy*, as a model – the writer wanted to show the reader the philosophising “self”. Like the French philosopher, a proponent of the Cartesian “*cogito ergo sum*” formula, Stempowski also finds the theme of *locus amoenus* very important. When reduced to the private and isolated space, it created perfect conditions for self-reflection and for self-discovery (Zawadzki 1999: 68). These are the places that the “Unhurried passer-by” seeks during his lonely walks in the Bern surroundings. Turning towards his own “self”, he encounters various obstacles, passes through various emotional states, and receives messages which draw him away from analysing his mind. This is why his private reflections are interrupted with passages aimed at documenting current historical events.

The social, philosophical and artistic issues mentioned by Stempowski in his diary, combined with subjectivity and reflectivity, make part of the entries, especially those deprived of private information, take the form of an essay. This essayisation aims at intimism and documentality. Stempowski processes information that reaches him from the outside world in an intellectual manner. Moreover,



as Czermińska confirms, the author's attitude manifests itself in the narrative perspective, whereby it can be, to some extent, shaped regardless of the genre conventions (Czermińska 2020: 19). The aesthetic criteria changed dramatically in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – the influence of the existing authorities diminishes, and previous opinions are relativised. The authors of poetics and manifests no longer have a considerable influence on the shape of literature and the models of its perception (Tomkowski 2003: 15). Stempowski is aware of this transformation. When making notes, he analyses his situation as a lecturer and the author. The entry of 30 January 1941, when he started a series of lectures at the internment camp in Wintertur, ends with this reflection:

There may be a new society created after the war, longing to read more than the pre-war circles and willing to listen to me as much. But even this is not going to save me. Since, in fact, my auditorium was made up of one person, who has become a shadow since then. Could I address a different auditorium? My present experience does not let me believe this seriously (Stempowski 2004: 68).

This entry testifies to the bad mental condition of the author, who still struggles with grief. However, there is hope for a better tomorrow for a reader who will be interested in the subject proposed by him, for whom he so longed. Stempowski's confession signals the tension between the urge to write only for the Apparition and the intention to publish the journal (Czermińska 1977: 111). The optimistic note ends with emphasising Stempowski's unreadiness, arising from the mourning that he still lives through. The auditorium of his lectures is made up of men of various professions: students, doctors, and technicians, and they are a light at the end of the tunnel for the writer tired of all the hardships.

Stanisław Jaworski is of the opinion that not all journals can be regarded as documents. This applies mainly to those with writers as authors. According to this scholar, their profession makes them used to fictionalising human life, which manifests itself in the language of their private notes (Jaworski 1993: 84). It is extremely important for these considerations as Pawła Rodaka claims. In his opinion, there are two intertwined motifs in writers' journals: existential (typical of all diarists) and creative (typical of writers) (Rodak 2006: 35). This confirms that it is justified to regard *Zapiski dla zjawy* as a form of self-therapy, self-discovery as well as a creation of literary text.

Transformation of personal notes into literary text, i.e. changing the journal practice to the writing aimed at creating a literary piece, corresponds to the attitude of challenge, isolated by Małgorzata Czermińska as part of her concept of the autobiographical triangle. This expert in the field terms this strategy

“intellectual duel” and a kind of author’s provocation. She also points out that the testimony, confession and challenge are attitudes which can be regarded as unambiguous only theoretically. In practice, each autobiographical narrative is situated between the apices of the triangle mentioned above, which is why one can only describe one strategy as dominant. The other two are ignored by the author or go unnoticed by the readers, which does not mean that they do not exist (Czermińska 2020: 29–31).

It is similar with *Zapiski dla zjawy*. First and foremost, there is the attitude of confession, typical of an intimate journal. A more in-depth analysis reveals the presence of elements typical of a testimony and a challenge. It is also beyond doubt that *Zapiski dla zjawy* is addressed to a real and external recipient, who only apparently seems to be absent. Since Stempowski had declared many times that his writing was addressed to the home reader, one could narrow this group down to his compatriots. However, given the universality of the topics that he dealt with, this limitation seems unnecessary.

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