

Paweł Sobczak\*

**El principe constante? Jan Lechoń and politics (after 1939)<sup>1</sup>**

*When I went to Paris, Beck spoke these words,  
Go there as an emigrant first, germinal...  
So in case of a crash or catastrophe,  
You could as from Poland as possible write about it,  
Then every Polish path will be dear to you,  
Alas! How you love Poland when you do not live there!<sup>2</sup>*

The outbreak of WWII found Jan Lechoń in the diplomatic service in Paris, where since 1931 he had served as a propaganda officer of the Polish Embassy.<sup>3</sup> He stayed in Paris until mid-June 1940 when, after France fell, the poet left the capital in a car driven by Jan Brzękowski and, after over a year of travelling through Spain, Portugal, and Brazil, he reached the United States. The dramatic wartime events and émigré fortunes spurred once again his poetic talent. Once in Rio de Janeiro he began writing poems which were later included in collections entitled *Lutnia po Bekwarku* and *Aria z kurantem*. The time of WWII and several years after it were also for Lechoń, who from 1943 was editor-in-chief of *Tygodnik Polski*, a time of intensive journalistic work. In his articles, the poet discussed

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<sup>1</sup> The article continues the theme of “Między kawiarnią a ambasadą. Jan Lechoń jako homo politicus”, included [in:] *Meandry skamandrytów*, W. Appel (ed.), pp. 363–380 (*Xenia Toruniensia. Series Nova II (XII)*).

<sup>2</sup> A fragment of a political comedy authored by Światopełk Karpiński and Janusz Minkiewicz of 1937 (quoted in: A. Stawiarska, “Bywalec i outsider” [in:] W. Gombrowicz, *Wspomnienia polskie*, Krakow 2002, p. 234). Those words, assigned by the comedians to Lechoń, from today’s perspective could be interpreted as an ironic foreshadowing of the fortunes of the poet in exile, to which the text is devoted. (*All translations of fragments from the Polish – J.W.*)

<sup>3</sup> Antoni Słonimski (*Alfabet wspomnień*, Warsaw 1989, p. 118) wrote that “only Leszek could use his personal charm to achieve such an alluring diplomatic position not possessing any qualifications for it.” Lechoń’s lack of qualifications consisted, e.g. in the fact that he did not speak French, and he only learnt it in Paris studying it for three hours daily. The learning was successful, yet the poet did not avoid some unpleasant situations, e.g. when “a Frenchman complained that for propaganda they chose a man who cannot speak French” (J. Lechoń, *Listy do Anny Jackowskiej*, Warsaw 1977, p. 150).

various strictly political matters<sup>4</sup> commenting on both past and present events. He defended the Polish character of Vilnius and Lviv (trusting that “the reveille from the St. Mary’s tower will sound again/ Lviv and Vilnius will listen to the steps of our soldiers”<sup>5</sup>), and he disapproved of the decisions made during the conferences in Tehran and Yalta. He also span, sometimes naive, concepts of a post-WWII world order: e.g. he developed an idea of a Federation of Central and East European Countries (including Poland, Yugoslavia, and Greece), or a bloc opposing Soviet influence.<sup>6</sup> However, he mainly counted on the United States. He hoped for a change in the power system in Europe thanks to their operations in the international theatre. As early as May 1942, Lechoń co-wrote a letter to president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in which Polish émigrés demanded a just settlement of the “Polish case.” Three years later, he signed an official letter sent by Polski Komitet Obywatelski (Polish Citizens’ Committee) to Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman. Its authors expressed their outrage at the arrests conducted by NKVD of sixteen leaders of the Polish underground under the charge of anti-Soviet subversive activities. In stating that “the incident, as well as many others, indicates the clear intention of the Soviet Union to erase Poland and the Polish nation from the face of the earth” the members of the Committee demanded Truman’s stern reaction to the “crimes of the Soviet dictatorship.”<sup>7</sup> The appeal had no effect whatsoever and did not prevent the absurd “trial of the sixteen”, yet the passiveness of the president of the United States did not discourage Lechoń. An extensive and bitter disappointment with France<sup>8</sup>, where the poet spent over a decade (the negative evaluation of the policy of the country also translated into extremely critical statements regarding post-WWII French literature) evoked ardent neophyte support for the American strategy which “is, in fact, a paradise on this horrible earth”<sup>9</sup> and “the last resort for the white race and western culture.”<sup>10</sup> The poet was absolutely convinced that soon, as he wrote in *Dziennik*, America “will take a position in the world that no other state since the Roman times has had, and for which it is

<sup>4</sup> Lechoń’s wartime articles included his first critical evaluations of Sanation politics (e.g. the annexation of Zaolzie), which were nowhere to be found in press articles or private statements from the 1930s of the author of *Karmazynowy poemat*. Being a contract employee of a Polish Embassy, he could not openly contest the policy of the ruling party, however, it is very difficult to find any information confirming his even unofficial opposition to some Sanation decisions.

<sup>5</sup> J. Lechoń, “Matka Boska Częstochowska”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Poezje*, R. Loth (ed.), Wrocław 1990, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. B. Dorosz, *Lechoń i Tuwim: dzieje trudnej przyjaźni*, Warsaw 2004, p. 54. A key role in those geopolitical initiatives was to be played by the émigré Peter II, the last king of Yugoslavia.

<sup>7</sup> “Aneksy”, [in:] M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, B. Dorosz (ed.), vol. 2, Warsaw 2006, p. 449.

<sup>8</sup> The “French theme” appeared in several poems written in exile by Lechoń, i.e. *Pożegnanie „Marsylianki”* (a description of the Germans’ seizure of Paris) and *Z La Manczy* (a depiction of Charles de Gaulle as Don Quixote).

<sup>9</sup> M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, B. Dorosz (ed.), vol. 1, Warsaw 2006, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

destined by its wise strength and its idealism.”<sup>11</sup> The conviction was not altered either by the lack of reaction from the United States to the victory of communists in China, or the negative phenomena in American internal politics, most of all, the Second Red Scare, the anti-communist psychosis of McCarthyism, raging through America. In 1954, Lechoń, still more pro-American than ever pro-French, wrote an extensive study (which he himself considered huge) *Aut Caesar aut nihil*, first published in *Wiadomości*, and later in book form. The text, to which Kajetan Morawiecki referred as a lay version of the *Qui habitat in adiutorio altissimi* psalm,<sup>12</sup> expressed the poet’s conviction about America’s mission in relation to the rest of the world, particularly Europe, which does not know or understand the United States. Actually, within just a few years, “America became one of the two superpowers of the political world, and its entering all disputes on all continents completely changed the proportions of power”<sup>13</sup> in the world. It is a country “destined for greatness”, and the only hope for “countries subdued by the Soviets.”<sup>14</sup> A sentence from a letter to Stanisław Baliński offered a synthesis of the poet’s judgements regarding his “third motherland,” including those formulated in *Aut Caesar aut nihil*: “America is Rome, with all its flaws as well as its power, which is the only thing that can bring salvation to the world.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, it was by no accident that the essay’s title indirectly referred to Julius Caesar.

Lechoń’s unwavering anti-communist attitude, worthy of the title of El Principe Constante of the Polish émigré community, who “spurned the laurel from the seductive hand,”<sup>16</sup> had already appeared in the early-1940s. The differences between Lechoń (and Kazimierz Wierzyński and Józef Wittlin, who shared his views) and Julian Tuwim appeared just as quickly. The growing divergence of their political views led to an eventual breaking off not only of over thirty years of friendship, but even any form of contact between the poets.<sup>17</sup> The author of *Srebrne i czarne* did not condone the actions of Tuwim, who expressed his leftist

<sup>11</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 2, Warsaw 1992, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> K. Morawski, “Podzwonne”, *Wiadomości*, 1957, issue 23, p. 4. Reprint, [in:] *Wspomnienia o Janie Lechońiu*, P. Kądziała (ed.), Warsaw 2006, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> J. Lechoń, “Aut Caesar aut nihil. Przemiany amerykańskie”, *Wiadomości*, 1954, issue 45, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, “Aut Caesar aut nihil. Dziedzictwo całego świata”, *Wiadomości*, 1954, issue 47, p. 2. Lechoń’s article evoked objections of his opponents who accused him of excessive optimism and could not comprehend – like Marian Axel (“Do redaktora *Wiadomości*”, [in:] “Korespondencja”, *Wiadomości*, 1955, issue 7, p. 6) – how “a lack of culture is supposed to lead to a restoration of the world.”

<sup>15</sup> “Listy Jana Lechońia do Stanisława Balińskiego”, T. Januszewski (ed.), *Kresy*, 1998, issue 3, p. 218. In another letter Lechoń wrote: “Against the malice of the whole world, America is truly the new Rome.” (*ibid.*, p. 26)

<sup>16</sup> J. Lechoń, “Cytata”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Poezje*, p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> It might had been under the influence of those experiences that Lechoń wrote: “Fifty-year-old bucks cannot convince one another about anything any more. The only thing they can do is to talk so as not to break into an argument, to avoid important topics in which the individuality of each of them is engaged” (J. Lechoń, “Kartki z *Dziennika*”, *Wiadomości*, 1956, issue 17, p. 2).

sympathies by participating in rallies organised by the Polish chapter of the International Workers' Union.<sup>18</sup> Initially, both poets tried not to discuss any current political issues, instead concentrating on recollections from their youth. Eventually, though, such avoidance of the sensitive subject proved absolutely unsuccessful. As a result of a heated political dispute, Lechoń decided not to maintain any personal relations with Tuwim. He informed his former friend about his decision in a letter written on 29 May 1942. In it, he rebuked the author of *Jarmark rymów* for his radical change of political views, since he once was a "friend of Sanation ministers and voivodes."<sup>19</sup> Not being particular with his choice of words, Lechoń also formulated exceptionally heavy accusations: of "a blind love for Bolsheviks, executioners, murderers of the Polish nation"<sup>20</sup>, and a suggestion of something approaching espionage activities by Tuwim ("Only simple people (...) stupefied by Soviet propaganda and only Bolshevik spies display such an attitude towards Soviets as you do"<sup>21</sup>). Those were very strong, though somewhat justified, words. It was symptomatic that the poet used the official form of a letter. Thus, on the one hand, the breaking off of their relationship assumed an official character (and the author of *Mochnacki* was always careful about observing all social customs<sup>22</sup>); on the other, though, Lechoń avoided in that way a personal confrontation with Tuwim. Possibly, he would not have been brave enough to form such judgements during a face to face exchange. Such an assumption is not unfounded since he did not sign in his own name or using his nom de plume any new texts published in *Tygodnik Polski*, in which he commented on any signs of Tuwim's political activity. Those anonymous texts included a definitive "severance" towards Tuwim by the émigré community associated with the magazine. It consisted of two main factors: refusing the author of *Czyhanie na Boga* any right to Polishness (Lechoń wrote that by supporting Edward Osóbka-Morwaski's Temporary Government, Tuwim

<sup>18</sup> Tuwim's political engagement at that time was discussed by Tomasz Cieślak, "Nieudany flirt z polityką. O okresie amerykańskim w życiu Juliana Tuwima (na podstawie tekstów publicystycznych i listów)", [in:] *Julian Tuwim. Biografia, twórczość, recepcja*, K. Ratajska and T. Cieślak (eds.), Łódź 2007, pp. 43–55.

<sup>19</sup> It was not only Lechoń who reminded Tuwim about his once close relationships with Sanation dignitaries (he was friends with, i.a. Wieniawa and Beck). In a letter of January 1942, Mieczysław Grydzewski wrote in response to Tuwim's accusations regarding the inclusion in *Wiadomości* of content by former National Democracy activists: "Today, it is no feat to accuse Sanation, you should have done that fifteen years ago" (M. Grydzewski, *Listy do Tuwima i Lechonia (1940–1943)*, J. Stradecki (ed.), Warsaw 1986, p. 67). Indeed, in 1927, Julian Tuwim was very far from "accusing Sanation" of anything.

<sup>20</sup> As cited [in:] B. Dorosz, *Lechoń i Tuwim*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> That mindfulness was confirmed in another anecdote recalled by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz: "(Lechoń) used sophisticated and «refined» expressions. E.g. instead of asking me: «How's your mother doing?» he used to say: «How is Mrs Iwaszkiewiczowa doing these days?» I was always boggled by such questions because I did not understand who he was talking about." (J. Iwaszkiewicz, "Lechoń", [in:] *ibid.*, *Aleja przyjaciół*, Warsaw 1984, p. 44).

“severed himself forever from the nation”<sup>23</sup>), and the demand for the poet to leave America and return to “Osóbka’s paradise” to “share the fate of those whom he had persuaded to enjoy that happiness.”<sup>24</sup> Soon Julian Tuwim complied with those directions and left New York’s Polish community dominated by “Polish Nazis.”<sup>25</sup> Soon, Lechoń was forced to close *Tygodnik Polski* due to continuing financial problems. He saw the reason for those difficulties, according to an account of Mieczysław Grydzewski, in the “absolute indifference of the Polish community to a better written word.”<sup>26</sup> Before that, though, the editorial board managed to receive a visit by Gen. Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, visiting the United States at that time, which was captured in a commemorative photograph with the editor-in-chief of the magazine. Lechoń’s peak of institutional activity concluded with the closing of *Tygodnik Polski*, however, in the following years, he cooperated with the Free Europe Committee, established in 1949 under the auspices of the Department of State, and from 1952 he worked at Radio Free Europe.<sup>27</sup>

The quoted press articles as well as numerous remarks in *Dziennik* proved without doubt that Jan Lechoń did not accept the political situation in Poland which had been so “despicably sold”<sup>28</sup> by Churchill, he could not come to terms with the circumstances in which the “mean venal Warsaw government”<sup>29</sup> gradually consolidated its rule. At the same time, he evaluated negatively the policy of the London-based government in exile, and he displayed a particular aversion towards Stanisław Mikołajczyk, who fled Poland fearing arrest. In a letter to Grydzewski dated April 1948, Lechoń wrote that the former leader of the Polish People’s Party (PSL) “is the worst shit that the Muse of our times has ever borne” and “the most treacherous of all traitors.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time he was less severe towards Władysław Sikorski, who in Lechoń’s *Dziennik* appeared as a “vain” politician “flinging from one

<sup>23</sup> As cited [in:] B. Dorosz, *Lechoń i Tuwim*, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47. The fact of breaking off any relations with Tuwim did not mean Lechoń ceased being interested in the later fortunes of the author of *Kwiaty polskie*. According to the remarks included in *Dziennik*, he closely tracked and commented upon the actions of his former friend and his works created in Poland (the image of Tuwim as perceived by Lechoń was reconstructed by Piotr Matywiecki, *Twarz Tuwima*, Warsaw 2007, chapter “Czytanie sumienia”). A poetic tackling of the author of *Aria z kurantem* with his pestering recollections was a poem entitled *Tuwim* (*Wiadomości*, 1955, issue 6, p. 1), on which Lechoń worked diligently upon receiving word of the poet’s death.

<sup>26</sup> M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, vol. 1, p. 142.

<sup>27</sup> Lechoń wrote to Grydzewski regarding Radio Free Europe (*Listy 1923–1956*, vol. 1, p. 398): “Free Europe is not a Polish institution, but in that alien institution Poles leased a piece of land where you can sow something good.”

<sup>28</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 1, Warsaw 1992, p. 319.

<sup>29</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 2, p. 364. It is worth mentioning a rare, in Lechoń’s case, rather positive, opinion on the authorities in Poland included in a letter written to Stanisław Baliński: “Bierut, Minc, Gomółka (*sic!*) did time in Polish prisons for their beliefs, so they are my enemies yet ideologists as well” (*Listy Jana Lechonia do Stanisława Balińskiego*, p. 219).

<sup>30</sup> M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, vol. 1, p. 177.

side to another, not sure of anything or anyone”<sup>31</sup> – the antithesis of Józef Piłsudski. The quarrels and disputes among the émigré politicians infuriated Lechoń who was convinced that “the entire political London consists of battling bands of thieves”, “mad gangs”<sup>32</sup> where “apart from the old man Arciszewski (...) no one actually thinks about Poland.”<sup>33</sup> He also devoted many bitter words to the community surrounding the Paris-based *Kultura* journal (particularly Czesław Miłosz) and its political ideas.

In order to break away from the disheartening reality and find hope, Lechoń referred more and more to the past. Also during the period of his life in exile the author of *Karmazynowy poemat* held to a firm cult of Piłsudski.<sup>34</sup> The significance of the legend of the Marshall was best proven by a fragment of *Dziennik* with the following confession:

I am faithful to Piłsudski, just like to the memories of my youth, Mickiewicz, and Żeromski. It is both an instinct and a conviction that he stood like Chatyr-Dah over other mountains, over all political specialists, the only one amongst them – equal to Shakespeare and Wyspiański, the only one belonging to poetry.<sup>35</sup>

In another section the article reads:

Piłsudski (...) was in the recent history of Poland the only great builder, an historic statesman who read the future from the stars like Cardinal Richelieu or Caesar (...) If a person of his stature had led America now, you could sleep calmly not fearing any Russian bombs.<sup>36</sup>

Jan Lechoń wrote those words over fifteen years after the death of the Chief of State, however, the passing years did not diminish his devotion to a person who, as Antoni Słonimski wrote in “Kronika tygodniowa” included in an issue of *Wiadomości Literackie* devoted to the Marshall, “fulfilled everything he dreamt about in his youth, his nation had ever dreamt about, and what was expressed in the songs of the greatest poets.”<sup>37</sup> Poland’s political situation amplified that longing for a figure

<sup>31</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 1, p. 480.

<sup>32</sup> M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, vol. 2, p. 271.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>34</sup> During the interwar period, the poet was an ardent Piłsudski follower. When he was only eighteen he became friends with Tadeusz Świącicki, and, if one is to believe the recollections of Tadeusz Katelbach, he interrupted theatre performances and distributed flyers demanding the release of Piłsudski and Kazimierz Sosnkowski from German imprisonment. In *Dziennik*, Lechoń defined the “intoxication with the legend of the Legions and the love for Piłsudski” as “the strongest feeling of his youth” (J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 2, p. 330); the words were proven true not only by a poem entitled *Piłsudski*, but also an interview conducted in 1924 for *Wiadomości Literackie* with the Marshall who at that time was staying in Sulejówek (J. Lechoń, “U marszałka Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku”, *Wiadomości Literackie*, 1924, issue 40/42, p. 1).

<sup>35</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 2, p. 367.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, *Dziennik*, vol. 1, p. 369. It is worth stressing that the declarations of adoration towards Piłsudski were accompanied by critical statements regarding his successors who, according to Lechoń, “began to prove clearly that there is no difference between them and National Democracy.” (*ibid.*, p. 480).

<sup>37</sup> A. Słonimski, “Kronika tygodniowa”, *Wiadomości Literackie*, 1935, issue 22. As cited in: *ibid.*, *Kroniki tygodniowe 1932–1935*, Warsaw 2001, p. 329.

of Piłsudski's stature who would possess his qualities: "gravity, unselfishness, and tragic courage, if needed."<sup>38</sup> It was not surprising, then, that grief was expressed in Lechoń's poetry in exile. One should refer at this point to a poem with a telling title: *Do Wielkiej Osoby* (To The Grand Person) published in 1944 in *Tygodnik Polski* and later included in a collection entitled *Aria z kurantem*. It was a synthesis of faith, trust, and longing personified by a person whose name, just like twenty-four years earlier in the poem entitled *Piłsudski*, the poet did not dare say, sensing that "in the raucousness of Piłsudski's cult there is some insult to his memory"<sup>39</sup>:

Thou, who did not part with glory for one moment!  
I remember that May in Paris and the hot evening,  
When no one wanted to believe what had already happened,  
And when I went to cry under the Arc de Triomphe.

I have never called Your name again,  
But when I do not call Your name as Vilnius is burning  
And a million bayonets glisten again on our roads,  
And you can hear once more Moskals' cannons in Warsaw.

So, please, march once more before us, oh Great Person,  
And peer into the dark future through your grey eyes,  
As we once more march with You in tragedy,  
To once again achieve the impossible.<sup>40</sup>

Another contemporary text by Lechoń recalling the Marshall was a poem entitled *Rejtan*<sup>41</sup>, in which Piłsudski, "the man with a bushy brow", was presented as one in a succession of historic incarnations of the title character symbolising the Poles' fight for freedom. A character so much needed now when "(...) throughout the world Moscow statues are roaring/ (...) various legations lick Moscow feet/ And applause for violence resonates in all directions."<sup>42</sup> Both poems included a considerable hope for a change in the situation of the motherland, a hope mystically associated with the memories of Piłsudski's deeds. They might have reflected Lechoń's psychological disposition in the mid-1940s. As the years went by and the expected political breakthrough never came, the poet's depression grew; his always perfect Poland, as Roman Loth wrote, "lived in memories."<sup>43</sup>

The Korean War did not prove to be the breakthrough he longed for. Fragments of letters of the author of *Aria z kurantem* to Mieczysław Grydzewski proved that Lechoń had high hopes about it. According to him, the American intervention in

<sup>38</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 1, p. 335.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., "Do Wielkiej Osoby", [in:] *ibid.*, *Poezje*, p. 205–206.

<sup>41</sup> It was published in a collection entitled *Aria z kurantem* (New York, 1945), due to censorship it was not reprinted in the People's Republic of Poland.

<sup>42</sup> J. Lechoń, "Rejtan", [in:] *ibid.*, *Poezje*, p. 207–208.

<sup>43</sup> R. Loth, "Wstęp", p. 74, [in:] J. Lechoń, *Poezje*.

Korea was supposed to constitute a prelude to WWII, which would bring about the defeat of the Soviet Union and free Poland from the Soviet area of influence. He based his calculations on the news he received from Polish politicians affiliated with the Washington administration. That news sometimes proved not quite accurate, nonetheless, Lechoń was still convinced about his particular political acuity “a lover of *Wesele* ought to (...) put his ear from time to time to the earth to see if can hear the hoof beats coming from the Krakow road.”<sup>44</sup> The following are a few quotations from that trans-atlantic correspondence in which the fevered author of *Lutnia po Bekwarku* revealed his prophecies:

You surely cannot doubt that the Honourable Uncle Samuel shall arm up and spank Uncle Joseph (*letter of 10.07.1950*).

The result of this war is absolutely clear for me – in the sense, of course, that Russia will be blown to fucking pieces (*letter of 22.07.1950*).

It is only a matter of who and where will drop the first a-bomb (*letter written after 10.12.1950*).<sup>45</sup>

Grydzewski proved much more realistic in that matter, persistently trying to tame Lechoń’s wishful thinking. It was, in fact, the editor-in-chief of *Wiadomości* who, from London, correctly assessed America’s policy, which he expressed by adding at the top of one of his letters sent to New York a note: “So where’s the war?”<sup>46</sup> Then, three years later, he stated frankly in response to yet another set of sensations (such as “soon, we are coming back to a free Poland”<sup>47</sup>) served by his allegedly well-informed friend: “Dear Leszek, (...) I consider your political prophecies utter nonsense.”<sup>48</sup> Eventually, Lechoń himself had to concede that he was wrong in his predictions, and that he was disappointed in the policy of yet another US president, this time Dwight Eisenhower. The end of the Korean War came as an utter defeat for the poet, and he considered the peace accords and the division of the peninsula into two zones of influence the “new Yalta”.<sup>49</sup>

In the light of the above findings, it is difficult to avoid the question of whether and to what extent the poet’s frustration resulting from the political situation in Poland (which he sometimes referred to as “Bierucja”<sup>50</sup>) resulted in his dramatic decision to take his life. Nearly thirty years ago Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz wrote:

I am truly terrified, no longer “metaphysically surprised”, when I try to imagine how that same boy who used to wake me up at night with a telegram just for fun (...) could jump out of

<sup>44</sup> T. Nowakowski, “Kamizelka ratunkowa”, *Wiadomości*, 1968, issue 20, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, vol. 1, p. 329, 335, 374.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>47</sup> M. Grydzewski, J. Lechoń, *Listy 1923–1956*, vol. 2, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>49</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 3, Warsaw 1993, p. 135.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

a window on the twelfth floor of the Hudson Hotel in New York. He must have gone a long and terrible road of which I knew nothing.<sup>51</sup>

Today, knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Lechoń's death is much more extensive. It does not seem, however, that one could use it to offer a straightforward diagnosis. In 2001, a discussion was organised in which well-known journalists (Cezary Michalski and Ryszard Marek Groński) participated, yet it seems that the former considerably overestimated the role of that political factor, while the latter underestimated it.<sup>52</sup> The available documents eliminate all doubt: Jan Lechoń was extremely critical and even displayed hatred in his evaluations of the political and cultural changes in post-WWII Poland. The radical character of his judgements is visible in a passage from *Dziennik* – an account of his impression while reading the national press: “It ‘s just like in the Soviet Union, there is nothing Polish any more – the time of the tsars was a time of unbridled freedom when you compare it to this slave-like debasement to which Bolsheviks have driven Poles.”<sup>53</sup> The poet feared “what it will look like in a few years’ time when those who don’t remember the true Poland grow up.”<sup>54</sup> The distance from New York to Warsaw is just under seven thousand kilometres, but the symbolic gap between them seemed much more extensive. In such a situation, Lechoń was not planning any return home<sup>55</sup>, he also broke off all relations with anyone who

<sup>51</sup> J. Iwaszkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>52</sup> The discussion was presented by Krzysztof Tomasik in an essay (“Prototyp homoseksualnego konserwatysty”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Homobiografie. Pisarki i pisarze polscy XIX i XX wieku*, Warsaw 2008, p. 75). Immediately after his suicide, the Polish press released many articles discussing the circumstances of the event, which was assigned an unequivocal political meaning. As a summary of those rather similar texts one could use a note by the anonymous author of an article published in *Lewy Tor*: “The recent domestic and international events sealed the failure of Lechoń the politician. The knowledge of that failure and his own creative feebleness have desperately led him onto the ledge of a New York window.” (*Lewy Tor* 1956, issue 22. As cited in J. Pyszny, “Śmierć Jana Lechonia w prasie roku 1956”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Boje na łamach. Pisarze i literatura w prasie polskiej lat pięćdziesiątych XX wieku: szkice*, Wrocław 2002).

<sup>53</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 1, p. 185.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>55</sup> In 1946 in *Szpilki*, Jan Brzechwa published a poem entitled *Gryps do Jana Lechonia* (Kite To Jan Lechoń), whose author ironically discouraged the author of *Karmazynowy poemat* from returning home, using towards that end clichés of anti-communist propaganda: “Dear Mr Jan, I am writing in secret/ So that this kite reaches You/ in time. With Your well-being in mind/ I do not advise returning home. Truly, I do not./ This life here is not for You. For can You believe it/ It is even worse here than your propaganda says it is?/ In Łódź there is no one left. All have been exiled./ I, with a handful of writers, on a hard bed/ I rags and shackles, with machine guns to our mugs/ Our penalty is to watch new films by Ford (...)/ Policemen, they catch us and under chloroform/ They order us to write to *Szpilki* and praise the reform./ Electricity, water – have long been eliminated in Łódź,/ to church, obviously, no one goes today/ For there, the Soviet guard, dressed as a priest,/ Exiles to Syberia anyone who comes.” The poem concluded in an apostrophe correctly predicting later fortunes of Lechoń and Tuwim: “And such is this life here, Dear Sir,/ So it is better for You,

“went into Warsaw service voluntarily”<sup>56</sup>, and who actively participated in the “tragic farce in which everyone takes part apart from Poldzio (*Staff – note by PS*) and Jasio Parandowski.”<sup>57</sup> And the group included some of his former friends: Tuwim, Iwaszkiewicz, Słonimski, Ludwik Hieronim Morstin, and Ryszard Ordyński. Thus, all that was left for the author of *Marmur i róże* was a New York banishment, which he could sometimes tolerate well enough (probably one such period resulted in the vitality-filled statement: “I love New York, and I feel better here than in Europe”<sup>58</sup>), but usually he coped with it poorly. During those worse times, he painfully experienced his unfitness for the American reality, completely different from that which we knew from Europe, since, as Tadeusz Nowakowski once wrote: “America is not located in a different part of the world. America is located on a different planet.”<sup>59</sup> Remarks written in those years and included in *Księga gości*<sup>60</sup> proved that Lechoń seemingly placed in the “centre of contemporary times”<sup>61</sup> mainly interacted with the, quite exclusive, New York Polish community. Bear in mind that his Paris apartment (decorated by Jean Cocteau) was often visited by the likes of André Gide, Paul Claudel, and Jules Romains! Lechoń’s life in New York was utterly different from the glamour-filled social life in Paris or Warsaw (“I was one of those people who owned Warsaw,”<sup>62</sup> as he assessed his influence among the interwar elite). At that point the sentimental story of the longing for his irreversibly lost motherland (which he left in the 1930s of his own free will), of a man who “could not live in solitude, away from (...) the tree on which he could bear fruit”<sup>63</sup> began to merge with another discourse, which also constructed the sense of the poet’s alienation. The American Lechoń was, in

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if You stay./ And, please, burn this kite! Tuwim is stubborn/ And he will surely think that it is some joke. / While I... You must understand it yourself: they will stand us against the wall,/ Shoot, hang and cut to pieces. ” (J. Brzechwa, “Gryps do Jana Lechonia”, *Szpilki* 1946, issue of 19 February. As cited in S. Nicieja, “Polemika Hemara z Brzechwą”, *Dekada Literacka*, 1992, issue 38. This article is available on the journal’s website (*Dekada Literacka* [on-line], accessed on 15.04.2013, <http://www.dekadaliteracka.pl/?id=559>).

<sup>56</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 1, p. 40.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, *Dziennik*, vol. 3, p. 320.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67. Tadeusz Nowakowski doubted the sincerity of such statements (*Kamizelka ratunkowa*, p. 1), wondering “whether the proud attempt at turning a faultless situation into a feature of voluntary choice was not actually yet another protective device used by Lechoń.” The author of *Obóz Wszystkich Świętych* assumed that “despite everything else, Lechoń would had felt better in France.”

<sup>59</sup> T. Nowakowski, “Ryba na piasku”, *Wiadomości*, 1957, issue 23, p. 5. Reprint [in:] *Wspomnienia o Janie Lechoni*, p. 271.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. B. Dorosz, *Księga gości Jana Lechonia*, Warsaw 1999.

<sup>61</sup> *Listy Jana Lechonia do Stanisława Balińskiego*, p. 212 (“America is the only country in the world where you can truly remain in the centre of contemporary times.”).

<sup>62</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 3, p. 426.

<sup>63</sup> The quoted sentence was included in a biographical note by Henryk Cyganik devoted to Jan Lechoń, and it was published on the website of Ad Oculos publishing house. (*Ad Oculos* [on-line], accessed on 11.04.2013, <http://www.adoculos.pl/index.php?s=wyniki&rodz=12&id=21>).

fact, a solitary person fighting his own weaknesses, trying hard to force himself to do any creative work (the task of writing *Dziennik* served him also as a type of motivation, forcing himself to write several lines of text each day), and concealing from everyone his homosexuality. New York's Polish community of the 1950s (to the company of which he was doomed, though he somewhat sentenced himself to it) with its puritanism did not resemble the artistic elite of the interwar Warsaw for whom Lechoń's sexual orientation was a public secret at most. In fact, it could not have been otherwise since official receptions were frequented by other members of the Skamandryci movement in the company of their wives, and he came in the company of handsome young men.<sup>64</sup> The atmosphere in New York was far less liberal. Apparently, someone filed a report on Lechoń, a fact which considerably hindered his efforts to receive American citizenship. Halina Wittlinowa claimed that as a result of that he was often called in "for interrogation regarding homosexual matters."<sup>65</sup> Many facts indicate that it was those harassments that constituted the direct cause (though not the only one) of his suicide.<sup>66</sup>

It seems unquestionable, though, that Jan Lechoń was a "political man" throughout his life. The dramatic wartime events and his fortunes in exile enabled him to find a ready-made form, deeply rooted in literary traditions, for expressing his longing and hopes. Thus, he once again became an "active" poet, though, politics remained at the centre of his focus. He was always keen on the subject, he wrote much on it, even though he was not an expert on politics by any means. He often did not understand its mechanisms, he span insubstantial projects, he made mistakes in his predictions, he was disappointed in his hopes being, as Maria Wszelaki wrote, "a professional dreamer"<sup>67</sup> following his heart and not his mind in his political analyses. His fascination with that domain formed in his early youth, and was destroyed on 8 June 1956. On that day Lechoń leapt out of the window of a New York hotel. And then everything went on as if in the song: "my hair was caught by the wind/ twelve floors and darkness."

<sup>64</sup> Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz ("Tolek", *Twórczość*, 1977, issue 6), when recalling the receptions at Aniela Zagórska's, wrote: "This place was sometimes visited by Tuwim with his beautiful wife, Wierzyński with his splendid Brysia, I with Hania, and Lechoń always in the company of an impressive young man." Then, in a letter sent from Brussels to Iwaszkiewicz, Lechoń frankly wrote that "you could look for hours at" the photograph of Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde's young lover ("Z listów Jana Lechonia do Anny i Jarosława Iwaszkiewiczów", *Twórczość*, 1976, issue 6, p. 78).

<sup>65</sup> *Skamandryci w Nowym Jorku*, interview by Anna Frajlich with Halina Wittlinowa. As cited in B. Dorosz, "Nowojorskie tajemnice życia i śmierci Jana Lechonia", *Teksty Drugie*, 2004, issue 6, p. 205.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. also R. Loth, "Ostatnie dzieło Jana Lechonia", [in:] J. Lechoń, *Dziennik*, vol. 1.

<sup>67</sup> M. Wszelaki, "Wspomnienie o Leszku", *Wiadomości*, 1959, issue 39, p. 3. Reprint [in:] *Wspomnienia o Janie Lechoni*, p. 301.

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### El principe constante? Jan Lechoń and politics (after 1939)

(Summary)

In the article, I focus on the theme of the political views of Jan Lechoń during his New York exile, which emerged in his literary work, letters, and *Dziennik*. The main elements of the political stance of the author of *Srebrne i czarne* were in that time: resolute anti-communism, critical assessment of the actions of the government in exile, his declared admiration for America, and a nostalgia for the interwar period (idealising Józef Piłsudski). The discussed views of the poet exerted a considerable influence on his personal life, which was proven by the politically motivated breaking off his long-time relations with Julian Tuwim. One important problem is where to locate Lechoń's dissatisfaction with the political changes in Poland, which he stated often, within the reasons for his suicide.

**Key words:** Jan Lechoń, emigration, New York, communism, suicide