

A Man of Conscience. The Private Life of Stefan Ryniewicz

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Presently, the Ładoś Group is an extensively explored *terra incognita*. We are still learning new details of the thus far little-known operation organized by the Polish Legation in Bern, Switzerland, which was aimed at rescuing Jews from the Holocaust.¹ The group comprised Aleksander Ładoś, Stefan Ryniewicz, Chaim Eiss, Abraham Silberschein, Juliusz Kühn and Konstancy Rokicki. But despite comprehensive archival research, little is known about the members of the group. What socio-cultural circles did they come from? What was their social environment? What happened to them after the war? And how did their activities in Bern affect their future fates? All these questions pertain to the individual's subjective spheres, however, and as such can rarely be answered on the basis of official documents held in archives. Here, one needs to turn to family memory, supplemented with private letters, photographs and postcards. The present text is a biographical essay about Stefan Ryniewicz (1903–1988), and is based on several surviving letters and photographs from the collections of the Woniak family.

Stefan Ryniewicz was my great-uncle (from his sister Julia's side). Although I was five years old when he died, I never met him, for he resided in Argentina, while I lived near Szczecin. It was only some time later that I heard about "Janek from Buenos Aires", as he was privately known. Numerous photographs and letters from Stefan to his sister Julia, and, after her premature death in 1941, to her husband and Stefan's brother-in-law, Michał Woniak – all signed "Janek" – have been preserved by my grandfather (Michał Woniak Junior, born 1935) and my father (Michał's

¹ The activities of the Ładoś Group, reconstructed on the basis of archival documents, have recently been described, among others, by Kumoch et al., 2019, and Drywa, 2020.

son, Marek Woniak). Julia was only two years older than Stefan, and so the siblings maintained close contact.

My family knew about Stefan Ryniewicz's diplomatic career in Riga and Bern, but the details were rarely, if ever, discussed. For this reason, we did not know about his participation in the Ładoś Group. The fact that Stefan went by the name of Jan in the family circle made it all the more difficult to connect these two figures with specific historical events. It was only at the beginning of 2024 that I realized they were one and the same person. As the text aims to shed light on the private life of Stefan Ryniewicz, his involvement in the rescuing of Jews will not be discussed, especially as the topic is totally absent from his extant private correspondence. Ryniewicz wrote mostly about family matters, which proves that considerable physical distance did not weaken familial ties. In one of his letters, Stefan also voiced his disappointment with Poland's new political system. However, before I let the correspondence speak for itself, I would like to take a closer look at Stefan's family home and outline his socialization, which undoubtedly influenced his life to a great extent.

Stefan Ryniewicz was born in Tarnopol, but his parents, Jan and Stefania née Sarama, were from Mielec. Stefan had four sisters (Julia, Wanda, Zofia and Maria) and a brother, Jerzy. Until 1918, Tarnopol was situated in the administrative region of Galicia in Austria-Hungary. In the late 1920s, the Ryniewiczzs moved to Lwów and took up residence in a villa at 39 Teatyńska Street (present-day Villa Rynyevychiv at Maksym Kryvonis Street). Stefan Ryniewicz's mother Stefania came from a merchant family, while his father Jan – according to Austrian documents – was a cattle exporter by profession. He served as director of the Polish Association of Merchants and Producers of Cattle and Hogs (*Nierogacizna w gospodarstwie państwa i kraju*, 1920). He was also active in the “Halpern & Ryniewicz” Cattle Trade Commission in Vienna (*Allgemeine Nachrichten*, 1927). Already in 1912, the supra-regional press described him as “an acknowledged expert on economic relations in Galicia” (*Pogoń...*, 1912). Having moved to Lwów, he retained his reputation as an affluent entrepreneur, cooperating with the municipal slaughterhouse. As a person of high social standing, he had the means to support a large family. He was very particular about his children's education – his son Jerzy attended the Warsaw School for Officer Cadets, while his daughter Julia took stenography classes in Vienna and graduated from a teachers' training college in Mielec. Stefan studied economics and political science in Vienna and Paris.

It is difficult to determine why Stefan decided to pursue a career in diplomacy. His later correspondence suggests that he was guided by patriotism and a desire to serve his homeland.

Since his early youth, Stefan had been curious about the world and enjoyed travelling. In February 1927, for instance, he went to Amsterdam, having first visited Rotterdam, where – as he stated in a postcard

to his sister, Julia – “there is nothing of interest”. He considered his trip to the Netherlands as “idling about the world” (*Pocztówka Stefana Ryniewicza z Rotterdamu do siostry Julii Woniak..., 1927*).

His first diplomatic posting was to the Polish Legation in Bern, where he worked from 1928 to 1933. It was probably during this period that he established contacts with Wander AG, a Swiss company engaged, among others, in the manufacture of Ovomaltine, a popular nutritious drink. According to Swiss archival documents, in 1933, just two years after the Bern-based company opened its factory in Kraków, Stefan was appointed its director (*An die Sicherheits- und Kriminalpolizei der Stadt Bern..., 1948, p. 3*). Stefan knew Kraków very well, for his wife Zofia came from the city, and it was there that they had got married and their second son was born. In 1935, Stefan re-entered diplomatic service and was appointed Consul in Riga. In December 1936, he suffered numerous injuries in a plane crash near Susiec; as a result, he had difficulty walking for a long time. After convalescing in Warsaw, on 12 April 1937 he returned to the Consulate in Riga.

In the summer of 1937, Stefan sent a long letter from Riga to his sister Julia. At that point, they were both married with children. Julia was 20 years old when she married Michał Woniak, nine years her senior, and she now had a two-year-old son, Michał, and lived with her family in Lwów and Stanisławów. Stefan, in turn, had married Zofia Olga née Zasadni in 1928 in Kraków. They had two sons: Jan Krystyn, born in 1931 in Bern, and Tomasz Maria, born in 1934 in Kraków. In the letter, Stefan informed his sister that both boys were fine and “speak German very well”. Jan was said to have a talent for music and a philosopher’s soul, while the four-year-old Tomek was “an avid soldier”. The boys’ pictures were attached. Some fragments of this letter suggest that Stefan was a religious man. As for his consular duties, he wrote thus: “I am uncommonly busy – just imagine, some 40,000 workers from Poland are employed in my area this year. The Consulate is growing and now has 10 clerks”. Stefan was very much interested in the fate of his compatriots; in the following year, he made visits to numerous Latvian farms with Polish employees to see for himself how they were treated. The “*Kurier Warszawski*” newspaper reported: “Everywhere he went, Consul Ryniewicz was greeted by the Polish workers with sincere warmth, as they understood that his role at the Polish Consulate is to be a true protector of the emigrants seeking bread outside their country” (*Objazd konsularny wsi łotewskiej, 1938*). To return to his letter to Julia, Stefan also mentioned his planned transfer to another post, though he finished with the statement that the matter seemed “to have been dropped for now” (*List Stefana Ryniewicza z Rygi do siostry Julii Woniak..., 1937*).

In December 1938, however, these plans did materialize. Stefan returned to the Consulate in Bern, taking with him his immediate family, including his mother-in-law. Initially, he served as the First Secretary, and later as a Counselor. Unfortunately, no wartime correspondence

has survived. As Poland was reconstituted within new borders after the Second World War, Stefan's parents lost their home in Lwów, and – just like their children – were forced to leave the Eastern Borderlands. They eventually settled in Wrocław.

In January 1947, Stefan sent a long letter to his brother-in-law, Michał Woniak, then resident in Szczecin, informing him about considerable changes in his private and professional life. I will start off with the former. During the difficult times of war and occupation, the Ryniewicz and Woniak families had lost contact with each other for a while. When his wife, Julia Ryniewicz, died of anemia, Michał Woniak Senior joined the Home Army, while in 1944 their only son, Michał Woniak Junior, found himself in an orphanage in Kraków. Two years later, in 1946, father and son were reunited and moved to Szczecin, where they settled in a house previously owned by a German family; the building remains in the Woniaks' possession to this day.

As it was already mentioned, the Ryniewiczzs settled in Wrocław, although the family was now smaller in number, as Stefan's father had died before the move. Stefan wrote in his letter that it took their family quite some time "to find one another and come together again". His mother, Stefania Ryniewicz, suffered from encephalosclerosis as a result of her wartime experiences, and he was very worried about her condition. He trembled as he opened every letter from Wrocław. Unfortunately, his concerns were justified, for a year and a half later his mother passed away. Stefan was additionally worried about his sister Zofia, who was also seriously ill. The burden of running the household and caring for their mother and sister rested on Jerzy and Wanda, and Stefan felt overwhelmed by the situation. "I help them as much as I can, most of all by sending parcels," he wrote. He also sent parcels to his sister Maria in Vienna and to more distant relatives on his wife's side; further, he offered Michał Woniak Senior to send his children's old clothes for his son. Stefan remembered the family members who had helped him during his studies, and they received parcels, too. He mentioned in the letter that the high cost of living in Switzerland was offset by better earning opportunities. The letter also contained brief character sketches of Stefan's sons, who lived at a boarding school and only came home for the holidays. He hoped that they would both graduate from university and never lose a sense of their roots, which – as he himself stated – was not easy in a foreign country.

In his January letter, Stefan wrote at length about his professional prospects in the aftermath of the war. I will let him speak for himself, quoting this telling passage: "With the political change that occurred in the summer of 1945, when the government in Warsaw was universally recognized, the entire Legation underwent a significant transformation. As they say, you cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and so both the big fish – who had always engaged in politics – and the small fry who were never involved were axed". The metaphor was used

in reference to the new Polish government, which replaced the entire staff of the Legation in Bern. Stefan apparently considered himself an ordinary civil servant, which is further substantiated by the following statement: "As you well know, I have spent most of my life abroad, but I never dabbled in politics. I knew one party: Poland, and I served and wanted to serve Poland and her only". It seems, therefore, that while patriotism and the prosperity of his homeland were concerns close to his heart, they also inspired him to undertake a career in diplomacy. Besides, Ryniewicz was convinced that there was a huge difference between politicians and diplomats: "The former do politics, determine courses of action, etc., while the latter are engaged only in implementation". Thus, he considered himself a diplomat, not a politician.

Due to the aforementioned political changes that took place in Poland, Stefan was dismissed from his diplomatic duties in the summer of 1945. This was an unpleasant experience for him – also in economic terms. At the same time, he was loath to engage in any tactical maneuvers, which he explained with two apt metaphors: "I consider it disgraceful and dishonest to jump ship at the eleventh hour, and so I stayed with the others until the very end; in the summer of 1945, after eighteen years of diplomatic work, I found myself unemployed in a country which, after all, is foreign to me". Stefan confessed in his letter that he humbly accepted his fate, and took up other work "without offense" to provide his family "with a morsel of bread and a roof over their heads". But the loss of his job at the Legation was a deep-seated issue with him, perhaps even a festering wound, for he returned to the subject once more in his letter. I will quote this passage in its entirety, since it possibly explains also his previous engagement in the issuance of passports to Jews threatened by the Holocaust: "Pray do not think, my dear Michał, that as a result of these events I am resentful or bitter that things unfolded as they did. I have learned to wonder at nothing and take everything in stride; I am never guided by my personal interests, but always by the compass that is known as human conscience". It seems, therefore, that Stefan was guided by the Christian concept of conscience during his activities in Bern, which is further corroborated by a religious expression used in the following sentence, namely "thank God" – not necessarily employed there as a matter of linguistic convention. In the summer of 1945, Stefan preferred to find himself "outside the warring factions", as he put it, rather than to sacrifice his ideals.

His dislike of "politics" found its expression in his complete refusal to participate in the life of the Polish diaspora in Switzerland, which he justified as follows: "I keep as far away as I can from the émigré circles, for history shows that these have never been a healthy phenomenon, and, especially among the strongly individualistic Poles, tend to facilitate personal quarrels and disputes". Stefan probably had a lot of bad experiences with Polish émigrés. When he had to start a new career at the age of 42, he preferred to rely upon the friendships he had made during the fifteen

years he spent in Switzerland. Nevertheless, he hoped for the best: “I think I will manage to raise my boys well and support my family at the same time” (List Stefana Ryniewiczza z Berna do Michała Woniaka..., 1947).

The strong sense of family ties that Stefan had developed during his early socialization remained with him for his entire life. In 1947/48, he helped his sister Wanda, a teacher who then resided in Wrocław, to leave for London via Switzerland, to join her husband, a major with the Polish Air Force. The endeavor was successful (Abhörungsprotokoll..., 1948, p. 5).

Stefan decided to look for employment on the Swiss labor market, for he had the right skills – he was a graduate in economics and, more importantly, had learned a lot from his father’s business ventures.

Initially, Stefan remained in Bern, probably because his sons were still in school, and as a Polish citizen he applied for a work permit. He took up employment as a sales representative for Transglob AG, a logistics company based in Bern. His responsibilities included acquiring foreign clients and expanding the company’s presence on the international market (An die Sicherheits- und Kriminalpolizei der Stadt Bern..., 1948, p. 3). In May 1947, Stefan temporarily relocated to France, but returned to Bern towards the end of that year. He did not steer clear of mistakes in his new role as a businessman, for instance in December 1947, when two men deceived him into giving them a large sum of money for an alleged investment in Italy. It was probably due to these failures that he had to resettle to Argentina. In April 1949, the family began efforts to leave the country through the agency of the International Refugee Organization in Geneva, and in July they received approval (Kartoteka Zofii Ryniewicz, n.d.). Stefan left Europe via the port in Geneva, while Zofia and their sons boarded a passenger ship in Cannes. The entire family arrived in Buenos Aires on 24 October 1949 and registered there.² For Stefan, the move meant restarting his professional life practically from scratch. What is more, the entire family had to make new acquaintances and find new friends. This time Stefan overcame his dislike of the Polish diaspora and became engaged in activities aimed at helping the local Poles.

The move to Argentina increased the spatial distance between Stefan and his siblings and relatives; during his residence in Switzerland, the chief obstacle had been the Iron Curtain. Now they were separated by an ocean, and Stefan could maintain contact with his family only by means of the post, sending parcels, letters and cables (which he regularly did). He never abandoned his plans to visit Poland. He managed to travel to the country several times; in late February 1969, he came to Szczecin. In a letter he sent before the journey to his brother-in-law Michał Woniak, Stefan wrote among others that he was helping his sister

2 The Argentinean database of emigrants: <https://cemla.com/buscador>.

Zofia, who was seriously ill, but did not plan to visit her in Kraków due to a lack of time. He also did not meet with his relatives from Toruń (*List Stefana Ryniewicza z Buenos Aires do Michała Woniaka...*, 1969). Stefan wished to talk about other familial and professional concerns in person, and these were indeed discussed during the meeting in Szczecin. According to family memory, his visit also served to settle inheritance matters. He had made all the necessary appointments in advance with the help of his brother-in-law. Stefan spent a few days with his relatives in Szczecin, as is evidenced by numerous family photographs, for instance taken in front of local monuments.

There was no further contact between Stefan Ryniewicz and the Woniak family. Owing to the family's appreciation of memorabilia, a large collection of photographs showing Stefan Ryniewicz, his parents and siblings has been preserved in the Woniaks' house in Szczecin. Many of these pictures are more than a hundred years old. They document Stefan Ryniewicz's childhood, education, adolescence and daily life in Tarnopol and Lwów, as well as visits to the countryside, which the whole family immensely enjoyed. Interestingly, Stefan added photographs of his wife and children to many of the letters which he sent from Latvia, Switzerland and Argentina.

The objective of the present biographical sketch is to use private correspondence from family collections to provide a fuller picture of Stefan Ryniewicz – a diplomat, patriot, entrepreneur, and family man. It is worth noting that the letters contain only the information that he considered appropriate and important to convey. What we receive is a self-portrait that the author wanted to impress on the family members to whom he addressed his letters. Perhaps this text raises more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to include family mementos and memories in academic research, for they endow historical figures with a tone of uniqueness.

(transl. by Aleksandra Arumińska)

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