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## **Russian Diplomat Vasily Nikitin and Polish Oriental Studies. Nikitin's letters to Professor Tadeusz Kowalski**

### **Abstract**

Vasily Nikitin (1.1.1885–6.6.1960) – a former Russian consul in Urmia, Iranian studies researcher and Kurdologist – corresponded with professor Tadeusz Kowalski for over a quarter of a century. His letters sent to Krakow in the years 1922–1948 are held in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU). The aim of this article is to present the relationship of Vasily Nikitin with Polish Oriental studies and Orientalists on the basis of an analysis of the letters sent by him to Tadeusz Kowalski. The correspondence changed during this time. At the beginning, Nikitin sought help from Kowalski in finding a job at the Jagiellonian University. With time, when his financial situation in Paris – where he was in exile – stabilized, he was interested in working with Polish Orientalists at a distance. Due to Kowalski's efforts, Nikitin became a foreign member of the Polish Oriental Society and the PAU's Oriental Commission. Thanks to this, he received publications issued by these organizations. He also published in the oldest Polish Oriental journal – the *Yearbook of Oriental Studies* (*Rocznik Orientalistyczny*) – and in other journals.

**Keywords:** Vasily Nikitin, Tadeusz Kowalski, letters, Polish Oriental Studies, international academic relations



The legacy of the Polish Oriental studies researcher Tadeusz Kowalski (21.6.1889–5.5.1948) is held in the Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (Polska Akademia Umiejętności) in Kraków. In addition to the researcher's work, documents on his organizational and academic activities, and biographical materials, it includes extensive correspondence, containing letters from 435 authors. Among these correspondents were Russians living both in the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup> and in exile after the October Revolution. The latter group includes Vasily Nikitin (1.1.1885–7.6.1960)<sup>2</sup> – a former Russian consul in Urmia, Iranian studies researcher and Kurdologist. The correspondence between the Russian diplomat and the Polish professor began in 1922 and lasted until Kowalski's death in 1948. Materials concerning Nikitin are catalogued under no. K III 4 j. 171(2), and held in the Archives of the institutions in question. Correspondence constitutes a significant portion of these materials which consists of 28 letters and 17 postcards. In addition, one can find an article by Nikitin devoted to the Mosul question, published in 1925 in French, as well as a handwritten biography sent to Kowalski in 1926. Moreover, there are two typescripts: the first is an article in French elaborating on the fate of Oriental researchers and Polish Oriental studies during World War II. Therein, Nikitin extensively quotes Kowalski himself, citing excerpts from a letter previously received from the Polish scholar. The other typescript is a review of a book about Kamchatka. The author intended to send both texts to *Le Monde* magazine. At this point, it is worth noting that the vast majority of correspondence was conducted in Polish, with the exception of the first letter, dated 22nd September 1922,<sup>3</sup> which was written in French, and the second one, dated 29th October 1922, written in Ottoman Turkish, and the third one, dated 24th February 1923, written partially in Persian and partly in Polish. During the twenty-six-year correspondence, there were two longer breaks – the first from mid-1927 until the end of 1930 (the gap seems to be related to Nikitin's refusal to work in Kraków), and the second – from 1939 to 1945 – obviously connected with the events of the Second World War. Almost all of the letters, except one, dated 28th June 1938, which was the official response to Nikitin's admission to the PAU's Oriental Commission, were handwritten. They are all legible.

The aim of this article is to present the relationship of Vasily Nikitin with Polish Oriental studies and Orientalists on the basis of an analysis of the letters sent by him

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<sup>1</sup> On the subject see e.g.: Izabela Kończak, 'Letters of Alexander Samoylovich to Tadeusz Kowalski as a source of information on research activities of the Soviet Turkologist in the mid-1920s', *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 75 (2022), pp. 20–30; Izabela Kończak, 'Dwudziestoletnia przyjaźń na odległość. Listy profesora Tadeusza Kowalskiego do akademika Ignacego Kraczkowskiego', in: *Wschód muzułmański w ujęciu interdyscyplinarnym. Ludzie – teksty – historia*, ed. Grzegorz Czerwiński, Artur Konopacki, Białystok 2017, pp. 85–101.

<sup>2</sup> The Russian form of the name is used deliberately and consistently as a sign of respect to the choice made by Nikitin, who until the end of his life considered himself a Russian.

<sup>3</sup> Franciszek Machalski claimed that the first letter was sent by Nikitin in 1920. Franciszek Machalski, 'Wspomnienie o Bazyliu Nikitinie', *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 2 (1961), p. 218.

to Tadeusz Kowalski.<sup>4</sup> The author of this article will attempt to answer the following questions: what was Nikitin's relationship with Poland and Polish identity? Why, at some point in his life, did the Russian Kurdologist want to work in Poland, and why did this plan not come to fruition? With which Polish Oriental researchers did he come into contact? What form of cooperation did he choose?

### A brief biography

Vasily Nikitin (also: Basile Nikitine, Bazyli Nikitin) was born on 1st January 1885 in Sosnowiec to a family of nobles. His father Peter Alexandrovich (Polish: Piotr Aleksandrowicz) was Russian; his mother (née Kosińska) was Polish. His maternal grandmother owned a tenement house in Warsaw. It was in this city that, in 1903, young Nikitin graduated from the 6th Russian State Gymnasium.<sup>5</sup> In the fall of 1904, he entered the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow. As a student, he went on internships abroad every year. For example, in 1905 he was in Constantinople, where, apart from the practical learning of Turkish, he spent a lot of time with Professor Boris Panchenko (1872–1920) in the library of the Russian Archaeological Institute. The following year he was sent to Paris, where he attended Turkish language classes with Charles Adrien Casimir Barbier de Meynard (1826–1908), and Arabic classes with Hartwig Derenbourg (1844–1908).<sup>6</sup> During the last year of his studies at the Institute, he went to Bulgaria, where he travelled on foot to the borders of Macedonia. In order to improve his language skills, he mainly contacted the Turkish-speaking people living in Eastern Bulgaria. During this expedition, he also had the opportunity to meet Jan Grzegorzewski (1850–1922). Years later, he recalled this event in the following words: “the meeting was pleasant and educational. It took place at the National Library, at the director's office, the poet Petko Slaveykov. He was the one who introduced us to Grzegorzewski, who came to him just when we were there. [...] at once Grzegorzewski invited us to his place. There, he offered us excellent white wine and gave us the Polish translation of Turkish firmans. [...] The professor said that his stay in Bulgaria was related to, among others, with the search for the head of Władysław III of Poland”.<sup>7</sup> Nikitin completed his studies at the Lazarev Institute in 1908, and received his first degree diploma for his dissertation prepared on the basis of Arabic sources, and dedicated to Zaynab, the Queen of Palmyra.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On the subject of the life and works of Tadeusz Kowalski see e. g. Ewa Siemienieć-Gołaś, ‘Tadeusz Kowalski (1889–1948)’, in: *Studia Turkologica Cracoviensia*, vol. 5, *Languages and Culture of Turk Peoples*, ed. Marek Stachowski, Kraków 1998, pp. 9–11.

<sup>5</sup> Basile Nikitine, ‘Mes reminiscences polono-orientales (Notes autobiographiques)’, *Folia Orientalia* 2 (1960), p. 154. In his biography, which Nikitin sent to Kowalski, he stated that he graduated from the gymnasium in 1904. See: Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (PAU) in Kraków, K III – 4/121 (2), Biography, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Biography, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Nikitine, op. cit., p. 155; Machalski, op. cit., p. 218.

<sup>8</sup> Biography, p. 1.

In the same year, on the recommendation from the authorities of the Lazarev Institute, he was admitted to the Department of Eastern Languages at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg. He wrote about this institution: “it was, in a way, a research facility with a two-year course, but it had only 10–12 students who were already employed by the Ministry”.<sup>9</sup> Still during the courses, in 1909, he was sent to Persia, to Isfahan. After his diploma exams in 1911, he was delegated to work at the Russian consulate in Rasht, where he took the position of secretary-translator. Working at this “most active of our consulates”, Nikitin recalled this experience as an excellent school of life, because in the consul’s absence he had to “manage the office independently and deal with difficult matters [...] according to the custom of the time, the consul should be both a judge, notary and administrator”.<sup>10</sup> After this experience, he was in turn appointed secretary of the consulate in Tabriz, and then, at the age of just over 30, he took up the post of consul general in Urmia. He astutely noted that “while not a careerist, I was making my career quite fast”.<sup>11</sup> After the political situation in his homeland changed, he received an offer from Leon Trotsky to cooperate and continue his diplomatic service, but he declined by telegraph. In May 1918, he closed the consulate and, via Tabriz, went to Tehran, where for some time he was the second interpreter for the Russian Mission.<sup>12</sup> Neither later nor elsewhere did he have the opportunity to work in a similar capacity. He wrote: “until my departure, forced by the Revolution, in 1919, my entire career was in Persia (Isfahan, Rasht, Tabriz, Urmia, Tehran)”.<sup>13</sup>

In May 1919, Nikitin and his wife, a French woman whom he had married in 1910, went from Tehran to Paris. Interestingly enough, he himself described this trip as a kind of holiday, not a departure to Europe forced by circumstances, which seemed more appropriate in the context of the above-mentioned information about the circumstances of his withdrawal from the diplomatic career path. From this vacation, as he put it, they never returned. They decided to stay in the wife’s homeland.<sup>14</sup> In the first years of his “emigration wandering”<sup>15</sup> he faced financial problems. In 1922 he wrote to Kowalski: “It is the fourth year now that I have been living in Paris and the longer I stay, the worse off I am. [...] of course, up to four months ago, I earned enough to live with my wife comfortably [...], but I lost my job and despite all my best efforts I haven’t found anything so far”.<sup>16</sup> In these circumstances, he seriously began to consider leaving France. He was looking for employment at academic institutions in the United States, the Czech Republic, and in Poland. However, his financial situation changed dramatically

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 5.10.1922.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Sorokina, ‘Vasily Nikitin: svidetelskie pokazaniya v dele o russkoy emigratsii’, in: *Diaspora: Novye materialy*, Vyp. 1, Sankt-Petersburg–Paris 2001, p. 588.

<sup>13</sup> Biography, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Sorokina, op. cit., p. 589.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 5.10.1922.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

in 1923, when he was employed at the *Banque Nationale Française pour le Commerce Extérieur*, where he became the head of the economic division. He worked in this position until 1951. One of his duties was to publish a newsletter on foreign trade. Working at this institution, in his opinion, offered prospects for a dignified life for the family. And this, above all, was the reason why he decided not to leave Paris. This position was not everything he could have wished for, because – as he claimed – “research work was always more absorbing to me than other activities”,<sup>17</sup> but financial and practical concerns were more important to him.

Ultimately, it turned out that Nikitin was able to reconcile his work at the bank with his interests in the Orient. In 1923 he wrote to Kowalski: “here, if I have a free moment, I can engage in my studies, not as a serious task, true, but to rest and to move to the East, even if it is only in my mind”.<sup>18</sup> It can even be said that over the years of “exile in Paris”<sup>19</sup> he was able to make a name for himself and became respected in Oriental studies circles, despite the fact that – as Franciszek Machalski aptly described it – Nikitin treated Oriental studies as a hobby in his life<sup>20</sup> (since he was a diplomat by profession). Undoubtedly, he was an expert in Iranian affairs, and he was primarily concerned with the history, religion and culture of the Kurds. His knowledge was appreciated by many academic bodies. He was a member of the *Société Asiatique* and *Société d’Ethnographie* in Paris, the *Russian Society for Oriental Studies* in Paris, the *International Institute of Anthropology*, and the *International Diplomatic Academy*.

It is also worth mentioning Nikitin’s ties to the Eurasian movement, “whose central idea was to turn to the East as a source of concepts shaping Russian civilization both in the past and in the future”.<sup>21</sup> This intellectual movement, which arose among Russian emigrants and tried to define Russia’s place in the world after World War I and to justify the distinct nature of Russian civilization as separate from Western Europe, over time became a political movement. The former consul joined this movement – as he recalled – in 1926, mainly due to the interest of its members in the East. In a letter to Kowalski, he wrote about it as follows: “The Eurasian group in Paris is active, i.e. we started a seminar to familiarize wider circles of emigrants with our programme. They asked me to preside over these meetings and also to give a lecture on Iran”.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, his activities focused on printing works in Eurasian publications and giving lectures at seminars organized by the movement, which he described as “a manifestation of the original Russian social thought created in exile”.<sup>23</sup> At the end of 1929, he ended his

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 24.09.1923.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Biography, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Machalski, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>21</sup> Stefan Grzybowski, ‘Wstęp’, in: *Między Europą a Azją. Idea Rosji-Eurazji*, ed. Stefan Grzybowski, Toruń 1998, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 28.11.1926.

<sup>23</sup> Cited after: Sorokina, *op. cit.*, pp. 590–591.

cooperation with the Eurasians, and the movement itself, due to an ideological and financial crisis, ceased its activities in 1930.

It should be emphasised at this point that Nikitin remained stateless until the end of his life<sup>24</sup>. He never accepted French or any other citizenship. When applying for a lecturer position in Poland, he anxiously asked Kowalski whether Polish citizenship was a necessary condition in order to work in this country. He identified as a Russian, about which he wrote in a letter dated 5th October 1922: “You will understand me when I tell you that although the research area is international, I would like to remain a Russian, because I have been so from birth, although my homeland is closed to me”.<sup>25</sup> His attitude was not changed either by his stay in exile or by the situation of his brothers who accepted Polish citizenship. In 1925 he wrote: “I now feel even more Russian”.<sup>26</sup>

### Analysis of the letters

The correspondence was initiated by Vasily Nikitin, who in 1922 sent the first letter written in French to Kraków. Therein, he informed Kowalski about his interests, requested that he send him Polish journals which published articles on Eastern issues, and inquired about the possibility of publishing articles in them. He was also interested in the development of Polish Oriental studies and wanted to know which Oriental languages were taught at Polish universities.<sup>27</sup> As the contents of the subsequent letter show, the specific questions were not asked at random. In a message sent on 5th October 1922, the former diplomat decided to ask Kowalski about the possibility of working at the Jagiellonian University as a lecturer of the Persian language and whether it would be feasible to write a doctorate on the Kurdish language.<sup>28</sup>

According to the content of subsequent letters, Kowalski instructed Nikitin to contact a professor at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv: Andrzej Gawroński (20.6.1885–11.1.1927). This outstanding scholar – a specialist in linguistics, whose field of interest was Sanskrit and the New Persian language – began working at the University of Lviv in 1917 at the Department of Comparative Linguistics. In time, he established an Oriental Institute in Lviv, and the city was promoted to the rank of “the centre of Polish Oriental studies”. In addition to the Department of Indian Studies led by Gawroński, the Institute also included the Department of Far East Philology and the Department of Muslim East Philology.<sup>29</sup> Nikitin wrote to Gawroński almost immediately, but for a very long time he

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 592.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 5.10.1922.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 24.01.1925.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 22.09.1922.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 5.10.1922.

<sup>29</sup> Tadeusz Lewicki, ‘Orientalistyka lwowska przed pół wiekiem’, *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1–4 (1985), p. 4; Karolina Wanda Olszowska, ‘Orientalistyka lwowska i krakowska – dwa ośrodki naukowe oraz ich wzajemne powiązania’, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne* 145/2 (2018), pp. 306–307.

did not receive any answer. As it transpired, the Polish scholar was not in Lviv during that time, because he was spending his short life travelling between research and treatment centres.<sup>30</sup> Apparently, the correspondence from France had not been delivered to him in due time. Ultimately, however, despite the considerable delay, he replied to the former diplomat's letter, offering him an assistant's position at the Department of Eastern Muslim Philology under Professor Zygmunt Smogorzewski (12.10.1884–9.11.1931). Nikitin then rejected this offer, saying, "If I had had the letter a year ago, I would perhaps have decided to go to Lviv. But I will not do so now [...] I cannot change our lives every few years".<sup>31</sup> Quite erroneously, he observed that it was too late to achieve the expected success in academia: "at the age of 38 and my life is broken, because of emigration, I doubt that I would be able to properly pay tribute to scholarship. It's too late".<sup>32</sup> It seems that the real reason for the refusal was the improvement of his financial situation in Paris. At that time, he already had a post at the bank, and the salary he received allowed him to lead a dignified life, which he related to Kowalski: "I have a modest, but stable earnings in the bank. We have now found a room with a kitchen and some comforts, cheaper [...] Besides, I am sick and only in Paris [...] I can have doctors".<sup>33</sup> The position in the social and academic circles that he managed to achieve over the last years was also a significant issue. During these few years of his stay in Paris, he managed to establish extensive contacts with French Orientalists and, as he himself wrote: "I am expanding my group of friends here and it would be unwise to interrupt some of my work and these relations".<sup>34</sup>

Since Gawroński divided his academic time between Kraków, Lviv and Paris, a meeting with a former Russian diplomat inevitably had to take place. The letters show that there were at least two of these meetings – one in September and the other in October 1925. At that moment, the professor renewed his offer to employ Nikitin in Lviv. This time Nikitin did not refuse as firmly as before, but he was probably not quite sure what decision to make. To assist him in this matter, Z. Smogorzewski also met with him in Paris at the beginning of 1926 "and there was another conversation about Lviv and my work on Oriental studies there".<sup>35</sup> It seems that personal acquaintance with Gawroński and Smogorzewski could have influenced the decision made by the former diplomat to leave Paris and move to Lviv. The negotiations on this subject were still continuing in May 1926. As Nikitin put it, "I do not lose hope that maybe we will manage to bring it to fruition somehow. Perhaps just not this year".<sup>36</sup> However, matters became complicated. At the beginning of the following year, Professor Gawroński died and, in principle,

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<sup>30</sup> Janusz Fedirko, 'Fenomenalny multilingwista. Profesor Andrzej Gawroński (1885–1927)', *Alma Mater* 2 (2008), p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 24.09.1923.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 8.09.1925.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 16.02.1926.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 10.05.1926.



all arrangements ceased to apply, and the topic of moving to Lviv did not resurface anymore. Nikitin learned about the death of the Polish scholar from the obituary found in *Kurier Warszawski*. He requested that Kowalski send him information about the work and activities of the deceased, as he considered it appropriate to make a farewell speech at the *Société Asiatique* meeting of which “the deceased was a recently elected member”.<sup>37</sup>

The next and, at the same time, the last attempt to bring Vasily Nikitin to Poland took place in 1927 and was connected with a work offer at the Higher Commercial College (Wyższe Studium Handlowe) in Kraków, where the Oriental Institute was opened. Nikitin’s interest in this position should come as no surprise. As early as 1923, the former diplomat spoke of the need to create a university educating young people in economics, while taking into account Eastern aspects. He mentioned this to Kowalski in a letter: “from the practical point of view, Poland must deal with the trade market in Anatolia and Persia, which is not possible without theoretical knowledge, languages and structure in these lands”.<sup>38</sup> Four years later, he only confirmed this position: “Today Asia requires them and to understand it, this side of the issue should not be neglected”.<sup>39</sup> The university, which corresponded to Nikitin’s description, was finally established on May 25, 1925 in Kraków under the name of the Higher Commercial College. It was not a state institution, therefore it had fewer powers, for example, it did not have the right to award academic titles. However, its authorities – headed by Arnold Bolland (10.12.1881–5.9.1940) – throughout the entire interwar period, made efforts to obtain full academic rights for the institution. The courses lasted three years. The students gained comprehensive education in the field of trade, economy and law, enriched by the teaching of foreign languages. The Oriental Institute, established within the framework of the College, allowed second-year students to acquire the necessary skills in the field of export and import, and above all, the knowledge of the unique nature of trade with the East, as well as to learn Turkish and Arabic.<sup>40</sup>

At the new university, Nikitin was to teach three Oriental languages – Persian, Turkish and Arabic.<sup>41</sup> He seriously considered this offer and discussed the language teaching programme by letter with Kowalski, under whose direction he was supposed to work there.<sup>42</sup> He wrote, for example: “as for Arabic, it is only an elementary course that seems necessary to me. In general, I would teach these languages in a strictly practical manner, because the Institute does not educate Oriental scholars, but creates human factors of Poland’s trade expansion in the East (newspapers, letters, conversation)”.<sup>43</sup> Nikitin also

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 17.01.1927.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 25.02.1923.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 17.04.1927.

<sup>40</sup> Iwona Kawalla, ‘Szkolnictwo handlowe w Krakowie w latach 1918–1939’, *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historica* 142 (2013), pp. 156–157.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 26.04.1927.

<sup>42</sup> Andrzej Zaborski, ‘Tadeusz Kowalski – pierwszy i ostatni nowoczesny orientalista polski’, in: *Tadeusz Kowalski, (1889–1948). Materiały z posiedzenia naukowego PAU w dniu 19 czerwca 1998*, Kraków 1999, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 26.04.1927.



corresponded with the head of the Higher Commercial College, A. Bolland, who offered him the position and salary of associate professor. Anything that he did not understand or that was unclear to him in the letters from Bolland – the issue of travel fees, financing the purchase of necessary materials, newspapers, and books – he consulted with Kowalski, who patiently answered his questions about living conditions and financial matters. After these consultations, it turned out that, for example, the amount of the associate professor's salary did not differ from the one the former diplomat received in Paris while working in a bank. This surprised him, because he was clearly convinced that the position would entail much higher earnings. The proposed housing conditions in Kraków – as it seems – also did not meet his expectations. He clearly informed the Polish researcher that “in order to make a final decision, I would need much better living conditions than in Paris”.<sup>44</sup> It seems that the offer did not live up to his expectations, so he finally rejected it.

Nikitin did not reject the offer to cooperate with Polish academics which would not require him to leave Paris. He was very interested in publishing in Polish periodicals. Even before the break in their correspondence, in 1925, Kowalski sent him the issue of *Przegląd Współczesny* with his own article and suggested he submit a text for publication there.<sup>45</sup> Nikitin did not refuse; he wrote: “I would be able to write about today's Persia and I am grateful to you for the suggestion”.<sup>46</sup> In February of the following year, he sent Kowalski the Russian version of the article, which – as the author himself noted – was “a bare recapitulation of the main facts, which I believe comprise the Kurdish question”.<sup>47</sup> The article was published in Polish almost immediately.<sup>48</sup> After a three-years hiatus in correspondence, the first one to write was Kowalski, who once again offered Nikitin a publication in *Przegląd Współczesny*, to which the former diplomat again readily agreed. He quickly responded: “On the present position of the Kurdish question for Prof. Wędkiewicz<sup>49</sup> I shall write with pleasure in a few weeks and thank you for your kind offer and details of the printing conditions”.<sup>50</sup> However, the following letters show that ultimately the text did not appear in the periodical. It is not even known whether it was created at all, because in 1933 Nikitin decided that this topic did not seem relevant to him any more and therefore it was not worth his time and effort. Instead, he suggested a completely different topic, which he considered more interesting at the time, namely the Anglo-Persian Oil Company – “I could write about it in the context of Persian-English

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 11.05.1927.

<sup>45</sup> Concerns: Tadeusz Kowalski, ‘Wypadki ostatnie w Turcji. Od października 1924 do marca 1925’, *Przegląd Współczesny* 13 (1925), pp. 125–142.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 1.06.1925.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 16.02.1926.

<sup>48</sup> See: Wasilij P. Nikitin, Kwestia kurdyjska i Mosul, *Przegląd Współczesny* 50 (1926), pp. 100–416; continued: 51 (1926), pp. 67–91

<sup>49</sup> Stanisław Wędkiewicz (1888-1963) – Romance literature historian, linguist, columnist. Between 1921–1934 professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Editor-in-chief of *Przegląd Współczesny*. Nikitin met Wędkiewicz in June 1946, when the Polish professor was in France.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 7.12.1930.

relations, oil policy, etc.”<sup>51</sup> This announced article also remained unwritten, as an analysis of the issues published before the war reveals that Nikitin was not listed among the authors.

Still, back in 1923 he had written to Kowalski: “I would be glad to provide an article for the *Yearbook of Oriental Studies* and it seems to me that it would be best to research a few Kurdish texts, selecting a few genres that are typical of my collection, i.e. fairy tales, songs, novellas”.<sup>52</sup> Within a year, he sent the article, but had to wait a long time for it to be published. He expressed his concern in his letters to Kowalski: “What is happening with Gawroński and the *Yearbook*, to which I submitted one Kurdish text with translation? I have not had any news from Lviv since G.’s departure?”<sup>53</sup> From time to time he repeated the question about the fate of his article, for example in the letter of May 14, 1933: “what is happening with the *Yearbook* and how does he find my dissertation *Une apologie kurde du sunnisme*, which I corrected for the first time a few months ago?”<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, this work<sup>55</sup> was published in 1934, when Professor Władysław Kotwicz (20.3.1872–3.10.1944) had taken over as the editor-in-chief of the journal.<sup>56</sup> It was also a time when Nikitin had the opportunity to meet Tadeusz Kowalski personally, which – as it seems – contributed significantly to the strengthening of contacts with the editors of this journal. The professor was a member of the Polish Oriental Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Orientalistyczne) practically from its conception, i.e. from May 1922, and after the death of Andrzej Gawroński, he became a member of the editorial board and vice-president of the Society.<sup>57</sup> It seems that it was on the recommendation of Kowalski that the former Russian consul was admitted to this organization with the status of an active foreign member. It took place during the General Assembly of Members held on 11th December 1932 in Lviv.<sup>58</sup> This membership gave Nikitin the opportunity to publish his works in the Society’s journal – the *Yearbook of Oriental Studies (Rocznik Orientalistyczny)*, which he willingly used. He refused Kowalski only once – in 1947, when the latter asked Nikitin to write an article about the fate of French Oriental studies during the occupation. The former diplomat decided that it was too broad a topic and there was no way to research it meticulously enough, while, on the other hand, he considered writing a text devoted exclusively to the fate of *Société Asiatique* and its members to be superficial, so he preferred not to write anything at all.<sup>59</sup> However, in the next letter dated 28th December 1947, he asked Kowalski if the journal was already in print, because he would have an article devoted to the development of the Persian nation.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 14.05.1933.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 24.05.1923.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 28.11.1926.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 14.05.1933.

<sup>55</sup> Concerns Nikitine’s: ‘Une apologie kurde du sunnisme’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 8 (1934), p. 116–160.

<sup>56</sup> For more information on activities the Polish Oriental Society see: Marek Marian Dziekan, ‘Polskie Towarzystwo Orientalistyczne 1922–2013 i jego dorobek naukowy i popularyzatorski’, in: *Towarzystwa Naukowe w Polsce*, Vol. 1, ed. Z. Kruszewski, Warszawa 2013, pp. 64–79.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Kronika’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 4 (1928), p. 309.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Kronika’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 9 (1934), p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 11.09.1947.

He explained, somehow justifying himself to Kowalski, that this article was a lecture he had delivered before the war.<sup>60</sup> As the author himself claimed, “all this [...] is interesting only from a political, not a scientific point of view, because, as you will see for yourself, I emphasize the importance of Reza Shah Pahlavi’s Persia, whose reign, however, was not too liberal”.<sup>61</sup> Nikitin’s article was published in the first post-war issue of the *Yearbook of Oriental Studies*, which became available after Kowalski’s death. The last article by Nikitin appeared in the first Polish Oriental studies journal in 1953.<sup>62</sup>

Another organization with which Kowalski connected Nikitin was the Oriental Studies Commission of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (Komisja Orientalistyczna Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności). This had been established in 1918 in Department I, i.e. Philology.<sup>63</sup> According to Andrzej Zaborski, its creator was Kowalski, inspired in these organizational activities by Jan Rozwadowski (7.12.1867–13.3.1935)<sup>64</sup>. The aim of the Commission was to “publish more extensive scientific papers. Its president, until his death in 1935, was Jan Rozwadowski, and its secretary was Tadeusz Kowalski”.<sup>65</sup> After Rozwadowski’s death, Kowalski became the head of the Commission, and Helena Willman-Grabowska (4.1.1870–31.10.1957) became the secretary.<sup>66</sup> As Julian Dybiec claims, “its (the Commission’s) unique flagship publication was the series titled *The Works of the Oriental Studies Commission*, which appeared in the years 1919–1953”.<sup>67</sup> Forty issues were published during that period. The first 27 are associated with Kowalski.<sup>68</sup> By decree no. 752/38 approved by the Faculty of Philology on 17th June 1938, Nikitin was granted the status of an associate of the Commission and the right to receive its publications. In an official letter addressed to all members of the Commission, Nikitin wrote: “This resolution and its consequences are very flattering for me [...] and I feel this honor all the more sincerely, because thus I am introduced to a wide circle of Polish Orientalists whose works have been for me [...] the most useful model for a long time”.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, he offered his assistance to Polish researchers as a member of many French bodies and a person with access to the National Library in Paris. Along with the official expression of gratitude, he sent a private letter to Kowalski, in which he wrote: “I was very flattered by the content of the decree sent to me, which I owe entirely to kindness. I am a poor Orientalist, and even poorer philologist. In any case, I will try not to dishonour you”.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 28.12.1947.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 22.01.1948; Concerns Nikitine’s: ‘La nation irannienne’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 15 (1948), pp. 196–234.

<sup>62</sup> Concerns Nikitine’s: ‘Le mihmandar de Gabineau’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 17 (1953), pp. 155–168.

<sup>63</sup> Julian Dybiec, *Polska Akademia Umiejętności 1872–1952*, Kraków 1993, p. 33.

<sup>64</sup> Zaborski, op. cit., p. 415.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Kronika’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 2 (1925), p. 339.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Kronika’, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 11 (1936), p. 263.

<sup>67</sup> Dybiec, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>68</sup> See: Zaborski, op. cit., p. 415.

<sup>69</sup> The official letter of thanks sent by Nikitin to the Oriental Studies Commission, PAU on 28.06.1938 (typescript).

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 28.06.1938.

Nikitin enjoyed meeting with Polish scholars in Paris. He knew H. Willman-Grabowska back from when she used to live in the capital of France. Like him, she was a member of the *Société Asiatique* and he met with her regularly, until her departure to Poland in 1927, during the meetings of the Society. However, later, after moving to Kraków, she often visited the French capital, because Nikitin mentioned her several times in his correspondence with Kowalski, for example in a letter dated 7th December 1930, where he wrote: "Please, be so kind and give Mrs Willman-Grabowska my regards and thanks for the print. I am very sorry that I did not see Mrs. W-G before she left her for Kraków".<sup>71</sup> Moreover, when the Polish Orientalist was visiting Paris, Nikitin was eager to meet him personally. Back in 1925, he met Stefan Stasiak (22.2.1884–9.2.1962) and Jerzy Kuryłowicz (26.8.1895–28.1.1978). He also recalled a meeting with Zygmunt Rysiewicz (5.1.1911–14.4.1954)<sup>72</sup> and with either Ananiasz Zajączkowski (12.11.1903–6.4.1970) or Tadeusz Lewicki (29.1.1906–22.11.1992). It seems that the former diplomat confused these two scholars and did not quite remember who he had had the pleasure of meeting<sup>73</sup>.

Practically from the very beginning of their correspondence, Nikitin mentioned his desire to meet Kowalski in person<sup>74</sup>. The first such opportunity in 1925 was unsuccessful. It seems that Kowalski was due to arrive in Paris for the meeting of *Société Asiatique* of which he wanted to become a member. However, he did not reach the French capital then, explaining that this was because of his family situation. In reference to this event, Nikitin wrote: "I am very sorry that your visit to Paris, and therefore the opportunity for us to meet in person, must be postponed indefinitely".<sup>75</sup> The meeting finally took place in 1931 in Leiden<sup>76</sup> during the 18th International Congress of Orientalists, which was held on 7–12th September.<sup>77</sup> Nikitin described him as very pleasant, although he found those few days spent together to be insufficient. He stated: "we had too little time to talk about everything that interests both of us".<sup>78</sup> Such a remark was, most likely, perfectly legitimate. During the five days of the session, over 200 papers were delivered in nine sections. In addition, alongside many hours of scholarly meetings, a number of attractions awaited the participants. The project was perfectly prepared and the academic debates were accompanied by many interesting events, such as gala dinners, tours, and exhibitions. Another aspect that was not conducive to their joint discussions was that Kowalski and Nikitin were certainly in different sections, because Kowalski gave a lecture on *Turks and the Turkish language in north-eastern Bulgaria (Les Turcs et la langue turque en Bulgarie du nord-est)*,<sup>79</sup> and Nikitin devoted his talk to questions related to the historical novel in

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 7.12.1930.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 11.09.1947.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 24.11.1945.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 24.02.1923.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 1.06.1925.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 11.11.1931.

<sup>77</sup> R. L. Devonshire, 'The Eighteenth International Congress of Orientalists (Leyden 1931) and some papers which were read there', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1932), pp. 111–113.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 11.11.1931.

<sup>79</sup> 'Kronika', *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 9 (1934), p. 185.

contemporary Persian literature. In the accounts of the participants from the Congress it was stated that these concepts were delightfully developed.<sup>80</sup> Congresses, conferences, and other events of this kind should have provided opportunities for further direct contact between the two men. The next Congress was held in 1935 in Rome. However, although in May Nikitin wrote: “I expect to meet you in Rome”,<sup>81</sup> ultimately he did not manage to arrive there. He abandoned his travel plans at the last moment, but did not give the reason for his decision. Most likely the second, and certainly the last meeting of the two Orientalists took place after World War II in 1947. As Nikitin stated, the Polish scholar visited him in Paris, on his way to Ankara, “where he was going in order to resume cooperation with his Turkish colleagues”.<sup>82</sup> In a letter to Ignaty Krachkovsky (16.3.1883–24.1.1951), Kowalski also recalled his stay in Paris, where a lot of time was devoted to talks about the future International Congress of Orientalists, which was to be held in the French capital,<sup>83</sup> but the Polish scholar did not manage to participate in it.

The death of Professor Kowalski in 1948 was a surprise for Nikitin; it is not known whether he was aware that his friend was ill. Nikitin’s letters do not appear to indicate that he had received such information. When Nikitin found out about the death of the scholar, it affected him very deeply. In June, he wrote to his Russian colleague George Vernadsky: “On 5th May, my friend prof. Kowalski passed away unexpectedly [...] of cancer”.<sup>84</sup> In another letter from August, after the deliberations of the Orientalists’ Congress, he noted that Kowalski’s absence was a significant loss for Oriental studies, and that it would be difficult to replace him.<sup>85</sup>

### Summary

Undoubtedly Nikitin had ties with Poland and Polish identity. In letters written to Polish scholars, he only emphasized these connections “from the mother’s side”. He also claimed that reading Sienkiewicz had sparked his interest in Oriental studies.<sup>86</sup> He knew the Polish language very well, and he was able to use it quite freely in his speech. On the other hand, he sometimes made mistakes in his writing, as evidenced by the surviving letters. However, all these ties connecting him to Poland could not obscure the obvious fact that he felt and considered himself a Russian. It appears that these connections could not provide a sufficient reason for him to settle in Poland and become involved with a selected academic centre. Apparently, his considerations on the possibility of

<sup>80</sup> Devonshire, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to Tadeusz Kowalski on 31.05.1935.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to George Vernadsky on 1.06.1948, cited after: Sorokina, *op. cit.*, p. 632.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Tadeusz Kowalski to Ignaty Krachkovsky on 7.11.1947. The Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences St.Petersburg Branch, f. 1026, o. 3, d. 450.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to George Vernadsky on 1.06.1948, cited after: Sorokina, *op. cit.*, p. 632.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Vasily Nikitin to George Vernadsky on 16.08.1948, cited after: Sorokina, *op. cit.*, p. 633.

<sup>86</sup> Nikitine, ‘Mes reminiscences polono-orientales...’, p. 154.

moving from Paris to Lviv or later to Kraków had a purely economic basis and family sentiments or emotional ties with Poland did not play a significant role in this situation. Naturally, with the passage of time, as he was becoming increasingly deeply embedded in French reality, social networks and professional ties, the incentives to move became smaller and smaller.

The decision to stay in France did not mean severing ties with Poles – on the contrary. The contacts that Nikitin established at the very beginning, when he was still considering moving to Poland, were maintained and cherished. They also allowed him to make new friends. Although it all started with an exchange of correspondence with Tadeusz Kowalski – initially a perfect stranger to the former diplomat – over the years, probably thanks to maintaining this relationship, Nikitin was able to become familiar with Kowalski's academic environment, the milieu of the journals and institutions with which Kowalski was associated, and more broadly with the Lviv and Kraków centres. His commitment to these contacts and their significance, not only professionally, is evidenced by the fact that after many years they extended beyond the sphere of exchanging experiences and scholarly opinions, and took the form of direct, personal meetings, visits, and hospitality of the host on French soil. Nikitin liked meeting his Polish colleagues and probably tried not to miss any opportunity for a conversation, using their research stays in Paris, and even short visits while passing through.

One can ponder what it was that pushed Nikitin to take up an epistolary acquaintance with Kowalski, and then what reasons were there to maintain this relationship for years, even prompting him to expand contacts with other Polish scholars. His intentions appeared to change over time. Initially, the establishment of necessary contacts that would enable him to move to Poland and improve his own situation and the living conditions of his family were probably paramount, while later, issues of settling in the academic community and Nikitin's position in France itself could have become more crucial. By accepting a post in a bank and without a professional relationship with any academic centre, Nikitin was somewhat on the sidelines of mainstream scholarly life. And although he was a member of French academic societies, it seems appropriate to describe him as a hobby-Orientalist, at least in the initial years of his stay in Paris. Maintaining extensive contacts in the academic world in various countries, including Poland, undoubtedly allowed him to achieve a better position in French circles. Over the years, especially as selected relationships evolved and transitioned into personal and even close, friendly ones with some correspondents, an emotional factor emerged. These kinds of relationships are nurtured rather than limited.

In all of this, the acquaintance with Tadeusz Kowalski stands out as the most important and unique one. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Nikitin's contacts with Polish Orientalists started with the professor. Or maybe because Kowalski seemed to be Nikitin's guide and guardian in this world. Apparently, on the other hand, this relationship was treated very seriously, as evidenced by Kowalski's efforts to include Nikitin in various national initiatives in which the professor himself was involved. In any case, the epistolary acquaintance of the Russian Kurdologist and the Polish Orientalist, lasting more than a quarter of a century, turned into a friendship for a reason.



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