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**...ET IN ARCADIA EGO...  
POLISH EXILES AT USOL IN SIBERIA  
AFTER THE JANUARY 1863 UPRISING**

Arcadia is a mythical country of rural calm and simplicity, idyllic, pastoral happiness, a country where life is free of worries. This is certainly not what Siberia brings to mind. Nevertheless, 'I, too, was in Arcadia' is the title which Włodzimierz Czetwertyński, exiled to penal labour (*katorga*) after the January 1863 Uprising, gave to a fragment of his reminiscences of the penal colony at Usol. It was certainly a bitter, ironic title, but does not this intentional contradiction between Usol and Arcadia conceal a deeper meaning? Did Czetwertyński use only a literary antiphrasis to define his recollections of Usol or did he choose this title deliberately to link Arcadia with this particular place, out of so many Siberian tracts and experiences?

Arcadia, a poor country in ancient Greece, has survived in human memory thanks to bucolic poetry. Usol has survived as a place of exile thanks to the reminiscences of Poles sent there after the January Uprising, and let us add that these reminiscences, though quite numerous, stand out among the rich exiles' literature in that their authors agree that they could have landed in a much worse place.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reminiscences of Usol have been written, among others, by: Wandalin Czernik, Włodzimierz Czetwertyński, August Iwański, Józef Kalinowski, Waclaw Lasocki, Waclaw Nowakowski and Ludwik Zielonka.

## I THE PLACE

This was not a bad place. Usol was the westernmost place to which the tsarist authorities sent criminals and political offenders sentenced to *katorga*;<sup>2</sup>

the environs were charming, especially in spring. The rapid current of the transparent waters of the Angara enlivened the landscape, and the neighbouring mountains sent back resounding echoes. The eternal, immeasurable larch forests, spreading as far as the eye could see, embellished the whole neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup>

Barracks for the prisoners, who worked to get salt from natural brine by evaporation, were on the salt island on the Angara, on the left bank of the river was a small town or rather a hamlet inhabited by the descendants of exiles, Russian officials and the exiles who, when their punishment was eased, could rent flats and settle down quite comfortably, without the prison rigour prevalent in the barracks, where 60 to 100 persons, constantly watched by guards, were squeezed into one room. Since the climate was mild for eastern Siberia and the capital of the province, Irkutsk, was not far away, the prisoners did all they could to be sent to Usol; some of them, especially the more prosperous persons, succeeded. The authorities sent there mainly convicts accompanied by wives or families, which itself made this place different from other Siberian labour camps, more humane, more friendly, more like a family home. What was important in conditions of the convicts' full dependence on the local work commandant was that the Russian civil and military authorities at Usol were considerate towards political prisoners. In 1866 the post of director of the salt-works and work commandant was taken over by

<sup>2</sup> In this text I have made use of Wiktoria Śliwowska's article about Usol and the Poles exiled there after the January Uprising, an article which was published in *eadem*, *Syberia w życiu i pamięci Gieysztorów — zesańców postyczniowych: Wilno — Sybir — Wiatka — Warszawa* (Warszawa, 2000), 44–69, and of the biography of Father Rafał Józef Kalinowski written by Czesław Gil, *O. Rafał Kalinowski 1835–1907* (Kraków, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Józef Kalinowski, *Wspomnienia 1835–1877*, ed. Ryszard Bender (Lublin, 1965), 106.

major Turov who — as Józef Kalinowski says ‘did not go into the details of our life and did not needlessly hamper freedom’.<sup>4</sup> In the daytime the convicts could move quite freely on the island and go to the nearest small town, of course with an escort of Buriat Cossacks, who were ‘kind, affable, restrained and moral’,<sup>5</sup> and, what is most important, did not steal.

The work which the political exiles had to do — cleaning the boilers of the sediments of salt — was not so hard as the work in the Kara mine behind Baikal, where the Poles convicted of the gravest crimes were sent. Besides, the most difficult work in the salt-works was done by convicted criminals who — what is important — lived in separate barracks. The constant company of criminals was perhaps the greatest torment in exile; it could not be avoided in Usol either, and the Poles sent there were frequently robbed.

Since there were more exiles than were needed for the work envisaged by the government, the work time was restricted and sometimes even symbolic, although the sentences had envisaged many years of penal labour:

Apart from some days when one had to do the work demanded by the government and some hours which had to be spent in putting the living quarters in order ... we could spend the rest of the time according to our needs or personal liking.<sup>6</sup>

The more prosperous exiles — and their number was by no means small in Usol — could even hire poorer, but physically stronger, colleagues to replace them in compulsory work which, strange to say, was paid. These earnings, small by any standards, seem to have been willingly accepted by the needy, especially from the group of ‘unprivileged’ persons, and they made the more sensitive ‘lords’ feel they had fulfilled a moral duty towards the exiled poor. Even Wandalin Czernik, one of the poor exiles, usually critical in his opinions, admits that in Usol

it was not difficult to earn a rouble a day. Our conditions therefore improved. We bought some clothes, replaced the lumps of salted tea with

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 105–6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 108.

ordinary tea with sugar and even equipped ourselves with luxury goods, samovars; and, what is most important, we could keep something against a rainy day, so that even though the hours spent there were not bright, we lived in calm and peace.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to Turov's goodwill, the exiles could set up their own organization, the Society of Usol Exiles, the activity of which was defined by 'the Usol exile act'; they elected the *starost* (Aleksander Oskierko), who successfully mediated between the commandant and the prisoners, as well as councillors and judges, set up a library, a provident fund and a loan till; all this made it easier to endure the rigours of what in fact was a prison, the primitive living conditions, the sense of alienation, the destruction of safe, or in any case known, social structures, the huge distance separating the prisoners from their homes, the humiliation of captivity after a struggle for a just cause, in short the distress of exile felt by all of them.

After some time the rigours were diminished following successive amnesties, the convicts were given lighter work (hay gathering, making branches up into bundles, gardening) or rather 'occupations', as August Iwański says,

for one could not call this 'work', even though it was done under the supervision of a non-commissioned officer. The governor was said to have told the commandant 'to keep the prisoners busy, even if they poured water from one vessel into another' and this is how our life went on, to our own advantage, for this kind of light work in the open air brought us out of a state of apathy, invigorating us physically and morally.<sup>8</sup>

Finally all Usol prisoners convicted before January 1866 were released from the duty of labour and included in the group of settlers, which meant a broader range of freedoms. Even the stringent regulations applied towards Polish exiles after the Baikal rising were not so painful in Usol as they were in other penal labour places; in fact, as the diarists say, nothing changed in their lives.

<sup>7</sup> Wandalin Czernik, *Pamiętniki weterana. 1864* (Wilno, 1914), 46.

<sup>8</sup> August Iwański sr., *Pamiętniki 1832-1876*, ed. Waław Zawadzki (Warszawa, 1968), 220.

Since the conditions at Usol were quite bearable, they eliminated, or perhaps put off, thoughts of rebellion. The exiled Poles' rebellions, protests or escapes, some of which were successful while others were tragic, were not a surprising event, either on the way to Siberia or in a place of punishment. In Usol, the goodwill of the commandant and the efficiency of the *starost* — alongside the presence of the families, the preponderance of serious, educated people of some social standing — eased conflicts and made it possible to reach a compromise acceptable to both sides.

All penal labourers were deprived of their rights, but in a society based on estates sympathy for persons of the same origin, education and culture frequently prevailed over hostility towards 'Polish rebels' on one side and enmity towards the 'Muscovites' on the other; conversations could be held in French, the counts remained counts, and Polish physicians were needed more in Siberia than forced labourers. There were over a dozen physicians in Usol, 'highly talented and in love with their profession'<sup>9</sup> and even though, formally, they were forbidden to carry out their work, they soon obtained the authorities' permission to conduct medical practice. Usol became 'a place visited by sick people not only from remote places in eastern Siberia but even from Irkutsk itself'.<sup>10</sup> This was largely to the credit of Turov who

not only did not hinder us from gaining and developing medical practice but did his best to make us famous all over eastern Siberia and put himself and his whole family under the care of doctors Jan Świda and Franciszek Missuna.<sup>11</sup>

Many exiles in Usol were from the privileged classes and even though they were deprived of their estate privileges, they lived relatively, if not much, better than their unprivileged colleagues, and it is they who set the tone for the entire community by organizing a makeshift of normal life in captivity, far away from Poland, by defining its rules and setting moral and social patterns to the extent allowed by the circumstances and frequently in defiance of them. Conflicts, animosities and prejudices did of course exist

<sup>9</sup> Wacław Lasocki, *Wspomnienia z mojego życia*, ii: *Na Syberji* (Kraków, 1934), 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

between the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant; the common fate and the court sentence which apparently equalized all exiles could not annul social, cultural and individual differences. The situation in Usol was the same. In accordance with *katorga* regulations, they all had to wear chains.

The chains in Usol were also different: the local blacksmith polished them so well that they looked as if they were made of silver and the local population was convinced that the Usol prisoners were princes for they wore silver chains. (For a proper fee the blacksmith could, of course, make the chains lighter and provide them with snap fasteners. August Iwański recalls that 'the wearing of chains was a formality for they were not heavy and the chains which my colleague Bniński gave me when I arrived at Usol were convex; in shape, though not in size, they resembled the chains that were once worn with watches'.)<sup>12</sup> Bniński and Iwański could, of course, afford such chains which were beyond the means of the poor exiles. But what we are interested in is Usol as a place, not the unjust, deplorable social differences.

But both those 'better' and 'inferior' people could use the salubrious salt baths, especially after the arrival of Mieczysław Bardecki, who installed bathrooms and a drop bath in the public gardens which he restored in the nearest small town.

Let me mention another important thing. In Usol the work in the brine started at the beginning of summer and ended before frost set in, which means that the Polish political exiles there did not experience the plague of inhuman work in eternal Siberian winter. The only exception was Józefa Gudzińska, included in the group of criminal prisoners, heroine of Aleksander Sochaczewski's painting 'Mrs Gudzińska washing sacks in an air-hole in a frozen river'.

So the exiles had quite a lot of free time and, taking advantage of their relative freedom and the permission of the Russian authorities, they tried not to waste it and use it well. But this was not only a question of too much spare time. 'Wasted time' was perhaps the most difficult challenge the exiles had to face up to: in Siberia, seemingly invisible and not painful, compared with physical sufferings, 'wasted time' became a destructive force in the new, unknown multidimensional space in which the exiled Poles found themselves, in that unwanted, hostile, destructive

<sup>12</sup> Iwański, *Pamiętniki*, 215.

world. Siberian boredom meant not so much an excessive amount of free time as its loss and the ruin of the social and individual opportunities of every intelligent man. All exiles tried to kill time somehow, but the majority probably wanted to make it, and their life, meaningful, motivated by noble ideas. The prisoners in Usol may have been more successful in reaching this aim than the exiles in other places.

There is no doubt that the existence and activity of the Usol exiles' self-government had a decisive influence on mutual relations between the exiles; it created a clear point of reference for that differentiated community and organized its life. As Lasocki recalls, the drafting of the Usol Exiles' Act was 'an occupation which helped a lot to relieve the monotony of our life for it was devoted to more general aims'; the act itself

survived until the end of the political offenders' stay at Usol and it was generally approved even by those who loudly criticized it when it was being drafted. That brief but clear exposition of what may be called the exiles' commandments was necessary for those most diverse, accidentally assembled elements, and the solidarity manifested by the most respectable and wisest of us imparted great practical strength to the dead letter of the act; so that even persons on a lower level followed the right course under the direction of the noble and wise ones.<sup>13</sup>

Amidst the few compulsory occupations and many voluntary friendly contacts, joint celebrations and meetings, readings and prayers, 'spiritual powers did not lie idle, and this was a great blessing which I can only attribute to Divine Providence',<sup>14</sup> wrote Kalinowski, and other prisoners probably shared his opinion, even though they did not necessarily attribute this to the heavenly powers. In any case 'every day of the week was occupied', as Czetwertyński writes, 'the wasted time' was not so painful, especially after the successive, quite speedily announced amnesties, when the hope of a change in conditions and of a quick return home dawned in this 'stability of hopelessness'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Lasocki, *Wspomnienia*, 152–3.

<sup>14</sup> Kalinowski, *Wspomnienia*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Czesław Gil's expression.

So the place was not bad, it was the unique place on Siberia's map of exiles' camps. But the people gathered there were also unique.

## II THE PEOPLE

In Usol the qualities of the place were happily combined with the qualities of the people sent there. Such an exceptional situation could exist in Siberia (and not only there) only if a place offered opportunities to people and if the people made life there fruitful by imparting a cultural sense to it. This coincidence — which was partly accidental but partly probably planned — lay at the root of the Arcadian myth present in the memory of exiles who described it: the island on the Angara river became a 'happy island' in 'Siberian hell'. It was a myth for nearly all the accounts about Usol come either from persons of noble origin, that is 'privileged' persons, for whom the stay in Usol was not so painful physically as it was for the 'unprivileged' people, or from intellectuals who, contrary to appearances, found it easier to adapt themselves to the new reality.

Such people were proportionately more numerous in Usol than in other places of exile. We do not know whether it was consideration for the prisoners or some bureaucratic idea that induced the tsarist authorities to send there mainly convicts who were voluntarily accompanied by their families and 'people of mature age'.<sup>16</sup> Anyhow, thanks to this policy of Russian officials (frequently backed by the exiles' own efforts or simply by kick-backs, well known in Russia) Usol had gathered educated people to an extent unknown in Siberia. A large proportion of them were people who belonged to what was then known as the 'intellectual class', and who would now be included in the group, or ideological community, of the intelligentsia. If the character of a community depends on proportions, this specific social structure of the Usol exiles' community made it an intelligentsia community.

As a result of the repressive measures applied by the Russians after the January Uprising, some 700 Polish exiles passed through Usol; some of them had been sentenced to *katorga* during the

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<sup>16</sup> Lasocki, *Wspomnienia*, 157.

uprising, others had come from labour camps beyond the Baikal when their penalties were reduced. The inflow of convicts from beyond the Baikal changed social proportions but it did not greatly influence the character of the community which had been shaped before and was functioning in accordance with generally accepted principles.

Some fifty convicts lived in Usol with their families; among the convicts were also five women sentenced to penal labour. The presence of women (both those sent there as convicts and those who came of their own free will), who commanded respect and compassion, but who also infused charm, tenderness and devotion, and sometimes even coquetry and attraction into the heavy atmosphere of the prison, softened the exiles' habits of life. In words full of old-fashioned elegance, August Iwański expresses high esteem for the women he met at Usol:

justice demands, first and foremost, to pay tribute to and express admiration for Polish women who shouldered the burden of heavy domestic work and of bringing up children and who wanted, and knew how, to brighten up the lives not only of their husbands but also of the homeless who tried to find solace in their homes. I would run short of superlatives if I wanted to laud their virtues.<sup>17</sup>

In another place Iwański says:

Our company consisted mainly of intelligent people, unfit not only for risky ventures but even for brawls, which seldom occurred in our place. In these conditions life went on quietly, I would even say apathetically, and was enlivened now and again only by the arrival of new comrades, a visit by the governor or by Father Szvernicky, the parish priest from Irkutsk.<sup>18</sup>

In Usol, these 'intelligent people' organized various intellectual occupations for themselves and others: from lectures, foreign language courses, the writing of treatises of different value to serious scientific work; 'the barracks became a reading room, a lecture hall and a club at the same time'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Iwański, *Pamiętniki*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 216.

<sup>19</sup> Gil, *O. Rafał Kalinowski*, 98.

Whoever could, devoted himself to reading. There was quite a lot of useful books: *A History of the Church* by Darros [should be Darras, A.B.] in French, the works of Ozanam in six or eight volumes, the *Conferences* of Father Feliks SJ, Father Ventura's *Lenten Sermons on the Passion of Christ*, the same author's *Les Femmes de l'Evangile*, and *La femme catholique*. In Polish translation we had Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well as historical and literary books. ... The catechism of Guilleri and Gaume and Perrone's theology were also there.<sup>20</sup>

The exiles played draughts and chess, enjoyed walks along the banks of the Angara. Society life flourished, especially in smaller circles of close friends (Wacław Lasocki regards 'our social contacts at that time' as 'the most pleasant moments of my life; for the level of conversations was so sublime and their content so rich that I can safely say that neither before nor later have I benefited so much by contacts with other people as I did at that time');<sup>21</sup> meetings, especially religious celebrations and prayers were also organized.

The more enterprising or less prosperous exiles took up 'bread-winning work' of various kinds:

The Łozińskis set up a bakery and traded in flour, the Potockis organized the production of sausages, Morzycki gained fame as a gardener and his cauliflowers were sent to Irkutsk to be served on dignitaries' tables. Michał Wielhorski, Michał Gruszecki, Hryniewiecki, Tołłoczko and Józef Konopacki had a factory of soap and tallow candles. Matysy, a pharmaceutical assistant, made candies which were quite good. Joiners, cartwrights, tailors, shoemakers and other craftsmen opened workshops ... others looked for some occupation in the more prosperous homes of their colleagues and contented themselves with the work of cooks, footmen or chambermaids, but this did not spoil truly friendly relations.<sup>22</sup>

Iwański supplements this catalogue:

the majority of men took any kind of skilled or unskilled work, learning, trying their best, experimenting; physicians had a practice in medicine and philanthropy ...; improvised pedagogues, Józef Kalinowski and Feliks Zienkowicz,

<sup>20</sup> Kalinowski, *Wspomnienia*, 108–9.

<sup>21</sup> Lasocki, *Wspomnienia*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 151.

taught Polish children, training themselves in this new profession; the consummate pedagogue Mioduszewski baked half-a-pound rolls, which was a greatly desired novelty; doctor Łagowski kept a herbarium; Mikołaj Hartung, a naturalist, collected insects; Józef Popowski translated Macaulay's essays; Karol Sierocki from Podolia, though no longer young, translated Lyell's Geology; ... Antoni Kościuszko from Sołowijówka and Jan Kamiński from the Grodno region were learning tailoring; Władysław Witwicki, who had studied in Kiev, continued my bookbinding firm; ... Wincenty Wasilewski from Sołowijówka, a medical student, became a dispensing chemist, etc, etc.<sup>23</sup>

In every country, at every time, political repression forces recalcitrant intellectuals to take paid work below the level of their education and aspirations. It was the same in Usol, but the many examples of this enforced pauperization did not mean a renunciation of ideals or a change in the prisoners' system of values. An intellectual remained an intellectual even when he was making shoes, like the Kiev student Stefan Wyhowski, who 'after unsuccessful attempts at bricklaying and tanning, returned to shoemaking, and sitting on a stool with a twine in hand, kept singing fragments of Mickiewicz's or Krasiński's poetry'.<sup>24</sup> In view of the symbolism of this scene one can try to redefine the concept of intelligentsia by shifting the essential accent from an occupational group to an ideological community. It was in the intelligentsia that the great Romantic poets, the leaders of the nation, found successors and executors who after the catastrophe of the January Uprising by their 'work from the foundations' assumed responsibility for the fate of society, creating an appealing paradigm of the intelligentsia as the elite of duty, morality and sacrifice.

This concept of the role of the intelligentsia is linked with the idea that it is the duty of every mission to create ethical patterns, also, and perhaps especially, in exile. Czetwertyński realized this when he wrote:

Usol was in this happy situation that the majority of the exiles were educated people who realized what the stance of exiled Poles should be like. Their duty was to gain the respect of the local population and to preserve

<sup>23</sup> Iwański, *Pamiętniki*, 218–19.

<sup>24</sup> Włodzimierz Czetwertyński, *Na wozie i pod wozem (1857–1917). Wspomnienia z lat ubiegłych wnukom i wnuczkom opowiedziane*, ed. Stanisław Wasylewski (Poznań, [1939]), 208.

national dignity; this is why a consensus was reached when the regulations were being laid down and they were binding on all.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Usol was not inhabited by angels: among the several hundred exiled Poles there were also mean, infamous, frivolous, good-for-nothing people; quarrels, misdemeanours, intrigues, discreditable events did occur, but the diarists mention them reluctantly. It seems, however, that such episodes, though unavoidable in such a large community, were on the margin of Usol prisoners' life and memory; they preferred to remember general, essential things, impressions which were worth writing about and which would create a picture which they wanted to present of their Siberian history, a picture which reflected the way they thought about it. The Arcadian myth created by the authors of memoirs was not groundless even though it was denied by the exiles' everyday life; it corresponded to a reality filtered through memory and assessed the camp's real value by comparisons.

Michał Janik summed up the essence of Usol reality when he wrote with some exaltation about 'the sublime and moving moral atmosphere mentioned by many diarists',<sup>26</sup> by specific diarists, let us add, educated, quite prosperous persons, privileged in their country and in exile. But it is precisely such people who could write extensive accounts, and it is they who created this 'moral atmosphere' and instilled it in others. It is thanks to them that this atmosphere survived in the prisoners' memory of Usol. And even though it did not characterize the whole community, it was its dominant feature.

Among the Poles exiled to Usol there was no lack of people who could influence not only Janik's opinion but also the attitude of the exiles themselves, to mention the best known persons: Józef Kalinowski (later beatified as Father Rafał), Father Waclaw Nowakowski or Jakub Gieysztor. 'The kind-heartedness, piety and ascetic life' of the two first and the profound religiousness of Gieysztor taught and comforted their companions, their presence braced them up and instilled hope in their hearts.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>26</sup> Michał Janik, 'Towiańczycy na Syberii', *Przegląd Współczesny*, xcix, 34 (1930), 105.

But it was not only the religion-based moral example set by these persons that created that 'sublime and moving atmosphere'. Usol brought together many students and graduates of Kiev University where in the pre-uprising times aspirations for a moral renewal and spiritual perfection developed in defiance of Russian-supported amusements and revels of light-hearted students devoid of ideas. Persons shaped in that way, and their likes, could in the most difficult Siberian ordeal save their dignity and teach dignity to others by pointing out norms and moral virtues which lost their value so quickly in the amorphous space of the exile. It was difficult not to succumb to temptation and try to escape from this world devoid of all ethical foundations and values. But it was also difficult to accept this world and cope with it. There were many cases of drunken, rowdy and rollicking behaviour and, on the other hand, of mental illnesses and suicides, but given the circumstances, they were understandable. But many exiles tried to live a worthy and, despite the difficulties, humanely creative life. Those who could find enough strength in themselves and moral support in the attitude of others were more able to save human dignity than those who tried to secure means for a physical survival for themselves.

Feeling the need for a metaphysical explanation of their fate, they looked for support in religion; the conviction that exiles were under God's protection could relieve individual and collective suffering. 'We did not lack spiritual aid for there had been a few priests at Usol before the authorities transferred them all, except Father F. Stulgiński to Tunka'.<sup>27</sup> Religious persons 'enlivened the powers of their souls by going regularly to the holy sacraments and their minds were invigorated in the company of the exiles' friendly hearts'.<sup>28</sup>

For believing but non-practising persons (and such persons were by no means absent), religious meetings were a kind of society life, they replaced recreation, so much-desired though seldom experienced in Siberia.

<sup>27</sup> Kalinowski, *Wspomnienia*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 113.

The days when the parish priest or curate of Irkutsk came to Usol stood out against the grimness of our daily life ... Irrespective of the reasons why the priests visited us, all parishioners did their best to decorate our newly-restored chapel as beautifully as possible.<sup>29</sup>

Among the exiles in Usol was also Józef Niedziński. In 1848 he emigrated to western Europe where he came across the philosophy of Andrzej Towiański, met the Master himself and became his disciple. On learning about the outbreak of the January Uprising, he went back to Poland, took part in the fighting and was sent to penal labour at Usol. He gathered a small group of coreligionists and propagated Towiański's teachings, the principles of God's Cause, among the exiles 'not only in conversations with well-disposed, selected persons; he also expressed his thoughts by writing to all exiles ... usually in verse'.<sup>30</sup> The poetic New Year's wishes which he wrote at Usol contained easy-to-understand but perhaps too simplified principles of Towianism to which Niedziński wanted to draw the exiles' attention: the Master's truths were adjusted to the conditions of exile, their subject was not so much the nation as the exiles, for they were predestined to make a sacrifice which would ensure Poland's rebirth.

Messianism contained ideas which were close to the exiles, those in Paris and in Siberia. By referring to the nation's martyrdom and the sufferings of individuals, it imparted theological sense to them by making them indispensable elements of God's redemptive plans and of history's sense; it could explain the exiles' sufferings by eliminating the feeling of moral pain and frustration evoked by physical and mental torments. In the conditions of exile, ethical improvement was an extremely valuable and useful demand; it enabled the exiles to preserve their personal and national dignity; it kept up the significance of humanitarian values under the destructive pressure of the reality by contrasting the exhausting conditions with a feeling of superiority and spiritual sovereignty, necessary to preserve the identity of the human being and the Pole. The exiles, being that part of the oppressed nation which was subjected to most painful sufferings for the truth, could feel not only to be different from the rest of society but also to

<sup>29</sup> Lasocki, *Wspomnienia*, 212.

<sup>30</sup> Janik, 'Towiańczycy na Syberii', 100-1.

be a community which had been chosen to implement the nation's ultimate aims by offering their sufferings as a sacrifice, on the analogy of the messianic concept of the nation chosen to realize Providence's plan to redeem the suffering mankind. In their metaphors, phraseology and intellectual structure many exiles' recollections are akin to messianic thought; they portray a messianic atmosphere, but we do not know whether it was the atmosphere of the exile that was messianic or only the memory of it and the way of narration.

The community of Usol exiles seems to have looked with favour on the ideas proclaimed by Niedziński and his group who referred to the highest religious and moral values, but this did not mean that they acceded to the ideology of Towianism. Among the persons 'more akin' to Towianism Janik mentions only seven persons, including two later clergymen, Kalinowski and Nowakowski, who can hardly be suspected of Towianism. The enunciations in the diary of Jakub Gieysztor, another exile included in the group of persons 'more akin' to Towianism, were closer to the ideas of messianism. Gieysztor portrays the picture of the exile as a martyr for the nation's cause; this picture, deep rooted in the Christian tradition, presents an ethically perfect man who 'gives testimony' to the Truth in a hostile environment, a picture which though close to many of Towiański's ideas, was more understandable to the Poles sent to Siberia for their participation in the fight for Poland.

Niedziński's words — irrespective of how they were received — could give comfort and hope to the exiles, imparting sense to their earlier choice and their actual suffering; even if they did not convert them to Towianism, they showed them how to survive with dignity and strengthened their conviction that it was worth living a worthy life.

But it was not only a good example, encouragement to lead a worthy life, compassion and consolation that saved the exiles from despair, ruin and corrupt practices.

Usol had its own poet — or rather a gifted rhymester — who in brilliant, biting verses described the exiles' everyday life. Julian Kędrzycki, a graduate of Kiev University, was a keen, critical observer of his fellow-prisoners, of their vices, weaknesses, illusive hopes and peccadillos.

Each act of recklessness, of a domineering person's mediocrity, each amusing peculiarity, became the butt of his satire. His terse words lashed mercilessly at behaviour that infringed on personal or national dignity in relations with the authorities and the environment, they lashed even more mercilessly at sordidness and vice. Kędrzycki had inexhaustible resources of humour and a scathing wit, but he was not always impartial and restrained in his evaluations and explanations of facts, and this is what many persons hurt by his satires reproached him with.<sup>31</sup>

It is difficult to estimate whether Kędrzycki really lacked impartiality, but his observations, written down without a moment's delay, even though they may have been ruthless towards some persons, undoubtedly tell us more about individual characters and behaviours than reminiscences of facts that must have sunk into oblivion and were therefore smoothed over. Can we therefore accept Kędrzycki's satirical revelations as a true picture of Usol or recognize that, since exceptions prove the rule, the dark sides described by him did not influence the general character of the community and did not change the picture kept in memory and fixed in an idealized myth? On the one hand we have a probably excessively sober evaluation of human weaknesses and limitations, on the other, appreciation and emphasis on how these limitations were overcome; the truth of everyday life and the truth of what things really look like if they are seen from a distance, the truth of the individual and of the community, the truth of an individual and of a generalizing dimension, a difficult 'historical truth' which has many faces and is never completely genuine.

Conflicts, a painful experience for all prisoners, though they may have fascinated some of them, constituted yet another face of the Usol reality. Many prisoners had during the uprising performed leading or important functions, and their old ambitions, animosities and suspicions led to endless disputes, interior investigations and sentences of infamy, a morass described with distaste and embarrassment by a few diarists (Wiktoria Śliwowska writes in detail about this in her book on the Gieysztors, recalling the sharp conflict between Jakub Gieysztor and Antoni Jeleński). Czetweryński mentions this briefly:

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<sup>31</sup> Lasocki, *Wspomnienia*, 171.

There was only one thing that got on my nerves and left unpleasant memories of my stay at Usol, namely, recollections of the uprising or even later times. When the investigation commissions started their work in our country: none of us had deliberately harmed another person in order to save himself. There may have been some persons who, ensnared by the insidious work of the investigation commissions, did not have the strength of character to face up to them, but on the whole, they were all honest people who loved their country and the cause to which they had devoted their lives. In those conditions, at a time of our common misery, references to these details which lacked proof, for apart from ungrounded statements there could not be any, seemed distasteful to me and I tried to avoid them as far as possible.<sup>32</sup>

Neither did the Usol camp escape conflicts that arose from historical and political territorial divisions, especially between the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland and those of the eastern borderlands; animosities between them broke out with redoubled force in the narrow circle of exiles. This was characteristic not only of Usol but of all exiles' camps, for the common fate in Siberia could not obliterate differences between persons from various parts of the old Commonwealth.

Nevertheless, the diarists seem to agree that at Usol 'the relations between us were very good and cordial'<sup>33</sup> and one of them adds:

It is worthy of praise that the behaviour of the political exiles at Usol was commendable and blameless; and contacts with what I would call first-class persons from all over Poland have left an indelible impression on my mind.<sup>34</sup>

These contacts have probably not left an impression on the minds of all exiles, and not to the same extent. But there must have been something exceptional about that place, something that did not fit the general ideas about Siberia, or perhaps even more so about those people, if recalling his time in exile and the persons met there, Waclaw Lasocki wrote after many years: '[that was the company] in which we spent several of the most beautiful years of

<sup>32</sup> Czetwertyński, *Na wozie i pod wozem*, 225.

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

<sup>34</sup> Iwański, *Pamiętniki*, 221.

our still young lives',<sup>35</sup> and he adds: 'Never in my life have I met so many countrymen of such great value in one place',<sup>36</sup> so many Polish intellectuals, let us add.

### III CONCLUSION

Despite its specific place on the map and in the exiles' memory, Usol was part of the Poles' experiences of Siberia, of its torments, uncertainty and suffering. In addition to the diarists quoted in this article, yet another person has left a picture, a painter's picture, of the exile. I have in mind Aleksander Sochaczewski, a student of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, who was sentenced to *katorga* at Usol and spent twenty years there.

In his best known picture *Farewell to Europe* (1890s), and in many studies Sochaczewski portrays his companions at Usol<sup>37</sup> in a scenery he could not have seen; he transfers real figures into an artistic dimension, imparting appearances of verisimilitude to his historical-philosophical creation. He places persons he knew in the icy wastes of Siberia, mentions their names and life stories, naming all nameless persons stigmatized by the sufferings of exile. Individual fate is transformed by him by the experiences of all exiles; the result is a convincing picture of Siberia, a black book of the Siberian fate of Poles in the 19th century. But is this a picture of Usol?

The painter had other recollections of the Usol exile. Regarded by all as an eccentric and an unpleasant, haughty recluse, he did not find the company of persons emotionally and intellectually close to him charming, and this was the basic element of the Arcadian myth transferred to posterity by the diarists mentioned above. Going through the Siberian experiences alone, he left a picture of his own impressions, of scenes he remembered from his way to the exile or facts he had heard about, which corresponded to collective memory and to the romantic vision of the nation's martyrdom. He attributed Siberian features to the individual fates of the exiled Poles, which, as we read in the Usol diaries,

<sup>35</sup> Lasocki, *Wspomnienia*, 206.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 170.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Helena Boczek and Beata Meller, *Aleksander Sochaczewski 1843–1923: malarz syberyjskiej katorgi (życie, twórczość i dzieje kolekcji)*, (Warszawa, 1993).

were not always so tragic as they were in the artist's pictures. The Arcadian myth about Usol and the infernal Siberian myth refer to the same reality, seen and remembered in a different way.

The myth that Usol was an exceptional place peopled by exceptional persons could arise only against the background of the Poles' collective experiences of Siberia, their mental and physical sufferings, their loneliness and homesickness. Lasocki, Iwański and Kalinowski, surrounded by friendly, compassionate persons, perceived this specific Arcadian face of Usol; Sochaczewski 'with his sick soul and wounded heart'<sup>38</sup> had to face Siberia and its traumas alone.

*(transl. Janina Dorosz)*

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<sup>38</sup> From Aleksander Sochaczewski, *In Sibirien* (Berlin, 1906) — quoted after Boczek, Meller, *Aleksander Sochaczewski*, 27.