VLADIMIR LEDOCHOWSKI, MAN OF TWO WORLDS

I have a letter from Wlodek I left unanswered. Too long. Too late. It is; it exists here, beside me, now. But now he was; its precise exposition of politics, its twists of ironic humour, its explosive intelligence, sudden turns of grace and affection remind me vividly that these qualities belong only to the past tense.

Vladimir Ledochowski. He signed himself with his splendid first name but all of us--his friends in Johannesburg-called him by the familiar diminutive. I am surprised to find I don't remember when exactly I met him and his wife Basia. They became so much a part of the definitive period of my life that impressions of them are richly overlaid. Thirty years since the first meeting? More? I grew to love them both in a friendship built solidly through strong experiences and a delicacy of understanding.

I suppose I must have met them first at parties when I was a young divorced woman living with my baby daughter in a suburb of Johannesburg where intellectuals with very little money found cheap flats and congenial company. They lived there, too. I had never been anywhere--a little provincial from a South African mining town--and they came from the great world whose turmoil during and after the Second World War had scattered nationalities and broken class and cultural barriers. 'Count Ledochowski' was a world away, in every sense of the word--breeding, education, experience--but he was my kind of person, as I was his. We shared a passion for the world of ideas--read the same books, admired the same poets, argued over literary criticism and political analyses, and--coming to this from such different existential situations--

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later shared the same growing involvement in opposition to South African racism. The friendship matured when I remarried; my husband, Reinhold Cassirer, another immigrant from Europe, also was much drawn to the company of the Ledochowskis. Wlodek and Basia, while retaining their innate Polishness, committed themselves to my country as I am committed: they were not content to shelter in white privilege but took on the responsibility to work within the black struggle for justice.

Bonds strengthened when we found they chose for their sons the school we had chosen for our son: Waterford-Kamhlaba School, over the South African border in the small black independent state, Swaziland. How few other people there were who understood the limitations and human deprivation of sending a child to a 'privileged' segregated school in SOuth Africa! And then there were practical consequences that brought our two families together; we would share the transport of our children to and from the school, and make a happy party of visiting our dear mutual friends (another bond) Mary and Wicek Roswadowski, who lived in Swaziland and whose sons also went to the school. Wlodek sometimes had voluble doubts about the easy-going, non-authoritarian discipline there, and I would tease him, saying that this contradicted his broad liberalism and stemmed from his own Jesuit education. But he was a formidable debater on every question under the sun, and he would always leave one with a small arrow of doubt lodged in one's own opinions.

I am a writer of fiction, and it is in the nature of a writer to harbour and probe doubts. I enjoyed the challenge of Wlodek's certainties. When he had emerged triumphantly from a discussion by means of one of those flamboyant discourses

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that came so easily to him, he would roar with laughter at his own victory, his brilliant, agate-streaked blue eyes delighting in the criss-cross of minds. Somehow, for me, the agility of his intelligence was strangely associated with a physical phenomenon--gestures with his forearm that could describe a complete circle, bending back at right angles from the elbow--actually the result of a war injury.

What is a man of culture? Knowing Wlodek gave me the definition that best satisfies me. A man of culture is a man who is open to cultures other than the one he was born to. Wlodek was that man. So many Europeans who come to Africa live out their whole lives on this continent without reaching into its vital sources, without making any connection with its pre-colonial base, without realizing that this will be the base of its future. At best, they develop some communion with nature, enthusing about their love of the beauty of the land. But Wlodek was not one of those who discount the people of the land, and live, mentally, as if they had never left Europe. He and Basia entered black people's lives at many levels--through church contacts, through liberal and radical organizations, through individual frienships. At the Saturday lunches in the garden of their house in River Road, Johannesburg, Pototskis ate beside black students; and Wlodek's sunburned, domed forehead signalled its familiar presence in the audience at black theatre performances as well as at chamber music concerts among whites. He was active in the progressive Catholic movement in South Africa, supporting the Catholic Bishops' Conference in its frequent defiance of the South African government's detention and torture of political dissidents. His was a familiar face at secular protest meetings, as well. In due course the Ledowchowskis were regarded

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with suspicion by the political police. Wlodek had good reason to believe attention had been drawn to him by conservative compatriot immigrants who viewed the Ledochowskis' concerned, non-violent opposition to the racist regime as a danger to white privilege. (I hope ~~those~~ people feel shame and remorse if they happen to read this.) There was a raid on the homely, hospitable house in River Road where I had been introduced to the ritual and comradeship of a Polish Easter, with wonderful traditional food cooked by Basia. Neither he nor she was cowed by police surveillance.

I had come to know Wlodek as a fellow South African. In 1979 I came to know him as a Pole.

Through having some of my books published in Polish translation, I had been invited to a literary conference in Torun. I was immensely excited at the idea of visiting the country from which my Polish friends, Witold Domanski, Wicek Rozwadowski and the Ledochowskis came; matching them, in my mind, with the cities and landscapes I should see. At once Wlodek said: 'If you are going to Poland, I have to be there to show you Poland.' And he was as good as his word, coming on from a visit to Rome to meet me in Warsaw.

In a small car lent by a friend he drove me to Cracow. We saw Novahuta and its extraordinary new church, in which the figure of Christ is extended under the roof like a billowing sail, and we saw the Black Virgin at Chestahowa, arriving just at the moment during the day when she is briefly revealed among the votary offerings of cheap costume jewellery which so strangely surround her. In Cracow he introduced me to debate with a professor teaching at the university, and knowing my love of tapestries, arranged for me to see with him the Wawel

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Castle tapestries. As we entered the castle he casually pointed to the coat of arms which incorporate those of his family--but this was done for my entertainment rather than out of aristocratic pride. For Wlodek there was only the aristocracy of the mind. His connections (or was it his immense charm, felt by all women?)--still effective after war and revolution and long absence--opened the castle to us after hours, and we were escorted by a museum director who allowed me to gaze my fill. Wlodek and I walked all over Cracow city; he peopled its Italianate beauty for me with his memories and anecdotes. And, as he recalls in the final paragraph of that last letter to me, in the evening I produced a bottle of whisky from my valise and while we drank he talked of present-day Poland in the open-minded, clear-headed way in which he dealt with changing realities in the world. For even in visiting his past, he was never a man of the past, but fully alive to the challenges of the present. A few years later he was to return to live in Poland; it was a confrontation, not a nostalgic retreat. He died, perhaps, of an overdose of avidity for life. That last letter is passionately involved with the problems of the two worlds his sensibility made one: Poland and South Africa.

That letter to which I waited too long to reply.

So Wlodek has had the last word. He always did. And, in a way, I am glad to accept that as my tribute to him: to his fine dialectical mind and bright spirit, which gave us--his loving friends--a bounty of stimulation and joy.

Nadine Gordimer