

Ewelina Gdaniec
University of Economy in Bydgoszcz

Internal clash of cultural identity – the case of George Bidwell

Introduction

Researching the topic of cultural identity requires a specific explanation and particularization. Undoubtedly, it is specific to the notions of ethnicity, social status, religious background, and other feature-shaping spheres of life. In the case of George Chandos Bidwell, who was a British citizen and the Head of the British Council in Poland in the after-war years, the change of cultural identity commenced with his relocation to Poland. The embodiment of Western civilization, in the person of one of the most prominent cultural departments abroad, seemed to be obvious and taken for granted, thus, Bidwell's decision to change the citizenship to Polish, might have been a shock to both imperialistic West and socialist East.

The ponderation on time framework made the author to restrict it only to dates from Bidwell's first appearance to Poland until June 1949. The ending date may be seen as an outbreak of a more visible shift, apparent stagnation and deterioration in East-West relations and, finally, an outcome of the Cold War peak occurrences. It is also the year, when Bidwell declared to change his citizenship to Polish¹.

The analysis of Bidwell's case required several queries in the National Archives in Kew in London, the British Library, the Archives of the Foreign Office of Poland in Warsaw and IPN Archives. The National Archives collects scores of files mentioning Bidwell, though through the analysis, it turned out that most valuable and clarifying are the files of the British Foreign Office marked FO 371 (Northern Department) and

¹ The claim that British-Polish relations stagnated in between 1949 and 1952 was first made by Jacek Tebinka in his numerous articles and books, see some cited works in the Bibliography. To read more about Bidwell's citizenship change see: Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej Archives (AIPN), BU 0192/223 Seven volumes on G. Bidwell; The National Archives, FO 371/77388 Work of British Council in Europe and methods for controlling potential British defectors who hold appointments in Iron Curtain countries, *The Meeting*, June 10th, 1949; TNA, FO 688/78 Bidwell, Bidwell's note, July 2nd 1949.

FO 688 (on Poland). Moreover, files from the BW unit, which comprise the documents of the British Council. Files from the Polish Archives, were necessary to follow the context of some historical events, taking part during the time of Bidwell's transition. The British Library's miscellany served as an important source of knowledge about Bidwell himself, because it collects his personal memoirs in his autobiographies and novels.

The relations between Poland and Great Britain in the outbreak² and peak years³ of the Cold War are inadequately described in literature, thus, it is important to point out that the topic of Bidwell's identity has not been taken upon fully⁴. In Poland he is mostly known for his novels⁵, but his life story has not been highly publicized. In the

² Major works concerning Polish-British relations from the final year of the 2nd World War to 1947: R. J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, London 2001; W. Borodziej, *Od Poczdamu do Szklarskiej Poręby. Polska w stosunkach międzynarodowych 1945-1947*, London 1990; A. Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda 1945-1953*, Salford 2002; M. Nurek, *Gorycz Zwycięstwa. Los Polskich Sił Zbrojnych na zachodzie po II Wojnie Światowej 1945-1949*, Gdańsk 2001; M. Pułaski, pod. red., *Między dwoma totalitaryzmami: Europa środkowa i południowo-wschodnia w latach 1933-1956*, Kraków 1997; J. Tebinka, *Brytyjska propaganda wobec Polski w latach 1947-1956*, [w:] M. Malinowski, P. Niwiński, T. Dmochowski, pod. red., *Media w PRL, PRL w mediach*, Gdańsk-Warszawa 2004; J. Tebinka, *Szczecin w polityce brytyjskiej w latach 1945-1970* [w:] *Polska w podzielonym świecie po II wojnie światowej do 1989 r.*, pod red. M. Wojciechowskiego, Toruń 2002; idem, R. Techman, *Raporty brytyjskiego wicekonsula w Szczecinie z 1946 r.*, cz. I i 2, „Zapiski Historyczne”, 1997, nr 1, nr 2-3; W. G. Tuchanowski, *Anthony Eden*, Warszawa 1979; A. Zaćmiński, *Emigracja polska w Wielkiej Brytanii wobec możliwości wybuchu III wojny światowej 1945-1954*, Bydgoszcz 2003.

³ Wide range of works concerning the relations between Poland and the United Kingdom between 1947 and 1949: S. A. Bidwell, *Dzieje Wielkiej Brytanii w XX wieku. Od światowego imperium do „małego państwa” na obrzeżach Europy*, Warszawa 2008; D. Jarosz, *Wizerunek Polski i Polaków w latach 1948-1955 w świetle brytyjskich dokumentów dyplomatycznych*, „Wiadomości Historyczne” 2003, nr 3; idem, M. Pasztor, *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne 1958*, Warszawa 2011; M.K. Kamiński, *Polska i Czechosłowacja w polityce Stanów Zjednoczonych i Wielkiej Brytanii 1945-1948*, Warszawa 1991; Korzon Andrzej, *Skrócona misja ambasadora brytyjskiego w Polsce w 1956 r.*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2002, nr 1, s. 155-183; J. Linowski, *Stosunki polsko-brytyjskie w latach 1945-1956*, Łódź 1990; idem, *Wielka Brytania w polityce zagranicznej Polski w latach 1945-1956*, Toruń 2001; M. Pasztor, *Francja i Wielka Brytania wobec polskich koncepcji rozbrojeniowych 1957-1964*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2003, nr 1, s. 85-111; K. Łastawski, *Polityka zagraniczna Wielkiej Brytanii 1945-1956*, Warszawa 1979; D. Piotrowicz, *Dyplomacja kulturalna Wielkiej Brytanii wobec Polski na przykładzie działalności British Council w latach 1945-1982*, [w:] *Historia w dyplomacji publicznej*, praca pod. red. B. Ociepki, Warszawa 2015; W. Rojek, *Strategiczne założenia brytyjskiej polityki zagranicznej w przededniu wojny koreańskiej*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego” 1997, *Prace Historyczne* 122, s. 45-58; J. Tebinka, *Nadzieje i rozczarowania. Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii wobec Polski 1956-1970*, Warszawa 2005; idem, R. Techman, *Ostatni raport brytyjskiego wicekonsula w Szczecinie Henrego F. Bartletta o sytuacji w tym mieście (6 III 1951 r.)*, „Przegląd Zachodniopomorski” 2000, z. 25, nr 4; L. Zyblkiewicz, *Polityka Stanów Zjednoczonych i Wielkiej Brytanii wobec Polski 1944-1949*, Warszawa 1984.

⁴ Articles on Bidwell's life: Maria Jolanta Łaszczuk, *O angielskim pisarzu zakochanym w Pol(s)ce...*, „The Teacher” 2005, 4, pp.56-58; Małgorzata Matuszewska, *Nasz sąsiad, pisarze: setne urodziny George'a Bidwella*, „Gazeta Wyborcza” 2005, 101, amendment „Wrocław”, pp. 7; Sławomir Żurek, *O Angliku, który wybrał Pol(s)kę*, „Panorama Dolnośląska” 2005, 30, pp. 67-69.

⁵ Bidwell wrote more than sixty novels; many were translated into Polish by his wife.

query on Bidwell, one can find only several page-long articles undertaking the topic of the British Council's former Head's change of nationality and presumably, his cultural identity. Thus, it appeared justifiable to do a wider research on that matter. It has to be stressed, though, that the analysis is strictly historical, based on fractography and documents. Author is not undertaking the psychological research.

Bidwell and the Historical Situation

George Chandos Bidwell was born on the 3rd of May 1905 in Reading in the United Kingdom. He was the youngest of three brothers and his parents were merchants. He went to a private school, but his education was financed from public money and because of that he felt that he shall change his faith. He managed to pass the exams to London University, but was forced to resign due to the founding problem and the birth of his younger sister. In 1922 he started his professional career as a journalist for the local newspaper, but two years later changed the post and started working for Barclay Bank. He got married and had his youngest daughter. He used to write articles for women magazines, but after the outbreak of the 2nd World War he joined the army and after a month-long training, he got the post of a vice-commander of a logistic division. In 1941 he was upgraded to major and from 1942 he was taking part in the campaign in Africa. After that, in 1943, he commenced to work for the British Council in the Middle East. Later he worked for different British Council Alaid Liaison Divisions and finally, in the Winter of 1945 he was offered to become the Head of the British Council in Poland. After a year in Warsaw, he met the love of his life, journalist Anna Krystyna Wirszyłło and divorced his British wife. On the 29th of September, 1948, he married Anna and was given a choice, whether to stay in Poland with her, live there and develop his writing career or come back to England. He chose Poland, and immediately became an instance used by the Polish authorities to present the Eastern culture as superior over Western imperialism, as it was chosen over by a British official. He died on the 20th of June 1989 in Warsaw and was buried in Wrocław⁶.

Venturing the topic of the above-mentioned internal change in Bidwell, it appears right to commence from presenting the essential historical framework of the years in which the change in him could have been mounting up. As it was mentioned, George Bidwell appeared in Poland just after the Second World War ended, namely on January 8th, 1946. He was given the post of the Head of British Council in Poland, after he had worked for diverse British Council Alaid Liaison Divisions.

In fact, after the Second World War, the British Council in Poland had to be rebuilt from the foundations both in terms of the location and administration. Due to the expansive Nazi policy in the early months of 1939, the new department which

⁶ Bidwell wrote two autobiographies: George Bidwell, *Wybrałem Polskę*, Warszawa 1950; idem, *Ani chwili nudy: autobiografia*, Katowice 1976.

was opened in Warsaw in 1938, had not managed to grow fully. That is why Bidwell's job was not only to recreate, but actually to create a totally new institution. After the Second World War the British Council in Poland reopened in Hotel Bristol, which seemed to be luxurious, though because of its war-damage, Bidwell described it as a ramshackle. Two other people were appointed to help him in his mission. They were all situated in three rooms in Bristol, with no water access, primitive sanitation and indifferent cleaning service⁷. However, Bidwell was constantly looking for a new residence for the institution and himself. He would even consider the Sobanski Palace in the proximity of the British Embassy, though he had to resign due to aberrating prices and mounting renovation problems. Finally, Bidwell chose to live in a flat situated on Targowa Street in Warsaw⁸.

Historically, Bidwell's role has not been easy from the beginning, as in 1946 the split between the West and East was becoming more and more visible. On the other hand, the British Council was highly esteemed in the world. It had a real influence on realization of British cultural policy abroad, as it had more than 120 offices in 80 countries in the world.

Bidwell must have been aware of the important role that he was undertaking. The exacerbating situation was making his new role even more complicated to perform. It has to be stressed, that in Polish-British after-war relations, position of British officials was endangered by entangling them into diverse kinds of Cold War occurrences. One of such examples could be a British Ambassador to Poland Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, who was not very popular among Polish authorities. His unfavorable declaims about communism and a possible counterfeiting of elections in January 1947, encountered defiance from Poles. Communists declared Bentinck *persona non grata* and he was forced to leave Poland. The charge was the alleged cooperation with secret intelligence services⁹. This instance commenced espionage-mania¹⁰. From now on, Polish officials would be even more distrustful of foreigners, especially those somehow connected to imperialistic powers of the West. On the 31st of July, British government opened a discussion on British policy towards Poland. The new ambassador to Poland Donald St Clair Gainer came from Warsaw to join the meeting. He propounded a change in the British policy to stricter and fiercer, and postulated escalation of propaganda. Gainer proposed to increase the funds of British Council, believing that this institution may enforce the western way of thinking on a crowning

⁷ TNA, BW 51/8 Poland: British Periodicals Exhibition (1949) – catalogue and report, *Report on British Council work in Poland*, Feb 28th, 1946.

⁸ idem, *Ani chwili...*, s. 228.

⁹ P. Howarth, *Intelligence Chief Extraordinary: The Life of the Ninth Duke of Portland*, Londyn 1986, pp. 113.

¹⁰ Read more about espionage-mania in Polish-British relations in: Dariusz Jarosz, *Wizerunek Polski i Polaków w latach 1948–1955 w świetle brytyjskich dokumentów dyplomatycznych*, „Wiadomości Historyczne” 2003, 3, pp. 131-143, E. Gdaniec, *Aresztowania i procesy sądowe brytyjskiego personelu dyplomatycznego oraz obywateli brytyjskich w Polsce (1947–1956)*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2017, 3, pp. 99-119.

number of Poles. The role that Bidwell was supposed to take upon in this assignment was undoubtedly major¹¹.

Bidwell decided to set new aims for the British Council work in Poland: 1) break down suspicion about British officials' work and build confidence; 2) work on cordial basis with Polish Authorities; 3) get on friendly terms with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials irrespective of their politics; 4) befriend leaders of academical and cultural life in Poland. On the basis of these four points one may assume that it might have been the first sign of Bidwell's internal change. He decided to get on friendly terms with officials of the country, which theoretically was in an opposing "power camp". Though, it was a major part of his professional career's demands. As the Head of the institution responsible for the dissemination of a positive image of Britons and western culture, he had to find allies among Poles¹². Since his appearance in Poland, he was trying to contact Polish ministers and heads of various cultural institutions on a daily basis¹³.

One of his main aims after the arrival in Poland, was to disseminate the English culture and language. He was constantly trying to do so, as it was his duty as the Head of the British Council and as an aficionado of the British way of life. Thus, it is interesting to see what has changed in him between the time of his arrival in Poland and his change of nationality. He was devoted to achieving his goals, so from the first days of his service he made efforts to befriend English-speakers with Polish officials. This goal was probably one of many infeasible in the times of the Cold War.

Bidwell managed to place a post of a professor of English at the University of Warsaw. He commenced the presentation of subscription of cultural periodicals to Poles in the times when they were "starved of information". Due to his initiative, the libraries of the biggest Polish Universities were granted English books and, what is more, he opened a library of the British Council as soon as he arrived in Poland himself. Giving access to English books to Poles was one of his primaries and he managed to do so while he was still living in the Bristol Hotel¹⁴.

After six months in Poland the tone of his reports changed. He was less optimistic and complained that: "the certainty that everything that can be done to recruit more staff for us is done, does not alter the fact that our existing staff cannot sustain indefinitely the pressure at which it is now working" and railed against "seven-day-a-week devotion to the Council's interest, (...) the adverse mental effect of living with literally never-escaping from work". He would point out that it is extremally hard for him and his staff to work in conditions like that, with no set accommoda-

¹¹ TNA, FO 371/66094 Political Situation in Poland: election arrangements and party relationships, *Hancock's note*, August 1st-2nd, 1947.

¹² TNA, BW 51/7 Poland – British Council Activities, *British Council Poland Annual Report 1947/48*, December 31st, 1948.

¹³ TNA, BW 51/8, *Report on British Council work in Poland*, Feb 28th, 1946.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

tion, no car and no telephone. One has to remember, that after the war Warsaw was destroyed, though, for a foreigner gaining these three basic amenities, must have been a real problem¹⁵.

At the end of the year Bidwell was more and more aware of the forthcoming Cold War clash, but he would still believe, that the British Council might have a real influence on Poland's culture. He would point out that: "The Polish Government may consider, both before and after the elections, that there is nothing essentially incompatible in Poland's looking to the East for its politics and to the West for at least a part of its culture". Bidwell believed that the USSR is no competition to the United Kingdom when it comes to culture, though, he understood that his work to incline culture would only be possible if the British Council's operations would be welcomed by the Polish authorities¹⁶. At the end of 1946, Bidwell met the love of his life, Anna Krystyna Wirszylło. After some time, they decided to marry and from that day she had had a great influence on Bidwell's view on Poland's affairs. With time, Bidwell commenced to understand that the period that Poland was entering after the elections, would force the British Council to pause some of its enterprises. He would realize that his zeal and urge to incline British culture among Poles through the British Council's activities was straitened¹⁷. What is more, after another 6 months Bidwell would think that the period of espionage-mania was going to vanish¹⁸, he would even say: "acceptance of its own value, and much of that restrictive suspicion about our real motives seems to have been dissipated"¹⁹. Similarly, at the beginning of 1948 Bidwell supported his statement on British-Polish correct cultural connections with mounting art-renting statistics and pointed that the collaboration between the two countries is possible only with the support of the Polish authorities²⁰.

His decision to divorce his British wife and marry Anna, was another point, that must have had influence on the change of his view on Polish-British relations and his role in them. He was given the choice to marry her and stay in Poland or to go back to the United Kingdom without her. He got to understand, that living in Poland might be a great opportunity to develop as a writer and to have a factual impact on Polish culture and broadly understood anglo-perception among Poles. In June 1949 he was replaced by officiating representative, educated in Oxford E. A. Innes, who continued Bidwell's efforts in the British Council.

¹⁵ Ibidem, *Monthly Report*, Jul 4th, 1946

¹⁶ Ibidem, *Monthly Report*, Dec 5th, 1946.

¹⁷ Ibidem, *Monthly Report*, Mar 26th, 1947.

¹⁸ Form the historical perspective, this kind of treatment of all foreigners in Poland, especially those connected to foreign embassies, would last no earlier than till after Stalin's death in 1953.

¹⁹ TNA, BW 51/7, *Monthly Report*, Aug 21st, 1947.

²⁰ Ibidem, *Monthly Report*, Jan 6th, 1948.

Conclusion

It has to be stressed that, regardless of the period's character, Poles appreciated and recognized the importance of British Council in Warsaw. In a book describing Britain's cultural policy, the author who was a Polish journalist, would underline the essence of the cooperation between Warsaw and London through the British Council itself. Thus, the British Council might have had a great influence on education and spreading British culture in Poland, but on the other hand, it was stressed that the influence was fuller after 1956 and in the early-post-war years, it was scarce²¹. From this point of view, Bidwell's role was initially marginalized by the Polish authorities, though through everything that happened after he decided to change his nationality, both Polish and British power centers had to change their attitudes towards him.

The research of archives and British Council's documents allows to present facts, thus, to undergo a further mental analysis, psychological approach would have to be considered. From the historical point of view, Bidwell's approach to Poland did not change at all. Since the day of his arrival, he has been trying to befriend Poles and authorities in Warsaw. He understood the role of British culture in the lives of Polish people and, indeed, still had a great impact on it after he changed his nationality. The amount of works that he created for the Poles, to plasticize the Anglo-Saxon history, cannot be overestimated. He decided to live in Poland, as it appears, because it was the best solution for him and his newly-wed wife. It cannot be estimated, how much the love of Anna was manipulated at the beginning of their relationship. Some may insinuate, that the marriage from the beginning was directed by the Polish government, thus, it seems highly improbable. The love that they shared till death, daughters that they raised in the respect for both cultures and Bidwell's autobiographies are evidently a sign that no cultural transformation had to undergo in Bidwell before he changed his nationality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Documents:

Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (AIPN), BU 0192/223 Seven volumes on G. Bidwell. The National Archives (TNA), BW 51/7 Poland – British Council Activities, *British Council Poland Annual Report 1947/48*, December 31st, 1948.

TNA, BW 51/8 Poland: British Periodicals Exhibition (1949) – catalogue and report, *Report on British Council work in Poland*, Feb 28th, 1946; *Monthly Report*, Jul 4th, 1946; *Monthly Report*, Dec 5th, 1946; *Monthly Report*, Mar 26th, 1947.

TNA, FO 371/77388 Work of British Council in Europe and methods for controlling potential British defectors who hold appointments in Iron Curtain countries, *The Meeting*, June 10th, 1949.

²¹ Jerzy Wajszczuk, *Zewnętrzna funkcja ideologiczna współczesnego państwa burżuazyjnego*, Warszawa 1977, s. 148.

TNA, FO 371/66094 Political Situation in Poland: election arrangements and party relationships, *Hancock's note*, August 1st-2nd, 1947.

Literature:

Bidwell George, *Ani chwili nudy: autobiografia*, Katowice 1976.

Bidwell George, *Wybrałem Polskę*, Warszawa 1950.

Gdaniec Ewelina, *Aresztowania i procesy sądowe brytyjskiego personelu dyplomatycznego oraz obywateli brytyjskich w Polsce (1947–1956)*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2017, 3, pp. 99-119.

Howarth Peter, *Intelligence Chief Extraordinary: The Life of the Ninth Duke of Portland*, London 1986.

Jarosz Dariusz, *Wizerunek Polski i Polaków w latach 1948–1955 w świetle brytyjskich dokumentów dyplomatycznych*, „Wiadomości Historyczne” 2003, 3, pp. 131-143.

Łaszczuk Maria Jolanta, *O angielskim pisarzu zakochanym w Pol(s)ce...*, „The Teacher” 2005, 4, pp.56-58.

Matuszewska Małgorzata, *Nasz sąsiad, pisarz: setne urodziny George'a Bidwella*, „Gazeta Wyborcza” 2005, 101, amendment „Wrocław”, pp. 7.

Wajszczuk Jerzy, *Zewnętrzna funkcja ideologiczna współczesnego państwa burżuazyjnego*, Warszawa 1977.

Żurek Sławomir, *O Angliku, który wybrał Pol(s)kę*, „Panorama Dolnośląska” 2005, 30, pp. 67-69.

Internal clash of cultural identity – the case of George Bidwell

Summary: George Chandos Bidwell was the Head of the British Council between 1946 and 1949. After he had met the love of his life, Anna Wirszyłło a supposed UB-agent, he decided to change his nationality to Polish. The aim of the article is to plasticize the matter of the internal change in Bidwell in the view of historical events described in the documents archived in TNA in Kew, London.

Keywords: George Bidwell, cultural identity, change of nationality, the Cold War

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34864/heteroglossia.issn.2084-1302.nr10.art14>