

The Puzzle of Józef Sędzimir

In 1902, in Vol.247 of the 'Biblioteka Warszawska' journal, there appeared an account of the life of one Józef Sędzimir, a Polish nobleman fallen on hard times. In 1814 (probably, but the letter is undated) he wrote from Paris to General Wincenty Krasiński, essentially begging for financial support. Sędzimir stated in his letter that he – like Benyovszky – had once fought on behalf of the Confederation of Bar against the Russians; his company, in which he had been an officer, was under the command of Krasiński's father.

According to this letter, Sędzimir had been taken prisoner at the battle of Wysowa (August 1770), and then was sent eastwards to Kazan, Tobolsk, Irkutsk, and finally Kamchatka. There he teamed up with Benyovszky, and participated in the escape by sea to China. There is a distinct lack of detail about all of these episodes, but especially about the escape by sea aboard the galliot *St Peter*.

Partial translation of the 1814 letter, by Robert Waglowski, of Warsaw University

Our party [of soldiers] drew the lot to march to Kamchatka, over a thousand miles from Irkutsk, to the Tcharakaskaya [*Polish: "Czarakaskaja"*] *krepost* (*fortress*), where our fortune led us; there we spent four years in the garrison. And then, once we led a revolution and obliterated the garrison, the governor and his [*military*] staff perished. Then we picked a commander for ourselves, born a Hungarian, calling himself Bieniowski, and held the fort for three months. We were worried that the military would arrive from Irkutsk, even though it was over one thousand miles to the Tcharaskaskaya *krepost*, and having placed anything we would need to sail on board three galleys which were there to hunt whales, we set out to the ice-cold sea, that is just the ice-cold channel, which divides North Asia from North America, which is no wider than seven miles. Because American mountains are well visible from this side and which are covered in snow [*RW's note: this doesn't make sense grammatically in the original either*]. However it is over a hundred miles long.

That channel is very dangerous for sailing. Because of hurricanes and strong winds tossing ice-cold rocks, which create mountains [?] with a noise so loud as if it was thunder; we spent twelve days and twelve nights on that channel. It was good fortune for us that at night that channel is so bright, as if it was after sunset in our homeland. Later, having found our way onto the Clear [*or "Clean" RW. Or maybe "Pacific"? AD*] Sea, we sailed along the coast of the Japanese kingdom and the whole of China; those two countries did not want to accept us into any of their harbour cities. Later we arrived to the Philippine Islands, where East India begins. Then we got to Pontishera, from where we got to the island of Madagascar, where we spent six years.

In geographical terms, this description is even more obscure than the narratives of Benyovszky, Ryumin and Stepanov, described in my book. But the author seems to suggest that they had been as far as the Bering Strait (in three ships, not just one!), where they had been forced to stay for twelve days and nights, before departing southwards to Japan and China. But there are additional elements: they also went to the Philippines, and then called in at "Pontishera", which is undoubtedly the Indian east coast port of Pondicherry. No other narrative of the voyage has proposed either of those deviations from route.

And then there is the bizarre claim that they went to Madagascar for six years – no mention of going first to France for a year. Benyovszky was, as we know, in Madagascar from November 1773 to December 1776; some of his surviving colleagues in the colony may well have stayed on there after that. But Benyovszky nowhere mentions this man, a fellow Pole.

Sędzimir subsequently went off to America, and stayed for 14 years in Haiti (Saint-Domingue); the French Revolution then meant that he lost everything and he was obliged to return penniless to France, where he had been languishing ever since.

In one of his several attempts to draw up a list of all the people who accompanied Benyovszky on his escape, the Polish historian Edward Kajdański examined this letter and decided that what Sędzimir described was true. In addition, in 1994, he identified Sędzimir with one previously unidentified participant in the voyage (from a list of names archived in the French National Archives in Paris) with one 'Sean Josef' (or 'Jean Joseph'). It is hard to determine why Kajdański should make this identification. Indeed earlier, possibly before finding out about Sędzimir, Kajdański had identified this 'Sean Josef' as the son of Ustyuzhaninov, a Kamchatkan priest (but who is also named as *Ivan* Ustyuzhaninov in Russian official documents). Aside from the name 'Josef' there is very little concrete evidence to support either identification.

There must be some suspicion that Sędzimir was falsely presenting himself in a way which capitalised on Benyovszky's fame; he was, after all, impoverished, and seems to have lost whatever Polish estates he may once have owned. It is odd that he claims to have been captured at Wysowa (August 1770), and subsequently spent four years in Kamchatka; Benyovszky himself (by his own account) was captured in April 1769, and only reached Kamchatka in September 1770, with few delays en route. Benyovszky and ship escaped from Kamchatka in May 1771. And the Confederation of the Bar was not founded until February 1768. Sędzimir's chronology simply does not work. However, he was writing some 40 years after the events he describes, so it is always possible that he mis-remembered some things. But probably not so many things.

Sędzimir's details of the Kamchatka plot and escape could very easily have been lifted from Benyovszky's own published account, and perhaps embellished it with some touches of his own (Philippines and Pondicherry) But it is a little surprising that Benyovszky – a comrade-in-arms from the Polish campaigns – did not mention his name in any form, either in his account of the Kamchatkan escape, or in his Madagascar narrative.

Józef Sędzimir may therefore not have been Benyovszky's companion. The question would then remain: if Sędzimir did not escape with Benyovszky, then how did he end up in Haiti and Europe? To which there is one possible answer: that he was never imprisoned in Kamchatka at all. As with all things relating to Benyovszky, the matter is shrouded in complete mystery.

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