

WIESŁAW KRAJKA

Conrad's Polish Footprints: A Tour in Words and Images

Wer den Dichter will verstehen
Muss in Dichters Lande gehen.

(Goethe, *West-östlicher Diwan*)

Editor's Introduction

Joseph Conrad is famous as a writer who chose English as his artistic medium, when it was not even his second or third language, let alone his first. He settled in England in early middle age and was to live more than half his life there, but he remained passionately attached to his origins, and carried a photograph album of his Polish relatives throughout his travels. What follows here is an evocation in words and pictures of Conrad's life in Poland, inspired by a conference.



Delegates at the conference 'Conrad's Polish Footprints'

Conrad's Poland

“[W]e had received an invitation to spend some weeks in Poland....The enterprise at first seemed to me considerable....I confess that my first impulse about a projected journey is to leave it alone. But the invitation received at first with a sort of dismay ended by rousing the dormant energy of my feelings....It was like the experience of another world....I was pleased with the idea of showing my companions what Polish country life was like; to visit the town where I was at school...there should have been a fibre [in my boys] which would answer to the sight, to the atmosphere, to the memories of that corner of the earth where my own boyhood had received its earliest independent impressions.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, *NLL*, 145-6)

“[T]his Polish journey...for so many years had been before us in a state of a project full of colour and promise, but always retreating, elusive like an enticing mirage.

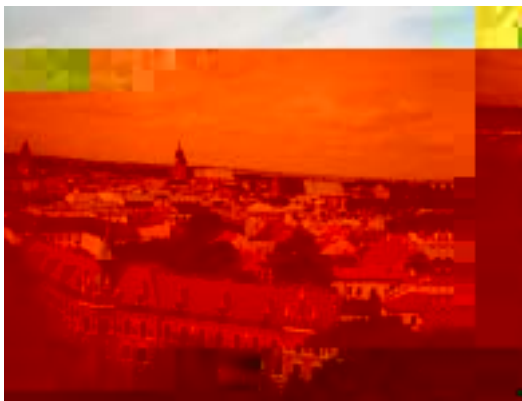
“And, after all, it had turned out to be no mirage.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, *NLL*, 147-8)

“Poland then, if erased from the map, yet existed in reality; it was not a mere

Cracow

“It is highly probable that I will move to Cracow once: if I am to bear hardships of life, it would rather be by this Holy Sepulchre, which may be a cradle for my child—a Royal, holy cradle!”



ready enough. For him, all this was part of the interesting adventure of the whole journey. We stepped out of the portal of the hotel into an empty street, very silent, and bright with moonlight.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, NLL, 164)

“In the moonlight-flooded silence of the old town of glorious tombs and tragic memories, I could see again the small boy of that day following a hearse....”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, NLL, 169)

“After his father's death Conrad, under the guardianship of his uncle Bobrowski, lived in Cracow until he was sixteen. Cracow, after the Rising, which had been ruthlessly suppressed, was sunk in the apathy of its national mourning and seemed to hold out little hope for the future. It could not have had much attraction for a gifted boy, eager to discover life for himself. Conrad must have felt stifled by the prevailing atmosphere of hopelessness, made all the more oppressive by his personal tragedy.”

(Tarnawski, *Conrad, the Man, the Writer, the Pole*, 50)

The Railway Station and The Grand Hotel

“What we saw upon our arrival to the railway station in Kraków, in the evening of 28th July was startling. Stupendous tumult and chaos, military trains, soldiers, soldiers everywhere—farewells, women's cries. War!”

(Zubrzycka, “Syn dw

where most of his boyhood had been passed. He pointed out several interesting places to us from the carriage window...

“At the hotel I was touched by the ready friendliness of our reception. Before we had been there half an hour, cards poured in upon us. I saw for the first time what an immense hold one’s native country could have upon one. We forgot the possibility of war. Only my husband referred now and then to the ominous fact that troops were even on our first night pouring into the town. He kept saying: ‘I wonder if it wouldn’t be wiser to rush you all home again? Still, what a fool I would look if nothing came of it after all. What do you think, my dear?’ I cheerfully urged him to be calm and make up his mind to enjoy our visit.

“I understood my husband so much better after those months in Poland. So many characteristics that had been strange and unfathomable to me before, took, as it were, their right proportions. I understood that his temperament was that of his countrymen. It was a severe trial to my nerves, those two months amongst strangers—strangers so completely foreign, and all talking in a language of which I knew at most a dozen words. I used to collect all the little Poles I could find and take them to play in our small bedroom. Children have a wonderful way of understanding each other without the need of words.

“At night, if I happened to retire early, I would lie anxiously listening to raised

“We reached Cracow on the evening of 1st August 1914, on the very day that Austria mobilized. We stopped at the Grand Hotel, and were received by the proprietor Mr Chronowski, who came in person to pay his respects to the Conrads.”

(Retinger, 149)



The Grand Hotel, Cracow: The suite where the Conrads stayed.

“For the next two days I went about amongst my fellow men, who welcomed me with the utmost consideration and friendliness, but unanimously derided my fears of a war. They would not believe in it. It was impossible. On the evening of the second day I was in the hotel’s smoking room, an irrationally private apartment, a sanctuary for a few choice minds of the town, always pervaded by a dim religious light, and more hushed than any club reading-room I’ve ever been in. Gathered into a small knot, we were discussing the situation in subdued tones suitable to the genius of the place.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, NLL, 170)

“And another happy revenant of the past was there to increase his enjoyment. When in the evening we were returning to the Grand Hotel we heard in the street an elderly man being hoisted on a sedan, and my little friend Kostaszek felt Conrad the

stranger. It was his old friend and school-fellow, Konstanty Buszczyński, who recognized Conrad after forty years.”

(Retinger, 157-8)

“We arrived in Cracow early in the evening....A table had been allotted to us on the far side of the room, and when we were about half-way through the meal, I suddenly became aware of my Father sitting quite rigid, with his fork half-way to his mouth, staring across the room towards the door. I turned to see what had attracted his attention in this way, and the picture which remains in my memory is of a tall handsome man with grey hair and moustache, standing motionless in the doorway and staring with equal intensity. Before I had a chance to ask the reason for this performance, my Father dropped his fork and leaping to his feet with a shout of ‘Kostoosh!’ rushed towards the door. His opposite number in the doorway burst into violent motion at the same time, and they met and embraced in the middle of the big room. When their mutual emotion had subsided somewhat, they came to our table and the stranger was introduced to us as an old school friend of my Father's—Mr. Buszinski. He remained with us for the rest of the evening and, before leaving, invited us to spend the following day with him at his country home a few miles from Cracow.”

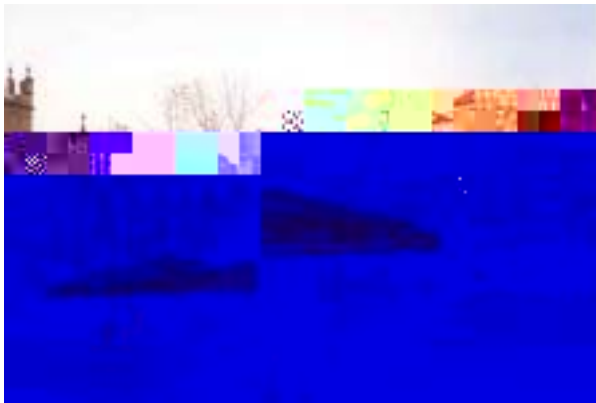
(Borys Conrad, 85-6)

The great Market Square

“After dinner, Jessie and John, tired with the strenuous journey, retired to bed, while Conrad, accompanied by Boris and myself, went out to renew his acquaintance with the old city. I wanted to take them straight to the central square, the famous ‘Rynek.’ ‘No, my dear Joseph,’ said Conrad, ‘I want to see Rynek as I have remembered it all

rocks on a silvery sea....As far as these trees and these paving stones were concerned, it had worked nothing. The suspicion of the unchangeableness of things already vaguely suggested to my senses by our rapid drive from the railway station, was agreeably strengthened within me. ‘We are now on the line A. B.,’ I said to my companion, importantly. It was the name bestowed in my time on one of the sides of the Square by the senior students of that town of classical learning and historical relics. The common citizens knew nothing of it, and, even if they had, would not have dreamed of taking it seriously....And then, happening to look up at the wall, I saw in the light of the corner lamp, a white, cast-iron tablet fixed thereon, bearing an inscription in raised black letters, thus: ‘Line A. B.’ Heavens! The name had been adopted officially!...I proposed that we should walk to the other end of the line, using the profaned name, not only without gusto, but with positive distaste....There was at the end of the line a certain street I wanted to look at, I explained to my companion.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, *NLL*, 164-6)



Left: The Rynek, Cracow – the market square

Right: The Rynek, Cracow – the sixteenth century cloth hall



“Conrad ceased talking to his son, he was obviously living again in Cracow, returning in spirit to moments he forgot for forty years, back in his youngster’s days. From time to time he dropped a phrase in Polish: ‘Where are those ancient chains, which formerly marked the outlets of the streets?’ ...’No, don’t show them to me, I will find them myself.’ ...’And, Joseph, the knife of the fratricide, is it hanging still?’ ...’Wait, wait, let me remember’ ...’Boris, this was a time which you, more lucky, will never know.’”

(Retinger, 151)

The Florian Gate; the Barbican



Florianska Street, Cracow, from the Rynek end:
“In the distance the Florian Gate...”

“In the distance the Florian Gate, thick and squat under its pointed roof, barred the street with the square shoulders of the old city wall. In the narrow, brilliantly pale vista of bluish flagstones and silvery fronts of houses, its black archway stood out small and very distinct. There was not

a soul in sight, and not even the echo of a footstep for our ears. Into this coldly illuminated and dumb emptiness there issued out of my aroused memory, a small boy of eleven, wending his way, not very fast, to a preparatory school for day-pupils on the second floor of the third house down from the Florian Gate. It was in the winter months of 1868. At eight o’clock of every morning that God made, sleet or shine, I walked up Florian Street...Every evening at seven, turning my back on the Florian Gate, I walked all the way to a big old house in a quiet narrow street a good distance

beyond the Great Square. There, in a large drawing-room, panelled and bare, with heavy cornices and a lofty ceiling, in a little oasis of light made by two candles in a desert of dusk I sat at a little table to worry and ink myself all over till the task of my preparation was done.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, *NLL*, 166-7)

“The night was advancing, and remembering his tiring journey I suggested returning to the hotel. ‘Not yet, Joseph, let me see the Barbacan.’”

(Retinger, 151-2)

The Fajll’s house at Florianska Street

“Konrad was placed in a pension for boys run by one Ludwik Georgeon, in the Fajll's house, on Florianska Street, a choice that was certainly not accidental since Georgeon was a veteran of the 1863 insurrection.”

(Najder, 30)

“Conrad learnt temporarily in a pension, first in Kraków at Floriańska street (the pension was later moved to Franciszkańska 43), conducted by Ludwik Georgeon. Conrad was in more or less close contact with this school for three years (1869-1872).”

(Koc, 16; trans. W. Krajka)

43 Franciszkańska Street

“While he was under the care of Louis Georgeon the establishment was moved from Flo

(Karl, 90)

“In 1914 Conrad said that he had left Poland ‘straight from the fifth class from Saint Anne's Gymnasium in Cracow.’ He may indeed have left ‘straight from the fifth class,’ but it was neither from Cracow nor from St. Anne’s Gymnasium. If he attended any Cracow school, which is doubtful considering his illness and the lack of any records, it may have been St. Jacek’s Gymnasium, on Sienna Street, where



“His love of reading was revealed during the last moments of Apollo Korzeniowski's life, too. His flat at Poselska 136 in Kraków was overwhelmed with a depressing mood of absolute silence. This was enhanced by the inaudible whisper of a

“Yesterday at 6 o'clock in the evening immense crowds surged along the Grodzka and Poselska streets, to pay the last homage to the untimely dead poet, a worthy son of Poland.”

(“Pogrzeb śp. Apollona Korzeniowskiego;” trans. W. Krajka)

St. Mary's Church

“To our right the unequal massive towers of St. Mary's Church soared aloft into the ethereal radiance of the air, very black on their shaded sides, glowing with a soft phosphorescent sheen on the others.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, NLL, 166)



St. Mary's Church, Cracow

“At its entrance in the shadow of the majestic Church of the Holy Virgin we stopped, awaiting the call of the bugle (*Hejnal*) which has marked the hours for over six hundred years. Conrad, proud of his memory, with pious zeal explained to Boris that this call celebrates the death of a bugler, who in the thirteenth century was stationed to watch out for a possible attack from marauding Tartar bands. He saved the city by giving the signal, but fell transpierced by an enemy's arrow.” (Retinger, 150-1)

“We took many drives in and round the town, Conrad pointing out to us those places familiar to him during his schooldays. He also told us that Cracow, like our Canterbury, had once had an archbishop murdered in its cathedral....He showed us,



The grave of Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski – Rakowicki Cemetery, Cracow.

“They also went to Rakowice Cemetery and there, for the only time in his life, Borys saw his father kneel down and pray—at Apollo's grave.”
(Najder, 399)

The Jagiellonian library

“Next day the librarian of the University invited me to come and have a look at the library which I had not seen since I was 14 years old. It was from him that I learned that the greater part of my father's MSS. was preserved there. He confessed that he had not looked them through thoroughly yet, but he told me that there was a

lot of very important letters bearing on the epoch from '60 to '63, to and from many prominent Poles of that time; and he added: 'There is a bundle of correspondence that will appeal to you personally. Those are letters written by your father to an intimate friend in whose papers they were found. They contain many references to yourself, though you couldn't have been more than four years old at the time....' That afternoon I went to the University, taking with me my oldest son. The attention of that young Englishman was mainly attracted by some relics of Copernicus in a glass case. I saw the bundle of letters and accepted the kind proposal of the librarian that he should have them copied for me during the holidays. In the range of the deserted vaulted rooms lined with books, full of august memories, and in the passionless silence of all this enshrined wisdom, we walked here and there talking of the past, the great

historical past in which lived the inextinguishable spark of national life; and all around us the centuries-old buildings lay still and empty, composing themselves to rest after a year of work on the minds of another generation.”

(Conrad, *First News*, *NLL*, 175-6)



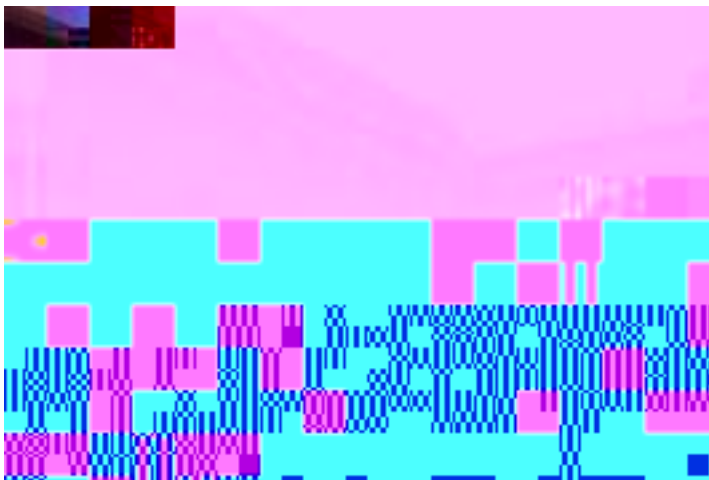
“For many years I believed that every scrap of his writings had been burnt, but in July of 1914 the Librarian of the University of Cracow calling on me during our short visit to Poland, mentioned the existence of a few manuscripts of my father and especially of a series of letters written before and during his exile to his most intimate friend who had sent them to the University for preservation. I went to the Library at once, but had only time then for a mere glance. I intended to come back next day and arrange for copies being made of the whole correspondence. But next day there was war.”

(Conrad, “Author's Note,” *PR*, X-XI)

“Late in the evening Conrad, Borys and ourselves took a stroll in the city. We walked slowly along St. Anne’s street. Conrad recollected his school years, he looked with

sons in an appearance which he never contemplated himself. They wandered everywhere, peering into dark crypts where kings, statesmen, and poets are buried; they knelt before the ancient dark crucifix of the Queen Jadwiga. In one of the majestic chapels, all gold and lace-like sculpture, a Mass was being read. Jessie bowed her head and, an indifferent Protestant, joined in the prayers of the Catholic religion, overcome with sentiment and emotion.”

(Retinger, 153-5)



The sixteenth century courtyard of Wawel Castle.

Zakopane

“The best move which occurred to me was to snatch them up instantly into the mountains to a Polish health resort of great repute - which I did (at the rate of one hundred miles in eleven hours) by the last civilian train permitted to leave Cracow for the next three weeks.

“And there we remained amongst the Poles from all parts of Poland, not officially interned, but simply unable to obtain the permission to travel by train, or road. It was a wonderful, a poignant two months.”

(Conrad, *Poland Revisited*, NLL, 171)

“We left Cracow on my eighth birthday, 2 August, and boarded the train for Zakopané. I do not know whether it was chance or my father’s forethought but we had the last compartment of the last carriage of the train to ourselves. Looking out from the windows we were able to see the engine winding up the curves ahead and my father kept me fully occupied going from side to side to watch the engine negotiate the steep gradients. I remember being fascinated by the numerous rods and levers, the little whiffs of steam, and the beat of the exhaust as the engine toiled up the slope.”

(John Conrad, 88)

“The little railway station of Zakopane is engraved for ever on my memory; no photograph or coloured picture could convey the depth of that impression. We soon discovered the dismal fact that only one of our trunks had got through, and, searching through our pockets, we failed to find our registration ticket. The second trunk we recovered in a most unexpected manner two months later in Vienna.

“Two days after our arrival we heard that England had come into the war. We had been confident she would. Then followed a nightmare of rumours. During that fortnight we were told that our army had been completely wiped out, and that all our fleet was at the bottom of the sea. Only news from German sources reached us, and every reference to England was accompanied by the most revolting insults. Every cartoon represented England and the English in some odious form...

“Sometimes the trains remained standing in the station with their passengers still aboard, there not being enough food in the place to admit of more people coming in.”

(Jessie Conrad, 75-6, 78)

The “Stamary” pension

“In Zakopane they stopped first at a big pension, Stamary, and after a few days moved to Zagórska’s Konstantynówka.”

(Najder, 400)



The Stamary Pension, Zakopane

“I met Conrad in Zakopane in the first days of August 1914....Conrad was staying in the villa of Mrs. Zagórska, his cousin; the Gielguds and ourselves were staying in the Stamary hotel. We met almost every day after

breakfast on the terrace on the sunny side of the building. We were sitting in comfortable cane armchairs and had a good time discussing various subjects, connected mostly with the war waged, and forecasting the future of Poland.”

(Górski, 1; trans. W. Krajka)

The Konstantynówka “pension”



“We arrived at Zakopané where the line



four feet above the earth and the other levels were about ten feet apart. The grounds of the house were separated from the footpath by a hedge and on the opposite side the pinewoods began at the edge of the road. Rushes and mosses grew by a tiny stream and here and there the gray mass of a lump of rock showed through.”

(John Conrad, 88-9)

“Madame Zagórska gave them a warm welcome at her overcrowded house. The place was full of distinguished refugees, and despite a general shortage of money, clothes and food, Conrad seems to have enjoyed the life of cafe conversations and late-night discussions. It was fine cloudless weather, but as August wore on, increasingly cold.”

(Tennant, 212)

“The house where we had found refuge was full of other refugees; some slept in the dining-room, some in the drawing-room, and one was never out of earshot of excited voices. All talked at once, all were without money, many with scanty clothes. Small change was there none, and the only thing to do was to deposit a hundred-mark note with a café, or shop-keeper, and to spend against it. I had no vest, and when it got

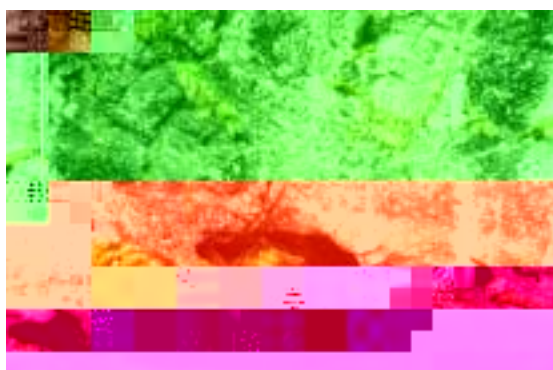
“Zakopane. The 3rd or 4th of August 1914. A beautiful morning. I come back home and hear some strangers’ voices in the parlour. My mother talks with some guests. I enter: a grey-haired, elderly man rises from the armchair. He has a stern face and distinguished appearance. Conrad!”

(A. Zagórska, “Kilka wspomnień o Conradzie;” trans. W. Krajka)

“We had two small bedrooms opening one from the other and on to a narrow wooden verandah....The house was built of enormous logs like a Swiss chalet and surrounded by a small, weedy garden. Numerous fowls of the bantam breed scratched unsuccessfully, and added greatly to its forlorn aspect, besides providing endless cause for trouble between the tenant and the old landlady (of evil aspect), who had retained two rooms on the top floor. There she lived closely shut in with a maid, as ill-conditioned as herself, appearing, as it seemed, always at the worst moments to continue her quarrel with her tenant about the bantams. I discovered that Madame Z. [Zagorska] had purchased them from some wily dealer in the fond belief that they would grow into large fowls. It took more than a month to persuade her that they were then at their full size and old at that. Later on a goose with a broken wing was added to the live stock. For two days we bore the sight of the poor bird waddling around,

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“During our stay in Zako



“About the 6th of October we were able, through the kindness of a Polish military officer, to get permits to proceed to Vienna...

“We left our place of refuge at one in the morning. Snow was lying thick on the gr

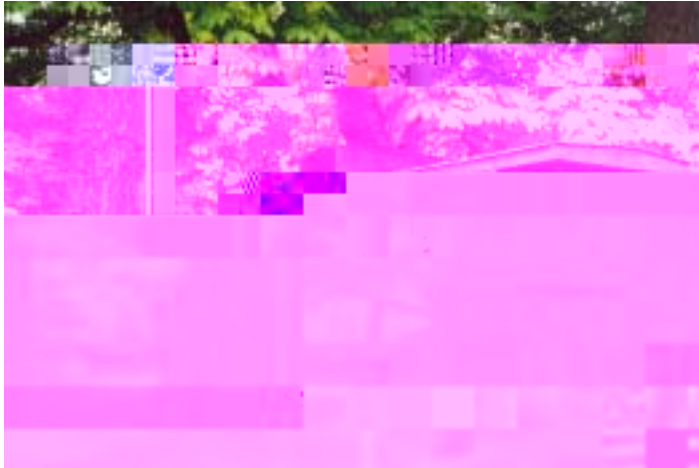
“We were all very cold and tired when we reached the station, where seats had been reserved for us in a train for Cracow...I shall never forget the hours we spent in Cracow. We had no permission to leave the station, and had to sit eleven hours on hard wooden chairs. Numerous trains thundered through, stopping to discharge their varied loads of anxious travellers, wounded soldiers, and one or two prisoners. One of these, a tall Russian General, sat stiffly between his two Austrian captors, glancing superciliously around the big refreshment-room, without taking the least notice of anything going on around him...I managed at last to make one of the officials understand that I wanted to wash my little boy’s hands...I followed them, with my hand on John’s shoulder and leaning on my stick. We passed through long, narrow passages reeking of blood and fennel, past long rows of bloodstained figures seated against the wall, some wit0 Tw[(2(de)16.9(r)13Tw[(14.9(o)1c9(ns 3Tw[(14de)16.9cd.2(i)0(gy TD-0e)1.4(

police regulations. I have also preserved from that particular time the awe of her mysterious gravity which indeed, was by no means smileless.”

(Conrad, “Author's Note,” *PR*, XI-XII)

“In early October 1861, shortly before a state of emergency was declared in the Kingdom, Ewa Korzeniowska and her son moved to Warsaw. On 17 October the

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The prison van: the Warsaw Citadel.

“On 21 October Apollo was arrested when the police raided his home, and Conrad retained a memory of himself standing with his mother in a big prison yard where he glimpsed his father's face watching them from behind a barred window.”

(Sherry, 9-10)



Left: The prison yard, Pavilion X, the Warsaw Citadel – Apollo Korzeniowski’s cell was behind one of the ground floor windows.

Right: A cell in Pavilion X, the Warsaw Citadel.



it by the name of his predecessor and brother. It is called the Alexandrian Citadel.”

(Korze

