

# Impressions: Polish Soldiers' Brief Experience of South Africa during the Second World War

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## Abstract

The Second World War had a tremendous influence on the people who lived through it. For those Poles who were forced by the conflict to travel across continents, this was also an opportunity to explore the vast British Empire first hand. On the way back to Europe, they often lived among and worked with people very different from themselves. The present paper attempts to elaborate on the experience of Polish servicemen who were transferred through the Union of South Africa during the war. Published accounts provide a rare glimpse at the imperial territories of the time and the Polish attitude towards imperialism. What was the soldiers' impression of that remote country, and how was it influenced by their origins? Where did the authors position themselves when confronted with the exotic (and the non-exotic) Other? The study aims to answer these questions by comparing and contrasting excerpts from selected war narratives.

## Introduction

An impression, that is, an idea or opinion of what something or someone is like or the way that something seems, looks, or feels to a particular person (Cambridge Dictionary), is a building block of any human experience. First impressions, formed in a fraction of a second, may last for years or forever, as is the case with once-in-a-lifetime encounters. The judgements that follow are often made relative to the self, with a person's own perception of his or her status impacting upon the image formed of others. Since some Polish servicemen during the Second World War had a rare opportunity to visit South Africa,<sup>1</sup> a far-away country they had not known much about, they relied on impressions of what they encountered firsthand to form life-long memories. Although the length of individual postings was obviously limited, they nevertheless dedicated pages of their war accounts to these exotic travels.

Previous analyses have shown that there exist analogies between the historical conditions of the South African and Polish peoples in the late-19th and early-20th centuries (Zajas, 2008). The present article aims to contribute to existing studies on Polish-South African cross-cultural relations by investigating how Polish soldiers viewed and interacted with the people of South Africa during the war. Thus, the author views the global conflict not as a "military clash of empires" but rather as a "contact zone" as defined by Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt, 2008, pp. 7–8). The research material consists of seven accounts of soldiers who were born in independent Poland and grew up in the 1920s–1930s. All of the authors, save one who arrived by air, reached the country on troopships around 1942, and stayed for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks. Przemysław Bystrzycki (1923–2004) and Stanisław Skowroński (1919–2016) were stationed in Pietermaritzburg, while Bronisław Czepczak-Górecki (1922–2001) and Zbigniew Siemaszko (1923–) were posted to Durban.<sup>2</sup> Another of the soldiers, Jan Weseli (1907–1982), had first been hospitalized in Johannesburg and was later recovering from malaria in Cape Town, where Ryszard Łysakowski (1923–) and Władysław Wójcik (1916–) were both disembarked.

The South African ports of Durban and Cape Town were part of a vital link connecting the Allies' worldwide territories at a time when the Mediterranean Sea was rendered inaccessible due to the naval activity of the Axis powers. Apart from vessels carrying equipment and raw materials, military troopships and hospital ships were a common sight along the coast. Furthermore, due to its climate, the country was considered

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1 The historical predecessor of the present-day Republic of South Africa was the Union of South Africa (1910–1961).

2 Clairwood Camp.

suitable for R&R (Rest and Recuperation) and popular particularly among officers serving in British West Africa (present-day The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria). However, the importance of the Cape route and the influx of Allied troops – fundamentally young men – became a source of tension, as they had to be integrated into the complex structure of South African society for the duration of their stay. According to Jean P. Smith, white servicemen enjoyed much greater freedom than soldiers of color, and various mechanisms of social control were put in place to manage the situation. Most importantly, in order to divert the soldiers' attention from alcohol and brothels, the authorities aimed at providing them with respectable forms of entertainment (Smith, 2020, pp. 158–160). In light of the collected research material, it appears that Polish servicemen did not engage in dishonorable activities throughout their stay.

It is estimated that over 12,000 Polish soldiers stepped onto South African soil during the war. Among them was a large group who arrived in Durban for training in June 1942, and they were billeted at Hay Paddock Transit Camp in Pietermaritzburg. Another group of Polish nationals, comprising cadets and officers who were to serve as army instructors in the Middle East, had sailed from Scotland to Durban, where they underwent training at the Imperial Forces Transshipment Camp in Clairwood in 1942. Furthermore, four Polish pilots are known to have stayed at the Imperial Forces Transit Camp in Westlake in 1943, while a small group of volunteer Polish Army officers from No. 663 Squadron RAF (*663 Polski Szwadron Powietrznych Punktów Obserwacyjnych*) came to South Africa for initial pilot training in Bloemfontein in 1944. That same year, five Polish soldiers are known to have been recovering from wounds suffered in North Africa at Baragwanath hospital in Johannesburg (HIA, 800/42/0/-/570, pp. 510–513).

Apart from the servicemen in training, on recuperation, or en-route to the frontlines, hundreds of Polish children and adult refugees were given shelter in the country during the conflict (Żukowski, 1994, pp. 154–169). In light of archival documents of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the situation of the soldiers and the refugees was intertwined. The formidable reputation of the Polish Army had influenced Gen. Jan C. Smuts' decision to admit a larger number of Polish child refugees to the country (HIA, 800/42/0/-/238, 1942, p. 890). Gen. Smuts was one of the most influential politicians of the time, and an advocate of the Polish cause; he had been in contact with the authorities long before Polish civilians and servicemen arrived in South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

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3 See, for example: HIA, 800/42/0/-/228, 1941, pp. 313, 321, 325. Smuts was Prime Minister in the years 1919–1924.

In the country, the authors of the memoirs encountered the Black (native) and the White (Afrikaner<sup>4</sup>) Other. It can be assumed that the men possessed a rudimentary knowledge of the country, even though the most recent period of Polish interest in South Africa was during the Second Boer War (1899–1902), decades before the authors had been born. Then, the Polish press had portrayed the Boers as freedom-fighting heroes and largely condemned the British invaders and their imperial politics (Żukowski, 1994, p. 91). The situation of the former was seen as analogous with that of Poland in the early 20th century, when the country was still partitioned and its people struggled to preserve their identity. Conversely, the image of the Boers presented in the late 19th-century ethnographic accounts of Antoni Rehman<sup>5</sup> had been very different. The author assigned 'Polish' qualities to both the native people of Africa, whose cause had been omitted from the Polish Boer War discourse, and to the Boers. The former were portrayed as proud and freedom-loving, while the latter were criticized for laziness and simplicity, that is, a characteristic which had contributed to the loss of their country's sovereignty<sup>6</sup> (Zajas, 2012, pp. 73–77). In the wake of Polish independence and during the inter-war period, the Boers and the far-away African country were largely forgotten. They returned to the Polish consciousness again at the onset of apartheid, a system of institutionalized racial segregation which was vigorously attacked by the post-war communist ideology.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the authors referred to in the paper mention the Second Boer War or show familiarity with the person of Cecil Rhodes. Although the British Boer War inspired a number of Polish novels and short stories set in South Africa (Zajas, 2008, p. 181), it is unlikely that these texts influenced the soldiers' perception of the country. In fact, the Polish-South African connection advocated during the partitions seems to have been lost in the inter-war period. With regards to the country's history, Weseli states that "South Africa was completely alien to me. Its history was in no way related to the history of Poland"<sup>8</sup> (Weseli, 1980, p. 261). As far as the image of the Africans is concerned, it is more probable that it was shaped by the literary works of authors fascinated with exotic lands and their representation in literature.

The Polish Romantic poets and positivist novelists could have influenced the authors' perception of the 'dark continent' towards Orientalism,

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4 Descendants of the mainly Western European seventeenth-century settlers, known as Boers.

5 The works of Rehman are considered to be the first Polish ethnographical accounts of South Africa.

6 As had been the case in 18th-century Poland (Zajas, 2008, p. 175).

7 A book by Jan Balicki, entitled *Rasizm w Afryce Południowej* (Balicki, 1951), gives an insight into the discourse on apartheid in the Polish People's Republic.

8 All translations from Polish are mine, P. Stanik.

as understood by Edward Said (Said, 1978). For instance, Sienkiewicz sided with a European colonizer's viewpoint on Africa despite having come from a nation deprived of its own state (Klobucka, 2001, pp. 246–248), while his extremely popular novel, entitled *In Desert and Wilderness*, was considered the “primary source of a Polish reader's awareness of Africa and its people” in the 20th century. Yet another author, Ferdynand Antoni Ossendowski (1876–1945), who wrote adventure stories with a colonial twist, advocated overseas expansion and Eurocentrism during the inter-war period (Forajter, 2018, pp. 280–293). The thesis that in the 1930s the interpretation of the colonialist discourse in Poland was Western-oriented, and that Poles were convinced of their civilizational supremacy and right to have colonies may be supported by the then popularity of The Maritime and Colonial League (*Liga Morska i Kolonialna*) (Hunczak, 1967, pp. 648–655). Consequently, the Polish soldiers likely approached South Africa with a set of preconceptions influenced by government propaganda<sup>9</sup> and a knowledge of some Orientalist literary works. However, for the citizens of a country which aspired to become a colonial power while simultaneously overcoming the dramatic past of the partitions, reflecting on the South African experience was by no means straightforward. Ultimately, the authors were faced with a dichotomy – a yearning for a colonial enterprise accompanied by its immediate condemnation.

### The representation of the African Other

Africans,<sup>10</sup> who appear in all accounts as servants, gardeners, miners, workers or in other menial capacities, are regularly depicted as voiceless and compliant. Among them, the authors take particular notice of the cities' rickshaw pullers. While some consider them an element of local folklore, admiring their physique or exoticism, Siemaszko is appalled and writes, “Although I'm not a liberal, seeing one man pulling another doesn't seem right to me” (Siemaszko, 2006, p. 87). Weseli, too, shares his viewpoint. He is so affected by the racial divisions that he becomes anxious and uneasy about his stay. Conversely, Skowroński, perceives the situation of the natives to be better than he anticipated. He notes,

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9 Filip Gończyński-Jussis elaborates on the scale and role of the government-supported Colonial and Maritime League in society (Gończyński-Jussis, 2015). Its journals were widely read, while the events which it organized were attended and commented on in the 1930s.

10 In all studied accounts, the Black inhabitants of South Africa are referred to by the Polish noun *Murzyn*. Although nowadays it can be considered offensive, for the purposes of the present study it is assumed that the term is neutral in meaning.

Even though it was difficult to establish the facts at first glance, we saw them [the Black Africans] happy, well-dressed, and well-fed. It was clear they lived among their kin separated from the Whites, but at the same time they enjoyed total freedom in cultivating their traditions. They worked and earned, spending the money as they pleased (Skowroński, 1998, p. 126).

On the one hand the author portrays the Africans as well-integrated into the 'civilized' society, but on the other he reinforces the image of the exotic 'native' whom he later describes as dancing "to the sound of drums" in remote villages (p. 151). Accordingly, he differentiates one indigene from another, sorting them into classes in a way that resembles early colonial divisions. In *Impressions on South Africa*, for instance, James Bryce juxtaposes "the wild or tribal natives" with "the tame or domesticated natives" who "are now civilized in most of their habits, are accustomed to wear clothes, speak mostly Dutch or English, and to a large extent profess Christianity" (Bryce, 1897, p. 361). Such transformation was possible only due to prolonged contact with Europeans and their influence. A similar correlation can be found in Skowroński's account, in which the seaport has a 'civilizing' effect on the Africans.

The association of Africa with the sound of slit drums can also be found in the account of Bystrzycki, who expected to hear "the beat coming from the jungles" (Bystrzycki, 1985, p. 38) as his troopship neared the harbor. The natives' perceived primitivism was an element of the colonial discourse used to differentiate them from the sophisticated Self, and linked to Said's notion of Orientalism (Said, 1978). In the studied accounts this dichotomy can be seen, for example, in the Africans' exaggerated reactions to the Poles' drill exercises, which made the former appear childish, and in their supposed lack of adequate aesthetic judgment. When visiting a miners' canteen, Weseli noted that all the items being sold there were so colorful and tacky that they "would offend the aesthetic tastes of a European" (Weseli, 1980, p. 262). His observation went in line with the judgment of South African army recruiters, who concluded that, "While a blaze of color might offend the susceptibilities of a European... almost any colorful reproduction will appeal to natives..." (Lt. J. B. Bruce quoted in: Grundlingh, 1986, p. 182). Bystrzycki's disappointment at not hearing the drums from the harbor was eased by the beauty of Durban, which he called "Europe at its best" (Bystrzycki, 1985, p. 38); he found the city cleaner, wealthier, and more ordered and developed than he had expected. Although the disenchantment of not finding the 'real' Africa was mixed with astonishment, the author was not fond of the 'touristy exoticism' he found instead. While comparing the stereotypical image of the continent to reality, he implies that African 'exoticism' is an artificial construct and that Africa, as he imagined it, may not even exist but be a product of Western imagination.

When directly confronted with the native Other, some authors recall treating the Africans as equals – much to the Afrikaners' consternation. Bystrzycki, while having dinner with a local family, was surprised to see servants helping the hosts get off the car. In his memoir, he portrays the servants as 'ebony figures' and writes, "I grabbed and shook the pitch-black hand with a thick skin and, while looking into his happy eyes, I said in Polish: 'good morning'" (Bystrzycki, 1985, p. 41). Likewise, when welcomed by a Black servant, Czepczak-Górecki shook his hand. He later apologizes to his hosts and explains himself by saying that "we [Poles] shake hands with everyone, with the elderly in particular, as a sign of respect" (Czepczak-Górecki, 2017, p. 119). While Bystrzycki and Czepczak-Górecki appear remorseful, Wójcik is far from morally justifying the discrimination of the Blacks happening before his eyes. He recalls how, along with his colleagues, he was "soundly reprimanded and formally warned not to" fraternize with the Black people by his commanding officer. Their 'crime', as he calls it, consisted in spending a night in a club attended by Africans. In his memoir, the author contrasts this unpleasant situation with the appreciative welcome given to them by the Afrikaners. He writes,

I took to the South African lifestyle at once. I enjoyed both the climate and the open, warm-hearted friendliness of the people. We were dimly aware that the white man was a superior life-form in this country but at that moment it hardly seemed to matter to us why this was so, or why he was clearly so much richer than the Blacks. We were just a bunch of young lads having a great time in Cape Town (Wójcik, 1996, p. 157).

In his observations, Łysakowski goes a step further, pointing to the "many contradictions and paradoxes" that struck him in South Africa. He notes that the democratic principles the country prides itself on do not apply to its Black inhabitants (Łysakowski, 1990, p. 210). However, the remarks of both authors might have been an echo of their post-war experiences, as Wójcik and Łysakowski wrote their memoirs down around the 1990s and had them published in English, aiming at an international audience. In addition, it was during this period that the apartheid system was dismantled, and this could have further encouraged criticism of the Afrikaners.

Siemaszko, too, seemed to be critical of Western imperialism, albeit not so openly. In his recollections, he anticipates South Africa's independence, as he does not see any reason why "South Africa, Australia or India [would] need British authority" (Siemaszko, 2006, p. 88). By including India among these countries, the author implies that non-European nations are capable of self-government. Therefore, he goes against the colonial discourse on race, which claims that for the colored population



“the supremacy of the Colonial Office and its local representatives is acquiesced in as fit and proper” (Bryce, 1897, p. 360). Weseli, the only author who openly challenged the *status quo* during a conversation with an Afrikaner, was fiercely criticized. His interlocutor was grievously offended and became so hostile that their paths soon diverged (Weseli, 1980, pp. 265–267). The large-scale social segregation and hypocrisy which he encountered in South Africa made him question his ability to openly “confront all manifestations of evil and injustice” (p. 272) in the future, and he therefore favored an internal monologue.

The authors' encounters with the female native Other seem to have been even more limited. While they had a chance to exchange a few words with male servants in various situations, the female indigene was only gazed at. Czepczak-Górecki was astounded to see native women “parading topless in the busy city center” (Czepczak-Górecki, 2017, p. 124), a sight which he immediately contrasted with the elegant attire of the Afrikaners. Although he was not openly critical, the use of the term ‘to parade’ [Polish: *paradować*] implies that he was not fully accepting of the scene either. However, what appears more significant than the comparison of apparel is the author's reference to the urban space where his observation was made. As much as he enjoyed looking at the exposed breasts of the young women, he may have considered them unfitting for the location, thereby implicitly drawing on the dichotomy between nature and civilization.<sup>11</sup>

In the accounts, the native Others never introduce themselves, and the only two names which appear in the narratives are provided by outsiders. Indigenous names are omitted, supposedly due to the difficulty of pronouncing them, and instead the servants are ‘refitted’ with European-styled names. To illustrate, Czepczak-Górecki greets Dick, whose name is of Germanic origin (Czepczak-Górecki, 2017, p. 119), with a handshake, while Weseli meets Kasia, an abbreviation for the Polish ‘Katarzyna’, at the house of his Polish hosts (Weseli, 1980, p. 274). The autononyms, that is the names of people in their native language, are never mentioned or enquired about, and names from the dominant Eurocentric culture are automatically accepted in their place. The omnipresent dominance of the Whites also manifests itself in a lack of interest in the natives' ethnicity<sup>12</sup> and in their portrayal as a largely homogeneous group.

It can be concluded from the main narrative of friendship between Poles and Afrikaners in the 1940s that the African indigenes were marginalized and indeed constituted a background. Although some stereotypical elements of the colonial discourse – portraying the natives as exotic and

11 Binarism, typical of the imperial logic of power, was used to establish a relation of dominance (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 26).

12 Only two of the authors refer to the Zulu ethnic origin of some of the Black inhabitants of South Africa.



primitive – are present in the accounts, they are not prevalent. Certain of the authors express concern over the discrimination of the natives, or go as far as stating that “none of us was convinced that the Whites’ attitude was morally justifiable” (Wójcik, 1996, p. 158). The dichotomy in judgment shows that there was no dominant Polish discourse on race and ethnicity in South Africa in the studied period, and that the authors’ cultural awareness largely depended on individual circumstances.

### The portrayal of the Afrikaner Other

The authors seemed overwhelmed by the wealth of the White inhabitants of the cities. Their suburban residences (commonly described as white-walled buildings with large windows and swimming pools), surrounded by gardens, must have been a stark contrast to the living conditions in inter-war Poland, where the majority of apartments consisted of only one room inhabited by, on average, two (in the cities) or three (in the villages) persons (Ambroch et al., 2018, p. 20). Another feature of South Africa that the servicemen noted was the number and quality of the vehicles on the cities’ streets, the latter wide, well-maintained and well-lit. As they were taken on motor car excursions by the Afrikaners or even offered cars for their disposal, again, the difference between the authors’ home-country and South Africa became striking (Lizak, 2011, pp. 164–165). Since technological advancement is considered crucial for establishing a country’s level of development, 1940s South Africa must have appeared as an example of progress. Interestingly, frequent references to vehicles also appear in the report of Lt. Col. Aleksander Idzik, stationed with his troops in Pietermaritzburg in 1942, as well as in other correspondences of the Polish authorities in South Africa and the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in London (HIA, 800/42/0/-/567, 1942).

According to the accounts, the country’s White population comprised mainly women and the elderly. The only young man to appear in one of the memoirs – Skowroński’s – was a rival for the love of Irene, an Afrikaner girl. The elderly are portrayed as mild-mannered and sentimental, while all decision-making power is held by men of working age. The male heads of families are depicted as well-educated, well-informed, and hard-working, although they do find time for leisure. In this patriarchal society, the female Other seems not to be far from the popular Victorian image of an ideal wife/woman, the Angel in the House. While the men converse about politics or business at dinner, the women do not participate. Instead, they excel in the realm of culture, coming to the fore as skilled pianists or ballroom dancers. In their contacts with young men, they are humble, meek, graceful, and self-sacrificing; and when they speak up, they are easily overcome by emotions, being prone to jealousy and sentimentality.

Undoubtedly, all soldiers valued their contacts with Afrikaner women due to their high social status and the attractiveness of the lifestyle they led. However, this also created an unbridgeable gap that cut all affairs short as soon as the soldiers were re-embarked. Although the authors had done their best to adapt to the roles of gentlemen, feelings of inferiority remained even after the war. Czepczak-Górecki writes, "I couldn't imagine Joan in the rented room which I shared with a friend in Poznań" (Czepczak-Górecki, 2017, p. 122). Apart from the lack of space, the author suffered because of the rather primitive heating system in his post-war Polish apartment, and felt somewhat embarrassed about making a living by giving private tuition. He even implied that Joan, his Afrikaner sweetheart, would not have been able to accept the fact that he did not have his "own Black [servant]."

Although the Afrikaners considered themselves to be oppressed by the British colonial administration, the memoirs portray them as dominant and emancipated. The accounts indicate that tensions flared up with Europeans mostly in the social sphere, and manifested themselves in ostracism. The Poles, at first unaware of the antagonisms, often happened to be boycotted by the Afrikaners when wearing British Army uniforms. These same military uniforms, however, were soon used by them as a protective measure against the natives' hatred of the Afrikaners, whom they despised more than the British. In any case, the soldiers were able to quickly adjust to the local customs, and devised ingenious stratagems which helped them to navigate through the complex South African milieu.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the report of Lt. Col. Aleksander Idzik, a commandant of a Polish contingent, which he submitted to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Exile. According to the author, the soldiers stationed in Pietermaritzburg in the summer of 1942 worked hard to build a positive image of Poles in South Africa by participating in military training and cultural – or, as he called it, 'propaganda' – activities.<sup>13</sup> Idzik's involvement in promoting Poland and its role in the war effort stemmed from the fact that before his arrival the perception of Poles had been distorted by hostile disinformation. His major concerns were that some Afrikaners could perceive them as "white negroes" or "Jews"<sup>14</sup>, and that his men had been significantly scarred by the experience of exile in Russia (HIA, 800/42/0/-/567, 1942, p. 354). In order to distinguish Poles from Jews and aid the soldiers' recovery, Idzik encouraged contacts between the local community and the military that had far-reaching consequences.

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<sup>13</sup> For an insight into the Polish government's propaganda efforts in South Africa during the war, see: HIA, 800/42/0/-/157, 1942–1943.

<sup>14</sup> In a letter to the Consul General of Poland in London, dated 9 July 1940, the Consul of Poland in South Africa stated that "Owing to the type of immigration of Polish citizens into this country, our subjects are exclusively Jews" (HIA, 800/42/0/-/564, 1941, p. 453).

The South African government saw this cooperation as a way to stimulate enlistment and promote its army (HIA, 800/42/0/-/569, 1943, pp. 761-764).

In an article written for a local newspaper, Natalie Roberts reminisced about the Polish soldiers' stay in Pietermaritzburg weeks after they had left the country. She pointed to the transformation they had undergone while in South Africa – the changes that had occurred in their physical appearance – and also to their religiosity and courteous behavior (HIA, 800/42/0/-/569, 1943, pp. 747-749). Roberts' text was not the only piece of news dedicated to the Poles' conduct in South Africa. By 1943, Polish Consul General Stanisław Łepkowski had become so concerned about the uncontrolled spread of information about Poland in the press that he asked for support from either the Ministry of Information or Ministry of Foreign Affairs in managing publicity activities in the country. Additionally, he suggested focusing on military, and not cultural, promotion (HIA, 800/42/0/-/569, 1943, pp. 753-754).

### The Polish Romantic Other?

David Omissi, who studied the Indian soldiers' experience of England and France, writes that “to travel is to see home in a different light, and perhaps to reflect critically on home. By being juxtaposed with a different world, home seems not only far away but also different” (Omissi, 2007, p. 389). Although all Polish authors were equally traumatized by the war and exile, reflections on home are not a common occurrence. Apart from the occasional comparisons of landscape features or reminiscences of nostalgia at Christmas, Jan Weseli's account is exceptional in that he befriended two elderly siblings, Jakub and Barbara, who were from the second generation of Polish migrants to South Africa. He recalls that in their home he felt as if in a 19th-century Polish country house: eating traditional Polish dishes and drinking vodka in a cozy living room with reproductions of famous Polish paintings and religious portraits hanging on the walls. His hosts owned a large collection of Polish literary works, and Barbara was proud to have memorized passages from Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, the Polish national epic. Their devotion to the mother country, however, quickly made Weseli feel uncomfortable. As he realized that they held an idealized image of their ancestral land, he was overwhelmed with compassion. Because of their age, however, and presumed inability to travel to Poland, Weseli undertook to adjust his narrative to their expectations (Weseli, 1980, p. 275).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The author does not elaborate on the discrepancies between the hosts' and his own image of Poland in the memoir.

The moral principles according to which Jakub and Barbara lived, as well as the appearance of their household were typical of the image of Poland portrayed in early 20th-century young adult novels set in South Africa. In his analysis of these narratives, Paweł Zajas points to the importance of symbolism and myth in the formation of collective memory, which plays a key role in preserving one's national identity (Zajas, 2008). The condition of Poles in the texts studied by Zajas seems strikingly similar to that of Weseli's Polish hosts. The house, for example, is central to the preservation of the couple's Polish cultural identity, the more so because they refuse to assimilate and are highly critical of both British imperialism and the Afrikaners' racism. By being one of the few entrepreneurs employing African natives in blue-collar roles, they epitomize the highest moral standards and resilience, and because of that feel isolated. Furthermore, they go to great lengths to engage in religious worship, since for them a devotion to religion equates with patriotism. Apart from Mickiewicz, the siblings revere two other Polish national heroes, namely Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746–1817) and Jan Henryk Dąbrowski (1755–1818), as well as a Frenchman, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821); all are deeply ingrained in the Romantic tradition. The use of ellipsis to introduce Napoleon, however, might imply that Weseli was astounded to see the portrait of the Emperor of the French in that South African house. While relevant during the partitions, the legend of Napoleon appears to have lost its allure in the inter-war period. Consequently, this meeting of two generations of Poles in South Africa in the 1940s produced an unexpected result: it allowed Weseli to discover yet a different Other and further reflect on his national identity.

## Conclusions

In light of the memoirs, attitudes towards the African natives appear to have been more ambiguous than towards the Afrikaners, who played a key role in boosting soldiers' morale and self-confidence in the difficult period of recovery from recent traumas. The warmth of their reception, as well as the respect and attention of the local community helped restore the authors' dignity and thus aided the healing of psychological wounds caused by the conditions they were forced to endure in exile. The servicemen appear to have been equally attracted to the angelic beauty of the Afrikaner women and to the 'exotic' sensuality of their dark-skinned counterparts, with whom, however, they never engaged. Although Poles were outsiders in the Union of South Africa in the 1940s, they complied with the social norms imposed by the dominant group, even if they were critical. Since the authors' skin color and military status ensured privilege in South Africa, they were less inclined to question the balance of power. On the only occasions they attempted to do so, they were either

officially reprimanded, or criticized for demonstrating their private perspective. The writings contain no accounts of conversations or friendships established between Poles and the natives, which is in contrast to their relations with the Afrikaners, whom the authors tended to befriend. They mostly distanced themselves from the discourse orientaling the African Other in favor of personal experience and hard evidence. Despite coming from a country that had endured a long history of subjugation, however, they did not identify with the oppressed Other. On the whole, in spite of some cultural anxiety, the soldiers' overall impression of South Africa and its inhabitants is favorable.

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