

Henryk Sienkiewicz

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Henryk Adam Aleksander Pius Sienkiewicz
(IPA: [ˈxɛnrɪk ˈadam alɛˈksandɛr ˈpʲus sɛnˈkʲɛvʲɨʃ],
artistic name: “Litwos”, IPA: [ˈlitʲɔs]) (May 5,
1846, Wola Okrzejska, Congress Poland, -
November 15, 1916, Vevey, Switzerland), Oszyk

Coat of Arms, was a Polish novelist and publicist. He received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1905 "because of his outstanding merits as an epic writer." One of the most popular Polish writers at the turn of 19th and 20th century.

Biography

Sienkiewicz was born in Wola Okrzejska, a village in Podlasie, into an impoverished gentry family, on his father's side deriving from the Tartars who had settled in Lithuania in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His family used the coat of arms Oszyk.

His parents were Jozef Sienkiewicz (1813 – 1896) and Stefania Sienkiewicz (family name: Cieciszowska, 1820-1873). Wola Okrzejska belonged to the writer's grandmother, Felicjana Cieciszowska. He was baptized in the neighbouring village Okrzeja, in a church funded by his great-grandmother. His family moved several times and in the end settled in Warsaw in 1861. In 1858 Henryk began secondary school in Warsaw. He did not receive very good grades, but he was good at liberal arts. Because of the hard financial times nineteen-year-old Sienkiewicz took up a job as a tutor in the Weyher family in Płońsk.

During that time he probably wrote his first novel – *Ofiara* ("Victim"). He also worked on his publicized novel – *Na marne* ("In Vain"). During that time he also finished his extramural classes in secondary school and in 1866 he received the secondary school diploma. According to his parents' will, he passed the examination to the medical department at Warsaw University. After some time, he resigned and took up law studies. He ended up transferring to the Institute of Philology and History. He gained there thorough knowledge of literature and Old Polish. In 1867 he made his first attempts in literature and wrote a rhyming piece *Sielanka Młodości* which was rejected by *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (Illustrated Weekly). In 1869 he debuted as a journalist. *Przegląd Tygodniowy* (The Weekly Review) printed his review of the play, and *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* printed his essay about *Mikołaj Sep-Sarzynski*. *Sienkiewicz* wrote to *Gazeta Polska* (The Polish Gazette) and *Niwa* under the pen name "Litwos". In 1873 he started to write a column "Bez tytułu" ("Without a Title") in *Gazeta Polska* and in 1875 the series called "Chwila obecna" ("The Present Moment"). From 1874 he took care of literary department in *Niwa*.

He wrote the novel *Na marne* ("In Vain", 1871)

and then *Humoreski z teki Woroszyły*, *Stary Sługa* ("The Old Servant" , 1875), *Hania* (1876) and *Selim Mirza* (1877). The last three works were called a Little Trilogy. Sienkiewicz also visited his relative Jadwiga Łuszczewska (known under Deotyma nickname) and the actress Helena Modrzejewska as their dinner parties were very popular at that time.

In 1876 he went to the USA with Helena Modrzejewska. He stayed longer in California. During that period he wrote *Listy z podróży* ("Letters From a Journey") which were published in *Gazeta Polska* and received wide recognition. He also wrote *Szkice węglem* ("Sketches in Charcoal") in 1877. The trip to USA inspired him to write following works: *Komedia z pomyłek* ("A Comedy of Errors", 1878), *Przez stepy* (1879), *W krainie złota* (1880), *Za chlebem* ("For Bread", 1880), *Latarnik* ("Lighthouse Keeper", 1881) *Wspomnienia z Maripozy* (1882), *Sachem* (1883).

In 1878 he went back to Europe. He stayed in London and then went to Paris for a year. In France he had got a chance to familiarize himself with naturalism, a new trend in literature. In the article "*Z Paryża*" ("From Paris"), written in 1879, he expressed a positive opinion on this trend.

He stated that, “ For a novel naturalism was in fact a brilliant, indispensable and perhaps the only step forward.” Two years later he changed his mind and became more critical about this trend. He expressed his opinions on naturalism and writing in general in following published works: *O naturalizmie w powieści* (1881), *O powieści historycznej* (1889), *Listy o Zoli* (1893).

His stay in America and his letter-writing published in Polish newspapers resulted in wide recognition and aroused interest. Bolesław Prus in his article entitled “Co p. Sienkiewicz wyrabia z piękniejszą połową Warszawy”, published in *Kurier Warszawski* in 1880, nicely showed the popularity of the writer. “As he was back from America, almost every lady took tall and handsome men for Sienkiewicz.(...) Finally, when I noticed that every man has got hair like Sienkiewicz and all of the young men, one by one, grow royal beard and try to have statuesque and swarthy face, I realised that I wanted to meet him personally.(...) From the corner where I sit, I can see that the room is almost exclusively crowded with the fair sex. Some men, who were there to amuse ladies or to write reports, spent so much time in the company of women that they started to talk in the feminine.

In 1879 in Lviv Sienkiewicz gave a lecture entitled *Z Nowego Jorku do Kalifornii*. In 1880 at Bazar hotel in Poznan he read his novel *Za chlebem*, and later in Warsaw he read two works on naturalism in literature. In Szczawnica, on his way back to Lviv in 1879, he read a work about his stay in America. That was also the place where he saw his future wife, Maria Szetkiewicz, for the first time. As he discovered that the whole Szetkiewicz family was going to Venice, Sienkiewicz went there too and met Maria personally. They got married on 18th of August 1881, on Theatre Square in a church which was a property of the Community of Canonesses (the church no longer exists). They had two children, Henryk Józef and Jadwiga Maria. The marriage did not last long because Maria died on 18th of August 1885. In 1882 he worked with *Słowo* (a daily newspaper with a tendency to conservatism and nobility). In the beginning, he was an editor-in-chief. He wrote a drama *Na jedną kartę* which was later staged in Lviv and Warsaw (1879-1881)

In 1880 he wrote a historical novella *Niewola tatarska* ("Tartar Prison") and started working on a historical novel *Ogniem i Mieczem* ("With Fire and Sword"). In his letter written on 1st February

1884 to Stanisław Smolka, an editor of Cracovian newspaper Czas, he wrote, “With regard the great novel, it will probably be entitled *Wilcze gniazdo* (“The Wolf’s Nest”). It takes place in the king Jan Kazimierz times, during the Cossack revolt.” Eventually the novel *Wilcze gniazdo* that was mentioned in Sienkiewicz’s letter was appearing in installments in *Słowo* from 2nd May 1883 to 1st March 1884 under the title *Ogniem i mieczem* (“With Fire and Sword”). At the same time it was printed in the Cracovian newspaper Czas.

Ogniem i mieczem (the same as the next two volumes of the Trilogy) was enthusiastically received by his readership and won Henryk Sienkiewicz a great recognition. Many people were sending him letters asking about the next adventures of their favorite characters. In 1879 a street in Zbarazh (one of the setting in *Ogniem i mieczem*) was named after Sienkiewicz. In 1900 people of Zbarazh did not permit building works on the church ground believing that it is the place where Podbipięta (one of the fictional characters from *Ogniem i mieczem*) is buried. The novel was also adapted for the stage. In 1884 Jacek Malczewski exhibited so-called living images inspired by *Ogniem i mieczem*.

The novel was also criticized. It was pointed out, not without a reason, that some of the historical facts and events were misrepresented and distorted.



Polish Złoty banknote in honor of Sienkiewicz

He started writing the second volume of his Trilogy – *Potop* (“The Deluge”); according to Sienkiewicz the title was supposed to indicate the deluge of masses of people trying to stop the Swedish invasion. *Potop* was printed in *Słowo* (from 23rd December 1884 to 2nd September 1886). The novel quickly became a bestseller and it established Sienkiewicz’s position in society. While Sienkiewicz was writing *Potop*, his wife, Maria Szetkiewicz, died of tuberculosis. It was a difficult time for the writer. After Maria’s death Sienkiewicz went to Constantinople (through

Bucharest and Varna) from where he was writing reports. After his return to Warsaw the third volume of the Trilogy, *Pan Wolodyjowski* ("Fire in the Steppe") appeared. The novel was published in *Słowo* from May 1887 to May 1888. The Trilogy made Henryk Sienkiewicz the most widely read and known Polish novelist. Stefan Zeromski wrote in his Diaries: "In Sandomierskiem I witnessed myself that everybody, even those who usually do not read, were asking about *The Deluge*." Sienkiewicz was given 15 thousand roubles in recognition of his achievements from unknown fan who signed himself as Michal Wolodyjowski (the name of the character in the Trilogy). Sienkiewicz used this money to open the scholarship fund (named after his wife) designed for artists endangered by tuberculosis.

In 1888 Sienkiewicz went to Spain. In 1890 he involved himself in organizing the Mickiewicz Year. At the end of 1890 he went to Africa what resulted in writing of *Listy z Afryki* ("Letters from Africa"). In 1891 a book edition of the novel *Bez dogmatu* ("Without Dogma") was published. Earlier, from 1889 to 1890, the novel was printed in installments in *Słowo*. In 1892 Sienkiewicz signed an agreement for another novel - *Rodzina Połanieckich* ("Children of the Soil"), and the

book came out in print in 1895. In the summer of 1894 in Zakopane Sienkiewicz introduced some fragments of his new novel *Krzyżacy* ("The Teutonic Knights", or "The Knights of the Cross").

In 1893 Sienkiewicz started preparatory work for his next novel *Quo Vadis*. The period at the turn of the 80's and the 90's was associated with intensive work on several novels.

Maria Romanowska, a step daughter of an odessian richman Wolodkowicz, entered into writer's life. They got engaged in Odessa. The wedding took place on 11th November 1893, but the marriage did not last long because Maria left. Sienkiewicz obtained papal consent to the dissolution of marriage.

In February 1895 Sienkiewicz wrote the first chapters of *Quo Vadis*, for which he had been gathering materials since 1893. The novel started appearing in print in March 1895 in several polish newspapers: in Warsaw's *Gazeta Polska*, Cracovian *Czas* and in Great Poland's *Dziennik Poznański*. It stopped appearing at the end of February 1896. The book edition appeared very quickly. The novel gained recognition and became extremely popular all over Europe. Up to now the

book is read with pleasure. It was translated into many languages, including such exotic ones like Arabic or Japanese. The popularity of *Quo Vadis* at that time was supported by the fact that the horses competing in Grand Prix de Paris were given names of the characters from the book. The novel was repeatedly adapted and put on the stage. There was also an opera made on the basis of the book. In 1913 *Quo Vadis* was screened. Later, the novel was filmed several times more.

In 1900 Sienkiewicz celebrated an anniversary of his artistic work. On that occasion the society endowed him with a property in Oblegork. He opened a school for children there. In the same year the Jagiellonian University awarded Sienkiewicz with a doctoral honorary degree.

Sienkiewicz involved himself in social matters. In 1901 he made an appeal in a cause of children in Wrzesnia. In 1906 he called on his fellow countrymen in USA to help starving people in the Kingdom of Poland.

In 1904 he got married to his cousin - Maria Babska.

In 1905 he won a Nobel Prize for lifetime

achievement as an epic writer. In the acceptance speech Sienkiewicz said that this honour was particularly valuable for the son of Poland. She was pronounced dead - yet here is a proof that She lives on". He also added, "She was pronounced defeated - and here is proof that She is victorious".

He wrote a novel entitled *Na polu chwały* ("On the Field of Glory") which was supposed to be the beginning of a trilogy. In 1910 his novel for youth entitled *W pustyni i w puszczy* ("In Desert and Wilderness") appears in installments in *Kurier Warszawski*.

After the break of the war Sienkiewicz left to Switzerland. Together with Ignacy Jan Paderewski he established the Vevey Swiss General Committee for Help to the Victims of the War.

He died in Vevey on 15th November 1916 where he was buried. In 1924, when Poland gained its independence, writer's ashes were placed in St. John's Cathedral in Warsaw.

He was a knight of the Legion of Honour.

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