

**The Experience of Polish Exile in the Times of the Second World War:
the Case of Joseph Wittlin**

Polish literature is, to a large extent, the work of emigrants. An example of an exile author is Józef Wittlin (died in 1976), who left Poland in 1939 and spent 35 years in the United States. He is known as the author of the novel *Salt of the Earth* and the collection of essays *Orpheus in the Hell of the 20th Century*, among others. He also left his memoirs which he was writing throughout his whole life. Wittlin's output presents an image of a divided America. In his essays he praises freedom and democracy in Washington's country. However, his private notes reveal a different America, where interpersonal relations are calculated, life is materialistic and religiousness superficial. Wittlin belongs to a wide circle of Polish exile writers in America who described their adoptive country. He stands out in this group because he presents an image of a less well-known America and at the same time he speaks as a moralist.

Key words: Joseph Wittlin, exile, the USA, the Second World War, religion

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The Polish people are a nation that, to a large extent, lives in a diaspora; and Polish literature is, to a considerable degree, the work of emigrants. Since the fall of the First Republic of Poland in 1795, until as late as 1918, Poland did not exist on the map of Europe. A short period of independence was interrupted by the Second World War, which began with the invasion of Poland in 1939. On the conclusion of the war, the Polish State fell under the control of the Soviet Union. A difficult process of re-establishing independence began again in 1989.

After the Second World War "about 6.000.000 Polish people refused to return to Poland, which was occupied by the Soviets, constituting a political emigration. This refusal was intended as a protest against the Yalta treaties which were in violation of international law and they also expressed the decision to fight for the restoration of Poland's independent existence, with all available means" (Pragier 1975:222). This group is sometimes described as the "Second Emigration," as distinctly different from the first "Great Emigration" group that began after the November Uprising in Poland, in 1831. Every time captivity occurred, a group of writers emigrated to preserve creative freedom and avoid persecution. Throughout the period of captivity, emigration was unquestionably a symbol of independence and an active expression of protest against the political diktat, and the literature created in exile became one of the three greatest emigration literatures in history, one of the most important aspects of Polish literature and, simultaneously, the core of Polish spiritual culture abroad.

Those who during the Second World War had to leave Poland traveled in different directions. Some found shelter in England, others went overseas and settled in South American countries, and also in Canada or the United States. The case of Joseph Wittlin is very characteristic of the experience of Polish exiles during the war, the outbreak of which significantly changed the writer's life. However, nothing suggested that he might find himself across the ocean.

Wittlin was born on August 17, 1896, in Dmytrów, "in northeast Galicia, on the border with Russia, in the part of Poland that then belonged to Austria" (Wittlin 1991:354). He was a Polonized Jew. In 1908 he began his education at a classical *gymnasium* in Lvov. Later, he gained his high-school leaving certificate in Vienna, where from 1914 to 1916 he also attended university. He participated in World War I, subsequently returning to Lvov. Upon the outbreak of war, he joined the Eastern Legion, and after its disbandment, when Lvov was captured by the Russians, he fled as a political refugee to Vienna, where he passed his final

secondary school exams and, in 1914-1916, studied at the University of Vienna. In 1919-1921 he once again resided in Lvov, where he studied Romance languages and philosophy as well as art history and Polish philology. He also taught at a Jewish humanities gymnasium and later worked for 2 years at a theater in Lodz. He also collaborated with *Tydzień Literacki*, a supplement to *Kurier Lwowski*. In 1922 he moved to Lodz and for one season was appointed literary director at the City Theater, also lecturing at the theater's Drama School. In 1925 and 1926 he traveled to Italy and Yugoslavia for the first time; in 1928 he also went to France. He visited the country on the Seine two more times before the war. In 1936 he published his famous novel *Sól ziemi* [Salt of the Earth], which was translated into 16 languages, and in 1939 he even came close to winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. He lived in Warsaw (where he lived on and off from 1927) up until June 1939. His stay, as a scholarship winner, at a Royaumont Cistercian Abbey in the vicinity of Paris, a well-known place where writers met and worked, became for Wittlin the beginning of his life-long estrangement from his native land.ⁱ Several months after the outbreak of war, he joined his wife and eight-year-old daughter in France. Having failed to leave for England, the Wittlins traveled through the south of France (Lourdes, Nice) and through Spain to Portugal; from there, in 1941, they went to New York, on Herman Kesten's invitation. The writer spent the rest of his life in this metropolis, specifically at Riverdale, a quiet port in the Bronx, on the Hudson River. In America, Wittlin further pursued his literary activity. From 1941-1942 he was editor of *Tygodniowy Przegląd Literacki Kola Pisarzy z Polski*, and from 1943 to 1947 – of *Tygodnik Polski* in New York. In 1943 he gained prestigious awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters in New York for the English edition of *Sól ziemi*, published in 1941. He also frequented the international community, as in the American metropolis “during the war there were [...] numerous German-language writers and artists from Austria, Hungary and Germany. It was a rather curious society, almost a continuation of the Habsburg Monarchy and Weimar Germany, including such personalities as Herman Broch, the author of *The Death of Virgil*, and Bela Bartok” (Miłosz 2001). It is therefore not surprising that Wittlin was a co-founder of the Writers in Exile PEN-Club.ⁱⁱ It is also not unimportant that on May 23rd, 1953, he was baptized into the Catholic Church, which crowned his religious quest initiated back in the 1920s, and particularly intense since his arrival in America. He died in the early morning of 29 February 1976, in New York.ⁱⁱⁱ

His departure for the United States of America became the beginning of the writer's lifelong stay in exile. He then undertook the third translation of *The Odyssey*, which appeared in London in 1957^{iv}, continued to write essays, as well as creating and translating poems. In 1963, the Paris journal *Kultura* published a collection of his essays under the collective title *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* [Orpheus in the Twentieth-Century Hell]. In addition, Wittlin had been cooperating with Radio Free Europe since 1952. It should also be remembered that the texts the writer left in manuscript form constitute a large percentage of his works; from the 1920s to the 1970s he kept notebooks, and after the war he also wrote memoirs.^v His stay in the USA inspired Wittlin to devote ten essays to American issues; the reprints were collected in the volumes *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku*^{vi} and *Eseje rozproszone* [Scattered Essays].^{vii} Radio Free Europe also broadcast ten talks by him concerning American literature,^{viii} four poetry programs presenting verses by American poets,^{ix} and the already mentioned reviews of Broadway theater plays.^x The writer's numerous comments on America are also included in his hitherto unknown notebooks.

There is an affinity between Wittlin and another exile, Tymon Terlecki, who wrote: “It is not true that Europe is an illusion. It is true that it takes the form of a difficult fidelity, a bitter, but unique, meaning of our life.” In this context, he made a significant appeal: “The heroism of Polish emigration after 1945 is simple: to persevere in European culture, in defiance of itself” (Terlecki 1999:172). Wittlin incessantly longed for Europe. On January 16, 1952, he wrote to Aleksander Janta: “[...] I was up to my ears in despondency and dejection, the mental states to which I am trying not to treat you [...]. I am already fed up with those 11 years of not moving from New York and a journey to Europe would come in handy – which I cannot even dream of.”^{xi} At the beginning of the 1960s, however, the writer was given an opportunity to go to Europe for the summer holidays. In the 1960s and 1970s he traveled to Western Europe eight times – mainly to Italy, France, Spain, Switzerland and England – to rest and to meet his family and friends. The trips to Europe became opportunities for the writer to escape from the stifling American atmosphere and to return to a high culture and warm human relationships.

The Lot of an Exile and Literature

In the article *Mój pierwszy krok w Ameryce* [My First Step in America], published shortly after his arrival on the American continent, Wittlin greeted his new homeland with gratitude and enthusiasm. He presented it as a mainstay of democracy and freedom; the country that gave shelter to thousands of castaways from all over the world, and which became for him the new territory for the free word, untrammelled by bureaucracy. As in the first years of his exile Wittlin considered returning to Poland; he collected materials for an essay on the United States. In 1946 he noted down a significant sentence: "Just wait till I leave America and I will write what I think about it."^{xii}

The writer's acquaintances that stayed in Poland sometimes envied him for his life in rich America, which they overly idealized: As a matter of fact, the Wittlins' situation was far from idyllic. On 26th February 1942, the author of *Sól ziemi* described his journey overseas and his first steps on the new land to his closest friend in exile, Kazimierz Wierzyński:

"If you are cross with me that I am writing to you only today, more than three weeks after my arrival to N.Y. – restrain your anger and forgive an old Grumbler who had a horrid journey in the dormitory aboard an American 'Siboney' together with 49 other pukers. There were storms all the time, once the boat almost keeled over. During one such storm I fell haplessly and hurt my arm, straining the collar-bone so painfully that for two weeks I could not sleep and my wife had to wash me and dress me. After my arrival to N.Y., I caught influenza (very cold here), recently Elżunia (Wittlin's 8 old years daughter –R.Z.) has been ill again, for a week she has been down with gland inflammation after flu. [...] Absolutely nobody here, neither from the Polish nor the Jewish circles, cares about our situation and does not intend to take care of anybody new who arrives. Here you must rely entirely on your own initiative. Those who have wealthy relatives and friends are in the best position. I have neither and have not earned anything, but spent already 200 dollars, from the remainder I had of the Culture Fund. We live in one room with a kitchen, which is simultaneously a bathroom, where Elżunia sleeps. For this we pay 9 dollars a week, and Halina cooks everything. [...] As you can see, our situation is rather cheerless. With all my heart I wish it would be different for you when you come here. But I believe it my duty as a friend to warn you against the help of the local Polish diaspora [...]. The Americans I have met here are quite nice, I was agreeably disappointed with them: friendly, humane, simple. If need be, they could lend one happiness. But relations with them are hindered by the fact that I don't speak English, which I will have to learn urgently."^{xiii}

Similar accounts on Wittlin's economic situation in America appear in his correspondence with Mieczysław Grydzewski. In a letter of 21 April 1947 he wrote to the editor of "Wiadomości":

"I am having a very difficult time here. With the greatest effort I am forcing my way through a strange life that is not mine [...]. And my wife is already very tired. I can say without exaggeration that in this most satiated city in the world that we have lived, this year, through periods of the most vulgar famine. Both my wife and I are still wearing clothes we brought from Europe. Yet from here we have dressed a number of people. But these are experiences that should not be mentioned and I communicate them to an old friend, asking him to keep this to himself."^{xiv}

In addition to his economic problems, those of health emerged and persisted throughout the writer's life, and made his stay in the foreign country and difficult housing conditions even more strenuous. Added to this there were difficulties with finding a job. Thus the encounter with America was brutal for the Wittlins, and from the beginning promised a more difficult life in the future.

The writer did not abandon literature, however. Thus his notebooks contain numerous entries that create a broad picture of America from the 1940s to 1970s. The value of these notes is in their sincerity: they reveal a different image of this country than the one which appeared in the writer's essays. They enable the exploration of America's soul from within, thus becoming familiar with its less visible, yet culturally important side.

It is natural that his encounter with America must have made him reflect on themes related to his profession and interests. Although he did not have any acquaintances in the United States, he did not arrive in a country entirely unfamiliar to him. He came to the homeland of writers whom he had met in Poland, through their books. In the essay *Do jakiej Ameryki jechałem* [The America I Traveled to] he reminisced about his guides.

They were "poets and writers who charmed us in our European childhood, our youth. They were many, but I will mention only the most important. First, Mrs. Beecher-Stowe, and then Fenimore Cooper and

Samuel L. Clemens, that is to say Mark Twain. Later they were joined by great poets: Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson. We read their works on the benches in the Jesuit Garden in Lvov, in the Stryjski Park and at the High Castle” (Wittlin 2000:310-311).

The essay *Mój pierwszy rok w Ameryce* [My First Year in America] leads to the conclusion that the writer traveled overseas with a relatively good awareness of the contemporary literature of his new homeland. He expressed it in a short comment:

“The last two decades in particular can boast a number of really excellent authors, such as Eugene O’Neill, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Thornton Wilder, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, John Erskine, John Steinbeck and others. These authors made famous discoveries in the area of prose fiction. [...] I believe O’Neill to be the most eminent playwright alive, along with Shaw and Maeterlinck – at least in the world of our so-called Western civilization” (Wittlin 2000:325).

Wittlin’s perception of American poetry was entirely different. He did not appreciate it as much as prose. In 1957, in one of his notebook entries, he voiced the following judgment:

“On American and English poetry. To understand [...] the essence of Anglo-American life experience we must realize that this is the poetry (of a nation of bores) – of the society of the satiated and – if one may be allowed to say so – the happy. This society does not expect from its poets to be taught how to satisfy hunger, how to struggle against evil that can be eliminated – how to achieve freedom. This is the poetry cultivated on the margin of the lives of individuals and of the country.”^{xv}

If he considered any literary works created in America as interesting, they were those written by African-Americans, whom he had had an opportunity of meeting in the Bronx.

“Today the poetry of the white man is, in North America, a reservation, an inner region of Dementia, independent of life in this expanse from the world. This is a lush, sometimes beautiful national park, yet separated from the American nation with a high hedgerow of uncanny associations, sophisticated metaphors and images detached from the real life of the masses. *Homo americanus*, weary of the incessant pursuit of success, would sometimes venture into this dangerous yet tempting thicket. But he might easily sink into morasses, into *poludes* of the over-refined *morbidezza*. Let us repeat: we mean the white man’s poetry, usually dry and cold as ice. The rich poetry of the black man springs from different sources: the ones that are closer to life and needed more by people. It is not ashamed of suspicious moisture and does not escape into the wilderness of the intellect. The black song is hot with the blood and tears of people who did not succeed in life” (Wittlin 2000: 346-347). This passage does not reveal which poets he had in mind, but one can presume that the writer appreciated the authors related to the Harlem Renaissance cultural movement of black Americans, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the leading representatives of the movement was Langston Hughes, whose poems the author of *Sól ziemi* translated. However, on the whole, he pays the work of American writers a rather double-edged compliment: “American literature is good literature: it shows the ugliness of the American life rather than its beauty.”^{xvi}

The People in the United States

From the beginning of his stay overseas, Wittlin clearly perceived some differences between Poland and the land he had settled in. Above all, he appreciated the political achievements of America and its ethical merits. As a person who, in 1938, had the painful experience of an attack by the press that had forced him to leave the country, he observed the attitude of the American press with satisfaction. At the beginning of 1945 he recorded: “The honor of the American press. In Europe a certain phenomenon of ethical nature was commented on in the press, according to the political slant of a given newspaper. Here all the papers treat crime as crime.”^{xvii} At the same time, he also recognized the merits of the main political achievement of America: democracy. It was not flawless, but made it possible to preserve law and order, compensate for evident wrong doings, build a just society: “(American) democracy provides [...] negative benefits: they do not hit you without a reason, do not judge without a court.”^{xviii} Other positive traits the writer observed in American society were the dynamism and pragmatism of life. After five years overseas he noted: “America is a negation of Poland. It is the country of life. Here everything is for life. Even a dead body, before it is buried, looks alive.”^{xix}

While the Poles are, for the writer, people who often meditate on their past, especially if it is heroic and tragic, the Americans’ eyes are fixed above all on the future, they cherish no sentiments toward what is

past, especially if the historical facts did not concern them directly: “The Americans do not like to brood over things that have ended, and they especially do not like fumbling in pointless matters. This is why there is indifference towards Europe, its worries, the massacre of the Jews, [...] . – What do you want? We cannot resurrect the dead. The Germans are defeated. We would have had neither means nor people – to defeat them. We move forward. – We need to pay attention and see if there is no new danger. We dislike speaking of threats that are no longer menacing.”^{xxx} The positive characteristics the writer recognized in the American political system were probably the reason for his good opinion of the United States entered into his notebook in 1954: “All America is one big refrigerator, conserving and protecting our all putrid civilization from decay.”^{xxxi} Against the background of Wittlin’s other pronouncements on America, this statement may be understood as an apologia for the political and economic power of the United States facing numerous threats emerging from the postwar world.

In principle, however, the writer did not view the new homeland through the prism of the role it played in the international arena. Nor did he devote much attention to the mechanisms for exercising power developed in the USA. Above all, he was interested in the everyday life of ordinary Americans he met in his neighborhood. He was occupied with the America as seen through the prism of the neighborhood, of everyday human behavior. In this case, his judgments were much more severe. Wittlin identified the extreme American pragmatism with indifference to human affairs, coldness in interpersonal contacts, absence of a deeper response to the suffering of others. “People in N.Y. seem imitations”^{xxxii} – he stated at the beginning of 1945. In 1949 he wrote: “In this country everything is frozen – especially the human heart. All inner life – cold.”^{xxxiii} According to the writer, the lack of emotions, the superficiality of contacts were perhaps the most conspicuous features of people he met, in New York City. In the essay *Poe in the Bronx* he clearly portrayed indifference to the suffering of others, masked by piety, his notes indicate that American society was, in his view, an ultimately de-personalized and mechanized one; where functions and offices replaced human reactions and impulses: “The local people seem not like people at all. Their good deeds, their acts of human solidarity result from their social roles or, strictly speaking, from their position in one of the social institutions. But during the 5-years I have lived here, I have not come across direct brotherly impulses.”^{xxxiv}

Wittlin considered indifference towards people not as a manifestation of callousness, but as the greatest evil man can commit, the one that bears the worst fruit. “Do not look for the causes of the end of the world in the Kremlin, but in your own soul. We have sinned against the Holy Spirit. With our indifference we have condemned people to death.”^{xxxv} Insensitivity to the human lot as the cause of man’s death is the idea that often recurs in the writer’s notes. This conviction has its source in his personal life experience: as an exile devoid of perspectives and help. The meaning of this conviction, however, is also universal. It contains the warning against the unobserved causes of human misfortunes. The indifference is an effect of living in an affluent country, where prosperity hindered the development of altruistic feelings and attitudes. The writer’s milieu was wealthy, which is indicated for instance by an entry addressed to a potential reader: “Riverdale – everything you can see around – is money – in those villas – everywhere – money lives.”^{xxxvi} Wittlin remarked that rich people produce their own sense of truth. It is difficult to reach them with something that disagrees with their own vision of the world: “America! Those people are so self-confident that they have no doubts what so ever! When you talk to them, you can explain nothing to them.”^{xxxvii} Therefore, the writer’s judgment is severe: “America is a country where a person with a lot of money – is always right.”^{xxxviii} He readily found the confirmation of his opinions in Norwid, the Polish exile and writer, the man who exactly a hundred years earlier had known America from his own experience. “Norwid on America. This respectable and politically young nation is still unable to understand so many things; in the first place: that there are things that they cannot understand – he said to rev. Marcei Lubomirski.”^{xxxix}

For the above reasons, the immense technological progress observed in America was, to the writer, a suspicious phenomenon that exerted a negative influence on Americans: “They are half-way between a machine and an animal. A combination of both. Actually, one wrongs animals comparing [Americans] to them. For an animal acts according to the laws of nature: And they have lost all natural directness, but have no culture. Neither nature, nor culture.”^{xxx} In particular, Wittlin exposed their affluence devoid of sensitivity to their fellow human being: “They think that culture consists of having as many stereo records as possible, and it never occurs to them that those records, the radio or television may get on their sick neighbors’ nervous systems. What’s the use of Mozart, if he hasn’t taught them gentleness of feeling?”^{xxxxi}

The reminiscences from his stays in France and from reading French literature were often the writer’s

intellectual and moral refuge. It is significant that his notebooks from the time of his stay in America contain a great number of references to France and excerpts from French books. Wittlin also read a lot of French literature, which he was provided with by his wife who, for a long time, worked at the New York Lycée Français; and in his observations he often compared France and America. Those comparisons often reveal his disappointment with the American reality: “In Europe, e.g. in France, there were bad people, wicked people – but they were people. Those here are not people. They would not commit wickedness, but they also do not react to human feelings in a human way.”^{xxxii} Hence, for example, this biting remark: “The difference between the European and the American is that the European eats dishes, and the American calories and vitamins. The European loves, the American satisfies his sexual needs.”^{xxxiii} The comments on the attitude of the Americans compared to European culture are always to a disadvantage for the New World citizen. “They chew European culture, Monet or Van Gogh, as they chew gum. They do not swallow it. From their saliva this culture penetrates into their blood. They will chew it up and suck out its juices – and spit it out like chewing gum.”^{xxxiv} Hence this confession by the writer, recorded in 1960, which is surprising at first glance: “It is better to be a beggar in Paris than a millionaire in New York.”^{xxxv}

Spiritual Life in America

In his views of America the writer never lost the perspective of a European and a Christian, which inclined him to frequent comparisons of the high Mediterranean culture (to him France was its symbol) and the American *mass culture* in the moral, esthetic and religious dimensions. He complained about the extraordinary monotony and boredom of life in New York. However, he was most perplexed by the fact that he found himself where all the values were blurred, where there was neither direction nor firm footing, and the criteria to distinguish good from evil and beauty from ugliness did not exist. “In pre-war Poland it seemed to me that by going against the flow I was fulfilling a significant task. Here in America there is no flow against which I might be going.”^{xxxvi} To put it in contemporary terms, this image of a postmodern society was, and continued to be, very frustrating for Wittlin. Most frequently he mentioned two religions and idols of the human mass consumer: television and the dollar.

According to Wittlin, television was the American religion.^{xxxvii} In fact, shallow entertainment coming from the glass screen was an attempt at filling the void of life. Radio programs, and especially television shows that developed so rapidly in America, were to the writer a clear negation of high culture, a means of pursuing sensation at the price of the impoverished message and blurred values. Television consumerism was also an expression of the void of life, a serious intellectual, spiritual and social impoverishment. In the notes of the author of *Sól ziemi* there are a great many remarks, often very short but apt, describing some aspects of media subculture. “The fear of loneliness. Void in people. They fill it by yelling. The Erebus-television screens – where the shadows of boxers and baseball players wander about.”^{xxxviii} Educated in Greek and Latin classics, enamored of French literature, cognizant of the outstanding works of German writers, enjoying listening to Mozart’s music, Wittlin had reasons to complain: “Hell above me and hell before me. How can I bear it here, with Homer and Sophocles, squeezed between televisions.”^{xxxix} In the same year he noted down a characteristic mini-dialogue: “– Why are they shouting so much? – They want to shout down death. They have death everywhere. Look into their dim saloons [...] they are sitting on those high stools, sad and silent – and staring dully at the television.”^{xl} Wittlin diagnosed television (not free from manipulation) as a new American religion. He wrote in English: “Do you believe in television? Television is the American religion.”^{xli} Watching the checkered development of the image transmission, he observed in 1954 that the Americans are “a thoroughly televised nation”.^{xlii} His reflection on television is above all a description and diagnosis of American society. “Modern Erebus: Television. The screaming shadows and the silent living who watch the former.”^{xliii} Television contributes to the shallowness and disintegration of family life: “The American husband has nothing to talk about to his wife and children. Therefore he spends every spare moment at home watching television.”^{xliv} Some years later, expanding this thought, Wittlin wrote: “Radio and television, constant noise in their heads, all their interiority formed amidst noise and signing [...]. They listen to this not because they are interested in what the characters are saying. They do not hear that. They need the noise only to deaden the void howling in them – or the vacuum.”^{xlv} And finally, he recapitulated: “TV – the annihilation of the inner life.”^{xlvi} It is possible to infer from Wittlin’s notes that the world under pressure from the electronic mass media is a modern “Erebus” for Orpheus the poet who

yearns to leave the “20th-century hell”. Because he cannot do so, he remains in the role of a critic, he does not refrain from the evaluation of what he sees and appears as a sensitive judge and a prophet.

Another idol that very powerfully determined the life of Americans was the dollar. Wittlin wrote about it in his essay *Mój pierwszy rok w Ameryce* with a large dose of humor:

“Here the favourite of the public from both sexes, statuses, creeds and skin colours is a mythical creature, often (like e.g. in my case) elusive, and green like hope itself, and like the Prophet Muhammad’s flag. Only in New York does it have more splendid temples, particularly in the vicinity of Wall Street where the mysteries of transfers and ‘endorsements’, accessible only to the initiated, are enacted. [...] In the reporting year I met people who listened indifferently to the news of sunken ships, of thousands of lives drowned in the ocean, but started sighing and groaning, when, along with those catastrophes, numbers combined with the name of the green god appeared” (Wittlin 2000:321).

In the writer’s notebooks the remarks on the materialism of American life are much harsher. At the time the cited essay was published, he wrote: “America is degrading us intellectually. So it is necessary to live here like a pig, to make a dollar.”^{xlvii} Remarks about dollars often appear in a religious context: “When an American is looking at a check, his previously merry face turns grave, solemn, concentrated – looking like the faces of bigots when they hear about God or the Church.”^{xlviii} Or from another statement: “America. I believe in God: in a bank account.”^{lix} And perhaps even stronger words about the materialization of life in the United States: “Take away their money, and you will see what remains of them.”^l In 1945 Wittlin even intended to write a text telling how in the United States “the dolorism of Europe is opposed by dollarism.”^{li} He complained about the “orgy of consumption”^{lii} taking place in America and people were being appraised mainly on the basis of their property status. However, it was not the cult of wealth itself that the writer considered as bearing testimony to the desertion of high values, but the resulting depreciation of moral life. In 1947 he made two bitter entries: “America: here you are allowed to be a scab and a lout.”^{liii} “America: They have everything: full libraries, wonderful concerts, gramophone records, and they behave worse than my grandfather’s groom. At their party I felt worse than at a fair in Kosovo [...].”^{liiv} Also after a decade in the United States he did not change his mind. “Here, the dollar is a god to whom most of the natives pray. But there are a few atheists.”^{liv} In the same year he also wrote a short comment on the utopian idea of making humanity happy: “I have lived in the U.S. too long (over 10 years) to be impressed by material welfare – as the ultimate end which humanity is supposed to strive for. For too long have I lived in this country, which is an example of what the Soviets strive for, to accept that it is worthwhile to oppress millions of people so that the children of those millions have a refrigerator at home and do not have to go outside to relieve themselves.”^{lvi}

The tendency, widespread in America, to judge people by their bank balance, and not by the qualities of their mind or character, were perhaps the most painful phenomenon for Wittlin. As a distinguished writer in Poland, and an exile deprived of everything in America, he experienced his difficult lot with a particular intensity; hence a bitter confession: “Here, in America, I am not worth as much as my skills, but I am judged according to how well I am doing.”^{lvii} Wittlin did not condemn the American wealth, but he did not want to become involved in the American “rat race”. In 1942 he noted down: “[In this country it is a shame to have success and a book.”^{lviii} and several years later he stated pointedly: “I am not vulgar enough to be able to achieve success in America.”^{lix} He came forward as a critic of unrestrained consumption, insensitivity to the needs of the poor, concentration of life exclusively on gaining material wealth without sensitivity to suffering and poverty: “I would sooner absolve a man who from feared, gave his mother away to death, who repudiated his mother and father (St. Peter), than a man who, in complete security, lives in affluence and grows fat, and seeing others die of hunger, does not help them.”^{lx}

Another issue that the writer carefully looked at was religious life in America, or, as a matter of fact, its extreme impoverishment, a lack of the need for contact with God or the replacement of faith with its poor imitation aiming to satisfy a desire for comfort and worldly prosperity. Religion, although powerfully present in the social and political discourse of America, is devoid of spiritual depth. Hence a lack of comprehension for a person whose life is in the field of a much more serious struggle than the pursuit of success, of material advancement and psychological wellbeing: “The natives advise me to overcome difficulties. The cult of overcoming difficulties reigns here [...]. They obviously mean vulgar material difficulties: That I am concerned with overcoming other difficulties they do not want to hear.”^{lxi} It was probably under the influence of his observation of the New York metropolitan space that he noted down: “It is not the number of churches,

convents, chapels and shrines in a country that decides, in my view, whether this is a Christian country, but the number of Christian hearts [...]. Admittedly hearts cannot be counted or registered, but everybody can see and count churches.^{lxiii} He also frequently emphasized boredom and coldness in American churches, routinized and hurried practices, superficiality, a lack of depth: “Mass character – quantitativity in America. [...] Mass confession in churches. Speed and hasty confessions, hasty Holy Masses.”^{lxiii} For this reason America was to him a country where he recognized “pure, healthy paganism and a pagan materialized world.”^{lxiv} Ultimately, according to Wittlin: “In no country I know is so much said about God, religion, Christianity, and in none is there so little God, religious and Christianity – as in the United States.”^{lxv}

The writer also mentioned religious life in America in a published essay. From 1962 to 1975, almost every year, he spent his holiday in Europe, and in particular in Italy, in Sant’Egidio, near Cortona. In this small Tuscan locality, halfway between Florence and Rome, a sanctuary of the 13th-century Franciscan saint was erected. In 1972 Wittlin wrote an essay *Cortona, Luca Signorelli i święta Małgorzata z Cortony* [Cortona, Luca Signorelli and Saint Margaret of Cortona]. In it he expressed his fascination with Italian art and described the holiness of the medieval penitent. The text compared the old parish church in New York with the new one. For Wittlin this architectural change was a sign of negative spiritual transformations that occurred in America, leading to depersonalization of human relationships, and thus to the loss of what is essential in them:

“The parish church in the district of New York, where the undersigned had lived for over thirty years, bears the name, St. Margaret of Cortona. It was built some years ago in place of the previous church of the same name. The old church had stood there for almost a hundred years and there was nothing special about it. But, its interior was filled with the atmosphere of devotion, it was possible to concentrate and meditate there. It was destroyed to make room for a car park and a basketball field. The new church, erected nearby at substantial cost and not yet paid for, brings to mind neither Cortona nor St. Margaret. It is excessively modern, comfortable, polished; so much so that it is cold (in the spiritual sense). In winter it is over-heated with radiators, and in summer cooled down with air-conditioning devices. In general, the atmosphere of coldness reigns here. On the two floors services are held in the language comprehensible for most New York inhabitants, that is in English. Obviously, at the main, very modern altar, there is a relic of the Saint Penitent. The stormy life of the patron saint of this sanctuary is probably unknown to the body of parishioners who kneel down in front of this altar. Nor have I ever heard her mentioned in sermons or prayers. Her modernistic statue decorates the main gate of the church, but hardly anybody raises their eyes to it” (Wittlin 1991:407-408).

Wittlin perceived American religiosity as very orderly, commercialized, devoid of inner truth. In the light of his observation of people attending the above-mentioned church, he sometimes remarked on the style of life and thinking of the Catholics he had met there: “St. Margaret’s church – the Rosary, on Friday the fourth Mystery – the Carrying of the Cross. [Americans] think that Christ is supposed to help them [carry] the cross on their way to success, not to the crucifixion.”^{lxvi} In the writer’s notes there are remarks on boredom during sermons and on soulless ceremonialism: “Lord, how much boredom I have endured for you in this church (in American churches). The local soullessness – where the soul becomes business (e.g. Church) – tires me most”.^{lxvii} Thus the following statement does not seem surprising: “To you religion is not a need of the soul, for you no longer have a soul”.^{lxviii} The artificiality in the existence of Americans, a specific – as he put it – “make-up of life”,^{lxix} is a characteristic Wittlin had observed since the beginning of his stay in America. Almost two years after his arrival in the Antipodes, he wrote: “America is a land flowing with (condensed) milk and (artificial) honey.”^{lxx} He also observed that this strongly affects the religious sphere. Hence, “even Christ of the Diocese of New York looks as if he used Colgate toothpaste and washed himself with Palmolive soap.”^{lxxi}

However, Wittlin did not criticize American religiosity in its entirety. We know from his notebooks that the years spent in America were for him a time of intense religious awakening. As I mentioned, on May 25, 1953, the writer was baptized in New York, and left numerous notes on Christian spirituality. He greatly appreciated Thomas Merton, whom he considered as one of “the most sensitive and most penetrating Catholic writers in today’s world.” In the New York “Tematy” two of Merton’s articles were published, translated by Wittlin: *Czy przetrwamy nihilizm?* [Can we survive nihilism?] and *Odpowiedzialność wystawiona na próbę* [The Christian in world crisis].^{lxxii} In the American Trappist monk’s papers the author of *Sól ziemi* found many thoughts that he had earlier formulated himself, for example the need to awaken the

“Christian imagination” in response to human misery, or the idea of the common responsibility for peace in the world.

Wittlin called himself an exile and he was one in the meaning given this word by Edward Said, who understood exile primarily as loneliness (described by Conrad, for example in the novel *Amy Forster*), a lack of belonging, alienation – not a lack of identity, of cosmopolitan identity, but the unceasing sense of being different, of not adhering to the surrounding culture and customs (Said 2002:173-186). Life abroad did not Americanize the writer; his identity remained connected to the European cultural and historical experience. Only to a small extent did Wittlin adopt the country of his exile as his own (in contradistinction, e.g., to Miłosz), and failed to take possession of it by means of poetic words. To the end he believed his spiritual center to be Mediterranean culture, and in this respect his attitude was not exceptional; it was characteristic of many of his compatriots cast out beyond the borders of their fatherland.

Wittlin belongs to a very long succession of Polish authors who wrote about Washington’s country from the vantage point of exiles. It suffices to mention Czesław Miłosz, Aleksander Janta-Połczyński, Kazimierz Wierzyński, Maria Kuncewiczowa, Zygmunt Haupt, Jerzy Kosiński, Wojciech Karpiński and Stanisław Barańczak... The accounts left by Janta and Wierzyński are fundamentally different. The former became famous for his interesting accounts devoted to America: *Odkrycie Ameryki* [The Discovery of America] (1936), and shortly before his death he published a book of essays *Przyjemnie zapoznać* [Meeting People is Pleasant] (1972) on eminent Poles in America, and a volume of memoirs *Nowe odkrycie Ameryki* [America Re-Discovered] (1973). The latter published a book *Moja prywatna Ameryka* [My Private America] (1966). Mention of these publications is justified because they include accounts from the same period and they were written by people who knew America well and who were, simultaneously, outstanding writers and Wittlin’s friends. Janta notes down his ideas from the standpoint of a reporter who grasps the observed reality in the heat of the moment, describes situations and people, and often writes about matters interesting for both Poles and Americans: he entertains and moves simultaneously. On the other hand, in his essays originally broadcast by Radio Free Europe, Wierzyński looks at America, as it were, from a distance, mentions eminent individuals and well-known customs of American society (perhaps to express his appreciation to the radio sponsors). He stresses what is great and typical of America, painting a monumental picture their shadow on life of its uniqueness and beauty. The case of Wittlin is typical of the first generation of exiles who could not fully grasp and understand the United States, because the habits and experiences acquired in Europe cast in the New World. As a result he speaks in a much more muted voice than the aforementioned writers. Wittlin became acquainted with America mainly within the boundaries of the Bronx. Thanks to this, however, he gave not an extensive but an in-depth description of American reality. He watched it, as it were, on the peripheries and in hidden recesses never visited by a reporter avid for sensation, an inquisitive traveler or even a bona fide journalist. Wittlin recognized the achievements of America but did not idealize it. Perhaps his most favorable opinion of George Washington’s country was a statement recorded after almost 20 years of his stay in the United States of America: “I owe it to America and to Catholicism that I was able to live without lies, falsity and chicanery.”^{lxxiii} The writer appreciated his new homeland as a mainstay of democracy and freedom, as the country that gave shelter to thousands of refugees from all over the world, and to him it became a place of rescue from the holocaust, as well as a sanctuary for free speech. On the other hand, he also uttered bitter words against America, although he did it secretly, in writings that were not meant for publication. He blamed the Americans for breaking with the classical tradition, for materializing life and making it shallow, for the atrophy of sensitivity to the affairs of men and God. To America he was, and remains, not an accuser, but a moralist. On this basis it is possible to conclude that Wittlin did not actually criticize the country of his settlement, but set it a high standard; he wanted to see America not only as a political power capable of opposing Soviet violence, but also as a spiritually strong country. This endows his harsh remarks on the United States with a Christian quality: “You speak so much of Freedom with capital F, but you do not know how to be free. You are tethered from within,”^{lxxiv} he wrote this several months after his baptism. Thus the remarks on America he left in his various texts constitute the voice of a prophet who quietly but firmly speaks to his adopted compatriots. This voice did not sound clearly in the writer’s lifetime, but it should not be suppressed and neglected now.

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ⁱ The circumstances of his departure were unpleasant, and Wittlin did not like to mention them. The fact that he was a pacifist, combined with his Jewish origin, became reasons for press attacks against him by the end of 1930s.

ⁱⁱ Other little-known facts of the writer's life are reported, on the basis of the FBI archives, by H. Stephan, 2006: 258-260.

ⁱⁱⁱ Józef Wittlin's output is still awaiting a thorough study. He is known to have been loosely connected, in 1919-1920, with the expressionistic poetic group “Zdrój”, and later (and it was a much closer bond) with “Skamander.” In the inter-war period, he also translated, inter alia, *The Odyssey*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* and works by Joseph Roth, began a never-finished novel on St. Francis, wrote essays, and *Sól ziemi [Salth of the Earth]*, the first part of a the planned trilogy *Powieść o cierpliwym piechurze [A Tale of a Patient Infantryman]* – one of the most outstanding pacifist novels. There are few studies about him, and those in existence need to be extensively complemented. The only monograph on the writer written in his lifetime is a small book by Yurieff:1973. A large proportion of the knowledge on Wittlin is provided in the book ed. by Frajlich:2001. It contains a bibliography of studies on Wittlin's writings published before 1998.

^{iv} He had been translating Homer's work since 1912. Two earlier translations were published in 1924 and 1931.

^v The output in question includes 133 pocketsize notebooks, deposited in 12 folders, a number of copybooks and other texts. These materials are stored in the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw, catalog number: 1704. They bear a very interesting testimony to the writer's spiritual evolution and provide an intimate commentary on his own work and 20th-century events – especially in Poland and the United States. Since they were made available several years ago, they have become an indispensable context for the understanding of the writer's output and views. The Houghton Library at Harvard University is in possession of his memoirs from years 1971-1974, which will be made available in 2026.

^{vi} They are the following essays: *Plaszcz [The Coat]*, *Do jakiej Ameryki jechałem [The America I Traveled to]*, *Mój pierwszy rok w Ameryce [My First Year in America]*, *Pod znakiem „Kartofli” [Under the Sign of “Potatoes”]*, *Novi Eboracii, Poe w Bronxie [Poe in Bronx]*, *Hemingway, śmierć i zabijanie [Hemingway, Death and Killing]*. In Wittlin: 2000.

^{vii} It includes: *Tadeusz Kościuszko*, [Thaddeus Kosciuszko] *Lorca na scenie nowojorskiej [Lorca on the New York Stage]*, *Teatr amerykański (i zachodnioeuropejski) [The American Theater (and the west European)]* in: Wittlin: 1995.

^{viii} The talks were entitled: *Graham Greene – przypadek wypalony [Graham Greene – a Burnt Out Case]*, *O Bernardzie Berensonie [On Bernard Berenson]*, *O książce Berensona „The Passionate Sightseer” [On Bernard*

Berenson's Book "The Passionate Sightseer", *O książce Filipa Friedmana „Their Brothers' Keepers”* [On Philip Friedman's Book "Their Brothers' Keepers", *American Poet – Robinson Jeffers, O starożytności klasycznej w Stanach Zjednoczonych* [On Classical Antiquity in the United States], *Atak na awangardę literacką w Stanach Zjednoczonych* [An Attack on the Literary Avant-garde in the United States], *O książce Van Wyck Brookes „Twórcy i odkrywcy. Dzieje pisarza w Ameryce. 1800-1915. (5 tomów)* [On Van Wyck Brookes's Book "Makers and Finders: A History of the Writer in America, 1800-1915 (5 volumes)], *O poecie amerykańskim Carlu Sandburgu* [On Carl Sandburg, an American Poet], *O książce Carla Sandburga o Lincolnie* [On Carl Sandburg's Book on Lincoln]. All papers in the archives of Joseph Wittlin in The Piłsudski Institute of America in New York.

^{ix} *Przekłady 5 poetów amerykańskich: Karl Shapiro, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Conrad Aiken, Marianna Moore* [Translations of 5 American poets: Karl Shapiro, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Conrad Aiken, Marianne Moore]; *Wiersze Robinsona Jeffersa* [Poems by Robinson Jeffers]; *Współczesna poezja amerykańska i brytyjska według antologii Pawła Mayewskiego* [Contemporary American and British Poetry according to Paweł Mayewski's Anthology], *Współczesna poezja amerykańska: Auden, Steven Vincent Benét, Eliot, Williams, Merton* [Contemporary American Poetry: Auden, Steven Vincent Benét, Eliot, Williams, Merton]. All papers in the archives of Joseph Wittlin in The Piłsudski Institute of America in New York

^x The manuscripts are preserved in the writer's archive at the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw.

- ^{xi} Wittlin, letters to A. Janta-Polczyński.
^{xii} Wittlin, notebook 85 dated 1946, folder 8, card 221.
^{xiii} Wittlina, letters to K. Wierzyński.
^{xiv} Wittlin, letters to M. Grydzewski.
^{xv} Wittlin, notebook 116 dated 1957, folder 11, card 296.
^{xvi} Wittlin, notebook 85 dated 1946, folder 8, card 234.
^{xvii} Wittlin, notebook 81 dated 1945, folder 8, card 10.
^{xviii} Ibidem, cards 25-26.
^{xix} Wittlin, notebook 83 dated 1945, folder 8, card 126.
^{xx} Wittlin, notebook 84 dated 1946, folder 8, card 145.
^{xxi} Wittlin, notebook 105 dated 1952, cards 218-219.
^{xxii} Wittlin, notebook 80 dated 1944, folder 7, card 413.
^{xxiii} Wittlin, notebook 94 dated 1949, folder 9, card 120.
^{xxiv} Wittlin, notebook 82 dated 1945, folder 8, card 85.
^{xxv} Wittlin, notebook 83 dated 1945, folder 8, card 114.
^{xxvi} Wittlin, notebook 81 dated 1945, folder 8, card 20.
^{xxvii} Wittlin, notebook 72 dated 1941, folder 7, card 117.
^{xxviii} Wittlin, notebook 86 dated 1947, folder 8, card 241.
^{xxix} Wittlin, notebook 105 dated 1952, folder 10, cards 218-219.
^{xxx} Wittlin, notebook 105 from 1952, folder 10, card 202.
^{xxxi} Wittlin, notebook 120 dated 1962, folder 12, card 124.
^{xxxii} Wittlin, notebook 118 dated 1959, folder 11, card 381.
^{xxxiii} Wittlin, notebook 97 dated 1950, folder 9, card 285.
^{xxxiv} Wittlin, notebook 99 dated 1950, folder 99, card 397.
^{xxxv} Wittlin, notebook 121 dated 1960, folder 10, card 520.
^{xxxvi} Wittlin, notebook 98 dated 1950, folder 9, cards 351-352.

^{xxxvii} To Wittlin, television was a symbol of a broader social phenomenon, namely, of a specific media subculture and the emergence of the contemporary *homo medians*, subject to the pressure of primitive entertainment and manipulated information. Wittlin even planned to write on this theme: "The life of an average New York woman, deprived of her own experiences. It is spent on wonderful experiences. Describe the life of such a [woman] concerned about divorces of film actors and actresses, love affairs [...], etc." (J. Wittlin, notebook 101 dated 1951, folder 10, card 41).

- ^{xxxviii} Wittlin, notebook 98 dated 1950, folder 9, card 337.
^{xxxix} Wittlin, notebook 100 dated 1951, folder 9, card 403.
^{xl} Wittlin, notebook 101 dated 1951, folder 10, card 6.
^{xli} Wittlin, notebook 99 dated 1950, folder 9, card 370.
^{xlII} Wittlin, notebook 110 dated 1954, folder 10, card 431.
^{xlIII} Wittlin, notebook 100 dated 1951, folder 9, card 407.
^{xlIV} Wittlin, notebook 98 dated 1950, folder 9, card 397.

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- xliv Wittlin, notebook 116 dated 1957, folder 11, cards 280-281.
- xlvi Wittlin, notebook 116 dated 1957, folder 11, card 261.
- xlvii Wittlin, notebook 71 dated 1941, folder 6, cards 85-86.
- xlviii Wittlin, notebook 82 dated 1945, folder 8, card 59.
- xliv Wittlin, notebook 84 dated 1945, folder 8, card 163.
- l Wittlin, notebook 105 dated 1952, folder 10, card 224.
- li Wittlin, notebook 81 dated 1945, folder 7, card 40.
- lii Wittlin, notebook 115 dated 1957, folder 10, card 231.
- liii Wittlin, notebook 86 dated 1947, folder 8, card 268.
- liv Wittlin, notebook 86 dated 1947, folder 8, card 333.
- lv Wittlin, notebook 100 dated 1951, folder 9, card 409.
- lvi Wittlin, notebook 100 dated 1951, folder 9, card 459.
- lvii Wittlin, notebook 94 dated 1949, folder 9, card 120.
- lviii Wittlin, notebook 80 dated 1944, folder 7, card 379.
- lix Wittlin, notebook 89 dated 1947, folder 8, card 374.
- lx Wittlin, notebook 84 from 1946, folder 8, card 212. Wittlin, despite his difficult position as an exile, made efforts to be a philanthropist and helped people in difficult financial circumstances or poor health. The best-known example of this is his commitment to helping a young Polish poetess Halina Poświatowska who, thanks to his initiative, could come for treatment to the USA.
- lxi Wittlin, notebook 81 dated 1945, folder 8, cards 33-34.
- lxii Wittlin, notebook 105 dated 1952, folder 9, card 202.
- lxiii Wittlin, notebook 108 dated 1954, folder 10, card 355.
- lxiv Wittlin, notebook 117 dated 1958, folder 10, card 330.
- lxv Wittlin, notebook 107 dated 1953, folder 10, card 346.
- lxvi Wittlin, notebook 120 dated 1960, folder 12, card 495.
- lxvii Wittlin, notebook 126 dated 1969, folder 12, card 92.
- lxviii Wittlin, notebook 105 dated 1952, folder 10, card 219.
- lxix Wittlin, notebook 90 dated 1948, folder 8, card 444.
- lxx Wittlin, notebook 77 dated 1943, folder 7, card 301.
- lxxi Wittlin, notebook 90 dated 1948, folder 8, card 444.
- lxxii The first paper was published in number 14 (1965) and the second in number 25 (1968).
- lxxiii Wittlin, notebook 119 dated 1959, folder 10, card 418.
- lxxiv Wittlin, notebook 108 dated 1953, folder 10, card 262.