

"This is an utterly exceptional book..." Ryszard Kapuściński

Kazimierz Nowak



ACROSS THE DARK CONTINENT

**Bicycle Diaries from Africa
1931-1936**



I am deeply moved by Kazimierz Nowak's book: *Across the Dark Continent*. Its content and the personality of the writer account for its compelling nature. As such, it should command greater attention and wider recognition. This incredible story unfailingly features in my lectures, discussions and commentaries on international affairs. I ardently hope that it will take its place among the classics of Polish reportage.

Krzysztof

Ryszard Kapuściński

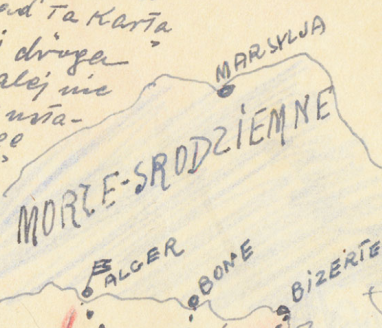
A solitary traveller moves tirelessly forward. His path leads him through breathtaking landscapes, past picturesque waterfalls, smoking volcanoes, countless herds of wild animals reigning over boundless spaces, through desert sands, the barren savannah and overgrown forest trails. He stops from time to time to take a photograph or make a note in his journal, and then moves on again, pushing his rickety bicycle loaded with some modest possessions. This is Kazimierz Nowak, the author of this story which, like a fairytale, transports us to a wonderful kingdom, distant in both space and time: Africa in the 1930s.

Gość

Kochany Marys!

*Wiem, że ta Karta
da Ci orientację dos.
Kochod Taceusza - co do moich
planów - w Karadym na-
wie w walnej chwili
pomysł nad Ta Karta
Sa NGIGMI drugie
malwa! dalej nie
ostatecznie usta-
lic nie mogę
jenera.
Sa!*

Parę



www.kazimierznowak.pl



PRZEJDŹ
do księgarń online:
www.sorus.pl

ACROSS THE DARK CONTINENT

Bicycle Diaries from Africa 1931–1936

*Oh, Mary! I so very much wish to write a book one day –
a thick and interesting tome –
and then to personally dedicate one of the first copies*

“To my dearest Marysieńka”.

*Alas, as yet, this is but a dream of mine –
much time will pass before I need to worry about the critics...*

Kazimierz Nowak (from a letter to his wife), Clanwilliam, by the Olifants River,
Africa, 5 June 1934

ACROSS THE DARK CONTINENT

KAZIMIERZ
NOWAK

Bicycle Diaries from Africa
1931–1936

Collected, edited and prefaced by
Łukasz Wierzbicki

Translated by
Ida Naruszewicz-Rodger


POZNAŃ

Photographs by Kazimierz Nowak from the private collections of
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NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

In response to the growing popularity and huge demand for the book *Across the Dark Continent*, Sorus Publishers have prepared its sixth (2011) and seventh (2013) editions.

Through the generosity of Kazimierz Nowak's family, we have obtained new material which has enabled us to introduce numerous amendments and additions to the latest editions. We have reviewed and modified the photographs and maps, which now boast enhanced graphics and provide more accurate information about the route taken by Nowak. We have also added an index of place names to make for easier reading.

We are particularly grateful to those diligent readers who reported mistakes and inaccuracies in the previous editions. The overriding aim of both the editor and the publisher has been to use the available material in such a way as to create a consistent whole, while capturing the spirit and retaining the original style of Nowak's narrative. For this reason, it was decided that photograph captions should be limited to direct quotes from his texts, and that footnotes would only be supplied where deemed necessary. Kazimierz Nowak's reports are rich in ethnographic, scientific, historic and geographical material. His expedition is likely to stimulate a great deal of additional independent research.

This edition of *Across the Dark Continent* is published under the patronage of the Foundation of Kazimierz Nowak. Established in November 2010, the Foundation aims to honour Nowak's memory, while promoting the values and achievements of this extraordinary yet long-forgotten traveller.

INTRODUCTION

TO THE FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

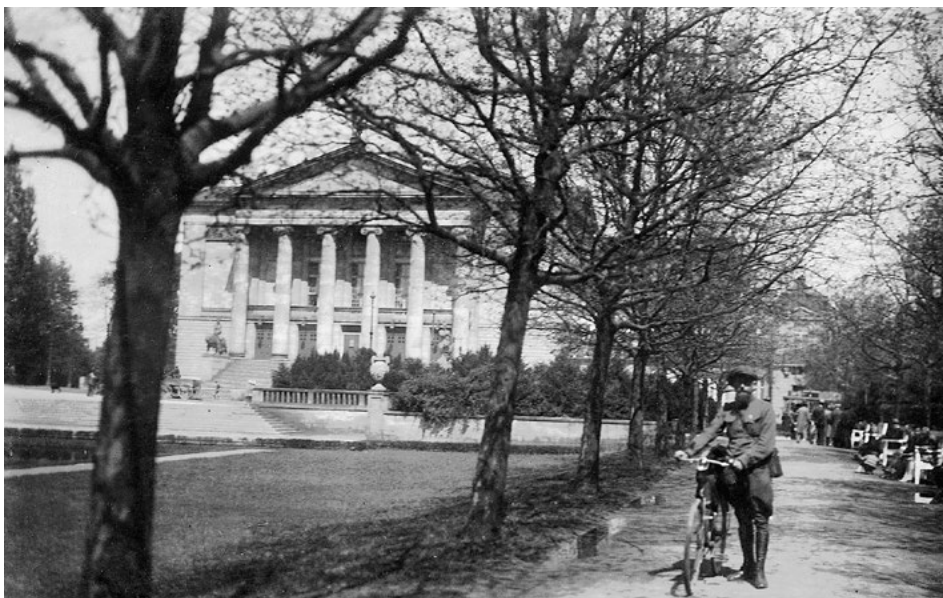
A solitary traveller moves tirelessly forward. His path leads him through incredible landscapes, past magnificent waterfalls, smoking volcanoes, countless herds of wild animals reigning over boundless spaces, through desert sands, the barren savannah and overgrown forest trails. He stops from time to time to take a photograph or make a note in his journal, and then moves on again, pushing a rickety bicycle loaded with his modest possessions. This is Kazimierz Nowak, the author of this story which, like a fairy tale, transports us to a wonderful kingdom, distant in both space and time: Africa in the 1930s.

My grandfather, Józef Wiśniewski, was a fascinating storyteller. Amongst the most memorable of his stories were those featuring Kazimierz Nowak, a traveller from Poznań, who between 1931 and 1936 undertook a remarkable journey through Africa. As a boy, my grandfather had diligently followed reports of Nowak's adventures in newspapers and magazines. It was also from my grandfather that I learned that the only post-war publication dedicated to Nowak was a photograph album entitled *Across the Dark Continent*¹ prepared by his daughter, Elżbieta Nowak-Gliszewska. This was a collection of over three hundred photographs taken by Nowak.

Inspired by my grandfather's tales, I went to the library in the spring of 1998, intending to locate Kazimierz Nowak's reports from Africa.

'Yes, this is the journey I was telling you about,' my grandfather enthused, when I brought him the first copies of the archived articles. Excited, he recounted further stories, recalling the magazines in which they had been printed. In pursuit of Nowak's reports, I searched through hundreds of volumes and microfiches of such periodicals as *Kurier Poznański*, *Światowid*, *Na Szerokim Świecie*, *Naokoło Świata*, *Ilustracja Polska* and *Przewodnik Katolicki* from 1931–1937. My research lasted several months. After locating additional letters from Africa, it was with amazement and awe that I pieced together the incredible adventures of the traveller from Poznań.

¹ K. Nowak, E. Gliszewska, *Przez Czarny Ląd (Through the Dark Continent)*, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1962.



Kazimierz Nowak in front of the Grand Theatre in Poznań

*

Kazimierz Nowak was born on 11 January 1897 in the town of Stryj in the Podole Region². At the age of fifteen, he travelled to the Vatican: it was his first independent trip abroad.

After the Great War, Nowak moved to Poznań. He took a job as a clerk in an insurance company, but frequently cycled around Poland, indulging his passion for travel and photography. On 19 March 1922, he married Maria Gorcik, and his daughter, Elżbieta, was born in the same year. His son, Romuald, was born in 1925. During the Great Depression, Nowak lost his job and for many months searched for a new one, but to no avail. In March 1925, he decided to leave the country to support his family as a foreign correspondent and photographer. He undertook two European trips, cycling through Hungary, Austria, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Romania, Greece and Turkey. In 1928, he reached Tripolitania in North Africa, which was at the time in the grip of war. Health problems and a shortage of money forced Nowak to return to Poland, but he decided that he would traverse the African continent from north to south in the future. He travelled across Poland and visited France, simultaneously making preparations for his African expedition. Few people then knew of his plans, and those who did scarcely believed in the possibility of fulfilling such an ambitious dream.

² Then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and now in Ukraine.

Nowak set off on 4 November 1931 from Boruszyn to Poznań, from there by train to Rome, then to Naples by bicycle, and finally by boat across the Mediterranean Sea. On 26 November, he once more set foot on the Dark Continent. From Tripoli, he was to ride thousands of kilometres south to Cape Agulhas, on his seven-year-old, trusty bicycle. His arrival at the Maradah Oasis, on Easter Saturday 1932, caused consternation among the officers on duty at the Zone Headquarters. Nobody could understand what a solitary cyclist from Poland was doing in the middle of the desert. Due to the unsettled situation in Cyrenaica, the Italian authorities ordered Nowak to change his route and travel to Alexandria in Egypt via Benghazi. He therefore had to reorganise his planned southern route. He travelled along the Nile, by the African Great Lakes, and then deeper into the continent, vibrant with its own, unfathomable life. Echoes of world events – the Great Depression and fascist politics in Europe – would sometimes reach him, but these seemed very distant in the face of the raging epidemics and sinister locust clouds which plagued the Dark Continent.

Travelling alone, Nowak would at times visit native villages in order to buy food or listen to local legends. He met the Tuareg, the Egyptian fellahin³, the Shilluk people inhabiting the banks of the Nile, the proud Watusi, the Babinga Pygmies and other Pygmy peoples, Transvaal Boers, Hottentots, Bushmen, the primitive Abasalampasu, the Hausa and many other exotic inhabitants of the continent, all united in their common fight for survival in a world governed by nature. As he continued on his way, the beat of tam-tams broadcast the extraordinary tale of the solitary white man and his strange vehicle.

By the sound of his flapping tent, Nowak recorded his impressions and observations. He wrote articles for newspapers at home in which he commented on the beauty of Africa, but also on the dangers of its wilderness. He wrote about colonisation and globalisation. He wrote to his beloved wife and children, telling them how much he missed them and that he hoped his efforts would bring the family some much-desired financial stability.

Nowak was encouraged by the kindness he experienced from missionaries. His sense of isolation seemed to increase whenever he came across white settlements; he observed how much he differed from white officials, army personnel and fortune seekers. Sensitive to injustice and full of respect for unspoilt nature, he assessed European imperialism objectively, critically and boldly, in a manner untypical of the time.

During his travels, Nowak shied away from city lights. Whenever he spotted a town on the horizon, he would pitch his tent outside it, and spend another night away from civilisation in his beloved, unspoilt African wilderness. Contrary to the hopes of the Polish Navy and Colonial League, he

³ Peasants or farmers.

would not support the colonial ambitions of the Polish state. Perhaps for that reason, Nowak was not given any material assistance other than the provision of bicycle tyres from the Polish rubber manufacturer, *Stomil*.

Meanwhile, Maria Nowak acted as an intermediary between her husband and his publisher. Thanks to Nowak's articles and photographs from the Dark Continent, she managed to support the family in Poznań. In accordance with his instructions, she regularly prepared parcels of photographic supplies and sent them to Africa. At times, she even managed to provide her husband with some modest financial assistance. She also sent him a 35mm Contax camera purchased from the Poznań camera workshop run by Kazimierz Greger, with which he took over 10,000 photographs during his travels.

On 30 April 1934, Kazimierz Nowak reached Cape Agulhas – the southernmost point of Africa. While in Cape Town, he decided to take a different route home, crossing the whole continent on his own once again. He set off immediately, in spite of debilitating malaria attacks and ever-empty pockets.

In his interview for *Dziennik Poznański*, he would later admit that the British were so full of admiration for his exploits that they offered him a free first-class ticket back to Europe, which he respectfully declined.

'I was overwhelmed by fear,' he recalled, 'thinking that I might find myself trapped inside four polished cabin walls. The sound of the restaurant jazz band rang in my ears and the silhouettes of elegant men and women loomed large before me. I got on my bike and fled.'

In the middle of the wilderness in South West Africa, Nowak's bicycle fell to pieces. Unexpected assistance came from Mieczysław Wiśniewski, a Pole living in Gumuchab, who gave Nowak a horse called *Ryś*⁴. Nowak then bought another one named *Żbik*⁵. A few days later, *Żbik* was exchanged for *Cowboy*, used by Nowak as a pack horse. Nowak travelled three thousand kilometres in the saddle before visiting Count Zamoyski at his *fazenda*⁶ in Angola, where he parted company with his four-legged companions.

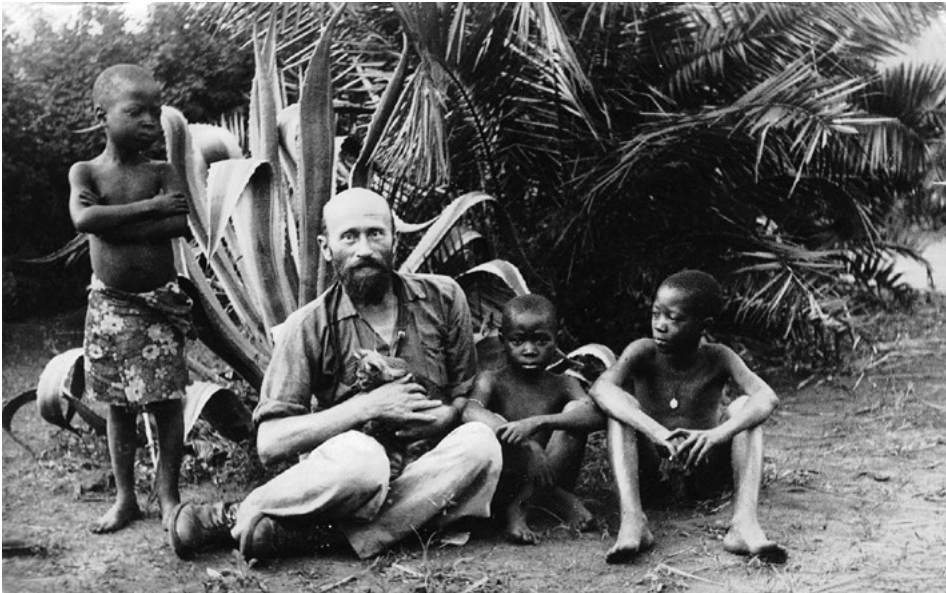
On a bicycle borrowed from the Zamoyski family, Nowak reached the Kasai River. There, the cyclist and horseman tried his hand at sailing. He negotiated the Kasai's rough and unpredictable waters in a made-to-order dugout canoe – *Poznań I*. This was lost, however, in an accident on the Kawewe cascades and Nowak was forced to walk hundreds of kilometres to Lulua, where he purchased another boat and customised it to his needs. He christened it *Maryś*, in honour of his wife. In September 1935 in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo) and after two months of solitary navigation, Nowak's journey along the Lulua, Kasai and Congo rivers came to an end. Astride his bicycle once more, he reached Lake Chad. The

⁴ The Polish term for *lynx*, or the diminutive of *Richard*.

⁵ The Polish term for *wildcat*.

⁶ The Portuguese term for *farm*.

authorities of French Equatorial Africa would not permit him to travel alone through the Sahara, insisting that he should be accompanied by a caravan with adequate supplies of water. Nowak then bought a dromedary⁷, hired a driver and formed his own caravan. He spent the following five months astride his dromedary, *Ueli*, arriving eventually in Ouargla. The final thousand kilometres from Ouargla to Algiers on the Mediterranean Sea saw Nowak on his bicycle once again. In November 1936, he completed his journey of over 40,000 kilometres. With his remaining money, he bought some warm clothes (it was autumn in Europe) and a ferry ticket to Marseilles. The next stop on his itinerary was Beaulieu near St. Etienne, where he spent two weeks at a Polish expat mining colony (which he had visited during his earlier trip around Europe). He tried to earn some money to pay for a railway ticket and for the transport of his bicycle back to Poland, selling prints from Africa as well as photographs taken of the local miners. He then headed for Paris where he obtained his Belgian and German visas. Thanks to his wife's assistance and with support from the *Stomil* tyre factory, he received a loan of 750 francs from the Polish consulate.



The traveller in the company of his African friends

On the night of 22 December 1936, he crossed the German-Polish border at Zbąszyń. Disembarking from the train, in the shadows of the darkened platform, he recognised his dearest amongst the people awaiting him.

⁷ A one-humped Arabian camel as opposed to the Asian two-humped Bactrian camel.

Upon his return to Poznań, Kazimierz Nowak delivered lectures and presented photographs pertaining to the ethnography of the African continent at the Apollo Cinema. He also travelled to other cities, presenting at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the Warsaw School of Commerce. He planned to publish his collected materials in the form of a book and to undertake another trip, this time to India and Southeast Asia. Alas, he was not to realise these dreams. Frequent relapses of malaria weakened him and he developed periostitis in his left leg. While in hospital following an operation, he contracted pneumonia. Nowak died on 13 October 1937, less than a year after his return to Poland.



The funeral of Kazimierz Nowak in Poznań, October 1937

Kazimierz Nowak was buried at the cemetery of *Our Lady of Sorrows* in Górczyn (Poznań), dressed in his travelling outfit and with a colonial pith helmet placed on his chest. As the church bells were tolling in Głogowska Street, a Boy Scout delegation, bearing the banner of the Polish Navy and Colonial League, walked at the head of the funeral procession. My grandfather remembered taking a day off from work to pay his final respects to the great traveller.

An exhibition of Nowak's possessions entitled *Africa Speaks* opened on 30 April 1939 at Poznań's No. 6 Primary School, located at 35 St. Martin's Street (at present no. 65). Profits from the exhibition went to Nowak's widow and the Polish National Defence Fund. Maria Nowak also received some financial assistance from funds raised by a cycling event to commemorate Kazimierz Nowak's achievements. This was organised by the *Stomil Sports Club* on 19 July 1939.

*

The benefits of this epic journey for Nowak are perhaps questionable. With each day he faced new dangers: hunger; thirst; the relentless heat of the tropical sun followed by dispiriting downpours in the rainy season... It is possible to dismiss him as an eccentric individual who paid a very heavy price for his years of solitary travel. After all, having been separated from his family for so long, he returned home every bit as poor as when he had set off. Overcome by sickness, at the age of forty, he died.

It is also possible, however, to see in his image a man who discovered the path to his own destiny under the African sun. Nowak's letters reveal that his dreams were conceived in childhood, when he looked at pictures of exotic countries. He was happy to have devoted his life to the pursuit of these dreams.

Not all of our dreams are connected with places as distant as Africa. Sometimes, however, simple dreams can be as difficult to realise as those we perceive to be more challenging. Relying only on himself, Kazimierz Nowak achieved his objectives, remembering that in order to return home safely he could not waste a single day on fear, anger or remorse. And he did not. At every obstacle crossing his path, he drew upon ever greater reserves of courage and willpower.

*

During the period of my initial research, which lasted several months, I came across over one hundred press reports from different stages of Nowak's journey. Unfortunately, in spite of my efforts, I did not manage to locate the traveller's family or additional archival material before the first Polish edition of the book was published. The next stage of my work was to copy Nowak's letters, put them in chronological order and edit them to form a complete narrative. This was no easy task. Some of the chapters in the book were compiled from extracts of Nowak's many and varied reports.

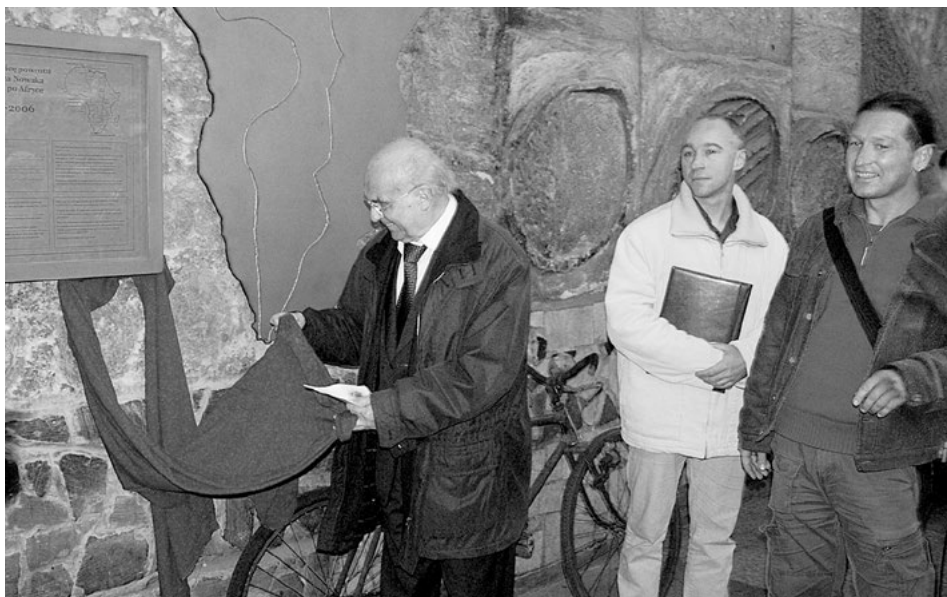
Although I was conscious of the gaps in this narrative, I was aware that I had before me a fascinating, beautifully written story, and a remarkable, detailed insight into 1930s Africa. This was a testimony of superhuman achievement and a unique record of one of the most extraordinary expeditions in the history of African exploration.

In 2000, the book entitled *Rowerem i pieszo przez Czarny Ląd* (*Across the Dark Continent*), published by *Sorus Publishers* (based in Poznań), appeared in the bookshops. It consisted of 150 pages. I decided to add to Nowak's story a moving tribute written by Tadeusz Perkitny, a fellow globetrotter from Poznań, which was released in the press shortly after Nowak's death. I then believed that the task which I had undertaken, inspired by my grandfather's

tales, had been accomplished. I was mistaken. Six years and two books later, I finally found the individuals who enabled the story to further unfold...

In early 2006, the book was picked up by Maciej Pastwa, another globetrotter from Poznań. Deeply moved, he decided to fund a commemorative plaque dedicated to Kazimierz Nowak.

Coincidentally, *Sorus Publishers* at the same time received a warm letter penned by Ryszard Kapuściński, who had also been inspired by Nowak's story. The author of *The Emperor* expressed his heartfelt wish that *Across the Dark Continent* should 'have a permanent place among the classics of Polish reportage.'



The unveiling of the commemorative plaque in Poznań in November 2006.

From left: Ryszard Kapuściński, Łukasz Wierzbicki and Maciej Pastwa.

Photograph taken by D. Szmajda

Upon seeing the letter from the famous writer, Maciej Pastwa was rendered speechless. His dream had been that Richard Kapuściński would personally unveil the plaque dedicated to Nowak. A metal cut-out of Africa, displaying Nowak's route, and the commemorative plaque with a biographical note in six languages, were placed in the hall of the Poznań railway station at the exact point where he began and ended his journey. Ryszard Kapuściński accepted our invitation, travelled to Poznań, and unveiled the plaque on 25 November 2006. His words at the ceremony became forever imprinted in my memory:

'Kazimierz Nowak's accomplishments make his name worthy of a place in all dictionaries and encyclopaedias, alongside such names as Stanley and

Livingstone. He was a man of great imagination and considerable courage. He showed that one white man, armed only with his faith in other human beings, could traverse a huge continent, all alone, at a time when Europe had just begun to discover the Third World. He taught us, back in the 1930s, how to approach the Third World and its inhabitants.

Only those who are familiar with the places through which Kazimierz Nowak travelled, and the modes of transport he used, can appreciate his heroic courage and incredible humility. He did not boast of his accomplishments; he simply described what he saw.⁷

Following these events, many people became interested in the exploits of Kazimierz Nowak. An idea was born that a square in Poznań's Łazarz district, where the traveller and his family had lived at 32/8 Lodowa Street, should be named after him. Another commemorative plaque, in the shape of Africa and dedicated to Nowak, was soon unveiled in the Garden of Tolerance by the Museum of Arkady Fiedler in Puszczykowo.

Nowak's family contacted us after watching television coverage of the unveiling of the plaque at Poznań Station. Irena Gołębiowska (a close relative of Maria Nowak, Kazimierz's wife) invited us to Sułów Wielki where, amongst the family's memorabilia, she kept many hitherto unpublished photographs taken in Africa and personally annotated by 'Uncle Kazio'. Through her, we were able to locate other members of his family. It turned out that Nowak's wife and his daughter, Elżbieta, despite the turmoil of war and subsequently relocating to the Tricity⁸, managed to keep many of the traveller's possessions. After Elżbieta's death, her husband, Marian Gliszewski, looked after these mementos. During my visit to his house in 2006, I was presented with a unique collection of photographs and clippings from African newspapers, letters written by Nowak to his family, and several hundred pre-war magazines and newspapers containing his correspondence from Africa. This was much more than I had been able to locate in the Poznań libraries. I also learnt that in the 1950s, Elżbieta Gliszewska, supported by her husband, had prepared an eight-hundred-page-long typescript for a book entitled *Traversing Africa*, which could not be published at that time.

Once again, I set about editing *Across the Dark Continent*, but now with a far more complete set of materials at my disposal. Simultaneously, I began work on a richly-illustrated book entitled *Afryka Kazika (Kazik's Africa)*: a collection of forty stories inspired by Kazimierz Nowak's adventures, intended for young readers. This book was published by *BIS Publishers* in February 2008. Together with *Sorus Publishers*, we are planning further publications drawing on the archival material we now possess, including a collection of Nowak's letters to his wife and son.

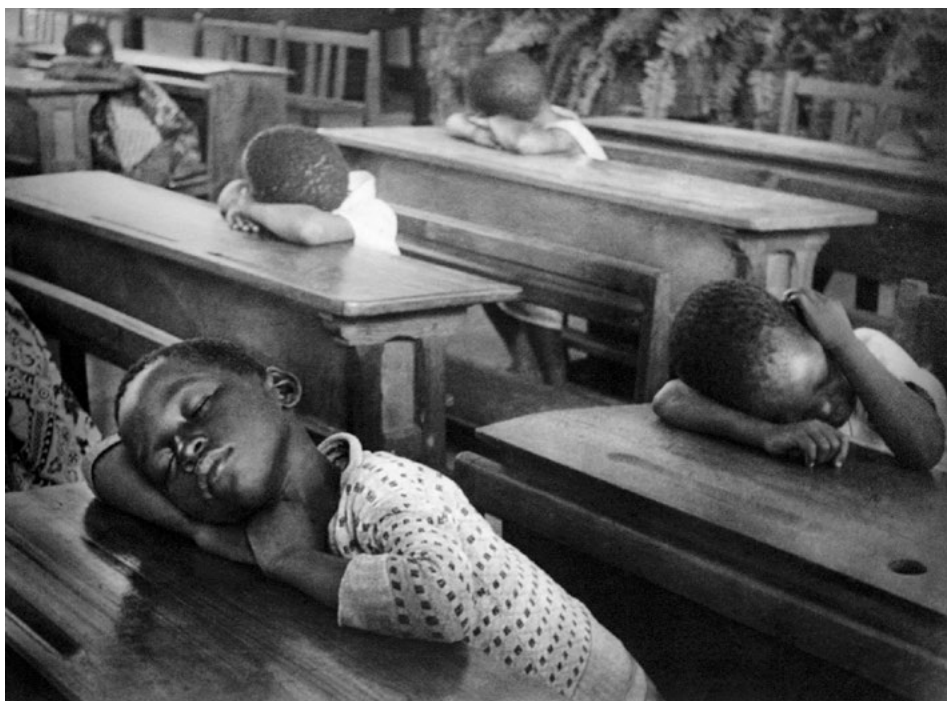
⁸ Three cities: Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot in the north of Poland on the Baltic coast.

For his inspiration and assistance in my research, I am indebted to my grandfather, Józef Wiśniewski, who died in 2002. I would like to thank Marian Gliszewski, Irena Gołębiowska and Janina Kielar (whose grandfather was Kazimierz Nowak's uncle), as well as Beata Nowak (whose husband was the traveller's grandson), for providing me with access to a great deal of original material. I am also grateful to *Sorus Publishers* for their invaluable assistance in preparing all seven editions of the book. My sincere thanks go to all the people involved in popularising Kazimierz Nowak's history, especially to Maciej Pastwa and Ryszard Kapuściński, whose participation in the unveiling of Nowak's plaque is for me a precious and unforgettable memory. I would like to dedicate all the work I have put into the publication of this edition to my wife, Klaudia.

*

This edition of *Across the Dark Continent* is a source of great joy to me.

Seventy years after Nowak's death, his dream has been realised, and a book documenting his travels, containing previously unseen images, has been published.



Compulsory one-hour rest time at the Missionary School in Elisabethville

In recent months, Kazimierz Nowak has featured in numerous press, radio and television reports, has become a comic book hero and a face seen on t-shirts. His photographs are widely exhibited and children draw pictures inspired by his adventures with great enthusiasm and imagination. Sports College No. 5 in Poznań became the first school in Poland to be named after Kazimierz Nowak.

As I am writing these words, a group of Polish cyclists is crossing the Dark Continent. They are taking part in an expedition following in the footsteps of Kazimierz Nowak. It started out on 4 November 2009 from Boruszyn, outside the house where the Nowaks lived in 1931. The initiative, which was christened *Nowak's Africa 2009-2011*, has taken the form of a relay in which over one hundred people from Poland and other countries have to date participated.

The story of this solitary figure travelling across the Dark Continent stirs the imagination. It will move the readers of this book as well as the young readers of *Kazik's Africa*. Nowak's experiences constitute a lesson in how to perceive the world through respect, kindness and interest. They are also a great source of inspiration for those planning their own journeys.

This is exactly what happened in my case. Motivated by my grandfather's stories, my trip to the local library turned out to be the start of one of my biggest adventures and inspired me to make several trips to Africa. Each one was an attempt to find answers to questions generated by Nowak's letters.

Since Nowak's time, much has changed on the Dark Continent. As predicted by the Polish traveller, and contrary to the interests of the colonial powers, the African nations demanded their independence.

Africa's struggle for self-determination was assisted by the Second World War. When the black soldiers drafted into the British and French armies returned home from war-torn Europe, they did so with a strengthened national consciousness, a newly-gained faith in their capability to decide their own destiny, and a desire to become free of white people's authority. The sparks of rebellion set the entire continent on fire. Following the examples of Ghana and Guinea in 1960, seventeen other countries soon gained their independence. Nothing could stop the course of history.

Independence, which came at a heavy price, did not guarantee peace and prosperity for African countries. It brought with it a new set of problems. Political borders, often artificially superimposed over tribal lands, frequently became the cause of conflicts unresolved to this day. Elitist governments and army regimes, prone to corruption, cannot relieve widespread poverty.

Officially, white people no longer rule the continent, but colonialism has, in fact, assumed new forms and economic incarnations. Away from the crowded, impoverished streets, and behind the tall green hedges, one can still find elegant villas with floodlit swimming pools, and restaurants where black waiters must abide by colonial etiquette.

The deeply-rooted prejudices of bygone days are slowly fading. Time passes, and the sons of independence fighters become fathers themselves. Africa awakens and this is its moment. Its unspoilt environment is its greatest asset. Africa's breath-taking nature, though threatened, still attracts and enchants people from all over the world. It offers a sense of freedom. The wealthy inhabitants of Europe and America come here on safari in order to experience the eternal cycle of nature, if only for a fleeting moment. They are welcomed. Comfortable taxis collect them from the airports and take them to luxurious hotels, from which travel agents organise safaris to national parks. They can take photographs and, for a special fee, shoot the animals. Credit cards are accepted everywhere.

Africa today is developing at an astonishing rate. This development is bittersweet; one feels one must hurry to see what can still be seen. Kazimierz Nowak completed his journey by bicycle, the first and last man to see that 'old' Africa. Nowak's Africa, its wilderness, people and customs, have since vanished. Every year, some aspects of today's Africa become yesterday's. The yet unspoilt beauty of the Dark Continent should also be considered endangered.

All is not lost, however. It is enough to get away from the tourist routes and look more closely at everyday life to discover how many historical and unique features of this extraordinary continent still remain unchanged. At night, the spirits of the ancestors listen attentively to the restless Africans' dreams. The days pass lazily, as they have done for centuries.

Fishermen return in their canoes from morning fishing trips, bringing in a fish or two if they are lucky. Barefooted women with infants attached to their backs balance vessels full of water or bundles of firewood on their heads – both are indispensable for the preparation of food. Groups of children play happily around baobab trees, although they have so little in the way of material possessions. The men shelter from the sun in the shade of acacia trees, and in the evenings they meet over beer to heatedly discuss matters which they will have forgotten by the following day. Poland is for them more distant and exotic than Africa is for Poles.

When I recall the spontaneous warmth of African men and women, the avenues covered in jacaranda flowers, the wild eagles feasting on fish on the blue-green lakes, the shrieking of hyenas during midnight scavenges, the sighing of the evening wind among the dragon-like rocks, the screaming baboons and intoxicating scent of herbs in the barren mountains, it seems to me that I understand the magic of these parts. One must experience for oneself the enchanting 'African charm' to which Kazimierz Nowak fell victim almost eighty years ago. One then promises to return to Africa every time one leaves, because otherwise, it would be too difficult to depart.

Lukasz Wierzbicki

Borówiec, May 1999, September 2007, June 2009 and February 2011.

PROLOGUE

I returned from Africa after spending precisely five years and four weeks on that continent. It was to be the end of my African journey, but not the end of my preoccupation with Africa. Although I may no longer be there physically, Africa lives on in my mind and will no doubt continue to do so for a long time. Not one of my memories has faded. I need only to reach for my small travel diary, which I wrote in daily, and they all come flooding back vividly.

Before taking my first step onto African soil in 1927, I had buried myself in publications pertaining to the colonies. These were steeped in the language of powerful nations, whose multi-coloured flags flew proudly over their distant lands.

My first trip through northern Africa broadened my horizons and awakened new desires within me. I freely admit that, at that time, I envied the French and other colonial nations their overseas territories.

I then had to leave Africa for financial reasons, but I did so with a strong resolve to return and acquaint myself with the area beyond the Mediterranean: the mysterious inner depths of the continent.

I read more about its geography and ethnography. I came across books written by ex-soldiers, officials and hunters, and statistics reaffirming the value of the colonial 'jewels' to European crowns. Those volumes were thick, beautiful and full of interesting illustrations.

Having read everything I could lay my hands on, I returned to the Dark Continent in 1931, making my own way into its depths. Yet, every day, as I immersed myself in it, I encountered a different Africa... one which was poor, sick, grey, black and infinitely squalid.

I had discovered a bleak truth. The word 'colony' – which had once inspired my envy and which continues to evoke a sense of pride among European nations – now, justifiably, fills me with deep revulsion.

In general, there are two Africas: the one which exists for show, and the other, which is largely unexplored. Discovery of the latter comes at a cost; a sweaty, hungry, thirsty and potentially life-threatening journey must be undertaken. As such, the 'unknown' Africa is seldom written about by travellers.

Proceeding on foot, by bicycle, horse, boat and dromedary, I was able to escape from the tourist routes, which constitute nothing but a contrived exhibition designed to captivate the visitor.

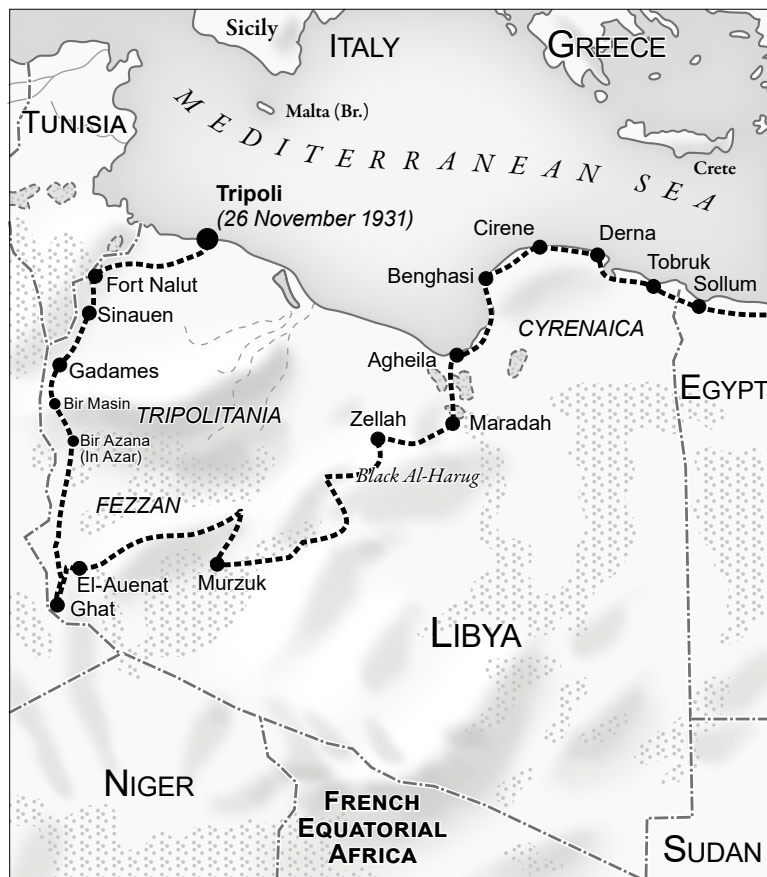
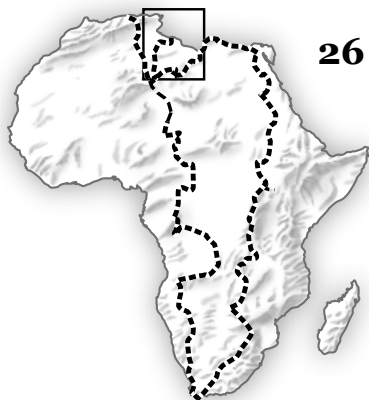
I have become acquainted with Algiers, Tunis, Cairo, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Brazzaville... it is difficult to list all the islands of civilisation scattered across the wilderness and deserts of Africa. Although I passed through them, they were not the focus of my journey. I mostly chose the wildest and least-travelled routes. I crossed countries without roads, which were just vast, empty spaces. In spite of all that has been written about it, I visited a completely uncharted land, as mysterious as the Sphinx itself, and became determined to unveil its black face. I believe that I realised this objective, at least in part, and what I glimpsed of its enigmatic features, I now share with my readers.

PART I



LIBYA

26 November 1931 – 21 June 1932





TRIPOLI – THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

I left Poznań in the first days of November 1931, bound for Africa. My plan was to travel around the continent. Such an expedition is naturally very costly, and as I had no money, I decided to travel by bicycle. I had to my name: a few Polish zloty, a pen, a camera, the bicycle and a large dose of determination. I was aware that the enterprise was not so much daring as quite insane, but my desire to discover Africa proved too strong to resist.

I travelled to Italy by train, arriving in Rome early in the morning. Having cleared customs, I began to search for lodgings. Unfamiliar with the city and with no money, this was no easy matter. I recalled a trip to Italy when I had been no older than fifteen. Having found myself all alone, I had still managed to cope quite splendidly. I knew that I must not get discouraged – and indeed, I happened to come across Brother Andrzej, a monk whom I had met in Turkey some years earlier. He took me to his monastery where I was given a quiet, bright cell with a superb view, overlooking the dome of St. Peter's Basilica. I slept blissfully, until I was woken by a multitude of pealing church bells. It was dawn.

A variety of unanticipated matters detained me in Rome for eight days. I pilgrimaged between offices, along streets made slippery by torrential downpours. It rained incessantly, and the grey, misty blanket which had descended upon the world was pierced only by the frightful blaring of car horns. Finally, I was able to leave Rome and, after cycling for three days, I arrived in Naples. There, I was fortunate enough to find a ship on which to cross the Mediterranean.

Sea travel does not agree with me; I was sick and unable to leave my berth. Eating was out of the question and even smoking made me nauseous. Once we had docked in Valetta, Malta, I immediately seized the opportunity to abandon ship and was soon sitting on the terrace of a café high above the harbour, enjoying some excellent tea. Yet whenever I glanced at the azure sea and the rocking boat below, my stomach started to churn once more.

Valetta is a very unusual town. The streets are little more than sequences of steps, presided over by herds of wandering goats. The owner milks his goats on request, while you wait, so fresh, warm milk is available 'on tap'. Barges, resembling Venetian gondolas, rock in the harbour and swarm like butterflies around the ships. One such barge had brought me to the island. There, I had found some respite before continuing my voyage, which was to end the following day... in Africa!

I arrived in Tripoli the next morning and was once again commandeered by 'official' matters when 50 lire were swiftly demanded for the transport of my bicycle. This was equivalent to almost 25 zloty. I was then also asked to pay customs duty. It took considerable effort to persuade the customs officials that the bicycle was just a rusty piece of old junk and should travel free of charge.

The small, squalid town that was here barely twenty years ago has been replaced by a beautiful, modern city. Tripoli is expanding on a grand scale, but its new districts are not appealing, being neither stylish nor picturesque. Instead, I turn towards the old town where the labyrinth of narrow streets can be explored for hours. The city is full of mosques, warehouses and workshops, bustling with crowds of Arabs, Arab-Berbers, Jews and the descendants of ancient slaves – blacks with a considerable dash of Arab blood. From time to time, an Arab woman slips past and sneaks a curious glance at me from behind her veil, or an elegant, bejewelled, portly Jewess walks majestically by. Scores of dirty, scantily clothed children are everywhere, screaming and playing heads or tails. Nature and nurture determine whether they beg or steal. Even this part of town has its palaces, however – inconspicuous from the outside, but beautiful within. Hidden behind grilled windows, the women in these harems pass their carefree lives in splendour.

Strolling through the winding streets, I spotted a curious sign on one of the houses: 'Fratelli Gadziński'. Without much consideration, I entered through the gate. Stacks of wooden crates, filled with merchandise from all over the world, were piled up in a large courtyard. An Arab walked up to greet me and led me inside the house. Before long, I was chatting with an amiable Pole who had been born here in Tripoli. We spent several hours in pleasant conversation over a good, black, Turkish coffee. Alas, we could only converse in Italian. My stories and photos from home would occasionally bring tears to the eyes of this grey-haired, old gentleman. He missed Poland, even though he knew the country only from the stories of his father, who had been exiled to this land (Turkish Tripolitania back then) following the Polish insurrection of 1863.

I spent the night by the sea, in a tent pitched on the outskirts of town. It was warm and peaceful. As midnight passed, I was still sitting motionless, delighting in the wonderful, African night. To one side of me, the Arab houses of Sugh El-Giumaa gleamed in the moonlight, while the vast expanse of the



I spent the night in a tent pitched on the outskirts of town

Mediterranean stretched away on the other. I eagerly listened out for the rhythmic murmur of the sea and the gentle swish of the palm fronds, which resembled the feathers on Native American headdresses. I could hear the distant sounds of the city, and the buzz of nearby camps being pitched by nomads arriving from the depths of the country for the Friday market. I could see the silhouettes of donkeys and dromedaries, while white-robed figures bustled around camp fires. The aroma of burnt incense and well-seasoned roast mutton assaulted my senses. Eventually, the fires died down and all fell still, as the people and their animals went to sleep.

A light breeze filled my tent with the salty fragrance of the sea. My candle flickered, prompting me to note down the numerous experiences of the past day in my travel journal. Most importantly, I had succeeded in obtaining a special permit for unrestricted travel around this vast, desert country from General J. E. Pietro Badaglio, the Governor of Tripolitania. I also learnt that all military bases had been informed about my expedition by radio telegram, and had been told that the *publicista* Polacco was Tripolitania's guest and should be treated accordingly by the army and administrative authorities.

The permit put me on a road which, although interesting and alluring, was also fraught with danger and hardship. I was gripped by fear and doubted the feasibility of traversing thousands of kilometres of vast space on an ordinary bicycle.

My faithful companion – quiet, calm and ever ready to assist – was propped up on the other side of the tent. At that moment, I wished that it could speak. Yet, I also sensed that when an object accompanies you everywhere for many years, it ceases to be inanimate and seems to think, feel and live.

2

THE DESERT PRAYER

On the morning of 30 November 1931, I left the emerald waves of the Mediterranean and the shores of Tripoli behind me. My heart skipping a beat, I proceeded into the unknown. I felt like the captain of a ship might, were he to be expected to complete a voyage without sails, a rudder or a crew.

The Tripolitanian coastline was coming alive again, its gardens blossoming after the recently ended war. Leaves rustled in the breeze above the paved roads, and a whole row of wells stood ready for thirsty tourists to drink from.

At school, children could be heard singing '*Giovinezza*'⁹ as heartily as their peers might in Rome or Naples.

I admired the panache and creativity of the Italians, along with their industriousness. Looking at this strip of shore, I understood why Mussolini was striving to increase the Italian population, why childbearing was promoted and large families protected with numerous laws. Here, a second Italy is being cultivated as a granary and garden for its European parent.

Although the conquerors of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica deserve a medal for their efforts, one side of it is undeniably bloodstained. When asked about the state of affairs, the natives say that they are happy. The unhappy can no longer voice their opinion; their skeletons now litter the Red Mountains and the nearby deserts and steppes as a grim legacy of the bloody war. The Bedouins¹⁰ who survived the butchery are today put to work on the construction of roads, schools and hospitals. When dusk falls, they are herded by their conquerors at bayonet point into camps where black soldiers patrol the barbed wire fences, their rifles poised and gleaming in the moonlight.

The ride along coastal Tripolitania makes for an enjoyable trip. My bicycle races over the smooth asphalt all the way to Bu Jhulau, a small oasis situated at the foot of the steep rocks of Tripolitania's single mountain range. These are the Jebel Nafusa Mountains, which stretch in a semicircle from the Gulf of Sirte right up to the Tunisian border. Although the highest peak, Qasr Gharyan, barely reaches 840 metres above sea level, the climate here is extremely harsh. Trees are rocked by frequent gales and can only grow freely in the dry river beds of the inaccessible ravines.

I follow the road upwards, taking frequent breaks, not only to rest but also to drink in the scenery. At the cliff edge, looking northwards, one has a panoramic view stretching for over 60 kilometres. Below lies a small, charming oasis, then a vast steppe, and beyond it the little town of Al Azizia, huddled against a solitary, protruding rock. The green gardens and white buildings of the capital and its port are visible in the distance, with the blue expanse of the Mediterranean stretching beyond the horizon.

This place will not remain wild and barren forever. Soon, there will be resorts and hotels here, presiding over landscaped gardens with specially imported soil. It will be one of the most beautiful spots in the world. Preliminary construction work has already begun. The huge, golden eagles which circle the cliffs in search of hideaways are startled by the sound of exploding rocks. Perhaps, when all is calm again, they will return to their old nests and circle languidly above the white hotel palaces.

⁹ *Giovinezza* (Italian for 'youth') was the official hymn of the Italian Nationalist Fascist Party and Italy's secondary national anthem between 1924 and 1943.

¹⁰ From the Arabic word *baddwin*, meaning 'a dweller of the desert'.

The most interesting point on the road from Tripoli is Fort Nalut. Its Berber underground town is almost invisible, but a five-hundred-year-old castle towers high above it. The windowless castle is peculiar for its lack of definitive style, small chambers having been built one on top of the other by hundreds of families. This fortified granary serves as a store for barley, grasses, dates and olives, as well as for the tools and livestock of the local Berbers. In the event of an attack by Arab tribes, the Berber families would gather their possessions and take refuge in the fortress. With their stores of water, fuel and food, amongst other things, they could survive even a long siege. If necessary, they could defend themselves by dropping rocks on their attackers to drive them away.

The real, rocky desert started in earnest upon leaving Fort Nalut. Only a few thorny shrubs sprouted in places but these were a blessing for the traveller, providing fuel during nights spent in the open. The stages of the journey became longer here, so my bicycle was loaded up like a dromedary. I naturally needed to carry supplies of food and water with me. But, the state of the water! It had been salty for two weeks. Everything tasted of salt: the tea, the coffee, even the sand which blew into my face and coated my lips.

I passed the small oasis of Sinauen, which lies below sea level. Having earned a little money from the sale of some photographs taken locally, I could buy groats, sugar and tea. I was also able to replenish my water supplies at Bir Tifist, a camp formed of Arab workers brought in to construct a road.



I passed the small oasis of Sinauen, which lies below sea level. Having earned a little money from the sale of some photographs taken locally, I could buy groats, sugar and tea



The boundless sea of peaks

The road was hard, bumpy and covered in sharp stones which made cycling impossible. It was even difficult to walk with the overloaded bicycle. Worst of all were the frosty nights, when I had to pitch a tent on the damp and rocky terrain. This was an exceptionally arduous task, but at least the tent provided some shelter from the most piercing gales, and inside it was possible to brew some tea over the red-hot coals of my camp fire.

Naturally, the nights were far from calm, so I would spend them half-asleep and half-alert. The haunting howls of scavenging hyenas could frequently be heard in the distance. Sometimes, a frightened raven squawked ominously or a preying owl hooted nearby. The howling of jackal hordes, wandering the steppes, echoed over and over off the cliffs. Despite the threatening noises, I was so weary that I would eventually drift into a half-sleep, shivering from the cold and longing for the dawn. At times, I would be woken by the cold or by some small animal seeking refuge in the heat of a human body.

In the mornings, numb with cold, I would emerge from my tent, axe in hand, ready to search for some brushwood so I could warm myself by the fire and melt the frozen water to make some tea. The water retained the smell of the leather *girba*¹¹ and reeked terribly, but what could I do? In the desert, tea tastes like nectar even when made with such water.

¹¹ A water container made from goathide.

One night, I awoke frozen-stiff, and was surprised to see the twinkling stars above me, even though I had gone to sleep inside my tent. It turned out that the tent pegs had been wrenched free by a gale, although I had thrust thirty-six of them deep into the ground. Buffeted by the wind, I wandered around in the dark for a long time before I found my tent, tangled in some thorny shrubs. I managed to erect it again and start a fire, albeit with great difficulty, only to spend the rest of the night listening to the grim wail of the steppe.

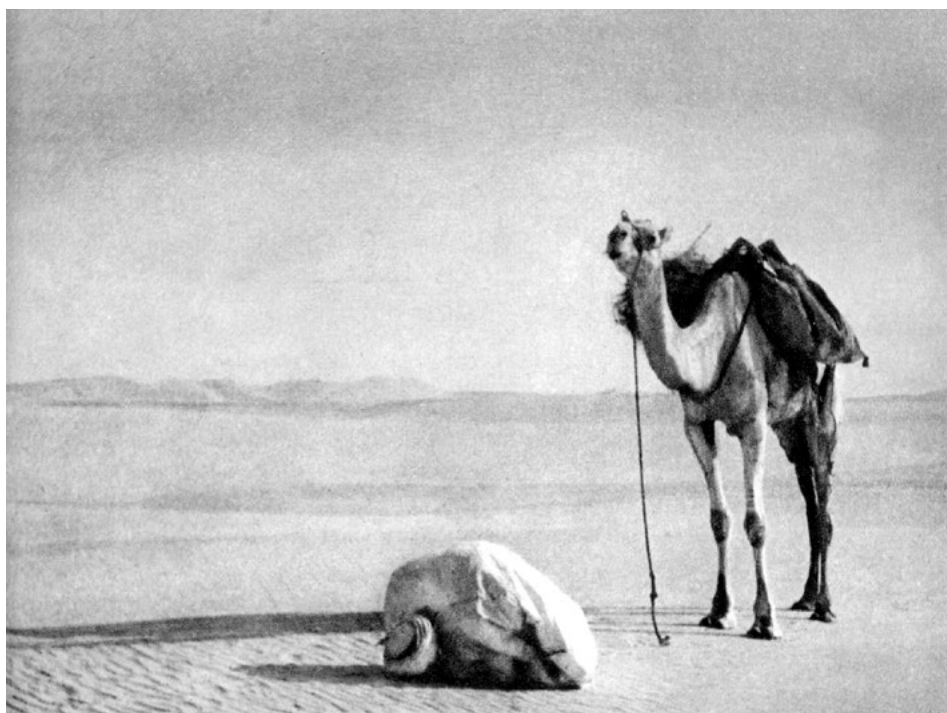
Once the sun's early rays finally pierced the morning mist, the wind became hot and dry, without changing direction or decreasing in strength. It brought with it countless swarms of flies, which covered my face, hands and clothes.

The days were getting hotter. I travelled through a strangely quiet, unremarkable region. It was only when the wind began to rage over the sand dunes and the rocky wasteland that all hell broke loose. Its demonic howls terrified the sole dwellers of the wilderness – gazelles, hyenas and jackals – out of their dens. There were not many gazelles here, and they would flee so quickly that it was all but impossible to catch sight of their rapidly receding silhouettes. These beautiful, nimble creatures became, for me, a glimmer of hope in a land devoid of life.

From time to time, I come across nomadic tribes who, trusting in fate, have sown barley on the steppe and keenly await rain. The black wives of the nomads carry wooden crosses with robes pinned to them around the fields, entreating the good spirits to send life-giving rain for their grain. Rain is scarce in these parts. Sometimes, not even a single drop will fall for five years. Yet the poor Bedouin, camped in a ravine, will still plough the steppe with his wooden plough, scatter his barley and then humbly beat his brow against the hard earth five times a day, imploring Allah for rain. Should the crop fail for lack of moisture, he will seek out the edible roots of steppe grasses in a bid to survive. If there are not enough of these, he dies. His neighbours will then bury him in a shallow grave, cover his remains with rocks, and return to their own concerns. At night, hyenas will dig up the wretched body and feast on it. It is a meagre meal, but then hyenas are not all that demanding. Ravens, ants and other insects will make short work of the leftovers. In the end, only the sun-bleached skeleton will remain on the steppe. The wind will sweep it into a crevice, shrouding it in sand, and so it goes on for countless generations.

The extreme temperatures crack the rocks, turning them into sand which the wind then sweeps into new, shifting mounds. Over time, these solidify into sandstone rocks. Here, everything follows its own desert-destiny.

The nights are cool, so a solitary desert wanderer can sleep peacefully, oblivious to the venomous snake coiled up nearby. In the morning, when the cold is at its most biting, he prepares his food. When he leaves, a desert mouse will feed on his breakfast leftovers and the snake will then eat the mouse. The snake will prove to be a tasty morsel for the desert eagle whose eggs will,



He fell to his knees, a humble song to Allah flowed from his poor, nomadic soul

in turn, often save a traveller from hunger. Everything lives, dies and is born again in an eternal cycle of life.

The days are arduous, the hardship indescribable. My bicycle ploughs through the shifting sand and is dragged over the rubble. From the brow of a hill, I spot a further sea of peaks and so it goes on, endlessly. Even though I cover considerable distances, everything around me seems to stand still. My water supplies run low. The sun is my compass.

The heat is so unbearable that it is hard to catch my breath. The wind is akin to a hot blast from a baker's oven. Sand carried by the desert wind dances over the lofty dunes like a flickering flame. The intense heat makes everything break up and fade.

Exhausting days of walking or cycling are followed, however, by enchanting African nights. Then, bathing in the glow of the moon and stars, I can regain my strength.

As evening approaches, I light a cheerful, fragrant fire of thorny shrubs and make *eish*, a Tuareg delicacy (flour boiled with garlic, peppers and olive oil). I prepare some tea, which is a heavenly and medicinal beverage in the desert. In spite of the overpowering fatigue it is difficult to fall asleep.

I feel I am the ruler of a vast kingdom, and that all the surroundings belong to me alone.

A shimmering mirage muddles the horizon. It becomes hazier and lengthening shadows creep across the terrain. Finally, the sun hides from view, and the sand gleams gold in the dusky light.

My camp may be the first of its kind in Saharan history. It is certainly not an everyday phenomenon – a bicycle, a Polish Bedouin and nothing but wilderness for thousands of kilometres around.

Deathly silence reigns over the lofty dunes of the Sahara and over the huge, dry lakes, so the coursing of blood through one's veins, the beating of one's heart and the shifting sand of the surrounding dunes can all be heard.

A moment later, the desert night comes to life – a miraculous phenomenon! The desert begins its evening prayer: a hymn resonating through the dunes and towering mountains, across the smooth *serir*¹² and the expansive, steep-banked *wadis*¹³ as it travels out into the world. Every stone and grain of sand joins the chorus. Placing an ear against a seemingly inanimate boulder or a fistful of golden sand, one hears the quiet, humble whisper quite clearly.

A Tuareg: son of the Sahara, uneducated, perhaps not even considered human in the eyes of the civilised world, asked me during the night whether I could 'hear the desert praying'. Having carried out the ritual washing prescribed by the Koran, using sand as a substitute for water, he fell to his knees and a humble song to Allah flowed from his poor, nomadic soul.

And then, I thought I could hear the sound of bells ringing out across the world from the little church in Poland where I used to pray. In the silence of the desert I repeated the words of a prayer my mother had taught me. It was Sunday, and here, in this foreign desert land, this solitary traveller joined the sand and boulders and prayed aloud, in Polish.

3

THE FIRST BICYCLE AT THE 'GATES OF THE SAHARA'

In the early morning of 24 December, I finally saw a blue haze on the desert. I had reached the Ghadames¹⁴ oasis. My vehicle attracted much attention, as it was the first bicycle to arrive at the 'Gates of the Sahara'! In order

¹² A desert of pebbles or larger stones.

¹³ Rocky water courses, dry except in the rainy season.

¹⁴ Often referred to as 'the jewel of the Sahara', Ghadames was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1999.

to get here, to the threshold of the sandy desert wilderness, I had travelled for hundreds of kilometres over stony tracks which had, until now, been traversed exclusively by dromedaries or, more recently, by specially-constructed desert cars.

It gives me pleasure to recall that I received a very warm welcome in Tripolitania. I was constantly on the air, as radio stations broadcast my movements. The Italians did have problems with the pronunciation of my name, so I became known to them simply as *Polacco*.

The location of the Ghadames oasis makes it an extremely important starting point for caravans heading from the shores of the Mediterranean deeper into Africa, and for those travelling from nearby Tunis or Algiers to the east. The caravans follow the routes on which springs or wells can be found, so they have the opportunity to water their dromedaries and to fill up their leather water bags. The sandy Sahara stretches for hundreds of kilometres to one side of Ghadames, the barren, stony Hammada¹⁵ el-Homra lies on the other. For this reason, it is an important stop which everyone includes in their itinerary.

Its many water springs are the heart and soul of the oasis. They have stimulated the growth of date palms, creating a shady forest of some fifteen thousand trees. Wheat and barley are harvested twice a year in this auspicious spot. The climate is almost tropical, but rain is very rare because the strong desert winds disperse all the clouds.



Above this dark, murky city stands a sunny kingdom of women – a town consisting of terraces

¹⁵ A desert plateau of hard, wind-swept bedrock, covered with a thin layer of sand and pebbles.

Ghadames is surrounded by a six-metre-high brick wall, which provides protection from sandstorms. The houses are all connected to form one large building, criss-crossed with numerous tunnel passageways. In the summer, a pleasant, cool breeze travels along the passageways, bringing relief from the scorching heat. In winter, the tunnels are almost deserted. Here and there, daylight streams in through small openings and it is possible to catch a glimpse of men sitting on brick walls. This part of the town belongs exclusively to men although, on occasion, a black woman might scurry by with a jug of water on her shoulders, or a donkey laden with date-filled baskets may amble past.

Above this dark, murky city stands a sunny kingdom of women – a town of terraces interconnected in such a way that its dwellers can freely walk around the whole settlement without needing to descend to street level. This is where wives prepare meals for their husbands, weave baskets, take care of their children and, of course, gossip.

A minaret towers above the terraces. I manage to climb it and take many interesting photographs. The muezzin pockets ten silver lire from me, but I do not regret the expense. It affords me a view of women moving with gazelle-like grace on the terraces, invisible from the town below.

The distribution of spring water among the gardens of Ghadames is very curious, as it is achieved with the aid of the so-called 'water clock'. The Ain el Fras spring produces some 3,000 litres of water per minute. This is collected in a square pool, from which it is channelled throughout the oasis. The owner of each garden pays for his allotted quantity of water, and its distribution is supervised by a special official. The volume of water is calculated with the aid of a bucket with a hole in it, with which the official draws water from the pool. He then places the bucket over the designated channel. Once all the water has leaked through the hole, he knots a palm leaf, fills the bucket again and lets it empty into the next channel. This action is repeated until the amount of water paid for is distributed. With this simple method, the leaky bucket acts as a clock, as it takes ten minutes to empty (or one hour to distribute six measures of water).

The water purchased through this 'water clock' system first flows through the men's and then the women's bathrooms. As the outside temperature reaches 30°C, a bath in a stone tub with running water is a great pleasure indeed! The water flowing from the women's bathrooms does so through wide channels which serve as laundries. Here, black slave women wash their spouses' linen, the linen of their husbands' first wives, then their own, and finally that of their children.

During my stay in Ghadames, I often visited the Tuareg shepherds in their tents, fishing for useful information. Just spending time in their company was a priceless experience. I could easily communicate with them in Arabic and, as an incentive for a chat, I would bring along their favourite herbal tea and sugar. The sight of such delicacies was irresistible, even to the oldest Tuareg.



*In the summer, a pleasant, cool breeze travels along the passageways,
bringing relief from the scorching heat*

Naturally, we talked about the desert. I was able to gather a great deal of detailed information about its topography, which would prove indispensable for my travels. One evening, I was drinking very sweet herbal tea in the company of some Bedouins who had been travelling under the leadership of Ali ben Geida. He was something of an old desert wolf and knew the Sahara so well that he was able to draw maps for me in the sand. I copied them into my notebook and they proved to be invaluable 'road signs'. When you venture south of Ghadames, the desert becomes wild and threatening. It is devoid of roads and difficult to cross as the existing maps are imprecise and unreliable.

