

“Call Me by My Name:” A “Strange and Incomprehensible” Passion in the Polish *Kresy* of the 1920s

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Stefan Góralski and Marjan Kuleszyński met on their way to the easternmost provinces of Poland in January 1922. Góralski was twenty-one and Kuleszyński twenty-eight years old. Góralski was changing trains in Skarżysko and Kuleszyński offered him a seat in his compartment. This journey started a passionate relationship that ended several years later in court. Although Kuleszyński would claim that Góralski was the love of his life, he would also curse the moment the young man entered the train compartment in Skarżysko, writing in 1925: “Why did the devil bring you to that railcar?”¹

When they met, both men worked as low-ranking officials in the farthest corners of the new Polish nation state. Góralski had recently obtained a job as a postal worker in the town of Ostrog in Volhynia in the Polish-Soviet borderland. Kuleszyński worked in the forestry management department of Karpilówka in Polesia. Both regions were relatively isolated and impoverished, with Polish-speakers in the clear minority. Poland had established its rule there only recently. The government devised various policies to polonize this part of the country, commonly called *Kresy* or borderlands, with colonization by young Polish men as one of them.²

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1. Archiwum Państwowe w Suwałkach (hereafter APS), numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789. This article is based on a file from the State Archive in Suwałki that contains the records of Kuleszyński’s and Góralski’s trial. Apart from the documents related to the court proceedings, it also comprises the records of the investigation. The unique nature of the case lay in the fact that it started with Góralski’s self-denunciation. The file contains letters from Kuleszyński to Góralski (five originals) and to Góralski’s female partner, Maria Koziówna (three originals), one copy of Góralski’s letter to Kuleszyński (made by the author), and one original letter from Kazimiera Wydrzycka to Góralski. Góralski gave the correspondence to the investigator as evidence. The letters were written between January 1922 and March 1925.

2. On Polish policies of integration of the *Kresy*, see Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization’s Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (New York, 2021); Piotr Cichoracki, “Polonization Projects for Polesia and Their Delivery in 1921–1939,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 109 (January 2014): 61–79; and Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, *Kalejdoskop kresowy: Wędrówki przez ziemie wschodnie Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1939* (Kraków, 2018), 242–43.

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Although Kuleszyński and Góral ski originally came from the very heart of Poland—the Świętokrzyskie region located between Warsaw and Kraków—they were of different class and social backgrounds. Góral ski was born to peasant parents and attended a 2-year teacher training.³ Kuleszyński proudly traced his origin to the nobility (*szlachta*) and insurgents fighting in Polish national uprisings.⁴ He graduated from a Higher Forestry School in L'viv and liked to emphasize his class superiority over others.⁵ For example, he wrote to Góral ski in March 1925 with a hint of condescension: “My dear son. . . although I didn't receive a great education, I have good manners (*obycie*) and was given a decent upbringing [:] but you, my poor thing, didn't have even that.”⁶

Despite these differences, in 1922 both men found themselves in similar life situations—both depended fully on work provided by the government; neither had savings or capital on which he could rely. Certainly, Kuleszyński might have felt more secure as a well-trained state official, just like his noble father. Góral ski, however, was a first-generation state employee with little preparation for the job. Nevertheless, as a representative of the Polish state in a region with a significant number of non-Polish speakers, Góral ski could feel empowered—his ethnicity now provided him with certain privileges.

Even if in the early 1920s men loving men could find sexual opportunities, anonymity, and a sense of community in Warsaw, this story demonstrates that a remote village in Poland could also be a site of homosexual life. Although the assumption that queers could not exist outside of urban spaces has long been disproved, there is still little research about rural modes of experiencing homosexual desire in Europe in the interwar period.⁷ The story of Kuleszyński and Góral ski does not corroborate the claim that the city was a Mecca to which all queers inevitably migrated.⁸ This case from Suwałki makes visible tensions between the countryside and the metropolis due to

3. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 336, 459.

4. Adam Malicki, “Bracia Karol i Paweł Kuleszyńscy herbu Ślepowron,” *Świętokrzyskie* 27, no. 31 (February 2021): 145–55. The Kuleszyńskis belonged to impoverished Polish nobility. The father of Marjan Kuleszyński was a lowest ranking official (*pisarz gminny*) in Congress Poland. Marjan's grandfather fought in the November Uprising (1830–31); his cousin in the January Uprising (1863–64).

5. Jan Miklaszewski, *Praca naukowa, oświatowa, uświadamiająca i społeczna leśnictwa polskiego w pierwszym dwudziestolecu niepodległego bytu państwowego Polski* (Warsaw, 1938), 1–5; and APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 401. Higher Forestry School in L'viv was a leading forestry tertiary education institution in the region. Earlier Kuleszyński attended a private secondary school (*gimnazjum*) in Częstochowa; he gave private tuitions at the time.

6. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 43.

7. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, 2005). For more on queers in twentieth century non-urban Europe, see Benno Gammerl, *Anders fühlen: Schwules und lesbisches Leben in der Bundesrepublik. Eine Emotionsgeschichte* (Munich, 2021); in the US: Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, eds., *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* (New York, 2016); Brock Thompson, *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (Fayetteville, AR, 2010); and Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia, 2013).

8. Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York, 2010), 14; and Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 35.

social and legal changes that took place in Poland in the 1920s. A skillful navigation between urban and rural worlds reflected similar movements between notions of intimate male friendship and homosexual love. This article demonstrates how Kuleszyński adapted to these binary systems in pursuit of his own same-sex love fantasy. This story shows how changing notions of male friendship and masculinity at the time created opportunities for men loving men, which counter our common-sense understanding of east European history today. However, it also describes the confusion that Góralski experienced when confronted with the modern concepts of (homo)sexuality.

Finally, the unique nature of the sources also dictates the main argument of this article. Kuleszyński's words demonstrate the existence of homosexual subjectivity in rural Poland in the early 1920s.⁹ Furthermore, I set his astounding statements against a backdrop of the couple's life together in the countryside. For some of the trial witnesses, mostly rural dwellers, there was nothing abnormal in the expressions of homosexual attachment among men. This fact may be interpreted as a lack of a certain, modern scientific type of knowledge about sexuality but equally as indifference toward it.

The very concept of (homo)sexuality spread unevenly in Poland in the 1920s, as changing social attitudes could cause confusion and misunderstandings. However, the coexisting and often contradictory ideas about sex, gender, and love at the time also created unique opportunities for men desiring other men. Obviously, those opportunities were accompanied by dangers.

Like Bachelor and Maiden in the Borderland

Several weeks after their meeting, Kuleszyński, smitten with Góralski, wrote him a letter:

Since our first meeting I've had my eye on you, just as—one could say—a bachelor on a maiden. I'm very preoccupied with you and I want to be even more. . . I strongly fell in love with you and you must work with me. . . Please, be patient and the hope—mine and yours— will come true and we'll work together until we die.¹⁰

9. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York, 1971), 163; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), 3; and Deborah L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 5–6. Judith Butler suggests that subjectivity precedes "identification," building on Michel Foucault's idea of the subject as a product of power. In a similar vein, Althusser argues that the individual becomes the subject once she has been "interpellated" or "hailed" (through texts, institutions, discourses) and recognized herself as the addressee of this "interpellation." My analysis is informed by Deborah Tolman's psychological definition of sexual subjectivity as "a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being. Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity."

10. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 387. This and all subsequent statements by Kuleszyński quoted in this article come from the collection of letters given to the investigating judge by Góralski.

In this way, Kuleszyński took the lead in the relationship and shouldered the burden of responsibility for arranging their life with each other. By promising that they would soon “work together” he found a way to name his emotional commitment. On the other hand, the heterosexual comparison opening the letter suggests that Kuleszyński derived his ideas of romance from the repository of available heteronormative cultural scripts on which he constructed a same-sex love fantasy for himself.¹¹

Contrary to his optimistic prediction, however, when Kuleszyński wrote this letter his own future was uncertain. He had had to leave Polesia and was waiting in Warsaw for a new work assignment from the state forestry authority. Not until February 1922 did Góral ski hear any news from him. At the end of the month Kuleszyński was already in the region of Suwałki, another multiethnic borderland of Poland, wedged between Germany and Lithuania.¹² He wrote to Góral ski: “I like you a lot, and believe me, you interest me a lot, so don’t hesitate. . . and come here as soon as possible. . . You’ll be on my keep and receive a salary, anyway we’ll organize it somehow. Believe me, what’s mine, will be yours.”¹³ Certainly, Kuleszyński’s behavior resembles the heteronormative pattern of a man inviting a woman to join his household. However, it also echoes the feudal bond between noblemen and their peasants—a relationship of the master (caretaker) to his subordinate (dependent). Kuleszyński’s ability to deliver on his promise, however, relied entirely on the new Polish state. But who, if not a son of a Polish noble patriot, could feel that this state was his own? In this new Poland declaratively based on the democratic paradigm, the social domination of Polish nobility over peasants persisted. In Volhynia, Góral ski must have understood that having Kuleszyński for a partner and a patron was a promising prospect.

Soon after receiving the letter, Góral ski quit his job and set off for the forests around Suwałki.¹⁴ Although the destination was far away—around 600 km as the crow flies—the region bore similarities to Volhynia. It was another area where Poland needed Poles to establish its rule. In turn, those Poles, like Kuleszyński and Góral ski, owed their opportunities to advance economically in the new lands to Poland. For them, the regions of Volhynia

11. Anna Clark, *Alternative Histories of the Self: A Cultural History of Sexuality and Secrets, 1762–1917* (London, 2017), 52. On sexual scripts theory, see: John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (New York, 2017). Kuleszyński’s (homo)sexual subjectivity revealed in the letters and the witnesses’ testimonies is reminiscent of the thoughts expressed in Anne Lister’s diaries.

12. Tomas Balkelis, *War, Revolution and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2018), 136–50. The region was inhabited by Polish and Lithuanian speakers, as well as by Jews. It remained a bone of contention between Poland and Lithuania. Between 1919 and 1920 the tension escalated into a series of armed conflicts over the border (with both German and Soviet forces involved at times). Changing sides was not an unusual event among the local population, even during skirmishes.

13. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 388.

14. Classifying Suwałki as part of the *Kresy*, I was informed, among others, by a speech of Józef Piłsudski, who in September 1919 encouraged the Poles of Suwałki to resist foreign influences: “the hardest duty of representing the culture of the nation falls on the *Kresy*.” Józef Piłsudski Institute Archive in New York, Przemówienie Naczelnika Państwa z dnia 13 września 1919 roku w Suwałkach, folder: 701/2/19, 386–87.

and Suwałki were full of promise. In a way, these circumstances rendered both men more equal.

What unfolded after Góral ski's arrival in Suwałki was a turbulent love story that evades easy interpretation. Marjan Kuleszyński and Stefan Góral ski stayed in a fitful relationship for around three years (1922–25). The former remained a forest ranger, whereas the latter, after serving for a while as Kuleszyński's assistant, started to work as an elementary school teacher. There, in the fall 1923, Góral ski met a new colleague, Maria Koziówna, with whom he began a relationship. This terrified Kuleszyński. He demanded that Koziówna break off with Góral ski but was ignored or misunderstood. Feeling desperate, Kuleszyński stalked the couple, prayed for divine intervention, sent insulting letters to Koziówna, and intruded on Góral ski's relatives.

The tension mounted until Kuleszyński—to demonstrate his attachment, or in response to blackmail—signed over all his possessions to Góral ski in January 1924. The latter immediately sold everything, including Kuleszyński's private belongings. A few months later, Góral ski reported to the authorities that Kuleszyński had committed homosexual acts with him. In his own defense, Góral ski claimed that when the acts had taken place he “had not been aware” they were criminal (“I committed [them] unknowingly”).¹⁵ As evidence, he handed over to the authorities several letters which he had received from Kuleszyński. Later, having second thoughts, Góral ski tried to retract his confessions and reconcile with Kuleszyński. But the legal procedures had already started. Bronisław Nowacki, an investigating judge, collected testimonies from witnesses, and a medical expert examined Kuleszyński's anus in search of evidence of the wrongdoing.¹⁶ In May 1925, the court in Suwałki sentenced Góral ski and Kuleszyński each to three months in prison for “committing *pederastja* through unnatural fornication.”¹⁷

Since the criminal codes inherited from the three empires out of which the new Poland was created in 1918 remained in force in the relevant parts of the country, Kuleszyński and Góral ski were convicted under paragraph 516 of the Russian Penal Code of 1903.¹⁸ By a strange irony, two years before the

15. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 31.

16. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789; and Małgorzata Materniak-Pawłowska, “Instytucja sędziego śledczego w II Rzeczypospolitej,” *Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne* 65, no. 1 (2013): 271–94. The investigation started in August 1924 and was conducted by the local investigating judge (*sędzia śledczy*) Bronisław Nowacki. In February 1925 a forensic expert examined Kuleszyński. The same month Góral ski and Kuleszyński were put under police surveillance. The indictment was issued in March 1925 and the trial took place in camera on May 8–9, 1925. In the judicial process in the early 1920s in this part of Poland, the investigating judge enjoyed broad autonomy and was the main person responsible for the investigation. Later, he participated in the trial as a witness.

17. Thanks to the amnesty of July 6, 1923, the court immediately pardoned both men. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 169–74, 251; and Ustawa z dnia 6 lipca 1923 r. w przedmiocie amnestji z powodu uznania granic Rzeczypospolitej, *Dziennik Ustaw*, 71, poz. 555 (1923).

18. The draft of the Russian Penal Code of 1903 never fully entered into force in Russia. For more on Russian criminal law related to homosexuality, see Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago, 2001), 115–22; and Richard C. M. Mole, ‘Introduction to “Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities,”’ *Slavic Review* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 1–2.

court in Suwałki passed its verdict, a group of prominent lawyers in Warsaw decided to decriminalize homosexual acts in the new Polish Law Code that would enter into force in 1932.¹⁹

Queers on the Move

There is no research on the criminal prosecution of homosexuals in 1920s Poland.²⁰ However, evidence points to the existence of communities of men loving men in Warsaw at the time. In 1924, a tabloid reported a male-only “ball of fake breasts” in a private apartment in the city center. Couples allegedly danced the shimmy; some men in flamboyant dresses posed as “Madame Pompadour, . . . Fatima—a daughter of a vizier, Eve au naturel, Mary—a lady of easy virtue (as she described herself), a Japanese Marquise Di-ning-alone [a racist pun “*Sa-ma-ja-da*”], a Vicomtesse d’Armagniac, a ballet dancer with hairy legs of an unknown name, and many others.”²¹ Three years after the “fake breasts” party, the vice brigade of Warsaw raided several cruising points and arrested a group of “pederasts.”²² In her memoirs, the head of the female vice brigade mentioned that in the 1920s male prostitutes in female clothes and “with faces painted” had troubled the policewomen under her command.²³ The existing sources leave no doubt that a homosexual scene existed in Warsaw in the 1920s.²⁴

Nevertheless, Kuleszyński and Góralski did not move to Warsaw (where they visited but never settled). Nor did they live in the villages where they had grown up. Their love story played out against the backdrop of a remote region, far away from their communities of origin. In the area of Suwałki, they took up posts and social positions that might not have been possible for them to assume in Warsaw.²⁵ What is more, as newcomers they had an opportunity to choose what stories to tell of themselves. For example, unchallenged by anybody, they claimed to be brothers or cousins.²⁶ The

19. Kamil Karczewski, “Transnational Flows of Knowledge and the Legalisation of Homosexuality in Interwar Poland,” *Contemporary European History* (2022), 1–18, doi:10.1017/S0960777322000108.

20. *Statystyka Polski*, Tom IX, Zeszyt 2 (Warsaw, 1930), 644, 676. No criminal cases related to homosexuality in interwar Poland have been described so far. However, there is evidence that such trials took place. In 1925 in Warsaw alone, thirty-one people were sentenced for “lewd acts, *pederastja*, sodomy.”

21. “Bal sztucznych biustów przy ul. Kruczej,” *Express Poranny*, January 17, 1924, 3.

22. “Aresztowanie zboczeńców,” *Gazeta Warszawska Poranna*, December 4, 1927, 3; “Z bagna stolicy,” *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny*, December 6, 1927, 6.

23. Stanisława Paleolog, *The Women Police of Poland, 1925 to 1939* (London, 1957), 90.

24. For more about the communities of men loving men in other European metropolises at the time, see Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York, 2014); Anita Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961* (Chicago, 2020); Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, 2015); Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe* (New York, 2006); and Pavel Himl, Jan Seidl, and Franz Schindler, eds., “*Miluji tvory svého pohlaví*”: *Homosexualita v dějinách a společnosti českých zemí* (Prague, 2013).

25. Góralski, with his short teacher training and little experience, would have presumably had more difficulties finding a job as a teacher in Warsaw than in the Suwałki region.

26. The claim of kinship as a tactic of queer self-fashioning in the rural setting echoes an account from Will Fellows, *Farm Boys* describing a same-sex couple in the Nebraska

liberty afforded by early-twentieth century mobility did not have to guide queers inevitably toward the metropolis but, undoubtedly, it set many of them in motion.

It is hard not to discern some parallels between the US frontier of the late nineteenth century and the *Kresy* after 1918.²⁷ If in the case of the American West the relocation of a male workforce to the frontier was related to the expansion of capitalism and the exploitation of natural resources, in the borderlands of eastern Poland it was the new nation-state that created the demand for Polish men to support its existence in nationally contested zones. In both cases the relationship between the men and the land that they were supposed to (re)claim as well as the character of their work very much defined their sexual opportunities. This is how greater anonymity and a rupture with traditional social institutions could be facilitated without migrating to urban centers.

The *Kresy* as the Closet

By the 1920s the *Kresy* had long occupied an elevated position in Poles' national mythology. For many Polish men these sparsely populated borderlands promised adventure and freedom. But could the rural *Kresy* offer anything to a male same sex couple? While the space of Warsaw created occasions for homosexual sex and bonding, it was also intensely policed. The capital was the first place in the country to experiment with novel disciplining and punitive measures, such as the female vice brigade assigned to police "pederasts."²⁸ The metropolis was also the primary resource for medical experts who produced the new sexual knowledge. The absence of these instances of power/knowledge in faraway places like Suwałki created genuine potential to act out homosexual desires.

Certainly, it was not a queer space in the style of Warsaw cruising points (*pikiety*), where men used doublespeak to avoid unwanted attention.²⁹ If the "closet" can be defined in purely spatial terms as a "secretive location" or as an invisible room hidden in a bigger space, then surely the rural countryside, idealized as a place of hard-working multigenerational families, could serve

countryside around 1950: "Everybody said they were brothers, but they didn't have the same last name." Will Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison, 1996), 132.

27. Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in The Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley, 2003); Robin Henry, "Queering the American Frontier: Finding Queerness and Sexual Difference in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Colorado" and Peter Hobbs, "Epistemology of the Bunkhouse: Lusty Lumberjacks and the Sexual Pedagogy of the Woods" both in Gray, Johnson, and Gilley, eds., *Queering the Countryside*. Scholars such as Peter Boag, Robin Henry, and Peter Hobbs demonstrated how the demand for a workforce in the US northwest created male communities of transient workers among whom sexual relations were not uncommon.

28. Paleolog, *Women Police of Poland*, 89–90.

29. For more on the concept of queer space, see Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same Sex Desire* (New York, 1997). Contemporary newspapers mentioned sometimes the language of Warsaw cruising points: "Wykrycie 'klubu' homoseksualistów," *Ilustrowana Republika*, December 5, 1927, 2.

as a closet.³⁰ Especially at a time when the metropolis was often viewed as the hotbed of perversity and degeneration.³¹ In other words, the seemingly inhospitable to queers countryside environment offered certain opportunities for some queer men. It could become a refuge, the closet constructed unlike the one known from urban spaces.

When in March 1922 Stefan Góral ski departed Volhynia for the Suwałki region, he was moving from one extreme Polish periphery to another. To ease his worries, Kuleszyński promised to pay for the journey, but he expressed one request: “If you come here, please, call me by my name, since I’ve told [everybody] around that you are my cousin and that’s why I’m doing my best to take care of your future.”³² Kuleszyński ended the letter with a reassuring sentence: “I am waiting for you impatiently. I am kissing you a million times.” Then, he added in the margin: “Come here, I have some land, I am going to buy a horse, we will run a farm together.”³³ These words offer a glimpse into Kuleszyński’s fantasy of love as woven of two components: the rural and the homosexual. In the letter he tried to enthuse Góral ski with this dream. Kuleszyński’s utopia of same-sex love in the countryside corresponded to the popular imagination of Polish life in the *Kresy* as a bucolic setting for the Polish *szlachta*.³⁴ Perhaps, he saw the *Kresy* as a place of freedom, where men could flee to escape the control and dominance of other men.³⁵

“Friendship for Life Oath”

From the day of Góral ski’s arrival the men shared a bed. Stefan Góral ski would testify later that at the first night Kuleszyński “played with [Stefan’s] sexual member.” During the later investigation Góral ski provided his interpretation of Kuleszyński’s actions that night: “. . . he probably felt a lack of women and this is how I explained his behavior to myself.”³⁶ Nevertheless, this experience was “pleasant” for Góral ski and was followed by emotional commitment:³⁷ “The fourth day [Kuleszyński] started to talk me into putting my member into his anus. However, before it happened, he received a

30. Isabelle Vonlanthen and Ulrich Schmid, “Literackie zawłaszczenie ziem polskich,” in Ulrich Schmid, ed., *Estetyka dyskursu nacjonalistycznego w Polsce 1926–1939* (Warsaw, 2014), 242–43. In Polish nationalist imagination in the interwar period the countryside was often depicted as the bulwark of tradition and heteronormative family—the opposition of the city. For further discussion of the closet as “secretive location,” see Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor From the Body to the Globe*, (New York, 2000), 45.

31. Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*; John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, 1999); and Vonlanthen and Schmid, “Zawłaszczenie,” 242–45.

32. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 277 (a letter from Rutka-Tartak, February 20, 1922).

33. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 276.

34. For more about mythologizing the *Kresy* in Polish culture, see Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński: Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie, 1793–1914* (Lublin, 2005), 12–19.

35. More on this trope, see Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* (Wołowiec, 2021), 15.

36. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 6, 33–39.

37. Góral ski admitted it before the court on May 8, 1925. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 152.

friendship for life oath from me.”³⁸ This “friendship for life oath” consisted of three promises: that they would never separate, that they would defend and support each other, and that they would keep secret whatever happened between them. The oath swearing marked the actual beginning of the relationship and a life-long commitment, hence it should be interpreted as a same-sex secret marriage ritual.

Whether Kuleszyński fashioned the oath to resemble religious rites, followed another pattern, or invented it himself is hard to know. Certainly, the oath created in both men the conviction of a strong commitment. Góral ski felt bound by it when he later wanted to break off the relationship. Kuleszyński’s response to this attempt was harsh: “You desecrated the holy ideals of friendship, you sold me like Judas sold Jesus.”³⁹ The oath is the key to understanding this love story. It derived its power from the prevalent notions of masculinity, honor, and male friendship. In this sense, it was a deeply gendered act. However, it also marked a crucial transgression by hiding inside a normative friendship a relationship with many attributes of a marriage.⁴⁰ The oath—this gateway to a secret union—separated and protected the couple’s intimacy from the surrounding social and legal realities. For Kuleszyński it was sacred.

The precedence of the oath to physical intercourse could have been a precaution taken by Kuleszyński to prevent any potential criminal prosecution. It could also reflect broader cultural and gender patterns, according to which the female act of “giving oneself” was seen as the highest act of commitment that bound together a heterosexual couple.⁴¹ Thus, in swearing his loyalty Góral ski *earned the privilege* to penetrate Kuleszyński. The oath and subsequent anal intercourse discursively reinforced each other, creating a dramatically culminating romantic sequence scripted by Kuleszyński. In this way, the oath was a sort of sacrament (the later reference of Kuleszyński to the relation

38. Polish: *Przysięga przyjacielska na całe życie*; Góral ski’s testimony to the investigating judge a fortnight (August 17, 1924) after his self-denunciation; APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 339.

39. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 305.

40. Nancy F. Cott argues that “public visibility” is a necessary aspect of marriage. However, John Boswell demonstrates how this feature did not play a significant role for more than a thousand years of western history. Stephanie Coontz argues in the same vein: “[e]ven the Catholic Church long held that if a man and woman said they had privately agreed to marry, whether they said those words in the kitchen or out by the haystack, they were in fact married.” I argue that the relationship of Kuleszyński and Góral ski should be considered a secret marriage (even if several people, among them the Wydrzyckis, might have been aware of the arrangement), as their oath was based on the notions of loyalty and permanence while it also involved sexual relations and cohabitation. John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1995), 162–65; Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (London, 2006), 2; and Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 1–2.

41. About the importance attached to the notion of virginity, see Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Devil’s Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland* (Ithaca, 2015); and Marianna G. Muravyeva, “Between Law and Morality: Violence against Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” in Wendy Rosslyn and Alessandra Tosi, eds., *Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Lives and Culture* (Cambridge, Eng., 2012). For clues about the idea of virginity in Poland, see also Albina I. Kruszevska and Marion M. Coleman, “The Wanda Theme in Polish Literature and Life,” *American Slavic and East European Review* 6, no. 1–2 (May 1947).

between Jesus and Judas is significant) that created a new reality between the two. This construction of the oath—the mixture of masculine friendship with anal penetration and honorable commitment—made the swearing of it a multifaceted ritual. It was perfectly heterosexually (and homosocially) normative “from the outside,” and intimately homosexual “on the inside.”

Modern Wedded Brothers

The oath of Kuleszyński and Góral ski echoed the old Slavonic ritual of “sworn brotherhood” (*pobratymstwo*).⁴² Zygmunt Gloger wrote in 1900 about the “wedded brothers” (*bracia ślubni*): “an old Polish tradition” according to which some male friends “swore each other brotherly, lifelong love.”⁴³ Two protagonists of the 1854 historical novel *Wedded Brothers* are blessed by a Catholic priest in a ritual resembling heterosexual marriage during a church ritual including an exchange of rings and in the presence of local nobility.⁴⁴ The most celebrated Polish national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, mentioned the tradition in the early 1840s.⁴⁵ It is impossible to say if either Góral ski or—more probably—Kuleszyński were familiar with this ancient noble tradition. Yet, their solemn oath was not an event without precedence in Polish culture.

For Kuleszyński, his relationship with Góral ski was an amalgam of life-long male friendship and romantic love bound together by sexual pleasure. In 1925 he explained the nature of his feelings:

My love for you does not come from [sexual] passion, because this I could get for money [from] a perfect man, but it is a feeling—a ferocious ideal love that shakes the foundations of the Earth, [it is] as if stones and rocks cracked, [about such love] people write poetry, because such a love the world once extolled: “the love of Pollux and Castor.”⁴⁶

In his popular book about Greek antiquity, *Mythology (Mitologia)*, published a year earlier, Jan Parandowski described Pollux and Castor as the “model of fraternal love.”⁴⁷ Kuleszyński evoked the Dioscuri as a symbol of “ideal” love, an emotion superior to sexual desire. Thus, although carnal passion played a role for Kuleszyński, the relationship transcended bodily pleasure. His words resemble a description of the constellation of Gemini by Parandowski, as Castor and Pollux transformed into “two bright stars shining

42. Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago, 2003), 126–29; and Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. Alan Bray mentions the tradition in relation to South Slavs. It corresponds to the rituals described by John Boswell.

43. Zygmunt Gloger, *Encyklopedia staropolska ilustrowana* (Warsaw, 1900), 204–5.

44. Zygmunt Kaczkowski, *Bracia ślubni: Powieść z czasów augustowskich* (Kraków, 1967), 1: 26–27; and Alessandro Amenta, Tomasz Kaliściak, and Błażej Warkocki, eds., *Dezorientacje: Antologia polskiej literatury queer* (Warsaw, 2021), 106–10.

45. Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziela* (Lwów, 1912), 2: 78.

46. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 36 (a letter from Kuleszyński to Góral ski, sent on March 13, 1925).

47. Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia: Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian* (Lwów, 1924), 125. Parandowski was also an author of two sympathetic biographies of Oscar Wilde. Jan Parandowski, *Antinous w aksamitnym berecie* (Lwów, 1921); Jan Parandowski, *Król życia* (Lwów, 1930).

next to each other. . . two brothers, who loved each other so much that even after death they wanted to remain together forever.”⁴⁸ Even if Kuleszyński’s letters do not evince whether he was familiar with Parandowski’s *Mythology*, they demonstrate that the 1920s references to the Ancient Greeks provided a language for expressing romantic feelings between men and offered them forms of representation in mainstream culture.⁴⁹

On the one hand, in his fashioning of the relationship with Góralski, Kuleszyński adhered to the old tradition of male friendship, the cornerstone of patriarchy. On the other hand, the oath made it possible for him to place homosexual love at the very core of a more modern version of friendship, exactly in the spot that was supposed to be most policed and devoid of any sexual ambiguity. By defying this principle, Kuleszyński hid same-sex love in plain sight—what could be purer and further from perversity than honorable, masculine friendship?⁵⁰ This would be Kuleszyński’s line of defense before the court: the tenderness and love but also jealousy and anger expressed in the letters obtained by the investigating judge were merely a sign of friendship and remained within the limits of affectionate closeness between men. At the same time, if Góralski was indeed unaware of what homosexuality was, the oath should have prevented him from telling anybody about the relationship and, consequently, from acquiring such knowledge.

Kuleszyński tried to navigate his desires through changing norms of male friendship and masculinity in Poland in the 1920s. The emergence of the homo-/heterosexual binary created by medical experts caused a split in the institution of romantic male friendship, depriving it of the possibility of sexual pleasure.⁵¹ This transition, however, created particular opportunities if one could skillfully move between various (often contradictory) prescriptions about what love and friendship was. Kuleszyński was familiar with both the legal status of sex between men and the idea of romantic male friendship. Thus, the choice of a country life and of a partner ignorant of modern ideas about (homo)sexuality could be a way to realize Kuleszyński’s love fantasy at the dawn of the hegemony of a homo-/heterosexual binary.

Using the marital oath, Kuleszyński played the old model of male friendship against the new idea of homosexuality. The uneven distribution of sexual knowledge in society and the rural setting provided him with favorable circumstances. This construction might have worked for decades in Suwałki

48. Parandowski, *Mitologia*, 61.

49. For more on the tropes from Ancient Greek mythology in the history of same-sex desire, see Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (London, 1993).

50. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick demonstrates that homosexual panic, “the fear of one’s own homosexuality,” rests at the heart of “post-Romantic” male friendship. It forces men into a zone of a permanent control over homosocial desire and a constant threat from the zone’s unstable boundaries. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 2008), 186.

51. Tomasz Kaliściak, “W piekle heteroseksualizmu: O męskiej przyjaźni w powieści Zbigniewa Grabowskiego ‘Ciszy lasu i twojej ciszy,’” in Elżbieta Dutka, ed., *Proza polska XX wieku: Przeglądy i interpretacje. T.3, Centrum i pogrnicza literatury* (Katowice, 2014), 19–20.

but for a fateful confession that Góral ski made to his relative, Józef Wydrzycki, in 1923.

The Apple from the Tree of Knowledge

Góral ski broke the “friendship for life oath” when he confided to his older half-brother and his wife, Kazimiera Wydrzycka, about his sexual relations with Kuleszyński. The Wydrzyckis lived in the very center of Warsaw. He was a hairdresser and she was a housewife. What in the Suwałki region might have been interpreted as inconspicuous behavior caused by a shortage of women, in Warsaw was understood as a serious transgression, an act that could render men criminal.

For example, around the time of Góral ski’s confession to the Wydrzyckis, the readers of the Warsaw press learned about the mysterious death of a private attorney, Konrad Meklenburg. A sensational newspaper explained how it was possible for a middle-class man to become a victim of a brutal killing: Meklenburg had stood trial for “pederastja” and was commonly considered “a degenerate.”⁵² The press suggested that death came to Meklenburg because of his homosexuality.

Only three weeks later, a Warsaw newspaper published by the police ran a long article that conflated homosexuality with the world of crime into a confusing mixture with a clear class bias. The article referred to men desiring men as “homosexuals” and to homosexual prostitutes as “pederasts.”⁵³ The former were upper-class men searching for “soulmates” while the latter—dangerous criminals who preyed on them. The newspaper warned its readership that in his appearance “the pederast” did not differ from “a young factory worker or a shop assistant.”⁵⁴ Hence, in the eyes of the police, every working-class man in his twenties walking the streets of Polish capital—just as Góral ski when visiting his relatives—could be sexually corrupt.

What Józef Wydrzycki and his wife, Kazimiera, told Góral ski in 1923, he would recall later as a moment of revelation: “I had not known at all what pederasty is until my brother explained it to me.”⁵⁵ Could such a claim be true in 1920s Poland?⁵⁶ The spread of ideas related to sexuality is difficult to trace. Even if in 1923 the Polish press mentioned “homosexuality,” the average

52. “Kula czy sztylet?,” *Express Poranny*, August 3, 1923, 1.

53. Archiwum Państwowe M. St. Warszawy w Milanówku, Komenda Policji Państwowej M. St. Warszawy, Urząd Śledczy, Akta Plutonu Mundurowego Brygady VI, 1934–1939, sygn. 839. In the documents of the Warsaw vice brigade, both homosexual prostitutes and men cruising for sex were referred to as “pederasts.” Kuleszyński and Góral ski were charged with the offense of “pederasty,” understood as anal sex.

54. “Specjalizacja zawodowych przestępców,” *Na posterunku*, August 22, 1923, 5–6. The article was a Polish translation of an excerpt from a book of Archibald Reiss, a Swiss forensic scientist, published in 1911 in French: Rodolphe Archibald Reiss, *Manuel de police scientifique*, (Lausanne, 1911).

55. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 347 (the first testimony of Góral ski before the investigating judge on August 17, 1924).

56. Importantly, even a twenty-four-year-old Polish aristocrat living in Warsaw, Józef Czapski, claimed later that when a man kissed him in 1920, he was so “naïve that [he] didn’t know what it was about.” Józef Czapski, *Świat w moich oczach* (Ząbki, 2001), 129.

reader was not necessarily familiar with the concepts behind the notion.⁵⁷ It is probable that outside of the metropolis such ideas had not yet gained a foothold, especially in the rural regions of central and eastern Poland.⁵⁸ Góral ski, who lived away from big cities and had not completed a secondary education, might have not heard of categories such as “pederast” or “homosexual.” In his letters Kuleszyński sometimes referred caustically to Góral ski’s lack of education and understanding of the world.⁵⁹

Apart from revealing to Góral ski the meaning of same-sex sexual acts, Józef Wydrzycki believed that he knew how to fix the deviated sexual desires of his half-brother and Kuleszyński. Góral ski would testify later: “The brother advised me to strike up acquaintances with women, to stroll with them, . . . in this way Kuleszyński would abhor me and would leave me in peace.”⁶⁰ Not long after the visit to Warsaw, Góral ski followed his brother’s advice and started the relationship with Maria Koziówna. Yet Józef Wydrzycki’s wisdom about the mechanics of sexual desire backfired. It only galvanized Kuleszyński into resistance. Góral ski reported later: “[Kuleszyński] did not stop trying to convince me that two men living together (that is love) is [sometimes] practiced and only temporarily criminalized by the state and with time it will be tolerated.”⁶¹ These assertive claims as well as Kuleszyński’s hopeful (and prescient) vision of same-sex marriage must impress today. What is more, not only did he try to convince Góral ski that there was nothing wrong with love between men, but he also set off for the metropolis to challenge the Wydrzyckis.

In October 1924, Kazimiera Wydrzycka would testify what happened during his visit: “Kuleszyński even tried to convince me that this form of sex between him and Góral ski is not a tragic thing, as we, I and my husband, think but rather a trivial one [*blaha rzecz*].”⁶² By downplaying the importance of the sexual acts, Kuleszyński tried to save his relationship with Góral ski. Yet the urban Wydrzyckis had a ready-made interpretation of homosexuality, which they used against Kuleszyński—for them, his sexual life was “tragic.”

When in spring 1924 Góral ski planned to marry Maria Koziówna, Kuleszyński was determined to forestall it. He called Góral ski an “uneducated cow” that was “under the control” of others.⁶³ It seems that in summer 1924 Góral ski informed Kuleszyński’s older brother about the situation, probably hoping that this could temper Kuleszyński’s obstinacy. The surviving letters

57. Leon Wachholz, *Wykłady medycyny sądowej*, (Kraków, 1896), 64; and Kamil Karczewski, “Transnational Flows of Knowledge.” The term entered the Polish language through medical literature as a translation from German in the 1890s.

58. Wojciech Śmieja, *Homoseksualność i polska nowoczesność: Szkice o teorii, historii i literaturze* (Katowice, 2015). In western Poland (formerly part of Germany), the press was explicit in describing homosexuality at the time. Also, its readership had been more familiar with the concept at least since the Eulenburg Affair 1907–9.

59. For example, APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 319.

60. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 347.

61. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 29 (a passage from Góral ski’s letter to the prosecutor, received on Mar. 24, 1925).

62. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 425. Wydrzycka testified as a witness at a police station in Warsaw on October 9, 1924.

63. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 319.

suggest that Góral ski also consulted a Catholic priest during the sacrament of penance. But none of this could persuade Kuleszyński to change his mind about love between men in general, and his love for Góral ski in particular: “Nobody in the world has the right to order me and I don’t listen to anybody, I’m a free citizen of the State and I’m not afraid of anybody. My conscience is clear, and I mock everything.”⁶⁴ Indeed, he mocked Góral ski’s sacrament of penance, saying that he who violated an oath could not truly believe in God. At the same time, Kuleszyński saw himself as a pious Catholic. He even visited the famous shrine in Częstochowa to make a solemn ritual of consecration, entrusting himself and Góral ski to the Virgin Mary. In Kuleszyński’s eyes, God, as the embodiment of justice, was on his side.⁶⁵

Kuleszyński also mocked the Wydrzyckis. He described them as people “who scowl at each other” (“God save [us] from such people!”)⁶⁶ This criticism of their manners, and perhaps of their class, was his self-defense. In this way, Kuleszyński attempted to counteract their influence on Góral ski by demonstrating that their knowledge and views did not intimidate him since they were primitive people with vulgar opinions.⁶⁷ Aware of their contempt, he reported to Góral ski that the couple looked at him the way one looks at a “social outcast.”⁶⁸ Yet Kuleszyński refused to feel like one. Instead, he held them in contempt. His interactions with the Wydrzyckis demonstrate that even though Kuleszyński never admitted his homosexuality to the court or to the forensic experts, he was much more outspoken in less perilous situations.

Was Kuleszyński’s opinion about same sex desire influenced by someone, or was it his original idea?⁶⁹ The trial witnesses’ testimonies shed some light on his notions about homosexual desire. For example, Góral ski claimed that on one occasion Kuleszyński said that “his parents were to blame for the fact that he was born such that he hate[d] women.”⁷⁰ Although he might have meant a

64. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 338.

65. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 46, 311; and Kamil Karczewski, “Transnational Flows of Knowledge.” Kuleszyński often invoked God’s justice and mercy in the letters. In the early 1920s in Poland the Catholic Church did not address officially the issue of homosexuality. Even its criticism of the 1932 Penal Code was rather focused on other questions, such as civic marriages, abortion. Góral ski’s sacrament of penance was mentioned only once in the correspondence and no other intervention by the Catholic Church can be found in the sources.

66. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 318 (Kuleszyński’s letter to Góral ski).

67. Adam Leszczyński writes about the contempt of the *szlachta* for peasants as “Polish racism without color” and Kacper Pobłocki demonstrates how it was intertwined with sexual desire. Keely Stauter-Halsted discusses the culture of sexual exploitation of peasant women by the *szlachta*. Even if the Wydrzyckis were city dwellers, they were still strongly connected to their peasant family in the country. Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski: Historia wyciszenia i oporu: Mitologia panowania* (Warsaw, 2020), 111; Pobłocki, *Chamstwo*, 118–20; and Stauter-Halsted, *The Devil’s Chain*, 60–64.

68. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 318 (Kuleszyński’s letter to Góral ski).

69. From the early twentieth century, a few popular and expert publications in Polish had presented a more positive vision of homosexuality. For example, in 1906 a Galician magazine, *Świat płciowy* (Sexual World) published an article about the views of Magnus Hirschfeld, where homosexuality was described as “true, noble love, passionate emotion. . . not an illness.” *Świat płciowy*, Zeszyt 6, January 1906, 10–14.

70. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 339.

childhood trauma, more probably Kuleszyński echoed increasingly popular eugenicist theories that presented homosexuality as a genetically inherited disorder.⁷¹ Whatever was his understanding of the reasons why he loved Góralski, Kuleszyński did not follow the medically and legally hegemonic prescription that aimed to suppress homosexual desire. Even if he might have believed in a particular “etiology” of it, he still saw his love for Góralski as pure as the one between Castor and Pollux—as one that should gain recognition in the future when the unfair persecution would end. Most remarkably, Kuleszyński seems to have had a coherent sense of sexuality, as containing sexual desire, love, and commitment. He felt entitled to sexual pleasure on his own terms, made active sexual choices, and expected emotional reciprocity and commitment from his partner. Kuleszyński also rejected claims that his feelings for Góralski were primarily of sexual nature.

What was Abnormal in the Village?

A view of this story as simply a clash between the prescient views of Kuleszyński and his monolithically homophobic social environment would be too schematic. A closer look at the trial testimonies of witnesses allows for a more nuanced analysis. If the law and its agents—the judges and forensic experts—followed the predictable, pathologizing interpretation of Kuleszyński’s behavior and sexual life, most of the witnesses understood the events differently.

Kazimiera Wydrzycka was not a typical city dweller. She lived in Warsaw but also spent a lot of time in the countryside taking care of her parents-in-law. Even if she seems to have been more familiar with the idea of pederastija than other witnesses, she still understood the relation between both men as a form of friendship. What is more, Kuleszyński’s argumentation was not completely lost on her. After Góralski eventually broke up with him, in July 1924 Kuleszyński met Wydrzycka again. She was not triumphant but rather showed some understanding of his pain. Just after this meeting she scolded Góralski in a letter:

The state of [Kuleszyński’s] soul is horrible, he has reached a dead-end, he is penniless, jobless, at odds with his brother, without prospects, he lost you, no wonder—this is horrible. There is a lot that is your fault here because you should have given him his money back—the money for the pigs and the other things. . . so [that way] you would have done it decently. Since you don’t want to be with him anymore and this alone made him vengeful against you, he doesn’t [now] want to have you at his side [either]. But you should have helped him. . . because, after all, you’ve been friends

71. The theory was popular among Polish forensic experts and psychiatrists and was one of the arguments for the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1932. In this view, criminalization could push homosexuals into “hiding” in heterosexual marriages, hence facilitating the intergenerational transfer of the genes allegedly responsible for homosexuality; see Jan Piltz, ‘Przyczynek do nauki o homologicznej dziedziczności w przypadkach homoseksualizmu,’ *Przegląd Lekarski oraz Czasopismo Lekarskie* (1921), 15(3), 29–31. For more about eugenics in Poland, see Maciej Zaremba Bielawski, *Higienišci: Z dziejów eugeniki* (Wołowiec, 2014).

for three years and one should not do to their worst enemy the kind of things you did to him.⁷²

Wydrzycka acknowledged the validity of the commitment between the men, either out of empathy for the broken-hearted Kuleszyński or out of respect for the idea of (male) friendship. For her, pederastja was not a reason to disrespect or mishandle Kuleszyński, and she wanted the men to separate on good terms. Kuleszyński appreciated this in a somewhat paternalistic tone, telling Wydrzycka that she “had missed her calling,” since she would have been “a great diplomat.”⁷³ There was a sign of reconciliation between them—the previous hostility was replaced by some common ground. Both agreed that Góralski had been disloyal and Wydrzycka believed that the homosexual desire Kuleszyński felt for her brother-in-law should not serve as an excuse for abuse.

Rural spaces are “simultaneously extremely public and private.”⁷⁴ It is hard to imagine that in the region of Suwałki the three-year long relationship and domesticity of Kuleszyński and Góralski would have escaped the knowledge of people living around them. For this reason, when preparing the indictment against the men the investigating judge questioned several of their neighbors.

In November 1924, Aleksandra Czarniecka was questioned. Her unskilled, barely legible signature under the testimony suggests that she might not have known how to write. The 20-year-old had been a live-in domestic worker with Kuleszyński and Góralski for almost a year. Although she must have known a lot about their relationship, Czarniecka did not think there was anything unusual about the couple. Her testimony did not deliver any incriminating details. She remembered few facts that seemed interesting to the investigator. For example, once when she was in the kitchen, an angry Góralski complained that Kuleszyński hit him and that Góralski had enough of this “torment.” She admitted that sometimes Kuleszyński “jokingly said that Góralski should not flirt with [her] when [Kuleszyński] was not home.” Nevertheless, Czarniecka emphasized that she “did not discern anything abnormal in the relationship.”⁷⁵

Franciszek Malczewski, a 53-year-old forester, testified that “the relation” between Kuleszyński and Góralski was “somehow strange and incomprehensible” (*jakieś dziwne i niezrozumiałe*). Sometimes, when Malczewski arrived in their house in the morning, they “loved and kissed each other (*miłują się i całują*) when still in their beds,” but on other occasions they quarreled, especially in the evenings when drinking. Malczewski admitted having heard rumors that Kuleszyński and Góralski committed “love perversions” (*zбочzenia miłosne*) but emphasized that he did not notice anything of this kind. However, he remembered that in their bedroom he saw “two beds standing

72. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 264–6 (a letter from July 24, 1924).

73. As reported with satisfaction by Wydrzycka in the same letter. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 266.

74. Katherine Schweighofer, “Rethinking the Closet: Queer Life in Rural Geographies” in Gray, Johnson, and Gilley, eds., *Queering the Countryside*, 230.

75. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 439–41 (a testimony from November 6, 1924).

against each other, as is usual among married couples.”⁷⁶ Apparently, neither loving and kissing nor passionate arguments in the middle of the night evoked in him an impression of any “love perversion.” What is more, his remark about “strange and incomprehensible” behaviors seem to have referred to the passionate character of the relationship between Kuleszyński and Góralski—to their frequent swings of emotions, rather than to the romantic or sexual bond between them.⁷⁷ After all, the letters attest to Kuleszyński’s dramatic personality: attacks of anger, fits of passion (Góralski: “in the fits of [sexual] passion he sometimes bit me”), and regular jealousy scenes. This *amour fou* might well have confused observers such as Malczewski.⁷⁸

The testimonies gathered by the investigating judge do not contain his questions to the witnesses. They consist of stories recorded by Nowacki, narrated in the first person and signed by the interrogated. A striking feature of these testimonies is the lack of language naming the relationship between the defendants other than simply “friendship.” Although sometimes the witnesses used the term *pederastja*, this could have been suggested to them by the questions of the investigating judge. Aware that their testimonies formed part of a criminal investigation, they tried to remember any details about Kuleszyński and Góralski that could indicate their wrongdoings. As a result, the interrogated discussed at length how often the men fought or were seen drunk, whether they were polite or not. Still, when referring to the subject of the investigation they talked about a lack of “abnormality” or “sexual perversion” in the defendants.

Zofia Mysławska, who at some point rented a room to Stefan Góralski, “didn’t notice that he was abnormal” and described him as “polite.” The visits of Kuleszyński seemed to her unremarkable.⁷⁹ Ksawery Pachucki lived next door to the couple and sometimes heard Góralski shouting “leave me alone!” Kuleszyński did not seem to Pachucki, however, to “have sought Góralski’s liking.” When the men drank, they argued, but otherwise their relations were good. What Pachucki did not like about Kuleszyński was that he “was rude to everybody.”⁸⁰ Stanisław Kącki shared with the investigator his impression that Kuleszyński was “a highly nervous person. . . it was visible in the way he shook his head without reason while walking and in how he moved his hand.”⁸¹

76. This detail Malczewski added during the trial on May 8, 1925. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 159 (the protocol of the trial).

77. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 406–7 (a testimony before the investigating judge from October 3, 1924).

78. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 342.

79. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 392 (a testimony before the investigating judge from September 11, 1924).

80. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 405 (a testimony before the investigating judge from October 3, 1924).

81. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 401 (a testimony before an investigating judge from Opoczno from September 20, 1924). Kącki did not live in the Suwałki region but in Kielce Voivodeship, where Kuleszyński came from. Góralski suggested to the investigating judge in Suwałki that Kącki was a former partner of Kuleszyński. Kącki was interrogated by proxy in Opoczno.

A young forester and a colleague of Kuleszyński, Józef Kulbacki, thought that the open secret that Góral ski suffered from venereal diseases excluded the plausibility that the defendants could commit pederastja. Kulbacki told the investigating judge that Kuleszyński neither “had courted” him nor had ever “offered pederastja,” even when they slept “together.” On the other hand, Kulbacki found Góral ski “disgusting and dishonest.”⁸² Kuleszyński’s brother Franciszek, just like Góral ski, claimed that he “did not know anything about pederastja” and had never noticed “any sexual perversions” in his brother. Franciszek confirmed that Góral ski and Kuleszyński came together to his name-day party but there was nothing “strange” about it.⁸³

It seems that most, if not all, witnesses in the trial apparently did not understand what kind of wrongdoing was being investigated. Retrospectively, they looked for signs of “abnormality” in the defendants, but in most cases could not remember anything remarkable. Neither emotional engagement (arguments) nor physical intimacy (kissing, sleeping together), nor the fact that Kuleszyński and Góral ski visited their families together (the name-day party) and took care of each other seemed “abnormal.”

It is not even clear if Nowacki, the investigating judge, knew what kind of evidence he was looking for. When he finished his job and presented the collected material to the court, many of the passages that Nowacki had underlined in the testimonies as indicating that the crime had been committed turned out to be useless. The court stated in the sentence that oral sex between men was not pederastja. It declared that anal “intercourse (coitus per anum) constitutes proper *pederastja*, while other practices such as sucking a member should be classified as so-called lewd acts not penalized in relations between men.”⁸⁴ Apart from Góral ski, no witness was able to confirm that anal intercourse had taken place between the defendants. Therefore, the investigation focused on the search for circumstantial evidence in the social conduct of Kuleszyński and Góral ski. But what behaviors would have characterized a *pederast*: a man having anal intercourse with another man? An unintended purpose of this investigation was to define a type of a person; diagnose a *species*. However, most of the witnesses (except for Kaćki, who apparently understood the *species* as a “nervous person”) found the behaviors of both men rather conventional. The villagers’ attempts to guess what happened between Kuleszyński and Góral ski reveal that the witnesses did not see the defendants as particularly different from other men.⁸⁵

82. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 448 (a testimony to the investigating judge from December 2, 1924).

83. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 455–6. Franciszek Kuleszyński did not live in the Suwałki region. Before 1925 he resided in Volhynia (Zdołbunów) and worked for the state railway; he was interrogated by proxy (January 21, 1925) in Dęblin (Central Poland), where he worked in a railway depot.

84. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 173.

85. Rachel Hope Cleves demonstrated a similar degree of acceptance for a same-sex couple by their neighbors in the early nineteenth-century, rural US. Anna Clark deploys the concept of “twilight moments” to describe the queer sexual acts that do not cause an emergence of distinct sexual identifications; both Góral ski’s and the villagers’ attitudes toward same-sex behaviors could be described using the concept. However, as the term might be seen as implying a teleological vision of queer history, I decided to not apply it.

The only one who clearly articulated such difference was Marjan Kuleszyński himself. His views expressed in letters and reported by Góral ski and Wydrzycka constitute striking evidence for male homosexual subjectivity in rural Poland in the early 1920s.

“You Dared to Use My Ignorance”

If Kuleszyński held clear ideas about (homo)sexuality, Góral ski’s views of sexual life rather resembled those of the trial witnesses. In fact, the men operated on two different registers when describing love, sex, and related emotions. Góral ski saw sexual acts from a non-binary perspective—what Sedgwick would refer to as a “universalizing view.” Such was, after all, his own experience. By contrast, Kuleszyński seems to have thought about his own desire in terms of a minoritizing paradigm, as a *homosexual* desire.⁸⁶ Among the correspondence preserved in the trial records, there is only one letter penned by Góral ski in March 1925. In fact, it is a copy the author made himself and handed out to the investigating judge. Although its content should be taken with a grain of salt, it still sheds some light on Góral ski’s perspective on this story. Somewhat surprisingly, it exposes the author’s romantic attachment to Kuleszyński.

Before Góral ski discovered “pederastja,” he did not perceive any constitutive difference between his sexual activities with men and women. He drew a clear distinction, however, between male friendship and heterosexual bonding (as oriented toward marriage). In Góral ski’s world view, a homosexual flirtation that started on the train in January 1922 could not result in a relationship akin to the hegemonic heterosexual model—something that Kuleszyński yearned for. Even if Góral ski found homosexual sex pleasurable, for him it was only an element of friendship. Confused by Kuleszyński’s expectations, Góral ski looked for advice to his family from Warsaw. The urban Wydrzyckis explained the concept of pederastja to him and warned that it was a crime. Following their advice, Góral ski ended the relationship with Kuleszyński. Thenceforth, armed with legal and sexual knowledge, Góral ski saw in the sex acts much more than he had seen before—new meanings emerged. He wrote to Kuleszyński in the aforementioned letter: “If you had explained to me at the beginning what all of this meant and what aim you pursued, and I had agreed to that, you could lay claim to me now.”⁸⁷ Góral ski felt used by Kuleszyński, who had known from “the beginning what all of this meant,” but did not share this knowledge with Góral ski. Once exposed, the refuge-closet of the remote forester’s lodge arranged by Kuleszyński collapsed, and a line of normalcy was delineated between the lovers. Kuleszyński’s fantasy came to an end.

Clark, *Alternative Histories of the Self*, 28; Anna Clark, “Twilight Moments,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (Jan.–Apr. 2005): 139–60; and Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (New York, 2014).

86. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 47, 79.

87. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 26.

However, this change had not happened without an inner struggle on Góral ski's side. In the letter, when the investigation was well advanced, he wrote to Kuleszyński. "After having received and read your letter, I thought I would go mad, I just don't know, believe me, whether because of a great joy or disappointment. I've realized that one should not disdain such love [like yours] and everything that I have considered the ideal is only a delusion." At that moment Góral ski regretted denouncing Kuleszyński and doubted heteronormativity—"the ideal"—but he did not see another solution to the situation. He described what he had felt after discovering the meaning of pederastja. "You have to understand that I hated you to the utmost degree and I begged you to free me from your love, but you. . . did not want to or could not understand me[;] because, after all, it is as plain as day that I had to cheat on you and try to free myself from you."⁸⁸ Góral ski did not want to stay married to Kuleszyński because "the ideal"—the vocation to heteronormativity—was "as plain as day." But he failed in this pursuit, either due to Kuleszyński's stubbornness or his own indecision.

In the following part of the letter Góral ski leveled his main accusation against the ex-partner:

"If you want to know where my hatred for you [came] from—it came only from the fact that you dared to use me in my ignorance as a means to satisfy your sensuality and you did not tell me openly why you brought me to your place and for what purpose you wanted to live with me."⁸⁹ For Góral ski, Kuleszyński's main fault was that he had not told Góral ski that their secret marriage was a crime and in this way manipulated him into activities that later turned out to be illicit. The power of the oath had only made this situation more difficult. In Góral ski's opinion, Kuleszyński had used his legal-sexual knowledge against Góral ski by not sharing it with him and then taking advantage of the friendship oath, which was, in fact, a wedding ritual. Góral ski thus found himself in the closet, without ever consciously having entered one. He also came out of it to his family without being aware of the process. He could only see and understand it in hindsight: "Yes, Maniusiu, you should have been from the beginning as you are now and act openly because one is sometimes not able to understand [others'] words, let alone thoughts and projects—and even less when they are ulterior."⁹⁰ The interpretation of the sexual acts presented to Góral ski by his family from Warsaw was legitimized by Góral ski's assumption of his own ignorance. Góral ski believed that knowledge now replaced his previous not-knowing, and he reinterpreted all his past experiences accordingly.

This interpretation relies on the assumption that Góral ski generally did not lie to the investigator. It is possible to tell this story differently. For example, Góral ski might have pretended his ignorance hoping for better treatment by the court. He might have used the trope of a simple peasant in need of the state's help in dealing with a manipulative, knowledgeable, and demoralized nobleman. Another interpretation, suggested by Kuleszyński in his letters,

88. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 25.

89. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 25.

90. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 24–8. Manius—*a diminutive of Marjan.*

would rather indicate that Góral ski exploited men and women on his way to social advancement—a sly peasant who used the generosity of a Polish *szlachcic*. Yet another version was suggested by Kazimiera Wydrzycka. She claimed to the investigating judge that what kept Góral ski for so long in the relationship was the oath—cannily devised by Kuleszyński to subdue and control the freedom of her good-natured brother-in-law.

While many narrations can be built on the sources from the State Archive in Suwałki, the surprising ignorance claimed by Góral ski becomes more convincing if the testimonies of witnesses are considered. Apart from Góral ski, Kuleszyński's brother also told the investigator that he did not know what pederastja was. When questioned about the men's "abnormality," the villagers from the Suwałki region talked rather about Kuleszyński being "rude," drinking too much, or Góral ski behaving dishonestly—clearly confused what kind of wrongdoing constituted pederastja. Apparently, not even the investigating judge was sure how to recognize a "pederast." What is more, Góral ski, when copying his own letter as evidence against Kuleszyński, included expressions of love and attachment, visibly unsure where the difference between the loyalty of a friend and the passion of a lover lay.⁹¹

Exposures

Throughout the investigation and the trial, Góral ski was accompanied in his journey from "ignorance" to "knowledge" by witnesses from the Suwałki region. The intervention of the state by means of its legal apparatus must have had an enormous potential to influence the world views of those involved in the investigation and judicial process. The verdict against the "pederasts" constituted an intrusion into the belief system of the villagers. The defendants took opposite attitudes. Kuleszyński did not repent, he preferred silence and denial, aware of the futility of resistance. Góral ski pleaded guilty and adopted the views expressed in the state's laws and the knowledge of medical experts: "My aim is to reveal this filth. . . . Let me be punished, but [Kuleszyński] should be also exposed."⁹²

Today, the letters that once incriminated Kuleszyński reveal a man with a clear homosexual subjectivity, who knew how to adapt to the differences between the urban and the rural as well as to the presence of modern sexual knowledge and lack thereof. Such was his navigating through the changing social landscape of the early 1920s in search of places and situations that would make it easier for him to follow his queer love fantasy.⁹³ In this way, his

91. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 148–64 (the protocol of the trial). Even if Góral ski did lie about his (lack of) sexual knowledge during the investigation, this fact neither interested the authorities nor helped him to receive a lighter sentence. He mentioned his own ignorance at the beginning of the investigation. The matter was not discussed later and the court did not interrogate Góral ski about his knowledge of sexual issues.

92. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 461 (Góral ski's statement to a forensic expert on February 2, 1925).

93. APS, numer zespołu 208, sygn. 4/7789, 159 (the protocol of the trial). The investigating judge testified that he had not believed in Góral ski's accusations until he

story clearly proves that both the metropolis and the countryside could offer certain opportunities for men desiring men in 1920s Poland. It also informs our understanding of queer individuals' available scope of agency at the time.

This story documents the first known case of same-sex marriage in Poland, even if it was kept secret and was not legally sanctioned. What is more, Kuleszyński's prescient claim—as reported by Wydrzycka and Góral ski—that the future should bring more tolerance for same-sex couples was a micro-level attempt at derailing the hegemonic narratives about homosexuality. It should also be interpreted as a political contestation of heterosexuals' total hegemony in marital law.

On one hand, the story of Góral ski confirms that legal and medical knowledge had the power to regulate the sexual behaviors of individuals, perhaps even to facilitate a formation of the heterosexual subject. On the other hand, the words of Kuleszyński suggest—to paraphrase and dispute the seminal passage of Foucault—that the “sodomite” as a species came into being not by the sole intervention of medical experts.⁹⁴ Just as in the better-known cases of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs or Károly Mária Kertbeny, in Suwałki, the *primum mobile* of homosexual subjectivity could be the subject himself acting against the magisterium of medical and legal authorities.⁹⁵

The preserved records of the trial indicate that in the 1920s the representatives of the Catholic Church in Poland did not focus on the topic of same-sex relations in their pastoral activities. The notion of sin does not appear in the correspondence between the convicts, both practicing Catholics. What is more, Kuleszyński eagerly manifested his attachment to religious rituals and did not see any conflict between his faith and homosexual desire.

The complete documentation of the trial that survived in the provincial Polish town indicates that more such sources may exist, probably inconspicuously described in the repositories or not catalogued at all. The unique letters of Kuleszyński included in the file of the trial demonstrate that a plethora of ideas about sexuality existed in rural Poland in the 1920s. But the significance of this finding reaches beyond the country, or even the region of eastern Europe. It reveals the flow of sexual knowledge between the European metropolises and rural areas. It is an example both of how medical expertise could be received in society and how it could be resisted in the first decades of the twentieth century. The case of Kuleszyński and Góral ski should help us to understand better the entanglements of the interwar nation state's policies with the sexuality of its citizens; how its territorial expansion shaped their sexual knowledge and identities and how it could be exploited by queer people in their individual pursuits of the fantasy of love.

saw Kuleszyński's letters.

94. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: Introduction* (New York, 1990), 43.

95. Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations. Sex, Crime and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860–1914* (Chicago, 2016), 93; and Judit Takacs, “The Double Life of Kertbeny,” in Geri Hekma, ed., *Past and Present of Radical Sexual Politics* (Amsterdam, 2004).