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## **REFLECTIONS ON JOZEF OBREBSKI'S WORK IN MACEDONIA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

**Jozef Obrebski (1905-1967) had a moderately long, interesting, and, in some respects, tragic life. The consequences of the Second World War and the subsequent Communist domination of Eastern Europe altered his life profoundly. While he and his immediate family escaped relatively unscathed and even his relatively voluminous scholarly documents were preserved he was never able to successfully readapt to the life he chose first in the lands of the then British Empire and finally in America. It would indeed be a limited approach to judge a person's life simply by their public record, in this case by a published output. Further it certainly is a tribute to Obrebski's scholarly life that now more than a third of a century after his death that scholars in Macedonia and Poland have chosen to explore in detail the documents he left behind.**

**Before undertaking this essay I used the quick computer approach to get an idea of his published output. Harvard University, which has perhaps the best collection of Slavic publications in the U.S. list some 6 items for Obrebski. Of this number we can immediately deduct four since they are the result of this author's relatively brief work with Obrebski beginning more than quarter of a century ago.<sup>1</sup> The other two relate to his work in Poland and represent a research paper and a bibliographical presentation of the work of others.<sup>2</sup> Another approach is to use Web search engines, which, in some respects only, do pick up all sorts of information about a person's life and their activities. This approach is even more disappointing since of the 9 references all are either to my publications on Obrebski or to his archival collection, which I brought to the University of Massachusetts. By way of contrast with an earlier generation of scholars of Polish origin, Harvard lists for Florian Znaniecki (1882-1958) some 21 books and monographs in Polish and English and the Web has more than 600 references, while for Bronislaw Malinowski, Obrebski's Professor at the London School of Economics, there are approximately 3,700 Web references.**

Since the focus of this essay is Obrebski's work in Macedonia another perspective is to examine Obrebski's work in Macedonia within the context of his overall career. Obrebski's life was spent within the contexts of six distinctive cultural environments three of them Anglophone and three Slavic. There were two South Slavic sites of his field research. First in Bulgaria and then, subsequently in Macedonia. With regard to the area of Poland, he never did any work in Poland proper, outside of some work as a student in an area near Cracow. He did, however, upon his return from Macedonia conduct investigations in Polesie, then in eastern Poland among populations who spoke dialects of Ukrainian and Belarusian. [Correspondence with Anna Engelking]. Referring, of course, to his original roots in Poland, within the context of the pre World War II boundaries, his work in Macedonia in the early 1930s, his doctoral studies in London, his postwar fieldwork in Afro-Caribbean Jamaica when it was still a colony of England and, finally, his stay in the United States. His fieldwork proper was, however, in Poland (Polesie), Macedonia and Jamaica. In terms of job descriptions, intellectual environments and approximate chronology he was initially a student researcher, assistant in an ethnology department in Poland, graduate student in London, and up to World War II he was a researcher, applied sociologist-anthropologist in Poland attached to governmental and academic institutions in positions of increasing responsibility. I have avoided any detailed descriptions of these activities since they are most ably documented in Anna Engelking's paper in this volume.

Following the war he emigrated from Poland and was invited by his old colleague Evans-Pritchard to deliver a series of lectures at Oxford, which were published after his death by this author. They are very well done, clearly written and focusing well on a series of then critical problems dealing with peasant society and its transformations. He was presenting materials of which British anthropologists were then unaware. But, unfortunately, he did not publish this material. However, through his anthropological contacts in London he was able to obtain a research grant to fund investigations on family life in Jamaica. Again he failed to manifest his findings by writing the expected research reports and there were no monographic publications. Essentially the conclusion of his work in Jamaica marked the formal end of his anthropological career. He then obtained employment with the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations in New York City. Finally at the end of his life he was a professor of sociology at

C.W. Post College of Long Island University where his wife Tamara was also a professor.

During his years at Post College there is evidence in his archive that he presented a paper at an anthropology meeting and even submitted it for publication in a well-known journal, but it never appeared.<sup>3</sup> Before arriving at Post College he had spent his career with premier institutions in Poland prior to the war. He received his education at the Universities of Cracow and London. After the war he lectured at Oxford University in 1946 (see the text of his lectures in the publication of Barbara and Joel Halpern).<sup>4</sup> The latter job was the initial step following his decision to emigrate from Poland for political reasons [Correspondence with Anna Engelking]. The immediate postwar period was a time of great expansion in the American university system and it was also one of great growth in the field of area studies of which the Slavic world was an important component. During the period of his employment at Post College there was a similar period of growth. But Obrebski lived on the margin of these developments for he had essentially no publication record in English although he certainly had admiring colleagues who valued his exceptional intelligence.

As professor Elizabeth Nottingham noted in her obituary published in *The American Sociologist*<sup>5</sup>:

"Joseph Obrebski remained throughout his life a humanist in the deepest sense of the word. He was a man of exceptional modesty but great independence of spirit. He possessed a magnificent sense of humor and was a wonderful conversationalist. He represented some of the highest values of his Polish Cultural Heritage. [...] The same spirit of open-handed hospitality and concern for the intellectual development of others was also evident in his contact with American undergraduates whom he encountered during his teaching activity not only at C.W. Post College, but also at Brooklyn College and Queens College of the City University of New York."

It is certainly important to know that those who knew him considered Jozef Obrebski a fine human being and this sincerity and desire to help others may have also aided him in his fieldwork in Macedonia. Importantly, however, this account mentions nothing about his professional work relationships with U.S. colleagues. There is good reason to assume that this aspect of his life did not exist very much while he was at Post College. There are, however, other references to his work with students and his role in promoting anthropology at Post College where it is noted that he

was the first anthropologist on staff there. But the obituary also notes that he was an associate professor at the time of his death at age 62. This is a marked indication that at this small and relatively marginal American College his work was not sufficiently esteemed by his colleagues and employers to promote him to the rank of professor something that would normally be expected. He was also evidently in need of money since he felt the need to teach courses at Brooklyn College and Queens College. Generally this was the kind of job opportunity sought by graduate students at places such as Columbia University so that they could earn extra money. There also seems little doubt that he had heavy teaching obligations at Post College. Without doubt he probably had about double the workload of professors as at Columbia University who were engaged in research. It would indeed have been most unusual if in the midst of all this teaching of undergraduates he found any time to do scholarly writing.

After writing the above comment I searched my files and found an excellent student paper prepared by an undergraduate student, Anthony J. Bellotti and submitted to me for credit in May 1992, the year I retired. This is already a decade ago and I wish to quote from it here extensively because of its importance. It should be viewed as an historical fragment which, under ideal circumstances, should require additional documentation but I cite it here because it is unlikely that we will have more to supplement the accounts of what happened some forty years ago during the final part of his career at C.W. Post College, the only period remaining in his life when he might have had an opportunity to work further on his Macedonia materials. Bellotti describes his visit to C.W. Post College and the interviews he conducted there. I have refrained from editing the student's text even when there are lapses in grammar and misspellings but I have shortened it when there are sentences containing speculation that does not materially add to the documentation.

"I turned to Professor Joseph Kissinger of C.W. Post College who was a rather young colleague (lecturer) of Obrebski's as well as the secretary, Alice Gorby, of the Sociology-Anthropology Department. Much to my surprise they remembered him clearly and vividly after 25 years since his death. Obrebski had worked at the United Nations for ten years as Senior Social Affairs Officer in the Trusteeship department. He had arrived at C.W. Post from Hofstra University. Initially I spoke with Alice Gorby on the phone. She immediately knew whom I was speaking of. She remembered Obrebski as a highly respectable man who was kind and gracious, She was

delighted to hear that someone was researching his work and very helpful in referring me to Prof. Kissinger as well as Prof. Louis Weinstein (whom I have not reached yet for an interview).

I wanted to interview these former colleagues of Obrebski's to bridge the gap between his sudden departure from Jamaica for the UN and his arrival at C.W.Post. Although Obrebski had already been at the UN for 10 years before he arrived at Post, I thought that they might have spoken with him, perhaps at length, about his experience in Jamaica and with the Survey. Initially in my phone conversation with Kissinger I did not want to ask very personal questions regarding the development of Obrebski's career or anything suggesting an inquiry into the events leading to his death.

I expressed to Prof. Kissinger that I was researching the Archives and that I was interested in what they might remember about him. He was rather open and frank about Obrebski's relationship with the American academic community and about C.W. Post College. Kissinger told me 'we brought him here' from Hofstra University during the time when the College was just developing its Sociology-Anthropology Department. The College was founded in 1956 as a Junior College (first two years of University courses only jh). Obrebski arrived in 1962. He said that he felt close to Obrebski, that he was very approachable and recognized by the students for his zeal and commitment to their development, and his unwavering scholarship. As a young graduate student/lecturer, Kissinger remembered the good conversation and rapport with both Tamara Obrebski, his wife, and Joseph. They spoke on a personal and professional level. Yet the exuberance that Kissinger spoke to me about their time together was also followed by a reminder of how Joseph Obrebski suffered much in his relationships with the larger academic community. I asked, rather bluntly, why it might be that Obrebski never published anything about Jamaica or anything since returning to the academic environment. 'Frankly,' he told me, 'there was a lack of appreciation for the quality of his research here in the States.' At first this seemed a bit too simplistic. 'In fact,' Kissinger continued, 'Obrebski was very frustrated because nobody was interested in his work. He was not very happy. He received little administrative support even here at C.W. Post.' I got the distinct impression of man still under the kind of censorship of his work as when he worked under the Survey and Edith Clarke. Kissinger did not say why his work was not accepted. However, this 'lack of support' was loudly enforced in Obrebski's relegation to Assistant Professor until 1966 when he was finally granted an Associateship. At the same time, Kissinger

told me, Obrebski's son Stephen, who had lived with him in Jamaica at the age of [ten], was of the same rank as an assistant professor of Oceanography at Stoneybrook College (it is actually the State University of New York at Stoneybrook and a graduate institution while C.W. Post was strictly an undergraduate institution jh). Tamara, Obrebski's wife, was an adjunct professor at C.W. Post. Kissinger underscored just how this rendering to obscurity 'rankled him,' indicating how Obrebski frequently uttered obscenities about his status. Kissinger was able to offer quite a valuable perspective as to why Obrebski did not publish anything after leaving Jamaica."

Several years afterward, in her conversations with Prof. Louis Weinstein and Prof. Joseph Kissinger, Anna Engelking obtained a confirmation of this perspective on Obrebski later years. They remarked on the singular modesty of Jozef Obrebski. In these conversations a hypothesis was suggested that his failure to publish derived from his lack of concern with respect to academic titles and the formalities of academic life in general. This was combined with a difficulty in adjusting to life in the US. These attitudes produced a situation in which Jozef Obrebski kept to himself. He did not like to talk much about himself. When speaking of the past he mostly recalled his WWII experiences in occupied Poland. This experience understandably involved a major trauma for all of his family. In the 60s he already gave the impression of a tired and resigned man [1996 conversation of Anna Engelking with Prof. Louis Weinstein and Prof. Joseph Kissinger].

But in a contrasting context he did retain his ties to Poland and at the time of his death he had an invitation for the academic year 1968-69 as a visiting professor to the Warsaw University to expand the cultural anthropology department and its offerings [Correspondence with Anna Engelking]. Probably these contacts with Poland helped him to keep up his spirits at a very trying time in his life. Unfortunately he did not live to take advantage of this significant opportunity.

It is also significant to note that Obrebski's research in the Balkans was not unique for this period. During the time he spent in Macedonia there were other scholars at work in the area but from abroad and within what was then Yugoslavia. Perhaps most immediately pertinent was the work of Professor Milenko Filipovic who before the Second World War was based at the University of Skopje. Professor Filipovic was an ethnologist who had been trained by the well-known Serbian human geographer, Jovan Cvijic

who in the interwar period taught at the University of Belgrade. Not only did Filipovic carry out numerous investigations in Macedonia but he also founded a journal of ethnology based at the University of Skopje.<sup>6</sup>

As far as I am aware they never met. Although Obrebski and Filipovic did share one point in common in that they both received Rockefeller fellowships. Although Filipovic received his on the eve of World War II but decided to remain in Skopje and not seek refuge in the U.S. In 1951-52 he did, however, come to the U.S. and spent most of his time at Harvard University. At that time he was employed by the Ethnographic Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences in Belgrade. Filipovic was my mentor at that time of my first visit to the Balkans in 1953-54. Obrebski would have been in the U.S. at that time but apparently their paths did not cross.

In another important instance Philip Mosely was in the 1950s and 1960s Professor of Political Science and Director of the Russian Institute at Columbia University and one of the founders of Slavic and East European Studies in the U.S. He was a close colleague of Filipovic and was instrumental in aiding him in renewing his Rockefeller Foundation fellowship. I initially met Filipovic in Mosely's office and through him made my initial arrangements for my doctoral research in Serbia. It is more than likely that Mosely and Obrebski did not overlap in their times in Macedonia. At the time I met him Mosely was not only an expert on the Balkans, but he was a key member in the American delegation that negotiated the postwar treaty with Yugoslavia concerning the country's western boundary with Italy, especially the area of Trieste. He was also both during and after the war a key advisor to the State Department and his original expertise involved the Soviet Union. He was resident in Moscow during the 1930s purge trials.

But in the late 1930s the American Social Science Research Council, in response to Mosely's application for funding for a historical project, insisted that he spend time in the Balkans studying household and family structure. As a result he wrote a series of now classic articles on the *zadruga*, the South Slavic extended family as a result of his travels throughout the Balkans. When I knew him, beginning in the early 1950s, he was also a colleague of Margaret Mead and they had collaborated on a number of projects involving anthropology and Slavic Studies. After Mosely's death in the late 1960s Mead wrote a chapter for a book issued on the occasion of a conference concerning Mosely's work to which Yugoslav and Bulgarian

ethnologists were invited. This book also had a chapter dealing with extended family households in Macedonia.<sup>7</sup> It seems quite clear that Mosely and Obrebski never met. Yet contacts could have been made quite easily for Sula Benet who was from Poland and had initially studied there was then a professor of anthropology at Hunter College. She was also a friend of Margaret Mead. I knew Sula Benet quite casually and after Jozef Obrebski's death his widow Tamara contacted me at the suggestion of Benet concerning the disposition of the Obrebski archives and photographs.

It is also appropriate to mention two other scholars who were active in the Balkans in the 1930s. One was the American rural sociologist Irwin Sanders who arrived in Sofia to teach at the American College there, a missionary related institution, the year I was born, in 1929. As of this writing Professor Sanders is still alive. While teaching at the American College he became interested in Bulgarian village life and began a study of a village near Sofia. This research subsequently became his doctoral dissertation in sociology at Cornell University where he enrolled after his return to the U.S. It was published under the title *A Balkan Village*.<sup>8</sup> In addition to his teaching career Sanders spent a period working for the Ford Foundation and was much involved with international education. He taught both at the University of Kentucky and at Boston University. The final scholar that I wish to mention is Rudolf Bicanic who began his career as an agricultural economist and became associated with the Croatian Peasant Party in the 1930s. In this capacity he prepared a number of detailed reports on the difficulties of peasant life in Croatia in the 1930s especially as a result of the Great Depression. He, like Obrebski, received an education in England and a number of his books and articles appeared in both English and Croatian.<sup>9</sup>

I think it can conclusively be stated that, apart from his Polish contacts, after his work in Jamaica, Obrebski remained totally isolated from the English-speaking world as far as research and publication are concerned. Obviously this was a loss, especially to Obrebski, but also to the wider scholarly community that would have benefited from his potentially seminal contributions. Clearly his inability to publish had drastic consequences. It is not at all surprising that in the very marginal corner of academia in which he found himself there was no interest in or support for his work. He was involved in a downward spiral. His pay was almost certainly limited in consonance with the type of institution in which he was employed. This



forced him to do extra teaching of elementary courses in the City University system and he clearly had no time to edit his massive accumulation of material for publication. This was also the time in the early to mid sixties in which extensive support for research was available from institutions such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Sciences Foundation as well as private sources such as the Ford Foundation. Such support would have provided him with full salary maintenance for a year or several years. But to apply for such grants you needed an initial record of substantial publication in English. In his sixties tired and despondent he was, in effect, living the life of a graduate student and his son was already surpassing him. If he had had some contact with the world of scholarship in anthropology and or Slavic Studies I would certainly have encountered him. In the period 1963-67 I was teaching at Brandeis University and then from 1965-67 at the Russian Research Center at Harvard University. It was a period of excellent funding of even large and elaborate research projects in Eastern Europe, a time when there were many opportunities for appointments at major universities with Slavic Centers. His researches would have been of intense interest. It is indeed a sad story. There are no villains here, he lacked basic political survival skills and the resulting traumas associated with his downward mobility, without doubt, caused him untold misery and doubtless shortened his life.

There is a final part of these events and that has to do with the miraculous survival of the major part of his archives. As noted earlier I first met Jozef Obrebski's widow Tamara through Professor Sula Benet who was then teaching at Hunter College (now part of the City University of New York). After initial phone conversations I invited her to Amherst and she was my houseguest and we first devised a plan for a photo exhibit involving his dramatic photographs of Polesie. The exhibit opened in one of the University of Massachusetts's art galleries on October 3, 1973 and I obtained money for a modest catalog, *Yesterday's People, Peasants of Polesie, An Exhibit of Rural Eastern Poland in the 1930's*.<sup>10</sup> The exhibit was a success and there was significant publicity in the local papers, in part inspired by the fact that the area around the University was settled in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by immigrant Polish farmers who replaced the original Yankees who had moved west.

From the beginning it seemed logical to bring the archives to the University where we then had a modest East European Studies program, a

graduate department of anthropology with several professor interested in Europe and a number actively researching in Eastern Europe. We also had a Slavic Librarian of Polish origin who was keen to build our library resources. However, Tamara Obrebski was very hesitant to part with her treasures, especially the many photographs. There was no comparable institution in the New York metropolitan area that was competing for the collection. But after her death her son was eager to arrange matters and have the voluminous material removed from the house in Queens so he could proceed with the sale. As a result I traveled to New York with a graduate student Dennis Venencak, of Polish origin who later did his doctoral work in Poland. Unfortunately he died too early of a brain tumor at the beginning of his career. He was most helpful. We rented and loaded a large truck and carted the large collection to Amherst. Obrebski's son generously provided an initial grant that was used to catalog the Jamaican material. A local Slavicist, Galina Rothstein, cataloged the Polish material. The Macedonia material is relatively well indexed but has not been as well cataloged as the other collections.

One must, of necessity be respectful of this information. But the essential point remains that, for whatever reason, Jozef Obrebski did not pursue a normal academic career at a University or research insitute just prior to World War II. Further, by implication, he was something of a perfectionist. Thus the author's publication of Obrebski's Oxford lectures did not require a great deal of editing as a comparison between the archival copy and final book publication text will demonstrate. Further, as has been noted, he tragically lacked the necessary skills to survive in the politics of the academic world as witness his Jamaican research experience. Thus when he finally came to the U.S. he lacked the essential formal credentials for an academic important at a major research university. His failure to produce a timely research report on his Jamaican experience evidently alienated his prestigious academic supporters in England. Thus the path was apparently set for his marginalization from the then quite active world of anthropological research. Apparently this marginalization had a very destructive effect on his health and no doubt contributed to his relatively early death. Fortunately he has bequeathed to us his very rich archive which documents the full extent of his talent and accomplishments.

## References

1. The first publication issued while Tamara Obrebska was alive was *Yesterday's People, Peasants of Polesie, An Exhibition of Photographs of Rural Eastern Poland in the 1930s* by Joseph Obrebski, October 3 to October 14, 1973, University Art Gallery, Herter Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She attended this exhibit and was most pleased with the interested it elicited.

The second one was "Ritual and Social Structure in a Macedonian Village" by Joseph Obrebski, edited by Barbara Kerewsky Halpern and Joel M. Halpern, Research Report No. 16, Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, May 1977 (this monograph was also issued by the International Area Studies Programs at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1977 as Program in Soviet and East European Studies Occasional Papers Series No. 1).

2. "Problem etniczny Polesia" ["Ethnic Question of Polesie"], "Sprawy Narodowocciowe", 1936, vol. 10, no 1-2, pp. 1-21.

"Indeks do *Lecznictwa ludu polskiego*" Henryka Biegeleisena" ["An index to *The Polish Folk Medecine* of Henryk Biegeleisen"], Kraków 1931, pp. 31.

3. The text "Social Structure and Ritual in a Macedonian Village" (1961) which was to be published in the journal "Comparative Studies in Society and History"

4. *The Changing Peasantry of Eastern Europe* by Joseph Obrebski, edited by Barbara and Joel Halpern, Schenkman Publishing Company, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976.

5. Elizabeth K. Nottingham, "Joseph Obrebski 1905-1967", "The American Sociologist", Vol. 3 no 3 (1968), pp. 256-257. Cited in *The Changing Peasantry of Eastern Europe*, pp 6-7.

6. A selection of Milenko Filipovic's work in translation was published as: *Among the People, Native Yugoslav Ethnography, Selected Writings of Milenko S. Filipovic*, edited by E.A. Hammel, Robert S. Ehrich, Radmila Fabijanic-Filipovic, Joel M. Halpern, Albert B. Lord, Papers in Slavic