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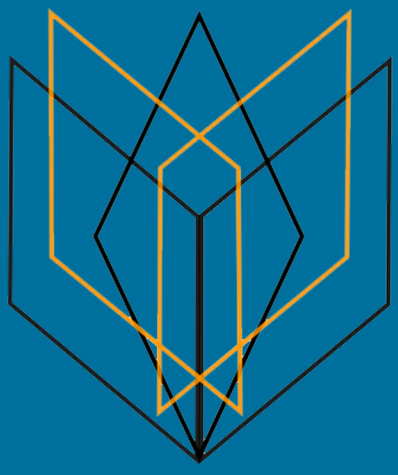

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Niderlandystyka Interdyscyplinarnie

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‘I wondered what they thought of Wrocław, of their youth in Breslau…’ — Interview with the Belgian writer Joseph Pearce

Interview with Joseph Pearce (JP) made on May 23, 2016 in Wrocław by Magda Rumińska (MR) and Weronika Gębicka (WG); technical setting: Miłosz Księżarczyk. Magda, Weronika and Miłosz are students of Wrocław University, Erasmus Chair for Dutch Philology, supervised for this interwiev by Barbara Kalla

MR: *We are very happy that you are here in Wrocław. First of all, how was it in Warsaw? I heard that you were there at a book fair recently?*

JP: The book – Pożegnanie z Breslau - was presented on Friday evening in Państwo Miasto. I was introduced by the journalist Grzegorz Dziemidowicz from the Polish Radio. The next day, in the afternoon I was invited to go to the book fair at the National Football Stadium. I was there for only one hour. I sold four copies!

MR: *That's good!*

JP: (laugh) Yes, quite a success! I also met with other visitors, they were mostly interested in family stories. Some people who were born in Wroclaw or had relatives there came to me when they saw „Breslau" in the title of the book. They asked me what connection there was with that city.

MR: *Did you do some sightseeing in Warsaw?*

JP: Yes, of course. It was my first time there. We went to see Stare Miasto, which I found very beautiful. Not as beautiful as the old Wroclaw, obviously. We also went with Andrzej Parzymies from Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog to the once Jewish district. Most of it had been destroyed, of course, but you can still see a few remnants of the old ghetto wall, and then there is the monument of Janusz Korczak and his orphans. Very moving.

WG: *So you think that Wrocław is more attractive than Warsaw. Wrocław was German for a long time, and Warsaw is one of the most Polish cities you can find. What is the most remarkable difference in atmosphere between these two cities, especially then for people from abroad?*

JP: First of all, Wrocław is greener. In the cold city you have Podwale, little parks and public gardens here and there. And then there is the Odra, running through the city centre. The Vistula in Warsaw seems to be further away. There's also more open space in the Stare Miasto in Wrocław than in Warsaw. Of course you have Łazienki park in Warsaw, but that's a bit

away from the city centre. The architecture in Wrocław shows the greatest differences. Wrocław is a mixture of architecture, from Norman to Gothic to renaissance to Baroque to Jugendstil, Bauhaus and modernism. Much renovation is taking place. This is my sixth visit to Wroclaw. I was here in 1994 for the first time, with my parents. When you look now, 22 years later, much has changed, for the better.

MR: *We have some questions about your biography. How did you find your father's real identity?*

JP: It's described in the first page of the book. I was 14 years old. It was my birthday when my father said to me: I've got something to tell you. You think I am English... but I'm not... I do have the British nationality, but I was born in Breslau. I was German and we were Jewish.

MR: *How did you feel?*

JP: I wasn't shocked. I didn't really react. I thought: Oh, interesting.

MR: *But why did your father wait such a long time before he told you?*

JP: My parents had a business at home, a wholesaler's, with many customers. It was not a very good idea to tell them after the war that you were of German descent. Moreover, there were not many Jews in Vilvoorde, the town where we lived, maybe one or two, so it was not very wise at that time to say that you were Jewish. A light form of antisemitism had always existed, even after the war.

WG: *It sounds that it didn't make such of an impact then when you first heard about it. Why did it take you a long time for you to get really interested in the story of your Jewish family? Do you remember the moment when you thought "Ok, maybe I should dig a little deeper and investigate it?"*

JP: I don't think that it was a precise moment. We fortunately had many photographs of my father's family. A goodly number of these photographs and postcards came from my

grandfather who was a Sanitäter-Unteroffizier, a kind of lazaret helper, during the First World War in France. He wrote a number of postcards to his family in Breslau In 1993 I thought it would be interesting to go to Northern France to see where our grandfather had served during the First World War. I consequently realised that as the family of my father was getting old, I shouldn't wait too long to visit them. In 1996 I decided to write a book about it and organise visits to all my Jewish relatives all over the world, because most of them had left Breslau before the war and moved to Australia, South Africa, Israel, England, Bolivia. After the war a cousin of my father's, a survivor of Auschwitz, also moved to the USA.

MR: *What was more important to you? To get to know your family's history or to contact them?*
JP: Both, I think. I wanted to know how they lived fifty years or more after the war, how they were doing in their own society. They came from Germany, they were Jewish, many people were murdered in the concentration camps. I wondered what they thought of Wrocław, of their youth in Breslau. But I am also fascinated by history. I am not only interested in how the world develops, not only in the 1930s by the way, but also in the personal history of my family. Where did they come from? Where did they end up, and why? I knew that my great-grandfather had lived in Poland, in a village close to Toruń. He moved to Breslau, which was then part of Prussia, in 1840 or 1850, and changed his name from the Polish-Jewish Peretz to the German Peritz. And his Jewish first name, Yehuda, was changed to the more German sounding Lewin.

WG: *How did you start working on your book? It's such a huge project. Your relatives lived all over the world! In which language did you communicate with them?*
JP: It was a huge project, indeed. All paid by myself, by the way (☒). I was able to speak English with all my relatives, except with the nephew of my father who lived in La Paz in Bolivia. We spoke German. I speak a decent bit of German, because in Belgium you learn four languages at school: Dutch, English, French and German. So there were no communication problems.

WG: *How did you exactly start writing the book?*

JP: Firstly, I wrote down a sort of introduction, only a few pages long, and sent it to two publishing houses with the explanation: This is the introduction, I intend to visit my family in those countries, I want to make a family story. Are you interested? They were immediately interested. I had to choose between those two publishing houses, I chose Houtekiet in Antwerp. Then I started to write. The book was published in the autumn of 1999. It was republished in 2008. It's still available with another publishing house, this time as a Print On Demand. It's the only book that I wrote that has been commercially successful. There has also been a French and a Russian version, and I'm truly over the moon that a Polish version is now available.

MR: *What was the most difficult thing in writing this book?*

JP: That's a good question. First of all, I asked myself how the contact with my family would develop. How would they respond to my visiting them? Would they open up? I was partly a relative and partly a nosy journalist. But they were all extremely co-operative. Hans, who had survived Auschwitz, told me all about his years in the concentration and death camps: the first time he had ever spoken about it. He had four children, but he had never told them what had happened to him during those awful years. And secondly, I knew I had to find the right tone for the book. I couldn't make it too personal, because then it wouldn't have interested other people. So I went for a neutral approach. Let my relatives do the talking. I was just a listener, a good listener, I hope.

MR: *What was your cooperation with the translator like? Did you have a good contact? What kind of questions did she ask?*

JP: There were no communication problems, Jadwiga Jędryas was very precise and asked me many questions. I saw her once before she started the translation, in Antwerp where I live. Then for the next year we regularly e-mailed. It was very amicable and fruitful.

WG: *Do you know the reason why the Polish translation was published only now?*

JP: Maybe the book wasn't good enough? (laughs) I don't know, I was here in Wrocław in 2011, your professors said it would be a good idea if a Polish translation would be possible, but nothing came of it. Then Koen Haverbeke, the Flemish Representative in Warsaw, offered the book to a small publishing house – Dialog. And they decided to take the risk. And it is thanks to the new Flemish representative, Yves Wantens, that I got the chance to visit Warsaw and Wroclaw. Thank you, Flemish tax payers!

MR: *What does writing mean to you? Is it a hobby or something else?*

JP: I was a Dutch and English teacher for many years, at a Jesuit college in Antwerp. I have always been interested in writing, but I didn't have the time to do anything about it – I was a full-time teacher, that means a lot of work. But once the book was published in 1999 it opened a gate. I got really good reviews in Flanders and the Netherlands. The famous Flemish writer Erwin Mortier interviewed me for the newspaper De Morgen. Afterwards he asked me if I had another writing project in mind. I said yes, a novel, and when that was finished I sent it to Meulenhoff in Amsterdam. They accepted the manuscript, and since then I have published about ten novels. Writing is an integral part of my life now. Well, it has been for the last fifteen years or so. I can't live without it.

WG: *Who is Max Adriaans?*

JP: It was a crazy idea of mine. As a writer I must have silence. I live in a city and it's noisy and I get irritated. I thought: Why don't I write a book about this dictatorship of noise in a city? Everybody complains about it, but nobody does something about it. And I thought: why not write a thriller about my problem? Which is the problem of many people, because noise pollution is the number one problem in a city, from the noise your neighbour makes to the endless summer music festivals in public squares and parks. I wrote the book very quickly, in a couple of months, and I used a pseudonym, not because I was ashamed to use my own name, but because I thought that the book was so different from my other work that it needed a different name. Quite a few writers use pseudonyms, of course.

MR: *Has Pożegnanie z Breslau changed your life?*

JP: Yes, absolutely, because until 1999 I was a full-time teacher. Immediately after the book had been published, the Flemish newspaper De Morgen asked me if I would like to write for them. I became a literary critic for the book supplement and I do public interviews with writers. I was already 56 when I was able to devote all my time to journalism and writing. I recommend it to you.

WG: *Do we have to become a teacher first before launching a writing career?*

JP: No, of course not. You have to have, though, a love of literature. I read a lot when I was young, even in languages that I could only half understand, such as French. But I loved the sound of that language.

MR: *Can everyone become an author?*

JP: I'm absolutely convinced that you have to love literature first of all. And secondly, if you want to learn from your mistakes, then I think many people can become writers. Good writers? There are a million writers all over the world, and some really good writers like me (laughs) don't sell millions of copies. Fifty Shades of Grey on the other hand, which is complete rubbish, is bought by millions of people.

WG: *You mentioned that your book is not a bestseller, but I think it will be.*

JP: When I'm dead and buried, yes, absolutely. (laughs)

WG: *The thriller by Max Adriaans is set in Antwerp, in your city. What are the Dutch-speaking Belgians reading now? Flemish writers? Dutch writers? Foreign-language writers?*

JP: The majority of readers read popular novels, thrillers and detective stories. Flanders and the Netherlands have quite a few excellent writers. Some of them sell hundreds of thousands of copies, but most have to be content with one or two thousand copies. I sell even less, except then for a few novels and Pożegnanie z Breslau, of course, I mean the Dutch original.

MR: *Do you know some Polish people here?*

JP: Writers?

WG: *Anyone that you look forward to seeing.*

JP: I only know a few people at the university. In the first place Barbara Kalla. I also met with Siegfried Huigen, Ewa Dynarowicz and Edyta Grzesik. And I do look forward to seeing them again. Delightful people.

WG: *Can you recommend us – young people, students of Dutch – a few writers?*

JP: I'm afraid I do not have the time to read many books by my Dutch and Flemish brothers and sisters. As a literary critic, my focus is on Israeli and Central European writers. What sort of books are you looking for anyway? The best of our literature? Or books that you can ease into so that you can gradually improve your Dutch?

MR: *What conditions do you need to write?*

JP: I can write everywhere, but I need my computer. I wrote Pożegnanie z Breslau and my first two novels, Koloniale waren and Maanzaad by hand, though. The most important condition for me to write in? Peace and quiet. If I had enough money, I would go and live in the Ardennes, where one can still find that peace.

MR: *Could you tell us something about your writing process?*

JP: It depends on inspiration and ideas; it's like an expedition – you never know what's going to happen. The most important thing, for me anyway, is story telling. I'm influenced by the Yiddish writers of the 19th and 20th century, you see, people like Jitschok Leib Peretz, who was the father of Yiddish literature. He hailed from Zamość. By the way, you know this I suppose, there is a Plac Pereca in Wroclaw. My father went there to the Jüdisches Realgymnasium, then at the Rhediger Platz. He went there because as a Jew he had to leave the Realgymnasium in the ul. Teatralna, then the Zwingerstrasse. The school at Plac Pereca is still

there! One of the few buildings that survived the war in that part of the city, because to the south of the Old City, more than 90% of the buildings was destroyed, and never rebuilt. Typical for Yiddish literature is not so much the plot as the ability to tell a good story. It's all about the joy of storytelling.

MR: *How would you describe your personality, your identity, who are you inside? A sensitive or a strong man?*

JP: It's a very difficult question, each of us has a lot of different aspects to his or her character, Not different masks but different ways to deal with different situations: sometimes when I'm angry I can explode, but that doesn't happen very often. I'm not going to explode now. There is no reason whatsoever (laughs).

MR: *Do you have some places that you like seeing each time you visit Wrocław?*

JP: Most of my family lived in the city centre, so I like this area very much. Here I feel at home.

MR: *Tomorrow we're planning a sightseeing tour with you. What would you like to see?*

JP: My brother and I went to see the Arsenal this morning, and then we went on to Dworzec Świebodzki. Good to see that the place is being renovated. We then walked along Podwale, always a favourite, to the Odra to enjoy the view across the river of Ostrów Tumski. We finally peeked inside the Hala Targowa. So, your sightseeing tour? You choose, please. My brother and I like to discover new things.

WG: *In 2016 Wrocław is European Capital of Culture - very recently things have changed here a lot.*

JP: Every time I come back to Wrocław, I see renovation, and I like it: new benches, public parks, new lighting, buildings with renovated façades. And the new concert hall is breathtakingly beautiful! There is still a lot of work to be done, but you should never forget

that Breslau suffered terribly from the war. I suppose the city authorities don't have piles of money to renovate it all. I'm sure Europe helps a little bit, too. In Warsaw I heard about a discussion: which city is more beautiful, Wrocław or Kraków? Have you heard about that discussion?

WG: *Poland has always been a competitive country, there is always some race to be won. How is your German?*

JP: Mein Deutsch? Sprechen Sie Deutsch ? Jadwiga Jędryas, my translator, used the original German names of streets and so on, on purpose of course. But if the reader gets lost, there is a list of the Polish equivalents at the end of the book. I don't speak Polish, unfortunately. Well, apart from a few words and expressions. I now often ask "Czy mówi Pani po angielsku ?" Most people do speak English nowadays, but back in 1994 the answer was almost always "tylko po polsku" - only Polish. At that time I never asked "Czy mówi Pani po niemiecku". Now German history is integrated into Wrocław history, and Wroclawians accept that the city also had a German past. So perhaps I might ask Wrocławians if they speak German. Many old or very old Wrocławians speak a little bit of German, you know. Perhaps those Wrocławians who lived in the city when it was still German. There have always been Poles living here, haven't they?

MR: *Did you hear any remarkable stories when your visited your Jewish relatives?*

JP: I was most impressed by Hans Peritz, who survived Auschwitz. He was still feeling guilty that he had survived. When I sent the French version to my relatives in USA, Hans had passed away by then, I received an angry phone call from Martha, his widow: "The Jews will be angry," she complained. "They will now know that we survived the camps!."

MR: *How do you feel now that the book has been published in Polish? Emotions and experiences come back?*

JP: My book in Polish is what I really wanted, it deserves a place here. Now I can safely die. (laughs)

MR: *What did you think about the tragic life of your grandmother?*

JP: Yes, she was an unhappy woman. She committed suicide on 8 March 1951, exactly nine months to the day before I was born. Although I never knew her or my grandfather, I did feel a strong connection to them. I visited their graves, my grandmother's in La Paz, my grandfather near Tel Aviv. Very emotional visits.

MR: *Are you still in contact with your family after all these years?*

JP: Most people have died since, of course. But I'm still in contact with the children of a nephew in Australia and Bolivia. And I also correspond with a relative in South Africa. He's not in the book. At the time I didn't yet know that I had relatives in Cape Town.

MR: *Were you not afraid of possible readers' reactions to your family history?*

JP: No, many people, including me, like to read family chronicles, not only those of famous people, also, how shall I put it, of normal families. As it happened, the family in this book were the victims of the worst disaster in the 20th century. Their story is also the story of millions of other people who were victims of the political turbulence in Europe. It is also the story of the drama of emigration. When you have to go and live in another country, you have to adapt to a new way of life. It's difficult. Where will you find work, how will you raise your family? That's why I'm very sensitive about the present political situation in Europe, with the influx of millions of immigrants from war-torn countries like Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Many people don't want them. Many populist politicians don't want them. It's however a very Christian idea to open your arms for people in need. It's also a Jewish-Christian idea. I therefore have the greatest respect for the German chancellor Angela Merkel. Wir schaffen das, she said. Let's hope she is right.

MR: *Is this book your best book?*

JP: For some people it is, for others it is my worst book. I have written ten books, of which nine are novels, and everybody has got a different idea, believe me. Why do people like a certain book? You need to have a personal and emotional connection to it.

MR: *You spent almost two years in London in the 1980s. How was life there?*

JP: I was able to write for two Flemish newspapers, De Morgen and Het Nieuwsblad. And I also did some radio work for the Flemish radio. London was fascinating, I was sad to go, but London is so expensive and I didn't earn enough to continue living there. A blessing in disguise, no doubt. If I had been able to stay there, I probably wouldn't have become a writer.

MR: *Do you think that literature is still divided into high and low literature?*

JP: Oh yes, I do. Almost nobody else does, unfortunately. When I read books, the best books by the best writers open up a fantastic world: there is the beauty of the language, there are the different layers of meaning, there are many inspiring or challenging thoughts and ideas, there is the deep humanity. You don't find these things in popular literature.

MR: *Do you get reactions from readers?*

JP: A few reactions, when I stumble on their opinions on social media. But social media are not for me: I'm not on Facebook, I do not twitter, I'm not interested at all in media that take up the time I need for more fruitful activities.

MR: *Do you recommend other people to write about their own family history?*

JP: Absolutely. I truly believe that in every family, if you listen to the stories long enough, you will always find fascinating stuff: mysteries, adventures, catastrophes, tragedies, drama, all sorts of deeply human stories.

MR: *Could you tell us something about your next book?*

JP: I'm in a middle of writing, about eighty percent is finished. It's going back to 1961 and 1962. Many important developments were taking place in those two years, such as the Cuba missile crisis, the Second Vatican Council with Pope John XXIII, Belgium had just lost its colony of the Congo, and so on and so forth. I want to find out how that impacts on a twelve-year old boy, who himself is in the middle of a few personal crises. But it won't be translated in Polish, I suspect. Unless Barbara Kalla finds it a wonderful book and decides to translate it. (laughs)

MR: *"When we're talking about people who died they're always with us" This is a very good motto.*

JP: A good book always relates to the human condition. We need to continue that tradition. It's a shame, it's a pity, that fewer and fewer people read good literature, because there we ask questions about ourselves, we find out about ourselves and we learn about the world. In the particular case of Pożegnanie z Breslau it was a very personal thing, I didn't know anything about my Jewish family and I'm extremely happy that I found out about them. When Jews visit a grave, they put a small stone, a pebble perhaps, on the grave, so as to remember the dead. I was here, they say to the dead. I remembered you. My book is such a small stone.

WG: *You have to invest so much of yourself into a book. What happens when it's finished and published?*

JP: Good question. During the writing a book is your own baby, as it were, it belongs to you and only to you. When the book is published, you give that baby away. if people don't like it, you have to accept that. Sometimes you've got bad reviews of course. It's a shock and sad, but you have to continue, you have to trust your own judgment. There's an English saying: " If you can't stand the heat, you have to get out of the kitchen."

MR: *Are you glad that you found out about your history and family?*

JP: I'm extremely glad that I had the time and the energy to listen to the stories, to make a book out of them. I was impressed with the way they forged a new life in a foreign country. I was privileged that they opened up to me.

MR: *Did this book change your life?*

JP: No, it just confirmed my view that I had already before, that life is often difficult and that you have to cope with many problems, many obstacles. But my relatives also taught me that you can still overcome those problems and obstacles. An immensely valuable lesson, indeed. Life is worth living. Most of the survivors of Auschwitz and the other death camps went on living. That shows how strong we are.

MR: *Never give up. Is that the final lesson?*

JP: Yes, we need to enjoy the moment, life is very short. We all go through ups and downs. So maybe you're right after all, the book did change my life. If I have problems now, I think of Hans Peritz. He survived Auschwitz, got married to another Auschwitz survivor, and raised four successful children. What should I have to complain about then?