

POLISH TRAVELLERS IN LIBYA

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Of all the Arab countries, Libya has not been very popular among Polish travellers, probably due to its geographical position. Since it is situated between two historically interesting countries – Tunisia with ancient Carthage and Egypt as the country of the pharaohs – it did not attract much attention. The first visits to Libya were thus mainly accidental and were related to trips to other Mediterranean countries. According to the journal *Wychodźca* in 1939, in comparison with other countries 'only a few Polish travellers have ever seen Libya, not even ordinary tourists; their number does not exceed 300 people'.¹ The editor of *Wychodźca* noted that 'the attractions of foreign countries abundant in ancient monuments make people disregard and dismiss Libya, the country of the future'.²

Although few Poles ever visited Libya, those who finally got there left behind many descriptions of its cities and everyday life as well as many photos and memoirs. The first Pole to reach Libya was Prokop Pieniążek from Nowy Targ (1536–89), the admiral of the Maltese fleet.³ According to Miłosz Gembarzewski, 'he attacked Algiers; achieved a victory in Tunis; defeated the Muslims at sea at Marabeka, and in the sea battle near Clolert he boarded the biggest enemy ship and killed one of the Turkish commanders after he had got onto the deck. In Algeria he was seriously wounded; in the war with the Moors he rescued his fellow soldiers from and thus became enemy attack'.⁴ In 1557 he defeated Algerian pirates near Tripoli, and thus became the first Pole to visit the city then occupied by the Turks.⁵

In the 18th century, Tomasz Stanisław Wolski from Uniejów (1700–36) arrived in Libya. Sailing on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he was wrecked near Tripoli in 1726. Waiting for another ship, Wolski visited the city and the surrounding areas.⁶ He wrote: 'Tripoli is situated on a plain, it has delightful gardens, full of luscious vines and charming orange and lemon trees that create special, unforgettable sights and fragrances. When entering the [city] gate, I met Turks who surely just for fun, started to throw at me some wooden sticks, sharpened as arrows. Fortunately, I managed to avoid this hazard, because that Turks soon left off this impertinent game and took themselves off'.⁷ In 1726 Wolski became Knight of

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¹ 'Polacy na szlakach libijskich', *Wychodźca* (Warsaw), (3 July 1939, no. 12, p. 10).

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³ 'Polacy na szlakach libijskich' p. 10.

⁴ Miłosz Gembarzewski, *Pierwszy Polak admiraem, Morze* (1934), no. 5, p. 3.

⁵ Stefan Golabek, *Zwiazki Polski i Polaków z Afryka do roku 1945* (Łódź, 1978), p. 13.

⁶ During his travels he also visited Jaffa, Jerusalem, Acca and Alexandria

⁷ Władysław Chometowski, *Pielgrzymki do ziemi świętej i sasiednich krajin* (Warsaw, 1874), p. 103.

Malta,⁸ and in 1730 the Pope nominated him the admiral of the papal fleet that was fighting the Turks in the Mediterranean Sea.⁹

In the 19th century, Alexander Jablonowski from Goźlin on Mazowsze (born 1829)¹⁰ reached Libya. He spent the whole year 1870 in Tripoli, and he published his impressions from the trip in the Warsaw press.¹¹ In *Wedrowiec* we read:

Tripolitania (Tripoli di Barbaria, Tarabulissi – Gharb in Turkish) is to a large extent a sad and barren country . . . The whole country is a desert brightened by occasional oases, where date palms, almond trees and fig trees grow. The inhabitants occupy themselves with breeding sheep, hunting and fishing, and sometimes committing petty thefts, which is characteristic of this region. The seaside towns are small because harbours are mainly covered in sand . . . Apart from fulfilling their ambitions, Italy and other countries would probably have few benefits from invading such a barren country.¹²

It was the first description of this region by a Pole.

In contemporary Algeria, a Frenchman of Polish origin, Adolf de Cassalanti Motylinski (1854–1907),¹³ was doing research. Born in Algeria, Motyliński was a translator and interpreter of Arabic and Berber for French army units. At the end of the 19th century he organized several research expeditions to western Tripolitania and Mzab. He was mainly interested in literature, history, ethnography and geography. Most of his works were devoted to these issues. Unfortunately, he did not manage to finish his researches on the Tuareg. He died in 1908 during one of his trips to the Ahaggar.¹⁴

Another Pole who went to Libya was Tadeusz Gasztowtt (1881–1936). He had lived in Turkey for years, where he befriended some members of the Young Turks movement. A Sejjeddin bey, he wrote articles for Turkish newspapers. He found himself in Libya in 1911 as a volunteer in the Turkish army during the war with Italy.¹⁵

In the 19th century tourism developed. The trips, expeditions and excursions organized by travel agencies became very fashionable and were extremely popular among the European aristocracy. Poles, as well as other Europeans, were very keen on spending their leisure time in the Near East or in Africa. Egypt was probably the most popular destination as dozens of memoirs and diaries written during those trips show.

Unfortunately, Libya in spite of its many archeological and cultural attractions, even at the beginning of 20th century was not very popular among travellers and tourists. In 1935, a famous Polish journalist, Roman Fajans, wrote:

⁸ Paweł Czerwiński, *Zakon Maltański i stosunki jego z Polską na przestrzeni dziejów. Szkic historyczny* (London, 1962), p. 149.

⁹ Waclaw i Tadeusz Slabczyńscy, *Słownik podróżników polskich* (Warsaw, 1992), p. 335.

¹⁰ *Autobiografia Aleksandra Jabonowskiego* (Lwów, 1939).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² Tripolis i Marokko, *Wedrowiec*, 16 June 1881, vol. IX, no. 233, p. 379.

¹³ *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, Vol. XXII (1977).

¹⁴ Gołabek, *Związki Polski i Polaków*, p. 42.

¹⁵ Józef S. Latka, *Z dziejów Polonii. Polacy w Turcji* (Lublin, 1980), p. 71.

Libya is not situated on one of the world's main tourist trails. There is no word about it in Baedeker's and the Guide Bleu's guidebooks. It is not included on cruise itineraries . . . In Libya, there are no Cook's or Wagons-Lits branches, maybe because there are no long-distance railways with sleeping cars. Thus, it is very hard for an eccentric to get to this almost unknown country, and especially to legendary Ghadāmis or mysterious Fezzan. There is no regular means of transport to these centres . . . However, there is always a possibility of joining a native caravan that goes everywhere, . . . [but] the journey may last so long (at least a few weeks) and be so uncomfortable, that I would not advise such a means of transport to any European not hardy enough, even if it has its undeniable, enormous charm.¹⁶

Most journeys through Libya started in Tripoli, where passenger ships from Europe called. From the deck of a ship sailing along the coast one could see the beautiful, green and sun-warmed coasts of Tripolitania:

Tripolitania was awaking after the war that had just ended and it was becoming green due to its lovely gardens. Millions of trees were rustling, there were beautiful asphalt roads and dozens of wells were prepared to serve thirsty tourist with their waters. At school you could hear sung by local children the Fascist anthem *Giovinazza* as correctly as by Roman or Neapolitan children. I admired the momentum and creativity of the Italian people and their willingness to work. When watching this coastline, I understood the reasons of Mussolini trying to increase the population of Italy and to legislate in favour of Italian families with many children. It is here that the second, overseas Italy is being founded, the garden and the granary of the European one. However, there is another aspect of the conquerors of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and the other one is as dark and gloomy as blood. Natives, when asked about the present state of affairs, they are content, and those that are not pleased can no longer speak. They left their skeletons in the Mountains and nearest deserts during the bloody war of past years . . . Those Beduins that survived the slaughter do forced labour building roads, schools or hospitals, and at night the conquerors' bayonets drive them back to a camp surrounded by the wire entanglements, patrolled by black soldiers with their shining rifles ready to be used in the moonlight. In the light of that the journey throughout Coastal Tripolitania is really a stroll . . . A bicycle rolls along the smooth asphalt to Bu Gheilan, a little oasis situated at the foot of steep rocks of the only Tripolitanian mountain range. The mountains are called Gebel Nefusah and their crescent shape begins at the Great Syrtis and ends at the Tunisian border . . . even though the highest peak, named Ras Gharian, hardly reaches 840 metres above sea level and the climate there is very severe. No wind avoids these mountains, and trees grow only in accessible gorges scoured by prehistoric rivers.¹⁷

Tripoli was the biggest Libyan port and capital of the colony, with the seat of administration and the Italian governor. At that time many Europeans arrived there both on business and as tourists. 'At the first glance, today's Tripoli has little real oriental charm . . . The Italians have destroyed too many old things during their civilising mission.¹⁸ Tripoli is dazzlingly white in the glare of African sun and at the same time full of dust and noise. In Tripoli everything is just being created, everything is just being done and everything just starts or ends.¹⁹ Yet, even two years ago the city did not have a single decent street of European character. Today,

¹⁶ Fajans, *Wskrzyszzone dzieło Cezarów. Z podróży do Libii* (Warsaw, 1935), p. 33.

¹⁷ Kazimierz Nowak, *Rowerem i pieszo przez czarny ład. Listy z podróży afrykańskiej z lat 1931–37*, all letters collected by Lukasz Wierzbicki (Poznan, 2000), p. 19.

¹⁸ Fajans, *Wskrzyszzone dzieło*, p. 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

all the streets and all suburban roads are served with asphalt, and the seaside boulevard recently created, the Lungomare Conte Volpi, is a true masterpiece of town planning. This wide, asphalted boulevard defined by two rows of palm trees – the lower, fanned in the middle and the higher plumed from the outside – extends along the steep, stony sea coast. Fenced off the sea with an elaborate balustrade, lighted by two rows of elegant lamps and glittering with the smooth asphalt surface – the boulevard makes an unforgettable impression.²⁰

After the first world war many journalists visited Tripoli. They were particularly impressed by specific Arab town buildings: 'We enter Arab district. Little, barred windows and narrow, smelly streets, are full of Arabs dressed in white clothes, mostly tattered and dirty . . . We go deep into the oldest quarter. The streets are even narrower and barred windows are even rarer. Here and there an arch over the street is in fact a passage between houses. Here and there you can see the dome of a mosque, over which there is a soaring minaret.'²¹ And they were also impressed with the multicultural atmosphere of the city. 'There is shouting and yelling, a stuffy air saturated with the smell of fried oil, tumult, and all these sensations make the unaccustomed observer dizzy. Heavily-laden donkeys and serious camels make their way through a dense crowd.'²² Every word written about Tripoli highlighted the distinctive local society, people who lived and worked different way than in Europe. Memoirs left by travellers highlight this wealth and diversity: 'The streets are full of Italians. They represent all the social strata, starting from colonial authorities, through the liberal professions, trade, craftsmanship, agriculture, down to house servants . . . Multilingual and multicoloured crowds are everywhere – Italians, Arabs, Jews, Berbers, black people. There is huge diversity of types and colours of skin – from white through the range of olive-bronze shades up to pitch-black inclusive.'²³ Travellers recorded all this in their writings. 'There is an incredible throng and commotion here. Everywhere crowds of people, nobody but men in turbans. Everywhere screams, shouts, stuffiness of fried olive oil and tumult making an unaccustomed spectator's head spin. Heavily loaded donkeys and solemn camels are clearing a path for themselves through the thick crowd.'²⁴

Using different means of transport, Bronislaw Wierzejski toured Libya three times, and the book that he published after his return to Poland remains a very valuable source of information about colonial Libya. It is Wierzejski who, using a camel among other different means of transport, wrote about the animal:

The Dignified "ship of the desert" rolls slowly, presenting its mangy flanks and looking at me suspiciously – I do not trust him either. However, I have to mount the camel. There is no saddle, only two thick, coarse sacks – there are no stirrups, so you have to put your legs on the animal's neck or leave them hanging down . . . After a prolonged 'chch, chch, chch', the camel decided to kneel down and accept me on his hump . . . However, I did

²⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

²¹ Wierzejski, *Forty na piasku* (Warsaw), p. 22.

²² Fajans, *Wskrzeszony dzielo*, p. 72.

²³ Wierzejski, *Forty na*, p. 16.

²⁴ *Wskrzeszony dzielo*, p. 72.

not know that the camel first raises his back legs when getting up and I was not ready for such a move, so I slid down over his head and landed with my nose in the sand when he suddenly jumped to his feet, causing everybody to laugh at me.²⁵

Wierzejski was one of the few European travellers and researchers to reach the most distant part of Libya, Fezzan, about which he wrote: 'Already one thousand years before Christ, Phazania (today's Fezzan) was inhabited by the Garamantes people belonging to the great family of Libyans. They are the oldest inhabitants of Fezzan known by history. Garama was the capital city. The caravans transporting ivory and heading to Phoenician settlements on the shores of Mare Internum were crossing their terrain.'²⁶ His observations were later completed by Kazimierz Nowak who was the first man to cross the whole of Africa on a bicycle.

Every oasis is like a little, independent state, and is very interesting and original, set in the desert, isolated from the rest of the world, dependent on the surroundings and on its own vegetation, and it gets into its inhabitants' souls in its own, special way. Undoubtedly, Ghat is the most interesting Saharan oasis. Romantic location in the midst of the Tassili, *Tummo* and *Ahaggar* mountain ranges, Ghat is situated at the foot of the steep, fantastic shapes of Akakus mountains, separated from the oasis merely by the bed of Tanezuft river, on the caravan trail. However, today's traffic is far lower than twenty years ago when Tripolitania was ruled by the Turkish Sultan and Ghat was the centre of the slave trade. Then, on the market that is deserted today, the slaves captured by greedy Arabs were tied to poles and waited for purchasers . . . The price fluctuated, between one to three goats, or was even lower for black boys and girls.²⁷

In the 1920s Poles began to visit Libya more often. It was already an Italian colony. The first Polish woman to cross the Libyan border was Maria Wicherkiewiczowa from Slawskich, Poznan. 'Tripolitania rose like phoenix from the ashes,' she wrote in 1925 while sailing along the Libyan coast.²⁸ Unfortunately, as a woman, she was not able to go sightseeing far into Libya and become familiar with the lives of its inhabitants. She was limited by cultural and social factors, as well as the restricted freedom of women in Arab countries. However, she visited Leptis Magna²⁹ and wrote about it in the following way: 'There was a word persistently coming back in my mind as nostalgia, a dream. The radiant and forgotten word. Like the sunny ruins in the sands of the desert. Leptis Magna.'³⁰

A few years later, in 1932, the ruins of Leptis Magna were also visited by Duke Leon Sapieha and his family who were on holiday in Libya. During their stay in Tripoli they were invited to supper by the governor, Pietro Badoglio. For the next few days they visited ancient Libya and finally they got to Homs to rest for the next few weeks.³¹

²⁵ Wierzejski, *Forty na*, p. 138.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁷ Nowak, *Rowerem i pieszo*, p. 24.

²⁸ Maria Wicherkiewiczowa ze Slawskich, *Trypolis. Wrazenia z podróży do Afryki i Wloch* (Poznan, 1927), p. 34.

²⁹ Leptis Magna is one of the three ancient towns founded by Phoenicians in Tripolitania around the 10th century BC. Ruins of the ancient town are in very good condition today.

³⁰ Wicherkiewiczowa, *Trypolis*, p. 1.

³¹ Kornel Krzczunowicz, *Leon Sapieha 1883-1944* (London, 1967), p. 87.

Polish scientists started visiting Libya as well. Among them was Professor Ludomir Sawicki (1884–1928), a recognized geographer at the Jagiellonian University. In 1927 he travelled across North Africa and Egypt. He managed to reach Tripoli. He set off to other towns from there – Zuwarah, Mizda, and Bani Walid – then he moved to Benghazi from where he travelled to Tobruk.³² Tripolitania must have remained in his memory for a long time, as he talked about it during one of his lectures at the Polish Geographical Society in Kraków. On 23 November 1925 he said to his listeners: 'I have been identifying with the soul of the East for a number of months, particularly visiting Tripolitania and Cyrenaica . . . Then, I have been getting right into the deep desert many times, where the soul of the East shows itself. I have been staying in most of the bigger human settlements from the borders of Tunisia to Ethiopia, in the tumult of bazaars, in the silence of homes, in the din of women gathering near the well, and in the ecstatic prayer in the darkness of temples I have been delving into its mysteries.'³³

Professor Sawicki was a very good observer of everyday life, as we can see from reading his travel writing:

Mostly villagers' huts are situated near the fields, so they are scattered over the oasis: however, in the middle there are administrative buildings, municipal office and court, mosque with minaret, bazaar and trade market. Here is the place where inhabitants of the area, and very often even from far away, come on certain days in order to trade their commodities. These trades, full of life and tumult, show us not only all the country's products, but also the character and soul of the inhabitants, and they make for the most interesting views of Tripolitania's villages. When having satisfied ourselves with the view, we enter under the arches of a quiet mosque, where the din of everyday life is excluded, have a seat on the cool stones of the floor after taking off our dirty shoes in respect for divine Allah, and look at the oasis bursting with life; and look at the mortal remains of sheiks lying near in stony sarcophaguses in eternal peace – and you will understand the essence of the Orient.³⁴

You have to know this oriental world well, from direct and longer personal experience, in order to get to the core of its bizarre soul, to devote oneself to the charm with which it influences the European, to understand the original element it is saturated with. We absorb the soul of the East willingly and easily with every step through boundless deserts, resting in the shadows of lush palms in oases, wandering about in the lanes of huddled Arab suburbs or listening to the resonant prayers of muezzins.³⁵

In the years 1927–31 Zygmunt Smogorzewski, an expert on Arab countries and a professor at Lwów University, did research on today's Algeria and Libya.³⁶ Another famous expert on oriental countries, Professor Bohdan Richter, stayed in Tripolitania in 1932 and 1933.³⁷ Doctor Gustaw Raciażek from Warsaw visited

³² Ludomir Sawicki, *Trypolitania odzyskana* (Kraków, 1928), p. 4; and Bartosz Olszewicz, *9 wieków geografii polskiej* (Warsaw, 1967), p. 427.

³³ Sawicki, *Trypolitania* p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁶ Golabek, *Związki Polski i Polaków*, p. 64.

³⁷ 'Polacy na szlakach', p. 9.

Libya in order to do research in the field of tropical medicine.³⁸ Jan Szaflarski (1908–89) geography professor and cartographer from the Jagiellonian University, arrived in Libya in 1937. Subsequently, he published some essays on the characteristics of colonization, which he came across during his trip in this country (troglo-dyte colonization).³⁹ Szaflarski visited regions where people lived 'in square holes in the earth. Each side of this square was approximately eight metres high, two-storeys deep with perpendicular walls, holes in the bottom leading to the caves dug from the clay which were the rooms for people and animals.'⁴⁰

At the end of 1920s the first Polish artists arrived on the coast of today's Libya. They were two Warsaw painters, Jan Zamoyski and Jan Gotard. After an arduous and very short stay in Africa, due to the fact that it was limited to Tripoli, they returned to Poland with a rich collection of sketches.⁴¹ One of these shows Tripoli market which was one of the most important locations in the town:

It is an original Arab bazaar, framed with a row of covered alleys lightened with various holes in the roof. We go down the Suk el Harra alley. They sell only carpets here. There are many tiny shops one next the other – colourful and eye-catching commodities overflow the street. Traders wrapped in clothes squat or lie at the doorstep and seem to be asleep or sunk in deep meditation. However, a half-closed eye is very wary, scanning each passer-by and evaluating his purchasing value. As soon as the traders find a potential customer, they instantly liven up and offer the full range of courtesies and inborn business talents . . . Suk El Turk, the main bazaar alley, is very bright as it is covered with a glass ceiling resting on a wooden scaffolding. There are a lot of Italian, Jewish and Turkish shops. Here, you will not find the peace and quiet of an Arab bazaar – here is din and tumult as much as a Street in Naples . . . What an assortment! Products made of leather and copper, silver and ivory, turbans, fabrics with patterns, ostrich feathers, skins of snakes and jackals, extraordinary colourful slippers, perfume, many kinds of herbs having magic therapeutic and rejuvenating power. Among local products there are also many commodities from Italy, Japan (oh, those Japanese!), and above all the worldwide trash "Made in Germany".⁴²

Maybe, in 1935 a sculptor from Warsaw, Romuald Zerych, was following their example. 'He was seating on Piazza del Kasb all day long and he was drawing Blacks and Arabs. He did not know either Italian or English, but still he was able to talk to each man.'⁴³ Numerous charcoal sketches that he made during his journeys were later shown in a Warsaw gallery.

Kazimierz Nowak was another interesting and fascinating person. In the 1930s, he travelled across the whole of Africa on bicycle, and his journey began from Tripoli.⁴⁴ He was born in 1897 in Stryj on Podole, and after the first world war he moved to Poznan where he started to work as a clerk in an insurance company. So in 1925 he decided to leave the country in order to support his wife and two

³⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁹ 'Osadnictwo podziemne dжебелu trypolitanskiego', *Wiadomosci Szuzby Geograficznej* (1938), Vol. 1, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Wierzejski, *Forty na*, p. 38.

⁴¹ Polacy na szlakach, p. 9.

⁴² Wierzejski, *Forty na*, p. 22.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴⁴ Nowak, *Rowerem i pieszo*.

children as a press correspondent. He went on a bicycle across Hungary, Austria, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Romania and Greece, and finally got to Tripolitania.⁴⁵

He was an anxious soul and keen traveller, underestimated in Poland and even very often jeered at due to his unusual appearance and inability to talk about his impressions as a traveller. Suffering from tuberculosis, he travels on his bike with a rucksack and bottle filled with water, dressed in sports shirt without sleeves, short trousers and boots on his bare feet. Thus, worried by fever, hunger and thirst, he visits distant and little known places in Libya, mostly alone and only rarely accompanying the Tuareg caravans among whom he became very popular.⁴⁶

Kazimierz Nowak's expeditions are perhaps among the most unusual and original in the history of African travel. He was a correspondent, a collector of anthropological and folklore material and a photographer. On 4 November 1931 Nowak appeared in the Black Land again. From his savings he had bought a bicycle on which he rode the shortest way from Tripoli to the Needle Cape, a dozen or so kilometres to the south. In the middle of the Sahara, at Ghat oasis, the Italian authorities told him to go back, and he accordingly made his way through Benghazi and Tobruk to Alexandria in Egypt. Nowak went south again from there.⁴⁷ He travelled along the Nile and arrived in Khartoum from where he cycled right across Africa, finally reaching Cape Town. He was the third Pole, after Walery Goetl and Jerzy Loth, to travel all the way from Cairo to Cape Town, and the only one so far who had managed to do this on a bicycle. This is what he wrote about the difficulties of his journeys:

A bicycle struggles deeply in the moving sand and at other times you have to pull it through rocky rubble. I can see another hill when I finally reach the top of the present one, and it is endless. It seems that everything stays in its place despite the fact that I am moving. I am short of water. The sun is my guide⁴⁸ . . . It is harder from day to day, I cannot ride and very often I have to lift my bike on my back in order to get to the top of a sand dune. My shoes are already worn down, my clothes are in shreds, and my only fuel, thorn trees, cut my hands. The traffic on this part of the trail no longer exists, so the old track disappeared somewhere in the sand and it is hard to orientate oneself . . . all the more so since the only device that I use to measure the distance – a watch counting the hours of march, stopped.⁴⁹

Among these reports are also descriptions of his journey, very hard and tough, but also very satisfying:

The heat is so great that it takes the breath away. The wind is as sweltering as the blast from the oven. The sand creating the shape of flames, raised by the wind, is marching on the crest of a unusual dune. All the shapes lose their sharpness in the heated air. However, after long days of marching or bike riding come magic African nights with the silver light of stars and moon, when I can take some rest and revive my strength. When

⁴⁵ Maria Paradowska and Jolanta Bagińska-Mleczał, *Z Wielkopolski w świat*, Vol. 1, Vol. 2 (Poznań, 1984).

⁴⁶ Polacy na szlakach, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Kazimierz Nowak, *Rowerem i pieszo . . .*, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

the evening comes, I kindle the sweet-smelling fire with thorn bushes. Then I cook the Tuareg delicacy – eish (bread spiced up with garlic, paprika and oil) and I make some tea that is here considered both a divine drink and a medicine.⁵⁰

Sometimes in the desert Nowak thinks about Poland and speculates on spiritual matters, especially when he observes praying:

Tuareg – a Son of the Sahara, an uneducated man that is not perceived as a man at all by the civilized world, used to talk to me during the Saharan nights: 'Do you hear? . . . The desert is praying . . .', and then, after washing his hands and other parts of the body the Qur'an prescribes, with sand instead of water, he used to go down on his knees and start to pray to Allah in a humble way. And it seemed that you can hear the hearts of the bells from the church that I used to pray so often in, the echo of which goes worldwide. And the words of the prayer learned from my mother diffused in the silence of a desert. It is Sunday today and the Polish wanderer is praying aloud in Polish, here, in the middle of the strange, foreign desert country. We were praying together: me, the sand and the rocks.⁵¹

Not many tourists decided to go beyond Tripoli. Rarely they headed towards the nearest villages where they met Berbers:

As far as the Berbers are concerned, it is even hard to call them a tribe. It seems they are true natives living in the lands of North Africa, the real rulers of these terrains in the past, until they were conquered by the Arabs.⁵² We pass by low, squalid ruins beyond the city – certainly not Roman. This is the Berber village. You can see some life here. A hen crosses the alley, children emerge to watch the car. Farther, there are houses, more precisely, little boxes made of stones and clay, half-ruined. The majority of them are empty, only a few of them are inhabited. I can see a praying old man seating on the top of his house – he raises his arms and kneels down humbly.⁵³ A square hole in the earth, eight metres wide, two floors high, with its walls perpendicular, with holes made at the bottom leading to caves sculptured in clay that serve as flats for people and animals – also make an impression.⁵⁴

One could also meet Beduin in the desert:

Desert travel made the Beduin very resistant to all the difficulties that life may bring, tough when it comes to lack of food or water, they learned to deal with dangers hidden in the sands of the desert each day and at every step, they acquired great ability in orientating themselves, promptness in decision making and how to act as a man. Those features made great warriors out of Beduins . . .⁵⁵ Beduin present the same physical features as animals living in a desert: frail but resistant, agile, quick in movement and decision making, sharp in appearance and observations with uncontrollable instincts, governed by emotions and a vivid temperament. He is an individual by origin, not keen on yielding to the constraints and yoke of organized society, having many aristocratic elements inside him.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ Nowak, *Rowerem i pieszo*, p. 21.

⁵² Fajans, *Wskrzyszzone dzieło*, p. 88.

⁵³ Wierzejski, *Forty na*, p. 38.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

⁵⁵ Sawicki, *Trypolitanja*, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

Much much rarer you could come across Tuaregs, although thanks to these Poles we learn something new about them:

Tuaregs are quite different from both Berbers and Arabs. They are a different race, with different customs. They live out of town in the desert because their 'national pride' does not allow them to live in 'captivity' – in the city . . . The desert is their homeland . . . they live their own, separate lives.⁵⁷ The Tuareg, although they derive from the white race, are mixed strongly with the Blacks, and many of them may be rated among the black race. Tuareg women, regardless of race, leave their faces uncovered, pretty, constantly smiling and with sensual lips. They are the rulers not only of their tent, but also of all the property. You can often come across Tuareg women riding alone on their camels to pay a visit to parents or friends. Most Tuaregs are poor. They are shepherds, they graze camels or Sudan rams in the numerous wadis. Occasionally, they work as guides or escorts of merchant caravans. They are decent and modest in their demands. They are the only people you can come across in the infinity of the desert. All the travellers learn from them ways of surviving in this land. By living on the desert they have managed to have accustom their bodies and souls to a hard climate. They are brave and resistant.⁵⁸

In the period of 20 years between the first and second world wars, Libya, except for Tripoli, was not a well-known part of Africa. Expeditions out of town or to nearby villages were very rare. Thus, there are not many descriptions of the country from that period. However, Kazimierz Nowak left one description of Cyrenaica and its capital, Benghazi:

I passed many new developments and finally reached Benghazi, the capital of Cyrenaica . . . After entering Benghazi, I could see with my own eyes the transformation from a little village to a great city today. Work has moved ahead quickly and many new buildings are now finished. A monumental cathedral is almost finished, so is the port; roads and squares are being asphalted, lovely trees are being planted down the avenues, everything is being made more and more beautiful. However, despite all these works, Benghazi still seems to be a little provincial town, which, by the way, is a feature of all colonial towns that I know. Perhaps it is caused by the fact that there are two civilizations here: one European and another closer to the Bible one. The streets are full of tumult, overpopulated by a multilingual crowd: here there are Italians, Greeks, Turks, Arabs, Blacks, Berbers, Jews and – only God knows who else – blacks, whites, yellows and people of unidentified skin or race. Every one of them chases after gold: they sell, they buy, and most of all they yell as if they would like to shout down the nearby sea which is always rough. Winds blow without a break and the mercury in the thermometer goes up and down. Beautiful, luxurious cars go down the streets waking up clumsy camels that have come in to the town from far away laden with goods. Donkeys bray alamingly, broken-down Roman wagons harnessed with mules roll, shepherds drive their herds of fat rams in the middle of the street. Poor blind fellows accost obtrusively passers-by in order to beg for money. A wonder-worker – a Black man – beats his drum and recommends to his compatriots different kinds of amulets; and on the other side of the square a tawny snake-charmer performs his tricks. The hoarse voice of a gramophone comes from somewhere down a narrow alley, the blast of a siren of a ship casting off comes from the port, and muezzins exhort the faithful to pray. The sun burns. Barefoot, yelling kids wildly chase one another. The lack of white women (Europeans) is a feature of African cities, so if any such woman, perhaps not as beautiful as Venus, appears on the street, every man watches her closely. Particularly the Black natives. Europeans live

⁵⁷ Fajans, *Wskrzieszone dzieło*, p. 131.

⁵⁸ Nowak, *Rowerem i pieszo*, p. 24.

here permanently. Each ship calling at a port is full of new 'settlers' and it takes old ones, tired of colonial life, many of whom return home suffering from local venereal diseases. It is not possible to describe a debauchery and loosening of morals prevailing here, both among natives and settlers. Everybody complains about boredom, monotony and they seek diversity in a moral swamp.⁵⁹

Nowak also left a description of the city of Derna: 'This seaside oasis is a true garden of Cyrenaica; it is really one of Earth's blissful nooks. Most of all, there is a lot of water here, sweet water rushing down the rocks with a rumble. These rocks surround the seaside valley in a semicircle. Vegetation is luxuriant, tropical, despite the fact that the climate is mild and healthy. Bananas, dates and many other fruit trees ripen. It is a truly delightful nook of Africa.'⁶⁰ And the city of Tobruk:

I head for Tobruk and I reach this seaside town in three days . . . The city is small and almost entirely built by Italians, with the exception of the old mosque, the minaret of which has been built lately, naturally with the Italian star on the top. A little bit higher up a new brick church is being built, as well as a few nice buildings. The inhabitants come from all over the world: Turks, Greeks, many Jews and a handful of Italians. Undoubtedly, the port of Tobruk is the best natural port of North Africa; however, it has no future as it is situated at the edge of frightfully desolate country. Round the azure bay there are grey, rocky slopes of hills, naked and cheerless as graveyards.⁶¹

Many journalists from Poland reached Libya as well.⁶² In 1932–34 Bronisław Krystyn Wierzejski visited the country three times. He sent the reports from each trip to the Warsaw *Kurier Poranny*. When he returned to Poland, he published a novel, *Forty na piasku* (*Forts in the sand*). Thanks to this study, we learn something of the variety in Libyan society at that time.

There are a lot of Italians on the streets. They represent a wide range of occupations such as colonial authorities, the learned professions, trades, handicrafts, agriculture and domestic service . . . One sees a crowd of people speaking different languages with different skin colours – Italians, Arabs, Jews, Berbers, Blacks. A wide variety of types as well as skin colours ranging from white, different shades of olive brown to black as tar.⁶³ We enter the Arab quarter. Small barred windows and narrow, smelly streets, full of Arabs in white ragged and dirty burnouses . . . we go further towards the oldest quarter. The streets are even narrower, and the number of barred windows even fewer. In some places one can find an arcade over the street – it is a passage from one house to another. Here and there a mosque with a minaret above it . . . A lot of Jews dressed in red fezzes, white fairly wide trousers with a rope around their waist as well as white, loose-fitting shirts. Jewish women wear heavy make-up on the streets and are wrapped in white, silk coats.⁶⁴

Another journalist who arrived in Libya in 1935 was Roman Fajans. He recorded his recollections from this trip in the book *Wskrzyszony dzieło Cezarów. Z podróży do Libii*. (*Revived the Work of the Caesars. A Trip to Libya*). He writes:

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁶² Articles about Libya were appearing for example in: *Wedrowiec, Kurier Warszawski and Czas*.

⁶³ Wierzejski, *Forty na*, p. 16.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

Libya is still a sanctuary . . . of the purest egotism; it has treasured genuine jewels since the ancient times of Islam in their original, impeccable form . . . It is surprising that such a sanctuary has been preserved despite a relatively small distance from Europe. It is still unexplored, original, protected against the destructive effects of so-called civilisation. People live here in the same way as they used to 500 years ago, believe as they used to believe in the first years of Islam, cultivate their wonderful and totally original art. They have not seen a European for months . . .⁶⁵

In the 1930s a well-known traveller, writer and colonial pioneer, Kazimierz Prószyński,⁶⁶ accompanied by Ludwik Puget,⁶⁷ arrived in western Libya.⁶⁸ This journey was repeated by another Polish writer Zygmunt Nowakowski,⁶⁹ who arrived in Libya in 1938.⁷⁰

In 1936, an engineer called Leonard Wedziagolski also decided to stay in Libya for a short time. His purpose seems to have been business as he was mainly interested in the Italian colonial construction industry.⁷¹

A few years later, in 1938, another Pole visited Libya. Although Teresa Maria Wierzejska was considered 'a woman of a poor health and frail figure',⁷² she traversed thousands of kilometres of eastern and western Libya using different means of transport, from camel to truck. She was particularly interested in the everyday life of native and European women who lived permanently in Libya.

At the same time, the military attaché in the Polish embassy in Rome, Cezary Nieweglowski, arrived in Tripolitania and familiarized himself with Italian military organization there.⁷³

The famous Polish driver Aleksander Mazurek, participated in international motor racing at Tripoli, which may be considered quite an unusual event.⁷⁴ He came first driving a car of Polish design and partly Polish-built.⁷⁵ He was accompanied by his second driver, Mieczysław Rządkowski, and the journalist Stefan Koper as members of the crew.⁷⁶

Apart from the Poles who merely visited Libya, a few chose to live there. The Polish community was small but significant, forming something of an intellectual

⁶⁵ Fajans, *Wskrzyszzone dzieło*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ In 1910 Kazimierz Prószyński (1875–1945), designed the first manual movie camera for reporters' photos, *Aeroskop*. In 1911 production of these cameras was started in England, from 1914 it was used chronicles for winding up successfully from struggles at the western front (from 1917 also of air chronicles). Prószyński's camera was rewarded with the Gold Medal at the International Cinematic Display in London in 1913. After the Warsaw Rising Prószyński was sent to the concentration camp in Gross-Rosen, and then to Mathausen. He died in 1945.

⁶⁷ Ludwik Puget (1877–1942), sculptor, painter and art historian, member of the Polish artists' company, *Art*.

⁶⁸ 'Polacy na szlakach', p. 9.

⁶⁹ Zygmunt Nowakowski (Tempka) (1891–1963), writer, actor, director, theatre manager.

⁷⁰ 'Polacy na szlakach', p. 10.

⁷¹ 'Polacy na szlakach', p. 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Golabek, *Związki Polski i Polaków*, p. 78.

⁷⁵ 'Polacy na szlakach', p. 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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elite. They were architects, doctors and engineers. A few Polish craftsmen – tailors, shoemakers and qualified workers – were employed in coal mines, on building sites and glassworks. Some Polish women were married to Italian officers who served in the army in Africa. These Poles lived mainly in cities, and as tradesmen and small craftsmen in Tripoli.⁷⁷ One of the richest men in Libya was Gadzinski.⁷⁸ His ancestors had emigrated from Poland to Turkey after the January uprising, when his father was sent to Tripoli as a doctor by the Turkish military authorities. Although Gadzinski identified himself with Poland (he kept his Polish citizenship until he was 50), he did not know Polish. Over two decades his family made a large fortune, having their own mill and an artificial ice plant. They traded crops and flour on a large scale and imported medicines.

Unlike other Arab and African countries, Libya was not very popular with Polish travellers, nor indeed among Europeans who mostly visited more interesting and healthy regions of the world. Libya – except 'Italian' Tripoli – was short of travel agencies, hotels, good roads, tourist routes and night life. However, there were also other reasons: the lack of guides and of information about local monuments and history. The geographical position of Libya meant that while it was too close to Europe for a long journey it was also the gateway to Africa. That is why most travellers spent only a few days in Libya and then crossed the Sahara. Those wanting rest went mainly to Egypt, the Nile or to the Holy Land, trips that had already been checked and recommended by friends. Egypt attracted tourists with its ancient pyramids and archeological excavations, while women were entranced by sunset on the Nile. Maghreb, colonized by France, attracted tourists with the rich Arab-Berber culture and nightclubs. Lying between the Maghreb and the Mashriq, Libya, which in past centuries had been covered by the sands of the Sahara, had little to offer contemporary travellers and tourists.

Italy was still conquering Libya in the early 20th century. It meant insecurity, military zones and restricted movement. At first Italians fought Turkish armies. Ksawery Krasicki during his journey across the Mediterranean wrote that all the Mediterranean Sea is on the warpath. Our voyage reflects the war. On the ship there are a dozen or so soldiers sailing to Sicily, and then to Tripoli, to join their regiments. We carry the living cannon fodder ranks, they are supposed to fill the gaps in decimated by the Turks. A few days ago they were ordinary people; they are today soldiers, tomorrow probably dead.⁷⁹ Then from 1912 to 1932 the Italians were fighting the Libyan resistance.⁸⁰

All these factors kept visitors away from Libya. Hardly anybody decided to go into the unknown. Usually the visits lasted only a few days and were limited to one city – Tripoli. The visitors spent time on entertainment and fun in the company of other Europeans, mostly Italians. Only very few were able to discover

⁷⁷ Jacek Knopek, *Migracje Polaków do Afryki Północnej w XX wieku* (Bydgoszcz, 2001), p. 92.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁷⁹ Ksawery Krasicki, *4 tygodnie na Morzu Śródziemnym* (Luck na Wołyniu 1913), p. 79.

⁸⁰ Omar al-Muchtar ((1862–1931), in 1911–31 commanded the rising against the Italian army in Libya.

and appreciate the beauty of Libya, and became able to understand Libyan life and ancient history. Not many Poles went to Libya, as did Professor Sawicki, who wrote:

It is good to get to know the oriental world well, from direct and long personal experience, to bury oneself in its weird soul, indulge in the glamour which influences the European, to understand an extraordinary element that it is imbued with. We absorb the Soul of the East willingly and easily everywhere we go, roaming boundless steppes in a slow caravan, resting in the shade of luxuriant oasis palms, wandering the alleys of the narrow, Arab settlement or listening to the sonorous prayers of muezzins flowing from characteristic mosque towers.⁸¹

⁸¹ Sawicki, *Trypolitanja*, p. 4.

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