

## MY J.R.R. TOLKIEN MEMORIES

by Dr Zbigniew Petczyński,  
Pembroke College, Oxford

My acquaintance with Professor Tolkien began sometime during the Michaelmas Term in 1955. I think it was during a dinner in Merton College, where I had just become a lecturer in Politics jointly with Balliol College. We either sat next to each other in the College Hall at dinner, or introduced ourselves in the Senior Common Room during after-dinner coffee.

I was very pleased to meet him as I had read 'The Hobbit' first by myself and then to my three very young children – who loved it. Tolkien seemed to be interested in my Polish background and when I came to know him better, it was a frequent subject of our conversation.

In October 1957 I became a Politics lecturer at Pembroke jointly with Merton and began taking both lunches and dinners regularly. Our meetings were largely at Merton lunch because Tolkien's wife Edith was then an invalid and he spent only mornings in his rooms in the College and rushed home after lunch as soon as possible to keep her company. This situation radically changed after her death and his retirement from the Merton fellowship. He was offered by Merton a small apartment just outside the College in Merton street, accessed by a special gate at the bottom of Merton College garden to which he had a key. He then became much more sociable, eating both lunches and dinners in Merton. And from then on we met in Merton very frequently.

At first, strangely enough, I had no idea of his strong Pembroke connection before Merton, until he mentioned it one day. He became a fellow of Pembroke and Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor in October 1925. This was his Oxford academic base until he migrated to Merton in October 1945 as fellow and Professor of English Language.

Later on we sometimes met also at Pembroke, particularly during special College dinners to which he was invited as a former fellow. A lot of time had to pass before I had the courage to ask him why he had changed colleges after twenty years. He smiled and answered that there were two reasons – academic and personal. First, he became rather tired of lecturing and supervising

graduate students just in Anglo-Saxon and badly wanted to broaden his teaching. Second, somewhat confidentially and with a smile he added: "To tell you the truth, I had become thoroughly tired of the Pembroke fellowship. It was very small, very conservative and largely undistinguished – quite the opposite of the Merton fellowship." His *betes noires* seemed to be H.L. Drake – the senior tutor, and L.E. Salt – the College Bursar, both old bachelors living in the College. The Master of the College – Rev. Frederick Homes Dudden (1918-1955) may have once been a distinguished theologian, but in Tolkien's later years he seemed to lose interest in both theology and the College.

During our chats in Merton, academic topics connected with Tolkien's linguistic and literary work were virtually never mentioned nor did he ever mention any personal biographical details. Instead, he seemed to be very interested in Poland and my wartime experiences under German occupation but most of all in the situation of the Polish Roman Catholic Church. The Church had suffered greatly under communism but became autonomous under the deal of Wladyslaw Gomulka, the new secretary of the Central Committee of PZPR (Polish United Workers Party). Gomulka was elected in October 1956 in the teeth of the opposition of Soviet leaders, who had once attacked and disgraced him for a lurched 'national deviation'. Again, strangely, he never mentioned he was a Roman Catholic and I only learned about it when I read his biography. It became a challenge to me when reading all his novels, always with great interest, to find traces of his Catholic background or religious inspiration in his works, but I must confess that I failed.

Especially in spring and summer our conversations took place during after lunch walks in the lovely, spacious Merton College garden. They became gradually quite frequent as well as sitting next to each other at lunch and I must confess I was very gratified that such a famous person seemed to like my company.

Our walks always ended at the back gate of the garden leading into Rose Lane. From there one could enter the side entrance of the University Botanical Garden where Tolkien insisted on going alone. He told me that he liked contemplating nature by himself, especially a gnarled pine tree, which he loved watching. Again, only some years later, when rereading Tolkien's novels did I appreciate the tremendous role which trees have played in his fiction. After his death in 1973 whenever I visited the Botanical Garden, I paid my respect to the 'Tolkien Pine'.

On one of the walks Tolkien told me – to my great surprise that three or four of his books, beginning with 'The Hobbit' have been translated into Polish and that the Polish publisher owed him a lot of royalties in zlotys, which were only convertible into pounds at a ridiculously low official course rate. He asked me if I could suggest an interesting way of spending the zlotys in Poland. The only thing I could think of were winter skiing holidays in the Tatra mountains. I asked him if any of his grandchildren was old enough and interested in skiing to go there, but the answer proved negative.

I wonder if Tolkien ever heard that despite his books' popularity they were eventually declared to be 'ideologically suspect' and 'hostile to socialism' and were withdrawn from circulation and never republished till the fall of communism in Poland.

Strangely, during our talks I felt a kind of sympathy towards me, which may have been simply personal, or derived from my Polish background which fascinated Tolkien. I remember that although friendly, he was rather reserved and seldom volunteered any stories about himself, his life and his route to Oxford, and I only discovered them after reading his biography.

Our friendship, if I may call it so, ended in June 1973 in circumstances which I remember vividly but with sadness. Walking around the garden as usual, he mentioned that he had a pile of his Polish books without knowing what to do with them. “Would you like a set? – he asked me. – They are in my apartment on Merton Street, we could go and fetch them together now.” Most unfortunately it was just before two o'clock and sadly I had arranged a tutorial in Pembroke for that time. I apologised, but he answered: “It doesn't matter, there will be other occasions, I'm sure”. He said goodbye and resumed his walk to the Roselane Gate and the Botanical Garden. The following week he went on a holiday and died during it in September. We never met again. I wrote to his son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien and asked if I could have the books. He sent me a note saying: “The books are available, but sadly without an autograph.” In due course I collected them from his teaching room at New College.

\* \* \*

Oprócz tej i innych niesamowitych historii ZAP ofiarował mi inny, równie bezcenny skarb – pierwsze polskie egzemplarze książek Tolkiena, подарowane mu przez samego Autora pod koniec