

Excerpt from **Kingdoms Fall – The Wieringen Proposal** by Edward Parr

[The following excerpt involves one of the two protagonists of the novel, James Wilkins, an agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service, during a mission to Poland during the First World War.]

Wilkins was convinced that Hesketh had only accompanied him to Warsaw in order to learn the name of his contact in the German army, and he realized that it would be necessary to shake her off long enough to first conduct another, secret meeting. Indeed, it was for that meeting that he had come to Warsaw at all, and yet it was one that Hesketh must learn nothing about.

He expected he would only have a moment to make his escape as she spoke to the innkeeper. Wilkins leapt from the bed and grabbed his clothes, threw open the window and lowered himself ungracefully into the snow drift on the street below. He stopped only long enough to pull on his pants and overcoat and, still barefoot, rushed around the corner out of sight of the boarding house. There were only a few vehicles on the street early that morning, but Wilkins leapt out to stop a passing motorist, drew his handgun, and made off with the stolen vehicle, leaving an astonished German officer shouting after him in the street. Surely the Germans would now be hunting him down, so Wilkins raced across the Vistula River and into the dense industrial sector where he had learned the Polish Legions were headquartered. He would have to find them quickly.

The Polish Legions had been founded early in the war. Thousands of Polish patriots had agreed to help Germany defeat the Russian army in the hope of winning independence for Poland. Their commander, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, had even forced Germany to acknowledge the independence of Poland, or at least to make that acknowledgment on paper. However, since the German invasion, the members of the “interim” government in Poland had been handpicked by the German Foreign Secretary, Baron Richard von Kühlmann, and now that the Russians had for all accounts and purposes been defeated, it was not clear whether Germany would honor its pledge of independence. No one yet knew how the potential peace treaty with the new Russian government would address the issue of Polish nationality, but the German envoys had portentously forced the Polish representatives to leave the nascent peace negotiations with Russia taking place at Brest-Litovsk.

Wilkins had learned that the leader of the Polish Legions had recently returned from the front lines in Galicia to make his headquarters in the industrial Targówek district on the outskirts of Warsaw. Wilkins barely knew enough Polish to ask directions to the unit’s headquarters, but he was soon able to abandon his stolen motorcar and knocked on the door of their modest brick house. A young man in Polish uniform answered.

“Co to jest?” He asked coldly.

“Nie mówię po polsku dobrze. Czy mówisz po angielsku? Chcę porozmawiać z Piłsudski,” Wilkins replied.

The soldier glared at Wilkins a moment, then without implying his approval replied: “*Wejdz*.”

Wilkins entered the dark, run-down house and followed the soldier to a bright and sparsely furnished room in the back of the house. Wilkins sat on the bare wood floor wondering if Hesketh and the Germans were yet on his trail, but no one came to arrest him as he waited hour after hour.

Finally, the Legion’s commander, Józef Pilsudski, arrived. A middle-aged man with fierce, narrow-set and dark eyes and a broad, pointed mustache, Pilsudski looked decidedly angry. “Who are you?”

Wilkins stood. “I am James Wilkins; I am from England, and I wish to speak to you about the future of Poland.”

“Good God, an Englishman? What the Hell are you doing in Poland? Did you come here to surrender?”

Wilkins laughed. “No, sir.”

“Tell me what you want, then. We cannot have Englishmen sitting here at their leisure.”

“Well, sir, I understand you have been fighting the Russian army in Galicia the past three years.”

“Yes, until the Russians stopped fighting.”

“Perhaps you have heard that Prime Minister David Lloyd George made a speech recently at the Trade Union Conference in London where he pledged Great Britain’s support for an independent Poland. And the American President made the same pledge in his address; it was one of his ‘Fourteen Points’.”

“That is what Dmowski and the National Committee have been doing in Paris while I have been fighting the Russians,” Pilsudski said bitterly.

“Yes, you and Dmowski have had a difference of opinion in that regard: He felt Poland should side with the Entente, and you chose to align with Germany. I won’t say I disagree with your decision – victory over Russia was clearly necessary for Poland to achieve independence. However, you must acknowledge that Russia has now been defeated. Your dispute with Dmowski is just water under the bridge.”

Pilsudski stared at Wilkins a moment uncertainly. “I suppose that it true,” he agreed at last.

“If I see him, may I tell him you said so? That you are prepared to work together now to achieve Polish independence?”

“If you see him,” Pilsudski said with a chuckle.

“You are still dedicated to achieving statehood for Poland. Of course you must be. So tell me of the promises you have received from Germany. Now that the Kaiser’s armies have occupied the whole of Poland and his Foreign Secretary has appointed your government, is Poland now free? Or do Germany’s promises seem less genuine with each passing day.”

Pilsudski glared at Wilkins angrily. “I suppose you have heard that Germany now demands we swear allegiance to the German crown?”

“Of course they do. Germany seeks to make Poland a vassal state or suzerain, and once you have taken their oath they will send your men to fight on the Western

Front against the British and Americans, far from your homeland, against two great nations that have sworn to make Poland independent.”

“So you would ask us to fight against Germany now, is that it?”

“No, sir, I do not. I come merely to learn whether you will continue to fight for Poland.”

“We will always fight for our motherland,” Pilsudski replied.

“In the past two weeks I have traveled through Austria, Galicia and Poland, and it is beginning to look as though this war is nearly over. Austria has all but stopped fighting. It is much the same on the Western Front, Great Britain, France and Germany cannot bear to go on much longer. Hindenburg knows he cannot advance once the Americans arrive in force, so further stalemate is inevitable; it is now merely a matter of time before the belligerents acknowledge as much and the peace treaties are written. Then they will redraw the borders of the European nations. I do not know where those borders will fall on the Western Front, sir, but I intend to see that on the Eastern Front those borders fall as far within Russian territory as humanly possible. Europe will need a strong and independent Poland.

“I came to speak with you because there is another great struggle about to begin, and we must anticipate and prepare for it. When that conflict comes, I regret to say that Poland will be on the front lines yet again, and you will be required to fight for Poland against your enemy and the future enemy of Great Britain and France *and* Germany. You and your men should not be resting in Flanders Fields when the Russians seek to return to Poland. This is where you belong.”

“You believe the new Russian government will seek to reclaim Poland?”

“Certainly they will: For Lenin’s ‘revolution’ to succeed, it must spread, and his fledgling ‘Red Army’ will prove far more effective at achieving that than *propaganda* alone. They will secure their government in Russia and then they will turn west to recapture Poland. That will only be the beginning.

“I cannot tell you when the Russians will come, Marshal, or whether Germany will seek to make Poland a puppet state, or in truth whether Great Britain or France would do likewise. You will have to wait and make that assessment for yourself. But I do know that you must be here, in Poland, when the time comes. You are a great leader, and the Poles will see how you have served your country. I came to tell you that France and Great Britain (and likely Germany, as well) will be your allies in the fight against Bolshevism. The day will come when you will want our help. My name is James Wilkins, and you may contact me whenever you wish Great Britain’s assistance.”

Wilkins looked Marshal Pilsudski in the eye and shook his hand and then walked calmly from the room without even waiting for a response. Outside, the afternoon was overcast and cold. A light snow was falling as Wilkins trudged back by foot over the Vistula River.

Wilkins was walking alongside Górnośląska Boulevard when he realized that a black motorcar was following him. He arrived at the boarding house soon afterward, and although nothing looked out of place, as he entered the building a large man suddenly grabbed his arm and forced Wilkins face down onto the damp and filthy wooden floorboards, his arms held tightly behind his back. His wrists were manacled,

and then he was hauled back up onto his feet and led into an adjoining guestroom where Hesketh, seething with hatred, awaited him.

“Where have you been!?” She shrieked at him.

“Out for a stroll, my dear,” Wilkins answered flippantly. It was a mistake. The man behind Wilkins held his arms tightly as Hesketh leapt forward and slapped Wilkins sharply across the cheek. Her rage had turned her face bright red.

“I want to know who your contact is, who you have been meeting. What is your real name, ‘James Bell’? You will tell me now or I will have your damned eyes out!” She screamed.

“I’ll tell you my name if you tell me yours first. Fair is fair.”

“Hesketh, Clementi, Nezie, Davidovitch, Baroness de Bellville, take your pick,” she spat at him.

“No, your true name, my dear. After all we’ve shared, don’t you think I deserve to know who you truly are?”

She looked in him with bitter hatred but then stepped close and brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered: “My name is Derya Storch.”

“You are very lovely Miss Storch, I must admit it, and I’ve enjoyed our time together immensely. A pity it must end. Come closer, and I will give you my name and the name of my contact in the German army. It is time we fully cleared the air between us.”

She leaned in. Wilkins whispered in her ear, and her face suddenly turned white.

It was a long and unpleasant journey to Germany. Even though the railway was quite comfortable, Wilkins’ captors kept him manacled and under constant guard. If his claims were true, and they had yet to be confirmed, then perhaps it would be better not to harm him impulsively. Certainly they could not simply execute him. However, the Germans in Poland were not quite sure whether to take their prisoner at his word – after all, he had admitted to being a wanted spy, notorious and long sought after by German Intelligence. In the end, the German military commandant in Warsaw decided to simply place Wilkins under arrest. Then the wire had come demanding that Wilkins be brought to Germany at once.

His train at last arrived at Cologne. At the railway station, Wilkins was blindfolded and taken by sedan out of the city. His hands were still manacled and the German officers sitting beside him were heavily armed. It was a quick ride over a river, presumably the Rhine, and another half hour before the sedan came to its final stop. Wilkins was led from the sedan and his blindfold finally removed. As he looked around, he shook his head and laughed: They had brought him to Stammheim, an estate he had visited several times as a boy. He knew exactly where he was, and there had been no purpose at all in blindfolding him during the short journey.

Wilkins followed the German officers calmly into the grand estate house and was led into the bright and airy library. A fire crackled in the hearth, and before it a

trim, middle-aged German commander was seated on a simple wooden chair. His hair was grey and short in the military fashion, his mustache was full but modestly trimmed, and his eyes were alert and deadly serious. His uniform, however, was heavily decorated with both military and royal medals, stars and emblems, and his shoulders were adorned with gold epaulets as befit this Field Marshal, the Commander of Germany's Northern Army Group consisting of the 1st, 2nd, 6th and 7th Armies. He was His Royal Highness, Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria.

Wilkins stood silent. The Crown Prince looked up and nodded almost imperceptibly. Wilkins' heavy steel manacles were removed and the German officers swiftly left the room. Wilkins rubbed his red, chafed wrists as Crown Prince Rupprecht stood and approached Wilkins. He circled around and examined the captured British spy carefully, and then came to a stop to face his prisoner.

"Tell me, James, how is my dear sister?" Rupprecht asked calmly.

"Mother was very well the last time she wrote to me, Sir, and she will be very pleased to learn that you have asked after her," Wilkins said.

The Crown Prince sighed heavily. "Sit down, James, and tell me what you are doing here," he said as he returned to the hearth and sank down upon the wooden chair.

"I came to see *you*, of course," Wilkins said as he sat down across from his uncle, the Crown Prince of Bavaria. Germany was a confederation of territories, the largest being Prussia. Bavaria was the second largest. Although the Prussian House of Hohenzollern held the title of Emperor, the King of Bavaria was among the most powerful men in Germany. His eldest son, Rupprecht, the Crown Prince, was one of Kaiser Wilhelm's top military commanders, but his youngest daughter, Elsa, had been married off to an English nobleman, the Earl of Bartlett, James Wilkins' father. Wilkins continued: "You can't imagine I was captured by accident."