



Józef Hieronim Retinger

1888-1960

### Who was Józef Hieronim Retinger?

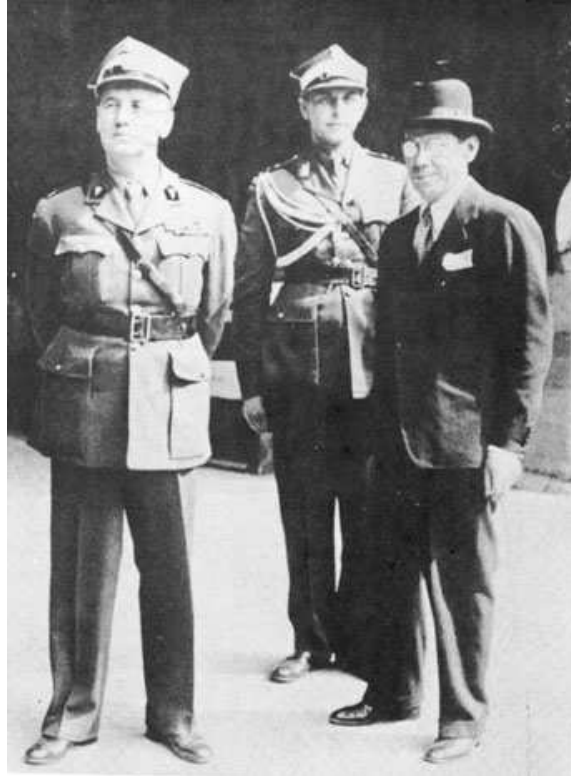
by Jan Chciuk-Celt

Consider these points:

- Born in Kraków in 1888, thirty years before Poland reappeared on the map of Europe
- Got his PhD in Literature from the Sorbonne in 1908 at the age of twenty -- youngest ever!
- Personal friend of numerous brilliant artists, writers and musicians, including Bonnard, Gide and Ravel
- Fluent in several languages, and a voracious reader in all of them: the very model of a polyglot
- Actively involved in promoting Polish independence from Germany, Russia and Austro-Hungary
- Close personal friend of Joseph Conrad
- His ups and downs included several episodes of being homeless and destitute, even in jail
- Reportedly had a price on his head during the Great War after he pushed his diplomatic meddling too far
- Twice married, father of three girls: Wanda Puchalska, Marya Fforde and Stanislaw French
- Active in Mexican politics during the 1920s and 1930s, friend and advisor of both President Plutarco Elias Calles and Union Leader Luis Napoleon Morones
- Close friend of, and advisor to, Polish General Wladyslaw Sikorski
- Parachuted into Poland in 1944 at the age of 56, thereby establishing a record as the oldest man ever to go on a combat parachute mission
- Survived a poisoning meant to kill him, ordered by the AK while he was in Poland in 1944
- Accused by whispered rumors of being a Vatican agent, a Jesuit spy, a high-ranking Mason, a Knight of Malta, a Jew, a homosexual, a CIA agent, a Zionist agent, an MI5 agent, an MI6 agent, a Russian agent and The Devil's Cousin -- and he'd say "that's not the half of it"
- Famously referred to in a British diplomatic despatch as "that man who looks rather like a monkey"
- Impeccably connected, to the point where he could pick up the phone and get the President of the United States on the line at once
- Steadfastly refused all medals, honours, decorations, etc., on the many occasions they were bestowed on him
- King George V did manage to award him a Medal for Courage in the Cause of Freedom in 1948, but he skipped the ceremony
- Never once took the opportunity to get rich personally, on the many occasions it presented itself
- Initiator of the European League for Economic Cooperation, which led directly to the formation of today's European

## Union

- Founder and Secretary of the Bilderberg Conference
- Total chain smoker, rarely seen without a cigarette in his hand; preferred the de Reske brand
- Died of lung cancer in London in 1960 in relative obscurity, and yet five cabinet ministers attended his funeral



Polish Prime Minister General Wladyslaw Sikorski with aide-de-camp Rotamaster Michal Miszke and political advisor Joseph Retinger. This is probably the most famous picture of Dr. Józef Retinger.

He was undoubtedly a person of tremendous charisma, a magnetic personality whose life story is filled with adventure and accomplishment. My dad spent several months in daily close contact with Mr. Retinger in 1944 and they were friends after that.

In English, his name would be Joseph Hieronimus Retinger. For the purpose of this brief biographical essay, we'll use his initials, JHR.

He was born in Kraków on April 17th, 1888, the youngest of four children. (Some sources say five.) This was at a time when there was no Poland on the map, and that part of Europe was a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire known as Galicia. Like many Poles of all generations, he wished fervently to see Poland become a free and independent country again. He once told a friend, "I wish Poland would soon be free again so I would not have to be a damn patriot!"

JHR's father was Józef Stanislaw Retinger, the private legal counsel and advisor to the eminent Polish nobleman Count Wladyslaw Zamoyski. His lasting contribution to Poland was that he was the lead counsel on the winning side of a lawsuit against Kingdom and Crown (*i.e.*, the Austro-Hungarian Empire) in the matter of the ownership of certain particularly beautiful lands near Zakopane, including Lake Morskie Oko. The senior Retinger was a fervently patriotic Pole, and he "Polonized" the spelling of his last name, "Röttinger," to "Retinger." The name in its original spelling indicates that the family would have originally come from the German town of Röttingen. JHR's mother was Maria Krystyna Czyrmińska, the daughter of the Dean of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. One of his sisters was Maria Dobrowolska. One of his brothers was University of Chicago Chemistry Professor Julius M. Retinger.

The elder Józef Retinger died suddenly in 1897 while JHR was still a lad, and Count Zamoyski took little Józio under his wing. JHR originally thought about becoming a priest and even enrolled in a seminary (he entered the Novitiate of the Jesuits

in Rome) but withdrew after three months upon concluding that the requirement of celibacy was going to be a problematic hurdle. Count Zamoyski sent him to study at the Sorbonne in Paris, covering all of his expenses. Aged 18, JHR arrived in Paris in 1906. Being the protégé of the fabulously wealthy and impeccably connected Count Zamoyski, JHR was granted entrée into Parisian society and was able to befriend an impressive array of people while still a student at the Ecole des Sciences Politiques. His field of study was Literature. His friends included the Marquis de Castellane, whom everyone called Boni -- a dapper roué who married American heiress Anna Gould and spent five and a half million dollars of her money before their marriage was dissolved -- and a couple of creative types named Maurice Ravel and Pierre Bonnard, before they were world-famous. He also knew personally numerous other painters and musicians, including the dazzling pianist Ricardo Vinez, the composers Claude Terrasse, Eric Satie, Francis Poulenc, and the writers Francois Mauriac and André Gide. A veritable Who's Who in 20th Century France!



Joseph Retinger, PhD

Two cute anecdotes may be mentioned here. Once, JHR showed Gide a manuscript of a novel he was working on, and Gide very kindly read through the whole thing and made copious notes in the margins, tried to explain to him the art of writing, etc., but in the end he said, "Anyway, my dear Joseph, I don't think you will ever be a writer," and that was that as far as JHR's creative literary ambitions were concerned. Not that this frank critique of his writing skills got in the way of their friendship! JHR did go on to write several non-fiction books, though, and wrote numerous articles for newspapers and magazines. On another occasion, he and some friends were over at Ravel's, and Ravel played them a new composition on the piano and asked Retinger what he thought of it. "I wouldn't miss the next streetcar to hear the end of it," JHR replied with a smile. Devastatingly honest!

Hanging out in cafés (his favourite was the "Vachette") and salons with artists of all kinds, bohemian or otherwise, did not take anything away from JHR's work ethic. In 1908 he received his PhD (*Docteur es Lettres*) in Literature from the Sorbonne at the age of twenty, establishing a record as the youngest PhD ever at the Sorbonne. After that, he continued his studies at the University of Munich, reading Comparative Psychology (*Völkerpsychologie*) with the idea that it would be useful in his future political career. In Munich, again, he met and befriended a lot of bright people, including Hans von Weber, and tried to learn a thing or two about publishing.

JHR traveled a lot between his graduation from the Sorbonne and the outbreak of World War I. In addition to the time he spent in England, France and Germany, he returned frequently to Kraków, and in 1911 he started a literary monthly. Many

writers gave him manuscripts for publication -- well-established Polish writers as well as undiscovered talents who were to make their mark later, but also friends from his University days, including Arnold Bennett, Franz Bley and Gide, who let him serialize his book *La Porte Etroite* before it was even published in France. His "Miesiecznik Literacki i Artystyczny" came out from January to December, 1911 and then folded. In 1912, he married a beautiful Polish girl named Otolia Zubrzycka (1889-1984). (Apparently her nickname was Tola.) She came from a good family; her father was the head of the Chemistry Department at the Jagiellonian University, and her mother had an estate.



Otolia Zubrzycka and Józef Retinger's engagement picture

It was around this time, before the Great War, that JHR first embarked on his career of political activity. A group of people representing a cross-section of the various Polish political groupings in Galicia asked JHR to open a bureau in London in order to advocate for Polish matters in Great Britain. It occupied one room in Granville House on Arundel Street. "Retinger did not belong to any political organization or group, but he consistently upheld the idea of Polish sovereignty vis-à-vis all three partitioning powers," writes Zdzislaw Najder. He was basically doing public relations for the Polish cause, which was more or less a non-subject in Britain in those days, so he set out to make contacts among those people who might one day be influential, and did what he could to promote the idea that Poland, which did not exist on the map of Europe, was in fact a nation. One neat little stunt he pulled involved the Polish Boy Scouts. Having spoken to Andrzej Malkowski, the father of Polish scouting, Retinger arranged to have the boy scouts from all three partitions of Poland set up camp at the Third Boy Scout Jamboree in 1913, under a banner that proudly said "Poland" -- even though the scouts were technically from Austria, Germany and Russia. The partitioning powers had to have been irritated, but he got away with it. One of his most important friends turned out to be Joseph Conrad, the Polish writer who had moved to England years before and who became internationally renowned for *The Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. They met in 1912 through a mutual friend, Arnold Bennett, whom JHR had known in his Sorbonne days and who had written for JHR's literary monthly. JHR and Conrad became the best of friends and spent a lot of time together. JHR later wrote an excellent souvenir of their time together, entitled *Conrad and His Contemporaries* (London: Minerva, 1941; New York, Roy, 1942). The Retingers and the Conrads were actually vacationing together, at Otolia's mother's invitation, in Galicia, *i.e.*, Poland, in the summer of 1914 when war broke out. There's a story about a frantic scramble to get the Conrads on a train -- they finally got to Vienna on October 10th, 1914 on a night train full of wounded soldiers.

During the Great War, JHR tried to use his contacts to persuade Austria to withdraw from its alliance with Germany and make a separate peace. Boni de Castellane tried to help; there were meetings with Asquith, Clemenceau, Northcliffe and Berthelot. The plan didn't work out, the two Kaisers didn't go for it, and by his meddling JHR managed to seriously offend some important people. He was declared *persona non grata* by Austria, was suddenly unwelcome in Britain, the Germans wanted him dead, and he had to leave France for Spain -- penniless! Joseph Conrad intervened on JHR's behalf as best he could, writing letters to important people and wiring him money. He wound up in Mexico, where he spent a lot of time in the 1920s and got to know all the key players, trade unionists, politicians, and so on. His good friend Calles eventually became the President of Mexico. Retinger encouraged the Mexican government to nationalise the oil industry, which severely irritated the American companies that had been profiting handsomely from Mexican oil and made JHR a kind of public enemy in the eyes of some key players in the U.S. Government.

JHR's marriage with Otolia Zubrzycka fell apart during the Great War. They had a daughter, Malina Wanda Retinger, later Puchalska, who was born in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1917, but by that time JHR was off doing his own thing, travelling, getting into trouble, and having love affairs. He had a mad crush on the American journalist Jane Anderson, which apparently drove something of a wedge between JHR and Joseph Conrad. In 1926, he married Stella Morel, the daughter of the Labour Unionist E.D. Morel. They had a daughter named Maria in 1927, and a second daughter named Stasia in 1930. Mr. David French is JHR's grandson. (Stella died in 1933.)

During the Second World War, in which Poland was once again wiped off the map by Germany and the Soviet Union, JHR was the principal political advisor to Polish Prime Minister General Wladyslaw Sikorski, as well as being a close friend of his. He accompanied the general to Tobruk when that city was under siege -- the only civilian in the group. JHR was devastated when Sikorski was killed in a suspicious plane crash upon takeoff from Gibraltar in 1943, but continued to play an important advisory role in the Polish Government in Exile. Acting on his own initiative, he undertook a mission to parachute into occupied Poland in 1944, when he was 56 years old, thereby setting a record as the oldest man to go on a combat parachute mission. That mission was code named Operation Salamander. Retinger himself was also code named Salamander, but used several false names while in Poland and carried ID naming him as Captain Paisley, in a British uniform. He's referred to in one surviving British despatch as "that man who looks rather like a monkey." [Click here](#) to see an authentic "Most Secret" document outlining the planning for Operation Salamander. (Note: The document is no longer classified, it's on public display at a museum in Poland, and it's been published in books -- so I'm not divulging any sensitive material here.)



Retinger as Captain Edward Paisley. Image courtesy of MHPRL Warszawa

My dad, code named Celt or Sulima, was in charge of JHR's safety during that mission, and got to know him well. Their mission was purely political in nature, having to do with trying to get people to come to terms with the fact that the Russians were going to come, and the allies wouldn't help, so it was best to try and negotiate with the Russians as soon as possible.

They also carried with them the sum of \$144,000, to be disbursed to various parties in Poland. People like to embellish the story and I've read that Retinger was delivering "millions" -- but the manifests survive and are reproduced as appendices in *Z Retingerem do Warszawy i z Powrotem* by Marek Celt. Certain rogue elements within the AK (Home Army) were suspicious of Retinger and ordered him liquidated during that summer of 1944. Now, sixty years later, it's becoming increasingly clear that some people in the AK top brass were dead set against this mission of Retinger's and actively and repeatedly sabotaged it. Retinger was robbed of his papers and prevented from boarding a crucial flight (Operation Wildhorn II), and several attempts were made on his life. A military nurse/assassin named Izabela Horodecka, assigned to Unit 993-W of the Home Army, which specialized in "targeted killings," was to give him a lethal substance (she says she doesn't know what was in it) but gave him only half the dose, because an officer named Rudkowski had taken the other half away from her. (There was another soldier involved, Stefan Rys, who also claims to have pulled a switch with the substances. Whatever the exact formula may have been, its effect on Retinger was devastating and nearly fatal.) This was the same Rudkowski (Group Captain Roman Rudkowski of the AK) who arranged to strip JHR of all his papers and keep him off that plane, all on the orders of the AK. So it can fairly be said that Mikolajczyk's government was working with an army in which some high-level elements, to say the least, were opposed to it. No wonder Mikolajczyk resigned! JHR survived the poisoning, but was delayed by two crucial months in returning to London, and he was paralyzed for several months afterward. My dad had to carry him on board a plane (Operation Wildhorn III) in his arms, like a child. Later, back in London, Retinger convalesced at the Dorchester Hotel, where my dad visited him. He told me that Rudkowski had visited JHR at the Dorchester as well, kind of trying to apologise, like "no hard feelings, OK?, I was just following orders," etc., whereupon JHR gave him a royal chewing out.



Retinger recovering at the Dorchester, photo by Datko

After the Second World War was finally over and Poland had been thoroughly destroyed by the Germans only to be handed right over to the Soviets, Joseph Retinger managed to persuade the British Army to give a large amount of valuable surplus military materiel to Poland, where equipment of all kinds was so sorely needed. They shipped blankets, field kitchens, tents, and even a few Bailey bridges to Poland. My father was his secretary there for a time, and took this picture of a frail-looking Mr. Retinger standing amid the ruins of what was once the beautiful city of Warsaw.



Retinger in the ruins of Warsaw, 1945 or early 1946, photo by Tadeusz Chciuk-Celt

It soon became evident that the Communists were grabbing power in Poland and cracking down hard. Retinger very wisely got the hell out of there while he could, and returned to London. My dad stayed behind with his pregnant young wife, and they both got arrested, interrogated and imprisoned at the dreaded UB (Secret Police) prison on Koszykowa Street in Warsaw. JHR intervened personally with Soviet Foreign Minister Vyachaslav Molotov, and my parents were released after several months of daily interrogations. When word reached my folks in 1948 that they were about to be arrested again, they fled the country with their toddler daughter, and that's how I came to be born in Germany to refugee parents.

In the years after the war, Retinger made it his personal mission in life to bring about a united, peaceful Europe. He initiated the European League for Economic Cooperation, which was a precursor to what eventually became the European Economic Community and finally today's European Union. He was highly motivated to try to put an end to the seemingly incessant wars that had been tearing Europe to shreds. He lived to see his dream of a united Europe begin to take shape. Nowadays when we drive across eastern Germany and enter Poland without even having to slow down for the border crossing ... we have JHR to thank.



Józef Retinger in Brussels in 1949, during one of the many meetings which led to the creation of today's European Community. Detail of a picture taken for LIFE magazine by Dmitri Kessel

His final achievement was also his most controversial -- and he'd had his hand in plenty of controversies before. Retinger convened a unique conference at the Bilderberg Hotel in the Netherlands, bringing together into one room all the most important key players in the entire international scene for a conference removed from the glare of publicity and dedicated to truly unfettered dialogue between all the conferees. The idea was to smooth out relations between Europe and The United States, which were clouded by a mutual distrust. The group was convened to try and get the Europeans and the Americans to work more closely together. Coming so soon after the second World War, it might have seemed that if we can just all work together to address our problems, then maybe we can hold back the next World War, which as we all know would be a nuclear holocaust. The event was such a success that it has become a regular event known as the Bilderberg Conference, convening every year. Joseph Retinger was the Secretary of the Bilderberg Organization at every meeting held, until his death in 1960. The so-called Bilderbergers continue to meet every year, and the list of attendees is invariably a "Who's Who" of world players. Many people regard the whole Bilderberg Conference thing with a great deal of suspicion, and some people view it as beyond evil, making Mr. Retinger the architect of a very nasty plan for the Illuminati (or someone) to take over the world. I'm staying out of that one. Even the author Daniel Estulin, whose book, *The True Story of the Bilderberg Group*, very correctly raises some pretty hairy suspicions about the Bilderbergers, allows as how they meant well and were motivated by high ideals **at the start** (my emphasis) and that the whole thing got a lot weirder a few years into it. In other words, Retinger was motivated by lofty ideals, not wicked schemes, when he first called the Conference together at the Bilderberg Hotel in Holland. You can judge for yourself by taking a look at his own monograph, [The Bilderberg Group](#) which was published in 1956 after the fourth meeting. My dad knew him well and thought very highly of him, and most certainly didn't ascribe any evil intentions to a plan to unite Europe and stop the warring and fighting. Dr. Joseph Retinger died of lung cancer in London on the 12th of June, 1960.



My parents with Dr. Retinger in Warsaw, March 1946

At his funeral in London in 1960, Sir Edward Bedington-Behrens said: "I remember Retinger in the United States picking up the telephone and immediately making an appointment with the President, and in Europe he had complete entrée in every political circle as a kind of right acquired through trust, devotion and loyalty he inspired."

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