

PRO MEMORIA

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JANUSZ TAZBIR (5 AUGUST 1927 – 3 MAY 2016)

The Third-of-May Day, the anniversary of the enactment of the first Polish constitution 1791, and thus the date of high importance for Polish historians, has proved extremely sad for us this year. It was on 3 May 2016 that Professor Janusz Tazbir, one of the most outstanding Polish historians, an excellent populariser of knowledge about the country's history, died at his Warsaw home.

Professor Janusz Tazbir was one of the doyens of Polish historiography. He belonged to the (now severely shrinking) group of scholars who in the early 1950s faced the task not only to rebuild the foundations of Polish humanities in the aftermath of the enormous damage and losses caused by the Second World War and the subsequent years of 'reinforcement of the people's (i.e., communist) authority' but also to defend the humanistic sciences against the threat of the 'historical materialist' ideology which was brutally superimposed by the authorities of the time.

Janusz Tazbir was born in 1927 in Kałuszyn, in the region of Masovia. During the German occupation he did some random or seasonal jobs for living whilst pursuing intense self-instruction, which enabled him to complete his secondary-level education after 1945 with the 'Juliusz Słowacki' Grammar School in Warsaw. With his matriculation completed, he commenced his tertiary education at the Faculty of History, University of Warsaw, and obtained his MA degree there in 1950. Professor Henryk Samsonowicz, his close friend, and an outstanding history scholar himself, recalls that as a university student, Janusz Tazbir was primarily interested in the history of Polish culture, as opposed to their colleagues, who were mostly preoccupied with economic and societal processes. This focus, established for most part in his student years, has prevalently determined his later field of research and the problems he tackled in his historiographic works. Tazbir was mainly influenced during his university studies by two eminent historians (who were clearly marginalised at the time), Władysław Tomkiewicz and Stanisław Herbst. Professor Tomkiewicz became Janusz Tazbir's master's degree tutor as well as, four years later, doctoral tutor.

Having obtained his PhD in 1954 (the degree was described at the time as 'candidate of sciences', following the Soviet nomenclature) in the field of cultural history and history of religious movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Janusz Tazbir got employed with the Institute of History that was being constructed under the auspices of the Polish Academy of Sciences [PAN] by Tadeusz Manteuffel. As one of Professor Manteuffel's closest associates, Janusz Tazbir pursued for a number of years intense research in the history of the religious Reformation in Poland and relationships between religions and churches in the modern era. Scientific studies penned by him in those years clearly corresponded with the interests of a quite large group of young researchers specialising in the history of thought and culture, described today as 'the Warsaw school of the history of ideas'. The working relationship Janusz Tazbir entered into at that time with Zbigniew Ogonowski and Lech Szczucki, later on figures of high importance to Polish intellectual life, has borne fruit in a series of pretty fundamental monographic publications and source editions. His focus as a scholar on religious heterodoxies, especially on the theological and social concepts of the Polish Brethren, called Arians, followed up the research initiated before the Second World War by Aleksander Brückner and Stanisław Kot, and has defined the main current in Polish historical studies in this area for a number of years.

1960 marked Janusz Tazbir's 'habilitation' with the Institute of History, PAN. In 1966, he was promoted to associate professorship. His interests gradually evolved in that period from heterodoxy to religious (confessional, denominational and interreligious) relation(ship)s, with a special focus on the ways in which Polish Counter-Reformation influenced the local culture. He published his biography of the Rev. Piotr Skarga, a fervent advocate of the Counter-Reformation, in 1962;¹ 1966 saw the issuance of a popular compendium of the history of the Catholic Church in Poland – *Historia Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce (1460–1795)*. In the following year, Tazbir's probably best known popular-science book entitled *Państwo bez stosów. Szkice z dziejów tolerancji w Polsce w XVI i XVII w.* [A Country with no Stakes: Polish Religious Toleration in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries] was published (a 1973 English translation is available). As the author of this particular book, Tazbir established himself not only as an 'elitist' scholar specialising in a narrow subject but also amongst numerous unprofessional lovers of history, and humanists. 'Country with no stakes' has become in the following years one of the synonyms of the nobility's Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The societal importance of such an efficient apology of the idea of tolerance in a period of moral and political crisis that prevailed in Poland after 1968 is not to be overestimated. Moreover, the many years of Janusz Tazbir's work as the editor of the *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* annual must not be

¹ Janusz Tazbir, *Piotr Skarga. Szermierz kontrreformacji* (Warszawa, 1978²).

neglected: owing to his tireless efforts, dozens of valuable essays and studies were compiled, edited and printed – many of them by beginner scholars.

In 1973 Janusz Tazbir crowned his scholarly curriculum vitae with full professorship. His research focus was shifting in that time from the history of ideas and religious relations toward the history of Polish Baroque-era culture. It was then that this author elaborated his characteristic style of research work: he would focus on in-depth, monographical processing of selected issues and subsequently arrange the outcome of such investigation into a larger cohesive whole, edited into a book format. Among the most valuable collections of studies was *Arianie i katolicy* [The Arians and the Catholics] (published 1971), followed, among others, by *Szlachta i teologowie. Studia z dziejów polskiej kontrreformacji* [The Nobles and the Theologians: Studies in the History of Polish Counter-Reformation] (1987), and *Reformacja w Polsce. Szkice o ludziach i doktrynie* [The Reformation in Poland: Essays on the People and the Doctrine] (1993). The method he applied in his research work and as an author aroused interest among expert scholars and made them appreciated by numerous national history aficionados.

Tazbir's intensive research in Polish culture of the Baroque has produced a number of articles published in specialist periodicals and treatises contributing to collections of essays or studies by various authors. Just to recall some of these publications, synthetic in character: *Kultura szlachecka w Polsce* [Culture of the Polish Nobility] (1978); *Świat panów Pasków. Eseje i studia* [The World of J.C. Pasek and His Peers: Essays and Studies] (1986); or, *Kultura polskiego baroku* [The Baroque Culture in Poland] (1986). The early 1990s saw two books by Janusz Tazbir appear in print that have reinforced this author's esteem as a foremost researcher in the history of culture whilst also consolidating his authority in the cultural scholars' milieu internationally. The books were, namely, *Protokoły mędrców Syjonu. Autentyk czy falsyfikat* [The Protocols of the Sages of Zion: An Authentic Manuscript, or a Forgery] (first publ. 1992; followed by a number of other editions and translations), and, *Okrucieństwo w nowożytniej Europie* [Cruelty in Early Modern Europe] (1993). The problems tackled in both do not boil down historical issues of, potentially, a general interest: they testify to the author's sensitivity to the problems one finds so bothering today – such as populism, intolerance, anti-Semitism, proneness to conspiratorial theories of history, or cruelty toward humans and animals. These books, and some other publications of the like sort have ranked Janusz Tazbir as an authority not only in the area of historical science and historiography but, broadly, in the humanities overall.

The last decades of the twentieth century marked Janusz Tazbir's most intense involvement in public and organisational activities. From 1983 to 1990, he served as Director of the 'Tadeusz Manteuffel' Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences; in 1983, he was made corresponding member of the PAN, and full member of the same since 1989. In 1993–8, he chaired

the Academy's Division I and sat, in parallel, on the PAN's Presidium (until 2011). Between 1999 and 2003, he was in office as Deputy Chairman of the same Academy. Tazbir was moreover member of the Polish Academy of Learning (also called the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences) [PAU] and of the Warsaw Scientific Society [TNW]. As Director and member of the executive of the PAN, he attached special care to the compilation and edition of the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (Polish Bibliographical Dictionary), a major work produced by, and about, Polish humanities scholars, including as Chair of the project's scientific council.

Noteworthy are the deceased scholar's endeavours to keep the humanistic scientific research to appropriate standards, along with his care for preservation of good habits among scholars. Janusz Tazbir has enormous merits to his credit in this respect, as a long-term member of the Central Committee for Academic Degrees and Titles (he chaired the body from 1997 till 2003). His scientific, scholarly, and organisational work and achievements were commonly known and highly appreciated not only among Polish humanities scholars. Tazbir has been awarded numerous prizes and held honorary titles and State decorations, the highest-ranked among the latter being the Commander's Cross (with a Star) of the Order of *Polonia Restituta*, awarded to him in 2000.

In the recent years, age and health have affected his activity as a research scholar; this did not prevent him, though, from keeping a watch on the situation of Polish humanities, the research conducted at his 'mother' Institute of History, PAN, and, in particular, the work on the Polish Bibliographical Dictionary. The phrase "With Janusz Tazbir's death, the Polish humanities science has incurred an irretrievable loss", used in his obituary, is not an occasional stock phrase: his friends, students, and associates will, from now on, miss his wisely reserved and thought-over attitude toward ongoing business and daily routine; his balanced and apt opinions; and, his ironic sense of humour. Yet, he has supplied us with a considerable heritage: the books, some of which he worked on until his last days, and the memory of the man who has been a really important point of reference for us, over so many years.

trans. *Tristan Korecki*

Wojciech Kriegseisen