

Janusz Tazbir (1927–2016)

I was deeply saddened to learn of the death of Janusz Tazbir, one of the most distinguished experts on cultural history in European historiography. My dear friend from when we were at school and from when we studied together at the University of Warsaw. His life is a perfect illustration of the experience of the generation of scholars who, despite the difficult times in which they worked, significantly enhanced our knowledge of the history of modern Europe.

During wartime, as a young man, Janusz Tazbir was forced to interrupt his education and earn a living as a farm worker. This didn't prevent him from using a rich body of literature (mainly classic authors of historical novels and great national poets), which, it should be added, wasn't easily available during the war. After the conflict, he continued his education, attending intensive secondary school courses. In the school year 1946/47 he was already in the final year at the Juliusz Słowacki School where he would astonish his friends and his teachers with his unusual erudition. It was early on during his school years that he decided to dedicate himself to the study of cultural history.

In the spring of 1947, having received a secondary school certificate, Tazbir began to study at the Institute of History of the University of Warsaw. He completed his university education in less than four years, obtaining his Master's degree under Professor Władysław Tomkiewicz. By the time of his graduation, his first works had already appeared in print. They covered, mainly but not exclusively, the field of research on which Tazbir was to focus most of his attention – the Reformation era, the different forms which the Reformation movements assumed in different countries and the consequences of the religious changes across Europe. While still a student, he made his mark as an author of an original work on the 'craze' for all things

Chinese in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Interested mainly in Renaissance Poland, from early on in his career he showed the ability to look at it from a wider European perspective. Already in his 1952 monograph, *Echa walk klasowych XVI wieku w polskiej opinii szlacheckiej*, he was able to move away from the Marxist schemes of historical interpretation, which the historians were at that time pressured to embrace, and introduce the reader to the religious debates taking place in sixteenth-century Poland. His subsequent, numerous works concerned the anti-Arian policy in the era of the Catholic reaction (1955). Further explored in the 1971 monograph *Arianie i katolicy* (additionally adapted for the German reader), and in the account of the history of the Polish Arians in exile *Bracia Polscy na wygnaniu* (1977), this complex issue was presented against the background of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As early as 1966, Tazbir prepared a monumental work *Historia kościoła katolickiego w Polsce (1460–1795)*, which not only portrayed the history of an institution but also offered an account of the main phases of the crisis of the Old Poland.

In various works published in France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Italy (in a series devoted to the history of Europe), Tazbir set the history of Poland against a European background, thus showing the specific character of the Polish historical experience. The title used to characterize the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the period of the greatest religious conflicts of modern Europe *Państwo bez stosów* (1967) has become a phrase commonly used in historiography. Another monograph *Dzieje polskiej tolerancji* (1973), devoted to the social relations in the Polish commonwealth in the era of the religious wars, constitutes the basis of our knowledge of the religious issues of the time, and so do his synthetic works on Renaissance culture. This range of subjects was also given a lucid exposition in Tazbir's dissertations on the religious consciousness of the inhabitants of modern Europe, in his articles analysing the Polish opinions about the religious wars in France, and in his monograph *Szlachta a konkwistadorzy* (1969). Of synthetic significance are also his studies of the religious minorities in Poland. The latter problem was approached from a wider European perspective, and so was the history of Polish toleration (1973).

As a scholar Tazbir didn't avoid offering wide, synthetic accounts of the history of his country, as is evidenced by the 1997 monograph *Polska na zakrętach dziejów* and the earlier work on the role

of preaching in the religious propaganda in Poland. A wide perspective adopted in the account of Polish history can also be seen in the 1992 work *Na skrzyżowaniu kultur i wyznań* (1992) and in a popular monograph entitled *Świat panów Pasków*.

Tazbir's widespread interest in Polish culture and its relation to a wide European background is well reflected in the collection of articles dedicated to him on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (1997). Entitled *Kultura staropolska – kultura europejska*, the work contains the impressive bibliography of his works.

The long list of his works shows that he was concerned not only with the modern era but also with a variety of problems concerning the contemporary issues. He didn't shy away from engaging in polemics with authors and views that had for a long time enjoyed wide acceptance among Polish readers. His works on the place of the battle of Vienna in Polish historical consciousness or on the 'Poles in the Kremlin' show the significance of the events both in Polish history and in the history of Poland's neighbours. In describing views held in our country, Tazbir referred to significant events taking place across the whole European Continent. It is to his pen that we owe synthetic accounts of the history of the religious minorities in Poland from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Among various problems he studied one should also mention the Polish views of the religious wars in France, the Polish visions of European community and the origins of Polish utopianism (*Prehistoria polskiej utopii*). The work *Problemy sporne dziejów kontreformacji w Polsce*, in which he wrote about the forerunners of the Polish Reformation movement, has been useful for scholars dealing with all the periods of Polish history. Tazbir's research also involved his distinguished predecessors such as, for example, Aleksander Brückner. He highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of their texts. His interpretations of various works by Henryk Barycz, Tadeusz Manteuffel and Władysław Tomkiewicz have enabled us to attain a better understanding of the way these scholars viewed the past. Janusz Tazbir paid much attention to the analysis of primary sources. He studied religious treatises to be found in Russian and Polish manuscripts. His attention was also drawn to the role of Enlightenment in dealing with the problem of national assimilation in Poland. He analysed Polish historiography in respect of the visions of the Middle Ages it developed and tried to determine various ways in which European historiographies used the concepts of *cruelty* and *toleration*. His scholarly interests encompassed thinkers

who made a significant contribution to theological debates and who established religious norms to be followed by the inhabitants of many European countries (Piotr Skarga, Philip Melancton, Jakub Niemojewski, Stanisław Lubieniecki, Wojciech Tytkowski). He examined the understanding of time by people living in earlier centuries. He also sought to clarify the meaning of the concept of the 'bulwark of Christianity', examining the process through which it became embedded in Polish culture. Much of his attention was devoted to the explanation of the role of various forgeries, including the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Concerned with the issue of the falsification of primary sources are such works as *Pseudoariańskie zbory i grobowce*, and *Przyczynek do dziejów mistyfikacji historycznych* (1992). Tazbir dealt in a polemical way with issues present in Polish collective memory. Worthy of mention in this context are the articles: *Krzyżacy – krótkie dzieje i długa legenda* (1996), *Twórcy i burzyciele legend historycznych* (1996) and *Kamienie milowe polskiej świadomości historycznej* (1997). Falling into this category is also the work *Rzeczypospolita Babińska w legendzie literackiej* (1972). In the article 'Zdrajcy' pomnikiem zhańbieni he analysed the source material containing information about generals who moved against the insurgents of 1830.

The work *Polska sława Krzysztofa Kolumba* (1991), addressing the question of truths and myths to be found in the Polish accounts regarding the life of the great traveller, deals with similar issues, as does the 1997 article *Pomiędzy stereotypem a doświadczeniem*.

The 1987 work *Polskie przedmurze chrześcijańskiej Europy. Mity a rzeczywistość historyczna*, which occasioned a great deal of controversy, can serve as a point of departure for a discussion, clearly needed in our country, of the role of historical images in shaping the knowledge of the past. The problem of how the world was viewed by the *szlachta* (i.e., nobility) was addressed by Tazbir in the 1978 synthetic work *Kultura szlachecka w Polsce. Rozkwit, upadek, relikty*. The book is important for the understanding of many attitudes held by the Poles today, and so are two original dissertations *Sarmaci o Abisynii. Stereotypy i wiedza* (1997) and *Spiski przeciwko światu* (1985).

One should also mention works that offer the author's personal reminiscences *Pożegnanie z XX wiekiem* (1999), *Pokuszenie historyczne* (2011), and the collection of texts devoted to various aspects of the past *Od Sasa do lasa* (2011). In a timespan of more than six decades of his research work, Janusz Tazbir published more than one thousand scholarly works, excluding brief texts published in the pages of

a variety of newspapers such as *Polityka* and *Tygodnik Powszechny* and TV and radio broadcasts popularizing history. His participation in these programmes was bound up with some perspicacious remarks he offered with regard to both academic and public affairs. In accordance with the values held by many distinguished scholars, he was very active in promoting and organizing academic life.

In the years 1983–1990 he served as director of the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences and in 1999 was appointed Vice-President of the Polish Academy of Sciences, holding this post until 2003. A member of the Polish Academy of Learning and the Council of the ‘Polin’ Museum, he presided over the Scientific Council of the Polish Biographical Dictionary, the National Committee for Academic Appointments and the academic journal *Przegląd Humanistyczny*. Associated for many years with the Council of the ‘Stopka’ Society in Łomża, he served as its president. He was also awarded the Literary Prize of the City of Warsaw.

Having received a doctorate *honoris causa* from the University of Opole (2000), he was appointed an honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (2000). He was decorated with the Commander’s Cross with Star, the Order of *Polonia Restituta*, the Order of Gloria Artis and the Alfred Jurzykowski Prize. Those with whom he worked, his students and colleagues, have suffered a great loss. They lost not only a great scholar who made an exceptional contribution to our knowledge of the past but also a loyal friend on whose help and advice they could always count and who had a great gift for talking about himself and others. His sense of humour, his apt remarks about people and events enriched those with whom he shared his life.

He will remain in the memory of his friends, colleagues and readers for many years.

Henryk Samsonowicz

Trans. by Artur MękarSKI

First published in *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 60 (2016), pp. 5–9
The publication of this English translation has received additional funding from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland