

# PRO MEMORIA

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## JERZY W. BOREJSZA (22 AUGUST 1935 – 28 JULY 2019)

‘The Professor’ (with a capital ‘P’): this is how we called him – we, his youngest students from the Polish Academy of Sciences’ Institute of History, his workplace since 1975 until his death. He protected and patronised us, in all senses of the phrase: he suggested important books we should read, invited to dine with him at his home or outside, asked about our private lives, whether we have a home and means of support, or how we were getting on in our marriages. Irena Szymańska, a long-standing editor with the Czytelnik printing house, said once of Jerzy Borejsza Sr. that he always had five ideas in his head at once, of which four were ideas of genius and one pretty feasible. Apples do not fall far from the tree: his son would, for instance, call up his doctoral student on Saturday morning – just to share with the student another brilliant idea about his or her future career path. Absolutely positive about his own conviction about our future, he would sometimes neglect our own plans in the more general picture of his daring designs. Generosity and beneficence were the driving forces behind it, rather than cocksureness. He did so because he believed in us and tried to open for us as many doors as possible.

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Jerzy Wojciech Borejsza was born on 22 August 1935 in Warsaw as the only child of Jerzy (Benjamin) Borejsza (1905–52) and Ewa Borejsza, née Kantor (1912–2004). His paternal grandfather was Abraham Goldberg (1880–1933), Zionist activist, editor of *Haynt* – a leading Yiddish daily newspaper published in Warsaw. While Jerzy Jr. was born too late to meet him in person, he often mentioned his grandfather and was very proud of him. After the outbreak of the Second World War, their family was split up: little Jerzy and his mother

found shelter in Berezno, at their maternal grandfather's place, and then in Lviv (they were the only ones to survive the execution of local Jews in the summer of 1941) and in Buchach (today in Ukraine). In 1942, they moved back to Warsaw, holding false documents and supported by their prewar acquaintances from the left-oriented and intelligentsia-dominated district of Żoliborz. They left the place before Warsaw Uprising of 1944 broke out, to a village near Żyrardów. The war over, Jerzy recovered all the lost time of education, attending schools run by the left-wing Society of the Friends of Children [TPD] – first in Łódź and then in Warsaw.

Borejsza wanted to attend a Polish Studies faculty at the University of Warsaw and become a writer. Yet, by the decision of a team of comrades from the Central Committee of the ruling communist party, he was sent in 1952, after his father's death, to Kazan in the Soviet Union to study history. He spent only one academic year there, and later on, described Kazan in his autobiography as a depressing and menacingly impoverished provincial area - his very first encounter with the realities of the Soviet political system. Then, he was allowed to move to the University of Moscow, where he obtained his M.A. based on a thesis on the history of the Second Proletariat party (his tutor was Prof. Irina Belavskaja). While in Moscow, he did intense research in the archives; the notes and microfilms he brought from there were useful to him for many years.

Back in Poland, he began his doctoral studies at the Warsaw University's Institute of History in 1962 and presented a thesis on Polish emigration after the January Uprising of 1863–4, with the resulting publications (entitled *W kregu wielkich wygnańców (1848–1895)*, 1963, and *Emigracja polska po powstaniu styczniowym*, 1966 – the latter was granted the Emil Kipa Award). In 1963, on the invitation of Stefan Kieniewicz, he served as secretary of the Committee for Celebration of the January Uprising Centenary. He would later recall Kieniewicz, along with Henryk Wereszycki, as those who formed his thinking about the techniques and resources used by a professional historian. Fifty years later, he presided the committee commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Uprising but resigned in protest against making the celebrations a political opportunity.

In 1964, he joined the University's Institute of History as assistant professor [*adiunkt*] and obtained his postdoctoral qualification [*habilitacja*] based on a dissertation on Armand Lévy, secretary to

Adam Mickiewicz (*Sekretarz Adama Mickiewicza. Armand Lévy i jego czasy 1827–1891*, 1969<sup>1</sup>, 2005<sup>3(rev.)</sup>), awarded by the Kościelski Foundation. In spite of enormous popularity of the seminars he conducted (recollected till this day by his former students as incredibly inspiring), Borejsza was made senior lecturer only (and not an associate professor) as part of repressions in the aftermath of March 1968 turmoil. In 1971, he was allowed to do an eighteen-month scholarship in Italy – his superiors probably hoped that he would opt for a career path in the West. The research he did there on Eastern Europe and Mussolini's Italy initially yielded articles first published in *Polityka* weekly and later on republished in two collections: *Mussolini był pierwszy...* (1979<sup>1</sup>, 1989<sup>2</sup>), and *Rzym a wspólnota faszystowska. O penetracji faszyzmu włoskiego w Europie Środkowej, Południowej i Wschodniej* (1981). He did return to Poland, never ceasing his endeavour to go on lecturing at the University. He was finally removed from the University in 1976, after he delivered a lecture on Soviet Union's attack on Finland in 1939. In 1975, Borejsza joined the staff of the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of History (before then, in 1962–4, he was an assistant professor [*adiunkt*] there); as a result, from 1976 onwards, it became his only workplace. He was promoted to full professorship in 1983.

The nineteenth century remained his first academic love at that time. Before he travelled to Italy, he had a biography published of Walery Wróblewski, a commander in the January Uprising, army general during the Commune of Paris and activist with the Polish Socialist Party (*Patriota bez paszportu*, 1970<sup>1</sup>, 2009<sup>3</sup>). 1984 saw the publication of an essay volume entitled *Piękny wiek XIX*. In the introduction to the study's third (revised and extended) edition, he remarked:

Half a century ago, when I wrote my doctoral thesis on Polish emigration after 1863, the nineteenth century seemed not-quite-distant, close, almost touchable. When I was a young boy, the great white beard of Tomasz Nocznicki (born 1862), the outstanding peasant movement activist, got stuck in my mind. Nocznicki lived before 1939 in our neighbourhood – at WSM [Warsaw Housing Cooperative] Colony 3 in Żoliborz ... From my elementary-school time, I can remember the figure of Stanisław Stempowski (born 1870), one of the leaders of Polish Freemasonry ... When I mentioned their names in the author's note to *Piękny wiek XIX*, twenty years ago, there was no need to explain who they were. Which seems not to be the case today.

With time, however, Professor Borejsza dealt more and more frequently with the twentieth century, which he described in the later years as ‘the century of annihilation’. From 1976 on, he joined several (shorter or longer) scholarship programmes in West Germany (Munich, Bonn, Berlin) to research on Nazism. This resulted in the publication of several books: *Antyslawizm Adolfa Hitlera* (1988), *Schulen des Hassens* (1999; revised edition published in Polish as *Szkoły nienawiści. Historia faszystów europejskich 1919–1945* [1999]), *Śmieszne sto milionów Słowian...* (2006; English edition: *A Ridiculous Hundred million Slavs. Concerning Adolf Hitler’s world-view*, 2017), and, *Stulecie zagłady* (2011) – a selection of essays first published between 1972 and 2010 in journals or (Polish and foreign) collective volumes. Moreover, he prepared and (co-)edited the anthologies *Faszystwy europejskie w oczach współczesnych historyków* (with Stefan H. Kaszyński, 1979 – on European fascist systems); *Po upadku Trzeciej Rzeszy. Niemieccy intelektualiści a tradycja narodowa* (1981 – on German post-war intellectuals and German national tradition); and, *Totalitarianism and Authoritarianism in Europe. Short- and Long-Term Perspectives* (with Klaus Ziemer, 2006).

In the nineties, Jerzy Borejsza intensified his activities abroad: in 1990–1 he was a guest professor at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg; in 1991–6, he ran Polish Academy of Sciences’ Research Station in Paris; lastly, in 1996–8, he lectured at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and at the University of Dijon. He was decorated with the Order of the Officer of the Legion of Honour in recognition of his efforts to the benefit of Polish-French scientific contacts; later on, he received the Stella d’Italia order from the Italian authorities.

Once back in Poland – for good, this time – ‘the Professor’ devoted himself to teaching, tutoring master’s degree and doctoral degree students, and consulting postdoctoral projects – within the Polish Academy of Science’s Institute of History, Department of Totalitarian Systems and History of the Second World War (he headed the department from 2001 to 2010) and as a professor at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (2004–12), Chair of International Relations and, subsequently, Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies. In recognition of his teaching achievements, he was awarded, on request of the University, with the Medal of the Commission of National Education. Health was the only limit to his lifelong professional activity: his last doctoral student submitted her thesis in May 2018,

the last doctoral seminar was held exactly a year later, two months before Jerzy Borejsza died.

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With time, the Professor thought of himself more and more intensely as one of the last to remember his time and certain people; as a side remark, he never positioned himself as a victim of the Holocaust. Being a witness is the leitmotiv of his last book, *Ostaniec, czyli ostatni świadek* (2018). Jerzy Borejsza thought of writing his memoirs for some time but could not decide its form. A polyphonic book was eventually produced, formed of a series of autobiographical sketches which were written over the years, at times with repeated threads. “Why should one write down his memoirs?”, asked he, rhetorically, in one of his sketches. “All the more so, what should third-rank people do it for? Again, however, once they get us reduced to ashes, this is often the only tangible thing we would have left; a trace of our once-existence: a written-down, printed, misrepresented vision of one’s own life. Frequently, we remain the only witnesses to our own cause”.

I am writing these words one month after the Professor’s demise. I still cannot accept that he is no more with us; and I am repeatedly asking myself what it was that he actually taught us, and what was distinctive about him in comparison to the other professors. He knew how to split between human and political sympathies – perhaps this is why one can see so astonishingly pluralistic attitudes and worldviews among his students. He was very indulgent for human weaknesses and preferred to give others a credit of trust (exaggeratedly, in some cases) then to sin with exaggerated distrust.

With a fluent command of Russian, French, German and Italian, Borejsza would not speak English as effortlessly (though he could easily *read* in English). Always busy and industrious, he organised in 2006 an international conference on the Crimean War, which was attended by scholars from the UK, France, Russia, Turkey, and Poland. The debates were held in English, at the Polish Writers’ Association and Polish Men-of-Letters off-Warsaw site in Obory (outside Warsaw). He was ambitious enough to take part in all the sessions, conducted discussions, and asked questions – all in English. In 2003–5 Jerzy Borejsza did intense archival research in Moscow, in collaboration with Professor Hubert Izdebski, for the purpose of a biographical dictionary of Poles in the Third International (regrettably, the project

was never finished). He completed his seminar cycle at the Nicolaus Copernicus University at the age of seventy-seven (he had commuted to Toruń from Warsaw once in a week, for several years). He was always planning new books to write: a study on Hitler's foreign partners, a biography of Stanisław Mendelssohn. Unfortunately, he did not live to see them written.

A cosmopolitan, Borejsza set his thinking in a framework of European categories (he would always think of Russia as a part of Europe). He encouraged his students to think about academic work not in terms of awarded degrees but rather in terms of writing books which should be good enough to get translated into other languages. In parallel, he would always say Polish language was his motherland. In a sense, he was an unaccomplished writer and attached considerable attention to the literary form of written matter, titles of books and articles. Not surprisingly, the phrase he coined, 'the beautiful nineteenth century', has become customary in Polish.

With all the years he spent exploring totalitarianisms, he remained a 'man of the nineteenth-century' deep inside: the period was extremely close to him, as if he were born in it. In terms of political sympathies, he found nineteenth-century socialism his favourite.

He would keep on repeating to his students that a historian is not a judge: his or her job is to understand rather than judge – whereas understanding certainly did not mean acceptance or praise. "To remind that writing history should be done in parallel with the endeavour to comprehend the conditions, language, notions, and ethical norms of the past epochs, rather than superimposing the researcher's own ones, is a banal thing to do", wrote he in the introduction to *Stulecie zagłady*.

If I were to characterise the Professor with one word, I would refer to the language of his ancestors – that is, Yiddish (he lamented he could not speak it and always said he would learn in, time allowing). Yiddish has the word *mentsh*, which basically means 'man' (cf. the German *Mensch*) – but, in a broader meaning, a genuine man or, a Man with a capital 'M'. So, to sum up this recollection of him, I would simply say: *Er iz geven a mentsh*.

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