

# In Memoriam

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ALEKSANDER GIEYSZTOR

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The death of Aleksander Gieysztor is a painful loss to historical science. Aleksander Gieysztor, professor of Warsaw University, was one of the most prominent contemporary medievalists, Chairman of the International Committee for Historical Science in 1980–1985, twice president of the Polish Academy of Sciences (1980–1983 and 1990–1992), *doctor honoris causa* of many Polish, French, British, Russian and Hungarian universities, member of over a dozen foreign academies and learned societies. He had been awarded the highest Polish decorations, the Cross of the French *Legion d'Honneur* and the German Great Cross of Merit.

Aleksander Gieysztor was born in Moscow; his father was a descendant of a Polish family which came from the territories of Lithuania. The young Aleksander was brought up and educated in Warsaw. He finished his studies at Warsaw University in 1937 and supplemented them by special training in Ecole de Chartres and Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris.

Thanks to his uncommon talents, outstanding intelligence, impressive erudition and a perfect knowledge of foreign languages he could undertake researches in many fields; the more fruitful as he effectively combined the research methods of history, archeology, anthropology of culture, history of art and linguistics. The nearly 1200 studies published by him in many languages concern the Middle Ages seen in a vast panorama of space and time.

Gieysztor was a historian of Europe which he regarded as a civilisational community linked by culture, economy and history. He paid special attention to the genesis of Europe's communion of culture, seeing its main components in Christianity, the Mediterranean tradition with Greek culture, in Roman law and also in native tribal customs. In his view, the adoption of these values depended on the development of economic foundations and social structures. This is why he studied all these questions starting with an in-depth research into the beginning of the European world in the time of Charlemagne (his first book published in 1938 concerned Charlemagne's power in the opinion of his contemporaries) and continuing these reflections with studies on the genesis of the crusades. He put effort, and also his heart, into research into the beginning of the "new Europe", a Europe with a mainly Slav substratum which was incorporated into the world of Christian civilisation in the 10th century. At the end of the 1940s, he co-founded a vast programme of studies on the beginning of the Polish state. Its aim was to examine the East European societies and their development from ancient times to the end of the first millennium.

Aleksander Gieysztor's research and organisational activity yielded two results of special importance: first, it resulted in the integration of various disciplines of learning, beginning with history *sensu strictiori*, through archeology, linguistics and history of art to paleobotany and geology. Secondly, it led to the elaboration of the concept of *civilisation materielle*, a concept useful for the theory of a new direction of research, popular also outside Poland, to which Gieysztor made a great contribution.

The studies he conducted over many years resulted in important observations on the culture of Ruthenia (1964 and 1982), the Slavs' economic structure, the economic and cultural regions of this ethnic group (1962, 1973), the territorial aspects of state-building (1973), the establishment of offices borrowed partly from the West (castellan) and partly of native origin (voivode, 1971). The crowning point of his reflections on the Slavs' spiritual culture was his *Mythology of the Slavs* published in 1982, in which he subjected well known theories to a critical analysis and on the basis of materials concerning Slavdom verified G. Dumézil's theory of Indo-European triadic gods.

Aleksander Gieysztor devoted much space in his works to social transformations in the 9th and 10th centuries. He researched the beginning of Slav towns, presenting the genesis of the large agglomerations set up in the 9th century. In his view, their oldest form in Moravia, Poland and Pomerania were centres of the nascent ruling élite and of the craftsmen and tradesmen who worked to satisfy its needs. In his opinion, an important role was played by the transformation of villages from isolated homesteads into regularly planned settlements, a process which took place from the beginning of statehood to the great reform of the 13th century (1964). He linked his studies on colonisation on the basis of German law with research into the beginning of the three-field system (1980) and with the question of rural people's services.

At the same time he continued work on the history of towns during that period and encouraged research into the socio-topography of Polish towns in the 13th-15th centuries (1974). In the course of detailed studies he worked out a financial documentation of towns (1964) and of the whole Polish Kingdom (1966), making use of late medieval sources.

Another subject researched by Gieysztor was the history of Christianity and the Church. He studied the relationship between German dioceses (Bamberg) and Poland's rulers (1971), depicted the complex penetration and development of the Roman Church in Poland, examined Church institutions on a comparative basis (Bohemia, Hungary), drew up a list of bishops active in the 11th century, and as regards later times, wrote a study on Hussite iconoclasm (1981). In this study he perfectly depicted the links between Church ideology and art, but as regards this question, his classic work was the one on the ideological content of one of the most glorious treasures of Romanesque art in Poland: the 12th century door of Gniezno Cathedral, which depicts the life of St. Wojciech (Adalbert) in a version consistent with the political requirements of the dukes who had founded it. In the monumental work *Polish Pre-Romanesque and Romanesque Art up to the End of the 13th Century* (1971), of which he was co-author, he summed up his research into the history of artistic thought.

It would be difficult to enumerate all the subjects researched by Aleksander Gieysztor. Let me mention but a few examples. Among his many treatises which initiated further studies special mention is due to his essays on the form of royal crown (*non habemus cesarem nisi regem*) (1969), on the spectacle and liturgy in the coronation rites of Polish kings (1978), and on Jews in East-Central Europe (1980). Mention is also due to his reflections on the roots and shape of national consciousness in the Middle Ages; they show a gradual, though irregular, widening of the social circles which had a sense of national unity in conditions of a growing threat to their identity (1956, 1987).

Aleksander Gieysztor's studies on the district which he regarded as his "little homeland", Mazovia, hold a special place in Polish historiography. He reconstructed Mazovia's oldest boundaries, reflected on the origin of its name, depicted the district's difficult history in the 13th century, the time of Lithuanian invasions (1967), and published excellent studies on the past of Warsaw, studies which present the city's beginning and the first centuries of its existence.

During the last few years of his life he devoted most time to studies on the history of medieval universities. A chapter he wrote on the beginning of *Respub-*

*licae Litterariae* in the east of Europe forms part of a collective international volume published in 1992.

All of Aleksander Gleysztor's works testify to his perfect professional qualifications. He was an almost encyclopedic expert in auxiliary sciences, in sphragistics, diplomatics, paleography and chronology. His handbook on these subjects (3rd ed. 1948) is still an irreplaceable book for university students, and his monograph *The History of Latin Writing* (1973) is indispensable for medievalists.

Aleksander Gleysztor accompanied his scholarly, publishing and editorial activity by pedagogical work. He promoted over 50 doctors, many of whom are now professors at universities or research institutes. Among them are experts in Byzantium and in Kiev Russia, historians of early medieval societies, of tribal organisations, of the states of the Franks and Longobards, scholars engaged in research into the history of the natural environment, the history of the Church and various ancillary sciences. He created a school whose disciples try to carry out the programme laid down by their master, a master who represented the true ethos of a scholar, a university professor, a man who recognised higher values. He did not have the temperament of a politician, but he thought that as a historian, as a scholar, he should take part in the life of the nation and the state when this was required by the situation. During the Second World War he fought as an officer in the September 1939 campaign and was a member of the Information and Propaganda Bureau of the clandestine Home Army. He took part in the Warsaw Rising. After the war he co-founded the Historical Institute at Warsaw University and directed this institution for twenty years in difficult political conditions. His signature figures among the signatures of 34 scholars who were the first to protest against the curtailment of the freedom of science in 1964. He was one of the initiators of the reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw and became director of this monument of national culture, contributing his expert knowledge to ensure that it was probably reconstructed and furnished.

During the first free elections in post-war Poland he was elected President of the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1980. In 1989 he took part in the debates of the Polish Round Table. In the worst years of Polish bondage he spared no effort to enable his imprisoned students to continue their work and assisted them by words of comfort and advice. Because of his tact, personal charm and kind heart he was a great authority and was an example worth following. It is impossible to equal him but it is the duty of his colleagues, disciples and friends to try to come up as near as possible to the example he set.

Henryk Samsonowicz