

PRO MEMORIA

Acta Poloniae Historica
114, 2016
PL ISSN 0001-6829

JERZY RYSZARD SZACKI (6 FEBRUARY 1929 – 25 OCTOBER 2016)

Born 6th February 1929 in Warsaw, Jerzy Ryszard Szacki began his studies in sociology at the University of Warsaw after the Second World War (in 1948) and associated himself with his *Alma Mater* for the rest of his professional life. He got his PhD in 1959, a postdoctoral ('habilitation') degree in 1965, and became a professor in 1973. Once retired (1999), he continued his research and worked with his PhD students on an individual basis. In 2003–9 Szacki was a professor with the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw (SWPS). Since 1984, he cooperated regularly with the Vienna-based Institute for Human Sciences, which he visited a number of times as a guest or visiting fellow. From the early 1990s until his last days, he was member of the Institute's Academic Advisory Board; 1995 saw him join a seminar contributed by the Institute and held at the Castel Gandolfo, with Pope John Paul II among the attendees. Within more than fifty years of his activity, Szacki often received scholarships with prestigious scientific institutions of Europe and the United States. His functions or titles included Associate Dean and Dean of the Warsaw University's Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Chair of the Polish Sociological Association, editor with *The Polish Sociological Review*, chairmanship of the Committee of Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, and membership with the said Academy. Jerzy Szacki has successfully tutored dozens of MA and a total of twenty-seven doctoral students. Since the 1970s, he supported the Democratic Opposition (dissident movement) and in the tough communist time defended the truth about Polish society and protected students repressed by the authorities. Jerzy Szacki was decorated with the Righteous Among the Nations medal (together with his mother Anna Barbara Szacka), and with the Polonia Restituta Commander's Cross with the Star. He was awarded an honorary doctorate with the Maria Curie Skłodowska University of Lublin and granted a renewed doctorate with the University of Warsaw. His prizes included that granted by the Foundation for Polish Science, the Polish PEN Club, and the Fr. Józef Tischner 'Znak & Hestia' Award. He died on 25 October 2016.

Jerzy Szacki is considered to have been a leading exponent of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas. It was a milieu of scholars who in the latter half of the 1950s, under a prevalent political control of intellectual life, embarked on innovative studies on the European tradition of philosophical, political, and social thought. As he recollected years afterwards, The School formed an “extremely vivid intellectual milieu where you could unrestrainedly discuss any single thing”.¹ In his first years as a scholar, Szacki focused on the history of Polish political thought. Under tutelage of Prof. Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, he wrote an MA thesis entitled *Aspects of the ideology of Polish revolutionaries of nobility background* (*M. Mochnacki / Dekada Polska; J.L. Łukawski / Nowa Polska*), 1952, and later on continued his studies in this field, crowning his efforts with a doctoral thesis (written under Prof. Bronisław Baczeko), published in a book form as *Ojczyzna. Naród. Rewolucja. Problematyka narodowa w polskiej myśli szlachecko rewolucyjnej* [Homeland. Nation. Revolution. The national question in Polish noble-revolutionary thought].² It was already at that early stage that Szacki outlined the problems he was to deal with till his last days, the first among them being query for the theoretical foundation and methods of research into the history of thought and for the relationships between social and historical sciences. These issues were visited in a number of his studies and in a dedicated book;³ among his late-period achievements is an erudite introduction to the Polish edition of a collection of studies by German historian Reinhart Koselleck.⁴ The other issue is nation as a collectivity and a category of importance to common(-sense) thinking, the theory of social sciences, and political thought. Szacki would revisit the problem systematically; over a number of years, he planned to compile a large study on the idea of nation and nationalism – an idea that was never fulfilled, owing to a variety of reasons.

His following book, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy. Wizje świata francuskich antagonistów Wielkiej Rewolucji 1789–1815* [Counterrevolutionary paradoxes: The visions of the world proposed by French antagonists of the Great Revolution, 1789–1815],⁵ investigated philosophical, political, and social ideas as manifestations of a comprehensive vision of the world which is formed

¹ Jerzy Szacki, ‘Lectio doctoris’, in *Jerzy Szacki doktor honoris causa Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej* (Lublin, 2009), 20.

² *Idem*, *Ojczyzna. Naród. Rewolucja. Problematyka narodowa w polskiej myśli szlacheckorewolucyjnej* (Warszawa, 1962).

³ *Idem*, *Dylematy historiografii idei oraz inne szkice i studia* (Warszawa, 1991).

⁴ *Idem*, *W poszukiwaniu czasu historycznego*, in Reinhart Koselleck, *Warstwy czasu. Studia z meta historii*, trans. by Krystyna Krzemieniowa and Jarosław Merecki (Warszawa, 2012), vii–xxxii.

⁵ *Idem*, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy. Wizje świata francuskich antagonistów Wielkiej Rewolucji 1789–1815* (Warszawa, 1965; 2012²).

resulting from the experiences of people that function in a concrete historic reality: the concept that became the identification mark of the Warsaw School of Historians of Ideas. French critics of the revolution experienced a loss; a world they considered good had been destroyed. Their thoughts turned to the past, with all its inherent things of importance and value to them. The idea to re-establish the lost order and harmony in place of a bad present, apparently rooted in things old and certain, was inevitably becoming utopian: it was a vision alternative to the actual reality and a programme of another revolution whose costs and consequences were impossible to calculate. One of the book's central themes was, therefore, the relationship between the tradition and a utopia; Szacki's research on conservatism and restoration made him aware of a complexity of the relationships between the past the societal and political present. A book entitled *Tradycja* [Tradition] focuses on this particular topic, with a penetrating analysis of the various meanings of the title notion – functioning in the political thought, the humanities, and everyday communication language – coming to the fore. Szacki identifies three concepts of tradition: (i) object-oriented, which includes heritage, patterns/models and values transmitted from one generations to the other; (ii) activity-related – that is, transmission of contents; and (iii) subjective – the present day generation's attitude toward the past, acceptance of certain values and models/patterns against rejection of others.⁶ This revisiting and rearrangement of the issue in question was of importance for the Polish humanities; subject-oriented understanding of tradition became an important theoretical perspective for research into collective memory in Poland. Szacki's focus on concepts relating to tradition caused that he deviated, for short time, from a 'historian of thought' path and assumed the role of research sociologist in order to conduct a thorough survey study on collective memory – or, to be more specific, on transmission of tradition in Polish families.⁷

Tradition and the dilemmas related with it was among the inspirations for Szacki to deal at a length with utopia – a topic of importance to the humanities in the late 1960s/early 1970s. The author would refer to his own book on utopia without much respect, considering it a study on the borderline of journalism and popularisation. As a matter of fact, the book is one of the most interesting scholarly essays ever written by a modern Polish humanist, incessantly inspiring, brilliant, thought-provoking, and well-written. And written it was “not so much for the purpose of making more accessible certain matters having been completely elaborated on and explained by experts as, rather, focus the reader's attention on certain problems the author considers

⁶ *Idem, Tradycja. Przegląd problematyki* (Warszawa, 1971; 2nd revised edn. – Warszawa, 2011).

⁷ *Idem, Tradycja i współczesność* (Warszawa, 1973).

important and, to no lesser extent, disputable and far from satisfactorily comprehensible.”⁸

The most renowned work by Jerzy Szacki, the one that was studied by several generations of social sciences students, is his *Historia myśli socjologicznej*. First published in English in 1979, as *History of Sociological Thought*, it was twice republished in Polish in 1981 and 1983, respectively. A new edition – greatly revised, with new sections added – came out in 2002. As the author recollected, with his inherent sense of humour, this most recent edition earned him no ‘ministerial score’ (the decision-maker officials saw it merely as a textbook) but won him, instead, the prestigious Foundation for Polish Science Award (2003). In the opening chapter, the author remarked that “the task this book is supposed to fulfil is rather modest: it has been conceived as a popular textbook of use for university-level sociology students”.⁹ While the remark makes one better aware of Jerzy’s modesty as a man, but would never apply to the actual content of the volume. The *History of Sociological Thought* is a complex work, one that stems from a meticulously thought-over response to the question on the rationale behind practising a history of science – sociological science, in this particular case: “As is the case with any tradition, the sociological tradition is thus not a collection of ideas and doctrines whose content is definitely definable at all, owing to the historians’ effort. The sociological tradition is constantly in motion that repeatedly invalidates the earlier findings, which takes place not so much owing to some new historical sources being discovered, as to the changes occurring in the contemporary scientific awareness.”¹⁰ This statement tells us much about how Jerzy Szacki perceived and comprehended sociology – namely, as a discipline with a two-century long ambition to be ‘the true’ empirical science whose methodology is close to that present in the natural sciences but is in fact polyphonic, embedded in various paradigms, incessantly resuming a theory and rereading the classics. To reconstruct the rich tradition behind the discipline in question was a great task; it is pretty astonishing that one man has succeeded doing it. Szacki’s objective was, unceasingly, to develop an interdisciplinary concept, rather than getting enclosed within the limits set by academic classification. Hence, his monograph is not limited to what has been written by authors defining themselves as sociologists. His outline of the evolutionary process of the sociological thought, from the Antiquity till the late twentieth century took account of representatives of other areas, including philosophy, psychology, economy, or historiography. In analysing the specialisations, trends or currents, he sought to identify what was common between their exponents – the questions shared by their epoch.

⁸ *Idem*, *Spotkania z utopią* (Warszawa, 1980)

⁹ *Idem*, *Historia myśli socjologicznej* (Warszawa, 2002), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 10.

In parallel, he took effort to understand the differences between the answers given by the various authors.

A monumental work, *History of Sociological Thought* has somewhat over-ridden the research into the history of Polish sociological thought carried out by Professor Szacki in the 1980s, based on which the book on Florian Znaniecki¹¹ and a (multi-author) anthology entitled *Sto lat socjologii polskiej* [A hundred years of Polish sociology], with an exhaustive introduction by Szacki,¹² were produced, among others. As part of his studies on the development of Polish sociological thought, its originality and its relations with international sociology, the scholar has often resumed the issue of nation.

Selected works have been mentioned in which Jerzy Szacki studies the relations and relationships between social and historical sciences. It would however require much more space to describe an output of some 450 larger or smaller-sized publications, numerous translations, introductions, and editorial work on collections of essays. Yet, it is not the number of pages written, or bibliographic items, that matters the most, since it is not the abundant output that was crucial to the authority Jerzy Szacki enjoyed in the milieu of Polish as well as foreign humanists. It is the quality of his oeuvre that counts. For dozens of years, Szacki systematically worked on it, always up to the unparalleled standards of scholarly techniques supported by extraordinary erudition, assiduity, and integrity. Intellectual independence of scholar is of no less importance in this case: a strong personality, Szacki never chased intellectual fashion, or yielded to political pressure: on the contrary, he was autonomous in setting the directions for his research, never giving up personal development and always looking for new subject-matters to tackle, and attracting disciples. Last but not least, the qualities of his writing need being mentioned. Jerzy Szacki was deemed a modest man, attentively listening, thinking deeply, talking not too much but always wisely, often with admixture of a fine sense of humour. These features, which surfaced in daily contact with this man, can also be found in his texts, concise and precise as they are. His written output is based upon profound thought, avoiding scholarly jargon but capable of rendering the complexity of matters. This scholarly prose of a high order proves that *Clio* extends her care not only to those cultivating the classical fields of history but also the chosen few among historians of ideas.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Piotr T. Kwiatkowski

¹¹ *Idem*, *Znaniecki* (Warszawa, 1986).

¹² *Idem* (ed.), *Sto lat socjologii polskiej. Od Supińskiego do Szczepańskiego* (Warszawa, 1995).