

# PRO MEMORIA

## STANISŁAW BYLINA

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Professor Stanisław Bylina was born in Kielce in 1936. Soon after his birth, his parents moved to Wrzosów in the Lublin voivodeship, where they lived until the end of the Second World War. After the liberation of Poland, his father was imprisoned in November 1944, and remained in prison until the following year. After his release, his parents decided to move to Józefów near Warsaw, where Stanisław Bylina spent many years of his life. He finally moved to Warsaw, although he would come to regret leaving the now so picturesque town of Józefów. Every time I visit Józefów (one of my Polish medievalist friends lives there) I think of Prof. Bylina. I fondly remember all of the friendly conversations we had at Polish-Czech conferences, his sense of humour, and his openness and honesty, something that is increasingly lacking in academia. We first met in the early 1990s in Warsaw in his office on the Rynek Starego Miasta, where there wasn't a single computer. Although I wasn't yet a Hussite specialist then, I had the advantage of frequently stopping by the director's office as a student of František Šmahel. After he has greeted me in Czech, it was clear that his doors would be open to me. Stanisław Bylina greatly respected František Šmahel, and he transferred his amiability onto me as well. As time went on, our meetings at various conferences took on a rather comical aspect. I would try speaking in my funny Polish and Stanisław Bylina would speak in correct, albeit a little old-fashioned Czech. But what really won me over was that Bylina was open to any debate; he never took criticism personally; he listened to polemics and then politely and affably disagreed. In a word, he was a kind and helpful person, his character and honour unchanged even when he held the highest academic positions. When it came to medieval studies, all who thought and had their own opinions were equal.

Many of us will miss this spirit of openness. We will also miss the books that he will no longer write. Fortunately for us, there are plenty in our libraries.

Stanisław Bylina became a medievalist by accident. He wasn't the sort of child to read Walter Scott and plan his academic future in a romantic fever. After secondary school, he thought about becoming a lawyer. But this was a bad time to study law, and so he followed his family's advice and decided to study Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Warsaw in 1954–9. Although by his own account he wasn't terribly interested in his studies and preferred to ride his bicycle than study every day, he nevertheless found his lifelong topic of interest: the Hussites. It sounds paradoxical, because in the late 1950s in Poland, Hussite studies were strongly influenced by Marxism, not to mention in Czechoslovakia. Polish Hussite studies were led by Ewa Maleczyńska, who sharply ideologically polemicized with the leading Czech medievalist Josef Macek. Bylina was not deterred by the ideologization of Hussite studies and chose as the topic of his Master's thesis *Proces Jana Husa w Konstancji w świetle jego korespondencji*. His thesis adviser was Prof. Jerzy Śliwiński, thanks to whose support he was offered the position of assistant at the Institute of Slavic Studies PAS, where he spent more than ten years researching primary sources. There was thankfully a relaxed atmosphere at the Institute, allowing Bylina to focus on his interest in medieval studies. The topic of his Ph.D. thesis was the reception of reformational ideas of the preachers Konrád Waldhauser and Milíč of Kroměříž in Silesia and the Kingdom of Poland at the end of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Unlike many young historians, however, he didn't travel from the periphery to the capital city for his Ph.D. seminar, but rather from Warsaw to Wrocław where the powerful Prof. Maleczyńska ruled the department. However, she proved to be very helpful to the young medievalist with an interest in Bohemia. Bylina was also fortunate that Roman Heck, who researched and wrote about Czech fifteenth century history, was also in Wrocław at the time. Unlike the two historians, however, Bylina was not interested in political or economic history, but was more and more inclined to study the history of ideas and heresy. Perhaps this was why he was so warmly welcomed in Wrocław, since preaching and piousness weren't topics that either Maleczyńska or Heck studied. Bylina defended his Ph.D. thesis very quickly in 1964. Two years later, he published it as *Wpływy Konrada Waldhausena na*

*ziemiach polskich w drugiej połowie XIV i w pierwszej połowie XV wieku* (Wrocław, Warszawa and Kraków, 1966).

Bylina came to the Institute of History PAS in 1970 because Tadeusz Manteuffel showed an interest in his work. At the time, Bylina was focusing on the history of medieval heresies, which was Manteuffel's topic of study as well. The History of Medieval Culture Department at the beginning of the 1970s was one of the most important Polish medievalist strongholds. After Manteuffel's death, the department was led by Stanisław Trawkowski. Tadeusz Lalik, Bronisław Geremek, and, later, Hanna Zaremska, Halina Manikowska, and Jacek Banaszek worked here as well. Bylina wrote about medieval heresies in his habilitation thesis *Wizje społeczne w herezjach średniowiecznych. Humiliaci, begini, begardzi* (Wrocław, 1974), which is one of the most significant contributions to Polish medieval studies on the topic. It later influenced a new generation of medievalists in their research on heresies in medieval Poland (Paweł Kras, Tomasz Gałuszka). Bylina devoted another, no less significant, book to heresy: *Ruchy heretyckie w średniowieczu. Studia* (Wrocław, 1991).

Of all the historians in the History of Medieval Culture Department, meeting Bronisław Geremek undoubtedly inspired Bylina the most. And it was Geremek who led Bylina away from heresies to the history of medieval piousness. Bylina's first book on his new research topic was on medieval eschatology: *Człowiek i zaświaty. Wizje kar pośmiertnych w Polsce średniowiecznej* (Warszawa, 1992). In it, he continued the work started by Jacques Le Goff and Aaron Gurevič, who studied the medieval concept of worlds beyond the grave and the origins of cleansing as a new religio-social category in Western Europe. But unlike Le Goff and Gurevič, Bylina traced the formation of medieval ideas about worlds beyond the grave in areas that had converted to Christianity late. In the 1970s, Bylina increased the tempo of his research and acquired new and lifelong academic contacts in Paris (Le Goff) and Prague. Because he became more and more interested in Hussitism as a religious reform movement (or even as a reformation, or rather pre-reformation), he became friends with Josef Macek and František Šmahel in Prague. The Prague Hussite symposium in 1970 was a great source of inspiration for him as it joined Hussite studies to medieval studies in general in a global context. Unfortunately, this era of openness didn't last long. During Czechoslovakia's period of normalization, doors were gradually closed, or at the very least sealed, in history departments all over

the country. Turning to Czech medievalists who weren't normalization era cadres wasn't much of a stretch for him – an apolitical historian – since the way he viewed the world was diametrically opposed to Marxism. He liked to recall the time when he was in the Institute of Czechoslovak History at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and was asked where he was staying in Prague, and he answered “at Josef Macek's”. The historians from the institute were horrified. The atmosphere in the room became so tense it could be cut by a knife.

From the end of the 1980s onward, Stanisław Bylina was primarily a Hussite historian. He worked his way toward a grand synthesis of the Hussite Revolution through dozens of studies based on primary sources that he later published in several thematically unified collections. It was apparent that what interested him about Hussitism was foremost the issue of Hussite religiosity, theology, and practical, religious politics. He saw the Hussite reformation in a broad Central European context. In fact, his works had a comparative character throughout his years as a researcher. He based them upon the knowledge that the Czech kingdom was the most developed state in Central Europe, far surpassing medieval Poland and Hungary. On the other hand, however, he equally emphasized that the Czech kingdom never caught up to Western Europe even under the reign of Charles IV and Wenceslaus IV, when the centre of the Holy Roman Empire moved to Prague, and that the effects of the area's late conversion to Christianity were felt at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. Bylina therefore posed the question of what constituted christianised Bohemia and how piousness and religious expression changed as a consequence of the Hussite revolution. These questions were reflected in his collections of studies, which also have a Czech-Polish comparative character: *Chryścianizacja wsi polskiej u schyłku średniowiecza* (Warszawa, 2002), *Hussitica. Studia* (Warszawa, 2007), *Religijność późnego średniowiecza. Chryścijaństwo a kultura tradycyjna w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIV–XV w.* (Warszawa, 2009).

Another facet of Hussitism he was interested in had a significantly ideological subtext in the 1960s. His greatest contribution to the polemics of Czechoslovak Marxist research was his original monograph *Na skraju lewicy husyckiej* (Warszawa, 2005), which can be read as an open argument with Josef Macek and, especially, with Robert Kalivoda. In it, Bylina followed in František Šmahel's footsteps, but did more to show that Kalivoda's construct didn't correspond to

reality. Bylina's analyses of the Adamites of Tábor turned out to be extremely valuable from a research standpoint. Today, their existence is still questioned by some researchers. But Bylina's masterful analysis of the sources uncovered the ideological world of the Táborite radicals and the sect that sprung out of the ideas held by some of them, which lived on eschatological time in its notions.

Although Stanisław Bylina was a full-fledged historian of Hussitism by the 1990s, he gave no sign of submitting a grand synthesis of the Hussite revolution. His mastery lay in micro-perspectives. But his thoughts about his own book were limited by the publication of the four-volume *Husitské revoluce* by František Šmahel in 1993. Why write a history of the revolution when it has recently been written and has never been surpassed by any other Czech efforts, for example those of Petr Čornej? Surprisingly, it was František Šmahel who encouraged Stanisław Bylina to write about his distinctive perspective on Hussite history. In the end, Bylina accepted this challenge, maybe because he was aware of the fact that his ideas were not formatted by the discourse of Czech Hussite studies, which was started by František Palacký one hundred and fifty years ago. Nevertheless, it cannot be stated that Bylina's three-volume history of the Hussite revolution was intended solely for Polish readers. In fact, it is not. Although it's not a classical historical synthesis, it establishes and uncovers questions that research on the Hussites has long ignored. The unifying arc of his interpretation isn't politics, as it is in the second volume of Šmahel's *Husitská revoluce* [Hussite Revolution], but the transformations of Hussite piety. This arc becomes most apparent in the first volume, entitled *Rewolucja husycka. Przedświt i pierwsze lata* (Warszawa, 2011). But it's also reflected in the second volume, subtitled *Czas chwaly i czas zmierzchu* (Warszawa, 2015), especially in the unparalleled chapters on dictatorship in the service of revolution and the culture of revolution. He confronts more general questions by considering when a revolution dies. The third volume: *Kontrrewolucja i opór pokonanych* (Warszawa, 2016) was ground-breaking. Its subtitle reveals that he was the Hussite specialist who devoted the most attention to Catholics, or later to the moderate Utraquists, who wanted to quash the revolution, or steer it in a direction that was acceptable to Catholics. And this is where Bylina's mastery lay – a talent for coming up with compromises, finding a *modus vivendi* in an era exhausted by everyday events. Bylina managed to connect the past with the present without inappropriately

updating it. This is the reason why it saddens me that I won't be able to ask him on what side he would have stood in 1435 and what he would have done to end the revolution. Unfortunately, we never got around to discussing these questions after the publication of his trilogy. Hopefully, we will get the chance in medievalist heaven.

*trans. Caroline Kovtun*

*Martin Nodl*