

**RECOLLECTIONS ON THE LATE
PROFESSOR WOJCIECH SKALMOWSKI,
ORIENTAL SCHOLAR, THINKER
AND LITERARY CRITIC (1933-2008)**

Wojciech Skalmowski was born in Poznań in 1933 to a family, as he himself referred in a radio interview given a few months ago, 'of doctors'. Upon the passing of his school leaving certificate examinations at a respected Poznań grammar school, he started his degree in Oriental Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. He chose as his specialization Iranian studies encompassing, among other things, besides the study of Persian also Arabic and Turkish. Persian language and literature were taught him by Franciszek Machalski, while he learnt the theoretical bases of linguistics under the direction of the world renowned academic, Professor Jerzy Kuryłowicz. There was at that time no lecturer from Iran who would have constituted a native speaker and consequently the practical level of Persian was poor.

During the years 1956-1960 Wojciech Skalmowski was to continue his Iranian studies in East Berlin at the Humboldt University. There Old Iranian languages (including Middle Persian colloquially known as *Pahlavi*) were lectured on by an eminent expert in this field, Professor H. Junker; while the lecturer in modern Persian was the well-known Iranian writer, Bozorg Alavi. Wojciech Skalmowski had therefore good conditions to supplement his degree courses from Cracow. And besides this it was there that he took up a lively interest in mathematical linguistics, the approach of which he utilized during the writing of his PhD (under the German title: *Sprachstatistische Untersuchungen zur persischen Sprachentwicklung*). His PhD defence was successfully completed in Berlin in 1960.

In this same year W. Skalmowski took up a post of reader at the Department of General Linguistics at the Jagiellonian University and started work with

students of Iranian studies. As an academic teacher we were impressed by him, that is we the students of that degree of study (I was such from 1957), in every conceivable way: he already had a PhD and knew Persian well. He was surrounded by an aura of modernity, of a western academic (German, even in the German Democratic Republic, still represented the culture of the West), who through the entirety of the riches of his philological knowledge represented in a certain sense the pure sciences, for mathematical linguistics was close to these. And in addition he was tall, combed his hair short, and in appearance recalled certain American film stars.

Wojciech Skalmowski was an excellent teacher. He aroused a sense of trust not only because of his deep knowledge but by the way in which he was able to win over a listener by his manner and sense of humour. Iranian as a degree course was studied at that time by only a few (the 1960s), which resulted in an intimate atmosphere during classes. Particularly the lectures and seminars run by Dr. W. Skalmowski were characterised by their lack of restraint, immediacy, by the certainty that the intellectual effort made on the part of the student while under the direction of the master would culminate in good results.

In those days all those in Cracow involved in Oriental studies dreamt of going to the Near and Middle East: to the country where the language and culture was the subject of their study. The realization of these dreams was difficult but not impossible. One had to however wait sometimes a good few years after finishing one's degree for the chance of a foreign scholarship.

Dr. Wojciech Skalmowski left for Iran, still imperial in those days, at the beginning of 1968. For an Iranian scholar this was something extraordinary: not only the daily language practice, impossible to obtain anywhere else on such a scale, but also the possibility to visit historic cities, areas and monuments – such as famous Isfahan, known by Persians as 'half the world', ancient Persepolis, Yazd with its Zoroastrians (Persians who have not adopted Islam), Mashhad (associated by Poles with Ksawery Pruszyński's short story *Karabela z Meszhedu* = *The Carabella from Mashhad*), and of course the spectacular Elburz (Alborz) Mountains with Damāvand at 'the head'.

Wojciech Skalmowski's trip to Iran was to constitute a departure from Poland for good, the start of a life-long period of emigration. For it was to be that his academic stay in Tehran coincided with the events of March 1968. In a way similar to the vast majority of the Polish intelligentsia, Skalmowski received with disgust the news of the deepening anti-intellectual and anti-Semitic hysteria that was being unleashed by ruling circles in Poland 'under the lead' of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) and its First Secretary Władysław Gomułka.

As a result of these events W. Skalmowski decided to leave Poland permanently for the USA. In 1969 he was employed, upon the initiative of the eminent Iranian scholar Richard N. Frye, at the famous university of Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts. However, as things were to turn out, in this very same

year he was offered a job in Belgium. As a consequence of the ethnic conflicts between the French-speaking Walloons and the Flemish-speaking inhabitants of Belgium (who use a variety of Dutch that is also spoken in the Netherlands) the highly regarded Catholic University in Leuven (Louvain; approx. 25 km to the east of Brussels) underwent a division into two universities: the French-speaking – Walloon (Université Catholique de Louvain) and the Flemish-speaking – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

Up to the moment of its division the eminent French-speaking Iranian scholar Professor J. Duchesne-Guillemain had worked at the Catholic University. When he moved to the newly established Walloon University, the Flemish, now deprived of an Iranian scholar, recalled that Dr. Wojciech Skalmowski had only recently taken up residence in the USA. A man who knew among many languages equally Flemish, and he was offered the appointment at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. This position he was to take up in 1970, initially as a reader (Belgium has no equivalent of the Polish academic degree of *Habilitation*) and from 1977 as a full professor. From then onwards he was to live in Brussels.

Skalmowski was entrusted with teaching classes connected with Iranian Studies (ancient and modern Iranian languages) as well as... lectures on the history of Polish literature. The latter was not merely tribute imposed on him by the authorities of the Catholic University as an Iranian scholar and a Slav (one recalls here the tradition that goes back through Czesław Miłosz right to Adam Mickiewicz). For Wojciech Skalmowski was in addition to his linguistic interests a lover and authority on literature itself. He had already during his studies in Cracow befriended Sławomir Mrożek, who highly valued Skalmowski's literary taste and for many, many years took advantage of his advice in literary matters.

Wojciech Skalmowski was to be the first reader of many of the famous Polish dramatist's works. The correspondence of both literary figures (for Skalmowski deserves equally to be considered a man of letters) is an important element of Polish cultural life of the second half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first. This correspondence was published by the Cracow Literary Publishing House in 2007 (*Mrożek-Skalmowski: Listy [The Letters] 1970-2003*). This book was of great interest not only to the literary critics to whose circle Skalmowski belonged. There were to be found in the letter deliberations of these two brilliant intellectuals and humanists reflections of matters important for world culture and for the history of Polish emigration with all its difficult dilemmas. The author of the introduction to the Cracow edition of their correspondence, Professor Andrzej Borowski, defined Skalmowski as 'an optimal reader in every conceivable way, superbly acquainted with both Polish and world literature, exceptionally sensitive, with a receptive ear to every, however small, stylistic trope' (*The Letters*, p. 6).

As I have already recalled Wojciech Skalmowski possessed an extremely wide range of interests. He was not only a linguist but a literary specialist as well as an *homme de lettres* of immense subtlety in his reception of a literary work and the ability to write about it in a beautiful and lucid way. He wielded a superb pen and chiefly an extremely penetrating approach to reading, one that exposed his exceptional intelligence. He quickly knew whether he was dealing with a text of note or simply an average piece of writing. I remember how he received, not without a certain (positive) surprise, the news about the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature (2001) to the Trinidadian writer of Indian descent, V.S. Naipaul. Skalmowski had been clued up on him as early as 1982 when publishing an article in Parisian *Kultura* (No. 9) an article entitled *Areas of Darkness* devoted to his novels. Skalmowski's surprise came in this instant from Naipaul's 'political incorrectness', as he dared to criticise certain aspects of the culture of the so-called 'Third World' (although some had already seen in him a future prize winner).

The editor of the Paris based quarterly *Kultura* – so extremely important for the preservation and cultivation of independent Polish thought, Jerzy Giedroyc, had quickly perceived W. Skalmowski's talent and abilities already at the beginning of the 1970s. He made available the forum of his journal for Skalmowski to publish literary reviews. Skalmowski wrote under the pseudonym of M[aciej] Broński. These (together with several sketches) were published in Lublin in 2004 under the title *Lektury dla "Kultury"* = *Readings for 'Kultura'* (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press). These reviews were devoted to the works of writers like: Vladimir Nabokov, Andrei Platonov, Witkacy, Gombrowicz, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, Salman Rushdie. Prior to this, in Paris in 1981, a volume of literary criticism had appeared, equally under the pseudonym Maciej Broński, the *Texts and Pretexts* (in Polish) of W. Skalmowski. In total he was the author of around 200 reviews and literary essays published not only in Polish language journals (chiefly in the above mentioned Paris based *Kultura* and the Cracow *Tygodnik Powszechny*) but also in Belgian journals (in Flemish in the Brussels based *Standaard der Letteren*). Wojciech Skalmowski knew well, among others, Russian and wrote and acquainted Flemish-speaking readers with various works of Russian literature.

Wojciech Skalmowski was an original and courageous thinker. He placed before himself ambitious demands and attempted to solve the most difficult problems regardless of the opposition his conceptions evoked within academic circles. He aroused the criticism of many Iranian scholars, for example, with the theory that interpreted the often enigmatic *ghazal* in Hafiz's writings (a classic of Persian mystical 14th century poetry) as a work of riddles by the nature of it, in which 'I' is to constitute a camouflage for... the very text of *ghazal*, addressing somehow the reader in its own name.

Of importance are W. Skalmowski's reflections on research into Polish literature which include his noteworthy insightful approach to the especially difficult fragments of the 3rd part of *Dziady* by Mickiewicz. Of equal worth is his interpretation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

A good example of his academic output, covering over 100 articles, is Professor Skalmowski's volume entitled *Studies in Iranian Linguistics and Philology* published in 2004 by the Jagiellonian University's Publishing House in Cracow. It contains articles published by the Professor in western European languages (chiefly in English). The first part is studies on the subject of ancient Iranian languages (Old Persian, Parthian) as well as modern (Pashto). Two articles concern Dardic languages which occupy, to use a simplification, the area between the Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages.

The second part of the above presented volume (pages 107-236) contains interpretations of the most difficult texts of the classics of Persian poetry (Attar of the twelfth century, Rumi and Sa'di from the thirteenth and Hafiz mentioned above). It is here that the reader is able to become more closely acquainted with the later arguments of Skalmowski concerning original interpretation of the (grammatical) form of the first person in Hafiz's *ghazal* that were presented in his article *The meaning of the Persian Ghazal* ('Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica', 18 [1987], pp. 141-162).

In the third part of the selection of Skalmowski's academic letters (*Studies...*, pages 239-304) there is to be found a reprint of his penetrating and often very bold etymological studies devoted to the problems of the interpretation and explanation of especially difficult lexemes that appear in such Iranian languages as: Old Persian, Avestan, Middle Persian and Modern Persian.

As an academic and teacher Professor Wojciech Skalmowski contributed to the raising of the level of Oriental studies (and others) in various countries by the writing of numerous academic reviews of PhD and post-doctoral works. He was an experienced organiser of academic life. Under his editorship (with the cooperation of Alois van Tongerloo) there was published a collection of papers given at the conference on languages of the Middle Iranian period (*Middle Iranian Studies. Proceedings of the International Symposium organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 17th to the 20th of May 1982*, Leuven 1984). In 1993 Skalmowski edited a volume of materials from a subsequent conference devoted to the languages of the Middle Iranian period (the book's title being: *Medioiranica*).

In Polish Professor Skalmowski wrote important chapters on New Iranian and Dari languages for the two-volume collaborative work entitled *Języki indoeuropejskie* (= *Indoeuropean Languages*) which was published in Warsaw in 1986 (volume I, pp. 161-244).

Following his retirement in 1998, Professor Skalmowski came to Cracow in the spring of 1999. Here he was to run for the summer semester classes in

Middle Persian. He started the course with great benefit for those who attended, amongst whom were not only students but also yours truly. Unfortunately bureaucratic matters resulted in the classes running for only a few weeks.

Professor Wojciech Skalmowski received many prestigious awards and decorations such as the Kościelscy Foundation Prize in Geneva (1977), the Order of Leopold II (officer) in Belgium, the Commander's Cross of the Order of Service to the Polish Republic (presented by the President of Poland in 2004). A measure of the recognition he enjoyed amongst the international academic community was the publication of two commemorative books during the celebrations to mark his 70th birthday (the 24th of June 2003 in Leuven). One volume contained articles on the languages and literature of the Slavs, the other - Iranian matters.

Wojciech Skalmowski was a man of great kindness, who with seriousness and understanding dealt with the problems of others. I owe a lot to his wise words of advice, which he shared with me by post while I was on a scholarship in Paris in 1971. I recall with fondness being a guest at his house on Avenue des Rogations in Brussels where, together with his wife Barbara (of the respected Plater family), I was greeted sincerely during my stay at the Armenian conference (Brussels, September 1986). There, in a warm homely atmosphere, I had the honour of moving into first name terms with my master, as I consider he who died on the 18th of July 2008.

During the last years our contacts were in a sense 'asymmetrical' as a result of health (the Professor was seriously ill). I would write a letter from time to time and he would reply by means of the telephone. He would kindly ask after the most varied of matters, share with me his experiences and observations of the world which filled him with an increasing sadness that deepened in its intensity with the increasing inroads of sickness. He was not strong enough to reply to my last letter of the end of April 2008. He simply did not ring anymore.

Cracow, 26th of August 2008

Andrzej Pisowicz