

Włodzimierz Winclawski

JAN SZCZEPAŃSKI (1913–2004)

Professor Jan Szczepański, the prominent Polish sociologist, died in Warsaw on 16 April 2004. He celebrated his ninetieth birthday last year. He started as a student of Florian Znaniecki, an adept of the most famed sociological institutions in the Second Republic – the school of Sociology in Poznań and the Warsaw State Institute of Rural Culture with director Józef Chałasiński. He was the last living participant of the Second Reunion of Sociologists in Warsaw (November 1935), when the debate began with a paper by Ludwik Krzywicki, the last among living authors of sociological texts, included in the columns of *Przegląd Socjologiczny* (Sociological Review) before 1939, where his name figured among the masters of Polish sociology, such as Bystroń, Czarnowski, Krzywicki, Malinowski, Znaniecki. He closes an epoch of modern Polish sociology which began with Józef Supiński (1804–1893) and developed in the 1920s.

Jan Szczepański left behind an enormous literary achievement – his bibliography consists of almost 1500 works, mainly academic and journalistic, some literary texts (he started writing poetry at a very early age, and is the author of a few books on an Indian theme). He gained an international academic reputation. His works were translated into various foreign languages (I have managed to count 9 countries excluding Poland where his books were printed), he was invited to give lectures at American universities (twice) and in Canada. He was chosen as the president of the International Sociological Association in 1966 (holding the function until 1970). He received honorary doctorates from the universities of Łódź, Warsaw, Brno and the Sorbonne in Paris, he was a member of the Polish Academy of Science, a member of foreign scientific academies (USA and Finland). He was awarded the OBE and in 1999 the Polish President awarded him the Great Cross of the Rebirth of Poland “in recognition for service to Polish science and for journalistic and social activity”.

Professor Szczepański contributed to bringing Polish sociology as well as that of the countries of the former people's democracies closer to western sociology. He was consistent in his combat against dogmatic Marxism, appealing for an

end to "abstract discussions about which methods are correct or incorrect from the Marxist point of view" (1964). He pointed out the progress in the methodology and theories of social science in the world. "We have to make a great effort if we don't intend to remain as the ruminators of those great issues of the past and if we do not want to wake up some day to find others have overcome these questions in a decisive and irreversible manner." In those countries where access to western literature was more restricted than in Poland, sociologists studied the Polish language in order to read Jan Szczepański's work.

He was an excellent organiser, initiating research on Poland's modern social structure, the social consequences of industrialisation, development and social role of learning and education. His handbooks on the propaedeutic of sociology *Elementarne pojęcia socjologii* (The elementary notions of sociology) 1963, reprinted: 1965, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1972 and the history of sociology *Socjologia. Rozwój problematyki i metod* (Sociology. Development of the problems and methods) 1961, reprinted 1967, 1969 – a work preceded by a script (published in 1953) *Burżuazyjne doktryny socjologiczne XIX i XX wieku* – (Bourgeois sociological doctrines of the 19th and 20th centuries) provided the foundations of sociology for almost 30 years of post-war sociological studies. He promoted many doctors of sociology, gave his opinion on Ph.D. theses and proposals for professorship.

He was also present on the Polish political scene – as an MP in the Polish People's Republic (1957–1960, 1972–1985), a member of the Council of State (1977–1982), a leader in the Parliamentary Committee controlling the agreements in Gdańsk, Szczecin and Jastrzębie (1981), leader of the Socio-Economic Council of the Parliament in the Polish People's Republic (1982–1984). His political activity took place during a fervent period of Polish history, a time when evaluations, opinions and attitudes were highly polarised. The personal and social consequences of this political involvement were very well evaluated in the speech given by Joffre Dumazedier on the eve of presenting Professor Szczepański with an honorary doctorate in Paris: "The independence of your relations with successive political parties was often poorly interpreted by dogmatists of all sorts. Those dogmatists are incapable of distinguishing reality from various forms of social dynamic, yet they are always inclined to include everything verbally into their uniform concept of politics. Nevertheless, your scientific competence and cheerful independence provided the possibility for your active presence in various political fractions. Without party membership you commanded the respect of all in your sociological group, as well as introducing a culture of dialogue with the political authorities".

Jan Szczepański was born on 14 September 1913 in Ustroń, near Cieszyn into the moderately wealthy peasant family of Paweł and Ewa, née Cholewa. His parents were Calvinists. He went to primary school in Ustroń and secondary school (1926–1932) in Cieszyn. He started studying philosophy in Poznań (while

also studying sociology) and graduated on 4 May 1936 with a Masters degree in Philosophy (the subject of his thesis was: Husserl's teachings on meaning). He did military service (1936–1937) at the Military College of artillery reserve in Włodzimierz Wołyński. From autumn 1937 to spring 1939 he worked in the State Institute of Rural Culture in Warsaw. In 1937 he married Eleonora Odlanicka-Poczobutówna (a university colleague – they had two children, Artur and Ewa). In April he moved to Poznań, as senior assistant in Znaniecki's Department of Sociology. On 17 June 1939 he defended his doctoral thesis, entitled *The concept of the social milieu in rural sociology*. He fought in September 1939. In the middle of 1940 he and his wife were expelled from Poznań by the Germans. He went to stay with his parents in Ustroń where he helped his father on the farm. In February 1942 he was sent to forced labour (he worked as a printing worker in Wrocław and then as a turner in the Viennese Garrens-Werke works). From October 1945 he worked as an senior assistant in the Department of Sociology at Łódź University which he was connected with until 1970. That was where he obtained his further academic degrees: Assistant Professor, 8 June 1949; Associate Professor, 11 April 1951; Full Professor, 12 September 1962. At his parent university he was vice-dean of the Humanities Faculty (1950–1951), dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and History (1951–1952) and rector (1952–1956). From 1955 he also worked at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Science, soon moving to Warsaw for good. In 1968–1976 he was Director of the Institute, 1969–1980 Vice-President of the Polish Academy of Science. He retired in May 1982.