

Kolakowski, Leszek (1927-2009) philosopher, historian of ideas and major Polish public intellectual, was born on 23 October 1927 in Radom, son of Jerzy Kolakowski, social activist in the cooperative movement and essayist (executed by the Germans in 1943) and Lucyna, née Pietrusiewicz, teacher (died 1930). When the Nazis invaded Poland, the family found refuge in a village where his secret, largely solitary education was aided by teachers from the Polish underground. In 1949 he married Tamara née Dynenson (born 1928), then a medical student, later psychiatrist. He studied philosophy at Łódź University and from 1950 at Warsaw University, obtaining his doctorate in 1953. At Łódź he was junior assistant to the Chair of Logic headed by Professor Tadeusz Kotarbinski. At Warsaw he was appointed in 1952 as assistant professor and in 1959 to the Chair of the History of Modern Philosophy. He also worked for several years at the Institute of Philosophy of the Polish Academy of Sciences and was editor-in-chief of Poland's main philosophical journal. He also taught at the Party School of Social Studies and joined the editorial boards of two journals run by young Communist intellectuals. In 1960 their daughter Agnieszka, later a translator and essayist, was born.

In 1968, because of his political activity, he was expelled from the University and banned from teaching and publishing. Then he accepted an invitation to McGill University in Montreal as visiting professor from 1968-1969. In 1969-1970 he was visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley and in 1970 came to Oxford where he was Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College until his retirement in 1995. In 1975 he was visiting professor at Yale University and from 1981-1994 Professor in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. He was a member of the board of the Vienna-based Institut für die Wissenschaft von

Menschen and regularly participated in gatherings of intellectuals with Pope John Paul II.

He received many honours, among them the Jurzykowski Prize (1969), the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels (1977), the Prix européen de l'essai (1981), the Erasmus Prize (1983), the MacArthur Fellowship (1983), the Jefferson Award (1986), the Prix Tocqueville (1993), the Premio Nonino (1997), the Kluge Prize of the Library of Congress (2003) and the Jerusalem Prize (2007), as well as numerous doctorates *honoris causa*. He was a Fellow of the British Academy (from 1980) and of several other national Academies. In 1998 he was decorated with the Order of the White Eagle. When he was buried in Warsaw, there was a minute's silence in the National Parliament.

He had embraced Communism as the Russians drove the Germans out of Poland, thinking it promised a better world of equality and freedom, but he then moved away from Soviet-style Marxism and became increasingly influential upon the younger generation as a leading voice for democratization and reformed Communism, or what came to be called 'revisionism.' This led to his expulsion from the University, constant police surveillance, the banning of his publications and his departure for the West. Thereafter, though his writing remained banned in Poland for twenty years, they circulated widely as samizdat and were hugely influential in shaping the intellectual opposition, which, in combination with the Solidarity movement, contributed greatly to the collapse of Communism in Poland.

In exile he was in close contact with the Polish opposition, writing articles, giving interviews and helping to fundraise and became in time an active supporter and adviser of Solidarity. It was over this period that he settled his scores with Marxism and, indeed, the very idea of socialism, to the disappointment of various marxisant intellectuals, who had hailed his

revisionism from afar, such as the historian E. P. Thompson, who published 'An open letter to Leszek Kolakowski' in *The Socialist Register* in 1973, to which he replied the following year in an essay entitled 'My correct views on everything.' The progress of his disillusionment is recorded and fully elaborated in his most widely-known work in Britain, *Main Currents of Marxism*. Comprising 1,200 pages, and first published in English in three volumes in 1978, it is not a history of socialism and Communism in practice but rather a lucid exposition of the ideas and arguments of Marx and Engels and subsequent European Marxists that focuses, in increasingly mordant style, on their attractive power and their dangers. For Kolakowski these dangers derived, as Tony Judt acutely observed, from Marxism's fusion of 'Promethean Romantic illusion and uncompromising historical determinism.' Kolakowski's way of linking Marxist ideas to Communist oppression and corruption cuts deeper and is more interesting than other such diagnoses of the time. By the third volume, entitled 'The Breakdown,' the tone changes, as Judt remarks, to 'almost unremitting contempt.'

Less well known in Britain are Kolakowski's considerable contributions as a philosophically reflective historian of ideas, specializing first in European intellectual history between 1500 and 1800, and later writing about positivism from Hume to the Vienna Circle, Husserl and Bergson. His early *magnum opus* is *Religious Consciousness and the Church: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Non-Denominational Christianity*. This work, on which he had been working since 1958, was published in Polish in 1965 and is currently available in French but not in English. It has an interesting affinity with his subsequent critique of the leftist illusions of Marxism and his later reflections on religion. Its subject is faith that involves resistance to the organized, institutionally controlled forms of religious life, notably mysticism, and the Catholic Counter-

Reformation's policy of finding a place for it, giving it an outlet, while keeping it under control. The book's message of distaste for institutionalized 'Truth' was unmistakable. In his later writings on religion, in works such as *The Presence of Myth; Religion: If there is no God: on God, the Devil, Sin and Other Worries of the so-called Philosophy of Religion* and *Metaphysical Horror*, he repeatedly returned to the theme of the ever-present need for faith and the category of 'the sacred' which could not be grounded in secular ways. Secular reason, he thought, was itself based on faith, and it could not settle inescapable religious questions or furnish a basis for morality.

Kolakowski was a brilliant writer of essays, which ranged from the seriously reflective to the polemical to the whimsical. An early essay on 'Hope and Hopelessness' was a significant source of inspiration for the Workers' Defence Committee of 1976 that led to Solidarity. Many displayed a piercingly sharp, ironic, sometimes self-ironizing, often aphoristic wit revealed by such titles as 'How to be a liberal-conservative-socialist' and 'The General Theory of Not-Gardening.' He also wrote plays, fables, biblical stories and a well-known collection of 'Conversations with the Devil.' A much-celebrated early essay was entitled 'The Priest and the Jester,' counterposing the guardian of tradition and accepted absolutes with the skeptic who doubts all that appears self-evident. One of his jests was to refer to his own essays as 'semi-philosophical sermons.'

He was himself a jester to the end, whose sense of humour, sly and gently sardonic, could be devastating. He passed his later years quietly, and much loved by friends and colleagues, in Oxford, while admired throughout the rest of the world. The British were under-appreciative of his considerable achievements: his scholarly contributions (he wrote some thirty books), which focused on continental European thinkers,

and his extraordinary impact and fame within the countries shaped by Soviet-style Communism.