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Andrzej Wyrobisz: In Memory of a Friend

One does not easily write a memory piece about someone whom one knew for over half a century. Though, at first glance, the task appears to be rather straightforward since one believes that one knew the late Friend so well, so close, so long. Seemingly, so many facts, events, and anecdotes have been accumulated over the years. But the first challenge concerns the choice of what is important and what one would like to say about the dear Friend from a chaotic array of recollections. Especially, when one is about to reminisce about someone who was far from ordinary: a great scholar, a judicious citizen, and a decent human being. One of our mutual friends responded to the news of Andrzej's death with the following words: "A decent man has passed away".

First and foremost, Andrzej Wyrobisz was a scholar and a teacher. I am convinced that his academic achievements and accomplishments will not only continue to have impact in the years to come but will be duly acknowledged as a major source of inspiration by new generations of cultural historians – particularly those interested in the history of the city, the everyday life of urban communities, as well as social customs.

In 2012, upon a joint initiative by the Museum of Polish History and the editorial board of *Mówią Wieki* (Centuries speak) magazine, fellow historians compiled a collection of his pieces entitled *Studia o kulturze i społeczeństwie w nowożytnej Europie* (Studies on culture and society in early modern Europe), with a knowledgeable and insightful study by Tomasz Siewierski entitled "Andrzej Wyrobisz. Zarys biografii naukowej" (Andrzej Wyrobisz: An overview of academic accomplishments). This young academic with impressive knowledge about the history of Polish historiography of the last couple of decades continues to study Andrzej Wyrobisz's work. Soon, in a special issue of *Przegląd Historyczny* (Historical review) dedicated to the memory of the late scholar Siewierski will publish another essay on the subject entitled "Z paryskich cechów do wyklętych miłości. Droga naukowa Andrzeja Wyrobisza" (From Parisian guilds to forbidden loves: An academic path of Andrzej Wyrobisz). For this very reason I feel that I am no longer obliged to provide an overview of my late Friend's academic accomplishments and achievements. Truth be told, given the fact that the list of Andrzej Wyrobisz's academic works, compiled in 2011, features as many as 482 pieces, any attempt to offer such an account would doubtlessly exceed my competence and abilities.

First and above all, I knew Andrzej as a senior colleague in my home institute, the Institute of History at the University of Warsaw, where I was a student from 1966 to 1971, and where I spent my entire academic career – from a trainee-assistant to a professor emeritus. For almost a quarter of a century, we were both members of the editorial team of *Przegląd Historyczny* (Historical review), where, after some time, I replaced him as the journal's Editor-in-Chief. Andrzej's cooperation with the journal can be traced back to his early youth: in 1954, when still an undergraduate student, he became a language editor, after a time he joined the journal's scientific editorial board, and in 1993, after the death of Stefan Kieniewicz, he was appointed its Editor-in-Chief.

However, we were more than just colleagues. Our relationship was far more intimate, almost family-like, which was largely due to Andrzej's character. For Andrzej was a student of Marian Małowist (1909–1988), who was his mentor and to whom he was closely attached until the latter's death. Consequently, he was a frequent visitor to Iza and Marian Małowist's house – the very place which, at some point in my life, became my own family home where I spent the best years of my youth. It was under those circumstances that I was privileged to become familiar with some of Andrzej's most important qualities: his immense and unbreakable loyalty towards people that were close to him, faithfulness towards his friends, and unshakeable readiness to bring help when needed. Marian Małowist – now ill and disabled – often needed help and Andrzej was the one on whom our family could count. His relationship with Marian was more than just an ordinary friendship between a former student and a former teacher. It was profoundly intimate to him. The death of Marian Małowist, followed a few years later (1995) by the passing of Iza Biezuńska-Małowist, moved him deeply. My own, household- or family-based, relationship with him provided me with an opportunity to see Andrzej's many traits – the ones that are available to close friends, but not necessarily to professional colleagues. Andrzej was a bit introvert, seemingly cool and brittle. When it came to socialising, he was rather withdrawn or undemonstrative, to say the least. Yet, on many occasions, he proved not to be averse to a good laugh. He had a deep and "English" sense of humour, often sprinkled with acerbity and asstringency. He enjoyed a good meal and a good drink, as well as long dinners with friends. His ostensible and often inhibiting (or even disheartening) rigidity cloaked a great deal of warmth and kindness. Kindness was the very trait that he deliberately and carefully nurtured. For he was a true-born member of the Polish intelligentsia, who lived according to a set of rules that have been nowadays abandoned and forgotten. He deeply believed in the mission and ethos of the intelligentsia, in their obligation to spread culture, care about education, particularly with regard to the youth, as well as to be an active citizen. He always claimed that one should make one's life "useful to others" (his very words). In the last few years of his life, when his state of health prevented him from being professionally and socially active, he lamented the fact that he could not any longer be involved in other people's lives and their matters. But even then he was more than ready to discuss all major and pertinent issues, taking great interest in current political events, as well as his academic milieu. When

his female colleague, whom he had known since their student years, produced some false and libellous remarks about his mentor, he reacted to it with both animation and determination, stating that the female slanderer “has failed her education (carried out by Marian Małowist) how to be a human being that is kind to people and socially useful”.¹ Because Andrzej believed (and so he wrote) that he developed these traits as a result of his contact with his mentor. He looked back to his student years as the best, or, at least, the most important period in his life – despite the fact that it was the time of the grim Stalinist regime of the Polish People’s Republic.

Andrzej Wyrobisz’s passionate commitment to social activism resulted in him becoming engaged in the establishment of the Faculty of Humanities and the Department (later Institute) of History at what was then a satellite branch of the University of Warsaw in Białystok (now the University of Białystok). In the periods 1969–1975, 1981–1982, and 1984–1985 he acted as a Faculty Dean – thus, he can well be recognised as the father of Białystok-based academic historians. It was in Białystok that he powerfully manifested his civic engagement when, as a member of the Solidarity movement and a brave anticommunist activist, he took part in the memorable events of 1980–1981. This resulted in Andrzej being removed from office in 1985 by the Minister of Science Benon Miśkiewicz. A detailed account of those events can be found in the above-mentioned studies by Tomasz Siewierski. Andrzej’s commitment to Białystok-based academic milieu remained strong until his death. One should also emphasize that it was always reciprocated by his Białystok colleagues. Certainly, one means of expressing their admiration for Andrzej and the way he acted in the 1980s was a festschrift entitled *Miasto, region, społeczeństwo. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Andrzejowi Wyrobiszowi w sześćdziesiątą rocznicę Jego urodzin*² (City, region, society: Studies offered to Professor Andrzej Wyrobisz on the occasion of his 60th birthday) that they compiled in his honour. Its subject matter corresponded entirely with Andrzej’s fields of interest, while the volume’s editors and contributors were his colleagues and students. The book is now recognized as a major contribution to Polish historiography. Andrzej’s friends from Białystok have never forgotten him. In 2012, the University of Białystok published another volume dedicated to Andrzej Wyrobisz entitled *Ars historiae – historia artis. Prace ofiarowane Andrzejowi Wyrobiszowi*³ (*Ars historiae – historia artis: Studies offered to Andrzej Wyrobisz*), co-edited by Ewa Dubas-Urwanowicz and Józef Maroszek.

It is my belief that the same set of characteristics – this honest and authentic need to participate in social life both as an individual and as a member of a group – were responsible for Andrzej joining the team of *Przegląd Historyczny*. He was eagerly looking forward to upcoming issues, both when he was its editor and when, in his final years, he could no longer take part in the editorial works. The journal

1 A. Wyrobisz, „Listy do redakcji”, *Przegląd Historyczny*, 2014, vol. 150, no. 4, pp. 769–770.

2 E. Dubas-Urwanowicz, J. Urwanowicz, eds., *Miasto, region, społeczeństwo. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Andrzejowi Wyrobiszowi w sześćdziesiątą rocznicę Jego urodzin*, Białystok, 1992.

3 E. Dubas-Urwanowicz, J. Maroszek, eds., *Ars historiae – historia artis. Prace ofiarowane Andrzejowi Wyrobiszowi*, Białystok, 2012.

was on his mind until the very end – quite literally, as the last time I talked to him about the journal was just two days before his demise. Next to his bed one could always find the latest issue of our journal – even when reading became quite difficult to him. In fact, this further testifies to Andrzej having been the intellectual *par excellence* – he was an avid reader even in his final days. Andrzej was a man who could not live without the printed word (however, he never took to computer technology and the Internet, and started using a mobile phone only when his own mobility failed him).

Our long relationship went through different stages. For example, I was never his student (when I was a student he was employed at the Institute of History of Tangible Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and later worked in Białystok) but if today I know anything about the Augustów Canal (Kanał Augustowski) it is because of the lecture he gave at a circuit seminar organised for the first-year students of history at the University of Warsaw (it was May 1967). It was back then that I first understood that he was a lecturer who talked about the issues that really interested him and that he knew inside-out. Erudition, integrity, as well as deeply held interests characterised Andrzej as a scholar. They are not so common among the present-day academics any more.

In all aspects of his life, Andrzej was truly authentic. He was always himself. Never did he hide his beliefs, or who and what he was; he never pretended to be someone else. He was not after fame and fortune. His modesty was quite baffling – as, indeed, was the fact that he never made a pile. He did not even possess his own apartment. He lived in a council flat which he claimed after his parents' death – the very place where he spent his childhood, youth, and, practically all his life. He never cared for material goods, and he was free from the desire to possess things. Instead, he cared for people. He was an old-fashioned man. He was a decent man.