

A True Citizen of the World

BY IRA KATZNELSON AND CLAUS OFFE



Photo: IWM

Over the course of three decades, the annual programs of IWM have been testimony to the protean mind, intellectual energy, and normative commitments of Krzysztof Michalski, the founder and *spiritus rector* of this unique institution. What an ambition is inscribed in its very name: *Institut für die (implying all) Wissenschaften vom Menschen!* Yet that is what Krzysztof wrought. Spanning philosophy and public affairs, social movements and public policy, analytical history and value-based assessments, social sciences and the humanities, the Institute, over the years of continued growth, has offered a home for these engagements of the highest order.

From the very start, as a martial law regime was being installed in Warsaw and long before anyone could anticipate the fall of the Berlin Wall, Krzysztof fashioned the Institute to serve as a robust *European* institution, connecting East and West. As such, the Institute came to have a strong formative impact on western scholars and intellectuals who were offered the chance to discover the heterogeneous and mostly underground cultures of investigation and debate in the East, and on their eastern colleagues, including a young generation, who had been cut off by the Iron Curtain from wider European currents. These connections at the founding in 1981/82 were unprecedented, perhaps even utopian. By acting, Krzysztof and his colleagues allied the Institute with emerging deep currents, and thus with possibilities for profound change. Ever

since, his work as an academic leader and public intellectual never lost an unrelenting focus on the spiritual and cultural contours of “Europe.”

Then young, just 34 and having earned a doctorate in Philosophy at Warsaw University in 1974, his work was inspired by the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka and specialized in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s writings, and, later, those of Husserl and Nietzsche. With this background, Krzysztof must have seemed an unlikely person to take on such an audacious challenge. Reminding others of the need for the virtues of “decency” and “courage,” he was fully aware that the new venture would require “much patience, diplomatic skill, tact, and sensitivity,” as he put things early on. Just these traits he possessed to an exceptional and exemplary extent. Even then, he possessed the necessary imagination, drive, and daring. Even then, he combined range and curiosity with rigor and depth. And he exhibited a burning desire to recover an idea of Europe imagined from the East, insisting that it be combined with a cosmopolitan and tolerant sensibility.

At once deeply Polish, marked by training in Cracow and by political commitments forged in times both difficult and uncertain, and at home in institutions, cities, and networks that were far-flung, Krzysztof embraced Vienna as a city where exchanges across East-West borderlands might be possible—a site that itself was in search of a post-imperial, and, later, post-Cold War purpose. He came to this task with the help of

a highly diverse network he brought from his Polish milieu, with contacts ranging from the new Polish Pope to Jacek Kuroń, from Adam Michnik to Fr. Józef Tischner, and extending to the exiled Leszek Kołakowski. The task concerning Central and East European countries, Krzysztof argued, was to “rediscover and remodel their self-understanding under completely changed conditions.” Very soon, his visionary project and personal magnetism engaged the support of such leading western thinkers as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor, Edward Shils and Ralf Dahrendorf, Fritz Stern and Reinhard Koselleck, Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricoeur. These persons first yielded to his importuning, but soon became close colleagues and often dear friends.

Over the years, the interests, networks, and subjects that Krzysztof brought within the ambit of the Institute broadened to include the United States, which itself became a second home once he began his professorship at Boston University in 1987. More than anyone we know, Krzysztof was both a true European and an Atlantic intellectual who urgently tried to bridge what he came to see as a “growing rift between Europe and the United States.” Yet nobody could have mistaken him for a representative of the “new Europe” as styled by American neoconservatives. As in Vienna, from Boston, he crafted relationships with persons in

ident of the European Commission on the “The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe” during the early years of this century, and often consulted with ranking members of the Commission to offer pointed advice. And he managed to tolerate, even provide a forum for, figures whose views he deeply disliked.

Over the years, especially since the nineties, Krzysztof fortified the Institute’s attention to the entwined fates of social justice, including gender justice, and solidarity, thus on challenges that had not been resolved by state socialism, becoming ever more urgent on top of its ruins, and throughout the West, where inequalities multiplied. Regarding these vexing questions, as indeed, on all the others with which he sought to deal, the free play of ideas at the Institute always was a good deal more than a bromide or slogan.

This spirit of intellectual and political pluralism also characterized the remarkable conferences he organized at the invitation of Pope John Paul II at Castel Gandolfo during the summer. With topics that included European identities after the fall of Communism, cross-cultural conceptions of time, and recent historiography dealing with the Enlightenment, Krzysztof promoted various forms of boundary-crossing with great composure.

But it was not simply the prominent or well-endowed whom he

Krzysztof garnered profound respect earned through his aura of purpose and practical achievement. His wry humor, quiet warmth, ability to listen, and embedded loyalty repeatedly transformed even the most formal of relationships into lasting bonds. Concurrently, he exhibited a much admired ability to raise funds for the Institute from governments, foundations, and individuals by deploying skills that were part and parcel of his authenticity and that persuaded by the power of his intellectual judgment and normative steadfastness.

For each of us, the personal and intellectual friendship he offered was prized. Krzysztof taught us much about connections between values and institutions, learning and networks. His uncompromising standards and persistent energy, even when ill, drew us, as it did tens upon tens of others into his orbit. Together, we had the chance to experience this constellation of traits when he invited us both to participate, in the wake of 1989, in an effort to build indigenous policy capacity to craft a post-Communist social state in Budapest and Warsaw, Prague and Bratislava. Together, we also participated with our colleague Kenneth Prewitt in shaping a series of conferences over the past decade that have grappled with the complexities of solidarity, as concept and reality, for our time.

All the while, Krzysztof sustained his vocation as a penetrating scholar. In addition to Boston, he held a professorship at the University of Warsaw, a post he first secured in 1986 after being habilitated there in philosophy. His books on logic and time, on theories of meaning, and, most notably on human finiteness in *The Flame of Eternity* (see publications, p. 24), whose radical re-reading of Nietzsche has attracted devoted attention by readers in Polish, German, and English, mark out a philosophical career of originality and distinction.

He was, in short, as our colleague Shlomo Avineri has observed, “a truly unusual person. Not a philosopher-king, but a philosopher-citizen, who was able to practice what Thomas More had called ‘philosophia civilior,’ active in the here-and-now; a Polish patriot and a true citizen of the world, equally at home in metaphysics and organizational know-how, to whom none of us could ever say ‘no’; a humanist in the Erasmian mold.” ◀

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the academy, journalism, and public affairs across a wide spectrum of politics and scholarship. He also induced such leading scholars as Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder, whose main institutional affiliations were in the United States, to play a central role in Vienna.

Personally modest and reserved, Krzysztof never shrank from personal engagement with a wide range of persons, encompassing those who possessed political power as well as individuals who sought to speak truth to power. Within democratic life, his friendships crossed divisions of partisanship and ideology to include Kurt Biedenkopf and Joschka Fischer, Bronisław Geremek and Alfred Gusenbauer; that is, persons who wished to accomplish both. On the character of Europe, he chaired the Reflection Group advising the Pres-

wished to cultivate. For Krzysztof was especially drawn to younger talent. He offered a special boost to emerging intellectuals and aspiring politicians from East and Central Europe, without neglecting those from other locations. The various fellowship programs he created, combined with the Institute’s spirited lecture series, remarkable library, Cortona Summer School, and lively informal and conference exchanges provided a fertile framework for the conduct of meaningful intellectual life, one lacking in self-celebration or the pomp of academic elitism. Rather, the style Krzysztof cultivated facilitated mutual inspiration by fellows, guests, and staff for the sake of sober and serious labor, always leavened by a keen sense of the ridiculous.

Across the range of scholarly, political, and funding networks,

Ira Katznelson is Professor of Political Science and History at Columbia University, New York, and President of the Social Science Research Council.

Claus Offe is Professor of Political Sociology at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. Both are members of the IWM Academic Advisory Board.