

*From the Editor*

# Krzysztof Michalski

## *Builder of bridges: IWM rector dies at 64*

by Dardis McNamee

So, the votes are in and Austria is aglow in the reflected glory of its two favourite sons, director Michael Hanecke and actor Christoph Waltz, as Oscars in hand, they took their bows at the 85th Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood.

At the same time, a much quieter, but none the less resonant tribute, is being paid this month to Krzysztof Michalski, the Polish philosopher, co-founder and *Rektor*, until his death 11 February, of the Institute for the Human Sciences (IWM).

Founded in 1982, the IWM was the brain-child of Michalski and two German university colleagues Cornelia Klinger and Klaus Nellen as a home for the intellectual legacy and archive of Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka, a leader of the human rights movement *Charter 77*. In addition, the Institute became a place for ongoing dialogue between scholars and activists across the Iron Curtain, and where a shared European culture could continue to evolve across the East-West divide.

The photos of the early years are fun to look at and might include Pope John Paul II or Mikhail Gorbachev, but also a very young bobbed-haired and earnest Angela Merkel.

I first encountered Michalski in 2001, on the occasion of a lecture by Edward Said, the much-laureled Palestinian-American professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, and critic of Israeli militarism. Said had been scheduled to give a lecture at the Freud Society in Vienna on Freud's fascination with the Middle East. But the invitation was withdrawn over a photograph allegedly showing Said throwing a stone at an Israeli soldier. Or was it a

guardhouse? Was it even a stone?

Michalski hated this kind of thing, and joined forces with the Renner Institute to invite Said back a few months later when he lectured to a packed hall in the *Festsaal* of the Palais Schwarzenberg. Said, whose health was failing, was already visibly ill, and spoke in a husky voice to a hushed audience straining to hear about the common origins of Jews and Palestinians, for a common culture that could serve as a way toward peace in the Middle East.

As I would learn over time, this was a typical Michalski "Aktion": The goal was dialogue and censorship was an abomination. If any progress was to be made in divided societies, over high walls and historical hatred, it must begin by conversation and by listening.

Over the years, I have attended many events hosted by the IWM, never enough but nearly always provoking new insights that linger.

Among the highlights of the intervening years was the Institute's 25th Anniversary Conference in 2007, a three-day event that took over the MAK and included academics and politicians, lawmakers and social scientists from East and West, from the First and the Third World. Heinz Fischer spoke and Joschka Fischer discussed, veterans of the battles to tear down the Iron Curtain showed up and young researchers cross-examined them. In the new Europe, there seemed to be ever-more important topics for discussion and action.

The conference – a masterful mix of ideas and organisational panache – was classic Michalski, an occasion to stop, to look back, but also to look forward to the next set of challenges.

Of all the things for which Vienna is renowned across the world – music, art, *fin de siècle* Modernism, theatre, or maybe even spies – few outsiders would mention ideas. But as people who live here gradually discover, the intellectual life of Vienna is exploding with activity, as a long list of research institutes and think tanks, university departments, literary, political and cultural forums host a nearly overwhelming richness of lectures, discussions and debates.

Even in this company, Krzysztof Michalski's Institute for the Human Sciences has long held a special place, asking the defining questions and attracting an astonishing circle of exciting thinkers, coming together at a point where ideas, heart and society meet, and the future of an enlivened, self-aware and hopeful Europe feels very real. ◇

