

Aleksander Smolar

## **A Man among People**

I don't know what Krzysztof was thinking in the long months of severe illness, which he hid even from his closest friends. Is it possible to find an answer in the following words from his book? "Somewhere out beyond all my concepts lies the unfamiliar, dark side of life. It is from there that the shadow of death falls on my knowledge ... this is where despair and the longing that time entails originate. And yet this is not all: this dark zone, mine and not-mine, this ever-present excess of meaning among my concepts, which can never be translated into propositions, into an additional bit of knowledge, into a description of what is (beyond what we already know) - all this places my life beyond myself, beyond what I know about myself, and my world, and thus also beyond (my) sadness in departing this world, beyond the cares, beyond my worry about everything I am to leave behind." (Krzysztof Michalski, *The Flame of Eternity*, 2012, p. 171)

I am not a philosopher and thus I'm not going to write about his books or about him as a philosopher. Besides, I've one more reason to be restrained – the words quoted above are shocking for me as they reveal a secret for which I'm not prepared. I had known Krzysztof as a man who loved life and who knew how to make the best of it; a charmer who juggled with ideas and jokes; and also a man who at the drop of a hat could become serious in what he did and said.

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In the last twenty-five years, Krzysztof was one of the most important people in my life. Less so in the 1960s when I met him and the 1970s when we lived in completely different places. After martial law was introduced in Poland, I heard that he got stuck in Germany, where he had gone thanks to an invitation from Hans-Georg Gadamer. Thanks to his support, thanks to the cooperation with his friend rev. Józef Tischner and thanks to the blessing from John Paul II – which had much more than spiritual consequences – he started to build up the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna. He assumed from the beginning that the Institute would be independent from the Church or any other institution. That's why, despite the support from the pope, he rejected help which was offered, for example by the German episcopate.

It was really fascinating that a young scholar, who was unknown in Austria, managed to be so successful in a foreign environment and to create a place that brought together representatives of different disciplines from West and East. Already at the time he proved to be a great intellectual – thanks to which he gained the respect and friendship of the most outstanding intellectuals and politicians from Europe and America – as well as astonishing organizational abilities and a talent of a "mendicant", who until his final moments fought to get funds for research projects and fellowships for young scholars from different countries. There were: the Tsvetan Stoyanov and the Robert Bosch Fellowships for the Balkans; the Milena Jesenska Fellowships for Journalists; the Paul Celan Fellowships for Translators; the Herzen

Fellowships for young Russians; fellowships for young Ukrainians; the Bronisław Geremek Fellowships for Poles. The Józef Tischner Fellowships, established after Tischner's death and co-funded by the pope, Georg Soros and the Kościuszko Foundation, had a very special character.

I'm not going to make a balance sheet of his endeavours to get money for research projects. I just want to mention that two weeks before he died, when he was hardly leaving his house, he was still using intermediaries to remind one minister about old commitments. At stake was little money but a great project: Timothy Snyder's "United Europe – divided memory": Contemporary Europe is built on uncertainties and in need of a shared historical memory constituting a base for the political unification of the continent.

Yet another very special and unprecedented venture, which was born as an offshoot of the Institute, were the debates in Castel Gandolfo. Starting from 1983, for more than a decade, a group of outstanding scholars met in the summer papal residence in order to discuss with him the most salient spiritual problems of our times.

The pope was the host, but he neither decided on the guests to be invited nor on the topics to be discussed. And he did not speak. He spent those days listening to outstanding speakers who came to his residence and who were chosen by rev. Tischner and Michalski. Similar to the Institute, conversations in Castel Gandolfo were, as Krzysztof emphasized, completely "independent from the church administration, from any bureaucracy, ideology, from any 'cause.'" The guests gathered in Castel Gandolfo talked about the idea of man in contemporary science and about the crisis of modernity; about Europe in confrontation with other cultures and about the European civil society; about the dilemmas of modern liberal society, about identity in a time of flux, about Enlightenment, about time and the end of time...

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It would be hard to list all those great people who took part in the debates in Castel Gandolfo. There were, among them: Böckenförde, Gadamer, Kołakowski, Ricoeur, Spaemann, Gieysztor, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Miłosz, Levinas, Shils, Bernard Lewis, Furet, Brzeziński, Dahrendorf, Szacki, Charler Taylor, Dworkin, Turowicz, Garton Ash, Judt, Fritz Stern, Albert Hirschman, Cardinal Etchegaray, Koselleck, Soros.

Krzysztof's relations with other people were fascinating. He was a selfless friend to many people in Poland and abroad. But the strongest bonds between him and other people were common passions and projects. He always managed to find diverse allies to realize his ideas. He was an amazing charmer. Among his friends there were the former prime minister of Italy Giuliano Amato and former chancellor of Austria Alfred Gusenbauer, Prince Karel Schwarzenberg and Lord George Weidenfeld. He was also in close relations with the former Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski.

He never forgot about people who became his friends. He maintained numerous friendships while establishing new ones. Perhaps the strongest relationship, however, was his friendship

with rev. Józef Tischner. After Tischner's death Krzysztof made a great effort to make the memory of Tischner, of his work and of his attitude, vivid. He told many anecdotes about Tischner. Krzysztof – himself a believer – saw in Tischner an example of faith that was free of bigotry and ostentation, and instead was a discrete faith, full of good humour and open to everyone, even to those whose convictions were very different. In other words, it was a faith which did not need enemies. Krzysztof felt both helpless and amused observing attempts made after Tischner's death to appropriate and “normalize” his death, inscribing him onto the list of Catholic conservatives. This fact was even more surprising given that Tischner - as well as *Tygodnik Powszechny* with which he cooperated - had been since 1989 under a constant attack of numerous priests and bishops, right-wing politicians and opinion-makers, and as such more and more isolated within the institutional Church. Polish official Catholicism evolved in a completely different way than Tischner's thought. Also, in a way which differed from the one that was indicated during the meetings in Castel Gandolfo, in the presence of the pope, of other Catholics, as well as of atheists, Jews, protestants, and freemasons.

At the end of the 1980s, Krzysztof understood that the Institute could play an important role in the public life in Europe. I am sure that he would agree with a famous formula of Jean Monnet: “Nothing can be done without citizens but nothing can last without institutions.” Therefore, he was enlarging the Institute for Human Sciences and its influences. He created the great bi-annual journal *Transit* and a very good Institute bulletin in which important lectures and conference reports are published. In order to foster European-American cooperation, he created a branch of his institute in Boston, where he used to lecture. He was a founder and a director of the Polish Institute of Public Affairs. In cooperation with Marcin Król he brought into being the Erasmus Chair at the Warsaw University, financed by the European Union, and he co-organized spectacular “Tischner Debates” which were gathering hundreds of listeners. A plan for the near future was the establishment of a Kołakowski Chair in Warsaw, where Krzysztof would have lectured after having resigned from Boston University. At the same time, he continued to develop the Institute in Vienna. In his last years, he was supported in this by Charles Taylor, Timothy Snyder and Ivan Krastev.

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What reflects well Krzysztof's position in the intellectual landscape of Europe and the European Union is the fact that Romano Prodi, at the time the President of the European Commission, made him the head of the Reflexion Group on “The Spiritual and Cultural Dimensions of Europe”. The aim of the group was to define specifically European values in the face of the upcoming crisis of the Union. Works and debates in the report, which took place in Warsaw, Rome, Vienna, Berlin and Paris, gathered the most prominent European intellectuals. The rapport's co-authors were, apart from Krzysztof, Kurt Biedenkopf, Bronisław Geremek and Michel Rocard.

Yet another important post created by Michalski were summer schools in Cortona, in Italy, dedicated mainly to philosophy and politics. They were attended by students and young scholars from the US and the two parts of Europe, and the lecturers were great scholars connected to the Institute. I remember how proud Krzysztof was noticing that the participants

from our part of Europe were doing better and better. In the beginnings they were timid, rather passive, and their English was poor. With time, they were becoming much better and it became more difficult to distinguish them from participants from the West, even from those coming from the best universities.

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What were Krzysztof's views? When he left Poland, they were liberal-conservative. His experiences in the West made him move to the left, but not in a partisan sense. He had friends among Christian democrats, conservatives and socialists. Also in Poland he tried to maintain good relations with different political currents, but his sympathies were obvious. The field of his ideological identification was marked by prominent Poles – Józef Tischner, Leszek Kołakowski, Bronisław Geremek and Jacek Kuroń - whose memories he aimed to preserve. He organized a series of big conferences on social politics in the US and Europe and he devoted them to Jacek Kuroń. He was a faithful friend, and he fought a conscious, persistent battle for the place of such people in the Polish and international collective memory. This was his way to pay tribute to them and to wrestle relentlessly with the worst aspects of Polish public life: laziness, aggressiveness, unwillingness to understand and to enter into dialogue, and intellectual mediocrity.

A few weeks before he died I asked him what he wanted me to write about. His laconic answer was: about Poland. "About Poland" meant many different things: it meant speaking about the situation in the country, about friends, ideas, debates, about a lot of people who were far away, but close and known to him. He never spoke publicly about his love for his homeland or about patriotism. I think that he would have considered it bad taste.

Translated from Polish by Agnieszka Pasięka