

Krzysztof Michalski

Polish philosopher who was caught up in the political turmoil and intellectual ferment as communism collapsed in Eastern Europe

Krzysztof Michalski was a Polish philosopher. He taught at the universities of Boston and Warsaw and he published studies on the thinking of Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

He was much involved with changes in Eastern Europe before, during and after the collapse of communism. In 1982 he was a founders of the Institut für die Wissenschaft vom Menschen (IWM, the Institute for the Human Sciences) in Vienna, a forum for intellectuals on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Krzysztof Michalski was born in 1948. In March 1968 he was studying philosophy with Leszek Kolakowski at Warsaw University when the latter was forced into exile. Through a mutual friend, Michalski came to know the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka, who had also been expelled from the university, after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Patocka, who in the 1930s as a young man had studied in Freiburg with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, was in the 1970s holding underground seminars on Heidegger's *Being and Time* in his Prague apartment. Patocka became Michalski's unofficial graduate adviser,

under whom he wrote a dissertation *Heidegger and Contemporary Philosophy* (1978, republished 1998).

Heidegger, as Michalski evoked him, was a thinker for whom reality had a primordially historical character, and for whom all meanings were temporal and temporary. Michalski read Heidegger's philosophy as an argument for non-negotiable individual responsibility, a responsibility that could never be abdicated on behalf of the "iron laws of history".

Like Patocka, Michalski understood Heidegger as an antidote to what the poet Czeslaw Milosz called "the Hegelian bite" — and to all schemata of "historical necessity".

In late 1976 Patocka accepted Václav Havel's request to serve as one of three spokespeople for the dissident human rights initiative Charter 77. As a result he was arrested; he died in March 1977, following brutal interrogations.

Michalski, who was a Humboldt Fellow in Germany the following academic year of 1977-78, persuaded a young German scholar he met there to help him to smuggle Jan Patocka's papers out of communist Czechoslovakia. Then, in 1982, Michalski, with Klaus

Nellen and Cornelia Klinger, founded the IWM.

IWM was to become both a home for the Patocka archive and a forum for intellectuals on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In time it acquired a broader profile as a community of scholars devoted to overcoming boundaries between East and West. Michalski remained IWM's rector until his death. He was the rare intellectual with a talent for organisation. IWM's series of debates in Warsaw (in memory of Józef Tischner) and in Vienna's Burgtheater continue to draw hundreds of people. Topics have ranged from Obama and the Europeans and the politics of climate change to the public role of religion and what is truth? IWM also publishes a journal, *Transit-Europäische Revue*, and organises an annual summer school in Cortona, Italy, where graduates from across Europe participate in intensive seminars on philosophy and politics.

Even while directing the IWM, Michalski continued to write and teach at Boston and Warsaw universities. He was a Catholic whose philosophical passions were Nietzsche and Heidegger. He believed that philosophers should

continue to ask the big questions: about the meaning of life, of death, of history. He was preoccupied with the problem of the passing of time and with the historicity of reason, understanding, and truth.

"Does the understanding of something suppose finding a unity in that which one wants to understand? Or



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He persuaded a German student to smuggle Jan Patocka's archives to the west

only then — when we are able in each fragment to see a part of some whole — can we discover some meaning in the multifariousness of the experienced world?" These questions, he told a recent interviewer, had kept him awake at night since his first years of university.

Michalski wrote his habilitation (professorial) thesis on Husserl; the English translation appeared in 1996 as *Logic and Time: An Essay on Husserl's Theory of Meaning*. His most recent book in

English is a collection of essays, *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*. Nietzsche is the point of departure for reflections on the meaning of eternity.

"Death and love," Michalski writes, "reveal the fundamental discontinuity of our bodily presence in the world. The fact is that in every moment of our lives all meaning may become suspended, and (here's Nietzsche) 'the clock of my life' — the clock that measures the rhythm of events: yesterday a seminar, today shopping, tomorrow travel — '[draws] a breath.' In this interval, briefer than any moment one can measure, in this crack, this fissure, this tear — in the blink of an eye — everything is left to question, and a chance for a new beginning arises. This is 'eternity'."

In 2003 Krzysztof Michalski was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland; and in 2007 he was awarded the Officer's Cross of L'Ordre National du Mérite of the Republic of France.

He is survived by his two daughters.

Krzysztof Michalski, philosopher, was born on June 8, 1948. He died of cancer on February 11, 2013, aged 64