

# Malicki, Jan

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## Alexandro Gieysztor Homini - Civi Polono - Viro Doctissimo - Professori Praestantissimo in Memoriam

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



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ALEXANDRO GIEYSZTOR  
HOMINI – CIVI POLONO – VIRO DOCTISSIMO  
– PROFESSORI PRAESTANTISSIMO  
IN MEMORIAM

PROFESSOR ALEKSANDER GIEYSZTOR (1916–1999)  
A MAN – A POLE – A HUMANIST – A SCHOLAR

Alexander Gieysztor\* natus est die XVII mensis Julii a. MCMXVI, obiit die IX m. Februarii anni MCMXCIX, quae sunt vitae limina unius ex virorum Polonorum doctissimorum saeculi vicesimi. De cuius vitae momentis singularibus, de origine familiari, de investigationibus, de fascinationibus, de illius scientia atque doctrina, de positione in virorum doctorum vita internationali adepta, deinde de illius civis Poloni atque militis in saeculo vicesimo Poloniae et Europae terribili atque turbulento breviter elucubratione in nostra narra-  
bimus, ut memoriae mandemus. Non minimi momenti est quinto post obitum anno illius Professoris reminisci aliquem, qui de illo non aliter dicere possit, quam «O, non obliviscende Magister!»

Hunc textum iam hodierna lingua internationali continuare constituimus, dum veremur, ne, etsi mori orationum in memoriam conscriptarum tradito geramus, eorum, qui commemorationes nostras lecturi sint, coetus nimis commi-  
nuatur, quod vitandum esse putamus.

Aleksander Gieysztor\*, one of the greatest Polish 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars and humanists was born on 17 July 1916 and died on 9 February 1999. This remembrance article briefly outlines some of the elements of his biography, family roots, his scientific research, fascinations and achievements, his inter-  
national position as well as his life as a Polish citizen and as a soldier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was such a turbulent time for both Poland and Europe. The fact that this article on the fifth anniversary of the Professor's death has been written by someone who has until now not been able to call him otherwise than «Unforgettable Master!» is probably of some importance, too.

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\* During the five years since the Professor's death, many extremely valuable notes, texts and remembrance articles describing the life and achievements of Aleksander Gieysztor, in Poland and abroad, in many countries where he was known have been published. Among Polish ones, first of all, worth mentioning are two editions of

He came into the world in tsarist Moscow, where his father, also named Aleksander, held quite a serious post in the management of one of the Russian Empire's railway companies. He was one of the thousands of Poles who during the Poland's partitions, originating from Poland, received education, worked, earned their living and embarked on their careers both in the two old Russia's capitals and in the vast areas of the Empire. The Gieysztor family, having a long noble tradition and an old coat-of-arms, came from that part of Poland – to be more exact – of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania [*Rzeczpospolita*] which was once called the Great Duchy of Lithuania. Like thousands of other noblemen, after the defeat of Poland in 1795 and during the partitions, which lasted for more than a century, i.e. until Poland regained independence in 1918, the family members made attempts to preserve Polish landownership, to play their roles as clerks and intelligentsia in the best possible way after they had lost the land, they fought against Russia and were sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia. All those roles were familiar to the Gieysztor family, who both were managers and played outstanding parts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century fights against Russia and thereafter in Siberia.

As Poland regained independence (1918), hundreds of thousands of Poles were coming back to their motherland, which had lost a great deal of its Eastern land by that time. Even though many of them had lost their estates, still their long-cherished dream of having their homeland finally came true and they saved their lives by escaping from the Bolsheviks.

This way little Aleksander Gieysztor came with his parents to Warsaw, where he lived until the end of his days. The city became his place. He was growing up in the architecturally beautiful, attractive and rapidly developing pre-war Warsaw. And he saw it burning during the war in 1939 and in 1944.

When he came back in 1945, he saw the city burnt, ruined and totally destroyed, with houses blown up one after another following the defeat of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Some time later, history of Warsaw became one of his favourite subjects of research and publications.

During World War II, Gieysztor was an underground activist in the Nazi-occupied Warsaw. He worked for the underground Polish Home Army Headquarters in the Information Office. He took part in the Warsaw Uprising, another valiant attempt which Poles made to gain freedom since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Warsaw as the capital under occupation, similarly to Rome and Paris,

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journals dedicated to the Deceased. In volume of: *Przegląd Historyczny* 91, 2000, the following articles were published: M. Koczerska, *Aleksander Gieysztor jako historyk dziejów Polski i powszechnych*; H. Samsonowicz, *Aleksandra Gieysztor badania nad Mazowszem*; K. S. Kuczyński, *Aleksander Gieysztor i nauki dające poznać źródła historyczne*; R. Kiersnowski, *Wspominając Aleksandra Gieysztor*; E. Kowalczyk, *Profesor Aleksander Gieysztor – przyjaciel archeologii i archeologów*; P. Mrozowski, *Aleksander Gieysztor jako badacz i znawca sztuki*. In volume of *Rocznik Towarzystwa Naukowego Warszawskiego* 62, 1999 the following texts are dedicated to Professor: E. Gieysztor, *Aleksander Gieysztor*; J. Bardach, *Aleksander Gieysztor. Uczony i obywatel*; W. Śliwowska, *Syberia w życiu i pamięci Gieysztorów*. Apart from that, brief press notes and a comprehensive biography of the Professor in the form of a book have been published – R. Jarocki, *Opowieść o Aleksandrze Gieysztorze*, Warszawa 2001.

stood up to fight against the Germans. Unfortunately, when those two capitals, owing to support of the Allied Forces, could soon enjoy freedom, Warsaw, abandoned by the Allies (due to the long distance and unwillingness to get into a conflict with Stalin!) and betrayed by the Soviets (the Red Army was standing on the other side of the Vistula river, in Warsaw ...) lost after two months of terrible fights. As a result, 200 thousand residents of Warsaw were killed by the Germans, the remaining hundreds of thousands were driven out and soon thereafter, upon a special order by Hitler, the city, old capital of Poland, was completely demolished! Three months later, the Soviet Army crossed the river and liberated ... the ruins of Warsaw. At that time, lieutenant Gieysztor, together with the commanders of the Warsaw Uprising, was kept captive by the Germans.

On his return to Warsaw, he immediately resumed his academic work; for a good start he was helping with the clearing off the debris of the Warsaw University. He was in the first group of PhDs promoted in 1945. He worked at the Institute of History at Warsaw University, where he was achieving subsequent degrees of: assistant, associate professor and full professor, and for many years he was the director there. He also was deputy dean of the History Department and vice-president of the entire University.

Similarly, he held important academic functions in the Warsaw Scientific Society, where he was president, and at the Polish Academy of Sciences, where he was twice elected president, in the times of Polish *Solidarity* and in independent state after communism collapse.

Gieysztor was probably the last of the so-called poly-historians, historians dealing with many different fields of historical sciences. Above all, he was an outstanding expert in medieval studies, but also he had great knowledge of the history of culture, history of art, history of Warsaw and even (because of his own experiences) of the history of Poland during World War II.

Gieysztor's last great task, work and passion was the King's Castle in Warsaw, which had been demolished, like the whole city, following the 1944 Uprising. He was a member of a special commission planning to furnish this historic building from the time, when in 1971 its reconstruction began, and thereafter, from 1981, he was the Castle's director for 10 years. For him, the Castle was a symbol of the grandeur which Poland had once had. Through the furnishings of the Castle he used to show the history of Poland from the time when in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which had been the epoch of elective kings, Warsaw had become the capital city until the times of the last king, who had remained in the Castle until the collapse of the Polish State in 1795.

He managed to turn this intention into reality, and the Castle is today one of the most significant Polish museums. He also succeeded in implementing his another objective: the Castle is the place where events of national significance take place. For instance, following the collapse of communism and regaining independence, the last Polish president in exile handed over the legal insignia of the independent Polish State to the first president of sovereign Poland, Lech Wałęsa.

Aleksander Gieysztor was the best-known abroad Polish historian. He was closely tied (since his studies before the war) to Paris and the Parisian

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes Sociales. Similarly, he closely cooperated with Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo in Spoleto, Italy.

Apart from that, many a time he was visiting professor or professeur associé at the greatest Western institutes and universities: at Oxford, Harvard, Sapporo, Brussels, Collège de France. It is difficult to specify the number of foreign Academies which he was invited to be a foreign member of. There were tens of them.

He was awarded 10 *honoris causa* doctorates (Aix-en-Provence University 1960, Marseille University 1960, Bordeaux University 1961, Budapest University 1975, Sorbonne 1976, Moscow University 1980, Oxford 1985, Poznań University 1992, Jagellonian University in Cracow 1996, Catholic University of Lublin 1997) and the honour of *renewing* his doctorate at his *Alma Mater*, Warsaw University, which was an event of equally great rank.

In addition to his participation in Polish academic corporations, the Professor also actively took part in international academic life. In this field, Aleksander Gieysztor achieved the greatest honour a historian can have: he was the only Pole after the war to be a member of the authorities of the International Committee of Historical Sciences; at first as a member of the board, then deputy president, and finally president in the years 1980–85. Aleksander Gieysztor's position among historians, and in Poland among scholars in general, could not be compared to anyone else's. Beyond any doubt, he was a great scholar, simply, a Scholar.

Last but not least, it needs to be added that Gieysztor enjoyed great popularity as a man. He was very charming and he had this kind of personal culture and gallantry, which were in Poland so characteristic of people who had been brought up before the war.

He also had an extraordinary and beautiful feature, which, unfortunately, is quite rare among people now, not only in Poland: in spite of his vast knowledge, titles and positions, he was able to, he could and he was willing to establish a true and honest contact and conversation not only with people who were equal or similar to him but, at times, also with ordinary, uneducated people. I had the opportunity to be a witness of that many a time. This great researcher of the middle ages was thus in a natural way practicing one of the knightly virtues:

*magno et parvo inclinare ...*