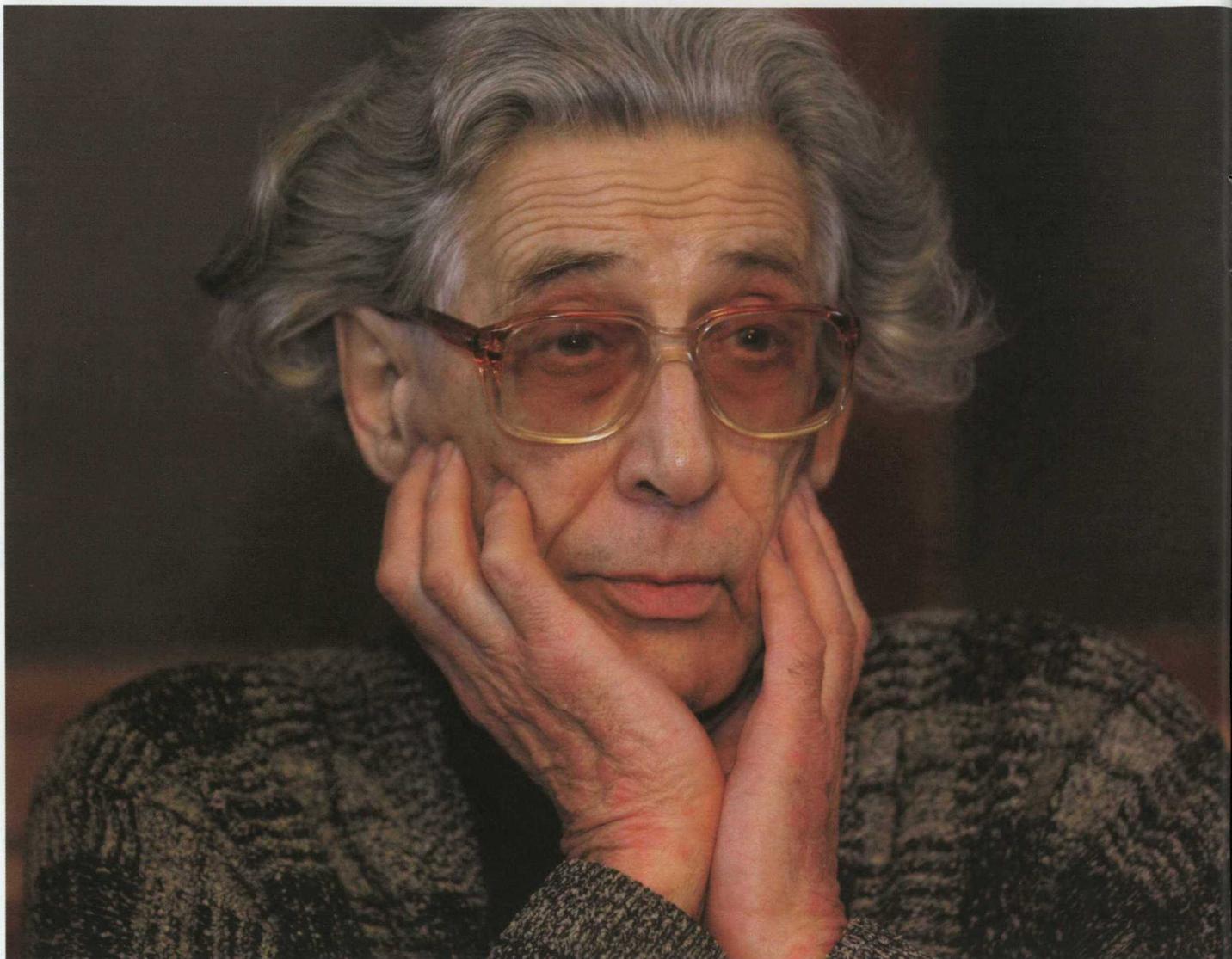


Interview with Prof. Jerzy Jedlicki

# Duty of Disobedience



Agencja Gazeta

Prof. Jerzy Jedlicki is a historian of ideas and author of the following books (in Polish): "What Kind of Civilization Do Poles Need", "Born Wrong: About Historical Experience", and "Degenerate World: Fears and Judgments of the Critics of Modernity"

**Academia:** What made you pick sociology to study at university?

*When I was preparing for my school-leaving exams, I was thinking of reading economics. But Łódź - where we were living after the war - closed its economics department in 1948, because the professor who lectured there was*

*not a Marxist. So instead I thought I'd either study sociology, which I knew very little about, or mathematics. I chose sociology, because I had heard of Józef Chalasiński, whose "Social Genealogy of Poland's Intelligentsia" started a lively discussion in the media and I was intrigued. I spent the first year studying in Łódź, and my fondest memories are*

*of seminars with Antonina Kłoskowska, at the time Chalasiński's assistant. After that we moved back to Warsaw, heavily damaged during the war, where my mother got a job at the "Czytelnik" publishing house and a small flat at the Warsaw Housing Cooperative, so I transferred to the University of Warsaw from my second year.*

**Was it Chałasiński's work that made you decide to study the intelligentsia?**

No, not at all. During my studies I got to know Witold Kula, whose lectures I had attended back in Łódź. They compared Marxian and Keynesian economics, and were absolutely fascinating. In Warsaw I attended his seminars at the history department, and seminars by his wife Nina Assorodobraj at the sociology department. I owe a lot to the both of them, both intellectually and in my life in general. I finished my course around the time when the Polish Academy of Sciences was being formed, and the Institute of History as one of its first research facilities. Kula became the Institute's scientific secretary, and he immediately found me a position. I spent my entire working life there, evolving from a would-be sociologist into a social and economic historian, focusing mainly on the 19th century.

**You led the department studying the history of Poland's intelligentsia.**

That was 40 years later! To start with, I worked at the department headed by Kula (and partially Janina Leskiewiczowa), studying social change in the Kingdom of Poland and the development of peripheral capitalism. When the department was split in 1975, a section for the history of the intelligentsia was formed by Ryszarda Czepulis, who led it efficiently for many years. I was working on something else at the time, so it wasn't until 1991, when I came back from a sabbatical at the Wilson Center in Washington DC, that I took over the lead at Ryszarda's request.

**You have written the book *What Kind of Civilization Do Poles Need?***

Yes, with no question mark, because I had no intention of answering that question. I wanted to discuss the position of Polish intellectuals who tried to address this and similar

questions in the 19th century, but I deliberately didn't state my own views on the matter.

**Would you be able to formulate a recommendation now?**

I recently gave a lecture, which was then printed under the title "Complexes and Aspirations of the Provinces." It discusses the fact that, for a millennium, Poland remained on the periphery of Western European civilization. That it was this particular civilization is important, as is the fact that we were on its boundaries, only finally starting to move towards a more central position recently. And there has never been a viable alternative. During the 19th century, there was the threat of central Poland and its eastern territories shifting in the opposite direction, towards the edges of the Byzantine and Muscovite civilization. But this met with considerable resistance, not least

intellectual circles. I don't like this sort of pigeonholing, but the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily recently published an article by my friend Marek Beylin called "I'm a Leftist Liberal", which really resonated with me. But the point is that we should be selective with accepting the torrent of innovation. The only problem is that although in theory it's easy to pick what's good or bad, what we like or dislike, doing so is almost impossible in practice. In reality, as the country becomes more open to influences from a more powerful, invasive culture, it has to accept them all. This is especially clear in the language and the media. The fast-disappearing handful of people who take a critical approach to the import and imitation of American pop culture have little influence.

**Do you think that the intelligentsia as it was originally understood is just this disappearing group of people?**

The language of contempt and hate, towards Jews or towards other traditionally derogated social and ethnic groups, must be rooted out of public life

from Russia itself. The only option for us was to choose Western European civilization; although we should count the blessings that came with it critically and dispassionately, now more than ever.

**Why?**

Because the West hasn't given us only good things, and the gates are open more widely than ever, which creates a real problem. Naturally, the harshest critics of modernity are supporters of the radical right. I, and others who think in a similar way, would never want to align ourselves with such criticism, although we may be in agreement in certain isolated cases. When I say "we", I mean liberal left

It's very difficult to say, because using a statistical understanding of the intelligentsia as an agglomeration of "intellectual" occupations, people educated to degree level, actually yields a rapidly growing, ubiquitous class which is in no way culturally cohesive. As a cultural formation which played a leading role in society, ideology and to a lesser degree in politics in the 19th and partially the 20th centuries, it does seem to be significantly narrower today. We do still have certain social circles whose members find it easy to communicate with one another because they have their own customs, a body of books that may not have been read by everyone but are understood to be important; they share a common language.

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*Sometimes all you need is a single word to know whether you're dealing with someone from your own sphere or somewhere quite outside it. These spheres have nothing to do with nationality or origins; they are about lifestyles, values, a certain ethos. This still resonates in some places, but it is dying out, and it's certainly losing its influence on politics.*

*of the name knows that – as Stanisław Ossowski was wont to say – disobedience is his professional duty. That he can be submissive in certain minor cases, but never in his thinking. Still, at times the pressure from the establishment was so great that its opponents had to give in, either under direct threat or as a result of enticement. On the other hand, at times the resistance was so great that*

*but they weren't much help. This is why we generally avoided working on recent history, because not many of us had the inclination to argue about every single article or write purely for the sake of writing. After the end of the Stalinist period, ideological pressures eased significantly, and no-one was forced to write texts going against their personal beliefs. So let's not paint ourselves as faux heroes or create dark legends.*



Jerzy Jedlicki with Bronisław Geremek, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Adam Michnik

**What was the relationship between science and politics before 1989?**

*There are two conflicting tales: one says that the intelligentsia and the entire nation constantly opposed the regime, while the other states that the intellectuals were the most submissive and opportunistic. In my view they are both false; things varied. The interests of science, literature and the arts are by their very nature different from those of the establishment. There has also been pressure from politicians who did not understand or want to accept this autonomy, and this did cause resistance, albeit not necessarily heroic. In the end every scientist, writer or artist worthy*

*it triumphed over the establishment. In our case, the severe ideological diktat was short-lived, only really lasting the six years between 1949-1955. Later on there were a few shorter periods of increased pressure from the authorities, such as 1968-1969, the last couple of years of Communist leader Gomułka's rule, and then again during martial law in the 1980s. But there is a difference between pressure requiring professors of history, philosophy, or law to write what the establishment wanted them to write, and one that simply forbid any writing on certain subjects. The latter lasted throughout the period, although with varying intensity. There were a few cunning tricks to circumvent censorship,*

**Did you belong to the Krzywe Koło Club [a freethinking discussion club based in Warsaw between 1955-1962]? Intellectual circles then seemed to be able to pull themselves together, to achieve something together.**

*I was a member and occasionally attended meetings. It's a good example of an answer to the question you asked earlier. It was not a political opposition; the club did what it felt was right, but it also took care not to provoke the authorities unnecessarily. Even so it was dissolved, since it posed a danger to the establishment just by being a fully autonomous and independent organization.*

**You also chair the Advisory Board of the „Open Republic” Association Against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia. Do you believe it is possible to positively shape Poles' attitudes so that the country is not perceived as being anti-Semitic?**

*We at „Open Republic” set ourselves a more modest target: to eliminate public attitudes and statements filled with contempt and hate, historical deceit and national pride, not just towards Jews, but other traditionally derogated social and ethnic groups. What people say in the privacy of their own homes is their business, and we wouldn't interfere with that. But we can investigate how history is taught in schools or depicted in the media. We have some influence here: reviewing textbooks, lobbying the education ministry, reviewing prosecutorial and court decisions, and publishing our own materials. The aim is to eradicate*

*hateful and obscene language from the public sphere, and we are slowly succeeding, both in terms of communication and attitudes. We try to follow the principle that if you teach people what they must not do or say because the law forbids it, or because it is simply not right, then they will start feeling and thinking differently with time. It seems impossible the other way round. If you're asking about foreign opinion, then in my view our country is perceived as anti-Semitic, which to a large degree it indeed is.*

**You spent the occupation in Warsaw. What kinds of attitudes did you encounter as a child?**

**I met noble and brave individuals, but I can't stand when such people are used to conceal the evil actions of others, like a fig leaf**

*I was in Poland, mainly in Warsaw, and always on the "Aryan" side; I went to school, I read underground newspapers. I met noble and brave people who helped us survive, found shelter and organized new documents. What I can't stand is when those righteous people are used to conceal the evil actions of others, like a fig leaf. We know what the situation was like in the countryside, but what was it like among intellectuals? The right-wing national democrats had a lot of influence, and it was tangible. When word got out in my school - a very good one - of my Jewish background, when my friends found out, I wasn't worried that someone would hand me over to the police or the Gestapo. It was inconceivable in those circles. But I did feel left out from my class, from my scout group. So my question is: were things good or bad in the overall tally? There simply isn't and can't be an overall tally.*

**Barbara Engelking-Boni, Jan Gross, and Jan Grabowski all recently published books about anti-Semitism in Poland.**

*I reviewed Grabowski's book in *Znak*, and Engelking's in *Polityka*. We should*

*be grateful to Gross that his three books have brought the topic of the occupation into Poland's public consciousness. The fact that they were first published abroad, that he himself lives and teaches abroad, made it easier for him to deal with the furor he caused and helped him endure it patiently and with dignity. It also means that subsequent publications following the historical trail he blazed and including far broader documentation haven't caused such uproar. The anger stopped with criticisms of Gross; his books were a breakthrough.*

**You have been awarded the St. George Cross for combating evil and propagating good.**

*I don't know what good is; there are good deeds and good people. I don't know what good in and of itself is, but apparently the "Tygodnik Powszechny" Foundation knows something about it. After the St. George Cross, I was also awarded a medal for tolerance, which is odd, because I believe that there is too much tolerance in Poland rather than too little, and I said so during the ceremony. Still, the Ecumenical Foundation "Tolerance" turned out to be tolerant, because they didn't take my medal away.*

**I understand that the people behind this award believe tolerance to be a good trait.**

*It is a double-edged sword.*

**Do you have any passions besides science?**

*I loved skiing for many years. I started skiing in the Tatras and the Beskids, and later, when it became possible, I started going to the Alps, to France, Italy, and Austria. Something I did for a week or 10 days per year, and only as a complete amateur, is hard to call a passion, but I enjoyed it enormously.*

**Our magazine is read by students and young people from across Poland. Do you have any messages for them?**

*I said it once before, in a previous interview, so I can say it again: try to behave so that you respect yourself when you look in the mirror. Don't do anything you might later be ashamed of. This doesn't mean I've never done things like that; of course I have. But you don't always realize it at the time - sometimes the reflection comes later, with experience. I have no other maxims.*

Interview by  
**Anna Zawadzka**  
Warsaw, 29 February 2012.

**Prof. Jerzy Jedlicki**, historian, studied the economic and social history of Polish lands during the 19th century, and the history of ideas in modern Europe. Between 1954-2009, he worked at the PAS Institute of History, leading the department of the history of the intelligentsia between 1991-2006. He edited *History of Poland's Intelligentsia Until 1918* (3 volumes, PAS Institute of History and Neriton, 2008), having also written volume 2. Between 1978-1981, he was one of the founders and lecturers of the underground Association for Educational Courses; he was interred during martial law. Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC, 1989-1990. Author of numerous essays and press publications. Chairman of the Advisory Board of the "Open Republic" Association Against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia; member of PEN International.