

Keynote speech
by Professor Irena Lipowicz “Science and Scientists under pressure – the Polish
experience in the 20th century”,
Warsaw, September 12-13 2013,¹

It is a very difficult task to show a complicated history of one European nation and its relations with other nations, and to show the extremely complicated history of a whole continent in the 20th century and, what’s even more difficult, to do this in an interesting way. I think this can be possible only in ways of a case study.

How was it to be a scientist in this country, in this city, in the 20th century from its beginning till the end? These final years I could participate in personally and could feel and see how the life in Warsaw was, because of my engagement in academic and political affairs at the beginning of the 90s.

However, describing the beginning of the 20th century requires a lot to make it sound interesting, especially with no direct experiences and memories. But still, for the scientist willing to reflect on the challenges posed to science in the 20th century there is – especially in this part of Europe – one question to be asked: what can a scientist do to oppose terror, to react to the lack of freedom in situations of the violation of basic rights and how far should we go facing such inhumane acts? What are the needs and possibilities to counter terror or regimes exercising terror against the people and what is the role of science in this respect?.

Let us look at the first years of the 20th century. Picture this: in 1904 in Warsaw there is a university but it is a Russian university. There is no possibility to study Polish language, nor the possibility to study Polish history or geography, and of course it is extremely difficult to study at all for a woman. The most famous female scientist at that time was of course Maria Skłodowska-Curie. Maria Skłodowska was born only a few kilometers from here, lived in the centre of Warsaw together with her father, who as a teacher gave the best possible education to his two daughters. Maria had to work to finance her and her sister’s studies, then she decided to move to Paris to study physics and mathematics, certainly not out of choice but because it was simply impossible for a Polish woman in Russia-occupied Poland to study and plan a scientific career. She never forgot Poland however, and here she later founded the first Radium Institute, one of the first institutes for radiology in Europe.

¹ The speech was held on the occasion of the 4th Symposium “Human Rights and Science” organized by the Human Rights Committee of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), at the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Warsaw

But let's go back to 1904: you are lucky if you were born male and wealthy enough to consider the possibility to study and teach at the Warsaw based Russian university; and you are lucky if you can write a book, have your own students, and maybe a chair. One of our famous professors of those times wrote very important words addressed to Polish scientists, his junior colleagues, warning that if they ever decide to write a book, it should really be the best book of their lives, because under those circumstances in Warsaw one could never know if it's not the last one. Unfortunately, this proved true in his very own case – after his first book, he lost his chair and had to go to Cracow, a part of the Habsburg occupied Galicia. If these were contemporary times he could have become a professor at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. But not so under the partition of Poland. First the Austrian bureaucrats forced the professor to take additional exams and to graduate from the Vienna University – and bear in mind that by that time he was already in his 40s! He made it and succeeded in becoming a Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. His was the life of a *scientist under pressure* in the beginning of a very important century.

Of course Polish scientists would have lived under a lesser pressure if they had agreed to accept this system and had not taken steps to prevent the Polish culture from disappearing. But these people here, in this strange city, came up with an idea: here in Warsaw they invented something called the *Flying University*. Its unique educational value was made possible only thanks to the sacrifice of many professors and students alike, who gathered in secret meetings, in private apartments to teach free of charge small groups of students. When discovered by the Russian authorities, they were sent to Siberia for a few years, but often without a right to come back to Poland at all. Because of this brutal measure Poland later had many professors in Siberia contributing to the academic developments in far Russia, for example in Irkutsk or Novosibirsk.

Of course one could be very lucky to be a student in the free and independent Poland of the 1920s. Then the Flying University became legal and simply one additional private university in Warsaw. Of course not everything was rosy. In the late 1930s conflicts at universities had not only a political but also a religious background. Poles of Jewish origin were discriminated against because of their religion and ethnic belonging. At the same time many Polish professors protested against extreme actions of one of the political parties. In general Poland was still a democratic country with some problems and deficiencies, but with strong science and with real freedom of science. For my domain of science – law – times were very difficult. Let us take as an example professor Tadeusz Bigo, a lawyer specializing in self-governmental and administrative law. In these years under Stalin and under Hitler suddenly new

tendencies in this field of science began to rise at Russian and German universities. Young professors began to publish against democracy, against self-government and one could be tempted to believe that this modern science was on its way to mark the end of democracy. I am very proud that Polish scholars, like professor Bigo, remained loyal to their principles at those difficult times. They had the abilities and potential to linguistically and scientifically question those tendencies in the West and the East. It was quite natural for them to compare their work with the results of their Russian or German colleagues. Out of this comparison they came out stronger and on the right side: keeping their principles of freedom and human rights unchanged. In this context one should also mention professor Stanisław Kasznica and professor Władysław Jaworski, who wrote significant articles, which even today allow us to express acknowledgment and pride.

In these wonderful twenty years between the two world wars there were also great and inspirational contacts between the Polish and German science, not only in natural science but also in law or history. But bad times should come soon and prove that even the best cooperation can be destroyed by hatred and deceit: in the beginnings of World War 2, when German Nazi-governor Hans Frank prepared the extermination of the Polish intellectual elite in Cracow, someone in Germany, most probably a former participant of the last Polish-German law congress prepared a complete list of Cracow based professors to be arrested and sent to concentration camps. We still do not know the name of the perpetrator.

During the 2nd World War times were extremely harsh for scientists. 20% of scholars of the Warsaw University and of the Lviv University were murdered. Cracow was the tragic showcase of the *Sonderaktion Krakau*, where German Nazis, personified by Bruno Müller permitted the Jagiellonian University to operate academically and invited all scholars to attend a lecture on the inauguration day. After approximately 200 scholars arrived the set-up became clear: the gathering was declared illegal and all of the participants, among them professors, lecturers and assistants, were arrested and sent to concentration camps Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg and Dachau, where many of them tragically died.

The same course of history can be applied to the eastern part of Poland occupied by the Soviet Union. As a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact signed on August 23 1939, only days before the Nazi German invasion in Poland and a few weeks before their allies – the Soviets – followed suit according to the Pact, the Soviets arrested Polish professors and sent them to Gulags in Siberia, where they were killed. Exceptionally dramatic was of course the case of Polish scholars with Jewish origin.

Generally one can say without a doubt, that being a scholar or lawyer in the occupied Poland was a tragic fate. For me one of the most dramatic episodes of the 2nd World War in the academic circles was the life of professor Roman Longchamps de Berier. Having French roots and three prior generations living in Poland, he was arrested with his sons by the Gestapo. His wife was told that her family would be freed if she agreed to send in her last son still remaining in freedom. The Gestapo also warned her that by refusing to cooperate she would be responsible for her family's death - as a consequence of which she sent her last son in. The Gestapo killed all of them. During the war the widow of Professor Longchamps de Berier tried to rescue the library of her husband's family. In the late 1970s, she sent it to the Silesian University where I was a student. We were the first to open the cases and read through the books of this private Longchamps library.

Another striking example of how hard life was for scientists under the Nazi and Soviet rule in occupied Poland is professor Karolina Lanckorońska. The first female professor at the faculty of history of arts at the Lviv University and in Vienna, Professor Karolina Lanckorońska was also member of the top aristocratic Vienna circle. She described the execution in Lviv, where 30 scholars of the university, among whom were the Longchamps family, were killed. Her description was later used as a report on the Soviet terror and transferred as a secret document to the Polish exile government in France.

You can see, that this is a very sad story of terror. Today, Poles ask themselves what could or should be done in such situations. We can organize underground universities, secret teaching, construct a well-functioning underground state with all branches of government and diplomatic ties. Six months into the war, Poland – despite all these losses – established two flying universities working permanently in Warsaw. Because of the total German Nazi terror in Poznan it was not even possible to have a flying university there, so the Poznan University was moved to Warsaw. This was done under circumstances, where any teaching exceeding basic writing and arithmetic skills was punished with Auschwitz, so as to introduce the Nazi idea of an average uneducated Pole. Therefore middle schools were prohibited and so were universities. At the same time the Union of Polish Teachers organized secret classes for 140 thousand Polish pupils who passed the middle school certificate, the so called *matura*. The teaching system was sophisticated and every participant was well aware of the risks involved. They knew perfectly well how to behave not to draw any unnecessary attention when going to private apartments and they knew what they should say in case of a Gestapo raid.

There were different types of universities, e.g. the polytechnic schools and seminaries – with one outstanding student Karol Wojtyła, the later Pope John Paul 2, who was secretly studying in Cracow. The courage of the Polish scientists of that time deserves the highest admiration. Courage as a personal feature is very individual, but here we had a whole system of education, and all my professors after the war stressed that the education in this framework was real and so were the exams. Of course it was not possible to have all kind of exercises or all kind of training, which you normally have at the university, but these people not only risked their lives for the youth, the nation and science, they knew about the possible consequences and they still engaged themselves with passion and restlessness, the level of which we sometimes today lack. We are very proud of them. They certainly paid their tribute to *science under pressure*. It is very important to understand the logic of the German Nazi system in the occupied Poland: The Holocaust stood for the extermination of a whole nation. In the case of the Polish nation it was partly different: we were supposed to lose our elite and be degraded to the level of cheap labor force serving the German “Herrenrasse”. That is why Poland was supposed to be deprived of any science. Of course there were collaborators, who betrayed their country, their families and cooperated with the enemy. There were even professors working at Soviet-installed universities or those who informed the Soviets, who was working at flying universities. On the other hand, however, one needs to mention the German minority in Warsaw, living here for many generations and contributing to the well-being of Poland with their every-day work in pre-war times. These families were often very loyal to Poland, their chosen home country. And the price they had to pay for their loyalty, when German Nazi occupants arrived in Warsaw was the highest: many were deported to the concentration camp in Mauthausen in Austria and killed. It would be really wonderful, if we could learn more about these families, it would also be a very good topic for today’s Polish-German relations.

Scientists exercising their academic passions in post-war Poland could hope for a wonderful world in the late 1940s and the 1950s: it seemed the question of an existing state and its academic institutions was not open anymore. There were universities and middle schools, and as a scientist at that time you could have a vision of living a normal life. Too early and in the end false were such hopes. The Soviet system for all countries on this side of the Iron Curtain was very similar. Not similar however was the reaction of the people, although one has to remember that even the slightest differences in the Soviet policy in respective satellite states under their control could have led to different systemic solutions. And so the academic situation in Poland was different than that of the GDR or Czechoslovakia. Because I started this presentation

with remarks concerning the beginnings of the 20th century, now you can see why the Polish situation at universities under communism was better than in Prague or in East Berlin. Because of our past I could study law, but my colleagues with the same beliefs and philosophy of life couldn't study law in Prague or East Berlin; they could maybe study nature science but not social science. The past was very important. Of course, we also had Marxist and Stalinist scholars. There was the secret police trying to find class enemies at each university and to install political terror. Many true scientists protected their students from this contaminated political atmosphere and there was something special in the air at universities of Warsaw, Gdańsk or Toruń. It was this sense of solidarity between old professors and young students. There were many cases in which young people wishing to study were not allowed to do so for political reasons and professors stood behind them, writing letters to their colleagues in other cities praising the qualities of such candidates. Many were successful.

The presence of the secret police brought about a permanent suspicion, which destroyed many branches of science in general and law in particular. For example the constitutional law was completely under the influence of the dominating ideology, so was economy and other most politicized areas of science. I have with me a book entitled *Ius Publicum Europaeum* and in the part about Poland you can see the description of a very specific situation². In Germany the constitutional law and the administrative law are coupled, in Poland it was very important to separate both, to move the administrative law as far away from the constitutional law as possible, so to rescue this element of science. Philosophy, economy, constitutional law and other disciplines were not really scientific in these times. But administrative law could still survive.

Now I would like to move to another positive aspect of the Polish-German relations. If you tried to find what was common for many reformers in Poland in the 1980s and 1990s, it would strike you that they were all lucky enough to receive either the Alexander von Humboldt scholarship or the Fulbright scholarship. These were very important back then. They gave young scientists the possibility to go "to the future", to work filled with ideas but without the ideological burden and to explore possibilities of true work for their country. Here I would like to thank the German science of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for their selection. It was done in perfect terms, because it managed to recruit people who afterwards wanted to go back to Poland and help to transform it. In the case of Alexander von Humboldt 85% of the scholars came back. Today we would like to support such a programme for the benefit of our eastern

² *Ius Publicum Europeum* – C.F. Müller Verlag – Heidelberg 2011

neighbors, although the conditions cannot be compared. Young Ukrainian and Belarusian scholars deserve the same chances we had 30 years ago.

I have started this speech with the concept of flying universities. In the 1970s the Polish democratic opposition suddenly re-discovered the old but not rusty ideas anew. Independent scholars started to give lectures in private apartments of Warsaw, teaching students in all prohibited branches of science. The *Society of Scientific Courses* and the Flying University in Warsaw and similar institutions in other Polish cities across Poland helped us prepare the intellectual backbone of Solidarność. After Solidarność became popular and gained strength, things were simpler and with time we established not only studies at the flying university, but also research. For example the underground legislative council of Solidarność worked very intensively and prepared legal solutions for the expected transitional period and independence. Of course at the beginnings of the 1980s this forecast was rather far-fetched, but in the end, in 1989, it turned out to be within reach.

Nowadays, with regular universities many conflicts come atop, almost in each faculty, at all schools, which seems to be a normal state. Additionally, some conflicts from the past persist, since for the sake of the system in some cases it was difficult to introduce clear-cut distinctions between those who collaborated with communism and those who remained loyal to democracy, the underground and Solidarność. From my own university in Silesia I know examples of students or professors bothered by the secret police, because a “colleague” was denouncing Solidarność-members. One of my professors at the Silesian University, professor Sobczak was a rather demanding type of a scholar. He was always strict and maybe not the hero of an average student. But one day he was forced to leave the university and no one knew why. After many years I discovered letters of denunciation against him prepared by one of his colleagues for the communist secret services.

The human being has strengths and weaknesses. I do not want to show you an idealistic vision of the Polish universities and science, but a system which in spite of being *under pressure* and often under real threat and terror, succeeded in promoting students and scholars. This lesson gives us hope and strength for our future. What we saw in the beginnings of the 20th century, what the Polish scholars accomplished in terms of protecting the language, culture and tradition against the Russian occupants set an example for their followers during the 2nd World War and later during communism. In this sense we were lucky. As a final remark I would like to say that each sign of courage, each sign of good principle in our academic work is fundamental

for the future. We do not know what the future holds. If democracy prevails, we will be fine. But otherwise, we will have to remember that independent thinking, continuity and sustainability in education and science are priorities to be protected. Also loyalty towards one's professors, especially the bravest ones, who set good examples is crucial for the development of one's character. These qualities are neither Polish nor German, Russian or Czech, but are, as I believe, universal.

I would like to thank the Leopoldina and all of you for your contribution to the progress in science, your enduring support for our colleagues in other countries and your continuing efforts to uphold the idea of Alexander von Humboldt. It will bring good seeds in the future, I am sure of that. Thank you very much!