

IN MEMORIAM: PROFESSOR MICHAŁ ŁESIÓW (1928–2016)

Michał Łesiów: linguist, outstanding specialist in Slavic languages, researcher of Polish and Ukrainian, teacher of many philologists and folklorists, a man of Polish-Ukrainian borderland.

Michał Łesiów was born on 3rd May 1928 in Huta Stara, a Polish village in the Ternopil Oblast in Ukraine, where he started his early education. The Łesiów family suffered hardship under the German and Soviet occupation during WWII, including the loss of Michał's father in combat. In 1946 Michał Łesiów left his home village with his mother and sisters and moved to the Recovered Territories in western Poland, where he settled down in the village of Zielin in the Szczecin province. He obtained his secondary education in Gorzów Wielkopolski and passed his *matura* examination (final secondary school examination) in 1950. During the years 1950–1955 Michał Łesiów studied at the Catholic University of Lublin, the only university during the Stalinist period that could claim to have freedom in education and research. There, he studied Polish philology together with Wojciech Górny, Wiesław Myśliwski, and Zenon Leszczyński. In 1955, he defended his MA thesis titled "The dialect of the village of Stara Huta in the former Buchach Province" under the supervision of Professor Tadeusz Brajerski.

The people of Huta Stara, Michał's birthplace, were mostly Polish and spoke the East Borderland Polish dialect, greatly influenced by the neighbouring Ukrainian dialects. Professor Brajerski's passion for dialectology, the branch of linguistics flourishing at that time, greatly influenced Michał Łesiów's further academic interests.

After graduating, Łesiów began his academic career at the Institute of the Polish Language at the Polish Academy of Sciences (IJP PAN) in Kraków under the supervision of the remarkable dialectologist Kazimierz Nitsch. Nevertheless, in 1956 he decided to return to Lublin, where he took the post of academic teacher at the Department of Polish Philology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS), headed at the time by Leon Kaczmarek. Łesiów taught descriptive and historical grammars of Polish

and of Old Church Slavonic, as well as a course in Polish dialectology and comparative grammar of Slavonic languages, for which he had excellent linguistic background. Meanwhile, he participated in the academic research of the Institute, where the main linguistic project, headed by Paweł Smoczyński, was to collect the regional toponomastic data and prepare an atlas of the Lublin province dialects. Michał Łesiów collected the linguistic material from forty different places of the Lublin region. The data were deposited in the archives of the Department of the History and Dialectology of the Polish Language at the Department of Polish Philology, UMCS.

From 1960 to 1961, Michał Łesiów worked as a research fellow in Kyiv, where he began his research on the development of the Ukrainian language, the research crowned in 1962 with the doctoral dissertation “The Language of West Ukrainian Dramas in the 17th and early 18th c.”, defended at the Philological Faculty of the University of Warsaw. The year 1963 marked a breakthrough in Michał Łesiów’s academic career: he was made responsible for organising the Russian language programme at UMCS. During his time as the head of the Department of Russian Philology, four post-doctoral (habilitation) degrees and six doctoral degrees were conferred upon members of the Department’s faculty, which renders Michał Łesiów the founding father of Russian and Slavic studies in Lublin.

Michał Łesiów received his post-doctoral Habilitation Degree in 1973 on presenting the monograph *Proper names of the Lublin region*. Soon afterwards, he left for the United States, where he delivered a series of guest lectures at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. from 1973 to 1974, and taught the course there on Slavic linguistics, in particular on the Ukrainian language. In 1986, he was a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. This experience brought him world-wide recognition as an expert in Slavic languages and resulted in a long-standing cooperation with the most outstanding scholars in research field. In recognition of his achievements, Michał Łesiów’s name was included in Polish (1996) and Ukrainian (1967) encyclopaedias.

As a token of appreciation and trust from his Alma Mater *milieu*, Professor Łesiów was chosen Dean of the Faculty of Humanities in the first free elections in 1981, the year of the Solidarity movement. It was due to his initiative that the Faculty Council, in the first days of the martial law of 1981, issues a resolution in defence of the Faculty’s detained members.

The number of M.A. students, doctoral students, and future professors who had the honour and pleasure to know Michał Łesiów during their careers exceeds one hundred. I dare take this opportunity to explain what was it that made us, his former students, love and respect our Professor.

He was a dedicated scholar whose work was his passion, his natural need, as well as a socially important activity. In his numerous publications, he linked facts of language with things folk and national, especially in analyses of Polish and Ukrainian. This is demonstrated most of all in the following book titles: *School Grammar of the Ukrainian Language* (1996) and *Ukrainian Proverbs in Poland* (1997). Professor Łesiów was very sensitive to rural dialects and folk culture; he had the greatest respect for “simple people”, the value tried to develop and instill in his co-workers.

Michał Łesiów was also sensitive to literary poetics. Besides his purely linguistic studies on the phonetics of dialects, he authored many articles on peasant poetry. Łesiów loved folklore: he collected and published folk legends and songs. He practised what may be called “linguistic realism”, cherishing, collecting, and analysing linguistic data. Łesiów’s legacy may thus serve as a reservoir of examples, as well as an inspiration for many generations of linguists.

Michał Łesiów was an open and versatile person, always willing to share his knowledge with his younger colleagues and other scholars. He read, commented on, and reviewed their work. Up until the end of his life, he remained an active linguist, giving invited talks at conferences and acting as a member of numerous editorial boards, including that of this very journal, *Ethnolinguistics*. His contribution and invaluable help also included expert reviews of recent Ukrainian publications.

Michał Łesiów was a man of peace, dialogue, who worked towards the reconciliation between Ukrainians and Poles. He was persistent in calling for a better understanding and communication between the two nations, and always strived to overcome prejudice on either side.

Personally, I owe to Professor Łesiów very much. He was my master and teacher in the exploration of the Ukrainian language, Ukrainian culture, and Ukrainian songs. It is from his classes of Ukrainian that I remember Dmytro Pavlychko’s wise poem on the immortality of things made by a good man:

*We are all immortal:
One man raised a child,
Another wrote a song, if only one,
And he who did not know how to do anything else
planted a tree by the road.*

Michał Łesiów was not only an outstanding scholar, but above all a wise and a good man. This is how he will be remembered.

Jerzy Bartmiński

Translated by Agnieszka Mierzwińska-Hajnos