

Benon Miśkiewicz (1930–2008)

Summary

To mark the centenary of the founding of the University of Poznań, the rectoral authorities have published numerous materials dedicated to this event. Among them, a series of profiles of successive rectors of the Poznań university is of particular significance. This volume is dedicated to Professor Benon Miśkiewicz, who left a distinctive mark on the history of the university for several reasons. Firstly, he is the only person in the institution's history to have held the post for three terms. Moreover, if we take into account the fact that he preceded these three terms by serving as vice-rektor, during which he was also part of the university's highest leadership structures, we arrive at an impressive 13 years in this honourable position. The second reason for treating Rektor Miśkiewicz's tenure with special consideration is more complex. It stems from an assessment of the times in which he held his post.

The last 40 years of the 20th century went down in Polish history as a systematic, slow decline of the political system imposed on us after the end of the Second World War. This system attempted, with varying degrees of success, to achieve goals which, though generally admirable in theory, proved unfeasible in practice. In the quest to uphold these theoretical principles, as well as to convince society of the validity of putting these theories into practice, higher education institutions were meant—as the authorities wished—to prove highly useful. Universities, in particular, were seen as bastions of research into social phenomena understood in the broad sense, as well as planning of political actions, and educating the younger generation in a way that would make them approve of the existing reality. There can be only one conclusion to be drawn from the above observation: the specific expectations directed towards higher education institutions by the authorities must also have applied to those individuals heading these institutions. To meet these expectations, a person appointed by political forces to the post of rector not only had to express views aligning with those of the state authorities but also by the ability to adapt their actions to the expec-

tations of decision-makers. This was a fundamental condition, without the fulfilment of which the university could not function efficiently.

This publication seeks to illustrate how Professor Miśkiewicz, as the Poznań university's long-time rektor, performed his duties within the context of that era. This question takes on particular significance given that the university he headed ranked among Poland's leading universities, which might presumably be attributed, to some extent at least, to the rector's administration. One might therefore ask: At what price? At what cost? Was it merely the result of personal decisions by the rector and his colleagues, or did it involve the entire university community?

The first part of this study focuses on Miśkiewicz's childhood and teenage years, when, as the son of a Polish officer, he fled in panic with his mother and brother from the aggressor from the East, only to end up working in a factory whilst studying under the occupation of a second aggressor. The years following the end of the war proceeded according to the accepted rhythm: secondary school, high school exams, and choosing a university. This period was both interesting and significant in terms of his organisational activity within the scouting movement and his engagement with the new political reality while still at secondary school. Such behaviour suggested that the young Benon would take an active stance towards life. Yet this could not be entirely attributed to a fear that, as an officer's child, he might receive harsh treatment from the oppressive political system of the time; rather, it was a conscious choice, driven by a desire to achieve ambitious goals and play a significant role in that reality.

Choosing to study history and archaeology at the University of Poznań proved to be the right decision, both in terms of his intellectual interests and the opportunities arising from postgraduate prospects linked to that knowledge. The humanistic and social dimensions of history as a discipline, combined with the young master's organisational skills, were qualities highly sought after at the time. These assets, combined with intellectual potential and diligence, virtually guaranteed success on the academic path. This is indeed what transpired, as the concluding part of the first chapter shows. This section concludes with a discussion of Benon Miśkiewicz's academic achievements and the subsequent stages of his career progression, marked by the acquisition of academic degrees and titles: doctor, associate professor, and professor.

Parts Two and Three chronicle Prof. Miśkiewicz's career, first as vice-rektor and subsequently as rektor of Adam Mickiewicz University. Subsequent events at AMU are set against the backdrop of developments on the wider national political stage; only in this way can one attempt to understand the specific decisions taken by the rektor and his associates from the university's senior management. These events are documented primarily on the basis of archival materials, particularly the minutes of collegial bodies (its Senate, faculty councils) and the accounts of those who participated in those events. However, the guiding principle here is to highlight the role of the rektor as a leader, one who was simultaneously a driving force but also the implementer of specific solutions that were imposed (and sometimes merely suggested

to him). Here, the author of this text encountered a significant obstacle: the existing sources do not always make it possible to determine to what extent events unfolded in accordance with the rektor's will or the degree to which they resulted from compliance with legal requirements or the expectations of higher authorities. The interpretation proposed by the author may not always satisfy the reader.

The final part of the book largely falls outside the scope defined by the nature of the 'rektorial' series of publications, and consequently, outside the author's interest. Having completed three terms in the highest office at the university, Miśkiewicz took the helm of the entire higher education system in Poland for a further seven years. These years are analysed through the prism of Minister Miśkiewicz's relationship primarily with his alma mater. References to other decisions concerning the situation of higher education as a whole are therefore occasional, occurring when these are legal acts binding on all higher education institutions, or when a specific situation is indirectly related to Adam Mickiewicz University. Such a situation arose, for example, when the former AMU Consultation Centre in Szczecin was transformed into the University of Szczecin, largely thanks to Minister Miśkiewicz's support. In this section of the publication, in particular, the attitude of the protagonist required an assessment that lies beyond the scope of the historian's interpretative capabilities. This may leave the potential reader feeling somewhat unsatisfied. Fully aware of this, the author is submitting this text for publication.

Translated by Rob Pagett