

Professor Dr Izydora Dąmbska in Secret Teaching*

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I met Professor Dr I. Dąmbska sometime around the summer of 1941. She hasn't changed since then. Apparently, there are people who remain unchanged over time and space, always the same – though this has nothing to do with the liveliness of the mind, which is eager and engaged. Ms Iza's unchanging nature is the steadfastness of her attitude and character, is something akin to the Envoy in Zbigniew Herbert's volume *Pan Cogito* [Mr Cogito]:

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize
Go upright among those who are on their knees
among those with their backs turned and those toppled in the dust
.....
repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends
because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly
like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand
and they will reward you with what they have at hand
with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap
go because only in this way will you be admitted to the company of cold
skulls
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of kingdom without limit and the city of ashes
Be faithful Go¹

* M. Oberc, *Profesor dr Izydora Dąmbska w tajnym nauczaniu*, "Ruch Filozoficzny" 1978, Vol. 36, Nos. 2–4, pp. 121–126.

¹ English translation: Z. Herbert, *Mr Cogito*, trans. J. Carpenter, B. Carpenter, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, pp. 61–62.

She is indeed stubborn, but not with that inert stubbornness in a pejorative sense – as Professor Czeżowski recently described stubbornness in contrast to perseverance during a lecture at the Philosophical Society. She is stubborn because she is faithful – faithful to those eternal moral values that remain unchanged in distinguishing between good and evil, a sense of honour and servility, courage and cowardice. And it was necessary to be not only perseverant in those times, but also stubborn, just as it is now often required, even against rationalistic premises that we tend to identify, in the colloquial sense, with common sense and considering possibilities and situations.

What reasonable premises could have justified organizing secret education almost immediately after the entry of the Hitlerite army? The need to create secret military organizations was much more appealing to reason and imagination. But to teach Polish grammar at that very moment?

My friend, only a 14-year-old at the time (I don't remember his name, and I don't know what happened to him) – also widened his eyes in surprise when having made it to Ms Iza (Ms Iza doesn't remember who sent him or where he came from), and upon requesting – because he had heard that Ms Iza was hiding one of our wounded senior officers – that the officer teaches them, the 14-year-olds, how to fight, she responded, "There will be time for that too. Do you know *Reduta Ordon* [Ordon's Redoubt]? And the third part of *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve]?" And that's how – as she says – it began. From the experiences of our past, from the Romantics.

She was the first in Lvov to decide to organize secret teaching – initially in Polish language and history, and later in all subjects, because, as she used to say, "An ignorant slave is a double slave; a corrupted slave is a quadruple one." So – what can I say: Philomaths and Philarets! And apparently, it was no coincidence that the first emerging groups took on names like Plater (after the Emilia who preferred to die rather than surrender) – I was fortunate to belong to this group – as well as Skłodowska, a romantic from a different era and field, and Staszic, who was primarily concerned with preserving human thought during times of political danger.

When in July 1941, the delegate Wycech came from Warsaw to Lvov to organize secret teaching, Ms Iza provided him with a complete roster of 20 study groups (each consisting of four to six people) at the secondary education level, already operating at full capacity. These groups were divided into two tracks:

mathematics with natural sciences and humanities. Professor Dr I. Dąmbska, then Dr Dąmbska, together with Dr Fryderyka Jarzębińska, headed these groups until July 1944. At the same time, before the formal organization of the secret university began, she spontaneously started giving philosophy lectures to students in the secret university-level groups.

How much perseverance and stubbornness did it take to keep going? How much faith was required in the belief that educating kids, giving them the opportunity to complete high school, and at a very high level, was a fundamental value that needed to be nurtured? After all, I was just a kid back then – one of the youngest members of the Union of Armed Struggle in Lvov – when the chief (as in Różewicz's *Zaraz skoczę szefie* [In a Moment I Will Jump, Chief]) told me, “You must stop your studies. You can't do both. You'll get caught because of some grammar lesson and drag us all down with you. The war will end soon... how long can it last? Six months? A year? You'll catch up! You'll make up for it!”

But Ms Iza said, “We can't afford to waste time, no matter how long it takes, and who knows?” – she always took a sceptical view of overly optimistic predictions, those written with the finger in the air – “we can't waste any time.” And she infected us, the kids, with her sombre enthusiasm, her refusal to offer consolation, her inspiration to endure and strive, even if the golden fleece turned out to be nothingness, even if we perished in the sands while crossing the desert. So I stayed in the organization – after all, Ms Iza was also in it and wasn't just teaching – and I didn't stop my studies. In 1943, I completed my *matura* exams in those very secret groups and enrolled in the secret university philosophy programme. But I only managed to attend a few lectures by Professor Ajdukiewicz before the Gestapo arrested me... and not for grammar. It so happened that when I was arrested, I had notes from the secret lectures in my briefcase... but no one, neither from the organization nor from the secret education, got caught because of me.

I remember when they brought me back from that first interrogation on Pełczyńska Street, along with my mother and father, and how in the *Geschäftszimmer* on Łącki Street, my father – evidently not having much faith in the endurance or stubbornness of his teenage daughter – whispered to me: “Did you say anything about Dąmbska and Szumska [Dr Urszula Szumska taught us history]?” – as if there was nothing else, neither the weapons under the bed, nor the secret mail, nor the pamphlets – and how the alert Gestapo officer immediately asked, “Was hat er gesagt, was hat er gesagt?” [What did he say, what did he say?].

And my quick, though awkward, response in German was: “Er will ein Glas Wasser bekommen... er will trinken...” [He wants to get a glass of water... he wants to drink...], and the Gestapo officer’s loud laughter followed: “Sofort, sofort, sie werden viel trinken in unserem Hotel...” [Right away, right away, they will drink a lot in our hotel...] and my father’s astonished gaze, through which I saw tenderness and something like pride, relaxation, relief. So, for my father, this was also the most important thing: the groups of children learning and those who risked their lives every day to teach them.

And our *matura* exams! I now look at the documents – greyed out, faded sheets from those days, recently sent to me from Bytom by Dr Urszula Szumska. They have survived all these years. On each one, written in neat, bold handwriting: Dr Izydora Dąbska – Chair of the National Examination Board; and then: members of the Examination Board: Polish language – Dr Dąbska Izydora, German language – Burzyńska Anna, history and topics – Dr Chmielowska Maria.

Or: Chair of the National Examination Board – Dr Szumska Urszula; members: Polish language – Dr Dąbska Izydora, mathematics, physics, chemistry – Dr Puchalik Marian.

Or: Chair of the National Examination Board – Cyganowa Teresa. Members: Dr I. Dąbska, Burzyńska, Chmielowska.

The names of our professors appear: Maria Homme – French language, Ludmiła Madlerowa – Polish language, Helena Sawczyńska – mathematics, physics, chemistry, Anula Majerska – chemistry, Helena Słoniewska – biology, Tadeusz Lewicki, Teresa Cyganowa, Stanisław Cygan – Latin, Anna Nikliburcowa – French language, Fryderyka Jarzębińska – Polish language, Fr Marian Rechowicz – religion, Professor Halaubrenner – physics, Stefania Des Loges – French language, Maria Kruczkiewicz – history; but always, on every document – Dr Izydora Dąbska. And I have these graduation certificates in front of me – that’s how many survived – 40 pieces!

The certificates are backdated, for example, from 1934 (understood as 1943), with the last one from July 1944. Memories come back – faded memories – how fortunate that they are confirmed by authentic documents. How much perseverance and stubbornness it must have taken to preserve them, to save these certificates from Lvov instead of a dining set or clothes, something which at the time – as rational considerations would suggest – seemed more useful and sensible to save.

But what can I say? I remember my graduation exam as if through a fog – so much has happened in my life since then. A small room in some district of Lvov, a candle on the table, someone whispering that “...the Gestapo is in the neighbouring villa”... and the calm voice of Ms Iza: “Please do not disturb, the arbiturient is writing.” I was writing my Polish language graduation essay. I know I wrote 16 pages on office paper, but if it weren’t for the surviving documents, I wouldn’t even remember what topic I wrote about, but here it is – first the report: at the top, it says “Plater” – that’s us, our group, and then:

On 7 August 1934, at 4:00 p.m., the candidate B.M. [that is, me] was dictated the topics for the German language:

Das *Nibelungenlied* als Ausdruck germanischer Denkungsart [The *Nibelungenlied* as an expression of Germanic thought].

Schiller als Stürmer und Dränger [Schiller as a Sturm und Drang writer].

Wie kann ein jeder Nutzen bringen? [How can everyone contribute?]

The candidate chose the second topic. The dictation of the topic lasted until 4:05 p.m. The candidate submitted the essay at 8:05 p.m. There were no irregularities during the exam.

She was under surveillance from 4:00 p.m. to 8:05 p.m. – I.b.

On 10 August 1934, at 1:00 p.m., the candidate B.M. was dictated the topics for the Polish language:

1. Echa klasyczne w twórczości Kochanowskiego [Classical echoes in the works of Kochanowski].

2. Pesymizm i drogi jego przezwyciężenia w twórczości Słowackiego i Krasińskiego [Pessimism and ways to overcome it in the works of Słowacki and Krasiński].

3. Legiony Dąbrowskiego i Piłsudskiego w pieśni i powieści [Dąbrowski’s and Piłsudski’s legions in song and novel].

The candidate chose the second topic. The dictation of the topic lasted until 1:02 p.m. The candidate submitted the essay at 5:30 p.m. There were no irregularities during the exam.

She was under surveillance from 1:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. – [no signature].

And now in the table:

WRITTEN EXAM

Polish language 10 August 1934	Pesymizm i drogi jego przezwyciężenia w twórczości Słowackiego i Krasińskiego [Pessimism and ways to overcome it in the works of Słowacki and Krasiński]
German language 7 August 1934	Schiller als Stürmer und Dränger [Schiller as a Sturm und Drang writer]

ORAL EXAM 12 August 1934

Religion	Exempted
Polish language	Text: Wyspiański, <i>Wesele</i> [The Wedding] (Act I, Sc. 1) The depiction of society in <i>Wesele</i> and the Polish cause in Wyspiański's work – accurate and comprehensive answers Polish political writing in the 18th century against the background of the Age of Enlightenment Folk dialects and their literary significance. For 2 and 3, the answers were accurate
German language	Joseph Görres, <i>Die deutschen Volksbücher</i> Goethe, <i>Faust</i> Allg. Charakteristik des positivistischen Zeitalters [General characteristics of the positivists era] Very good answers
History and top-ics	The Acropolis in Athens (topography, examples of particular styles) – good Conquests of Charlemagne – comprehensive and intelligent response Kościuszko and the Legion based on readings – accurate, detailed, and comprehensive analysis The idea of federation in Poland and in Europe – very good

And finally, the summary of grades:

From the first and second years of high school: religion, Polish, Latin, German, history, topics, mathematics, physics, chemistry, propaedeutics, biology.

Grades from the written and oral exams...

Final grade...

She passed the matriculation exam at the general humanities high school of the humanities type, with a very good result.

Chairwoman of the National Examination Board – Cyganowa Teresa.

Members of the Examination Board: Polish language – Dąbmska Izydora, German language – Burzyńska Anna, history and topics – Chmielowska Maria.

This is the protocol from my matriculation exam and my *matura* certificate. There are 40 such protocols and diplomas – the wording of every question, the assessment of each answer, the solemn phrase: “No irregularities occurred during the exam” – as if we would even dare! In those times...? “Under surveillance from... to...” – just like in the good old days.

The memory returns: the Gestapo in the neighbouring villa and the calm voice: “Please do not disturb, the arbiturient is writing.”

And those precise questions, often related to the candidate’s interests. I browse through them:

Fastnacht Helena. – Polish language: 1. Chopin in Polish poetry; 2. Music and poetry – a comparison of these art forms and their interplay in religious, folk, and military songs; 3. The highland dialect and its literary significance.

Helena Fastnacht was the one who saw nothing beyond music, the one who also attended the conservatory – of course, the secret one.

Kubisty Jadwiga. – Polish language: 1. The Philomaths and Philarets (history, ideals, influence on the spiritual development and works of Mickiewicz).

She was the one with a historical inclination. And so on.

Ms Iza knew us well. Her lessons stimulated thinking, encouraged discussion..., sometimes extending almost until curfew. If any of us managed to stay late, they would walk her home, and along the way, we could discuss anything – the meaning of existence and death, happiness, faith, and its collapse. One could forget that she was a professor. She talked with everyone as an equal – she was the one who seemed shy, questioning, allowing us to believe that we were the ones discovering new lands, that we – not she – were the wise philosophers. She didn’t convince, she didn’t impose..., she waited for us to reach conclusions on our own. In Polish class she would sometimes read excerpts of poems – quietly, calmly, and in a way that often made us cry, and then we were ready to shoot and die, even though she never said: shoot, fight, die with honour! She never used grand words, she couldn’t stand pathos.

I think she taught us much more than grammar and who wrote what. Then, and even today, I sometimes think: if I did this or that, what would she have said about it? I believe she taught us, above all, to distinguish good from evil, baseness from honesty, and not just to distinguish – but to persistently, stubbornly, defend the most valuable virtues inherent within a person – even at the cost of one’s own life.