

A Remembrance of Stanisław Ossowski*

Jan Strzelecki

These words will be about Stanisław Ossowski as a teacher, as he was one of the people who linked their life's project with this task, saw their social calling in this role, and in it achieved a form that would arouse gratitude and a kind of reverence from all those who had the opportunity to encounter him; he fulfilled this role to the end with unwavering willingness and readiness, giving it a special beauty with his captivating humanity; it was the central form of his friendship with people, it was his gift given to those near and far.

It is difficult to free oneself from solemn words, which he disliked so much, but let the manner in which he faded away be a justification; in a solemn manner, because the solemn matter was the spiritual strength with which he fulfilled his calling until his last days, despite his body being consumed by illness.

This man was a teacher in a diverse, rich sense of the word; starting from the moment he began to fulfil – for ten years – the duties of a teacher in high schools in Warsaw, preparing at the same time, often at night, his scientific works, until the moment when, ten days before his death, he appeared for the last time in the building of the University of Warsaw, entrusting his collaborators and listeners with an extensive programme of work he wanted to conduct with them. He was a teacher in the most literal sense of the word, as well as in the sense in which its content goes beyond the act of mediating between people and the body of knowledge, beyond the act of perfecting and transmitting ways of developing science – and reaches into the realm called wisdom and becomes giving an example of attitude towards certain values and providing care for the development of these values in the life of society.

Therefore, it is impossible, while attempting to write down words about his teaching, not to try to define the values associated with his vocation. Then one

* J. Strzelecki, *Wspomnienie o Stanisławie Ossowskim*, "Życie Warszawy," 19.11.1963, p. 3.

enters the circle of symbols often used in not always unambiguous sense, symbols whose historical adventures Stanisław Ossowski masterfully followed and depicted. But there is no other way, so let us try to stick only to the meaning that he imparted to these symbols with his words and life.

So he was a humanist; he was one when he wrote *U podstaw estetyki* [At the Foundations of Aesthetics], trying to organize and explain the issues that “were imposed on us by our interaction with works of visual arts and with the beauty of nature, were imposed on us by concerts and theatre, and cinema, were imposed on us by reflections on literary works and the history of art,” and when he took an active part in the work of the board of the Workers’ Society for the Care of Children, overseeing the Society’s schools in Żoliborz. He was one when he accompanied from afar the fate of Republican Spain and rejoiced in the achievements of the Spanish left, that “here, in the areas of Spain and Catalonia not occupied by fascists, during heroic fights, amidst the roar of cannons and aeroplane bombs, new cultural values were emerging, there were carried out basic reforms in matters of education and cultural organization, broad plans were being drawn up to revive the exuberance of intellectual life” – just as when he wrote during the occupation the study *Ku nowym formom życia społecznego* [Towards New Forms of Social Life], reflecting on the issues of socialist democracy, in which the development of the human would be undertaken based on institutions overcoming the “impersonal character of economic forces,” characteristic of the era of bourgeois liberalism.

He was one as a lecturer at the Warsaw Underground University, an institution that, in the depths of the era of furnaces, gave poignant expression to the intellectual vitality of a mortally threatened nation; he was one as a member of the Institute of Social Planning, which worked on the issues of post-war reconstruction of Warsaw, in which the division into the beautiful districts and streets like Miła was to disappear; he was a humanist when, after the war, he wrote about the theoretical tasks of Marxism, analysing the burden of the past on common concepts; he did so with a deep sense of responsibility for “the cause of the intellectual activity of the leftist camp in Poland,” he was one when, after his reinstatement as a university professor, he wrote in 1957:

A research worker, who is guided in his professional activity by social motivation and significantly associates their task with the cause of socialism, will not easily give up the conviction that political pressure distorting research results

or hindering their development was not a necessity in building socialism, but a mistake stemming from underestimating far-reaching effects. The future of socialist culture depends on recovering the squandered capital of faith in non-conjunctural values.

This man saw in intellectual activity, called the pursuit of the truth, one of the acts that bestow dignity upon human existence – and the recognition of this dignity was his profession of faith. If he defended this dignity, he did not do it to spite anyone, but he did it for all of us; he also did it with a sense of shared responsibility for the sphere of affairs and tasks called the construction of a socialist society, for which the issue of human dignity is to be a constructive concern, giving reason and purpose to all other concerns.

If one were to characterize his value system with further symbols, the next one would be the word “socialist.” And to provide the meanings of this word specific to Stanisław Ossowski, the same facts and quotes could be cited. For those who became close to him as his students during the occupation, he was like a link between matters related to these two concepts. He was, in the circle of the problematic of traditional humanism, an advocate of the recognition of the closest connection between the issue of human development and the issue of the radical reconstruction of institutions created in the era of capitalism. He was, in the circle of the problematic of socialist society, an advocate of human diversity, and creative freedom, advocate of treating humanistic values, such as truth, beauty and goodness, as non-instrumental values, that is, ones that are a measure, not a tool. As a man of the 1930s, the years of the victorious offensive of fascism, which posed a threat to everything that he considered valuable in human life, he knew well that one does not emerge from the conflicts accumulated by the decline of the era with mere good words alone; but he was troubled by social consequences of such tactics of political struggle which would treat all areas of life and values as permanently subordinated to itself.

In his last years, Stanisław Ossowski devoted himself entirely to the pedagogical and creative tasks of a professor of sociology and the University of Warsaw. The fruit of this dedication is another of his books, which is being translated into several languages. The fruits of this focus are interrupted plans for works of a polyhistorical scope. His manner of dying recalled the words he wrote during the occupation:

Life itself is not something so very important, and the transition into an inorganic state is not something so very important. Life is important as an opportunity for experiencing and for doing things worth living for.

His life, therefore, was a very important life.