JERZY DOBRZYCKI (1927–2004)

Jerzy Dobrzycki was born in Poznan on 8 April 1927, and after Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 his family was expelled from there and he spent the harsh wartime years in Piotrkow Trybunalski. His hardships were not over, for he later suffered under a repressive iron-curtain regime, but he never lost his dry sense of humour. Trained as an astrometrist with a doctorate in astronomy from the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan in 1960, he spent the years 1949–61 as an assistant for the observatory there. In 1956 he went with his new bride and fellow geodeticist, Maria Staniewska, as the original crew of the Astronomical Latitude Station of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Borowiec, where they were responsible for the inception of the latitude service during the International Geophysical Year.

Jerzy was “unafraid of languages” as he put it, and was thus in an ideal position to turn his skills in 1961 toward the history of astronomy in anticipation of the Copernican quinquecentennial of 1973. As a staff member of the Polish Academy of Sciences’s Institute for the History of Science in Warsaw, he was co-editor of the Warsaw edition of the Copernicus Opera omnia, acted as editor for Edward Rosen’s English translation of the Revolutions, and co-authored Copernicus: Scholar and citizen (written jointly with Marian Biskup in 1972) and Historia astronomii w Polsce (written jointly with Eugeniusz Rybka in two volumes, 1975 and 1983).
With a growing reputation in historical scholarship, in 1974 he became Professor and Head of the Department of the Exact Sciences at the Institute, and from 1989 until his retirement in 1995 he served as Director of the Institute. In 1976–79 he was president of the IAU’s Commission 41 on the history of astronomy.

I first recall meeting Jerzy in 1964, at the colloquium on the history of astronomy held in conjunction with the IAU Congress in Hamburg. When he learned that I had glimpsed his war-torn country in 1946, he invited me to return to Poland for the 1965 triennial meeting of the International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science, and that began a fruitful collaboration that extended for more than three decades. On a bus trip during that IUHPS Congress, Jerzy fell into conversation with W. P. D. Wightman from Scotland, and this led to his identification of the third sixteenth-century manuscript copy of Copernicus’s Commentariolus in the Aberdeen University library. The Polish historians proposed that the definitive text should be reserved for their Nicolaus Copernicus complete works edition, and this robbed Jerzy of credit for perhaps his most important discovery, for even today the Latin volume remains unpublished.

Jerzy was particularly influential in the preparation of my An annotated census of Copernicus’ De revolutionibus, bringing his linguistic skills to bear on its many aspects and serving as de facto editor even though he modestly declined explicit recognition of this role when the work was finally published in 2002. Together we published in this journal “The Master of the 1550 Radices”, bringing to light the role of Jofrancus Offusius as a Copernican commentator (November 1993). With Richard Kremer he also published here an extraordinary analysis of the ephemerides of Johannes Angelus (August 1996).

Jerzy and Maria had two children, born while they were serving in Borowiec. Their second son, Adam, followed his parents’ footsteps as an astronomer, and Jerzy collaborated with him in publishing a star atlas. In his later years Jerzy unfortunately suffered from increasing ill-health, and he ultimately died on 1 February of this year with complications from arteriosclerosis.

Owen Gingerich