

## A few reminiscences of Jan Michalski

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I am glad to share with you a few personal reminiscences of Jan Michalski, whose memory lives on, not only in our hearts, but also in his work, and will continue to live in the Foundation that is taking form.

I met Jan well before his encounter with the young woman who would become his wife. It was 30 years ago. At the time, I was Rector of the College of Europe, an academic institution established in 1949 in Bruges to prepare university graduates for the exercise of responsibilities in fields relating to Europe, in both the public and private sectors.

Students from Central Europe, with the exception of a few refugees from the War years and the immediate post-War period, did not participate in the life and activities of the College during the first quarter century of its existence. On taking up my functions in 1972, I set myself as one of my objectives in the inclusion of some of these students in each Promotion at the College. On the one hand, I recalled the joy that I had myself on leaving the Communist cage and going to study in the United States, during the brief post-Stalinist thaw. On the other, and this is more important, I always believed that Communism would collapse sooner or later and that the countries of Central Europe would then be in need of people with a first-hand knowledge of the problems and mechanisms of European integration.

This objective was difficult to attain for a number of reasons. Moreover, it involved risks of which I was aware. However, that is not an issue on which I would like to dwell. The essential fact was that in the autumn of 1978, three young Polish university graduates finally arrived in Bruges and were included in the Paul-Henri Spaak Promotion. Two of them at first gave the impression of not being at ease in their new human and intellectual environment, appeared rather stiff and avoided any contact with me. They seemed to be marked by the communist system in which they were born and have grown. However, the third – Jan Michalski – was more relaxed, more spontaneous and more confident. The fact that he had spent the previous year at the London School of Economics perhaps played a certain role in his demeanour. But I had the impression that it was essentially due to his well-rounded character and his convictions.

At the beginning of the academic year, I used to receive all the new students for an individual meeting. Already, during this first conversation, Jan seemed relaxed, spoke freely of his earlier studies and his aims, willingly shared with me his impressions of the programme and the atmosphere of the College. He also talked to me about his family and particularly about his mother, a Pole from the Soviet Ukraine who, by some miracle, had survived the apocalypse of the Great Famine of the 1930s and of the deportation to Kazakhstan. He spoke as well of the patriotic and rigorously anti-Communist attitude of his household. This first contact was followed by several others. I felt that he trusted me and it was a few weeks after his arrival in Bruges that he gave me an account of what had

been said about the College of Europe and about myself at the police office to which he had been summoned to receive his passport.

That was still the period of the Cold War. Moscow and its allies in the East and in the West conducted an intense political and ideological struggle against the European integration (in the Kremlin's view, a chaotic juxtaposition of so-called "sovereign States" appeared to be an easier future prey than a united and organized Europe). Accordingly, the College had been described to Jan as a cog in the great machine to combat "the camp of peace and progress": a factory of the evil European ideology and a nursery for the no less evil Brussels bureaucracy. The Rector, in turn, had been depicted as a enemy of "socialism" – someone who had sold his soul to "imperialism". It was therefore necessary to monitor scrupulously everything that happened at the College, keep the Rector under attentive observation and, evidently, once back in the country, relay this treasure of information to so-called "competent authorities". Quite clearly, the latter were very keen to obtain as much first-hand information as possible on the College.

Jan's account was interesting and instructive, but did not surprise me overmuch. I had my own experience of Communist dictatorship, its infatuation and perversity. But my discussions with Jan brought me something more important – the feeling that I could trust in him, accompanied by a lively empathy. This survived Jan's departure from the College. We kept in contact and I followed with much interest and admiration the work undertaken by Jan and Vera with the creation in 1986 of the publishing house *Noir sur Blanc*. Even before the "Solidarity" movement swept away the Communist dictatorship in Poland and before the Berlin Wall fell, they set themselves to build bridges over the gulf that had separated the two halves of Europe since the Second World War. I have no hesitation in saying that they have contributed in their own way – admittedly on a modest scale, but nevertheless really and effectively – to prepare these major events.

Do we need reminding that, seen from the West, the countries of Central Europe had become another planet during the four decades of Communism and forced isolation: a planet that was distant, foreign and strange, incomprehensible and worrying. And yet these countries had drawn on the same sources and had lived at the same pace as those of Western Europe. They had experienced in succession Christianity and feudalism; Humanism, Reformation and Counter-Reformation; the Enlightenment and Romanticism; gothic and baroque; socialism and nationalism ... But all that had, in a way, been hidden by the leaden coating of Communist totalitarianism. The cities like Prague and Cracow – with all their historic and cultural wealth – geographically much closer to Lausanne than London, Copenhagen or Madrid, had become distant "Eastern cities", anonymous and lacking in any charm and luster.

However, under this leaden cover life was being lived and in the daily confrontation with oppression, cynicism and lies, men and women, often more numerous than was imagined in the West, were fighting to safeguard their dignity and independence of spirit, to defend the truth, preserve the meaning of words and the treasure of language that was constantly being disfigured and demeaned by the jargon of official propaganda. Under this shell, courage and talents survived, and works touching upon the essential traits of human existence emerged, in all forms of writing: novels, poetry, theatre, memoirs, satire, history, philosophy and politics... Some could appear in the official circuit, others were printed in the clandestine one.

Jan had the intuition to open a sort of breach in the wall cutting off the “other” Europe, to disseminate eye-witness accounts of its intellectual and artistic life to French-speaking readers in the West – accounts that were often surprising in their depth and universal meaning. Quite naturally, given Jan’s origins, translations from Polish took up a major part of the first period of *Noir sur Blanc*. But they were soon followed by translations from Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, Serbo-Croat, Hebrew, and others.

After the upheavals of 1989, as soon as the barriers between the two halves of Europe had fallen, Jan and Vera also applied themselves to making available to readers in the former Communist countries books which formed part of the West’s cultural agenda at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In so doing, they responded effectively to their thirst for anything which formed the lifeblood of Western Europe and America. Jan and Vera’s work was well adapted to the situation and requirements of the time. It has, therefore, rapidly taken a very large dimension.

Starting out from Montricher, *Noir sur Blanc* established bridgeheads in Lausanne, Paris and Warsaw. Soon afterwards, several publishing houses, some fairly important and well-known, became attached to, or rather were grafted onto the trunk of *Noir sur Blanc*. The work to which Jan devoted himself with conviction, passion and love has become a player at the European level. It is sufficient to have a look at one or another of the catalogues to see this. Jan was very demanding in his choice of texts to be published, but also took care to ensure that the volumes coming off the press could really be called “fine books”. This tradition lives on in the major international publishing group of which Vera Michalski is today the soul and the strength.

My personal relations with Jan remained close when I was Ambassador of the new Poland to France, between 1990 and 1996. From time to time, he used to come to the Embassy to speak to me of his work and his projects, or to seek my advice on a problem that preoccupied him. But sometimes I had the impression that he simply wanted to chatter for a moment in Polish, evoke the memories of Bruges and be reassured of my friendship.

As I was able to follow closely the work of Jan and Vera and to realize its great importance, I asked the President of the Republic of Poland to grant to both of them a high honour. The President acceded to my request and I had the joy of presenting them with these decorations at the Polish Embassy in Paris in the presence of their relatives from the various countries of Europe. For me, this act took on the meaning of major recognition and warm encouragement.

I would have so much liked to see Jan continue, extend and perfect his work for many years to come. The news of his disappearance, which Vera announced to me by telephone, literally left me thunderstruck. But when I think about him today, I am happy that his work is being continued thanks to the will and dedication of Vera, and that his memory will live on through the Jan Michalski Foundation, which is now emerging and will enjoy, I have no doubt, a great and resounding success.

Please allow me to express my cordial thanks to Vera and to congratulate her for having conceived of the idea of the Foundation and taken the necessary steps to assure its future.

Montricher, 9 November 2007