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Polish Universities Yesterday and Today (Part One)

Directed Readings and Analysis

By Rev. Charles Brock

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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article is the first of two parts on Polish universities.

17th in a Series

The object of this series on ancient universities is to show how older teaching can impact our studies today. There is a crisis in contemporary college teaching – it is far too specialized and though it helps get jobs for students, they often graduate ignorant of the world they live in and hope to affect. Ancient universities prepared their students to ask the big questions and to lead their nations into the future with good intelligence for solving issues of governance locally, nationally, and internationally. Most of them still do.

The ancient universities of Eastern Europe should be considered along with the usual Western European and American ones. Krakow University is one such example. There are many others such as Vilnius University in Lithuania where I visited recently and a part of the setting for the big NATO gathering this week.

Many great figures have come from Poland and Lithuania. Copernicus was a scientific revolutionary who helped shape our understanding of the universe.

And Czesław Miłosz is an example of a deep awareness about society using his poetic and verbal skills to help shape our understanding of the world today. Both were integrative thinkers who cared much for society and government. That is the point I want to stress for current education which has largely lost both points in the concentration for job training.

The Jagiellonian University [Krakow university] is a public research university in Poland. Founded in 1364 by King Casimir III the Great, it is the oldest university in Poland and the 13th oldest university in continuous operation in the world. It is regarded as Poland's most prestigious academic institution. The university has been viewed as a vanguard of Polish culture as well as a significant contributor to the intellectual heritage of Europe.

The campus of the Jagiellonian University is centrally located within the city of Kraków. The university consists of 13 main faculties, in addition to three faculties comprising the Collegium Medicum. It employs roughly 4,000 academics and provides education to more than 35,000 students who study in 166 fields. The main language of instruction is Polish, although around 30 degrees are offered in English and some in German. The university library is among the largest of its kind and houses a number of medieval manuscripts, including the landmark *De Revolutionibus* by alumnus Nicolaus Copernicus.

In addition to Copernicus, the university's notable alumni include heads of state King John III Sobieski (my favorite Polish rye vodka is named after him), Pope John Paul II, and Andrzej Duda; Polish Prime Ministers Beata Szydło and Józef Cyrankiewicz; renowned cultural figures Jan Kochanowski, Stanisław Lem, and Krzysztof Penderecki; and leading intellectuals and researchers such as Hugo Kołłątaj, Bronisław Malinowski, Carl Menger, Leo Sternbach, and Norman Davies. Four Nobel laureates have been affiliated with the university, all in literature: Ivo Andrić and Wisława Szymborska, who studied there, and Czesław Miłosz and Olga Tokarczuk, who taught there.

History

In the mid-14th century, King Casimir III the Great realized that the nation needed a class of educated people, especially lawyers, who could arrange a better set of the country's laws and administer the courts and offices. His efforts to found an institution of higher learning in Poland were rewarded when Pope Urban V granted him permission to set up a university in Kraków. A royal charter of foundation was issued on May 12, 1364 and a simultaneous document was issued by the city council granting privileges to the *Studium Generale*. The university was the first university in Europe to establish independent chairs in Mathematics and Astronomy.

While it was, and largely remains, Polish students who make up the majority of the university's students, it has, over its long history, educated thousands of foreign students from countries such as Lithuania, Russia, Hungary, Bohemia, Germany, and Spain. During the second half of the 15th century, over 40 percent of students came from the outside of the Kingdom of Poland.

By the 1870s, the fortunes of the university had improved even more. The liquefaction of nitrogen and oxygen was successfully demonstrated by professors Zygmunt Wróblewski and Karol Olszewski in 1883. Thereafter the Austrian authorities took on a new role in the development of the university and provided funds for the construction of a number of new buildings, including the neo-gothic *Collegium Novum*, which opened in 1887.

Modern era and renovation

On November 6, 1939, following the Nazi invasion of Poland, 184 professors were arrested and deported to Sachsenhausen concentration camp during an operation codenamed *Sonderaktion Krakau* (Special Operation Krakow). The university, along with the rest of Poland's higher and secondary education, was closed for the remainder of World War II. Despite the university's reopening after the cessation of hostilities in 1945, the new government of Poland was hostile to the teachings of the pre-war university and the faculty was suppressed by the Communists in 1954. By 1957, the Polish government decided that it would invest in the establishment of new facilities near Jordan Park and expansion of other smaller existing facilities.

By 1989, Poland had overthrown its Communist government. In that same year, the Jagiellonian University successfully completed the purchase of its first building plot in Pychowice, Kraków, where, from 2000, construction of a new complex of university buildings, the so-called Third Campus, began. The new campus, officially named the "600th Anniversary Campus," was developed in conjunction with the new LifeScience Park, which is managed by the Jagiellonian Centre for Innovation, the university's research consortium. Poland's entry into the European Union in 2004 has proved instrumental in improving the fortunes of the Jagiellonian University, which has seen huge increases in funding from both central government and European authorities, allowing it to develop new departments, research centers, and better support the work of its students and academics.

Nicolaus Copernicus - 19 February 1473 – 24 May 1543) was a Renaissanc polymath, active as a mathematician, astronomer, and Catholic canon, who formulated a model of the universe that placed the Sun rather than Earth at its center.

Copernicus was born and died in Royal Prussia, a region that had been part of the Kingdom of Poland since 1466. A polyglot and polymath, he obtained

a doctorate in canon law and was a mathematician, astronomer, physician, classics scholar, translator, governor, diplomat, and economist. From 1497, he was a Warmian Cathedral chapter canon. In 1517, he derived a quantity theory of money – a key concept in economics – and, in 1519, he formulated an economic principle that later came to be called Gresham's law.

Nicolaus Copernicus was born in the city of Toruń (Thorn), in the province of Royal Prussia, in the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland. His father was a merchant from Kraków and his mother was the daughter of a wealthy Toruń merchant. Nicolaus was the youngest of four children. Copernicus never married and is not known to have had children, but from at least 1531 until 1539 his relations with Anna Schilling, a live-in housekeeper, were seen as scandalous by two bishops of Warmia who urged him over the years to break off relations with his "mistress."

Copernicus' Kraków studies gave him a thorough grounding in the mathematical astronomy taught at the university (arithmetic, geometry, geometric optics, cosmography, theoretical and computational astronomy) and a good knowledge of the philosophical and natural science writings of Aristotle and Averroes, stimulating his interest in learning and making him conversant with humanisti culture. Copernicus broadened the knowledge that he took from the university lecture halls with independent reading of books that he acquired during his Kraków years.

Copernicus did take minor orders, which sufficed for assuming a chapter canonry. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* proposes that his ordination was probable as, in 1537, he was one of four candidates for the episcopal seat of Warmia, a position that required ordination.

During his three-year stay at Bologna, which occurred between fall 1496 and spring 1501, Copernicus seems to have devoted himself less keenly to studying canon law (he received his doctorate in canon law only after seven years, following a second return to Italy in 1503) than to studying the humanities. He verified its observations about certain peculiarities in Ptolemy's theory of the Moon's motion, by conducting on March 9, 1497 at Bologna a memorable observation of the occultation of Aldebaran, the brightest star in the Taurus constellation, by the moon. Copernicus the humanist sought confirmation for his growing doubts through close reading of Greek and Latin authors. Later he studied at the University of Padua, famous as a seat of medical learning, and – except for a brief visit to Ferrara in May-June 1503 to pass examinations for, and receive, his doctorate in canon law – he remained at Padua from fall 1501 to summer 1503.

As at Bologna, Copernicus did not limit himself to his official studies. It was probably the Padua years that saw the beginning of his Hellenistic interests. He

familiarized himself with Greek language and culture with the aid of Theodorus Gaza's grammar (1495) and Johannes Baptista Chrestonius' dictionary (1499), expanding his studies of antiquity, begun at Bologna, to the writings of Bessarion, Lorenzo Valla, and others. There also seems to be evidence that it was during his Padua stay that the idea finally crystallized, of basing a new system of the world on the movement of the Earth. As the time approached for Copernicus to return home, in spring 1503 he journeyed to Ferrara where, on May 31, 1503, having passed the obligatory examinations, he was granted the degree of Doctor of Canon Law. No doubt it was soon after (at latest, in fall 1503) that he left Italy for good to return to Warmia.

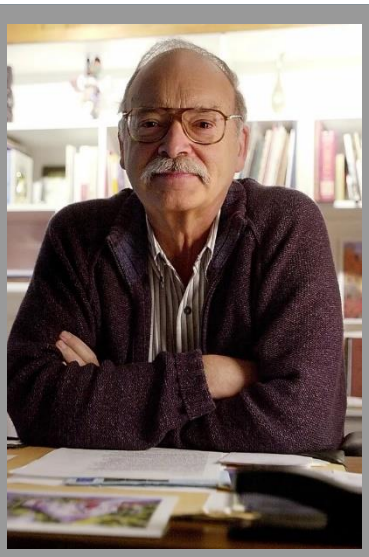
It was astronomy that caused him a lot of trouble with church authorities. In the *Commentariolus*, Copernicus listed assumptions that he believed solved the problems of ancient astronomy. He stated that the Earth is only the center of gravity and center of the moon's orbit; that all the spheres encircle the sun, which is close to the center of the universe; that the universe is much larger than previously assumed, and the Earth's distance to the sun is a small fraction of the size of the universe; that the apparent motion of the heavens and the sun is created by the motion of the Earth; and that the apparent retrograde motion of the planets is created by the Earth's motion. Although the Copernican model maintained epicycles moving along the deferrent, which explained retrograde motion in the Ptolemaic model, Copernicus correctly explained that the retrograde motion of the planets was only apparent not real, and its appearance was due to the fact that the observers were not at rest in the center. The work dealt very briefly with the order of the planets (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, the only planets that could be observed with the naked eye), the triple motion of the Earth (the daily rotation, the annual revolution of its center, and the annual revolution of its inclination) that causes the sun to seem to be in motion, the motions of the equinoxes, the revolution of the moon around the Earth, and the revolution of the five planets around the sun.

These ideas were not popular with the Roman church at the time and Martin Luther also made negative comments. However, Melanchthon eventually accepted these ideas and Wittenberg, Germany became a center where Copernicus' work was studied.

He was indeed a polymath and fearless with his revolutionary concepts. He was a humanist scholar, a doctor, probably a priest, and a scientist, and he had a mistress. There are not many like him today.

SOURCES: From Wikipedia, Encyclopedia Britannica, Stanford History of Philosophy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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