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## PROBING EDUCATION

### Polish, Lithuanian Universities Yesterday and Today (Part Two)

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 last of two parts on Polish and Lithuanian universities.*

#### **18th 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 our 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. Many 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.

**Czesław Miłosz** (30 June 1911 – 14 August 2004) was a Polish American poet, prose writer, translator, and diplomat. Regarded as one of the great poets of the 20th century, he won the [1980 Nobel Prize in Literature](#). In its citation, the [Swedish Academy](#) called Miłosz a writer who “voices man's exposed condition in a world of severe conflicts.”

Miłosz survived the [German occupation of Warsaw](#) during [World War II](#) and became a cultural attaché for the Polish government during the postwar period. When [communist](#) authorities threatened his safety, he defected to France and ultimately chose exile in the United States, where he became a professor at the [University of California, Berkeley](#). His poetry, particularly about his wartime experience, and his appraisal of [Stalinism](#) in a prose book, *The Captive Mind*, brought him renown as a leading *émigré* artist and intellectual.

Throughout his life and work, Miłosz tackled questions of morality, politics, history, and faith. As a translator, he introduced Western works to a Polish audience, and as a scholar and editor, he championed a greater awareness of [Slavic literature](#) in the West. Faith played a role in his work as he explored his [Catholicism](#) and personal experience. He wrote in Polish and English.

At one point during the war, Polish soldiers fired at Miłosz and his mother, an episode he recounted in *Native Realm*. The family returned to Wilno [Vilnius, Vilna – now the capital of Lithuania] after the war ended in 1921.

Despite the interruptions of wartime wanderings, Miłosz proved to be an exceptional student with a facility for languages. He ultimately learned Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, English, French, and Hebrew. After graduation from [Sigismund Augustus Gymnasium](#) in Wilno [now Vilnius, Lithuania], he entered [Stefan Batory University](#) in 1929 as a law student. His first published poems appeared in the university's student magazine in 1930.

In Vilnius, Miłosz's early awareness of class difference and sympathy for those less fortunate than himself inspired his defense of Jewish students at the university who were being harassed by an anti-Semitic mob. Stepping between the mob and the Jewish students, Miłosz fended off attacks. One student was killed from a rock thrown at his head.

Miłosz was repelled by the Poles' religiosity and nationalism – their growing hostility to Lithuanian, Jewish, and Belarusan minorities. In 1931, Vilnius University, where he was a student, was convulsed by anti-Jewish riots. Miłosz, Franaszek writes, was “among the few defending the Jewish students.”

Lithuania had been a center of Jewish learning and religious study during the 18th century and into the 19th. Vilnius was called “the Jerusalem of Lithuania.” Many Jewish religious movements were vibrantly represented in Lithuania; examples include the legendary Orthodox Mir Yeshiva.

Miłosz's first volume of poetry, *A Poem on Frozen Time*, was published in Polish in 1933. In the same year, he publicly read his poetry at an anti-racist "Poetry of Protest" event in Vilnius, occasioned by Adolf [Hitler's](#) rise to power in Germany. In 1934, he graduated with a law degree, and the poetry group Żagary disbanded. Miłosz relocated to Paris on a scholarship to study for one year and write articles for a newspaper back in Vilnius.

By 1936, he had returned home, where he worked on literary programs at [Radio Wilno](#). After only one year at Radio Wilno, Miłosz was dismissed due to an accusation that he was a left-wing sympathizer: as a student, he had adopted socialist views from which, by then, he had publicly distanced himself, and he and his boss, Tadeusz Byrski, had produced programming that included performances by Jews and Byelorussians, which angered right-wing nationalists. After Byrski made a trip to the Soviet Union, an anonymous complaint was lodged with the management of Radio Wilno that the station housed a communist cell, and Byrski and Miłosz were dismissed. In summer 1937, Miłosz moved to Warsaw, where he found work at [Polish Radio](#) and met his future wife, Janina (née Dłuska; 1909–1986), who was at the time married to another man.

Miłosz was in Warsaw when it was bombarded as part of the [German invasion of Poland](#) in September 1939. Along with colleagues from Polish Radio, he escaped the city, making his way to [Lwów](#). But when he learned that Janina had remained in Warsaw with her parents, he looked for a way back. The [Soviet invasion of Poland](#) thwarted his plans, and, to avoid the incoming [Red Army](#), he fled to [Bucharest](#). There he obtained a Lithuanian identity document and Soviet visa that allowed him to travel by train to Kyiv and then Wilno. After the Red Army invaded Lithuania, he procured fake documents that he used to enter the part of German-occupied Poland the Germans had dubbed the "[General Government](#)." It was a difficult journey, mostly on foot, that ended in summer 1940. Finally back in Warsaw, he reunited with Janina.

Like many Poles at the time, Miłosz participated in underground activities. For example, with higher education officially forbidden to Poles, he attended [underground lectures](#) by [Władysław Tatarkiewicz](#), the Polish philosopher and historian of philosophy and aesthetics. He translated [Shakespeare's \*As You Like It\*](#) and [T. S. Eliot's \*The Waste Land\*](#) into Polish.

Miłosz's riskiest underground wartime activity was aiding Jews in Warsaw, which he did through an underground socialist organization called Freedom. His brother, Andrzej, was also [active in helping Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland](#); in 1943, he transported the Polish Jew Seweryn Tross and his wife from Vilnius to Warsaw. Miłosz took in the Trosses, found them a hiding place, and supported them financially. The Trosses ultimately died during the [Warsaw Uprising](#).

Miłosz helped at least three other Jews in similar ways: Felicja Wołkomińska and her brother and sister.

Despite his willingness to engage in underground activity and vehement opposition to the Nazis, Miłosz did not join the Polish [Home Army](#). In later years, he explained that this was partly out of an instinct for self-preservation and partly because he saw its leadership as right-wing and dictatorial. He did not participate in the planning or execution of the [Warsaw Uprising](#). According to Irena Grudzińska-Gross, he saw the uprising as a "doomed military effort" and lacked the "patriotic elation" for it. He called the uprising "a blameworthy, lightheaded enterprise," but later criticized the Red Army for failing to support it when it had the opportunity to do so.

As German troops began torching Warsaw buildings in August 1944, Miłosz was captured and held in a prisoner transit camp; he was later rescued by a Catholic nun – a stranger to him – who pleaded with the Germans on his behalf. Once freed, he and Janina escaped the city, ultimately settling in a village outside Kraków, where they were staying when the Red Army swept through Poland in January 1945, after [Warsaw had been largely destroyed](#).

Stuck in Warsaw, unsure if he would ever be allowed to leave or to see his family again, Miłosz was despondent. A friend, Natalia Modzelewska, recalled that he "became mentally unstable [and] suffered from bouts of depression, which gradually got worse. ... It was easy to discern that he was close to a nervous breakdown." It wasn't just his own fate that frightened him. Miłosz had mostly been away from Poland since 1946 and had not witnessed the worsening climate of repression in the country. Now he could see. "I came across astronomical changes," he wrote in a letter to another exile. "Peasants go mad with despair, and in the intellectual world state control is deeply entrenched and it is necessary to be a 100% Stalinist, or not at all. The so-called Marxists are highly depressed."

After the war, Miłosz tried to describe the effect of disaster on his world view:

When gold paint flakes from the arms of sculptures,  
When the letter falls out of the book of laws,  
Then consciousness is naked as an eye.

When the pages of books fall in fiery scraps  
Onto smashed leaves and twisted metal,  
The tree of good and evil is stripped bare.

These lines capture one of the central characteristics of Miłosz's art: the instinct to strip away the inessential, to zero in on the heart of the matter. He could see "the skull beneath the skin," in the words of T. S. Eliot, whose work he knew well. But, where Eliot often used this kind of moral X-ray vision to express

contempt and disgust for the world, Miłosz had seen too much death to find skulls profound. Instead, he sought a poetry that was truthful and perceptive enough to be trustworthy even when annihilation seemed imminent.

In the preface to his 1953 book *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz wrote, "I do not regret those years in Warsaw, which was, I believe, the most agonizing spot in the whole of terrorized Europe. Had I then chosen emigration, my life would certainly have followed a very different course. But my knowledge of the crimes which Europe has witnessed in the 20th century would be less direct, less concrete than it is." Immediately after the war, Miłosz published his fourth poetry collection, *Rescue*; it focused on his wartime experiences and contains some of his most critically praised work, including the 20-poem cycle "The World," composed like a primer for naïve schoolchildren, and the cycle "Voices of Poor People." The volume also contains some of his most frequently anthologized poems, including "A Song on the End of the World," "Campo Dei Fiori," and "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto."

As the Polish government, influenced by [Josef Stalin](#), became more oppressive, his superiors began to view Miłosz as a threat: he was outspoken in his reports to Warsaw and met with people not approved by his superiors. Consequently, his superiors called him "an individual who ideologically is totally alien." Toward the end of 1950, when Janina was pregnant with their second child, Miłosz was recalled to Warsaw, where in December 1950 his passport was confiscated, ostensibly until it could be determined that he did not plan to defect. After intervention by Poland's foreign minister, [Zygmunt Modzelewski](#), Miłosz's passport was returned. Realizing that he was in danger if he remained in Poland, Miłosz left for Paris in January 1951.

Upon arriving in Paris, Miłosz went into hiding, aided by the staff of the Polish émigré magazine [Kultura](#). With his wife and son in the United States, he applied to enter the U.S. and was denied. At the time, the U.S. was in the grip of [McCarthyism](#), and influential Polish émigrés had convinced American officials that Miłosz was a communist. Unable to leave France, Miłosz was not present for the birth of his second son, John Peter, in Washington, D.C., in 1951.

With the United States closed to him, Miłosz requested – and was granted – political asylum in France. After three months in hiding, he announced his defection at a press conference and in a *Kultura* article, "No," that explained his refusal to live in Poland or continue working for the Polish regime. He was the first artist of note from a communist country to make public his reasons for breaking ties with his government. His case attracted attention in Poland, where his work was banned and he was attacked in the press, and in the West, where prominent individuals voiced criticism and support. For example, the future Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda, then a supporter of the [Soviet Union](#), attacked him in a communist newspaper as "The Man Who Ran Away." On the other

hand, [Albert Camus](#), another future Nobel laureate, visited Miłosz and offered his support.

Miłosz was finally reunited with his family in 1953, when Janina and the children joined him in France. That same year saw the publication of *The Captive Mind*, a nonfiction work that uses case studies to dissect the methods and consequences of Soviet communism, which at the time had prominent admirers in the West. It became a staple of political science courses and is considered a classic work in the study of [totalitarianism](#).

Andrzej Franaszek has called *A Treatise on Poetry* Miłosz's magnum opus, while the scholar [Helen Vendler](#) compared it to *The Waste Land*, a work "so powerful that it bursts the bounds in which it was written – the bounds of language, geography, epoch." A long poem divided into four sections, *A Treatise on Poetry* surveys Polish history, recounts Miłosz's experience of war, and explores the relationship between art and history.

In 1960, Miłosz was offered a position as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. With this offer, and with the climate of McCarthyism abated, he was able to move to the United States. He proved to be an adept and popular teacher and was offered [tenure](#) after only two months. The rarity of this, and the degree to which he had impressed his colleagues, are underscored by the fact that Miłosz lacked a doctoral degree and teaching experience. Yet his deep learning was obvious, and after years of working administrative jobs that he found stifling, he told friends that he was in his element in a classroom. With stable employment as a tenured professor of Slavic languages and literatures, Miłosz was able to secure American citizenship and purchase a home in [Berkeley](#).

On October 9, 1980, the Swedish Academy announced that Miłosz had won the Nobel Prize in Literature. The award catapulted him to global fame. On the day the prize was announced, Miłosz held a brief press conference and then left to teach a class on Dostoevsky. In his Nobel lecture, Miłosz described his view of the role of the poet, lamented the tragedies of the 20th century, and paid tribute to his cousin Oscar.

Many Poles became aware of Miłosz for the first time when he won the Nobel Prize. After a 30-year ban in Poland, his writing was finally published there in limited selections. He was also able to visit Poland for the first time since fleeing in 1951 and was greeted by crowds with a hero's welcome. He met with leading Polish figures like [Lech Wałęsa](#) and [Pope John Paul II](#). At the same time, his early work, until then only available in Polish, began to be translated into English and many other languages.

In 1981, Miłosz was appointed the Norton Professor of Poetry at [Harvard University](#), where he was invited to deliver the [Charles Eliot Norton Lectures](#).



He used the opportunity, as he had before becoming a Nobel laureate, to draw attention to writers who had been unjustly imprisoned or persecuted. The lectures were published as *The Witness of Poetry* (1983).

After the [fall of communism in Poland](#), he split his time between Berkeley and Kraków, and he began to publish his writing in Polish with a publisher based in Kraków. When [Lithuania broke free from the Soviet Union](#) in 1991, Miłosz visited for the first time since 1939. In 2000, he moved to Kraków.

Czesław Miłosz died on August 14, 2004, at his Kraków home, at 93. He was given a state funeral at the historic [Mariacki Church](#) in Kraków. Polish Prime Minister [Marek Belka](#) attended, as did the former president of Poland, Lech Wałęsa. Thousands of people lined the streets to witness his coffin moved by military escort to his final resting place at Skalka Roman Catholic Church, where he was one of the last to be commemorated.

Protesters threatened to disrupt the proceedings on the grounds that Miłosz was anti-Polish, anti-Catholic, and had signed a petition supporting gay and lesbian freedom of speech and assembly. Pope John Paul II, along with Miłosz's confessor, issued public messages confirming that Miłosz had received the sacraments, which quelled the protest.

In 1978, the Russian-American poet [Joseph Brodsky](#) called Miłosz "one of the great poets of our time; perhaps the greatest." Miłosz has been cited as an influence by numerous writers—contemporaries and succeeding generations. In 1989, Miłosz was named one of the "[Righteous Among the Nations](#)" at Israel's [Yad Vashem](#) memorial to the [Holocaust](#), in recognition of his efforts to save Jews in Warsaw during World War II.

By being smuggled into Poland, Miłosz's writing was a source of inspiration to the anti-communist [Solidarity](#) movement there in the early 1980s. Lines from his poem "You Who Wronged" are inscribed on the [Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers of 1970](#) in Gdańsk, where Solidarity originated.

Miłosz expressed some criticism of both Catholicism and Poland (a majority-Catholic country), causing furor in some quarters when it was announced that he would be interred in [Kraków's](#) historic [Skalka](#) church. [Cynthia Haven](#) writes that, to some readers, Miłosz's embrace of Catholicism can seem surprising and complicates the understanding of him and his work.

The poetic chorus he wrote is deployed not just to highlight the complexity of the modern world but also to search for morality, another of Miłosz's recurrent themes. Nathan and Quinn write, "Miłosz's work is devoted to unmasking man's fundamental duality; he wants to make his readers admit the contradictory nature of their own experience" because doing so "forces us to assert our

preferences as preferences.” That is, it forces readers to make conscious choices, which is the arena of morality.

Miłosz's willingness to accept a form of logic in history points to another recurrent aspect of his writing: his capacity for wonder, amazement, and, ultimately, faith – not always religious faith, but "faith in the objective reality of a world to be known by the human mind but not constituted by that mind." At other times, Miłosz was more explicitly religious in his work. According to scholar and translator Michael Parker, "crucial to any understanding of Miłosz's work is his complex relationship to Catholicism." His writing is filled with allusions to Christian figures, symbols, and theological ideas, though Miłosz was closer to [Gnosticism](#), or what he called [Manichaeism](#), in his personal beliefs, viewing the universe as ruled by an evil whose influence human beings must try to escape. From this perspective, "he can at once admit that the world is ruled by necessity, by evil, and yet still find hope and sustenance in the beauty of the world. History reveals the pointlessness of human striving, the instability of human things; but time also is the moving image of eternity." According to Richard Hass, this viewpoint left Miłosz "with the task of those heretical Christians ... to suffer time, to contemplate being, and to live in the hope of the redemption of the world."

**What are some takeaways from Miłosz's remarkable career? First, he used his university education to become a broadly based person, not a narrow scholar or practitioner. He was concerned about morality and did not want his poetry to be "aesthetic" only. He forced his readers to make conscious choices in the arena of morality. He wrestled in the dust and dirt of capitalism and communism and fascism, the leading ideologies of his time. He was concerned about the persecution of the Jews, and in college and later life entered the fight for their freedom. He lived a dangerous life not confined to the library but was embroiled in the many worlds of hate and conflict. His writings made trouble and he had to hide from the authorities who wanted to imprison or kill him.**

**He had what it takes to be a fighter and thinker for righteousness and used his education well not only for himself but for others, especially those who were persecuted for their beliefs. He had a "unique blend of skepticism and sincerity," which are much needed in today's world. Universities can help bring that again to our world if they value the old learning.**

*Do not mention force, or you will be accused  
Of upholding fallen doctrines in secret.*

*He who has power, has it by historical logic.*



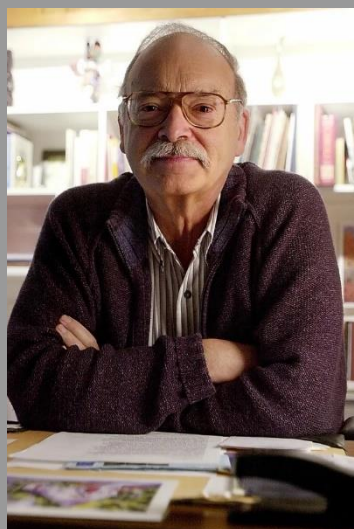
*Respectfully bow to that logic ...*

*Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision.  
Then burn the house down to fulfill the prediction.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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