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Original publication:

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Heidegger Krzysztof Michalski: "Reading Heidegger in communist Poland in the mid 1970's." Introduced by Ludger Hagedorn and Piotr Kubasiak

Heidegger in Russia and Eastern Europe, 2017, 177–181

London, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017

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Chapter 8

Heidegger

Krzysztof Michalski

Introduced by Ludger Hagedorn and
Piotr Kubasiak

"READING HEIDEGGER IN COMMUNIST POLAND IN THE MID 1970s"

Below we publish, for the first time in English translation, an article that the young Polish philosopher Krzysztof Michalski wrote in 1975 for the monthly journal *Twórczość*.¹ The article was reprinted two years later as an introduction to a Polish collection of essays by Heidegger that Michalski edited.²

Besides these Polish publications, the author also made sure to prepare an English translation. It is not known whether this was done because Michalski envisaged a concrete publication or whether he simply wanted to have an English version of it on hand by way of precaution. In any case, it remained unpublished until today. The translation has been preserved as a typescript³ and is part of Michalski's *Nachlass* at the Institute for Human Sciences (*Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*) in Vienna, which he had founded in 1982 and where he served as rector until his death in 2013.

The typescript bears the simple title "Heidegger" (as does the Polish original). It does not mention Michalski as the author, nor does it provide any information about the translation process. In particular, we do not know the year of the translation or the translator's name. From the character of the typescript, it seems clear that the translation must have been finished before the mid-1980s. Roughly speaking, we can therefore

date it between 1975 and 1985. The standard of translation is very good, and the phrasing in English is excellent. People who knew Michalski well agree on the fact that his English by that time was not good enough to have possibly done the translation himself alone. It seems probable, however, that the author was closely involved in the translating process, particularly with regard to philosophical terminology and the specific Heideggerian vocabulary and neologisms.⁴ The very few and carefully written notes in the margins testify to the fact that Michalski actively took care of improving the translation, but that he also seems to have had no major objections or points of disagreement with the final result presented here.

Evidently, the main ambition of the article is to provide the reader with an introduction to the thought of Martin Heidegger; hence also the unspecific title. But the achievements of the essay are, in fact, nevertheless considerable: While, at one level, this chapter will be a highly insightful reading for those not fully acquainted with Heidegger's philosophy, it, at another, advances a perspective guided by its own, independent research question: "Why is it that Heidegger's thought had—and still has—such fascinating force?"⁵ In endeavoring to provide an answer, Michalski's reflections lean as well on Heidegger's erstwhile students, Hannah Arendt and Walter Biemel. The special fascination with Heidegger, he would hold, was—and is—that he teaches his students and readers to think. His philosophy is not just another trend or school, but rather a manner of learning to think for oneself, a "path" that is its own reward. In this sense, it can never be sufficient to characterize his thought as an overcoming of metaphysics and philosophical subjectivism, and rightly so! Following Michalski, Heidegger's philosophy should, above all, be understood as "an attempt to grasp our life-historical situation from scratch and to show to us the possibility of another life."⁶

In addition to his doctoral thesis (published in 1978 and reprinted in 1998),⁷ Michalski edited the aforementioned collection of essays by Heidegger entitled *Budować Mieszkać Myśleć* (*Building, Dwelling, Thinking*). Notably, the selection of essays for this volume is not identical with the original 1954 edition *Vorträge und Aufsätze*.⁸ Besides four essays from this German collection (including the eponymous "Bauen Wohnen Denken"), Michalski's edition also comprises other well-known studies by Heidegger, such as "What Is Metaphysics?" (1929), "What Are Poets For?" (1946), and *Letter on "Humanism"* (1947). As

he writes in the introduction, the aim of his selection was to retrace Heidegger's *Denkweg* (his "path of thought") for the Polish reader, including the reinterpretation of his philosophy by Heidegger himself in the time after his *Kehre* (the "turn" of his thought). According to Michalski, the selection of essays for this volume was agreed upon consensually with Heidegger.⁹

The importance of Michalski's work for the reception of Heidegger in Poland must be understood in historical context. Prior to his works, only two notable studies on Heidegger were accessible to the Polish reader. The first was an article by Franciszek Sawicki entitled "Pojęcie i zagadnienie nicości u Heideggera" ("The Concept and Problem of Nothingness in Heidegger"). Published in 1955, the aim of this article was essentially to depict Heidegger's thought as an atheistic existentialism. The second major publication was the volume *Filozofia egzystencjalna* (*Philosophy of Existentialism*, 1965). It was edited by the two outstanding philosophers Leszek Kołakowski and Krzysztof Pomian and saw the first Polish translation of selected passages from Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*).¹⁰ Hence it was the volume conceived by Michalski that for the first time made a broader selection of studies by Heidegger available for Polish readers. Alongside the editor himself, there were four other well-known philosophers involved in the translation works: Krzysztof Pomian, Marek J. Siemek, Józef Tischner, and Krzysztof Wolicki.¹¹ It is noteworthy that major decisions concerning the translation of crucial terms were made consensually. As an appendix to the volume, Michalski also added a "dictionary" of Heideggerian terms. His edition thereby set a standard for the further translation of Heidegger into Polish, and even today it continues to serve as a kind of guideline.¹² It strongly influenced the reception of Heidegger in Poland, and we can rightly state that "his translation of Heidegger's neologisms, being basically an imposition of a certain interpretation, is by now well-rooted in Polish philosophical jargon."¹³

In 1974, Michalski finished his dissertation on "Heidegger i Filozofia Współczesna" ("Heidegger and Contemporary Philosophy") at the University of Warsaw.¹⁴ His main advisor was Jan Legowicz.¹⁵ After the 1968 political crisis in Poland, with its ensuing anti-Semitic campaign and the repression of dissidents, many intellectuals were forced to leave the country, among them the philosophers Leszek Kołakowski and Krzysztof Pomian, who were principal influences on Krzysztof Michalski.¹⁶ Without an adequate advisor, Michalski tried to get into

contact with the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka, whom the Polish philosopher Irena Krońska had recommended to him. This was the beginning of an intense philosophical correspondence between the two and the initial impulse for a development that led to the establishment of a Patočka Archive at the Viennese *Institute for Human Sciences* (IWM) a few years later. Michalski would therefore insist that Patočka was the “true, though unofficial advisor” of his doctoral thesis.¹⁷

How much the authors envisage Heidegger’s thought as a potentially liberating force against the political constraints of their day is a highly remarkable aspect of this correspondence between Prague and Warsaw in Communist times. In one of the letters, Patočka explicitly highlights the “particular meaning of Heidegger’s philosophy for our East-European nations”¹⁸ and bases this claim on the fact that it entails “a certain philosophy of history”¹⁹ that promises to offer an alternative to the historical determinism of Marxist ideology. “This philosophy,” Patočka continues in the same letter from 1974, “concerns the history of being itself and therefore is about to supersede the one which is prevailing today.”²⁰ In his answer, Michalski does not directly react to this sweeping assertion by Patočka, but there is almost too nice a coincidence and a funny echo of it to be found in his letter, when Michalski reports on his dissertation defense, where he was attacked by one of the referees for not acknowledging that “Heidegger’s philosophy is a deliberate and deliberately hidden polemic against Marxism.”²¹ Had the critic known how close his remark came to the candidate’s most recent correspondence! What Patočka considers the “greatest and most vibrant” side of Heidegger’s philosophy—namely, its historical dimension that, as he says, “no one in the West has connected to”²²—remains an important impulse also for the later reflections of Michalski. It is telling evidence that one of his best known and most widespread essays is entitled “Iron Laws and Personal Responsibility,”²³ criticizing the deterministic view of history and offering an alternative in existential philosophy. Ten years later, in the 1998 foreword to the second edition of his book on Heidegger, Michalski coins another remarkable phrase that in some sense sums up much of his earlier correspondence with Patočka: “Heidegger (. . .)—in my eyes, as in the eyes of my teacher Jan Patočka—offers us an antidote to the ‘Hegelian bite’ (*ukąszenie heglowskie*) which for so long transformed the lively faces of intellectuals into the bumptious mugs of secretaries.”²⁴

Michalski's correspondence with Patočka in this sense is not only the documentation of a philosophical friendship but, as Nicolas de Warren nicely holds, it testifies to "the development of a civil society founded on institutions of conversation" and shows how *civil society* for many Eastern European dissidents came to mean "an engagement with a *life in truth* at odds with the aesthetics of banality (. . .) and the bureaucratization of life."²⁵ Patočka's often quoted "solidarity of the shaken" in this sense finds its vivid expression in his epistolary discussions with Michalski. Not accidentally, Michalski also ends the article published below with a reference to Patočka that reflects his admiration and gratefulness for the professor from Prague whom he had, in fact, met only once.²⁶

The importance of this chapter ought to be understood in light of the fact that for more than thirty years now, Michalski's article has served as an introduction to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to Polish readers. Michalski insightfully depicts the development of Heidegger's philosophy and outlines important sources of his thought. Above all, however, he argues against the common prejudices against Heidegger's philosophy as mere psychologism, anthropologism, or atheistic existentialism.²⁷ Or in Michalski's own words: "I wanted to portray Heidegger's thought as a *problem*, neither adopting nor rejecting it."²⁸

Yet the most striking feature of Michalski's article is, indeed, something else: More than anything else, it is a document of his own fascination with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger—the fascination of a young Polish scholar who, against all odds and political circumstances, sets out to explore a philosophy that does not help to master the world and promises nothing but persistent inquiry.