

Julia Zabłocka

(Feb. 14, 1931–March 26, 1993)

Prof. Julia Zabłocka, Ph.D., was born on Feb. 14, 1931, of working-class parents in the town of Borek-Bytom in the industrial region of Upper Silesia. Everyone who knows the basic facts of the complex history of Polish-German relations, is aware that after World War I Upper Silesia was divided between these two countries. The city of Bytom and its suburbs belonged to the Polish part of the region. However, there were mixed, Polish-German and German-Polish, families in both parts of Silesia. It was to such a family that Julia Zabłocka was born.

The untimely deaths of her father and all siblings had a dramatic impact on the life and personality of the future Assyriologist. From that moment on, her mother remained her only close companion during many years. This resulted in intense intimacy and firm, mature friendship between the two women. When her mother died in 1986, this was an irreplaceable loss to Professor Zabłocka.

Julia Zabłocka began her education during World War II, at a German school where German was the language of instruction. Later, her perfect command of this tongue turned out to be valuable for her studies of ancient civilizations, and German was the language of most of her work published in international journals of Assyriology. After the war, J. Zabłocka continued her education at a Polish high school in Zabrze, graduating in 1950. The next stage of her life was as exotic as it is obscure: she left to study history in Kazan (USSR). This was where she gained a thorough acquaintance with the classic culture (Latin language and literature) and general history. Still, it is not known who her teachers were.

Upon returning to Poland, in 1956 J. Zabłocka became an assistant lecturer at the Department of Ancient History, Faculty of History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. At that time, the Head of the Institute of Ancient History was Prof. Tadeusz Zawadzki (subsequently Professor at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland). Under his supervision and scholarly guidance, the young lecturer wrote her doctoral dissertation, and simultaneously studied Greek and modern languages. In this way, she acquired remarkable linguistic competence: her command of German and Russian was perfect, and she also knew English and could read in the most important Romance languages. Later, while studying under I. M. Diakonov in Leningrad, she refined her knowledge of the Akkadian language. Scholars exploring the classic culture admired her familiarity with the cuneiform, and orientalists, her fluency in Latin and Greek. A reader aware of how isolated a country Poland used to be, especially in the first period of the cold war, and how difficult it was for our scholars to study in Western Europe, must appreciate the effort that such degree of linguistic competence required.

J. Zabłocka's mentor Professor Zawadzki, a disciple of the famous Polish student of the antiquity L. Piotrowicz, then researched mainly the social and economic history of the Greek and Hellenistic civilization. He also showed interest in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. The principal subject of his studies was Anatolia. This was the period when the highly acclaimed monographs by W. M. Ramsay, M. Rostovtzeff, A. H. M. Jones and J. & L. Robert threw a new light on this subject. Professor Zawadzki contributed to this revival with a treatise on the agrarian and social organization of Anatolia in the Hellenistic epoch (*Z zagadnień struktury agrarno-społecznej krajów małoazjatyckich w epoce hellenizmu* [Selected Issues of the Agrarian-and-Social Organization of the Countries of Asia Minor in the Hellenistic Epoch], Poznań, 1952), and encouraged his disciple to explore the economic factors that governed the material life of this region's

aristocracy in the early period of the Roman Empire (cf. Bibliography, No. 8). J. Zabłocka's doctoral dissertation (defended in 1964) focused on founders' inscriptions, emphasized the Anatolian aristocracy's beneficence toward cities and showed that the land had not been the only source of this class's wealth.

After World War II, Marxism became the official ideology of the Polish State and learning. In historiography, this doctrine stimulated (or often enforced) a study of social and economic history of a magnitude previously unknown in Poland. A frequent deficiency of such projects consisted in their erroneous methodological assumptions, which became particularly conspicuous when their authors arrived at the stage of general conclusions. On the other hand, many truly relevant analytical monographs of this realm of the past were published. Poznań at that time was among those scholarly centers where virtually every historian addressed, to a smaller or greater extent, the issues of social and economic history. Such was also the tendency among the historians of the antiquity. The seminal books on this subject were written by Prof. Henryk Łowmiański (specialist in medieval history) and Prof. Jerzy Topolski (modern history), then still a young man.

Yet, an interest in social and economic history was not brought to Poznań when Marxist ideology started to govern Polish culture. It had also taken root among this city's historians before the war. It was at the Adam Mickiewicz University that Prof. Jan Rutkowski (1886-1949) worked, and this historian and economist established the Polish school of economic history and founded the journal *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych* [*The Annual of Social and Economic History*]. The journal's superior academic quality displayed the expertise of Poznań scholars to good advantage. Beginning with 1957, this was also the journal with which J. Zabłocka collaborated most actively throughout her life.

The general concern with social and economic history profoundly affected the emergence of J. Zabłocka's scholarly pursuits, and—as her most outstanding disciple Stefan Zawadzki pointed out—“even if the subjects and chronological boundaries [of her research] kept changing, she continuously manifested an interest in social-and-economic matters” [*Archiv für Orientforschung*, 40-41, 1993-1994, p. 342].

The social-and-economic issues of Roman and Greek history (and especially, the economic condition of various groups of society) were Julia Zabłocka's first research concern, and one that she never really abandoned. Another topic that aroused her interest at the same very early period of her scholarly career, pertained to the civilizations of the Near East, and in particular of Mesopotamia. Her first achievement in this field was the annotated translation of selected source texts on the history of the ancient Near East (edited with Prof. T. Zawadzki, cf. Bibliography, Nos. 1 & 5). Even though many years later the author herself was to consider some of her comments to be obsolete or outdated, and contemplated publishing a new edition, yet even in its original form her book still constitutes a valuable aid for the students of ancient history.

The turning point in her life came when she received a two-year scholarship at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), to study under the eminent Soviet orientalist I. M. Diakonov. Ms. Zabłocka herself declared on several occasions that Diakonov was the scholar who had affected her intellectual development the most profoundly. He was the supervisor of her post-doctoral dissertation (*Habilitationsschrift*), published in 1971 as *Agrarian Relations in the State of the Sargonids* (Bibliography, No. 11). Two characteristics of J. Zabłocka's research methodology are conspicuous in this treatise: a tendency to use source texts which have not been published yet (in this case, the inedited New Assyrian documents from the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin),

and to use them in order to reinterpret historiography's previous postulates. As Ms. Zabłocka's dissertation was published in Polish, it obviously could not produce a marked effect on her fellow scholars' views. And yet, what deserved particular recognition about it was her innovative attempt at relating the Sargonids' policy of deportation to Assyria's economic life.

Until her death, the scholar took a keen interest in the matters of the property of the palace and the temples, and collective and private property in Assyria. At the same time, these scholarly pursuits did not preclude her concern with other aspects of the empire's economic life.

Since 1977, when she paid a scholarly visit to Iraq, J. Zabłocka was seriously preoccupied with the progress of archeological investigations. She addressed herself mainly to the process of the emergence of cities in the Near East, although again her interest was not limited to a single issue, and she took active part in the archeological excavations in the Roman town of Novae in today's Bulgaria.

Ms. Zabłocka intended to discover regularities in the process of the emergence of cities, a process that she regarded as the cornerstone of the ancient civilizations. This matter had a direct bearing on her *magnum opus*, the handbook of the history of the ancient Near East (Bibliography, Nos. 20, 25 & 27), where she paid very much heed to the issues of prehistoric settlements and the origin of cities.

In the 1980s, when J. Zabłocka had become a Professor at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (in 1982) and the Head of the Department of Ancient History, a major subject of her research was the royal ideology in Mesopotamia and Egypt. She delivered a long series of lectures on this topic, only a few of which have been published so far. At time of her death she was also working on an extensive monograph on the history of Iran from the antiquity to the time of Khomeini.

J. Zabłocka participated in many international congresses of oriental studies. In 1989, she organized one in Poznań (*Šulmu IV*). She was also an active member of several research groups within the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Poznań Society of the Friends of the Sciences.

Her home University in Poznań owes to her the introduction of the studies of the ancient Near East into the syllabus of history. Ms. Zabłocka was the first Polish orientalist who examined this culture from a historical rather than a literary-and-linguistic angle. Even if the circle of her direct disciples was very narrow and comprised only two scholars, hundreds of students attended her lectures, and many took part in her highly instructive seminars.

Socially, Julia Zabłocka was a very popular person. She enjoyed talking to people, and would find time for long conversations with her students. She made many friends due to her honesty and sense of humor. Her left-wing political views were the result of her firsthand experience of the poverty of the Silesian working-class families and—to a certain degree—of her long visits to the Soviet Union. She never renounced them, not even when Poland abandoned the Communist ideology, and many people underwent a sudden and drastic change of their political beliefs.

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