ADDRESS AT LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI’S FUNERAL ON JULY 29, 2009 AT THE POWĄZKI CEMETERY IN WARSAW

By

Jacek Bocheński

I am very moved and honored. Tamara, Leszek Kołakowski’s widow, asked me to speak on behalf of his friends. Presumably she did this for one very understandable reason: I am one of the very few people who by right of age can say they shared the Deceased’s youth. Nonetheless Leszek had—and has—very many friends. Far from purporting to speak on behalf of them all I will limit myself to those—old, young, known and less-known—whom he “invited” into his life. In this sense when I say “friends” I mean people who at different times over history listened to what he said, observed his conduct and followed—or at least tried to follow—in his footsteps. And who, perhaps, feel that their own lives, decisions and fate would have been different if not for Leszek Kołakowski.

It is difficult to say how many of them there are—but then it is equally difficult to overestimate the exceptional influence this extraordinary man exerted over so many others, some of them quite big eminencies themselves, and the resulting impact he had on the course of latter-20th-century history in Poland and Europe. A history he co-authored and at times initiated.

Leszek Kołakowski was no official authority, leader, legislator, religious hierarch or official. He was merely a philosopher, writer and citizen. I would say he concentrated within himself the experience and understanding of the demons of his times. Leaving no doubts about demons being devilish, he also posed another, deeper question: can the Devil be saved? As far as I remember he never told us outright what we were to do. Once, when we took a walk (I believe this was in Oxford), I heedlessly asked him what we were to do. Leaning on his stick, he looked surprised and said nothing. Of course—we were to know what to do and decide about it ourselves.

Why, then, did we, his friends whom he so mysteriously invited into his life, listen to him at all? Because he was wiser? Yes—but perhaps most of all because he was always authentic and always credible in what he said and did. This credibility made us feel obliged and we wished to participate in it to
the best of our ability. That is what linked us to him.

Now that he is gone we feel something had been torn from our innermost. And we seek to reclaim the loss as we would seek after a missing part of our own bodies. But we find nothing, and all we feel is pain. Pain we share with you, Tamara, and your daughter Agnieszka.