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

By

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Long ago philosophers believed virtue and reason went hand in hand. Those days may lie far in the past, nonetheless today we can also occasionally see that reason withers when unaided by one very basic virtue—courage. Of course by courage I don’t mean the military kind, but civil courage. Of all the people I have ever known, Leszek Kołakowski was without doubt the one most absolutely endowed with civil courage. Without heed of the consequences, he had to, was inwardly compelled to, say out loud what many of us thought about in silence. And unspoken thoughts stumble and can not grow. Perforce Leszek Kołakowski became our spiritual and intellectual guide. This, however, did not mean he was faultless. Together with us, Poland’s post-war intelligentsia (or at least its considerable part) he erred, but righted his errors a step ahead of the rest—thanks to the virtue of courage.

He was a spiritual leader and a moral authority. I think that it was precisely for this reason that he and no one else authored a severe critique of Marxism, a critique in which he not so much squared accounts with his own past as attempted to understand Marxism as a phenomenon which became a major trend in European thought—both in its valuable aspects and in that which from the very outset was poisonous. This poison first killed the values, then the doctrine itself—and underway cost countless lives, also of many of the doctrine’s supporters. When Kołakowski attempted to lead us away from this doctrine in communist Poland, he perforce came into conflict with the political authorities, and it was then that a party functionary branded him a “political hooligan”. I think Leszek Kołakowski valued this epithet as a high distinction long before post-communist Poland awarded him a White Eagle Order.

What he left us with, the gift of courage that is so necessary for thought, carries something we should continue—not so much for his
sake, as for ours. Every era has its clichés and conformities, and we must know how to resist them. We must know how to preserve this life-giving impulse of courage—or hooliganism—for ourselves and those that will come after us. Without it all thought would wane and we would depart fruitlessly. And we need to live fruitfully so that Poland doesn’t perish.