

Eugeniusz Olszewski: Engineer, Historian and Cofounder of the Committee

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The history of technology is not as popular discipline in Poland as we might wish. An average scholar or student of either historical or technical sciences has probably not heard about ICOHTEC, its mission and goals. He or she would be more than surprised to learn that the first president of the Committee was a Polish professor, Eugeniusz Olszewski.

An engineer

Olszewski was born in Saratow, Russia, on December 4th, 1911. His father, Kajetan, although of Polish blood, voluntarily joined Russian army in 1875 and was quickly promoted to lieutenant, and ultimately to major general in 1914. The Olszewski's family returned to Poland in May 1918, and shortly after the First World War was over, Kajetan began his duty as lieutenant general in the newly formed Polish army.

Young Eugeniusz was finally able to start his education in his native language. He was a pupil at the Stefan Batory State Gymnasium in Warsaw. After completing his exams, he joined Warsaw University of Technology (WUT) as a student of the Faculty of Civil Engineering, majoring in road and bridge construction. Shortly after receiving his engineering diploma in 1935, he started working for the department of construction in the Ministry of Defense, and later for Polish State Railways. Shortly before the Second World War began, he started his own engineering enterprise, and he became interested in theoretical aspects of construction, such as a theory of elasticity.

In 1942 he joined the teaching staff of the State High School of Technology (as the Nazis demoted WUT), where he specialized in the strength of materials. In 1943-44, while still working there, he got involved in the underground movement. He was among other academic teachers elaborating a reconstruction program of Polish education after anticipated end of German occupation. This was carried on under

auspices of the Polish Government in exile in London. Olszewski's group envisaged introducing a dual mode of education in the field of civil engineering: the engineers with practical skills and those of theoretical attitude for R&D work would be trained simultaneously.

Not much happened with the plan after all. When the Red Army liberated eastern Poland from Nazi occupation, all hopes for re-establishing prewar political conditions in Poland collapsed. The Soviet-controlled Polish government was established in Lublin, and shortly after that, and still before Warsaw was set free, Olszewski engaged himself in establishing a branch of WUT in Lublin. At that time, Olszewski attempted to introduce some of his thoughts as to engineering education in post-war Poland, but with very little to no success. In Warsaw beginning in early 1945, Olszewski served in various ministries and on committees and in departments focusing mainly on reconstruction of the Polish capital City, Warsaw, terribly destroyed during the war.

Although occupied by all his new and demanding duties, Olszewski never quit his academic career. From March 1945, he worked as an assistant professor in the Department of Structural Statics, Faculty of Civil Engineering at WUT. Later he became a professor of Mechanics of the Faculty of Transportation, and for several years served as its dean. His research efforts focused on theoretical problems of construction, and he with co-authors published extensively the results of his scientific studies in leading Polish engineering journals.

His interest in the history of technology began in the early 1950s. In 1951, he attended the first Congress of Polish Sciences held in Warsaw, and he served as a commentator in the session on engineering.³⁸ In his introductory speech, he focused on the history of construction and civil engineering. In the newly established Polish Academy of Sciences, he became a member of the Committee for the History of Sciences, and shortly thereafter he was named a chair of the Division for the History of Technology and Technical Sciences of that Committee.

³⁸ The Polish Academy of Sciences has been formed at this occasion. More than 1800 scholars representing all disciplines gathered at Warsaw and Krakow then.

A historian

The importance of professor Olszewski in establishing the history of technology as an academic discipline in Poland is an outstanding one. It is impossible to overestimate the role he played in consolidating and institutionalizing the movement of Polish historians of science and technology. In 1956, he erected a Chair of History of Technology at WUT and served as its head for thirteen years. Meantime, between 1958 and 1968, he was a vice-director of the Department of History of Science and Technology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Later, in 1969, he took a position in the Department of Study on Science and Technology at WUT. He remained its vice-director until 1982, and later he worked among founding members of Polish Society for the History of Technology (Polskie Towarzystwo Historii Techniki - PTHT). In 1966, Olszewski received a degree of full professor in history of technology. In every institution that he established and successfully directed, he is still remembered as a 'humane boss' - always friendly and encouraging good working relationships among co-workers.

One can distinguish three main areas of his research activity. First, he looked at methodology of the historical studies as it pertained to technology and its meaning in the historical processes. In his writings he shared not only his own thoughts, but also, having broad international connections, he acquainted Polish readers with current scholarly ideas developed by historians from both sides of Iron Curtain. For example, in his papers he frequently referred to the works of T.S. Kuhn, M. Daumas, S.V. Shukhardin, E.W. Constant II, and others.³⁹

The second area of his interest was the history of his alma mater, Warsaw University of Technology. He edited several monumental works on that topic, including a book commemorating the sesquicentennial of technical education in Warsaw published in 1979.⁴⁰

In his third area of interest, he published several short but comprehensive papers summarizing some aspect of historical studies on

³⁹ Olszewski, Eugeniusz: O strukturze rewolucji technicznych na marginesie artykułu E.W. Constanta II. In: *Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki*, (1) 1975, pp. 71-77.

⁴⁰ Domanski, Eugeniusz et al. *150 lat wyzszego szkolnictwa technicznego w Warszawie 1826-1976*. Warszawa 1979.

science and technology. He authored or edited, for example, a number of important works on general history of technology in Poland.⁴¹ The variety of his interest fully justifies the way he referred to himself - as a philosopher of technology.

Professor Olszewski's devotion to the history of technology could be also seen in his extensive work as an editor and a member of editorial boards of various journals published mainly by the Polish Academy of Sciences. Those included 'Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki' (The History of Science and Technology Quarterly), 'Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Nauki Polskiej' (Studies and Sources in the History of Polish Science) and 'Organon'.⁴²

From the second half of 1960s, Olszewski's interests slightly shifted from history to the contemporary problems of science and technology, the scientific revolution, research in science, and predicting the development of technology. Except for a set of publications on that topic,⁴³ this shift in his interests resulted in several changes in organizational structure of departments erected by professor Olszewski in former years. In early 1969, for example, his Chair of History of Technology at WUT, was placed into the Institute of Economical and Social Studies and later transformed into a Department of History of Technology as a part of that institute. Only a year later, during major reorganization at WUT, that department was dismissed and all its employees moved to a Department of Marxist Philosophy. Eventually, in 1975, a new Department of Research on Science and Technology was formed under professor Olszewski's direction.⁴⁴

The marriage with Marxism, although astounding, was not an incidental one. Professor Olszewski was known for his devotion to that

⁴¹ Olszewski, Eugeniusz and Orłowski, Bolesław: *Z dziejów polskiej myśli technicznej*. In: *Podstawowe problemy współczesnej techniki*. Tom X. Warszawa 1965; Olszewski, Eugeniusz: *Od wiedzy technicznej do nauk technicznych*. In: *Historia nauki polskiej*. Tom III. Wrocław 1977; etc.

⁴² Pilatowicz, Józef: Olszewski Eugeniusz. In: Pilatowicz, Józef (ed.): *Słownik Biograficzny Techników Polskich*. Tom XI. Warszawa 2000, p. 107.

⁴³ Olszewski, Eugeniusz: *Od rewolucji naukowych i technicznych do rewolucji naukowotechnicznych*. In: *Człowiek i Światopogląd* (11/12) 1972.

⁴⁴ Pilatowicz, Józef: *op. cit.*, p. 108.

ideology, though somewhat unusual when one considers his family background. His attitude, however, could be seen in his lectures, especially in those given in the Institute of the Librarian Studies and Scientific Information at Warsaw University. He referred to various works of Lenin and Marx, but he had a special estimation for *Dialectic of Nature* by F. Engels. He did not avoid this ideological attitude even during his lectures for students of engineering: “I will be teaching you the Marxist mechanics” he used to say.⁴⁵ Today it could sound like a joke, but it was not.

His dedication to the left wing showed up in his political activity, particularly at the turn of 1940s. Shortly after the war, he became a member of Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna - PPS) and he joined the Polish United Worker's Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza - PZPR) in 1948.⁴⁶ He was declared atheist. In 1968, when the manipulations of Communist government resulted with a wave of Anti-Semitism in Poland, professor Olszewski very openly expressed his aversion to all symptoms of this repellent drive.⁴⁷

There is not much known about Olszewski's personal life. His associates have noted that he was an avid bridge player, and he loved to play tennis and ski. He was a man of distinctive manners, calm and free of eccentricity. Except perhaps for one - he insisted on spelling his name 'Eugenjusz', an old-fashioned and a bit fancy version of that name. But, it was exactly what was written on his birth certificate. He was an uncompromising opponent of pop culture, and since he believed that television should be blamed for its expansion the most, he never owned a TV set. He was a frequent visitor to National Philharmonic and to theaters in his home city of Warsaw. Finally, he was a declared atheist.

⁴⁵ Lotysz, Sławomir: Telephone conversation with Bolesław Orłowski. October 1, 2008.

⁴⁶ In the Western world PZPR was commonly but incorrectly called the 'Polish Communist Party'.

⁴⁷ Holender, Henryk: Wspomnienie o Profesorze Eugeniuszu Olszewskim (1911-1994). In: Schiller, Joanna; Zasztowt, Leszek (ed.): Instytut Historii Nauki Polskiej Akademii Nauk w latach 1953-2003. Warszawa 2004. p. 222.



Shukhardin Olszewski Kranzberg
Bucharest 1981

Co-founder of ICOHTEC

There is a firm belief in Poland that professor Olszewski played the major role in forming the International Committee for the History of Technology. This can be found in the professor's biographic note, authored by professor Jozef Pilatowicz: "in 1965, during the International Congress of History of Science in Warsaw, Olszewski proposed to establish an International Committee for the History of Technology.⁴⁸ He addressed his proposal to the most eminent historians of technology from both sides of the Iron Curtain." This

⁴⁸ The 11th International Congress of History of Science was held at Warsaw and Krakow, August 24-31, 1965.

would not have happened, however, if there had not been a network of personal relations between the scholars, which – in the world before Internet affording international calls and flights – had to rely solely on letters sent by post. Olszewski met Kranzberg at the IUHPS-Congress in Barcelona in 1959. After the meeting both of them seemed to be impressed, but ‘astonished’ would be a more appropriate word here. Kranzberg felt like he was re-discovering a new world, in which history of technology existed as well established scholarly discipline. For Olszewski it was like a flow of fresh air from the West, from which most East European historians had been disconnected for two decades.⁴⁹

The idea came true in 1968 at Olszewski’s house, during a private meeting with Maurice Daumas, Melvin Kranzberg and Semyon Viktorovich Shukhardin. During this founding meeting, Olszewski was named the first ICOHTEC’s president.⁵⁰ Why did it happen just at Olszewski’s? Professor Boleslaw Orłowski, who knew Olszewski very well, suggests an answer: “That must have been because of the delicious cuisine served by Barbara, Eugeniusz’s wife. She was cooking by an old book, the same as the one used at the court of the last king of Poland, Stanislaw August Poniatowski.”⁵¹ What the world of politics and economy had to wait for the next twenty years, the roast goose served by Madame Olszewski made for scholarship in one evening.

Was ICOHTEC then, more or less literally cooked up at Olszewski’s house? If so, it would give a nice touch to the story of the first days of the Committee. This way or another, as Dr. Henryk Hollender, Olszewski’s associate and friend summarizes, “the ICOHTEC was born in his house and out of his initiative.”⁵²

It is no surprise, that having such point of view well established, none of our historians has bothered to consult the primary sources (e.g. Olszewski’s personal papers and letters) in the pursuit of finding how the ICOHTEC was really born, or what was behind the scene. Also, as

⁴⁹ Information of Bob Post to Wolfhard Weber, April 2009.

⁵⁰ Pilatowicz, Jozef: *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁵¹ Orłowski, Boleslaw: Eugeniusz Olszewski jako historyk Techniki. In: *Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki* (3-4), 1994, p. 136.

⁵² Holender, Henryk: *op. cit.*, p. 223.

such claims might be flattering for Poles, no one even attempted to confront them with what the three others remaining Committee's co-founders had to say.

What may astonish us, however, is that Poles did not really emphasize or popularize the importance of Olszewski for the international movement for the history of science, nor mention exploiting it to popularize and strengthen the discipline within the country. What has been neglected for the last forty years will be hard to make up today in the age of the Internet and overwhelming (and somewhat appalling) popularity of such sources as a sort of user-edited, online encyclopedia. While searching the web for information on the origin of ICOHTEC, one may find out that it “was founded at a meeting of the International Congress on the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine, Paris in the summer of 1968. Its founding was the brainchild of Melvin Kranzberg.”⁵³ Yet another firm statement, and again with very brief references to the role played by co-founders.

Professor Eugeniusz Olszewski passed away on June 1, 1994. That day the history of technology in Poland lost a great mentor and a personality of unquestionable respect, but still his example can be an inspiration for coming generations of young Polish scholars, especially, since ICOHTEC, which he cooked up forty years ago, is still in its prime.

⁵³ ICOHTEC. Available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ICOHTEC> [Accessed December 20, 2008].