



Ewa Wipszycka (1933), University of Warsaw

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Ewa Wipszycka’s exceptional grades at high school gave her unconditional access to the university: she was exempt from entrance exams. Since she combined her academic attainments with voluntary organizational work, she was labeled one of the “leaders in the social and academic effort,” as it was then called. She began to study history at the University of Warsaw in 1954. She was quickly noticed by the Head of Ancient History, Professor Iza Biežuńska-Małowist (1917–1995), who took her under her wing. Biežuńska-Małowist was an exceptionally motivating educator, even if her lectures were less than ideal, says Wipszycka. Able to convince students of the many exciting periods in ancient history that must be studied anew, Biežuńska captured the imagination of young people and inspired them with enthusiasm for her discipline. During the first year, history students learned about ancient and medieval history, but Wipszycka was never tempted to specialize in anything but antiquity.

Some of the talented students Biežuńska-Małowist attracted at that time were truly outstanding, such as the future professor Jerzy Kolendo (1933–2014). Quite a few people attended the second-year seminar. Biežuńska-Małowist and her husband Marian Małowist (1909–1988), a medievalist, knew how to gather bright and capable young students. These students would often later choose to specialize in another discipline but always did so having absorbed something of their working method and their vision of what the study of history entailed and why it mattered from the seminars. As Wipszycka said,

working with the Małowists, students were conscious of being close to authentic scholarship.

Aleksander Gieysztor (1916–1999), a hero of the Resistance during World War II and a legendary figure in Polish medieval studies, was another key historian in Wipszycka's professional development. It was the period of intensive research conducted in preparation for the Millennium of the Polish State, a major interdisciplinary program including a robust archaeological component.¹ Gieysztor visited site after site and knew how to infuse the excavations with a sense of history. Still, it was Biezuńska-Małowist whom Wipszycka considered her mentor. First of all, she forced the young historian to choose her specialism. Her preparatory seminar was excellent: engaging, very lively, with plenty of discussion. The MA seminar was similar. Biezuńska did not teach facts as such but what to do with them. In Wipszycka's academic life, she played an inestimable role. She was positive that Wipszycka should study papyri. Purely pragmatic considerations decided the matter. Professor Jerzy Manteuffel (1900–1954) was still alive but in poor health and practically inactive. On the other hand, Rafał Taubenschlag (1881–1958), the prewar professor of Roman law and papyrology at the Jagiellonian University, who returned from the United States in 1947, became the Chair of Ancient Law at the Faculty of Law in the University of Warsaw, and together with Manteuffel taught at the Department of Papyrology at the Faculty of History. Taubenschlag brought his impressive library from the States and, as a renowned scholar, received huge numbers of various offprints, the main instrument of exchange and communication between scholars at the time. The circulation of offprints kept academics informed about who did what in their discipline. Taubenschlag's library saved Wipszycka from a depressive inferiority complex. There was simply no way anything could have been missing from that library. Indeed, everything was there, in its proper place, a solid basis for research. Wipszycka, for a long time, resisted Biezuńska's idea that she should study papyrology. She admits that this resistance originated in external reasons, i.e., in her political interests, orienting her toward studying the late Roman republic. However, her mentor was convincing and stood by her proposal, which proved right.

Wipszycka said she was not only guided by her mentor, but was a child of the Institute of History, an unusual place open to the world even before the 1956 thaw and much more so following the subsequent wave of liberalization. A great school of historical sciences, once the borders

1 Cf. the paper of Elżbieta Olechowska in the present issue.

opened, it promoted personal exchanges abroad and demonstrated to all of Europe how economic and social history should be taught. Not many people know or remember the Institute today, but Aleksander Gieysztor, Marian Małowist, Witold Kula² (1916–1988), Antoni Mączak (1928–2003), and to a lesser degree Henryk Samsonowicz (1930–2021) were scholars who had shown what could be achieved when history is practiced with intelligence and wisdom. It was undoubtedly history influenced by Marxism but adopted highly selectively and with discernment. Wipszycka said she was the product of this community with which she identified and which taught her a whole spectrum of values. For that reason, when she first traveled abroad and found herself in Paris in 1959, she was aware of the difference between herself and her fellow students in seminars. She was a historian, and they... Her perception of history, research tools, and historical research themes were diametrically different from theirs. She was conscious of lacking only technical skills and accepted this shortcoming with humility and desperation, simultaneously realizing that the Institute of History had taught her the difficult art of dealing with economic and social history.

During the last year of her studies, Wipszycka worked as a history teacher at a teacher-training high school in Stawki Street in Warsaw. She covered the work of a teacher on sick leave and kept this post for a year after graduation. She admits that she hated university then and still does not love it. She considers the pervasive, inbuilt dependence of young people on the old incredibly unhealthy. Also, her attitude to people who surrounded her was – how to define it – uncompromising. Later, she mellowed. She always knew that teaching was her destiny, and it came naturally.

She thinks she was a good lecturer. Her grandfather taught at the first Warsaw polytechnic. Growing up, she could observe her mother's example and be psychologically prepared for this profession. She started teaching at the university at a time when failing the first

- 2 W. Kula was the only member of this group who belonged to the short-lived and ill-fated Marxist Association of Historians (*Marksistowskie Zrzeszenie Historyków*). It was created in 1948, several months before the merger of PPS (Polish Socialist Party) and PPR (Polish Workers' Party), by activists of both organizations. It was never truly launched and remained on paper until its reactivation in 1950, which led to a short period of activity, after which, it expired again. See Marcin Kula, "Dobrymi chęciami piekło wybrukowane: Refleksje nad Marksistowskim Zrzeszeniem Historyków" in *Społeczeństwo w dobie przemian: wiek XIX i XX. Księga jubileuszowa profesor Anny Żarnowskiej*, edited by Maria Nietyska, Andrzej Szwarz, Katarzyna Sierakowska et al. (Warsaw: DiG, 2003), 452–465.

year meant not being able to continue. If she did not give a passing grade to students, they automatically dropped out. In the case of male students, it had exceptionally unpleasant consequences: compulsory two-year military service. Obviously, like all beginners, she was inclined to be excessively severe. In any case, during exams, she was strict until her retirement. She admits that in teaching matters, she always had enormous help from Iza Biežuńska, who conducted her didactic activities perfectly. Biežuńska insisted that her assistants be present when she was examining students. It was an excellent way to learn how to do it. When Wipszycka worked at the Institute of Archaeology, she examined older students in a different, more tolerant manner. She was very flexible when selecting readings and due dates, and she never gave failing grades. She was willing to give as many chances as necessary. She remembers these exams with great satisfaction.

Wipszycka believed that sharing her knowledge with society without the Communist Party's participation in the process was crucial for her as a historian. She therefore took part in creating and running a popular monthly, *Mówią Wieki* [The Past Speaks], founded in 1958 on the wave of the post-October '56 liberalization. There were surprisingly few problems with Party censorship. Wipszycka and her colleagues were worried that they had done something wrong if the censors did not molest them enough.

The topic of her PhD dissertation did not stray from the general research practice of all members of the so-called Małowists' stable and was chosen under their guidance. Scholars such as Mączak, Samsonowicz, Benedykt Zientara (1928–1983), Kolendo, and herself would tackle similar subjects from economic history. Iza Biežuńska, her PhD Adviser, instructed her to work on crafts in Egypt. A month later, feeling bold, she told Biežuńska that she could not learn the technologies of all crafts and proposed to limit the topic to weaving. Her adviser immediately accepted the change of subject. The sources for this branch of crafts were impressive. Still, during the first six months, she studied weaving technology and learned ancient methods of the craft, even if this is not immediately evident in her book. That was the beginning of her adventure with Egyptian weaving. Once the dissertation was published, she traveled the world sharing her knowledge of this craft. She says with satisfaction that to this day, the book remains the fundamental economic study of the subject, even though one recent publication does complete certain areas. Even when she was still writing *L'Industrie textile dans l'Égypte romaine*, she knew what she would research later, and this new research area would have nothing to do with Biežuńska. She was going to study the early Christian Church.

Biežuńska ensured that Wipszycka received a bursary for a one-year stay in Paris; she knew how to guide people. Before Wipszycka left, Biežuńska told her to use the whole time to study, attend seminars and lectures and not pretend to do any research, only study, study, study. This advice met precisely with Wipszycka's own desire. Indeed, during that year, Wipszycka attended scores of classes and got to know many scholars. She met two authorities on papyrology. One of them, Roger Rémondon, was particularly inspiring, and because his area of expertise was Late Antiquity, she decided to focus on that period. She thought then that her choice was unusual but soon learned she was far from alone in her preference. Late antiquity became nearly the forefront of research on antiquity and gathered an increasing number of scholars. Still, even before she began researching the history of the Egyptian Church, she realized through her familiarity with papyri that the institutional history of the Church had been untouched. That is how she found her niche, over which she has retained a monopoly.

From her stay in Paris, Wipszycka brought back a husband, an Italian classicist, Benedetto Bravo. They attended the same seminar conducted by an eminent epigraphist, Louis Robert (1904–1985). She describes her marriage as contracted according to the best academic models. Robert used to invite international students home for dinner. Wipszycka and her future husband met there and realized they lived on opposite sides of the same *cité universitaire*. They kept in touch, which also allowed Wipszycka to enter a circle representing a way of thinking quite new to her. It influenced her greatly. Her next study trip, facilitated by Iza Biežuńska, took Wipszycka to Berlin, where she could select the papyri she wanted to publish. The Berlin collection was at the time recently recovered from Soviet Russia. She remembers being taken by the curator of the collection to an enormous hall filled with low cabinets housing papyri mounted under glass. With his hand toward the cabinets, he said: "Go ahead, take your pick" – and left. It was not a simple task. There were tens of thousands of papyri in the hall, but if the curator thought she would be overwhelmed, he was wrong because she knew how to tackle the problem. She looked through the inventory and, based on that, selected several papyri. She thought that her habilitation dissertation would be based on these sources. Luckily, this was not what happened, but already then, she was looking for the word *ekklēsia* in the papyri. In Warsaw, she acquired a solid papyrological basis thanks to Anna Świderkówna (1925–2008)³ and underwent additional training in Paris. She was, first

3 A classical philologist and Chair of Papyrology at the University of Warsaw from 1962–1991.

of all, a social-economic historian, and that was her focus in the study of the Church. When she began to broaden her interests, she met almost insurmountable obstacles. In the early 1960s, no adequate library in Warsaw specialized in this aspect of ancient history. Rev. Marek Starowieyski (1937)⁴ was just beginning to build his library on the subject. As Wipszycka reports, Anna Świderkówna used to say he had charisma for books, and she was right. However, when Wipszycka started researching Church history, Starowieyski's library did not yet exist. She needed to be introduced to the study of the Church. Finding partners in Poland who could provide such assistance then was not easy. What was on offer at the Academy of Catholic Theology⁵ was unacceptable. Wipszycka had to find out on her own what the main research tools were and learn to use them. The Catholic clergy unconsciously believed that the history of the Church is like a mosaic to which subsequent generations add their tiles according to divine design. Protestants were exactly the same. There were, however, still remnants of a prewar circle of historians of theology who assumed that scholarship, such as the history of the Church, its institutions, doctrine, and liturgy, could not rely on a, let us call it, *transcendental* endpoint. Wipszycka was unaware of that, however. She was fortunate because what she chose as her niche was primarily the domain of theologians – something she was never interested in – and second, that of editors of theological texts. Historians were practically absent from the field. She could read “her” papyri in peace as the confessional researchers gave them a wide berth. They trembled at the very sight of papyri because the text was incomprehensible, with holes, torn in pieces, missing the beginning and the sides. While deciphering papyri, Wipszycka systematically read literary texts and tried to draw a whole picture from these elements. At first, she looked for consultation among the Polish clergy, the only ones she could contact. To no avail. Then, a third type of source revealed itself – archaeology. She realized that it was impossible to study antiquity without a different discipline, let us call it technical. For her, it was papyrology. For her friend, Jerzy Kolendo, it was archaeology. She understood the importance of archaeology, but

- 4 Eminent specialist of early Christianity, in particular of the Apocrypha of the New Testament and Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church, Professor emeritus of Classical Philology at the University of Warsaw, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum and Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.
- 5 Akademia Teologii Katolickiej was created by two decrees of the Communist Council of Ministers in August 1954 simultaneously closing down the Faculties of Theology at the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Canonical approval of the Academy was received from the Vatican Congregatio de Studiorum Institutis only on June 29, 1989.

her road to working with archaeological material took some time. It finally happened in Egypt. When she published her habilitation book, she went with a copy to Kazimierz Michałowski.⁶

She told him there was no valid reason for her going to Egypt other than a deeply felt necessity to see the sky and the land. Michałowski granted her a two-month bursary, and in the early 1970s, she went to Egypt for the first time.

The timing was not ideal, as the country was under martial law, but she still managed to see a lot. In the early 1980s, she received a three-month grant that was hardly sufficient to cover the price of bus tickets. However, she met many new people and took advantage of any chance to travel. She observed the excavations, but a historian without archaeological training and any talent for drawing or taking photographs is useless at an excavation site. On the other hand, she was knowledgeable about Egypt, its clergy, and the saints. Later on, Wipszycka returned to Egypt almost every year, and she visited some monastic sites each time. She probably saw 90 percent of all there was to see. That is how she augmented her niche. At some point, Marek Starowieyski asked her to write an introduction and a commentary to a selection of previously translated texts about St. Anthony. The translator used Migne's *Patrology*, a Latin version of an Arabic translation of the original, and had no clue about St. Anthony's times. Wipszycka found the rule that Anthony allegedly dictated to fathers from Naqlun. Reading this text, she vaguely remembered having read about this monastic site in a book written by a Jesuit, an eminent specialist in monastic Egypt.

In her copy of the book, the pages about Naqlun were missing. She called a friend in Paris and asked him to read them to her. Later, she solicited other people for works about the convent in Naqlun. Finally, in desperation, she went to the National Museum, to Włodzimierz Godlewski (1945).⁷ She told him that they have to try because first of all, she has in hand the rule of her monastery, and second, at the edge of the

6 The best known Polish twenty-century classical archaeologist who conducted excavations in Edfu (Southern Egypt) in 1936–1939; in Mirmeki in the Soviet Crimea in 1956–1958; in Tel-Atrib in the Lower Egypt in 1957–1969; in Palmyra (Syria) in 1959–1969; in Alexandria, since 1960, where the first ancient theatre in Egypt was discovered and reconstructed; in Deir-el-Bahari, since 1961; in Faras (North Sudan) in 1961–1964; in Dongola (also North Sudan) in 1964–1966; in Nea Paphos on Cyprus, since 1965. Michałowski directed also UNESCO project of moving Abu Simbel temples to save them from flooding by the Aswan Dam in 1964–1968.

7 Professor of archaeology at the University of Warsaw, student of Kazimierz Michałowski, specialising in the archaeology of Egypt and Christian Nubia.

Faiyum Oasis, there are remains of a monastic complex that has never been examined. She knew he was supposed to depart soon to work as the secretary of Cairo archaeological station for a year. After some time, he wrote that he traveled to Naqlun and found a great *kom* or hill created in the desert by sands covering old buildings. There was certainly something there. She thought that one excavation season would be enough, but work continues to this day. Work on the site began in 1984. Wipszycka admits her admiration for Włodzimierz Godlewski's organizational talents. Her task was to run up and down the hills and identify possible emplacements of *eremitoria*. Finally, one afternoon, she told Godlewski: "Tomorrow, the workers arrive. Come with me to decide where they should start digging." They looked at a few *eremitoria* along a small valley, and Godlewski decided, "We are digging exactly here." This was indeed the most exciting place. Some call it intuition, but it was simply a combination of exceptional knowledge, erudition, and experience. Conditions were difficult, with water shortages and abundant bugs, including flees. Still, it immediately became apparent that this site probably flourished as the most important monastic complex in Central Egypt. They were fortunate because, already during the first season, they uncovered papyri and a fragment of parchment with what proved to be a page from the lost eleventh book of Livy. Benedetto Bravo, Wipszycka's husband, a true classical philologist, was beyond himself when she brought photographs of the parchment. These initial successes helped in obtaining money for further digs. The effect of the first season was simply triumphal.



Marian Małowist and Iza Biezuńska-Małowist, with their friends Nina Assorodobraj-Kula and Witold Kula, Paris 1947 (photo courtesy of Włodzimierz Lengauer).