

# IN MEMORIAM

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IN MEMORY OF PROFESSOR GRZEGORZ BIAŁUŃSKI  
(1967–2018)



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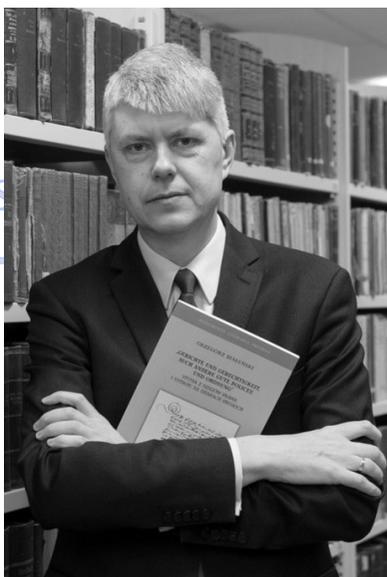


Photo from the Archive of University of Warmia and Masuria

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On the morning of October 26<sup>th</sup> 2018, Professor Grzegorz Białuński, an outstanding historian, expert on Masuria and Prussia, and researcher of legal history, sadly passed away. Barely anyone is fully prepared for the death of a person close to their heart, and very few will humbly reconcile the passing away of someone to whom they have been emotionally attached. Many of his friends, who on that bright day received the sad news that the struggle of Professor Białuński against an exhausting illness came to its end, were struck with grief. As Cicero asked – *Qui potest mortem metuens esse non miser?*

Indeed, “is it possible to think about death and be happy?” His grave illness and the thought that Professor Białuński had to face it on a daily basis, agonized his family and numerous friends that were attached to him through common acade-

mic pursuits, as well as those remaining with him in master – apprentice relationships. Professor Białuński gave his closest relatives enough time to prepare for the worst, even though at the same time he did not deprive them of hope that he would improve, and that, with the loving care of his wife and son, he might ultimately be able to fully recover. Professor Gerard Labuda had a saying about the “healing powers of research”. Consciously or not, Professor Białuński clearly adhered to this expression, as research was – just after his family – the most important pursuit of his life. This is reflected by the extensiveness of his research output that encompasses over 250 publications including 12 monographs. Despite a progressing illness, he worked assiduously until the end. Even when he was already moving with considerable difficulty between voluminous historical sources heaped up at his house, he did not lose his intellectual powers, still continuing his research and submitting research papers for publication. Five of them were published after his death. A rich collection of studies by Professor Białuński prepared in the last months of his life will soon appear in print.

Grzegorz Białuński was born on 2 April 1967 in Giżycko, lived and grew up in the little village of Skop with two sisters and a brother. Between 1981–1985, he attended the Wojciech Kętrzyński Comprehensive Lyceum in Giżycko. After he successfully passed the maturity exam, Białuński enrolled as a student at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń from which he graduated in 1990. During his studies he took great interest in the history of Prussia and Masuria. Nevertheless, he often emphasized that his fascination with the prehistory and early history of his native territory originated in his childhood from interest in a hillfort situated in the village of Jeziorko. As a high school pupil, he keenly learned about Prussia. During his studies at the University of Toruń, Grzegorz Białuński broadened his knowledge by means of participation in the Student Association of Researchers of Warmia and Masuria, presided over by Professor Janusz Mańlek, with whom he maintained cordial relations also after graduating. His interest in medieval studies, and especially in the medieval history of Prussia, influenced his choice of a master thesis topic that was eventually written under the supervision of Professor Antoni Czacharowski. On 12 June 1990, Professor Białuński defended his thesis entitled “Galindians – the development and demise of the tribe”. Topics related to Galindia and Galindians often appeared in his subsequent works and significantly influenced the research profile of first a young and ambitious master of arts, then doctor and finally professor. At any rate, this subject was capacious enough to encompass a chronological range stretching from early medieval times until the modern era. Grzegorz Białuński used this opportunity (inspired also by Professor Janusz Mańlek) to prepare his doctoral thesis to which he applied his knowledge obtained

during the previous research and combined it with an analysis of new sources that helped him gain new experiences related to settlement theory and social studies. When writing his doctoral thesis with Professor Marian Biskup as his doctoral advisor, he first worked from September 1990 as a history teacher at a small school in Skop, and afterwards in Giżycko that was situated 14 km away. He often recalled his years as a teacher with a smile, saying that he found the work very satisfying, especially when preparing his students for school contests. On the other hand, his inherently calm nature was not always, as he claimed, compatible with the more vivacious behaviour of his students.

Undoubtedly, the first crucial moment in the life of Grzegorz Białuński was his wedding to his faithful companion Marta (née Chwalba) that took place on 4 August 1990. Two years later the Białuński family welcomed their son Maciej into the world. The difficult period of combining professional, marital and paternal duties required a great deal of discipline and organisation. All of this did not, however, hinder the defense of Białuński's doctoral thesis entitled „Osadnictwo południowej i środkowej strefy Wielkich Jezior Mazurskich – starostwo leckie (giżyckie) i ryńskie od XIV do początku XVIII wieku. Studium zmian osadniczych na środkowych Mazurach” (*Settlement in the southern and middle area of the Great Masurian Lakes – the Lec and Ryńsk Starostwo between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. The study of settlement development in Middle Masuria*) that occurred on 6 March 1990. The academic degree opened up for him new career prospects.

On 1 September 1996, Grzegorz Białuński began to work at the Wojciech Kętrzyński Research Centre in Olsztyn. His dissertation was recognised as outstanding, and in 1997 he was awarded the first Wojciech Kętrzyński prize. The time spent at the Centre was an exceptionally valuable and fruitful period of his research activity. It resulted in three of his highly esteemed and still cited books. The first one was a monograph based upon his doctoral research *Osadnictwo regionu Wielkich Jezior Mazurskich od XIV do początków XVIII wiek. Starostwo leckie (giżyckie i ryńskie)* (“Settlement in the area of the Great Masurian Lakes from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Lec (Giżycko and Ryńsk) Starostwo”) published in Olsztyn in 1996. The book was translated into German as *Siedlungswesen im Bereich der Großen Masurischen Seen vom 14. bis 18. Jahrhundert – Ämter Lötzen und Rhein*, and published in Hamburg in 2005. Subsequent publications included *Studia z dziejów plemion pruskich i jaćwieskich* (“Studies on the History of the Prussian and Yotvingians Tribes”), Olsztyn 1999; *Przemiany społeczno-ludnościowe południowo-wschodnich obszarów Prus Krzyżackich i Książęcych (do 1568 r.)* (“Socio-population changes in the regions of Southeastern Teutonic and Ducal Prussia [until 1568]”), Olsztyn 2001; *Kolonizacja Wielkiej puszczy (do 1568 r.) – starostwa*

*piskie, elckie, straduńskie, zelkowskie i węgoborskie (węgorzewskie)*, (“The Colonisation of the Great Forest [until 1568] – Pisz, Elk, Straduny and Węgobork [Węgorzewo] Starostwo”), Olsztyn 2002. The latter became the basis of his habilitation colloquium that took place on 8 October 2002 at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. While working at the Wojciech Kętrzyński Research Centre, Grzegorz Białuński also co-created *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* (“Masurian-Warmian Bulletin”), to which he contributed even several papers per year in this journal. He also edited many joint publications and co-organised academic conferences. Moreover, he saw a particular value in forming a historical and regional awareness of the Warmian and Masurian inhabitants, which inspired his popularisation activities. He diligently traced the latest publications. The reviews he wrote in that period abounded in meritorical comments and greatly influenced the environment of Polish medievalists.

In 2004, Grzegorz Białuński was appointed to a fellowship at the University of Warmia and Masuria, moreover he was still employed at the Wojciech Kętrzyński Research Centre (until 2014 it was his main research center). At the beginning of the academic year, he joined the Institute of History and International Relations (as an Associate Professor), and headed the Department of Baltic Land History. His research work in that period resulted in the following research papers and monographs: *Ród Prusa Kleca ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem rodziny von Pfeilsdorfów-Pilewskich* (“The clan of Prus Klec with particular attention to the Pfeilsdorf-Pilewski family”), Malbork 2006; *Misja prusko-litewska biskupa Brunona z Kwerfurtu* (The Prussian-Lithuanian Mission of Bishop Brunon of Querfurt), Olsztyn 2010; *Studia z dziejów rycerskich i szlacheckich rodów pruskich (XIII–XVI wiek). Część I* (Studies from the History of Knightly and Aristocratic Prussian Families (13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century). Part 1”), Olsztyn 2012.

On 12 January 2012, partly owing to his extensive research output, Grzegorz Białuński was appointed Professor Ordinarius (Chair Professor) by the president of the Polish Republic, Bronisław Komorowski, and on 22 February 2012 he received his professorial nomination in person. This year was undoubtedly exceptional for the new-fledged professor. He not only took over the duties of the Staff Vice-Rector at the University of Warmia and Masuria in Olsztyn, but also started working at the Law and Administration Department as the head of the Department of Common Law History, Roman Law and Legal Comparatistics, which resulted from his research interest in the legal practices (also customary) in Prussia from the tribal period until the modern era. This research was published in the form of several articles and a monograph entitled *„Gerichte und Gerechtigkeit, auch andere gute Policey und Ordnung. Studia z dziejów prawa i ustroju na ziemiach pruskich* (“Laws and Justice, and Other Good Regulations and Order. Studies on the History of Law and Political System of Prussian Lands”), Olsztyn 2016.

During his employment at the Private Vocational High School in Giżycko (between 2001–2010), where he held a position of a lecturer at the Department of Tourism teaching history of the region, Professor Białuński demonstrated his expert skills both as an exceptional researcher and a gifted pedagogue. He also showcased those skills during many academic conferences and in his daily work with academic students. In addition to his outstanding expertise, his manners were impeccable. The usual outfit he wore at work consisted of a jacket, a white shirt and a tie. His students still remember him as an exceptionally warm person, tactful and elegant, nonjudgmental with regard to appearance or principles. Certainly due to those features, he was eagerly chosen as a bachelor, master and doctoral advisor. His doctoral candidates treated him, as we may attest based on our own experience, with an utmost respect. He never refused them his help and advice. He always readily served them with his comments, his private library and source material, he often guided them through archives and supported during conferences. The cooperation with him was both a pleasure and a challenge.

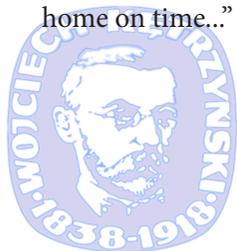
Professor Białuński always tried to act reserved in interhuman relations; his nature, however, was more jovial than it at first appeared. He always opened doctoral seminars with a casual small talk on miscellaneous topics, only to cut it short soon with a sacramental: “well..., and now let us hear your news, is there any progress in your works, what problems have you encountered, what successes have you had...”, and he took true interest in what we had to say. He always appreciated the efforts of his students and doctoral candidates. Sometimes he was particular in such a degree that he even thanked his students for remarks on a given problem in the footnotes of his publications. He also encouraged them to read his books and he was sincerely content when they were able to point out his shortcomings. Between 2011 and 2018, Professor Białuński successfully advised six doctoral candidates.

Professor Białuński introduced his students to the world of research organising the Seminarium Prussicum as part of the academic meetings of the Pruthenia Academic Association. From 2001, he was an active member of this society, an initiator and the editor-in-chief of the Pruthenia Journal, the head of its editorial board, co-organiser of the series of conferences known as Colloquia Baltica and a board member.

Human life is full of unexpected turns and symbolic incidents. Looking at the life of Professor Białuński, one may have an impression that this also was true in his case. On 21 October 2017, at a conference in Reszel organised in the 680<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town, the professor seemed tired. After the sessions ended and everybody gathered around tables laden with delicious cakes, his appetite was more restrained than usual (even though he liked sweets). He complained of a stomach ache and confessed that he was soon due for a checkup. Several days later he re-

ceived a grim diagnosis. This was the last conference he attended. Nevertheless, together with one of his PhD student Robert Klimek he undertook the edition of the conference proceedings: *Reszel. 680 Years of History*. Unfortunately, he did not manage to read it, as the book was published on the same day he passed away.

Seneca the Younger said that “life without research is death itself and a tomb for a living man.” Professor Białuński lived truly. He was an unparalleled example for his students. For his family, he was a loving husband and father. His family was his support and the central point of his life. During his work in the Secret State Archives Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin, or during prolonging meetings and discussions on academic topics, when each moment spent with the professor was crucial for us, he would rise at a certain time, finish his work, and wish us a good evening, saying: “please excuse me, but I promised my wife to come home on time...”



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IM. WOJCIECHA KĘTRZYŃSKIEGO