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In memoriam Joanna Mantel-Niećko (1933–2009)¹

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Joanna Mantel-Niećko was born in Warsaw on August 14, 1933. From her parents – her mother a physician, her father an engineer (who was later killed by the NKVD² in the Katyn massacre in 1940) – she inherited a deep sense of social engagement, one of the characteristics that nobody who knew her could miss.

She spent the Second World War in a village in southern Poland, returning to Warsaw and to school education soon after hostilities ended. After completing her baccalaureate in 1951 she registered at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw, and studied at the Department of Semitics. The department had been created a year before by Prof. Stefan Strelcyn, whose interests in Ethiopia and Ethiopic provided the basic direction for the studies in Semitics in Warsaw and for many years gave the department its profile.

She graduated in 1956 on the basis of her master's thesis "*Staroamharskie Piesni Królewskie: analiza gramatyczna, przekład, komentarz*" ("Old Amharic Royal Songs: Grammatical Analysis, Translation [into Polish] and Commentary"). The same year she started her work at the Institute, where she spent the next 50 years of her life.

During the early period of her academic career her research interests were in linguistics, and her Ph.D. thesis was devoted to the verb system in Amharic: *Les verbes de type A/B–C en amharique: analyse sémantique comparée* (1969).

¹ For the full list of her publications see LAURA ŁYKOWSKA, "Bibliography of Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niećko", in: WITOLD WITAKOWSKI – LAURA ŁYKOWSKA (eds.), "Bibliography of Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niećko", in: *Wälättä Yobanna: Ethiopian Studies in Honour of Joanna Mantel-Niećko on the Occasion of the 50th Year of Her Work at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Warsaw University* = *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 59:1, Warsaw, (2006), pp. 25–32. Her last publications should also be mentioned: 1. "O Afryce" [= About Africa], *Afryka: Biuletyn Polskiego Towarzystwa Afrykanistycznego* (Warszawa) 25 (2007), pp. 110–116 and 2. "Spotkania przy bibliotecznej szafie" [= Meetings at the library], in: *Andrzej Bartnicki, pierwszy rektor Pułtuskiej Almae Matris, 1994–2004* [= A.B., the first chancellor of the Pultusk Alma Mater], Warszawa 2009, pp. 77–80. I owe this information to Laura Łykowska.

² The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Russian: Народный комиссариат внутренних дел, *Narodniy komissariat vnutrennikh del*), abbreviated NKVD (Russian: НКВД), public and secret police organization of the Soviet Union.

Although she did not completely abandon her linguistic interests, e.g., preparing a study of Amharic phonetics (with palatograms) in 1971, or in sociolinguistics (1975), she soon began to devote more time to what became her main field of interest, Ethiopian history. After producing some shorter papers, in 1971 she published her major work *Historia Etiopii* (*History of Ethiopia*, 2nd expanded ed. 1987), together with Andrzej Bartnicki, a specialist in modern history. The first general monograph on this topic published after the Second World War, it was recognized as an important work, and was subsequently translated into Russian (1976) and German (1978). Although there are now monographs on specific periods of Ethiopian history, in providing coverage of the whole of Ethiopian history this work continues to be invaluable even today. She also contributed several chapters on Ethiopian history to volumes devoted to the history of Africa in general (1996).

The economic history of Ethiopia became yet another field of interest for her, her first work in the area being a paper on the forms of land tenure and social stratification in the countryside (1976, Engl. transl. 1984). This was also the main focus of *The Role of Land Tenure in the System of Ethiopian Imperial Government in Modern Times* (1980), her *Habilitationsschrift*.

As this brief overview suggests, her contributions concerning Ethiopia and Africa in general were often aimed at a general audience, and they reflect her commitment to dispel the prejudices then prevailing about the African continent.

Her textbooks for students will also remain an important part of her legacy. The author of this obituary was learning Amharic with the help of the manual that she, together with Getachew Paulos Berhane, the teacher of Amharic at the time, produced in 1969.

Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niećko contributed several entries for the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, but her declining health prevented her from continuing this work.

After a reform of the Department of Semitics, she became the Director of the Department of African Languages and Cultures at the University of Warsaw (1977–87), in which capacity she took the initiative to publish a periodical, *Studies of the Department*.

In the 1980s and 1990s she became more and more interested in the modern and contemporary history of Ethiopia, including the structure of the revolutionary regime (*Därg*). Its development, in her view, provided a “laboratory” parallel to the history of communist regimes in Europe, that could be studied *in vivo*. One of the ways in which she put this understanding into practice was by advising Ryszard Kapuściński, the author of *The Emperor* (1978), which was translated into several languages (Engl. ed.

Witold Witakowski

1984, 2006). In Poland, however, it was not read as a study of Ethiopian autocracy but rather as the study of collapse of an authoritarian regime. The popularity of the book led to its being set as a play in Poland, for which adaptation Joanna Mantel-Niećko served as a consultant.

In the difficult years of political change in Poland in the 1980s, her insight into the nature of totalitarian regimes, combined with her social empathy, could not but lead her into siding with the democratic opposition. An important member of the Solidarity movement at the University of Warsaw, she was even temporarily imprisoned after the military coup (1982). In the democratic Poland she again combined her scholarship with her interest and involvement in contemporary history and wrote *Próba sił (Trial of strength)*, 1995) in which, over 400 pages she superbly documented the activities of the Solidarity movement at the University of Warsaw. This work has subsequently become a reference book for this period of the university's history.

Her political engagement meant she could not be promoted to a full professorship until 1992, after the fall of the old regime.

She died on October 28th, 2009 in her flat in Warsaw.

In her long career at the University of Warsaw, she educated generations of students, who became infected with her enthusiasm for Ethiopia, in some cases strongly enough to pursue academic studies of the country, its languages and culture. Their continuing work is the best testimony to the impact that their teacher made.