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# **Wincenty Pol – a Professor at the Jagiellonian University**

Wincenty Pol was born on April 20th, 1807 in Lublin. In popular notion he is primarily associated with literature and, in particular, with poetry. He made the name for himself especially by writing the *Song of Our Land*, a piece that has had a number of publications. However, his role in the development of Polish geography is still underestimated, even though his above-mentioned work of poetry has almost from the very beginning been referred to as “Polish geography in verse”.

Pol’s interests in geography started to manifest themselves clearly during his stay in the Tatra Mountains in the winter of 1835. Probably at that time he decided to undertake regular scientific expeditions to the Carpathians, which he would traverse in the subsequent years. Moreover, he would also visit other regions of Poland. He was clearly under the influence of the initiators of modern geography, namely of German scientists, Karl Ritter and Alexander Humboldt. He successfully introduced their ideas into his own work. For a number of years he worked on an monumental work consisting of many volumes and entitled *Geography and Ethnography of Poland*. Unfortunately, its manuscript was burnt in a fire in 1846 during the peasants’ riots in Galicia led by Jakub Szela.

Pol’s greatest achievement was the success in persuading the contemporary authorities that it was necessary to establish a Chair of General Geography at the Jagiellonian University. During his stay in Vienna, in the autumn of 1849, he presented his vision of modern academic geography to the Minister of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment. On November 8th, he was appointed “the professor of general,

physical and comparative geography” at the University of Krakow. He became involved in the organisation of the Chair immediately, collecting the necessary didactic materials, books and maps. The inauguration lecture took place on January 10th, 1850. He titled it *A Glance at the Knowledge of Geography from the Point of View of a University Lecture* and presented in it his vision of this scientific discipline. In that lecture he presented evidence that he was a supporter of Humboldt’s ideas and especially of those of Ritter’s. The future generations would frequently call him “Ritter’s disciple in geography”. Yet often he was more advanced in his research than his master. One of the participants of that inauguration lecture compared it to the lectures and talks delivered by Karl Ritter himself. Pol’s lectures attracted crowds of students, high-school pupils and inhabitants of Krakow. He lectured for five semesters and the range of classes he offered was very wide. In the spring of 1850, he introduced a new form of didactic classes in geography, namely field trips. They were attended by groups ranging from 80 to more than 100 people, which at that time was more than just a significant number. Apart from offering substantial knowledge, the trips conducted by Pol constituted an important element of patriotic education of young people, very much like his other didactic classes.

Wincenty Pol was also very actively involved in the issues related to the functioning of the University. He corresponded with his friends and acquaintances in order to persuade them to accept the positions of the heads of different chairs at the University. In connection with these issues he contacted, among others, such people as Seweryn Goszczyński (literature), Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (literature), Stanisław Konstanty Pietruski (zoology) and Karol Szajnocha (history). During a dangerous fire of Krakow, in July 1850, together with Józef Muczkowski, Stefan Kuczyński and with the students he was involved in a heroic rescue of the Jagiellonian Library collections that were then kept in the Collegium Maius. At the same time the fire consumed Pol’s unprotected manuscripts, his lecture materials, a handbook prepared for publication including a number of maps he had made himself, precious cartographic collections, as well as the manuscript of the *Geography of Austrian Monarchy*. He initiated open scientific courses for general public. Beside him such courses were also taught by other University professors – Ludwik Zejszner, Stefan Kuczyński and Józef Kremer. He was active in the Scientific Society of Krakow. In 1850, he prepared a memorial concerning the establishment of the Museum of Antiquities in Krakow. On January 19th, 1850, in consideration of Stefan Kuczyński’s motion, the Faculty of Philosophy unanimously awarded Pol the doctorate of honour of the Jagiellonian University.

In January 1853, the Austrian authorities liquidated the Chair of Geography. Pol’s disloyalty and ‘revolutionary plotting’ were mentioned as the grounds for this decision. They allegedly manifested themselves primarily in his didactic activity marked by the considerable load of patriotism. Apart from Pol, the emperor also dismissed three other professors of the Jagiellonian University – his friend Antoni Helcel, Jozafat Zielonacki (both from the Faculty of Law) and Antoni Małecki (from the Faculty of Philosophy).

In 1869, W. Pol’s friends employed at the University undertook certain actions aimed at restoring the professorship and the Chair to him. Pol himself also applied

for that. Early in 1870, Pol's application was supported by the Faculty of Philosophy and by the University Senate. It was emphasised that his return to the University and the reactivation of the Chair of Geography was in line with the need to develop the geographical awareness of the society and to carry out the necessary academic research. The possibility of Pol's return to the University was also regarded as a chance for him to 'bring up' his successor, which was an urgent need, especially in the face of the scarcity of specialists in geography in Poland. Since at that time Pol was already seriously ill, three professors – Stefan Kuczyński, Alojzy Alth and Józef Szujski – volunteered to help him with his lectures. Unfortunately, these efforts did not bring about any success. The Chair of Geography was restarted only as late as 1876 and Franciszek Czerny-Schwarzenberg was appointed its head.

One of the biographers, Henryk Barycz, wrote:

“Pol's professorship at the Jagiellonian University played a significant, hitherto unknown and even unanticipated role in the scientific and national promotion of that only scientific institute in Polish lands, as well as in the undertaking of implementation of the great idea consisting in transforming it into a Polish national and modern centre of academic education<sup>1</sup>”.

From the historical perspective it can be said that the mere fact of the existence of the Chair – even for the short period of three years – with time made the society aware of the role of geography in getting acquainted with the native lands. Moreover, Pol made it possible for this discipline of science to join other disciplines that for a long time had already constituted separate subjects of university tuition in their own rights. The fact that the Chair was created is regarded by historians as an event of world's scale significance. Through its establishment, in 1849, the University became involved in the process aimed at creating the bases of modern geography, which in Europe was already a trend acquiring solid foundations. Pol's Chair was the second such institution in the world after the Chair of Geography at the University of Berlin, established in 1820 for Karl Ritter. Other such institutions started emerging in Europe only as late as the 1860s, and in the lands of Poland the second Chair was established in 1882, at the University of Lvov.

Through his research Pol initiated a number of geographical disciplines, either not practised or poorly developed before his times. One should primarily mention here the studies connected with the landscape of Polish lands, geomorphology and regionalisation. He also created the bases for the development of anthropogeography, geography of religion, political geography and phytogeography. He was the first man to make an attempt at determining the “historical separateness of the territory of Poland” on the basis of the analysis of physiographical elements. In hydrography he considered himself an heir of Jan Długosz. He closely tied geography with ethnography. Last but not least, he was the first geographer who emphasised the great role of field trips in the education of geographers.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Barycz, *Wincenty Pol as a Geography Professor at the Jagiellonian University*, Nakład PAU, Krakow 1949, p. 4.

All these merits of Wincenty Pol contributed to the fact that he is commonly regarded as the “father of modern Polish geography”.

In 1872, he was appointed a member of the Polish Academy of Skills. He died several months later, on December 2nd, 1872, in Krakow. On October 13th, 1881, his mortal remains were moved to the Crypt of Distinguished Poles to the Church on Rupella (Skalka) in Krakow.

He shall remain in the memory of the posterity as one of the most meritorious professors of the Jagiellonian University.