

Wiktor Osiatynski

## Learning My Own Limits



I was born in 1945 in Poland. I live in Poland, but I usually spend half of every year abroad, most often teaching in the United States. I have degrees in Sociology and Law. That is all I am certain about myself. Otherwise, I have a problem with my professional identification. As a university professor I have taught Law, Political Science, History and Ethics. In 1985, I came from Poland under martial law to California to teach Human Rights in American prisons, where I learned a lot. As a journalist and a science writer for more than 15 years, I wrote 15 books, some of them on the history of American social and political thought, some on science, and some on sports. In 1989, I established the Commission of Education on Alcoholism in Poland, which is at present active in most of the post-communist world. Since 1990, I have been taking part in constitution-making in Poland as an advisor to various parliamentary committees that usually failed to accomplish their task. Since 1991, I have been the co-director of the Center for the Study of Constitutionalism in Eastern Europe and a visiting professor at the University of Chicago Law School. While at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I signed a five year contract with the Central European University to teach one quarter in Budapest and one in Warsaw every year. Thus, I will share time between Budapest, Chicago and Warsaw, perhaps adding, to all of that a short visit to Wissenschaftskolleg, now and then. — Address: The University of Chicago Law School, 1111 East 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA.

My experience at the Kolleg was a series of extremely important personal discoveries. Their price was frustration, guilt, and depression which accompanied me during most of my stay in Berlin. As I see it now (at the end of August 1995), the gain was worth the pain.

I came to Berlin with great plans. After five years of teaching, advising and chairing a number of non-profit organizations, I had the prospect of freedom: a full year free from all other activities, which would

permit me to focus on my own work. For someone who was stealing weeks or days for writing amidst other activities, a year seemed an eternity. Thus, I planned accordingly. In fact, I had not much choice in my planning. I owed an annotated syllabus on "Human Rights in Post-Communist Eastern Europe" to Columbia University, the book on comparative study on constitutionalism and individual rights to the Ford Foundation, and a book on constitution-making in Poland to the University of Chicago Press. Accordingly, I brought tons of notes, books, and articles and hoped to fulfill all my outstanding commitments.

To motivate myself even further, I planned to organize, in late April 1995, an international seminar that would discuss my book on Poland. Rector Lепенies sent the invitations out, and we were planning a big event and celebration of my book.

By late April 1995, I did not have even one chapter to discuss and the seminar was canceled. I had dropped the German class long before then. I tried to write as much as possible, and everything became a nuisance: German classes, lunches, small group seminars, the entire Kolleg. I felt an overwhelming sense of failure, frustration, and depression.

The fact that I had a good excuse was of little help, at least to me. The excuse was the Constitutional Commission of the National Assembly to which I was an expert advisor. Before I came to Berlin, the Commission was meeting once every month for one day. This I could tolerate and so I did not resign from my advising duties. In mid-November, however, the Commission decided to meet for three days every two weeks. The Kolleg supported my work in Warsaw. In practical terms, it meant that I was leaving every other Monday to return on Friday. Then I wanted to re-focus on my books. But usually, right after I had picked up the train of thought it was time to go again. I could not accept this and I suffered a lot.

By late April, after the conference was canceled, I let it all go. I decided to forsake my books and focus on the Constitution. One day, some time after I accepted this decision, I sat by the computer and wrote one sentence. Then I wrote another one, still one more. By my next flight to Warsaw, I had about 60 pages. After my return, I got still more. I felt a bit better, even though I never finished even one of my planned books. The depression returned when I realized that, for purely political reasons that had nothing to do with the content of the Constitution itself, the prospects for the adoption of the draft I have been working on were close to null.

I did many other things "in the meantime". I wrote scores of opinions for the Constitutional Committee. I wrote a long paper on "Social and Economic Rights in a New Constitution for Poland", and I re-wrote

another paper on the discussion on freedom of education in Poland. Although I gave up the syllabus for Columbia, I prepared two other ones, on constitutional and economic transition in Poland and on legal issues of addiction, which I will teach this fall in Chicago Law School. I wrote a long essay on the harm-reduction approach to drugs, and prepared the English version of my book on alcoholism. This I could accomplish only by grace of the wonderful help of Mitch Cohen, the best and most thoughtful book editor I ever have encountered. I also wrote a couple of articles on constitution-making in Poland, one for the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* and one for *Die Welt*. Finally, I wrote two long essays on the developments in Poland for *East European Constitutional Review*.

As I list all these things now, I see how much I did do in Berlin. It doesn't help, though. I still have an overwhelming feeling that I have failed in my professional duties. Although painful, it is a worthwhile feeling for it tells me much about myself. Here I come to what I really got from my year in the Kolleg.

I have learned in Berlin beyond any doubt that I am a workaholic. I cannot plan modestly my tasks, and by making unrealistic commitments I set myself up for frustration and failure.

I have learned, pretty painfully, that my obsession to write, combined with ambitious plans, isolates me from other people, from my family and from life in general. Although I did see and sense something of Berlin, it was much less than my wife or my daughter did.

On a more "positive" side, I have learned that I do not need to write to prove my own worth, to myself or to others. I realized that this might have been the driving force for my overly prolific writing in the past. After I completed each of my many books, I felt better about myself, people respected me, and sensing this respect I felt even better about myself. My writing was my life success, and I might have become a slave of my own success. So the realization crucial to my self-awareness was that most people around me at the Wissenschaftskolleg liked and respected me, even though they did not read a single sentence of what I wrote (at least of what I wrote in Polish). Thus, my obsession to write was rather the result of my own lack of self-esteem than of any real need.

This does not mean that the final result of a year spent in Berlin is the idea to give up writing altogether. I found out, this past year, that while I do not deal well with deadlines, I very much like to write for my own pleasure. While struggling with my unrealistic plans, I wrote, in tiny bits and pieces, in time stolen here and there, more than 100 pages of a Berlin journal, which I think may be more important than all other things I

did here. I also wrote my second set of poems; the first I wrote when I was 18.

Let me conclude with the final lesson I learned at the Wissenschaftskolleg. It is contained in my answer to the question: what would I have planned if I were to come again to the Kolleg.

Yes, I would come, under one condition. I would come if I made the contract with myself that I am going to be rather than to do. Then my plans for a year would not be to write two books but rather just to read two books, preferably not related to my professional interest. And to enjoy the world and the people around me.

I do not have to explain how grateful I am to the Kolleg for that lesson.