

Ryszard Kiersnowski (4 November 1925 - 7 July 2006)



The year 2006 turned out to be black for European numismatics. Not even half a year after Philip Grierson died, another great historian of medieval money Ryszard Kiersnowski, passed away on July 7. Although a Pole he was born on the eastern frontier of the Polish state of that time – in Wilno / Vilnius, now the capital of the Lithuanian state. His date of birth was always thought to be January 4, 1926. Recently, however, it was determined that it actually happened two months earlier - November 4, 1925. His birth certificate was changed by his parents, who wanted to delay their son being drafted.

Ryszard Kiersnowski spent his childhood and early youth in Vilnius, and in the family estate in Podweryszki. During the war he was very active in the resistance and guerrilla movement. He fought both the German and Soviet invaders within the underground Polish army (Home Army) until as late as the end of April 1945. Undetected by the new authorities, with false documents on him, he was displaced to Cracow, where in the years 1945-1948 he studied history at the Jagiellonian University. In 1951 he was awarded his doctoral degree for his thesis on an early medieval defence system in Silesia.

After that he moved to Warsaw, where between 1949-1953, he worked in the Ministry of Culture and Art as head of the Section of Research of the Beginnings of the Polish State. In 1954, he was assigned to the newly established Institute of History to the Polish Academy of Sciences, where he worked for almost half a cen-

tury. Within its framework, he carried out intensive research on history and history of culture, history of material culture, archaeology, heraldry and – last but not least – history of money. The latter domain, the most interesting to us, was neither his first nor his only area of interest. About half way through his numismatic life, however, it became the main focus of his activity and the one to bring him the greatest success and esteem in Poland and abroad.

At first he mainly dealt with the history of Pomerania in the early Middle Ages, and devoted a number of studies to it. Early medieval money – also of Pomerania – continued to interest him as late as 1955. In this he enjoyed the help of his wife Teresa – an archaeologist and pioneer in the study of early medieval hoards in Poland after World War II, who later also co-authored a certain number of his works. Ryszard Kiersnowski extended the area of his research the money of other regions and different historical periods: at first to the Baltic zone, then to Central and Western Europe, and finally covered the entire Latin Europe.

He produced works remarkably differentiated both in terms of chronology – from the early Middle Ages to modern times – and of character. His publications, both the popular ones, as well as the scholarly ones were of the highest level. Besides monographs and syntheses, he also worked on source materials, an extremely intensive but indispensable labour – inventories of early medieval Polish silver finds from Pomerania, Masovia, Ermland and Mazuria (1959-1966) and from Polabia (East Germany, 1964) as well (T. & R. Kiersnowscy, *Wczesnośredniowieczne skarby srebrne z Pomorza. Materiały*, Warszawa-Wrocław, 1959; A. Gupieniec, T. & R. Kiersnowscy, *Wczesnośredniowieczne skarby srebrne z Polski Środkowej, Mazowsza i Podlasia. Materiały*, Wrocław, 1965; M. Haisig, R. Kiersnowski, J. Reyman, *Wczesnośredniowieczne skarby srebrne z Małopolski, Warmii i Mazur. Materiały*, Wrocław, 1966; R. Kiersnowski, *Wczesnośredniowieczne skarby srebrne z Polabia. Materiały*, Wrocław, 1964). He also translated a Russian text by V.M. Potin acquired by *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* on coin finds in Poland at the time of the Russian partition zone, based on archival materials from Leningrad / St. Petersburg (1967).

His research on the history of money can be divided into three successive phases. The first covered the early medieval period from the 9th to the 12th century. Ryszard Kiersnowski's main work concerning that period is *Pieniądz kruszcowy w Polsce we wczesnym średniowieczu* (Metal money in early medieval Poland), Warszawa, 1960. For its time it was simply sensational on the European scale. Even though new sources have turned up and research has progressed, it remains a fundamental starting point for further studies. The work's biggest merit is to apply historical methods to archaeological sources, i.e. silver finds. It created a new specialisation within the history: the history of the very sophisticated early medieval, metal currency. Since then it has been successfully used particularly in Poland, Germany and Scandinavia.

Only four years later the next important work appeared: *Wstęp do numizmatyki*

polskiej wieków średnich (An introduction to Polish medieval numismatics), Warszawa, 1964. It is a handbook of numismatics unrivalled in earlier Polish literature, in which particular consideration was given to the late Middle Ages. It opened the way to new approaches in Ryszard Kiersnowski's research. He started focusing upon the great Groschen reform in Europe and Poland. This subject was expanded into a separate book *Wielka Reforma Monetarna XIII-XIV wieku* (The Great Groschen Reform in the 13th and 14th centuries), Warszawa, 1969, 'Part one'. Part two, dealing with Poland, was never published as a book. However, it can easily be reconstructed on the basis of a number of treatises and articles, which appeared in different journals, mainly in *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne*. This overview will soon materialise in the volume by Ryszard Kiersnowski, *Opera selecta* (Institute of History to the Polish Academy of Sciences).

Ryszard Kiersnowski's bibliography shows that as time went by he came to regard also the issuing of money in the late medieval economy as an exhausted one. Works on coin iconography and inscriptions, as well as on the function of money would appear instead. This new line of investigation resulted in another treatise *Moneta w kulturze wieków średnich* (The coin in the culture of Middle Ages), Warszawa, 1988, unsurpassed both in Poland and abroad. Unfortunately it has not yet been translated into another language, an obvious loss for those who do not know Polish. At present in Moscow the work is being translated into Russian.

Another excellent work, quite different from all the preceding ones, followed: *Niedźwiedzie i ludzie w dawnych i nowszych czasach. Fakty i mity* (Bears and people in the former and newer days. Facts and myths), Warszawa, 1990. It is of an interdisciplinary character, combining history and heraldry, archaeology and ethnology, as well as iconography, though pertaining mainly to cultural history.

In Ryszard Kiersnowski's last period of studies there is no compact subject-matter concerning the history of money. Nevertheless, a series of valuable works was published, inter alia on the beginnings of Lithuanian coinage and Jagiellonian coats-of-arms, coins by Jaksa of Kopnik, or the research of his great predecessors: Joachim Lelewel and Kazimierz Stronczyński. At the same time, however, works devoted to completely different topics appeared – heraldry, history of literature, even modern history. More and more frequently his works included references to his homeland – Lithuania and the Grand Lithuanian Duchy. Thus one might suppose that the Author - slightly weary of the problems he dealt with so far – started to look for a new area of research. This turned out to be beneficial to the new disciplines, quite disadvantageous to those researched till then.

All of Ryszard Kiersnowski's written works, regardless of the subject-matter and the time of publication, have something in common: the perfection of the form – the beauty of the language. Had he not become an eminent and versatile historian, he might have made an outstanding writer, perhaps much to the benefit of literature, but an irreparable loss to history. His very interesting memoirs from the time of the

war provide a sample of his literary talent (*Tam i wtedy. W Podweryszkach, w Wilnie i w puszczy, 1939-1945* [There and then. In Podweryszki, in Vilnius and in the forest, 1939-1945], Warszawa, 1994). Whereas in the field of history of money, he joined his renowned predecessors. For the first half of the 19th century, Joachim Lelewel was a most outstanding figure among the Poles – Kazimierz Stronczyński for the second one. In the first half of the preceding century Marian Gumowski was the most famous and most prolific scholar in Poland. Roman Grodecki, however, must be regarded as the most eminent historian of medieval money at that time. In the second half of the 20th century, Ryszard Kiersnowski was undoubtedly his follower and worthy successor.

Ryszard Kiersnowski's activity was not limited to research. He was also an outstanding teacher. I had the privilege to personally experience that by attending his lectures on the history of medieval money towards the end of the 1950s at Warsaw University. This is when a group of his pupils was formed, which – much to my honour – also includes myself.

The review *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* established in 1957 is another momentous accomplishment of the late Professor. He was not its first editor in chief, but he managed it for a quarter of a century, bestowing upon it a high scientific level and steering its development. To this day it remains Poland's only – and one of the very few in Central and Eastern Europe – scholarly numismatic periodicals of international character, thanks to its contributors.

Ryszard Kiersnowski did not shun volunteer work. He devoted much of his time and effort to the Polish Archaeological and Numismatic Society, where he was very active, not to mention his two-term presidency over the Main Board.

His numerous international contacts and active participation in Numismatic Congresses (starting with Rome in 1961) and symposia, research visits to France and Germany, are well known. His election to the Council of the International Numismatic Commission in 1973, and to its Vice-Presidency, attested to the prestige he enjoyed in the international community. He was also a corresponding member of the American Numismatic Society, honorary member of the Royal Numismatic Society and the Hungarian Numismatic Society. In Poland and in many other countries he had many devoted friends, colleagues and students. They all contributed to a Festschrift for his sixtieth birthday: *Nummus et Historia. Pieniądz Europy średniowiecznej* (The money of medieval Europe), Warszawa, 1985. This volume includes the first part of the honouree's bibliography (p. 7-24). The later parts were published in the fascicles of *Wiadomości Numizmatyczne* dedicated to him on the occasion of later jubilees (XL, 1996, p. 215-217; XLIX, 2006, p. 133-137).

Ryszard Kiersnowski will be remembered not only as an eminent, versatile scholar and teacher, but as a wise man of great moral authority as well.

Stanisław SUCHODOLSKI