

AT THE TIME NOBODY KNEW THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NAZI CRIMES...

Recollections of Wanda Konopczyńska-Mrozowska, daughter of the historian Professor Władysław Konopczyński

In the early morning of 1 September aircraft appeared over Kraków. The corner room of our apartment at the crossroads of Ulica Łobzowska and Aleja Słowackiego had a large bay with windows on all sides. Through those windows Father watched the planes flying round and round and said that they weren't Polish, so that must mean it was war. Then we heard the noise of bombs falling somewhere in the neighbourhood. We lived on the first floor of a six-storey house. Only university professors were residents there. When they realised that the bombs were incendiary and that the Germans were bombing Kraków, they organised a self-defence effort, taking turns for loft-duty to put out the fires caused by the bombs. On Sunday, 3 September bombs fell on the Carmelite nuns' church, just across the road from us. The Germans dropped the bombs just as people were leaving the church after Mass, and a few people were killed. I remember that in those first few days of the War people were panic-stricken and there was a mass exodus to the east. Our family stayed in Kraków, Father did not agree to leave the city. The Germans entered Kraków on 6 September. I remember walking along the Karmelicka with my older sister to the city centre and seeing that there were squads of German soldiers on motorcycles in the Planty Gardens at the top of the Karmelicka, where it merges with the Szewska. We turned back home. Those were my first impressions of the outbreak of the war.

Father was Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy. He continued to work in the dean's office after the Germans had occupied the city. From 1–10 September there was a lot of confusion, but after that the University started to organise its work. Some classes, student registrations etc., started already in October, I think. After the shock of defeat people were hoping that the Western countries would help us and that the war would end in spring. Father was a historian and before the war started he observed the doings of Hitler's Germany with apprehension. He said it would be total war, which would devastate Poland. He was extremely sceptical about Poland's occupation of the Zaolzie, saying it was a big mistake politically, that we should never have come out against Czechoslovakia. In his opinion the Slav nations should keep together, and although he held some distinguished Germans in respect, he was generally anti-German. On the other hand he was a great friend of France and believed Poland and France had the same interests. He didn't say much about the Soviet Union. The Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17 was a knife in the back. The fall of France in the spring of 1940 was equally tragic news.

The day when the professors were arrested came after two months of occupation. It was a Monday. On the Sunday morning Professor Ignacy Chrzanowski, who lived in the same house on the third floor, came to see Father for advice whether to go to the lecture that had been announced. He was retired and had no obligation to attend. After a discussion Father and Professor Chrzanowski decided they would go, as Rector Lehr-Spławiński had asked for as many people as possible to attend, so that the speaker should not feel snubbed and take it as a boycott. Professor Chrzanowski paid with his life for that decision, he died in the concentration camp. Next day Father went to the University, with the intention of attending the lecture. I remember that on that day I did not go to school (I was in the last form, due to take the school-leavers' exam), as I was ill, I'd contracted rubella. People said at the time that the professors' detention was only a preventive measure, to stop young people from holding a patriotic demonstration for 11 November and to prevent the risk of public disorder, and that probably they would be released after the eleventh.



Z rodziną
With his family

Mother, who took an active part in public campaigns, joined a committee to provide aid for the professors. Essentials were sent to them in the belief that they would only be held for a few days. I remember Mother went to a fairly important official in the German Consulate. We had a family friend there, a Fräulein Ida who had once been Father's and his brothers' governess and later lived in with our family. She was a good person and on very close terms with us. She died in March 1939. When Hitler came to power the staff of the German Consulate in Kraków started to show a lot of concern for the welfare of the local German community. Fräulein Ida used to be invited to all sorts of events in the Consulate and often mentioned a Frau Kanzler, I can't remember the name. Mother went to the Consulate to see that Frau Kanzler and ask her advice what to do. She reassured Mother, telling her not to worry. The detained professors were very well off. They were playing golf, horse-riding etc. That's the information Mother brought home. Later it turned out that on 10 November the Germans had moved them and for a long time there was no news of them.¹ The first news we received came from Wrocław, the letter was dated November 10 but it arrived just before Christmas. It must have spent a long time in the censor's office. Then came the tragic January of 1940. There was a spell of very cold weather, with temperatures below minus 20 degrees Centigrade. By that time the professors were prisoners of

Sachsenhausen and were being made to stand to appeal outside for hours in drill cotton clothes. The older ones died one after another. The families were informed that they had died of pneumonia. Mrs. Bednarska, wife of the Russian tutor, went to collect the urn with her husband's ashes.² Then Professor Chrzanowski died, and Mrs Chrzanowska and their daughter went to Sachsenhausen for the urn.³ The other families waited in suspense, dreading the arrival of such a letter.

On 10 November we were evicted. I remember it well: it was in the afternoon, around 4 p.m., and already dusk. Someone rang the doorbell and my uncle, who had returned the previous day from his trek east [to join the Polish army], opened the door. They asked if he understood German, he said he did, and they told him that the apartment was to be vacated within two hours. We could only take clean personal items. We started collecting our things, we didn't pack, we just put them into the tablecloth from the table and tied up the corners. In the two hours we had to take as much as we could. Then the two of us, Mother and I, were homeless and did not know what to do. We went with these bundles on our backs to friends where we stayed the night. At the time my eldest sister was at her sister-in-law's, whose husband was in the group of arrested professors. My second sister had not returned home yet. She had gone through the siege of Warsaw, where she had married and later stayed with her husband's family in the area of Łódź, from where she was deported. She arrived in Kraków in a cattle truck on 8 December 1939. After the Germans had evicted us many kind people offered to take us in. For instance Mrs. Smoluchowska, the widow of the physicist Marian Smoluchowski, who had a large apartment on Ulica Pierackiego. There was a grammar school there, and another school building nearby, all occupied by Germans, and Mother was worried we would be thrown out of there as well. Then Dr. Kamieniecka, one of Father's students, offered us part of her flat. She and her sister shared one room and let us use two small rooms. It was a house with no mod. cons, you had to cross a long balcony to get to the lavatory, and there was no bathroom. The house was on Ulica Krzywa, not an elegant street, and Mother felt safer there. First Mother and I moved in, and later my sister and her husband joined us after they were evicted from the Łódź area. In early February 1940 Father returned. When we were all together again, Mr. and Mrs. Lewkowicz offered us their apartment in the Krowoderska. They had three sons who had slipped across the border and were in the Polish army in the West. We stayed there until the end of the war.

The first news we had of Father came before Christmas, from the prison in Wrocław. I have that letter. It was addressed to the apartment on the Słowackiego, and we got it thanks to the janitor whom the Germans kept in the house. Later a card reached us from Sachsenhausen. I remember sending money to Father from the bank on Ulica Basztowa, we were allowed to send small sums of money from time to time. As I later learned, only a small portion of that money reached the prisoners. If I remember rightly, on the day of Father's return from the concentration camp someone came to the flat on Ulica Krzywa and said that the professors were at Kraków railways station and told us to go there, as they might perhaps be taken somewhere else. As I walked along the Basztowa in the direction of the station I noticed a lorry with people wearing strange clothes on it and looking very poorly. It was the first group of deported professors. At the station I saw a cordon of SS-men around another group of very worn out people. I looked round for Father and then I saw someone waving to me. He was so emaciated I couldn't recognise him. Father had always been lean, but in the three months he had lost 20 kg! We did not know what would happen to the professors. But it turned out that the Germans took them to the Montelupich



Prof. Władysław Konopczyński, 1946 r.
Professor Władysław Konopczyński, 1946

Prison, allegedly for some sort of medical tests. They had to sign declarations that during their stay in the concentration camp they had not sustained any physical or mental injuries.



Prof. Władysław Konopczyński z żoną, 1948 r.
Professor Władysław Konopczyński and his wife, 1948

Once Father was home I remember him asking for potatoes. He wanted to have his fill of potatoes. But we could not give him potatoes, since he was so famished that he had to take his food in small portions. Friends would bring a chicken, or a bottle of cod-liver oil, or something else to help him recover. Luckily Father had a strong constitution and fortunately returned to his normal condition. He recovered physically and psychologically quite quickly. He had a very strong character and was dauntless.

Father did not talk much about what he went through in the concentration camp. The people who returned from such places were not very talkative, they just did not want to recall the most difficult moments of their life, and they were especially reluctant to tell their children about it. Father was a historian and had the habit of making records of things that happened. Every day in the camp he made notes on scraps of newspaper. He would write down keywords which he could later elaborate on to give an account of the nightmare that was life in the concentration camp. He rolled up all his notes into a small bundle which he managed to take with him when he was leaving the camp. Later on he used them in the diary which he kept

all through his life. They were also the basis for his book *Pod trupią główką* [At the Sign of the Skull]. Father never had any German academics as friends, but some of them he respected and valued. However he was disappointed with the attitude of German intellectuals when they failed to react to the arrest and imprisonment of the Jagiellonian University professors. He simply did not realise that German academics were just as intimidated as everybody else. When the professors were arrested their families did all they could to free their husbands and fathers. Some managed to get out.

I know that some Hungarians intervened on behalf of Professor Dąbrowski, who had many Hungarian friends.⁴ My eldest sister certainly made a contribution to the campaign to free the professors.⁵ Her husband, who was a *docent* (senior fellow) of the Jagiellonian University and lectured in the history of philosophy, left Kraków in the first days of the war.⁶ He had a car. Very few people in Poland between the wars had cars. He told his wife and in-laws that he was leaving to join the army. He had no petrol, but got some from a friend. Masses of people headed east [to join the army], and then returned, but there was no sign of my brother-in-law. It wasn't until early in November that some Italians who owned

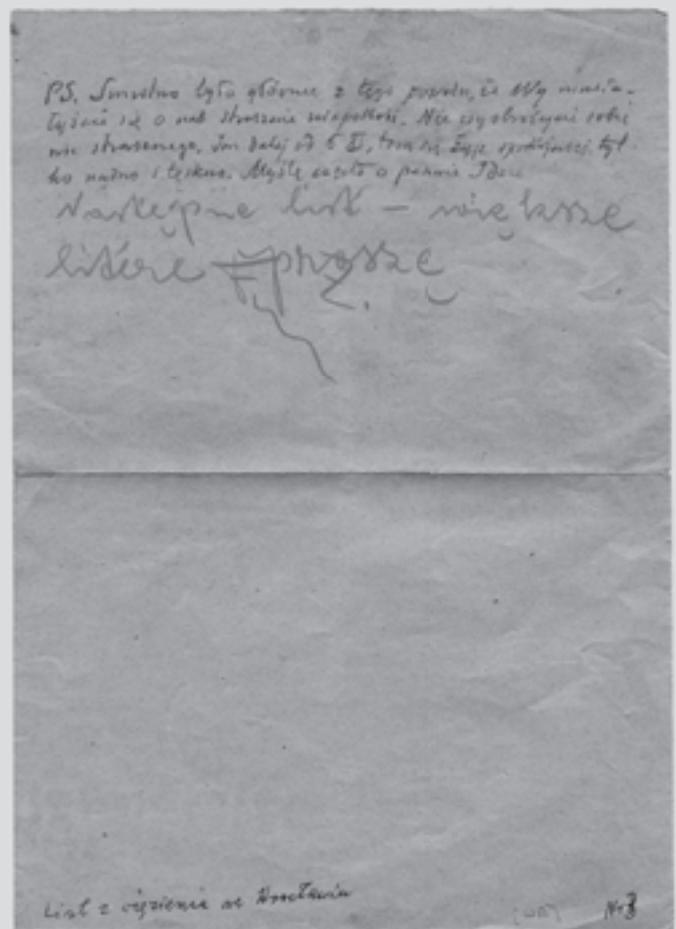
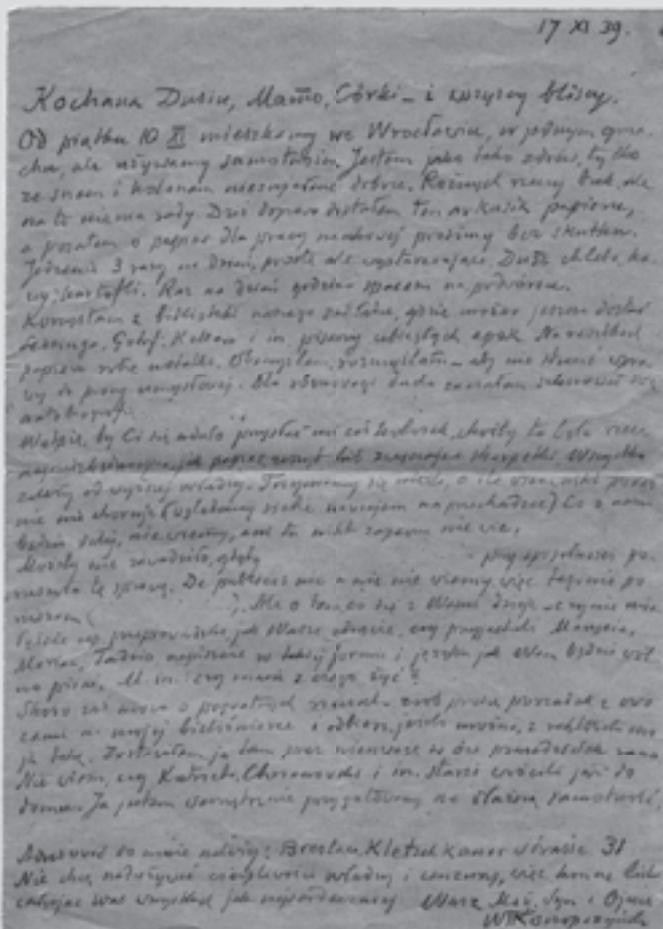


Ida Hanning, zm. 1939 r., Niemka, bona Władysława Konopczyńskiego

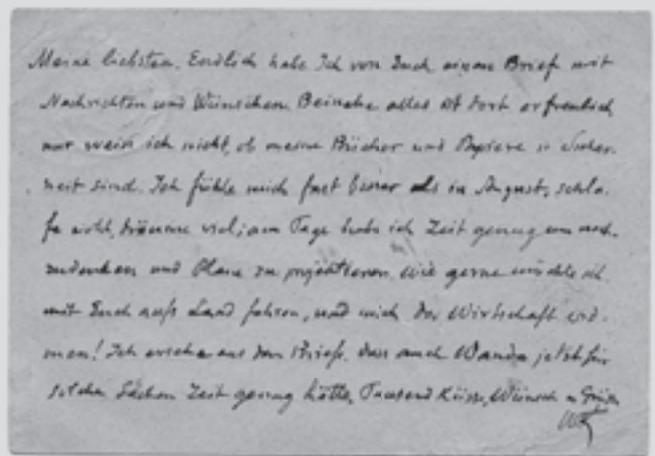
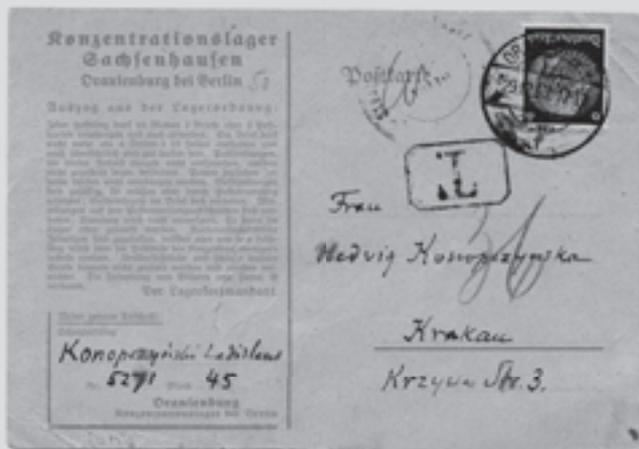
Ida Hanning (d. 1939), Władysław Konopczyński's German nanny

a spaghetti factory in Kraków came and told us that they had met him in Milan. He sent word by one of them (Mr. Bauto) that he was going to France to join the Polish army that was being created there by the Polish government-in-exile. In the letter to his wife he wrote that he would probably see her in two years' time. He meant that that was when the war would end. We thought it an extremely pessimistic prognosis, we thought that by the spring France and England would launch an offensive and that would be the end of the war. In fact the war went on for 6 years. At about that time the professors were arrested and my sister started thinking of getting through to the West. She had a good knowledge of Italian and had spent a year studying in Rome. On her return she kept in touch with the Italians living in Kraków and was an active member of the Dante Alighieri Polish-Italian Friendship Society. She applied for a Generalgouvernement passport. At the time Polish people were not permitted to leave the Generalgouvernement, but to our surprise she got the passport. She did not have an Italian visa, and the nearest Italian Consulate was in Katowice, that is in the Reich [part of Poland was directly incorporated in Germany], so first she had to get a permit for Katowice. Eventually she got an Italian visa and around 20 January

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*List z więzienia we Wrocławiu
Letter sent from jail in Wrocław*



Karta pocztowa z obozu

Postcard sent from the concentration camp

1940 left for Milan via Vienna. In Milan she got in touch with Mrs Kaftal, a Polish Jewess who arranged the further transfer of Polish refugees. Mrs Kaftal contacted my brother-in-law, who was in Angers, France. He sent the money for Halina's fare and she was able to continue her journey. While she was in Rome Halina petitioned the Italian authorities, through the services of Mr. Loret, director of the Rome branch of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, to intervene on behalf of the imprisoned Polish scholars. Thanks to Maciej Loret she reached an Italian First World War hero (I can't remember the name), who'd lost all his limbs.⁷ Italians held this man in very high esteem and Mussolini took his opinion into special consideration. According to one story it was this man's mediation that contributed to the German decision to release the professors. The Swedish Academy of Science, of which Father was a member, also appealed for their release. At the beginning of the war Polish people did not know much about German terror. They thought that the professors would return home after 11 November. Perhaps some had heard of concentration camps, perhaps some had heard of Dachau. At any rate at that time nobody knew the truth about the crimes the Nazis were committing.

When Father returned from the concentration camp the clandestine university was just beginning its operations and he became head of the Department of History. He believed this was the right thing to do. Professor Małeck, who worked in the Institut für Deutsche Ostariet, organised the secret university. Father spent a lot of time in the country; our parents had a farm in the area of Ojców. My paternal grandmother lived in the country; she'd moved from Warsaw just before the war broke out. Father went to the farm either on foot, some 30 km from Kraków, or by train to Rudawa or Zabierzów and then over the hills to our house in the country. You could also go to Kleparz market and take a horse and cart which was travelling in that direction. Father came into town for classes with students. Then he would return to the country. Classes were held in private homes, but

not in our rooms. One of the students attending these classes was Miss Dydówna, and I think classes were held in her house, and in the house of Mrs. Traczewska, who'd taught me history at school. I attended clandestine university classes too. The medical group to which I belonged had lectures mostly on Sunday afternoons. They were held in different venues, under cover of a meeting for coffee and cakes. During the war I completed a course in an economics school, as the Germans had closed down all the other schools above primary level (16 November 1939). We did not know at all what to do, we wanted to continue our education, we were in the final form. I wanted to

complete my school education, but the only options available were the economics school on the Podwale, of which Mr. Wroniewicz was head, or the laboratory technicians' school, but at the time I was not yet thinking of reading Medicine. So I decided on the economics school, and in the holidays revised for the supplementary examination in the vocational subjects. It was a two-year course, like an economics technical school. I took my school-leaving examination there and got a job. I worked in the former Chamber of Commerce until the end of the war. Quite by chance I learned of the medical

classes held in the secret university. The head of the medical group was Professor Maziarski, a histologist and an acquaintance of my parents. Mother and I went to see him. He lived on Ulica Orzeszkowej or on the Augustiańska. Professor Maziarski brought down my enthusiasm a bit, saying that for the time being there was not much of a chance for that. So I started Pharmacy on the clandestine course, which comprised lectures in biology and chemistry, but no laboratory classes.

I started my medical studies in mid-November 1944, so I was a member of the clandestine course in Medicine for only a short time. Examinations were held in private apartments. I remember the biology exam in Professor Skowron's flat in Borek Fałęcki. I had taken my school-leaving exam in the same manner. On 18 January 1945 Kraków was liberated. We still had secret classes after that,



W Szwecji
In Sweden

chemistry lectures, in the University buildings on the Kopernika, in lecture halls or clinics, but the real University did not start until 1 May. The clandestine students were admitted automatically and put in the first year of Medicine, while new candidates had to take entrance examinations. The older clandestine groups went into the second year of Medicine. In my year there were people of very different ages. Some had taken the school-leaving examination before the war in 1939 but had been prevented from going to university, some like myself had finished a secondary education during the war [most on clandestine courses, as the Germans closed the grammar schools], and some who took their school-leaving exam after the war. There must have been around 270 people in the first year, as there was a terrible shortage of doctors after the war. We graduated in 1949.

What was my father like, how did I remember him? Always hard at work. Once he wrote that he'd wasted many hours of his life on being a member of parliament, serving in the army etc. Whenever he travelled from Kraków to our farm at Młynnik near Ojców he would proof-read a scholarly paper for publication, making notes in the margin. He never had an idle moment. Often when he was sitting at table with his family, he would be working on some topic in history at the same time. He did not need to have silence in the house when he was working, he could concentrate all his attention on his subject of interest. He would prepare his lectures by making brief notes and keywords. He did not make his daughters take up his own interests, we were free to choose the discipline of our studies. My eldest sister chose the humanities, she read History and wrote a dissertation on the history of culture under the supervision of Professor Kot. My other sister decided on the Faculty of Electrical Engineering in the University of Technology, and I became a doctor. Father took no part in everyday household affairs. He never went shopping with us, he did not make the arrangements for winter fuel, he never attended school interviews. Mother was the one who handled the practical side of life, she even managed the business of procuring our apartment in



Władysław Konopczyński z rodziną
Władysław Konopczyński with his family

the professors' home on the Słowackiego. Father was our authority in important matters, but he never meddled in the day-to-day ones. I have several moving memories of him. He was a good, caring father.

His imprisonment in the concentration camp did not break his spirit. He had lots of plans and was full of energy. He was planning the reorganisation of the humanities in the University. He was elected President of the Polish Historical Society. Then at a congress of historians, I think it was in 1947 in Łódź, he incurred the wrath of Professor Jabłoński, by expressing his view on the role of scholarship. This is how he put it, "We hear that scholarship should be in the service of life. Yes, let it serve,

but let it not be servile." Father wanted to have this motto inscribed on his grave, when better times came. His wish has been fulfilled.

Compiled by Maciej Janik⁸

¹ The academics were kept in Wrocław until 27 November 1939, and reached Sachsenhausen on 28 November 1939. W. Konopczyński, *Pod trupią główką*, Warszawa, 1982, p. 24.

² Stefan Bednarski was given no medical attention and died of pneumonia on 1 January 1940 at Sachsenhausen. After Wanda Baczkowska, "Stefan Bednarski." *Wyroki na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim*, ed. Leszek Hajdukiewicz, Kraków, 1989, p. 130.

³ Ignacy Chrzanowski was given no medical attention and died of pneumonia on 19 January 1940 at Sachsenhausen. After Wanda Baczkowska, "Ignacy Chrzanowski" *Wyroki na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim*, ed. Leszek Hajdukiewicz, Kraków, 1989, p. 138.

⁴ Jan Dąbrowski was released on 26 November 1939 from the prison in Wrocław. After Urszula Perkowska, "Jan Dąbrowski." *Wyroki na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim*, ed. Leszek Hajdukiewicz, Kraków, 1989, p. 140.

⁵ Halina Heitzmanowa. After Henryk Pierzchała, *Pomocne dlonie Europejczyków (1939–1944)*, Kraków, 2005, p. 157. Marian Heitzman. After Henryk Pierzchała, *Pomocne dlonie Europejczyków (1939–1944)*, Kraków, 2005, p. 157.

⁶ Marian Heitzman. After Henryk Pierzchała, *Pomocne dlonie Europejczyków (1939–1944)*, Kraków, 2005, p. 157.

⁷ Carlo Delcroix, President of the Italian Association of War Invalids (*Presidente dell'Associazione Nazionale Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra*) After Henryk Pierzchała, *Pomocne dlonie Europejczyków (1939–1944)*, Kraków, 2005, p. 158.

⁸ Compiled on the basis of a recording made by Bogusław Sławiński.

WŁADYSŁAW KONOPCZYŃSKI (1880–1952)

Distinguished historian of Poland in the modern period. His main research fields were the history of Polish parliamentarism, the history of political ideas, biography, and source editing, chiefly for the 18th century. He also published work on contemporary history, the methodology of history and the presentation of historical subjects in journalism.

Member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Lwów Learned Society (Towarzystwo Naukowe we Lwowie) and the Warsaw Scientific Society, founding member of the Union of the Polish Intelligentsia (Związek Inteligencji Polskiej), and member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History, and Antiquities.

Arrested on 6 November 1939 and detained in Sachsenhausen concentration camp until 8 February 1940. After returning to Kraków, organised the clandestine university course in History (autumn 1942) and served as lecturer and examiner in Polish Modern History until the autumn of 1944.

President of the History Commission of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences as of 1945; as of 1946 presided over the Kraków Division of the Polish History Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne), and became the Society's President in 1947. Retired in 1948. Died at Młynnik near Ojców on 12 July 1952.