

Professor Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska

Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska was born in Warsaw on June 15, 1935. Having completed her high school education in Szczecin in 1952, she moved back to Warsaw, where she became a student of the Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw. Her capabilities were soon appreciated – as a fourth-year student, she started to work as a deputy assistant at the Department of Turkic Studies. In 1957 she went to Cairo, where she enjoyed a status of the first Polish student to receive a scholarship in Egypt. From August 1958 until January 1959 K. Skarżyńska worked as an interpreter for the Polish Embassy in Cairo. This prolonged stay in the Egyptian capital proved very fruitful also in the socio-intellectual context – it was then that she met the most famous Egyptian writers of the time, such as Yūsuf Idrīs, Naǧīb Maḥfūz, or Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm. Back in Warsaw, she joined a team of experienced translators who worked on Polish rendering of the collection of medieval Arab texts known in English as *Arabian Nights*. This giant and long-lasting effort, organized and supervised by prof. Tadeusz Lewicki, was crowned in 1974, when a voluminous and beautifully illustrated Polish edition of the *Nights, Księga tysiąca i jednej nocy*, was finally published in Warsaw.

In September 1959 r. Krystyna Skarżyńska completed her MA thesis titled *Problematyka powieści Tawfīq al-Ḥakīma* [“Themes of Novels of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm”] received the MA diploma, and was immediately offered a post of assistant at the Department of Turkic Studies, University of Warsaw. In 1964 she moved to the newly established Department of Arabic Studies, which was then run by Doc. Józef Bielawski. As a senior assistant, Krystyna Skarżyńska offered courses in morphology and syntax of the Arabic language as well as classes in reading of the classical and modern Arabic texts. She also tutored MA students, worked as a students’ counselor, and was responsible for administrative affairs of the new department.

Somewhat unexpectedly, 1965 brought one of the most unusual experiences in her life. In December that year she went to Egypt with Edward Ochab’s (then Polish prime minister) official delegation. Her job was to accompany the prime minister’s wife and to work as her personal interpreter. While in Cairo, the Polish politicians realized that during their visit in Ethiopia, which was their next destination, Edward Ochab’s wife might also need an interpreter and an accompanying person. Krystyna Skarżyńska did not know any of the Ethiopian languages, but she was fluent in French. She was

kindly asked to undertake the task. As a chance to see Haile Selassie's court with one's own eyes was not given to many, Krystyna agreed without hesitation. Not surprisingly, the visit in Ethiopia proved to be an absolutely unique and unforgettable adventure.

In 1966 Krystyna Skarżyńska went to Cairo once again, this time for scholarly reasons – she planned to work on her Ph.D. thesis. Once again she was offered a proposal that could not be rejected. The Cairene Center of Egyptian Folklore invited her to participate in a huge ethnographic project which aimed at documenting the local folk culture in those areas of Nubia that were soon to be flooded as a result of the Aswān High Dam construction. The work in Nubia inspired Krystyna to promote a new direction in Arabic studies. Back in Warsaw, she initiated a course in ethnography of the Arab world and encouraged students to make researches in this field. Her effort proved successful and resulted in numerous excellent MA theses – many of them based on field research – dealing with the Arab folk culture and ethnography.

In the late 1960s Krystyna married (from that moment on she has been using the name Skarżyńska-Bocheńska) and soon had two sons (in 1967 and 1969). Despite the new duties resulting from the requirements of the family life, in 1970 she managed to defend her Ph.D. The thesis, written under supervision of Józef Bielański, was titled *Poglądy Al-Ġāhiz'a na retorykę i stylistykę* ["Al-Ġāhiz's Views on Rhetoric and Stylistics"]. She defended it on January, 1970. Reviewers were Prof. Tadeusz Lewicki (Jagiellonian University) and Prof. Ananiasz Zajaczkowski (University of Warsaw).

Throughout the 1970s Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska taught classical Arab literature as well as modern Arab literature. In the mid-1970s she started, together with Prof. Bielański and Dr. Jolanta Jasińska (later Kozłowska), a complex and challenging project aimed at compiling a volume which would present the state of the art of modern Arab literature. The collective effort resulted in a comprehensive work titled *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w. Literatura arabskiego Wschodu* ["Modern and Contemporary Arab Literature. The Literature of the Arab East"] (1978) which covered literary production of the eastern part of the Arab world (i.e. Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Kuwait).

The work on the volume aroused her interest in modern Arab literature. In the late 1970s K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska went to Tunisia in order to make a research on the literary production of the young generation of Tunisian writers. Her stay and work in Tunis resulted in *Habilitationsschrift* titled *Tradycja i nowatorstwo we współczesnej poezji tunezyjskiej* ["Tradition and Novelty in Contemporary Tunisian Poetry"] (1980). The *Habilitation* exam took place on June, 17. 1980. Reviewers were Prof. Józef Bielański, Prof. Karel Petraček (Charles University, Prague) and Prof. Stefan Żółkiewski (Polish Academy of Sciences). Subsequently, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska was offered a post of assistant professor (docent).

In the mid-1980s, Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, Józef Bielański and Jolanta Kozłowska met once again in order to realize a common project in literature. The effort of the team, which this time was joined by Dr. Ewa Machut-Mendek, resulted in another volume on modern and contemporary Arab literature:

their *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w. Literatura arabskiego Maghrebu* [“Modern and Contemporary Arab Literature. The Literature of the Arab Maghreb”] was published in Warsaw in 1989.

In recognition of her academic achievements, in 1992 Prof. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska was honored with a title of Professor of Humanities. The beginning of the 1990s was also a time when she became charmed by works of a Syrian poet known to his readers as Adūnīs (‘Alī Aḥmad Sa‘īd). The fascination resulted in a number of studies and translations of his works, such as a collection of Adonīs’s poems *Rycerz dziwnych słów* [“A Knight of Strange Words”] (1994), or a monograph titled *Adonis, obrazy, myśli, uczucia* [“Adonis: Images, Thoughts, Feelings”] (1995).

Her academic career notwithstanding, Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska was also active in making the Arab literature available on more popular level. Having this objective in mind, she compiled *Pieśni gniewu i miłości* [“Songs of Anger and Love”] (1983), a comprehensive anthology of modern Arabic poetry which she translated. In 1990 a revised and expanded edition of this collection was published.

From the very beginning of her academic career, Prof. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska has actively participated in conferences and academic meetings/debates, both in Poland and abroad. As an active member of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, she attended this organization’s international congresses on regular basis (such as those held in Salamanca, Budapest, Sassari or Neapol, for example). Invited by her colleagues from various universities, she also travelled a lot across Europe to give lectures in Arab poetry and literature. The memories of her visit to Ruprecht-Karl-Universität in Heidelberg (1989), to Moscow State University (1990) or to Istituto Orientale in Napoli (1990) are particularly important to her. In the years 1980–1981 and 1993–1994 K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska was a head of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies. For her academic achievements, she was awarded with a medal of Komisja Edukacji Narodowej in 2004.

In the late 1990s prof. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska became involved in social and political activities. In 1997 she participated in election campaign of AWS party and in the years 1998–2002 she acted as this party’s representative to the Warsaw City Council.

The new millenium has brought new challenges. In 2006 she published in Kraków *Klasyczna literatura arabska* [“Arab Classical Literature”], as a chapter of book which was edited as volume XII of the major series titled *Historia literatury światowej* [“History of World Literatures”]. In recent years she returned to the “roots” of her academic activity. Pressed by her friends, colleagues and students, she decided to make Al-Ġāḥiẓ more widely known in Poland. In 2009 she published a monograph *Pochwała sztuki słowa: Al-Ġāḥiẓ i jego teoria komunikacji*. It was dedicated to the memory of Prof. Bielawski. In the following year the book was partly translated into English and French, revised and published as *Al-Ġāḥiẓ and His Theory of Social Communication* (2010).

Profesor K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska is a member of Polish Oriental Society and Committee for Oriental Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences. Under her supervision over thirty MA theses and one Ph.D. thesis were written.

Always extremely enthusiastic in all she has been doing, Prof. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska loves to share her thoughts and reflections with colleagues and students. Her passionate approach is sometimes contagious – she can attract people not only to Al-Ġāḥiż or Adūnīs but also to rowing, yachting and swimming, which she practiced for many years and of which she still is very fond.

Barbara Wrona



K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska (standing in the middle) during her field research in Nubia