

Krzysztof Wieczorek

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7987-168X>

University of Silesia in Katowice

## Honor in the land of inconsistency. On ethical reflections of Józef Tischner, Adam Michnik, and Leszek Kołakowski

### Introduction

Unlike it is the case with most Western European countries, the Polish culture is, by and large, traditionalist.<sup>1</sup> It has preserved elements that were shaped centuries ago within the culture of the noblesse (the so-called culture of Sarmatism) and were kept alive during the time of the partitions (1795–1918), when the Polish territories were under Prussian, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian rule. This peculiar attachment

**Krzysztof T. Wieczorek**, prof. dr hab., a professor at the Institute of Philosophy, the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Silesia. Doctorate in philosophy: University of Silesia 1986, habilitation 1994, professorship 2005. A holder of scholarship from Katholischer Akademischer Ausländer-Dienst, Freiburg im Breisgau 1990–1991. He has published 4 scholarly monographs and approximately 200 papers in academic journals and chapters in monographs. He cooperates with academic institutions in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Slovakia. His scientific interests include history of modern and contemporary philosophy, philosophy of the encounter and dialogue, phenomenology, logical and philosophical problems of natural language, philosophy of culture, axiology.

<sup>1</sup> “An original feature of Polish classical culture is the widespread ethos of the nobility, with its attachment to such values as militancy, service, loyalty and honor. [...] Also the workers adopted noble models. Writing about Lech Wałęsa, Norman Davies noted that «probably, he instinctively realizes that the basic danger lies in the absolutist ambitions of the state authorities. If this indeed is the case, one may conclude that the Polish working class is bringing back to life the political traditions of the democracy of the noblesse,»” (P. Tarasiewicz, *Specyfika Polaków jako narodu* [The Uniqueness of the Poles as a Nation], “Cywilizacja” (2011) nr 37, pp. 48–49). Unless marked otherwise, all in-text quotations originally written in Polish have been translated into English by Paweł Jędrzejko.

to tradition is one of the consequences of the harsh historical conditioning of the country's evolution. In the face of the loss of state sovereignty, it was only the distinctiveness of the identity of the ethnic community of Poles that made it possible for the ethos of Polishness to survive in the conditions of political oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural expansion on the part of the invaders, who sought to Russify or Germanize the indigenous inhabitants of the annexed Polish lands.

With the Poles of different social classes sharing a common fate, the community of experience resulted in the fact that the national archetypes and models of Polishness cultivated chiefly at the noble courts and manors permeated into villages; soon the Polish folk culture assimilated them, albeit sometimes not without modifications. The scale and intensity of this process would vary from one ethnic region to another; most vitally, however, the phenomenon of the "rustic chivalry" (*cavalleria rusticana*) manifested itself in the culture of the Tatra Highlanders (the so-called Góral culture) living in the region of Podhale (including the Polish-speaking part of the Tatra range its northern piedmont). Since the times of the first Wallachian migrants, who, consenting to settle in the extremely inhospitable mountainous areas, would be granted special privileges by the king of Poland, it is there that the ethos of freedom, autonomy, and self-sufficiency has been cultivated with particular reverence. This fact is of unique significance in the context of Józef Tischner's thought, as the philosopher cherished a profound connection with the Highlander culture and, as is soon to be revealed, derived some elements of his own ethical reflection from it.

One of the traditionally Sarmatian values – a value held in high esteem both in the elite culture of the noblesse and in the folk culture (drawing from the former) – is the ideal of honor. After many years of disregard or even contempt (which phenomenon was partly related to the nature of the processes of democratization and liberalization of social structures, and partly a result of the pressure of the left-wing ideology reprobating social divides, stratification, and inequality) this ideal has returned from oblivion and established itself in mass culture, of which a significant part of the Polish population, no longer class-ridden, partakes.

In the Old Polish era (beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup>- and ending in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) the ideal of honor was derived from the quasi-mythical genealogy of the Polish nobility, who were believed to have descended from ancient Sarmatians, a people epitomizing heroic qualities and noble attributes.<sup>2</sup> Some popularizers of Polish history went so far as to equate the Polish nobility with the descendants of Japheth, presumably the eldest of Noah's three sons, whose name – in the Hebrew tradition – is associated with beauty and openness. Contrary to the concept of honor informed with the Polish nobility's poorly justified sense of superiority, in other social classes, including the peasantry, the shared ideal of honor was understood as relative to their living conditions.

Needless to say, today, the sense of the concept central to these reflections is no longer relative to the stratification of the social structure. The above notwithstanding, the understanding of honor had not become uniformized or homogenized in the process of the culture's evolution. Within contemporary moral climate, it is possible to distinguish several ways of thinking about honor and modes of experiencing particular attitudes to what living a life of a person of honor involves. My objective is to single out some of these stances and to discuss them on the basis of the analyses of biographies and works of Józef Tischner (1931–2000) and Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009): two Polish philosophers who played a particularly significant role in shaping the Polish ethos in the second half of the twentieth century. My discussion concerning the views of these two intellectuals is further augmented with references to the thought and persona of Adam Michnik – a historian, journalist, and one of the leading figures of the Polish democratic opposition in the final years of the Polish People's Republic.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Orzeł, *Mityczne pochodzenie rodów szlacheckich* [On Mythical Origins of Noble Families], "Pasaż Wiedzy." Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, 23.04.2015, [https://www.wilanow-palac.pl/mityczne\\_pochodzenie\\_rodow\\_szlacheckich.html](https://www.wilanow-palac.pl/mityczne_pochodzenie_rodow_szlacheckich.html) (25.09.2020).

### Honor in Józef Tischner's thought

In a somewhat playful, yet deeply accurate way, Józef Tischner described the essence of his philosophical vocation as follows: "I do not intend to save the hopes of the Germans by introducing them to Husserl, or of the French by teaching them Bergson or Ricoeur, [even though] myself I cannot afford not to know these gentlemen. [...] I chose to be a narrow-minded, obtuse philosopher of the Sarmatians. I am trying [...] to give them advise [by] seeking out ways out of the crisis of hope [by way of tracking down] our own, Polish, philosophy of man – a philosophy we have in our blood, but that has never been fully described."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, apart from numerous works in the fields of the history of philosophy, ethics, axiology, phenomenology and hermeneutics, studies devoted directly to the uniqueness of Polish collective life constitute an important part of his interests and a significant current in his research. In the last half century of the philosopher's life, the history of Poland abounded in dramatic events, against which both the entire nation (as a community shaped by their collective ethos) and individual citizens had to define themselves. Hence Tischner's numerous – and persistent – attempts to grasp the phenomenon of the post-WWII Polish collective ethos<sup>4</sup> by means of phenomenological and hermeneutic tools, to first understand and describe it in an orderly manner, and then to be able to give the Poles good "advice" by pointing them to the axiological foundations of their own ethos: foundations capable of supporting proper and correct choices in difficult, often dramatic, circumstances in the life of the nation and in individual lives.

<sup>3</sup> J. Tischner, *Myslenie według wartości* [Thinking in Accordance with Values], Kraków 1982, pp. 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> Among numerous publications Tischner dedicated to this problem area are such texts as: *Chochół sarmackiej melancholii* [The Capsheaf of Sarmatian Melancholia], „Znak” (1970) nr 10 (196), pp. 1243–1254; *Etyka solidarności* [The Ethics of Solidarity], Kraków 1981; *Polski młyn* [The Polish Treadmill], Kraków 1991; *Polska jest Ojczyzną* [Poland is a Fatherland], Paris 1985; *“Homo sovieticus” między Wawelem a Jasną Górą* [Homo Sovieticus between the Wawel Castle and the Luminous Mount], „Tygodnik Powszechny” (1990) nr 25, pp. 1–2.

Of particular significance for Tischner's reflections is the culture of the Podhale region, a unique sub-phenomenon within the diverse, polymorphic national culture of Poland. Tischner, himself born into a traditional Highlander family, felt a profound emotional and intellectual connection with the region. He deemed some of the manifestations of the Podhale folk wisdom exemplary, almost close to the ideal. During one of his appearances in the series of short television documentaries titled *Siedem grzechów głównych po góralsku*<sup>5</sup> [Seven Deadly Sins in Highlander Style],<sup>6</sup> the philosopher declared: "It just so happens that when you have traveled across the vast expanse of Poland and reached the mountains, even the so-called cardinal sins tend to turn into virtues [...] There is great power in the Highlander culture. Everyone follows their own way to heaven. After all, heaven also deserves some ornament: we, the Highlanders, are *it*. The mountains give us such dignity." This statement bears all the traits of the philosopher's unique sense of humor, but at the same time it reveals the authenticity and sincerity of Tischner's admiration for the beauty and dignity of the Highlander culture.

One of the episodes of the mentioned series explored the sin of pride (*hubris*). Addressing this subject, Tischner stated that in Podhale one would have to first distinguish honor from pride, which is not easy. It sometimes happens – he said to the camera – "that such pain lingers in a person that there is no other way to let it out but as pride. It is a longing for greatness," which the philosopher largely justified as a human imperfect response to the magnificence of God's gifts bestowed upon every human being. Pride, however, must be moderated, and then it will transform from sin into an honorable virtue. The philosopher explains that the model of an "honorable peasant," well-known in Podhale, is a model of someone who inherited land from his forefathers, and whose heart sings the song of freedom.

Of course, the statements cited above do not bear traits of philosophical analyses. Rather, they may serve as an illustration – or expression – of the

<sup>5</sup> See <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1237116> (25.09.2020).

<sup>6</sup> Produced by Polish Television Channel Two in 1995.

philosopher's intimate bond with the Highlander culture, in which he was always glad to be immersed; it was in its axiological and social climate that he felt most at home. Importantly, however, the quotations indicate the strong presence of the idea of honor in Tischner's reflection on man. Yet, if one were to look for a systematic elaboration of the concept of honor in his research, there would be little to find. The above notwithstanding, on the basis of other statements the philosopher made, it is possible to attempt at a hypothetical reconstruction of his understanding of honor and, equally importantly, of his view on the conditions for the practical implementation of the ideal of a man of honor.

Such an endeavor will reveal "honor Tischner-style" as a consistent, perhaps even Highlander-like stubborn, allegiance to oneself and to one's own ideals. Or, more precisely, faithfulness to one's own axiological "I." According to Tischner, the deepest and most enduring foundation of the personal identity of the human subject is the axiological "I" that reveals itself in one's primal experience of oneself: "of many possible and actually lived experiences of one's own self, the experience of the «I» as a unique value (*axios*) is the most fundamental. In consequence, the concept of the axiological «I» based on this experience is the concept from which all other notions of the self can be derived."<sup>7</sup> It is also "the ultimate condition of being able to experience all possible values"<sup>8</sup> and, at the same time, "inclining towards the world [...] the axiological «I» demands its realization in time and space."<sup>9</sup>

Attempting to figuratively describe how the axiological "I" acts, Tischner writes thus: "I endeavored to grasp [...] the binarity of the «behavior» of the axiological «I.» On the one hand, the «I» is active, or even aggressive: it tends to sympathize with that which it finds particularly dear, and for this purpose it emerges from its depth, assuming a concrete

<sup>7</sup> J. Tischner, *Impresje aksjologiczne* [Axiological Impressions], in: *Świat ludzkiej nadziei* [The World of Human Hope], Kraków 1975, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> J. Tischner, *Fenomenologia świadomości egotycznej* [The Phenomenology of the Egotistic Consciousness], in: *Studia z filozofii świadomości. Dzieła zebrane* [Studies in the Philosophy of Consciousness. Collected Works], t. 1, Kraków 2006, p. 412.

<sup>9</sup> J. Tischner, *Impresje aksjologiczne*, op. cit., p. 177.

shape [...]. On the other hand, it is with great concern that it guards its distance from the world, protecting its distinctiveness.”<sup>10</sup>

The description above vividly resembles the “two-fold behavior” of an honorable man: on the one hand, honor drives us to act; it makes us actively change the world for the better in accordance with our own judgments and convictions. On the other – it impels us to “guard our distance” from matters and actions that could jeopardize it.

Next, honor needs to be considered in terms of its “content” and “form.” The content of honor is always tantamount to some value that appears in the horizon of the axiological “I” and that demands that the “I” (actively) implements it or (passively) protects it. The form of honor, in turn, is a specific pattern of behavior that the subject displays when defending it. Both in its form and in its content, honor may be distorted, which may result in our honorability being called into question. In terms of content, honor may become skewed when we misinterpret the experience of values, as a consequence of which a distorted vision of the axiological order becomes the basis of our actions. In effect, in our actions conceit may take the place of dignity, pride may overshadow self-esteem, disrespectful, patronizing pity may surface instead of compassion, etc. In terms of its form, honor becomes marred when the subject behaves disproportionately to the circumstances, exceeding the limits of a rational reaction to the threat posed to the value in question. It is important that our behaviors in situations, in which our honor is imperiled should clearly manifest our awareness of our own position as subjects in the space of values: here I stand, and I shall not give ground. Tenacity, beyond doubt, is an indispensable component of honor.

When must honor be defended? The above analyses, emphasizing the primary role of the axiological “I” in the positioning of the subject in the space of values, require that attention be paid to two basic types of situations. The first type includes contexts in which someone directly sullies our name, slanders us, shows us contempt or disregard. The second type – less obvious, but necessary to acknowledge and to take

<sup>10</sup> J. Tischner, *Impresje aksjologiczne*, op. cit., pp. 171–172.

into account – comprises contexts, in which basic values falling within the scope of our axiological “I” are threatened in our immediate environment. This is so because the axiological “I” is “a sphere where [...] the compassionate experiencing of values that exist in the world evokes one’s sensitivity to one’s own value.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, whoever violates the values that I profess and serve also levels an attack against me, and it is my honorable duty to oppose such an action.

It is not always that such a defense can be effected actively and efficiently; sometimes the radical asymmetry of means and possibilities of action between those who infringe on values and those who try to defend them renders it unviable. This, for example, was the case in the context of the nearly half-century-long conflict between the communist government of Poland and the part of the Polish society that refused to accept the country’s official Marxist ideology or the methods of its practical implementation. At times, the only weapon against the oppressive power – a weapon more symbolic than it was efficient – was laughter. Tischner was well aware of this, as is evidenced by the following words from his letter to the eminent Polish historian and philosopher Andrzej Walicki,<sup>12</sup> who, at the time, was residing in the USA: “I am here and I am alive because I am a Highlander and I can laugh those trying to shoot me down right in the face.”<sup>13</sup>

The symbolism of “shooting,” which Tischner understood as a figure of an important (and necessary) attitude towards values, looms large in his consequential, very personal text, which reveals the philosopher’s attachment to two educational patterns. The text in question is that of Józef Tischner’s lecture delivered on the occasion of his receipt of the honorary doctorate, awarded to him by the Pedagogical University in Cracow on October 14, 1996. In his speech, the laureate emphasized

<sup>11</sup> J. Tischner, *Impresje aksjologiczne*, op. cit., p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Andrzej Stanisław Walicki (1930–2020) was a Polish historian, a professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, USA, expert on the philosophy of sociopolitics, and one of the founders of the Warsaw school of the history of ideas.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in L. Kołakowski, A. Walicki, *Listy 1957–2007* [Letters 1957–2007], Warszawa 2018, p. 197.



the need to fuse together two radically different styles of education, epitomized, on the one hand, by the Greek philosopher Socrates and, on the other, by the Highlander storyteller Sabała.<sup>14</sup> “The juxtaposition of these two characters may come as a surprise,” Tischner explained. “Usually, we do not put Plato’s dialogues and Sabała’s stories side by side on the library shelf. But life is not a bookshelf. In my life, Sabała was neighbors with Socrates – and they both, out of hiding, charted the course of my views of education.”<sup>15</sup>

Socrates, as may easily be deduced, embodies the dialogical approach to education.<sup>16</sup> Tischner emphasizes the liberating role of the Socratic dialogue: “The Socratic obstetrician assists in an extraordinary labor: out of man, he delivers a thinking man. [...] Thinking is wondrous human ability. Man feels both distinguished and elevated, as if a light were kindled in him. Because he thinks, he sees that there are many roads for him to choose from. He is set free from the bondage of time and place.”<sup>17</sup> On the margin of this statement, one should probably add that the sense of “distinction and elevation,” induced by thinking, gives rise to one’s need to protect these values, or, in other words, activates one’s sense of honor.

The second patron of the Cracovian philosopher’s educational reflection is Sabała. Interestingly, Tischner’s point of departure for his further

<sup>14</sup> Sabała, born Jan Krzeptowski (1809–1894) – an amateur musician, storyteller, singer, and Tatra mountain guide – inspired innumerable Polish artists of his time, including such eminent figures as Tytus Chałubiński or Stanisław Witkiewicz. Eternalized in their works, he came to be recognized as of the lasting symbols of the Podhale region and an epitome of the Highlander culture.

<sup>15</sup> J. Tischner, *Droga Sokratesa i perc Sabaly. Uwagi o filozofii wychowania* [Socrates’s Way and Sabała’s Mountain Path. Remarks on the Philosophy of Education] “Znak” (1996) nr 11, pp. 41–45; <https://tischner.pl/ks-jozef-tischner-droga-sokratesa-i-perc-sabaly> (24.09.2020).

<sup>16</sup> Aldona Pobjewska describes the traits of the Socratic dialog as an educational tool in the following manner: “Socrates abandons [...] expository teaching methods that assume the student’s cognitive passivity in acquiring knowledge. [...] Instead, he favors methods engaging the charge in the knowledge-making process. Such a preference is based on his belief that the profound truth about the world cannot be delivered to the individual from the outside, but that everyone must arrive at it on their own by way of systematic thinking” (A. Pobjewska, *Edukacja do samodzielności* [Education for Self-Reliance], Łódź 2019, p. 88).

<sup>17</sup> J. Tischner, *Droga Sokratesa i perc Sabaly*, op. cit., p. 43.

arguments is the following declaration of the famous Highlander: “I fancied shooting since I was a child.”<sup>18</sup> The very fact begs the question as to why the thinker finds Sabała’s desire – seemingly infantile and, at the same time, dangerous – so important?

First, for purely practical reasons. Tischner addresses his audience directly: “there is little probability that you – I am referring to future teachers and educators – will at any point come across a Socrates with his noble inner *daimonion* in your pedagogical work. Conversely, it is nothing short of certain that – especially in this country – you will meet hundreds of students who ‘fancy shooting,’ which is why Sabała’s problem needs to be approached with particular attention.”<sup>19</sup> This, however, is not the only reason. The second, and probably more important one, is the axiological resonance of shooting-as-a-symbol. Again, the motif of liberation from bondage resurfaces in Tischner’s thought: “With his fancy for shooting,” the philosopher explains, “Sabała found himself on his way to freedom. He did not yet know exactly what the shooting would be about, but he knew that if he did not learn to shoot – and, thereby, if he chose not to risk being shot himself – his liberty would be in danger. Man becomes a man not only by way of thinking, but also by way of freedom.”<sup>20</sup>

The above notwithstanding, it would be a profound distortion of Tischner’s idea if we understood “the incentive to shoot,” as expressed in the text, literally. This, of course, is only a metaphor, whose aim is to emphasize the need to be able to actively defend endangered values – values, for which one feels responsible in his or her own “axiological conscience.” It is owing to this ability that man becomes trustworthy.

The merger of these two educational inspirations – education for thinking, which helps one in making the right decisions (including those concerning values), and education for courage in defending one’s own

<sup>18</sup> In the original Highlander dialect, Sabała’s declaration reads as follows: “Od małości miałem chętkę do strzylanio” (J. Tischner, *Droga Sokratesa i perć Sabały*, op. cit., p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> J. Tischner, *Droga Sokratesa i perć Sabały*, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> J. Tischner, *Droga Sokratesa i perć Sabały*, op. cit., p. 44.

beliefs – warrants every chance that a person shaped along such lines will be a person of honor. Particularly worth emphasizing is the fact that the synthesis outlined in the lecture was not derived from purely theoretical considerations, but that it arose directly from Tischner's lived experiences. The synthesis is deeply rooted in the life of the philosopher who reveals patterns of thought in the world that he describes following his philosophical inspirations (Socrates and beyond) and drawing upon the unique values that shaped the culture of Podhale – values epitomized by the storyteller Sabała, whom Tischner made their symbolic exponent.

It is possible to talk about a similar synthesis with regard to Tischner's ideal of honor. The first component of such a synthetic concept is "Highlander honor," based on the best models of the regional culture of the Polish Tatras, to which the philosopher was so intimately attached. The second component, that of "personalistic honor," is built on a philosophically profound awareness that one must be able to calmly and resolutely defend the foundations of the inalienable personal dignity of every human being, and to do so without obstinance and without deception.

### **The ideal of honor according to Leszek Kołakowski**

The second Polish philosopher whose thought and writings played a key role in shaping the attitudes of Polish intelligentsia in the second half of the 20th century was Leszek Kołakowski. To some extent, his personal fates and his ideological and intellectual choices reflect the dilemmas and quandaries of a large part of the generation living in the era of the Polish People's Republic who experienced the political transformation that marked its twilight. According to Józef Tischner, Kołakowski was "a man who was looking for a tool of liberation in Marxism, but in the end he never found it there, [although for many years] Marxism was a part of his own life. [...] Kołakowski truly wanted to be a Marxist, heart and soul. And I guess he really was one." Ultimately, however, as a result of a thorough revision of his former convictions, Kołakowski "presented a radical critique of Marxism" – all the more valuable and credible that "his contention with Marxism is the philosopher's dispute

with himself. [...] It seems to me that Kołakowski shows what many others from this generation have experienced in a crystal clear form.”<sup>21</sup>

At first glance, the connections between Kołakowski’s stance, his philosophical reflection and the notion of honor seem even less obvious than in Tischner’s case. There is, however, a lead which seems worth following. The lead (admittedly, indirect, but nevertheless promising) that energizes further insights is the following statement by a Polish theologian and philosopher Jan A. Kłoczowski: “[in] the seventies, I met Adam Michnik and we talked a lot about the ethical imperative of commitment, about our responsibility for the country, about what the Gospels contribute to the understanding of life. In Adam, I saw a diligent reader of Kołakowski.”<sup>22</sup> The philosopher’s next mention of Michnik reads as follows: “It is worth to recall an interesting text documenting the transformations in thinking among people close to Kołakowski’s inner circle, [namely] Adam Michnik’s *Z dziejów honoru w Polsce. Wypisy więzienne* [From the History of Honor in Poland. Prison Notes], Paris 1985.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Kłoczowski states unequivocally that Michnik, influenced by Kołakowski’s writings, undertook and carried out an in-depth study of the idea of honor.

Adam Michnik, let me reiterate, is a figure whose ties with both Kołakowski and Tischner are strong. Jan Kłoczowski places him “close to Kołakowski’s inner circle” and Michnik’s personal friendship with Tischner and their mutual fascination – which lasted quite some time and found its reflection, among others, in their respective publications<sup>24</sup> – is a fact commonly known both in the milieu of open Catholicism and in that dubbed the “secular left.”

<sup>21</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu* [The Polish Form of the Dialog], Paris 1981, pp. 158–168.

<sup>22</sup> J. A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit. Leszka Kołakowskiego spory o religię* [More than a Myth. Leszek Kołakowski’s Disputes over Religion], Kraków 1994, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> J. A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit*, op. cit., p. 21, footnote 12.

<sup>24</sup> See J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., pp. 168–190; see also J. Tischner, *Po co Pan Bóg stworzył Michnika?* [Why Has God Created Michnik?], in: A. Michnik, *Kościół, lewica, dialog* [The Church, the Left, the Dialog], Warszawa 1998, pp. 345–362. For Michnik’s comments on Tischner, see, i.a., A. Michnik, *Kościół, lewica, dialog*, op. cit., pp. 250–258 and pp. 303–306.

Moreover, Michnik is one of the first and most important representatives of the new formula of the anti-communist opposition, which Tischner characterized as follows: “With Michnik – though not with him alone – dawns the era of the «open opposition» (at least in Poland). The onset of the new formula marks the moment of the departure from the concept of the «underground opposition.» [...] Suddenly, the underground rises to the surface. All this happens around 1968, sometime close to the famous «March events.» I remember the shock that the gesture of coming out into the open caused. I myself belong to the generation of «those from the underground,» proficient in the art of «walking in disguise» and adept at pretending to be someone who they really are not. People like Michnik do not conspire. [...] They openly criticize the system. This is how the time of *new ethics* has arrived in our, Polish, or perhaps even Central European, political life.”<sup>25</sup>

A factor that significantly contributed to the shaping of the intellectual and moral atmosphere that ultimately gave rise to the formula – and style of action – of the open opposition, was the intellectual ferment stirred up by the collective experience of reading Leszek Kołakowski’s texts and by ensuing discussions that affected a broad milieu of dissident intellectuals and progressive activists. Zbigniew Mentzel (who, next to Jan A. Kłoczowski, is recognized as another eminent expert and commentator of Kołakowski’s work) emphasized the role of two essays that proved to be particularly inspiring to the dissident community. In recognition of their impact, he included them in the 2010 collection of Kołakowski’s works *Nasza wesola apokalipsa. Wybór najważniejszych esejów* [Our Merry Apocalypse. A Selection of the Most Important Essays], which he edited. In his *Foreword*, Mentzel states: “This volume would not be complete [...] without *Tezy o nadziei i beznadziejności* [Theses on Hope and Despair] or *Sprawa polska* [The Polish Question] – two memorable sketches from the early 1970s, which [...] became the

<sup>25</sup> J. Tischner, *Po co Pan Bóg stworzył Michnika?*, op. cit., p. 348.

intellectual founding act of the democratic opposition emerging in the People's Republic of Poland.”<sup>26</sup>

It is possible to observe that along with the shift in the forms of resistance to the totalitarian state apparatus of Poland under communist rule also the ethos of the opposition underwent a change. One of the effects of this transformation was the emergence of a new sense of honor – a sense unknown before the open opposition became a fact. Until then, the traditional understanding and experiencing honor, derived from the ideals shaped by Polish canon of Romantic literature, with the works of Adam Mickiewicz in the lead, was dominant. One of the model heroes of that era was Konrad Wallenrod, a Lithuanian pagan captured and reared as a Christian by the oppressors of his people, the Teutonic Knights. Having risen to the dignity of the Grand Master of the Order, he accidentally discovers his legacy in a song of a bard, and henceforth seeks to destroy the hostile Teutonic Order by means of intrigue and deception. Seeking justice, he sacrifices his own happiness, his love for Aldona, and ultimately his own life to the cause. Reflecting on the archetype of the hero as embodied by Mickiewiczian Wallenrod, Maria Indyk observes that “the loftiest values are [...] honor, dignity, courage, and heroism understood as a [sense of obligation] to give up personal happiness, [leading to] sacrifice that does not allow him to remain stuck in humiliating bondage [or be comfortable with] servitude, and drives him, time and again, towards new deeds. An allegation of collaboration with the invader or the charge of national treason bring utmost disgrace upon the hero. Honor demands that one must fight irrespective of circumstances – even if the advantage of the enemy leaves no hope for victory – because death is better than bondage. The hero's emotional life is rich, but his intellect [is of lesser importance, and therefore] the value attributed to is insignificant [...]. Honest and sincere, the hero suffers most when the means to which he must resort [...] fail to meet

<sup>26</sup> Z. Mentzel, *Słowo wstępne* [Foreword], in: L. Kołakowski, *Nasza wesola Apokalipsa. Wybór najważniejszych esejów* [Our Merry Apocalypse. A Selection of the Most Important Essays], Kraków 2010, pp. 5–6.

the demands of honor – this is the essence of Konrad Wallenrod’s tragedy [...]. Besides combat, love plays an important role in his life. The hero’s love is faithful, capable of overcoming various obstacles and stronger than hardships. Often put to test, it is usually unhappy. At the same time, love is the ultimate test of the hero’s patriotism: the hero must often choose between love and his struggle. Testifying to the viability of this model is the fact that writers who were active during [and after] World War II almost automatically revived it”<sup>27</sup>.

With the emergence of the new generation of oppositionists, the model of the man of honor also changed. In his study *Z dziejów honoru w Polsce*, Adam Michnik no longer relies upon the romantic models. He is interested in the comportment of a man who experiences the timeless “dilemma of an intellectual subjected to the pressure of history,”<sup>28</sup> a quandary as difficult in antiquity as it is today. Such a person is far from romantic effusions of feelings or exalted motivations. His or her basic tool is reason, and his or her field of action is defined by the irremovable tension between the apparent determinism of forces and laws shaping history on a global scale (Michnik spells History with a capital H<sup>29</sup>) and his or her steadfast will to “improve the world by improving the ruling power.”<sup>30</sup>

The struggle to improve the world turns out to simultaneously be the fight in defense of honor – both one’s own honor and the honor of those whom an oppressive power humiliates, corrupts, and strips of dignity. History – perceived as an alleged opponent and, at the same time, as the carrier of the forces of evil – operates in the same manner in which evil itself acts: as Tischner described it, it tempts and threatens. The role of an intellectual – who, in the pages of Michnik’s book, becomes the epitome of the man of honor – is first to objectively evaluate the historical

<sup>27</sup> M. Indyk, *Ethos rycerski – i polski?* [The Chivalric – and Polish – Ethos?], “Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja” (1974) nr 2 (14), p. 168.

<sup>28</sup> A. Michnik, *Z dziejów honoru w Polsce i inne szkice* [From the History of Honor in Poland and Other Sketches], Warszawa 2019, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> A. Michnik, *Z dziejów honoru w Polsce i inne szkice*, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> J. Tischner, *Po co Pan Bóg stworzył Michnika?*, op. cit., p. 360.

situation in order to be able to assess the limitations of the circumstances it entails. Then – it is his or her obligation to devise a program of “a great struggle to build a new, better world.”<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, it is an intellectual’s duty to estimate the moral consequences of the implementation of this program, and finally, on such grounds – to make a decision as to whether to commit or withdraw. The honor of the person undertaking such task renders him or her independent of the threats and temptations on the part of History. Sometimes, however, it does happen that a person of honor should face a choice between the temptation of a career hinging on his or her readiness to serve ideas and values that are alien to them, and the threat of punishment or persecution, should he or she choose to refuse the “offer.” In such a situation, while following the path of his or her choice, a person of honor should not prioritize his or her private interests over their own convictions.

Despite the lack of direct references in the text, the style of thinking about honor manifest in Adam Michnik’s study lends itself to being perceived (as Jan A. Kłoczowski argued) in terms of its proximity to Leszek Kołakowski’s reflection. Since Michnik, demonstrably, continues and augments and expands Kołakowski’s insights, one may retrospectively reconstruct the latter’s understanding of the idea of honor taking the former’s considerations as the point of departure.

In his 1973 essay *Sprawa polska* Kołakowski develops the idea that the defense of honor (literally: of “living in dignity”) is, practically, the only way to save the identity of the Polish nation in the face of relentless Sovietization, in the times, in which “everyone knows [...] how great the pressure that is meant to strip one of dignity is.” In the article *Theses on Hope and Despair*, written two years earlier, he likewise concludes that a society under the oppression of socialist despotism has only one way to effectively oppose it: “The means of exerting pressure are available, and almost everyone can make use of them – that is what matters. It would be sufficient to draw the consequences of the simplest precepts: those which forbid surrender to baseness, servility toward the ruler,

<sup>31</sup> A. Michnik, *Z dziejów honoru w Polsce i inne szkice*, op. cit., p. 39.



seeking alms in exchange for one's abjection. Our own dignity entitles us to proclaim aloud the old words: «liberty,» «justice» and «Poland.»<sup>32</sup>

This is no longer the same Kołakowski, who in the 1950s and 1960s passionately (though not uncritically) defended the assumptions and theses of Marxist philosophy, and spoke in favor of their practical implementation in the so-called “people’s democracies,” including socialist Poland. As a result of the memorable events of 1968, a profound change came about in his attitudes and views, though the transformation may not have been as fundamental as one might judge from the evolution of his attitude to Marxism – in theory and in practice.

As Tischner observed in 1981, the unchangeable trait of Kołakowski's personality is “his natural sensitivity to any debasement of human dignity [...], manifest both when Kołakowski was still an enthusiast of Marxism, and today, when he is its critic.”<sup>33</sup> Kłoczowski, in turn, referring to Kołakowski's remarks, writes thus: “He himself says that he felt communism was a continuation of the ethos in which he had been grown up since childhood. [...] When asked about the reasons why he opted for the «new faith,» he mentions two kinds: negative and positive. The negative premise is that the «new faith» allows one to cut oneself off from a certain type of Polish cultural tradition, which he defined with the terms: philistinism, bigotry, and clericalism. [...] Among positive reasons [...] he mentions two: its efficiency in the fight against fascism and [...] his belief in the millenarian illusion [based on] his conviction that completely new foundations of culture must necessarily be built.”<sup>34</sup>

Further on, Kłoczowski quotes an excerpt from an interview for “L'Express” dated August 18, 1980, in which Kołakowski ascribes the development of the skill of thinking in historical categories to the influence of Marxism: “Historical materialism encapsulated important intuitions.

<sup>32</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Theses on Hope and Despair*, transl. K. Devlin. Material prepared for the use of the editors and policy staff of Radio Free Europe, 16 September 1971. The source of the English translation: “Politique Aujourd'hui” July–August 1971; the source of the French translation: “Kultura” (1971) nr 5–6.

<sup>33</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>34</sup> J. A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit*, op. cit., pp. 19–20.

These intuitions modified our vision of history, got us used to thinking about cultural history in connection with conflicts defined in terms of material interests.<sup>35</sup> The above notwithstanding, we know that at the root of Kołakowski's thinking is Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and his master-slave dialectic, of which an important element is the struggle to win the opponent's recognition. Such a struggle can also be interpreted as the defense of honor.

Paradoxically, the same humanist and ethical sensitivity that pushed him to defend the Marxist arguments in his youth, later made him an implacable critic of Marxism and communism. Tischner writes: "Kołakowski decided to be a thinker who strives to change the world – to change it by means of debunking its realities. First, he would debunk religion. Then he changed his object to Marxism. [...] There is something amazing about the portrait of Marxist philosophy that he has painted for us in the three volumes of his history of Marxism. This is not an ordinary story. Lingered behind each chapter of it, one can see dead hopes – more and more of them with every chapter one reads."<sup>36</sup> It is highly possible that as a result of the experience of his juvenile hopes waning, many years later Kołakowski may have been able to reminisce on his youth similarly to how another literary representative of his generation, Stanisław Stanuch, recalled his.<sup>37</sup>

After all, it not only about the beautiful days of youth, but most of all about the myths that we have trusted, our false dreams and errors that we made and are still making. Any attempt at embracing these complicated and unclear [...] issues requires that we reject all the self-deceptions that we have cultivated in ourselves in order to be able to swim across the rough waves of those years.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in: J. A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., pp. 158, 162. The philosopher alludes to Kołakowski's three-volume work *Main Currents of Marxism. Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution*, originally published in Paris in the years 1976–1978. Since then, numerous editions of the work have been published; it has also been translated into many languages.

<sup>37</sup> S. Stanuch, born in the same month and year as Tischner, was a Polish writer, journalist and reporter.

<sup>38</sup> S. Stanuch, *Wstęp* [Introduction], in: A. Bursa, *Utwory wierszem i prozą* [Works in Verse and in Prose], Kraków 1982, p. 12.

I would only add that there is another unchanging trait of Kołakowski's personality – something that “is absolutely important in his thinking” and that allows him to “remain true to himself in spite of everything.”<sup>39</sup> This trait is his quiet and unobtrusive, yet constant and strong commitment to the ideal of honor. What, then, is this ideal like in Leszek Kołakowski's *weltanschauung*?

Certainly, it must be consistent with the entirety of his views, and in particular with those explicated in such programmatic texts as *In Praise of Inconsistency*<sup>40</sup> (1958), *The Priest and the Jester*<sup>41</sup> (1959), *Ethics Without a Moral Code*<sup>42</sup> (1962), and *Metaphysical Horror*<sup>43</sup> (1988). It is therefore the honor of an incurable skeptic, always ready to undermine any dogma and questioning any certainty, whether religious, metaphysical, epistemological or moral. The question remains, however, if in such an unstable universe of beliefs, where all truths are revocable and all values are relative, there may be any room for stability and steadfastness – values, without which it is difficult to think about honor at all?

Józef Tischner asked himself the same question, phrasing it thus: “Looking at the evolution of Kołakowski's thought, I have one question in mind: what is it that is absolutely important in this thinking? [...] In other words, where in Kołakowski's thinking does the interpretation end and where does the persuasive power of the experience of the absolute begin? The answer to this question is not easy, if only because Kołakowski once compared himself to a jester whose motto was vigilance: caution not to accept any absolute. Nevertheless, hard as it may be, the answer is necessary.”<sup>44</sup> And yet, the necessary answer seems to impose itself in the context of our discussion of honor: the permanent and

<sup>39</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> L. Kołakowski, *In Praise of Inconsistency*, trans. I. A. Langnas and A. Rosenhaft, “Dissent” 10 (1963) issue 1, pp. 201–209; <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/in-praise-of-inconsistency> (20.03.2021).

<sup>41</sup> L. Kołakowski, *The Priest and the Jester*, “Dissent” 2 (1962), pp. 215–235. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-priest-and-the-jester> (20.03.2021).

<sup>42</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Ethics without a Moral Code*, “Tri Quarterly” 22, Fall 1971, pp. 153–182.

<sup>43</sup> See L. Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, Oxford 1988.

<sup>44</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., p. 160.

unchanging basis for persuasion, which is more profound than any doubts and relativizations, is Kołakowski's sense of intellectual responsibility for all the theses posited and the choices made.

Józef Tischner, inclined to include Leszek Kołakowski in the hermeneutic current of the "masters of suspicion" who expose evil and its manifestations both in theory and in practice, believes that in Kołakowski's thinking "there is something upon which the debunking procedure rests, some inviolable obviousness that functions as a fundament."<sup>45</sup> Such a fundament may be found in Marxist philosophers who (in their own opinion) expose the errors of bourgeois philosophy. In Marxism, it "was invariably to be class interest."<sup>46</sup> Kołakowski, whose hermeneutical analyses at one point reached a greater depth, rejected the Marxist basis and adopted a more fundamental principle in its place. According to Tischner, "it is partially changeable, but, in essence, it constantly serves some ethical ideal."<sup>47</sup> The task of the scholar exploring Kołakowski's thoughts is to reconstruct and reveal this principle.

Tischner seems to suggest that Kołakowski had remained in the circle of Marxist thought as long as he believed in the convergence of his own principle with the "hermeneutics of class interest." In other words, he would stick to Marxism so long as he trusted that it was in the interest of the proletariat to implement the ethical ideal that was close to the one he himself cherished, and that such an implementation was the main goal of the class struggle at the time. Gradually, however, he noticed that the abstract ideal of a non-antagonistic society, based on the joint ownership of the means of production and cooperation of all with everyone, became reified in the form of the absolute primacy of the interests of the party nomenclature, protected by means of direct coercion. As a result of the clash of the ideal with the mundane facts of real socialism, great expectations turned into a great disappointment. In this situation, what does the honor of the intellectual dictate? It demands that

<sup>45</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>47</sup> J. Tischner, *Polski kształt dialogu*, op. cit., p. 159.

one abandon one's illusions and stay true to oneself in the deepest layer of the ethos, where one's elementary sensitivity to human suffering and injustice makes itself felt. Effectively, of the philosopher's old fascination with Marxism only one vestige remains: his faith in the need – and the possibility – of fighting for a better world. Certainly, however, such a battle would not be fought with the methods that, on a daily basis, could be observed in use in the countries of the Soviet bloc.

In this new position, formed on the ruins of old hopes, we can distinguish honor understood as the will to remain faithful to the ideals that define the face of the new world. The battle for honor must be won by firmness in the face of various obstacles. This idea is in harmony with the classically understood concept of honor. In Latin, the word “honor” means “respect or regard, mark of esteem, reward, dignity or grace, or public office,”<sup>48</sup> but it is etymologically related to the notion of “honestas,” meaning “honesty, integrity, decency, fairness” or “wealth.”<sup>49</sup> As Jacek Woroniecki<sup>50</sup> claimed, “honor is gained when the spirit reaches out to greatness,”<sup>51</sup> and therefore, although initially honor was the attribute of the knighted class alone,<sup>52</sup> later epochs could bring the recognition that anyone could become a man of honor. Still, the elements of bravery and perseverance, characteristic of the chivalric ethos, remains in the semantic field of this concept<sup>53</sup>.

In Kołakowski, the traditionally understood chivalry is replaced by the nobility of reason, which, while struggling in the field of intellectual

<sup>48</sup> See *Honor*, in: *Latin Dictionary*, <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?parola=honor> (20.04.2021).

<sup>49</sup> See *Honestas*, in: *Latin Dictionary*, <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?parola=honestas> (20.04.2021).

<sup>50</sup> Jacek Woroniecki (1878–1949), a Polish theologian, professor of ethics and scholastic philosopher, one of the most eminent Polish Thomists of his time.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in J. Banaś, *Honor – dobro niezbywalne* [Honor – an Inalienable Good], Instytut Edukacji Narodowej 2009, <http://web.archive.org/web/20180123043618/http://ien.pl:80/index.php/archives/1362#more-1362> (24.09.2020).

<sup>52</sup> See J. Banaś, *Honor – dobro niezbywalne*, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. M. Ossowska, *Ethos rycerski i jego odmiany* [Chivalric Ethos and its Varieties], Warszawa 2020.

battle for the truth, aspires to follow the highest epistemological and moral standards. This intellectual “honestas” is expressed in a radical refusal to accept any epistemological and axiological absolute *a priori*. In his essay *In Praise of Inconsistency*,<sup>54</sup> Kołakowski directly negates the possibility of constructing a non-contradictory model that would adequately and consistently describe the whole of reality, because the world is internally contradictory. Therefore, an intellectual’s only proper response to the irremovable contradiction contained in being itself is inconsistency understood as “a hidden awareness of the contradictions of this world.”<sup>55</sup> The inner structure of the universe of values manifests itself as similar: “[...] the world of social values, unlike the world of theory, is not a world [...] of two-value logic. [...] Or, in other words, there exist values that are mutually exclusive without ceasing to be truths [...]. Inconsistency, as we define it here, is simply the refusal, once and for all to make a choice for all future time between two mutually exclusive values.”<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, inconsistency understood in this way does not coincide with relativism, whether epistemological or axiological. “Are there not events in life toward which we should behave with perfect consistency and thus contradict our repudiation of consistency?” – Kołakowski asks rhetorically, only to assert that “This question must be answered in the affirmative: There are such events, and we call them basic human situations. Basic human situations are situations in which tactical considerations cease to be valid, i.e., situations toward which our moral attitude remains invariable whatever the circumstances. [...] such basic human situations include clearcut military aggression, genocide, torture, oppression of the helpless.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, Leszek Kołakowski reveals the “obviousness that should not be touched,” which allows one, where necessary,

<sup>54</sup> L. Kołakowski, *In Praise of Inconsistency*, op. cit., pp. 201–209; <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/in-praise-of-inconsistency> (20.03.2021).

<sup>55</sup> L. Kołakowski, *In Praise of Inconsistency*, op. cit., p. 204.

<sup>56</sup> L. Kołakowski, *In Praise of Inconsistency*, op. cit., p. 204.

<sup>57</sup> L. Kołakowski, *In Praise of Inconsistency*, op. cit., pp. 208–209.

to overcome skepticism, and makes the shaping the model of a man of honor honorable that would be “consistent in its inconsistency.”

## Conclusion

The above extracts from the works of three important figures in the Polish intellectual life of the second half of the twentieth century – Józef Tischner, Adam Michnik and Leszek Kołakowski – offer a multifaceted insight into the philosophical underpinnings of the contemporary understanding of honor in the space of the Polish culture. The analyses of their reflections presented in these pages serve to identify traits that render man honorable – both in theory and in cultural practice.

The time and space that all three thinkers shared proved conducive to the emergence of unequivocal manifestations of distinctive ethical and civic attitudes. In the face of the constant confrontation of values represented by the advocates of the ruling Polish United Workers’ Party and by the state authorities of the era of real socialism with those shared by the society thirsting for freedom and sovereignty, the difference between those who stood up in defense of basic democratic values with honor and courage, and those who only cared to retain the minimum of life stability – became emphatically visible. (Of course, somewhere between these two poles lingers a class of cynical careerists, whose position, however, may hardly be found worthy of attention).

In the circumstances determining the reality of life under the communist rule, honor was one of the “rare goods.” Hard to find, often won at a high social cost, honor, held in high esteem, was universally admired. As a rule, therefore, people of honor would enjoy the status of high authority within their own milieus. And today? Do the present social and cultural conditions of life, to which the generation of the third millennium of our era was born, still allow us to understand and appreciate what honor is in the lives of people and nations?

Opinions on this matter vary. For example, Jacek Banaś, the author of the article *Honor – dobro niezbywalne* [Honor – An Inalienable Good], is rather skeptical about “the present times, whose motto is becoming

tantamount to the thought expressed by Pepel of Maksim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*:<sup>58</sup> «What good does it do – honor or conscience? Can you get [them, muck and dregs,] on their feet instead of on their uppers – through honor and conscience? Honor and conscience are needed only by those who have power and energy...»<sup>59</sup>.

On the contrary, having empirically analyzed selected rulings of Polish courts, Joanna Ptak-Chmiel states that most of the texts she examined testify to the widespread recognition of honor as a value of importance to contemporary Poles<sup>60</sup>. If so, there is still hope that the actual merits and advantages of the attitudes of honor may not be consigned to oblivion or completely suppressed. And if the idea of honor is indeed to survive, it is worth reaching for the best possible models of its understanding and implementation in cultural practice. This, ultimately, was the goal of this text.

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<sup>58</sup> M. Gorky, *The Lower Depths. A Drama in Four Acts*, trans. J. Covan, The Project Gutenberg 2016, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52468/52468-h/52468-h.htm> (20.03.2021).

<sup>59</sup> J. Banaś, *Honor – dobro niezbywalne*, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> See J. Ptak-Chmiel, *Czy jesteśmy „społeczeństwem honoru”? Rekonstrukcja pojęcia honoru w wybranych orzeczeniach polskich sądów* [Are We a „Society of Honor”? Reconstruction of the Concept of Honor in Selected Judgments of Polish Courts], “Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny” 80 (2018) z. 3, p. 229.



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## Abstract

### Honor in the land of inconsistency. On ethical reflections of Józef Tischner, Adam Michnik, and Leszek Kołakowski

Honor is one of the values permanently inscribed in the traditional *ethos* of the Polish culture. In the past centuries, it was a feature distinguishing only one social class – the nobility. However, as a result of cultural changes, the concept of honor was democratized, thus entering the universal system of values, shaping the entire social structure. The above notwithstanding, the understanding of this concept had not become homogenized in the process. Even today, one can still observe the concurrence of different styles of thinking about honor, manifest in a variety of coexisting patterns of honorable behavior and particular attitudes to honor, whose respective uniqueness depends on socio-cultural contexts. It is, therefore, possible to speak of the honor of peasants or Highlanders, or of the honor of an oppositionist or an intellectual, and it stands to reason that in each case the sense of the concept will prove to be slightly different. In this text, the author presents the results of an analysis of the ways in which honor is understood by Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski – two Polish thinkers who played important roles in the intellectual life of Poland in the second half of the twentieth century. These considerations are further complemented by a reflection on one of the leading activists of the democratic

opposition in the final years of the Polish People's Republic, an influential writer, journalist, editor, author of *Z dziejów honoru w Polsce. Wypisy więzienne* [From the History of Honor in Poland. Prison Notes] and numerous other books – Adam Michnik. An insight into his views on honor, and the reflection on the stance he adopted, combined with the analysis of Tischner's position, allows the author to reconstruct Leszek Kołakowski's ideal of honor, whose currency transgresses time.

**Keywords**

honor, inconsistency, Tischner, Kołakowski, Michnik