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**JÓZEF ŁĄCZAK (05.12.1926–21.08.1989)**  
**A Linguist, Specialist in Indo-Iranian, Finno-Ugric and Polish**  
**Studies, Teacher, Human**

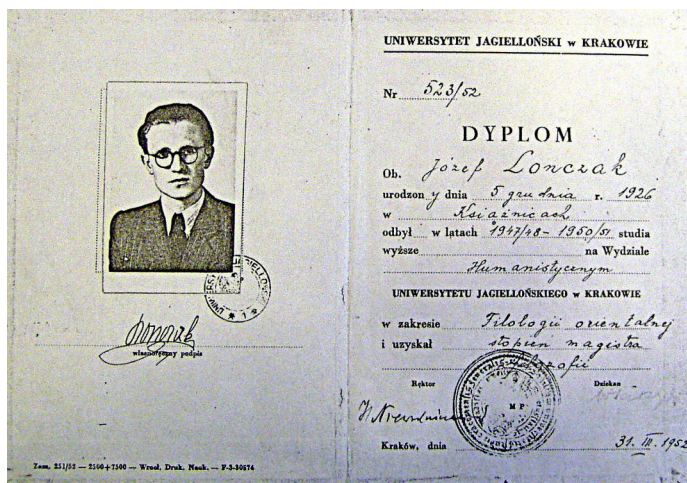
Józef Łączak<sup>1</sup> was born in the village of Książnice near Mielec in the south-east of Poland. He attended elementary school in Mielec in 1942. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War he was forced to work for a year in the Mielec Aircraft Factory. At that time he also continued his high school education in secret courses, a year of trade school and two years of grammar school. After the war, in 1947, he got his secondary school certificate, got married to Marta Krawczyk and started studying Indo-Iranian and Polish philologies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. He studied Sanskrit, Avestan and Dravidian languages with Professor Helena Willman-Grabowska.

He graduated in June 1951 and in September of the same year he got a work order from the authorities, which was a normal procedure at that time, to take the post of Polish teacher at the grammar

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<sup>1</sup> His family name was originally spelt Lonczak, but during the 1970s he changed it to Łączak, as he considered this form to correspond more to the phonetic rules and etymology of the Polish language. He thought his name to be of French origin.

school of Biecz, a small town in the south-east of Poland. In November 1951 he was given a month's leave to take his final examination and get his MA degree in oriental philology.



Certificate of Master's degree

In Biecz he taught his young students not only Polish literature and grammar, as he was supposed to do, but also true facts from Polish history. This probably was the reason for the refusal of the Education Department in Rzeszów to extend his employment in Biecz. From 1952 to 1954 he was a teacher of Polish, Latin, Astronomy and Introduction to Philosophy in two secondary schools in Mielec. In 1953 his eldest son, Krzysztof, was born.

In 1954 he went to Budapest and until August 1961 he was a lecturer in Polish Language and after 1956 also a reader in the History of Polish Literature and Descriptive and Historical Grammar of the Polish Language at the Eötvös Loránd University. The introduction of Polish language courses in the Chair of Slavonic Studies was the result of a personal interest of György (George) Gömöri, who is a renowned poet and translator of Hungarian and Polish literature. György Gömöri

left Hungary after the revolution in 1956, in which he took part, and from 1969 to 2001 he taught Polish and Hungarian literature at the University of Cambridge. At first he was the only student of Józef Łączak.<sup>2</sup>

Do  
Wydziału Państwowego Ogólnokształcącego Szkoły w Bieczu

Prośba

Upominam się prośbą o zatrudnienie mnie w tej szkole  
Jako nauczyciela i charakterystyki mój (kontraktowy) / wyjechał  
pożegnany w roku szkolnym 1952/53.

Łonaski / prof.

Biecz dnia 10 marca (VII) 1952

Umowa kontraktowa nr 102/53  
na r. n. 1952/53

Podstawowa Szkoła Ogólnokształcąca  
Stopnia Licealnego  
w Bieczu

Chrysto-als chowa  
dyr. zch.

Woj. Wydział Oświaty w Rzeszowie mi zgodził się  
na przedłożenie umowy z ob. Łonaskim i Józefem  
Łonaskim, ustawa z dnia 3/IX. 52. - znowa Łonaski

Chrysto-

The application for the renewal of employment in Biecz with the prior acceptance of the school headmaster and the later refusal of the Department of Education in Rzeszów.

<sup>2</sup> Here we would like to acknowledge the willingness of Professor György Gömöri to share his memories of Józef Łączak with us during his stay in Kraków in October 2008.

During his stay in Budapest Józef Łączak not only focused on his work as a teacher of the Polish language and literature, but also developed his scholarly interests in linguistics and continued his education in the field of Hungarian and comparative Finno-Ugric linguistics. His Professors were Dezső Pais and Géza Bárczi (Hungarian Linguistics), Ödön Beke (Finno-Ugric Linguistics and the Udmurt, Komi, Mari and Mordvin languages), Gábor Berecki (the Mari language), Ödön Lavota (the Mansi and Estonian languages) and Magdolna Kispál (Finno-Ugric Linguistics and the Finnish language). At that time he started to prepare his doctoral dissertation under Professor Pais, entitled “Assimilation in Hungarian Dialects”. Unfortunately the almost completed work was burnt to ashes in 1956 during the Hungarian Revolution, when the Royal Hotel, where the revolution leaders stayed, was bombed by the Russians. As he often reminisced, the only thing left after the fire was the spine of his Hungarian dictionary. In 1959 he began his second doctoral dissertation with Professor Beke, devoted to the subject of “Infinitive and Participial Constructions in the Udmurt Language”, however, as he told us, prior to his final examination, another work devoted to this subject was published and in his utmost honesty he decided he should not continue with his work.

After his return to Poland in 1961 he did not have any permanent employment for almost three years. In the meantime he was granted a year’s scholarship from the Ministry of Higher Education. Afterwards he was a member of the editorial board of the Hungarian-Polish Dictionary, edited by Jan Reychman and his main task was to check the correspondence of the entries in detail. In 1963 he started work at the Chair of Hungarian Philology at the University of Warsaw. During his employment he spent three years from 1965 to 1968 at the University of Helsinki, where he taught Polish Language and the History of Polish Literature and at the same time continued his studies in the field of Finno-Ugric Linguistics. He studied Finnish Linguistics under Professor Erkki Itkonen, Finnish Morphology under Professor Terho Itkonen, Permic and Samoyedic languages under Professor Aulis Joki, pre-Finnish phonetics under Professor Lauri Posti

and the Sami language under Professor Mikko Korhonen. In Warsaw he taught general and Finno-Ugric linguistics, descriptive and historic grammar of the Hungarian language, as well as holding a linguistic seminar in Old Hungarian. He resigned from this post in 1972.



A picture of Józef Łączak from his university files

In 1974 he married Ann Maija Reinikainen, with whom he had two sons, Zbigniew and Olaf.

In 1973 the Department of Indian Philology was re-established at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków by Professor Tadeusz Pobożniak, another disciple of Professor Helena Willman-Grabowska.

Józef Łączak was asked to join the staff in 1976. He taught Sanskrit, Vedic, historical and comparative grammar of the Indo-Iranian languages, Avestan and Pali. He was the main author of the curriculum of Indian Philology at the Jagiellonian University, which, for the main part, is still followed. His dream was to incorporate Dravidian studies in which he was also interested and which, after many years, we managed to fulfil. He was the head of the Department of Indian Studies from 1980 until his premature death in 1989.

He was a man of incredible honesty, patriotism, civil courage, kindness and modesty. He had the incredible skill of interspersing his lectures with pieces of information from other fields, as well as anecdotes. One, which has a special place in our memory, was about his refusal to accept a financial award for good work, a fact which got him into trouble with the Communist authorities. As he explained, it was not a form of a protest against the Communist system, as it was regarded, but, simply, in his opinion, he did not deserve any additional money as he was paid his salary for good work only.

He was an excellent teacher and developed his own innovative method of teaching Sanskrit and other languages. His ability to systemize highly difficult problems became a guideline and model for us, his disciples, in our work with our students.

Mr Łączak was a teacher whose dedication to work was extraordinary. His attitude motivated his students to work extremely hard. It was impossible to attend his classes without being prepared to the best of their ability. He was also willing to sacrifice his time to encourage the specific interest of his students, whom he treated with respect. He changed the curriculum to adjust to them, which cost him additional time for preparing lectures. For example, he ran a three-year course in Avestan for one student only.

The spectrum of his academic interest was very wide and forever growing. As was evident from the outline of his biography above it was mainly linguistics, Indo-Arian, Finno-Ugric, Dravidian, but not only that. As he used to joke he was interested in languages as old as possible or as rare as possible. When a course of Lovari was introduced by Professor Pobożniak in 1984, he was at once the most diligent student. Apart from his linguistic interest he managed to inspire his students to study wider aspects of Indian culture, which resulted in broadening the curriculum of Indian studies later by us as employees of the Department. However, his interests were not only limited to academic ones. He shared with us his recipes for delicious preserves and his love for smithery as well.

He had the ability of passing on his passions and trained many researchers, who work in different universities in Poland and abroad. Most of the senior researchers in the department are greatly indebted to his thorough knowledge of linguistics. However, he was above all a true teacher in each and every sense of the word, who, apart from willingly sharing his extensive academic interests and knowledge, made a significant imprint on our personalities.

He was almost certainly a person who had a great impact on most of us, both on personal and professional levels, a man who we will hold in high esteem and remember fondly for ever.