

## Editor's Preface

The co-operation between European universities has a long history. In recent years such co-operations is made possible within the framework of consecutive editions of Erasmus programme that encourage student and staff exchange. For an individual student who takes part in the Erasmus exchange the co-operation provides an opportunity to continue academic studies in a partner institution and thus extend the knowledge of a particular subject area. However, the time spent in another country is also an opportunity to learn about that country – its society and tradition, its historical and cultural heritage. Institutions involved in Erasmus co-operation are obliged to assist incoming students in academic matters. The other obligation is to help incoming students to get acquainted with the language and the culture of a host country.

Since the beginning of the University of Łódź participation in Erasmus in 1998, different activities have been undertaken to provide incoming students with information about the country they have chosen for their studies and also about Łódź and the University itself. The example of such activities is creation of a study module “Poland – history, culture and society” offered every semester to all incoming students who wish to attend it. The module extends the knowledge about Poland presented to the incoming students during the Orientation Programme available at the start of each semester. It covers a variety of topics and is taught by academic teachers from different faculties.

The present book “Poland – History, Culture and Society. Selected Readings” is the third edition of a collection of academic texts written with the intention to accompany the module by providing incoming students with teaching materials that will assist them in their studies of the course module and encourage further search for relevant information and data.

The papers collected in the book have been authored by academic teachers from the University of Łódź, specialists in such fields as history, geography, literature, sociology, ethnology, cultural studies, and political science. Each author presents one chapter related to a topic included in the module or extending its contents.

Part I of the collection is devoted to Poland's natural history and architecture. It starts with the chapter by Robert Wiluś – “The Natural History of Poland”. The reader will find here a brief outline of Polish topography, climate and vegetation as well as information on main natural regions of the country complemented with a short discussion of the ever-relevant issue of environmental protection. What follows is the chapter “Architecture of Poland as Heritage of the Past in the Present” by Sylwia Kaczmarek, an overview of Polish architecture across centuries illustrated with selected examples of historic cities, castles and palaces. It is hoped that the reader will find these first two chapters particularly informative and instructive. Together, they can serve as a guidebook for those who plan trips around the country during academic vacation.

Part II of the book comprises six chapters devoted to Polish history and selected social and political issues. Presentation concentrates on the last two and half centuries, but an overview of Polish history in the Middle Ages is also provided. These issues are covered in the opening chapter “History of Poland during the Middle Ages” by Anna Kowalska-Pietrzak. The other chapters on Polish history describe processes and events since the loss of independence at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the present time. In the chapter “Poland in the Period of Partitions 1795–1914” Radosław Żurawski vel Grajewski provides an overview of events and processes that throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century accompanied Polish struggles for independence until its re-establishment after World War I. The following chapter “Poland in Times of Great War and Second Independence 1914–1939” by Jacek Pietrzak, deals with the most important events and processes that shaped the development of independent Polish state and its activity on the international arena. The next chapter “History and Contemporary Politics of Poland 1939–2003” by Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski, covers a very important period of Polish his-

tory. Recognising the challenge behind a possibly detailed and objective description of more than 60 years of modern Poland, the author provides “a skeleton of facts” that had the most important impact on the country’s contemporary history. The author describes the period of World War II, from days of German invasion and occupation of Polish territory, then writes about the postwar communist state, and finally about political transformation and democratic reforms which paved the way for Poland’s accession to the European Union.

The issues related to system transformation and integration with the European Union are presented in the next two chapters of Part II. Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, in “System Transformation: Achievements and Social Problems in Poland”, presents the period of economic and political transformation from a sociological perspective. Starting from the characteristics of Polish socialism and theoretical models of system changes, the author describes the most important elements of the transformation in the 1990s. In this description, a lot of attention is paid to social costs and benefits of the transformation. The following chapter, “Poland’s Integration with the European Union” by Maria Celina Błaszczyk, presents a brief outline of the process that led to the Accession Treaty signed in Athens on 16 April 2003 and to Poland’s membership in EU.

Part III of the book is devoted to cultural issues and offers a variety of texts and forms of presentation. It opens with the chapter “Culture and Society” by Anna Matuchniak-Krasuska. Applying sociological perspective, the author gives a brief overview of Major approaches to the study of culture, including the national culture. The chapter gives also some information on participation of Poles in cultural activities. Although no special attention is paid to younger generation and students, this part of the chapter might be of interest to foreign visitors, especially when they compare situation in Poland, as described by sociologists, with that of their home country and with their own observation of everyday life in Poland.

The chapter “Polish Folklore” by Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska provides the reader with basic information on the history of Polish folk culture. It also brings brief description of some present customs that are strongly embedded in old folk traditions. Again, it is hoped that the reader will find

it interesting to compare Polish customs with those in his/her country and to search for their common European roots.

The next four chapters are highly specialised. Hopefully, they might be of interest not only to those who came to Łódź to study Polish literature and cultural studies, but also to other visiting students. The chapter "Towards the Modern Alternative Theatre in Poland – Selected Issues" by Dariusz Leśnikowski is an interesting presentation of the most important ideas and creations within Polish theatre that led to the alternative theatre developed mostly by students. Even if one has no opportunity to see the performances described in the text, it is worth to know the origin of some of these productions and learn the names of theatre groups. It may also be interesting to find out how Polish alternative theatre compares with alternative culture in the reader's home country. The chapter "A Short History of the Sublime in Polish Literature from a Comparative Perspective" by Jarosław Płuciennik brings a brief analysis of a fairly specialized topic. In the analyses of the sublime provided by the author, examples of selected literary works of Polish most important poets are used. Thus the reader is made familiar with their names. One of those poet, Czesław Miłosz, was awarded the Noble Prize in Literature in 1980. It is worth to remember that over the years this prize was awarded to other Polish writers – Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905), Władysław Stanisław Reymont (1924) and Wisława Szymborska (1996).

The chapter "Polish Novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" by Agnieszka Izdebska provides an overview of the most important writers and their work. Some of the novels mentioned in the chapter have been translated into other languages or have been filmed, thus the visiting students might have come across their titles or their authors' names. Chapters in Part II informed on the most important facts and processes in the history of Poland. The last chapter of Part III – "Film in the Shadow of History. Jozef Lejtes and Polish School" – describes how the history of our country is reflected in Polish films. This topic is particularly appropriate to be discussed in Łódź, where the Film School is located made famous throughout the world by its graduates, such as Roman Polański.

One of the additional aims of the present book is to familiarise the reader with Polish names and phrases. For this reason they are printed in italics throughout the text. The other convention applied while editing

this book is to combine into one list the references provided by each author and present this list of cited works at the end of the book.

The authors and the editor hope that the selection of texts presented in this volume will assist the reader in better understanding of the country they have chosen for their studies within the Erasmus exchange, and will encourage them to search for more information. The staff of the University of Łódź will do their best to be of help in this endeavour.

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