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A Brief History of Polish-Ethiopian Relations and Ethiopian Studies in Poland

The first mentions of Poland's official interest in Ethiopia date back to the reign of 17th century king Jan III Sobieski (1674-1696). Being aware of the fact that in a distant Ethiopia a Christian emperor Iyasu I was in power, the king intended to involve him in the anti-Turkish coalition of Christian states. Iyasu was to have attacked Ottoman Egypt. However, the mission of Polish envoys ended in a fiasco, since Iyasu did not let them in Ethiopia.

1. Establishing diplomatic relations

The first official diplomatic relations took place in the 1930s, when Juliusz Dzieduszycki, *chargé d'affaires* residing in Cairo, represented Poland at the coronation ceremony of emperor Haile Sellasie I. After the celebrations the Ethiopian envoy residing in Paris revisited Poland. It was followed by signing the first treaty of friendship by both countries in 1934. By virtue of the treaty each state could appoint and accredit diplomatic and consular representatives at the other side.

Once Italy entered Ethiopia, the General Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Rome extended its competences to Ethiopia, which in practice meant Poland's support for the Italian plan to annex the empire, and it was actually the case. The Polish Government supported the Italian policy in the Eastern Africa: Warsaw was in favour of making Ethiopia dependent on Italy. In this context, Poland's attempts to renew relations with sovereign Ethiopia undertaken after 1941 met with diplomatic silence on the part of Haile Sellasie I. Nevertheless, as early as in 1947 the diplomatic relations between the two countries were reestablished and the Polish envoy to Cairo was accredited to Addis Ababa. In 1950, in the UN forum, the

Polish side supported Ethiopian efforts to get an access to the sea and to include Eritrea in the empire on a federation basis (in accordance with the position of the USSR in this matter). For more than 10 years there were difficulties in accrediting an Ethiopian envoy to Poland. It finally took place as late as in 1962, when the Ethiopian ambassador with the permanent seat in Moscow was accredited to Poland.

In September 1964, Ethiopian emperor Haile Sellasie I paid an official visit to Poland, where he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of the Rebirth of Poland. In 1965, the Chairman of the Council of State revisited Ethiopia and the agreement on cultural and scientific-technical co-operation was signed. By virtue of the agreement, in 1969 over 100 Ethiopians began studies and professional internships in Poland.

At the end of the 1960s, proper bilateral relations deteriorated due to the differing positions of the two states on the Israel issue and the six-day war of 1967. The Polish People's Republic, as the USSR, severed diplomatic relations with Israel, whereas Ethiopia supported its fight against the Arab world. However, at the beginning of the 1970s, a revival of the relations took place as a result of Edward Gierek's assuming power in Poland, which meant the policy of *détente* and greater opening to the West. Until the outbreak of the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, the countries fostered extensive cultural co-operation.

The year 1975 saw a breakthrough in the bilateral relations. Both countries found themselves in the same ideological camp. It was followed by a period of intensive contacts, whose typical characteristics were numerous mutual visits, student exchanges, trade co-operation and a number of bilateral agreements signed. In September 1978, Poland was visited by Dr Mohammed Duri, President of the Addis Ababa University, and later by LT. COL. Mengistu Haile Mariam, Chairman of the Ethiopian Provisional Military Administrative Council. The revisit of the official delegation of Polish authorities took place a year later.

2. Economic relations

Since 1950s, the trade relations were unilateral (export of Polish goods) but continuous. Establishing and maintaining trade relations between the countries was not easy – what hindered them were mainly high prices of Polish products and the fact that Polish manufacturers accepted only cash payments. The Polish side could not afford to grant soft loans to Ethiopian recipients, nor did it accept barter trade, since the only products which it imported from Ethiopia were tanned hides. Poland's export included: machine spare parts, tools, metallurgic products, electronic and electro-energetic devices and pharmaceuticals. In 1977, a trade agreement regulating all aspects of Polish-Ethiopian trade, navigation and transport issues was signed.

In the years 1985-1987, as part of an international operation aimed at bringing aid to starving Ethiopia, Poland had four shifts of pilots working on three helicopters which transported food to the most inaccessible parts of the Ethiopian Highlands. Their work and commitment met with a very positive reception of the international community.

3. Suspension and renewing of diplomatic relations

In the years 1989-1991, in connection with the fall of the Berlin Wall and adopting capitalism by the former Eastern block, Poland's relations with Ethiopia loosened. In 1992, as a result of implementing the program of economical state in Poland, operations of the Polish embassy in Addis Ababa were suspended. It was closed at the end of the year, the ambassador was recalled to Poland, and his competences were taken over by the ambassador accredited to Sana, Yemen. Nevertheless, efforts of both parties resulted in reopening the Polish embassy in Addis Ababa. The decision came into force in April 2003, and in March 2004, after 12 years of absence, Polish *chargé d'affairs*, Piotr Myśliwiec, was accredited there. In 2005, the duty to manage the embassy was assumed by Mariusz Woźniak, ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary. In September 2007, the position was taken over by ambassador Piotr Szczepankiewicz. His Excellency Kassahun Ayale Tesemma is currently accredited the Ethiopian ambassador to Poland with his permanent seat in Berlin.

4. Distinguished Poles in Ethiopia

What also contributed to shaping the bilateral relations and to promoting Poland in Ethiopia were those Poles who somehow have gone down in the history of Ethiopia. They include diplomats, civil servants – sometimes highly-ranked ones, financial advisors, numerous experts and specialists, academics (mainly lawyers), sales specialists and other people who found themselves in Ethiopia during or after the World War II, as well as those individuals who emigrated and chose this country as their second homeland. The most prominent ones include:

Professor Stanisław Chojnacki, an eminent specialist in Ethiopian studies, expert, researcher and collector of Ethiopian art, for a number of years head of the Library and Museum at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Haile Sellasie I University; he spent 26 years in Ethiopia and left it in 1976 to settle down in Canada;

Professor Jerzy Krzeczunowicz, a lawyer who organized and for a long period of time was head of the Law Department at Haile Sellasie I University; he drew up a number of Ethiopian law codes and was an advisor to the emperor's government for several years; he left Ethiopia during the revolution and settled down in Switzerland;

Witold Grabowski, in the 1930s vice-chairman of the Ethiopian Supreme Court, probably one of the persons involved in drawing up the constitution of 1931 and working on Ethiopia's political system at that time;

Wacław Korabiewicz, a medical doctor, a traveler and ethnographer by avocation; he worked as a doctor at the hospital in Gorie; the author of "Słońce na Ambach" (Sun on Ambas, 1970), one of the most important books on Ethiopia for the general public, which enabled Poles to become familiar with this remote country; he gathered an impressive collection of the crosses worn by Ethiopian monks, which he subsequently offered as a gift to the National Museum in Warsaw; in the 1970s, using the funds he received from the emperor's treasury, he published in Ethiopia an album on crosses;

Barbara Goshu, a painter, graduated from Cracow's Academy of Fine Arts and came to Addis Ababa in the late 1960s; she specializes in painting Ethiopian icons; together with her husband Worku, also a painter, Barbara has exhibited her works in many parts of the world, including Poland, where in 2000 she was awarded a diploma for outstanding achievements in promoting Poland in the world by Władysław Bartoszewski, then Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs.

5. Ethiopian studies in Poland

Polish interest in Ethiopia was primarily academic in nature especially in the 1920s and 1930s. I believe that the first and most important Polish scholar who conducted international research into Ethiopia in the first half of the 20th century was Izaak Wajnberg (1878-1941). He was a philologist and linguist studying historical examples of Ethiopian religious and hagiographic literature and conducting research on Amharic and Tigrinia languages. However, he never taught anything related to Ethiopian studies, which is why he did not leave any disciples who could continue his research into Ethiopian languages.

Another 20th century specialist in Ethiopia was Ludomir Ślepowron Sawicki (1884-1928), a geographer, professor of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and traveler, who in 1913 published "Studya nad Abisynią" (Studies on Abyssinia), which included geographic, anthropological and ethnographic description of Ethiopia. He planned an expedition to Ethiopia but was never given a chance to carry it out. It was him who made the Cracow's academic milieu interested in Africa.

The Ethiopian studies in Warsaw were established in 1950 as part of the Department of Semitic Studies of Warsaw University by professor Stefan Strelcyn (1918-1981), a world-famous specialist in Semitic and Ethiopian studies. The main area of his interest and didactic activity was the languages, history, literature and cultures of Ethiopia. The department was to conduct in-depth research into languages, cultures, history and writing of certain Semitic peoples, including those of Ethiopia. The curriculum included Geez, Amharic, Hebrew and Arabic. Professor Strelcyn was the first Polish specialist in Ethiopian studies to have gone on a research trip to Ethiopia. The

collections of manuscripts in Geez he brought back were the first materials of this type collected in Poland by a specialist in the field. They constituted the basis for further linguistic and cultural research.

The first students were admitted to the Department of Semitic Studies in academic year 1951/1952. Among them were Joanna Mantel-Niećko, later an eminent specialist in Ethiopian studies, and Włódz Brzuski (1935-1987), a gifted linguist, later conducting research into South Semitic languages. He published the first grammar of Geez in Polish and wrote a comparative grammar of Ethiopia's Semitic languages.

Professor Strelcyn was in charge of the Department in the years 1950-1969. He contributed to developing trade, diplomatic and academic relations between Poland and the Ethiopian empire. In 1967, he was awarded the prize of Emperor Haile Sellasie I Foundation for academic achievements in Ethiopian studies and establishing in Warsaw one of the most important centers of Ethiopian research in the world. The award was handed in by the emperor himself at the Africa Hall in Addis Ababa. He was, as Professor Mantel-Niećko wrote of him, "the architect of Polish post-war Oriental, African and Ethiopian studies"¹. And Professor Mantel-Niećko is actually a great continuer of his life's work.

In 1971, in co-operation with professor Andrzej Bartnicki, professor Joanna Mantel-Niećko published "History of Ethiopia"², translated into German and Russian, which became an important event in the international milieu of Ethiopian historians. The first edition of the book was updated in 1987. Professor Andrzej Bartnicki (1933-2004) was an employee of the History Department of Warsaw University specializing in world history, who in the 1960s started research into diplomatic relations between the Central Eastern Europe and Ethiopia.

In 1977, professor Mantel-Niećko created the Department of African Languages and Cultures of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Warsaw University and ran it for eleven years. Since 1988 the department has been headed by professor Stanisław Piłaszewicz.

¹ Mantel-Niećko 1996:43.

² Bartnicki / Mantel-Niećko, 1974; *Id.*, 1976; *Id.*, 1978.

In December 1985, Abiye Kifle, the President of Addis Ababa University (AAU), paid a visit to Warsaw and Cracow. An agreement on academic co-operation between the Warsaw University and AAU and the Working Program for Co-operation were signed, and Professor Grzegorz Białkowski, the then President of UW, paid a return visit to Addis Abeba. The agreement, which was in force until 1990, was related to student and researcher exchanges and provided, among other things, for educating Polish specialists in Ethiopian studies at AAU in linguistics, literary studies and Ethiopian culture. And it was really the case – nine students of Ethiopian studies have been coming to Ethiopia for five years to do one- or two-semester studies at AAU. Among them were two nowadays specialists in Ethiopian studies: Laura Łykowska, Ph.D and Ewa Wołk, Ph.D. As part of the agreement, Polish lecturers, mainly of law and geography, worked at AAU, whereas in the academic year 1986/87 an Ethiopian linguist came to Poland to teach Amharic. It was the only agreement to have been signed to date between the universities which enabled the student exchange.

Currently the Department of African Languages and Cultures relies on the academic staff educated at the Institute of Oriental Studies and a few specialists in humanities from other institutes of the Warsaw University. The Department faculty members are engaged in research in the following disciplines: linguistics, literature, history and sociology together with ethnology. Since 1984, the current results of the Department's research have been published in the bulletin *Studies of the Department of African Languages and Cultures*.

Students of the Ethiopian section could, starting from the third year of studies, choose one of the four tracks within the Horn of Africa specialization: linguistic, literary, historical and socio-cultural. After completing the 5-year MA studies, students should have developed a fluent command of Amharic and certain proficiency in another language of cultural significance for the area (e.g. Geez) and acquired a wide range of information on Africa, including geography, history, language situation, current political, social and cultural developments.

Currently, the following academics conduct research and lectures at the Ethiopian section:

- professor Joanna Mantel-Niećko, retired; for a number of years she used to teach the history of Ethiopia and Amharic language; she was a supervisor of majority of the MA thesis defended at the Department;
- Laura Łykowska, Ph.D, in 1991, she submitted an MA thesis on sentence schemata for Amharic and in 2001, a doctoral dissertation on tense relation markers in Amharic as exemplified by the Gospel according to Matthew, both at the Department of African Languages and Cultures. Currently, she is interested in the problems of grammaticalization in the languages of various language families spoken in the territory of Ethiopia. She conducts lectures and classes of Amharic, as well as a linguistic seminar in Ethiopian studies;
- Ewa Wołk, Ph.D, in 1990, she submitted an MA thesis entitled "The Infinitive in the Amharic Language" and in 2003, she obtained a Ph.D degree on the basis of the doctoral dissertation on conceptualization of the sphere of interpersonal bonds in the Amharic language, both at the Department of African Languages and Cultures. She continues research into expressing positive and negative emotions in this language. She conducts a lecture on Ethiopian literature and Amharic classes;
- Hanna Rubinkowska, Ph.D, in 1997, she obtained an MA degree on the basis of the thesis on the reign of emperor Haile Sellasie I as exemplified by Ethiopian and European historiography at the Department of African Languages and Cultures. In 2005, at the Institute of History of Warsaw University, she submitted a doctoral dissertation on the reign of empress Zawditu. Currently, her main interest is the issue of the reaction of the Ethiopian ruling elite to the policy of Great Britain in the Horn of Africa at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. She lectures on the history of Ethiopia and Africa;
- Mekonnen Asfaw, Ph.D, since 1999 he has conducted Amharic language classes.

Another centre in Warsaw conducting Ethiopian studies, however at a significantly smaller scale, is Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, where catholic priest, Professor Stanisław Kur, a disciple of Professor Strelcyn and Professor Enrico Cerulli, analyses manuscripts devoted to lives of abbots of Ethiopian monasteries and teaches Geez.

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