



## BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR WESTERN AFFAIRS

### ■ Karl Dedecius - an ambassador of Polish culture in Germany, an advocate of Polish-German reconciliation

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Karl Dedecius, widely recognized as an outstanding and the most eminent 20<sup>th</sup>-century translator of Polish literature, “one of the last members of the generation who had lived through World War II and fought for reconciliation”, died in Frankfurt am Main on February 26, 2016 at the age of 94. Dedecius proved to be utterly crucial for Polish-German relations. His contributions as a translator and his work for promoting Polish culture in Germany and other German-speaking countries, cannot be overestimated. Marion Hedda Ilse Gräfin von Dönhoff (the publisher of the Hamburg-based weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*) believed that “no one has done more for Poland in Germany” than Dedecius. His enormous contribution to the Polish-German reconciliation was commonly recognized.

#### “Bridge-building” - life and mission

Karl Dedecius was born to parents of mixed German, Czech and Polish descent in the city of Łódź on May 20, 1921. His exposure to Polish and German culture in Łódź, which at the time was a multicultural town, had a huge impact on his entire life and work. Drafted into the German army (the Wehrmacht) during World War II, he was sent to the eastern front in the summer of 1942. After the battle of Stalingrad, he spent several years as a Soviet prisoner of war. Released from a prison camp in 1949, he settled in Weimar. In 1952, he and his family moved to West Germany and took residence in Frankfurt am Main. His first job was that of a proofreader in a West German publishing house. He went on from there to work in the Allianz insurance

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company. His war-time and captivity experience inspired him to strive for a mutual understanding between the neighboring nations which he sought to achieve through culture. This aspiration lay the groundwork for his future activities putting him on a course which he faithfully maintained throughout his life. Poetry provided him with an escape from the daily drudgery of clerical work. His love for Polish literature and poetry and his superb command of both languages put him in an excellent position to pursue his passion of translating the works of Polish classics into German (he also translated Russian literature). His translations soon gained the esteem of critics and attracted the attention of West German readers. With his 1959 anthology of Polish poetry entitled *Lektion der Stille (Lesson of Silence)*, Dedecius began trans-border dialogue, spearheading change in the mutual perceptions of Germans and Poles. Ever since that time, he persistently translated Polish (domestic and emigrant) works, compiled anthologies, wrote essays and developed translation theory. He worked as a critic as well as a publisher who published his own books and essays.

The spiritual convergence of both nations through literature which Dedecius commenced found recognition on both sides of the border and in the rest of Europe. Dedecius received numerous distinctions in Poland and Germany for outstanding achievement as a translator and for promoting Polish culture and literature. He was granted the award of *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung* in Darmstadt (1967), the Hessian Culture Award, a special prize of the Polish Culture Foundation (1988), the Polish-German Award, the Award of the Polish Society of Authors and Composers (1978), the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (1990), the Grand Cross of Merit and the Star of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (1994), the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit (1995), Samuel Linde Award (1996), and Andreas Gryphius Award (1997). He was the first German to receive Poland's topmost distinction: the Order of the White Eagle (2003). He was also presented with the German National Award (2010).

Dedecius received many honorary doctorates in recognition for his contributions (among them the doctor *honoris causa* degree of Albrecht Magnus University of Cologne (1976), the Catholic University of Lublin (1987), the University of Łódź (1990), the Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń (1995), the Jagiellonian University (2000) and the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt am Oder (2011)).

## The German Institute of Polish Culture (Deutsches Polen-Institut) of Darmstadt

In 1977, at the invitation of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, Karl Dedecius attended the Polish-German Forum in Bonn at which he presented his ideas and concepts for Polish-German collaboration and reconciliation. In the autumn of 1979, supported by the then Mayor of Darmstadt Heinz Winfried Sabais, Countess Dönhoff, Chancellor Schmidt and President Richard von Weizsäcker, Dedecius founded the German Institute of Polish Culture (*Deutsches Polen-Institut*) of Darmstadt. Extensive support for the project was additionally provided by Hesse and Rheinland-Palatyn state authorities, the German government and private sponsors. The Institute was to help disseminate

knowledge on Poland and its culture throughout Germany and improve relations between the two nations. He pursued this mission by holding literary meetings, exhibitions, film showings and, in particular, engaging in editorial activities. Headquartered on Mathildenhöhe Hill (in a villa owned formerly by the Architect Joseph Olbrich, a friend of Stanisław Wyspiański), the Institute was officially opened on March 11, 1980. Dedecius headed it until 1997. Currently, the Institute is in the process of moving its headquarters to the Residenzschloss (Palace) in the city center.

Dedecius' successor, Prof. Dieter Bingen, emphasized "the key role which the Institute played in overcoming hostility between Poles and Germans during the cold war when the countries belonged to two opposed political and military blocks". He believed that Dedecius worked tirelessly and continually for the mutual understanding and convergence between the two nations at times when their relations were largely severed. In doing so, he paid no heed to attacks from communist authorities and German-based opponents of reconciliation with Poland. Dedecius "blazed trails" across Europe separated by the iron curtain. He said this about himself: "I didn't know the first thing about politics. With a passion for language and literature, I set out on bringing Poland and Germany closer together through culture".

Today, the Institute is an institution of research and a center for information on Poland and Polish-German relations. It holds meetings, conferences and other events dedicated to Polish culture, history, politics and society. Additional research and educational interests were added to its profile. The Institute organizes political forums and conducts editorial projects. Its mission is to disseminate knowledge in both countries on their partner states. The Institute runs Germany's only specialized library to hold a collection of Polish literature and Polish-German translations. It publishes works on cultural relations (past as well as contemporary) and pays particular attention to perceptions of Polish-German relations against the background of relations with other neighboring countries and to the European perspective. Research is also conducted on Poland's contributions to European history, culture and politics.

Every two years since 2003, together with the Robert Bosch Foundation, the Institute has been conferring the Karl Dedecius Award (Karl-Dedecius-Preis) to Polish literature translators in Germany and German literature translators in Poland for outstanding translation achievements, contributions to building linguistic bridges and furthering mutual understanding between Poland and Germany.

## Works and activities

Dedecius published ca. 200 books. In addition to anthologies of Polish literature classics and German-language poetry, he put out a number of works on literature and translation technique and translated more than 3000 poems. Thanks to his anthologies, German readers recognize such poets as Zbigniew Herbert, Stanisław Jerzy Lec, Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Wisława Szymborska, Adam Zagajewski and many others, bringing them into Germany's inner circle of literature. His translations of works by Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska are a major reason for their global

popularity and have helped them win the Nobel Prize in 1980 and 1996. Dedecius' key publications include *Deutsche und Polen. Botschaft der Bücher* (*Germans and Poles, The Diplomacy of Books*, 1971), *Überall ist Polen* (*Poland is Everywhere*, 1974), *Polnische Profile* (*Polish Profiles*, 1975), *Zur Literatur und Kultur Polens* (*On the Literature and Culture of Poland*, 1981), *Vom Übersetzen* (*On Translating*, 1986), *Von Polens Poeten* (*On Poland's Poets*, 1988), *Lebenslauf aus Büchern und Blättern* (*A Curriculum Vitae Made of Books and Pages*, 1990).

The crowning achievements of his translation and publishing efforts are the *Panorama of Polish literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century* (in 7 volumes) which attempts to provide a representative selection of Polish 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature and the 50-volume *Polish Library* series (a joint project of the DPI institute, the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Suhrkamp publishing house). The final volume in the series appeared in 2000. The series included volumes on preeminent Polish authors, literary periods between the middle ages and the present, historical novels, short stories, poetry, culture and society. Dedecius referred to himself as a "European from Łódź", which is precisely the title he gave to his 2008 memoirs. In addition to his translation and writing work, Dedecius organized meetings between Polish authors and German readers, awarded scholarships to Polish intellectuals and organized exhibitions and study visits for journalists.

Dedecius' Polish-philiac activities became the topic of doctoral dissertations, documentaries and poems by leading authors. The University of Łódź held an international session entitled "Karl Dedecius - the Ambassador of Polish Culture in Germany" in 1999. In 2008, the University established the scholarly journal *Rocznik Karla Dedeciusa* dedicated to the life and work of "the man who for decades was actively involved in the work of Europe's intellectual elites, mainly in Germany and Poland".

In 2001, Dedecius donated his personal archive (collections of manuscripts, typescripts, books, letters, etc.) to the Viadrina European University in Frankfurt am Oder. The collections were placed in the Collegium Polonicum library in the Polish town of Słubice. In 2013, Dedecius established the Literary Archive of Karl Dedecius Foundation (*Stiftung Karl Dedecius Literaturarchiv*) within the framework of European University Viadrina, to which he donated a large proportion of his literary collections.

## Opinions

Reports on Karl Dedecius' death appeared in many leading dailies and weeklies across Poland and Germany. Farewell notes were posted on the websites of Łódź, Darmstadt, the German federal state of Hesse and a number of institutions and organizations associated with Dedecius (including universities and foundations). Hesse Prime Minister Volker Bouffier bid farewell to Dedecius with the words "we have lost a great European". He noted that Dedecius' use of the language and culture with a view to bringing people, and especially Germans and Poles, closer together made him a bridge across cultures. The Prime Minister stressed that Dedecius gained wide recognition not only in both countries in question but also internationally. He recalled how effective Dedecius had been in overcoming prejudices and antagonisms, helping him to further the cause

of peace and reconciliation among nations. He assured that Dedecius' active life and work would never be forgotten and announced that work towards Polish-German friendship would continue in the same spirit.

The *Stiftung Karl Dedecius Literaturarchiv* bid their farewell to Dedecius with the words: "We have lost a remarkable man, a dependable friend and a tireless ambassador for Polish-German reconciliation". It committed to proudly guard his legacy. "We have not only lost a man who entrusted his invaluable archive to our European University and whose life and work as a literature translator inspired and sustained scientific research in Frankfurt am Oder and Stubice. Even more importantly, we lost a teacher of tolerance and respect for the fellow man regardless of his origin, education and status and an advocate of the responsible use of language". Others recalled Dedecius' persistent effort to secure peaceful relations among people. Dedecius best summarized his views at the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize conferral ceremony by saying: "Those who wish for peace must first earn friendship". He would believe in and frequently repeat those words until his final days. "Karl Dedecius will forever retain prominence in the history of our young university", assured Prof. Dr. Alexander Wöll, President of Viadrina.

The Polish press described him as "a remarkable translator", "a European from Łódź", "an eminent citizen of Łódź", "an advocate of European reconciliation and solidarity", "a promoter of Polish culture in Germany", "an essayist and promoter of Polish-German reconciliation"; "a builder of bridges between Polish and Germany", and as "the man who showed the value of Polish poetry to German people". The German press depicted him as "a great European", "a tireless intermediary between Poland and Germany", "the man who opened our eyes to Polish literature", "the man who showed us how to bridge gaps between nations with language and literature", "Karl Dedecius, the ferryman [a pun on the name of his birth city of "Łódź", which is Polish for "boat" or "ferry"] dedicated his entire life to bringing the two sides that face each other closer together". All these comments demonstrate just how esteemed and valued Dedecius was in both countries.

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The passing away of this remarkable man, who made enormous contributions to Polish and German culture and to dialogue between Poland and Germany, is a grievous loss not only for Polish-German relations but also for the cultures of both countries, which he unquestionably enhanced. This has been noticed by all who have come across him and his work. Dedecius' work as a go-between connecting the two cultures and nations shows that if profoundly dedicated to his mission, even a single individual can overcome barriers which at first glance might appear to be insurmountable.

Let us hope that the commitments and assurances to continue the work of Dedecius will all be put into practice rather than being committed to paper and left unfulfilled. We trust that worthy successors will come along, follow in Dedecius' footsteps and consistently seek reconciliation against all odds, finding ways to act together in various fields and, most importantly, build mutual relations on the foundation of cultural legacy.





No one needs convincing about the well-known fact that culture brings nations together. A living proof of just that is Dedecius, who demonstrated that the best ambassadors of countries are none other but people of culture. Therefore, politicians should make it their utmost priority to support such people. Nothing blazes trails towards knowing and trusting one another more effectively than culture. Although the political and social circumstances in which Dedecius carried out his work have changed considerably and although the challenges faced today have become very different, one should continue to ensure that persons actively pursuing Polish-German dialogue succeed in achieving their goals and tasks through proper cultural policies (i.e. those friendly to such actions) pursued by the state and through solid, financial support from state administration.

The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

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