Jerzy Osiatyński[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

Remembering Kalecki: 22 05 1899 – 18 04 1970

Remembering anyone is a difficult exercise. First, good memories are what we should and wish to treasure. Therefore our memory becomes selective. However, as many others, I have only good memories of Michał Kalecki. Second, I knew him personally for a few years only, between 1963 and 1970. I met then his wife, Mrs. Adela (Ada) Kalecka with who, after Kalecki passed away, my wife and I became close friends. In her place we met her brother, Ari Szternfeld, his wife and their two daughters, as well as other relatives of Ada. They all also visited us in our home. Over more than twenty years since 1973 until Ada’s death in 1994 as the editor of Kalecki’s *Collected Works* I have spent in Kalecki’s apartment many hours every week studying his papers and consulting with her many details of his professional life, but also learning about their personal relationship, their travels, their families, relatives and friends. Already when Kalecki was still among us I made friends with many of his friends and close collaborators, professors Kazimierz Łaski, Ignacy Sachs, Tadeusz Kowalik, Władysław Sadowski, and Wiktor Herer among them. In all discussions with them Kalecki, his theories, his policy advise, as well as his principles and integrity of character have been the key point of reference and a guidance of conduct. When I am now remembering him, looking at his books that Ada gave me and which I store with care in my personal library, at the small heirlooms from her that we treasure in our home, I wonder whose memories these are – mine, Ada’s, or our friends’. These memories are all of that.

I met Kalecki in 1963, as a fourth-year student at the Department of Foreign Trade of the Main School of Planning and Statistics (presently – the Warsaw School of Economics). Kalecki taught at the School since 1962. Łaski was the deputy Rector of the School and thanks to his perseverance he persuaded Kalecki to start teaching at the School. Kalecki has never been an academic lecturer and he thought only his own theory thinking its presentation would not need as much as 30 hours a term. When later in his life he was offered a teaching position that involved 60 hours of teaching a term he rejected it on the grounds that he would first have to work for several years on developing his theory to subsequently teach it his students.

Yielding to Łaski’s pressure who wanted to bring to the School the best quality teachers Kalecki agreed to give a regular course on his theory of economic dynamics and business fluctuations, and another one for foreign postgraduate students and government officials, on planning economic development in the Third World Countries. He was also involved in other post-graduate teaching and research projects. In order to exempt him from administrative burdens, formally he was merely a tenured professor at the Chair of Political Economy at the Department of Foreign Trade. The Chair was headed by Łaski. However, in all teaching and research projects that Kalecki was involved he was an undisputable intellectual leader and guru.

With the beginning of the 1962-63 academic year Łaski invited me to attend his MA seminar and write my thesis under his supervision. This was a rare distinction and I happily accepted his generous invitation. In early 1963 Kalecki’s *Introduction to the Theory of Growth in a Socialist Economy* was published (Kalecki 1963/1993), and Łaski asked me to attend Kalecki’s new course which started in the second term. In the following academic year I attended also Kalecki’s lectures in his theory of economic dynamics and business cycles.

Each Kalecki’s lecture was composed of two parts. In the first 45 minutes he lectured to his audience. He explained the dynamics and modus operandi of the economy in question, in line with his own theory. As I used to joke at the time, Kalecki taught ‘a capella’, never using any lecture notes, hardly ever referring to any textbooks, including his own publications. However, each lecture was very clear-cut, carefully worded, as if he were dictating it to a stenographer. This way of lecturing was very unusual at the School and Łaski once asked Kalecki how did he managed to be that precise and concise without using any notes. Kalecki replied “I walk in the green and thoroughly prepare myself for presenting all that I want to say. I know all that I have to explain” (Kowalik, 2011: 44).

The second part of his lecture was a Q & A session. His lectures have been attended by many Polish top academic economists, some high-rank economic policy makers, next to PhD students, some junior staff of the faculty and a few undergraduates. Some of his audience were travelling from academic centers far away from Warsaw. Although his listeners might have had different opinions on issues Kalecki explained, or simply might not fully understand his line of thought which was far not easy to follow, questions were seldom asked. If there were no questions from the audience Kalecki asked them himself, addressing the points which he thought especially important or complex. However, if a question did arrive, answering it Kalecki would repeat more or less exactly what he had already said before, but in a bit lauder voice, and if his answer was not understood and the question repeated he would again repeat his answer but still lauder. No doubt, he was not a charismatic teacher and found it difficult to accept that some people in his audience might not follow his fast and incredibly condensed argument.

In 1964 I graduated my MA studies and Łaski arranged my assistantship at his Chair. In October that year he asked me to become the research secretary to Kalecki’s and Łaski’s newly organized workshop on problems of growth in a centrally planned economy. Next to that workshop Kalecki run also two other study groups. The best-known was the workshop organized under the joint auspices of the Main School and the Warsaw University, and led by Kalecki in tandem with professors Czesław Bobrowski and Ignacy Sachs. It studied issues of economic development and planning of the Third World countries. The third group studied problems of economic dynamics and business fluctuations in developed capitalist countries. Similarly as in the case of Kalecki’s lectures, all these workshops were attended by prominent Polish academic economists, PhD students, and high-rank economic policy-makers. When in November 1964 Joan Robinson came to Warsaw to attend the joint celebrations of Kalecki’s 65’ and Lange’s 60’ jubilees, impressed by Kalecki’s and his collaborators’ achievements in all those areas of macroeconomic research, she said in amazement that what Kalecki established in Warsaw was a true ‘Socialist Cambridge’. All this lasted until 1968 when his school of thought was chased away as a result of political purges.

In capacity of the workshop managing secretary I have had rather regular contacts with Kalecki and Łaski, discussing the agenda of successive meetings, the recommended reference literature and the would-be referees for individual presentations. With time I started to ask Kalecki also questions on the substance of his theory, the more so that since the 1965-66 academic year I taught it our undergraduate students. Possibly because of my involvement in the workshop and of my interest in his theory, when in 1964 Joan Robinson came to Warsaw Kalecki introduced me to her, and in 1970 she helped me get a scholarship of the Faculty of Economics, and a guest-fellowship in Clare Hall, Cambridge, where I spent the next two years.

While not being an outstanding lecturer, at the same time Kalecki was not much demanding from his students. He gave a course on his theory of growth in a socialist economy for the fourth-grade students while I and another assistant taught it the second-graders. At one stage we asked Kalecki if we could listen to him examining his students so that we could accordingly pattern marks and ranking criteria when examining ours. He agreed, as did the students he examined, and to our surprise he was passing some of his fourth-graders for answers that our second-graders would be asked to see us again. Not that we would formally fail them, but we would make another appointment, and perhaps still another one, until we knew the student in question comprehended the essence of Kalecki’s theory. Once he finished examining we asked him for the causes for his leniency with his students. I still remember his reply. “If you had heard the nonsense which I had so often been told by senior officials of the Planning Commission you would be as lenient as I am with those kids”.

Kalecki would come to his office at about 9 a.m. and stay until 1 p.m., coming again in the afternoon to attend seminars or meetings of many research committees or supervisory boards which he headed or of which he was a member. For lunch he walked home since the Kaleckis lived only about a mile away from the School. They had a maid, Pani Zosia, who was a good cook herself but who gladly and accurately followed Mrs. Kalecka’s cooking instructions, and Pani Ada really knew the Polish and the Jewish cuisine. The cooking at their home was superb, and the boletus mushroom soup had no equals. The boletus mushrooms, as well as occasionally some caviar, would come all the way from Moscow, along the route that will become clear later on.

When in the office, Kalecki would come to the common room for morning tea. Sometimes he was accompanied by Łaski or Sachs, very rarely by one of his PhD students; often, however, he set alone. Of course, everybody in the room knew who and what he was. This, I think, might have discouraged people from disturbing him. They might have thought – there sits a world-famous economist and though he is not in a company, he may be thinking over yet another extension of his theory, or pondering over economic policy measures, and must not be interrupted. Would he mind if he were? Those who dared to join him for his tea could immediately find out what a gentle and friendly person he was, curious to know the news, the gossip, ready to help with our personal problems, and at the same time very witty, with a sardonic sense of humor.

Kalecki’s sense of humor is well reflected in short limericks, and proverbial aphorisms and maxima that he wrote in the 1960s. The limericks were patterned a little on Krylov whose writings Kalecki knew well, and were closely related to his critical and mocking observation of current economic and political developments as well as on some political and economic celebrities of his days. Some of these limericks and aphorisms had wait for 50 years before their publication (see Łaski and Osiatyński, 2015) lest personal rights of some of their ‘heroes’ were harmed. His sense of humor is also rather well reflected in an anecdotal evidence given by Mrs. Ada Kalecka and related to the Kaleckis visiting the Keynes’s.

After arriving in April 1936 in London, the Kaleckis rented a room in the Bloomsbury area, unaware that at the time Keynes used to live just round the corner (see Toporowski 2013: 80). Joan Robinson, who met Kalecki soon after he arrived to London and was very fond of him, was keen to introduce Kalecki to Keynes, and she eventually persuaded Keynes that he and his wife – the famous prima ballerina of the Moscow Ballet, Lidia Lopokova – invited the Kaleckis to tea. Interested to know how the meeting went, the following morning she telephoned Kalecki and asked how was the tea. Kalecki replied: “The tea was good. Mrs. Keynes behaved like a don, and Mr. Keynes like prima ballerina”.

Kalecki might give an impression of being rather timid and modest in personal relations but that far not applied to him presenting his own ideas, and challenging those of others. A very accurate evidence of the latter is given by Kaldor in his colorful summary of Kalecki’s participation, in 1936, in Lionel Robbins’ regular seminar at the London School of Economics. The seminar was of an ‘open’ nature and was attended by professors and lecturers as well as the graduate and post-graduate students of the LSE.

Kalecki was an active member of the seminar from the very beginning. At the outset he gave the impression of a little man with a loud and creaking voice, who spoke English completely unintelligibly. He spoke with a very strong and peculiar accent, and nobody could follow what he meant. But he persisted in making frequent interventions, and gradually the situation changed. At first, he was a source of annoyance to most people, but then we gradually learnt to respect him, including Robbins, because it gradually emerged more clearly what he said, and his contributions were always relevant and appropriate for the occasion. And so he emerged, I would say, almost as an important figure (quoted after Toporowski 2013: 81).

While kind and friendly in personal relations, at the same time Kalecki was a highly principled man, of great integrity, often ready to submit resignations from his positions, in defense of freedom of speech and criticism, or of the fundamental moral and value standards. Mrs. Kalecka used to say his husband’s life could be presented as a series of resignations, starting with the 1936 one from the Institute for the Study of Business Cycles and Prices, in protest against firing his two close collaborators who wrote a critical note on Government policy measures, through his leaving the Oxford Institute of Statistics in 1945, resigning his senior position in the United Nations Secretariat in 1954, then his position in the Planning Commission in Poland in 1964, and finally – one year ahead of his retirement –his professorship at the Main School of Planning and Statistics, in 1968.

Since I was a witness of circumstances which triggered Kalecki’s last resignation, let me share with you my recollections of what happened. As the origins, the course and the repressions that followed the March 1968 student and intellectuals revolt in Poland have been already much discusses in literature, there is no need to give them special attention here (for their comprehensive summary see e.g., the entry: “1968 Polish Political Crisis”, *Wikipedia*, access of August 22, 2020; see also, e.g., Davis, 1982: 589-91). Let me therefore address only the process of destruction of Kalecki’s School in Warsaw. There were two different causes of attacks on Kalecki and his collaborators.

First, the communist party top leaders could not forgive Kalecki his criticism of successive five-year plans, his pointing out their internal inconsistencies and lack of realism, especially in promising improvements in living standards which at the time were simply not achievable. What made the outrage even stronger, was that in the course of those plans’ implementation Kalecki was proven right. Władysław Gomułka, the then Secretary General of the Polish communist party, infuriated by yet another Kalecki’s criticism of the 1966-70 Economic Plan (see Kalecki 1992: 243-254), contemptuously dismissed it saying: “Professors with titles, grown-up people, instead of conducting research, or helping, write nonsensical theses” (Kalecki 1992: 422; following this public criticism by Gomułka, Kalecki resigned his position in the Planning Commission).

The second factor was triggered by Gomułka’s speech given at the national conference of the Polish communist trade unions, shortly after the 5-10 June 1967 Israeli – Arab war. In his speech Gomułka talked about the alleged Jewish ‘fifth column’ among the Polish intellectual elites, in government structures and in the army. This well harmonized with demands of the nationalist faction within the leadership of the Polish communist party. That faction for several years by then demanded ‘cleansing’ of the party apparatus from ‘alien elements’ and following Gomulka’s aforementioned speech it led an aggressive ‘anti-Zionist’ campaign. Although neither Kalecki, nor any of his associates at the Main School were involved in those factional feuds and power-struggle, they became the prime object of attacks and subsequent purges, especially if they were Polish Jews.

The campaign which aimed at breaking up Kalecki’s School was initiated by a conference on “The Situation in the Political Economy of Socialism” organized in early May 1968 by the Central Party School (affiliated at the Central Committee of the Polish communist party). It was shortly followed by a conference of the Polish Economic Society, and then at the Main School of Planning and Statistics. Organized on June 17-18 by the Rector of the School and the School’s communist party Executive Committee, the conference discussed “The Main Problems of the Political Economy and Teaching It” (for an account of those conferences, see Editor’s Notes to Kalecki 1993: 255-258).

Because of his health problems (at the time of the conference he was in an early phase of recovery from diabetes) Kalecki did not attend the first day of the debate and spoke only the next day. In the morning, on the day the conference started, shortly after he came to his office, I popped in to ask how he was and to share some conference-related gossip. When I opened the door, he set at his desk with a pencil in his hand (he often drafted his texts in pencil to facilitate rubbing out a word or two when he wanted to replace them with more appropriate ones; some of the survived manuscripts among Kalecki’s papers are penciled), so I apologized for disturbing him. He said I didn’t, and invited me to come in. He said he was not writing anything new but was merely bolding his handwriting of the speech he was to give the next morning, to make it easier to read. Then he read all his short speech to me and asked if I liked it.

I was rather shocked. True, in the past I would occasionally make a comment on a way of formulation one or other sentence in his theory, usually rather asking questions than making positive suggestions, and there Kalecki asks me for opinion on his speech. Incredible I thought, and possibly only because of the political context of the conference, or to check if what he intended to say would not be over-complicated to the young members of the faculty. Anyway, as a critic I proved useless. I said I liked the text, especially his outright defense of professors Kazimierz Łaski, Włodzimierz Brus and Jerzy Tepicht who were all under heavy and ad personam attacks in the conference papers (for his speech at that conference, see Kalecki 1992: 259-264). I know that once I left he saw Łaski and also consulted his speech with Sachs since their many joint research projects were in jeopardy (see Kalecki 1993A: 210-211 and Osiatyński 2015: 45-49). In fact, the organizational consequences of those orchestrated actions appeared very quickly and ended in breaking up Kalecki’s School. Łaski, Sachs and others were dismissed from the Main School of Planning and Statistics, several were forced to emigrate. In October 1968 Kalecki resigned his professorship at the Main School. When in 1970, a few months after he passed away, I decided to leave for England since I could not get any research job my country, in lieu of her late husband Pani Ada wrote me a letter of recommendation. She was also instrumental, next to Kowalik and Brus, in my getting the job of the editor of Kalecki’s Collected Works, when I returned from Cambridge at the end of 1972.

For all those reasons you would not be surprised that at the end of those recollections I shall also remember Mrs. Kalecka, a true and lifelong companion to Michał. She was born in 1903 in Sieradz, a small town near Łódź, in a merchant Jewish family. Later the family moved to Łódź where she finished her primary and secondary education, and in 1921-26 she studied biology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Having graduated in 1926, she returned to Łódź where she met Kalecki who had given tuition to her older sister, Franciszka. In June 1930 Adela and Michał married “Adela Kalecki was to be her husband’s lifelong companion and confidante. Although she was not an economist, he told her of his plans and the fears and insecurities that arose from their professional insecurity that plagued him virtually throughout his working life. Her accounts and notes are a record of his thoughts on his situation. She was also close to him politically. … Adela, like Kalecki, avoided party politics” (Toporowski 2013: 28-2).

However, next to being Kalecki’s wife, Ada was also a sister Ary Szternfeld, the world famous co-founder of modern aerospace science. His advances on aerospace could not be understood either in his native Poland, nor in France where he sought better comprehension of his research. In 1923 he ultimately ended up in Moscow, where he collaborated with Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. Szternfeld had calculated with great precision the trajectories of the aerospace rockets, including the one along which in 1957 the first Soviet Sputnik traveled. In France, he lived in poverty, and then again in Russia, following the late 1930s Stalinist terror and the closing of the Institute in which Szternfeld worked. The Szternfelds spent several years in the city of Serov, in the Urals. He returned to Moscow in 1944 and lived there until his death in 1980.

Szternfeld, known also as the ‘Lord Paradox’ for his disclosing numerous paradoxes related to the future interplanetary flights, has a star in the space named after him, and a honorary citizenship of the Sieradz town, where he was born. Yet, the Kaleckis for many years had to help him and his family to make a modest living. The aforementioned boletus mushrooms and occasionally a can of caviar were tokens of gratitude passed to the Kaleckis through family members or close friends traveling between Moscow and Warsaw.

When I and my wife, Elżbieta, some years after Kalecki’s death met Ary Szternfeld, invited by Pani Ada for dinner, he impressed us with his modesty and openness. Human greatness, we thought, does not go well, nor does it need, any wedges. Kalecki and Szternfeld were both exceedingly good examples of that.

Pani Ada, as she herself often admitted, in all her life in a way stood between those two intellectual giants, one of who was opening new ways in economic theorizing and the other in the aerospace travel. She shared the joy of their respective discoveries and the honors bestowed upon each of them, but was constantly concerned about their personal downturns and troubles. Once they both passed away, until the end of her life she spared no effort to propagate and consolidate the opus magnum of them both. For all that we must be grateful to her.

References

Davis N., 1982, God’s Playground: A History of Poland, 2nd ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Kalecki M., 1992, *Collected Works of Michał Kalecki* (ed. J. Osiatyński), Vol. III, *Socialism: Functioning and Long-Term Planning*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Kalecki M., 1963/1993, *Introduction to the Theory of Growth in a Socialist Economy*, in *Collected Works of Michał Kalecki* (ed. J. Osiatyński), Vol. IV, *Socialism: Economic Growth and Efficiency of Investment*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Kalecki M., 1993A, *Collected Works of Michał Kalecki* (ed. J. Osiatyński), Vol. V, *Developing Economies*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Kowalik T., 2011, unpublished autobiographical interview with Łaski, Osiatyński’s papers.

Łaski K, and Osiatyński J (eds.), 2015, Michał Kalecki: Kapitalizm: dynamika gospodarcza i pełne zatrudnienie, Warszawa, iTON Society.

Osiatyński J., 2015, Introduction, in: Łaski K, and Osiatyński J (eds.), 2015, Michał Kalecki: Kapitalizm: dynamika gospodarcza i pełne zatrudnienie, Warszawa, iTON Society.

Toporowski J., 2013, Michał Kalecki: An Intellectual Biography. Volume I: Rendezvous in Cambridge 1899-1939, Palgrave, Houndmills.

1. \* Institute of Economics, Polish Academy of Sciences. Orcid No: [0000-0001-5539-2556](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5539-2556).

   This is the Introductory contribution to the (virtual) conference “Kalecki and Kaleckian Economics”, Poznań, 24-26 September 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)