

My India Began in Poland¹

Maria Krzysztof Byrski was born on 12th January 1937 in Vilnius (now Lithuania) as the second child of Irena née Szymańska (1901-1997) and Tadeusz Byrski (1906-1987), well-known actors, stage directors and very important personages of the Polish theatre, who at that time were working at the Polish Radio in Vilnius. Very soon, in February 1937, the family with two children – Maria Agnieszka (born in 1933) and Krzysztof – moved to Warsaw. In 1941, Maria Katarzyna, the youngest child in the family, was born. In June 1944, just two months before the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, Irena Byrska with her children went to Stoczek Łukowski for a summer camp organised by the Main Welfare Council (Rada Główna Opiekuńcza). Tadeusz Byrski stayed in Warsaw, from where he was detailed to Lvov as a soldier in the Home Army. During his entire stay there, he was very worried about his wife and children, and finally decided to make his way to Stoczek, where he was happily reunited with his family in September 1944. The aftermath of the uprising and the situation during the last months of the war in Poland made Irena and Tadeusz Byrski play the role of a foster family to about 80 Warsaw children of “the summer camp”, till May 1945.

After the war, the Byrski family several times changed the place of their dwelling, sometimes being separated. Tadeusz and Irena Byrski worked, among other places, in Kazimierz Dolny, Sierakówek near Gostynin, Warszawa, Łódź, Opole, and Toruń, trying to realise their artistic ideals in different Polish theatres, as well as on the Polish radio. In 1952 they came to Kielce, where they were the managers of the Stefan Żeromski Theatre till 1958.

It was in Kielce, in 1955, that M.K. Byrski completed his secondary school education in the Stefan Żeromski Grammar School. To a great extent inspired by his mother, the same year, he entered the Institute of Oriental Studies of Warsaw University, where for five years he studied Indology. In 1960, he obtained his M.A. in Indology on presenting his thesis on Harṣavardhana, written under the supervision of Prof. Eugeniusz Śluszkiewicz.²

In March 1961, he went to India as a recipient of the scholarship of the Paderewski Foundation to pursue his studies on Sanskrit drama, where, during the period between

¹ “Moje Indie zaczęły się w Polsce” – the opening sentence of Maria Krzysztof Byrski’s reminiscences *Studia w Benares (Studies in Benares)* (1977: 99).

² For more on this and later periods at Warsaw University, see Byrski 2006: 23-28.

1961 and 1966, he was a Ph.D. student at the Banaras Hindu University at the College of Indology, Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology. According to M.K. Byrski, those years were a very important formative period for him as an Indologist, when he not only had an excellent chance to master Sanskrit and do his research on Sanskrit drama but also to acquire a very good command of Hindi, giving him an insightful understanding of contemporary India, her people and culture. In 1966, he obtained his Ph.D. degree from the BHU; his doctoral dissertation was later published as *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre* (Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi 1974).

After his return to Poland, in 1966, M.K. Byrski joined the Department of Indology of his *Alma Mater*, lecturing on Sanskrit literature and Indian classical drama, as well as Hindi. With this institution he has been connected till the present day, leaving his post occasionally in connection with India.

On 14th February 1971 Krzysztof Byrski married Barbara née Wróblewska, herself also a graduate of the Department of Indology at Warsaw University. Later that year, they both went to India – he as a lecturer in the Polish language at Delhi University, she – on a scholarship to Delhi University to study Marathi. During that stay in India, on 23rd October 1972 their first son, Łukasz, was born in Delhi, having as his godparents Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, the famous novelist and short story writer, as well as screenwriter, and Michał Grocholski, also a graduate of the Department of Indology at Warsaw University. In 1973, the Byrski family returned to Poland and on 18th November 1973 their younger son, Mateusz, was born in Warsaw.

In 1978, M.K. Byrski obtained his habilitation (a postdoctoral degree) at the Faculty of Modern Philology, Warsaw University, on the basis of his book *Methodology of the Analysis of Sanskrit Drama* (Warsaw University Press, Warsaw 1979; Indian edition in 1997), and in 1979 he was promoted to the post of *Dozent*.

In 1980, he was very active in organising the structures of the independent trade union Solidarność/Solidarity at Warsaw University and was unanimously elected the chairman of the unit at the Faculty of Modern Philology. The 1980s were the time of M.K. Byrski's involvement in the activities of the Polish opposition, to which he contributed, for example, in the form of legal, or illegal (underground), lectures on the ideology of the Gandhian non-violence movement. After the political changes of 1989, he was among those who lobbied effectively for the betterment of teaching and studying conditions at Warsaw University, supporting the initiative of the so-called University at the Royal Route³, proposed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-communist prime minister of Poland after the Second World War. That initiative was meant to acquire for the university the buildings formerly used by the omnipresent branches and institutions of the Polish Workers' Party. M.K. Byrski was especially active in collecting donation certificates – issued in the 1950s for the construction of the seat of the Central Committee

³ The Royal Route of Warsaw leads from the Royal Castle in the Old Town through Krakowskie Przedmieście Street – where the University is situated, along other famous streets of Warsaw to Łazienki – the former summer residence of the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, and to Wilanów, another wonderful former residence of a Polish king, Jan III Sobieski.

of the PWP – from the Polish public to prove the moral right of Warsaw University to house its library there. Finally, due to technological reasons, it was decided that the new library would be built in another place, and the Central Committee building itself rented to the newly established Banking-Financial Centre; the money acquired from the rent was, however, to be used in the construction of the new Warsaw University Library (built between 1993 and 1999).

In 1990, M.K. Byrski, having taken a long-term leave from academia, joined the Polish diplomatic service and was nominated as counsellor at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in New Delhi, and in 1993 he was appointed Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. During the period of his service, in 1992, he obtained the academic title of “professor in human sciences” from the President of Poland.

After the presidential elections in 1995, Prof. M.K. Byrski resigned from his post and returned to Poland in 1996, re-joining the university. A few months after his return, he was elected director of the Institute of Oriental Studies for the term 1996-1999, and re-elected for this post in 1999 for the term 1999-2002. In the years 1996-1999, he was also a member of the Academic Senate and from 1998 the chairman of the Rector’s Commission for Promotion. In 2000, Prof. Byrski was awarded the title of full professor at Warsaw University. Recently, in September-November 2006 he was a visiting professor of Sanskrit at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

In the second half of the 1990s, Prof. Byrski very strongly lobbied for the introduction of a new type of studies designed to provide knowledge of Asian and African cultures and societies to Polish students, thus encouraging a better understanding and cooperation between the West and the East. His idea, negotiated and transformed during numerous debates among the academic staff from within the Institute and from without, finally resulted in the establishment of the Centre of Cross-Cultural Relations as a new unit of the Institute of Oriental Studies in the academic year 2000-2001.

Prof. Byrski has published several books and many articles on Sanskrit literature, especially Sanskrit drama, and on topics pertaining to various aspects of Indian history and culture (see his bibliography later in this volume). He has been granted many awards in Poland, among others by the Rector of Warsaw University, for example: in 1978 for his book *Concept of Ancient Indian Drama*, as well as in 1997 and 1998; in 1980 by the Minister of Higher Education and Technology for his book *Methodology of the Analysis of Sanskrit Drama*; in 1986 by the Association of Polish Translators for his Polish translation of *Manu-smṛti* and *Kāma-sūtra* (PIW, Warsaw 1984), recognised as the best translation in the field of *belles-lettres* in 1985; in 2004, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the post-war history of Indological studies at Warsaw University, Prof. Byrski was awarded the Medal of Warsaw University in recognition of his contribution to its development. In India, in the 1980s, the honorary title of Nāṭyācārya was conferred on him by Madhya Pradesh Nāṭak Lokkalā Akādamī in Ujjain and in 1995 he was granted the prestigious George Grierson Award of Kendriya Hindī Saṁsthān (Central Institute of Hindi) in Agra by the President of India, for outstanding work contributed by a foreign scholar in Hindi.

Prof. Byrski has taken part in many international and national conferences, has been a member of many academic societies, e.g. the Polish Oriental Society, Warsaw Scientific Society, Société Asiatique, International Association of Sanskrit Studies; he is also a member of the standing committee of the Parliament of Cultures with a seat in Ankara (Turkey).

During all these years, Professor Maria Krzysztof Byrski has educated several generations of Indologists, thus building the so-called Warsaw school (of Indology), he also contributed to the promotion of many Polish and foreign Indologists. Apart from his undeniable achievements in the field of Indology, his role as a founding father of the Centre of Cross-Cultural Relations of the Institute of Oriental Studies cannot be overestimated. Thanks to his numerous efforts many of us can say, following his own words: "My India/Orient/Africa began in Poland." Thank you, Professor!

Danuta Stasik, Marek Mejor

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The Byrski family in the 1940s



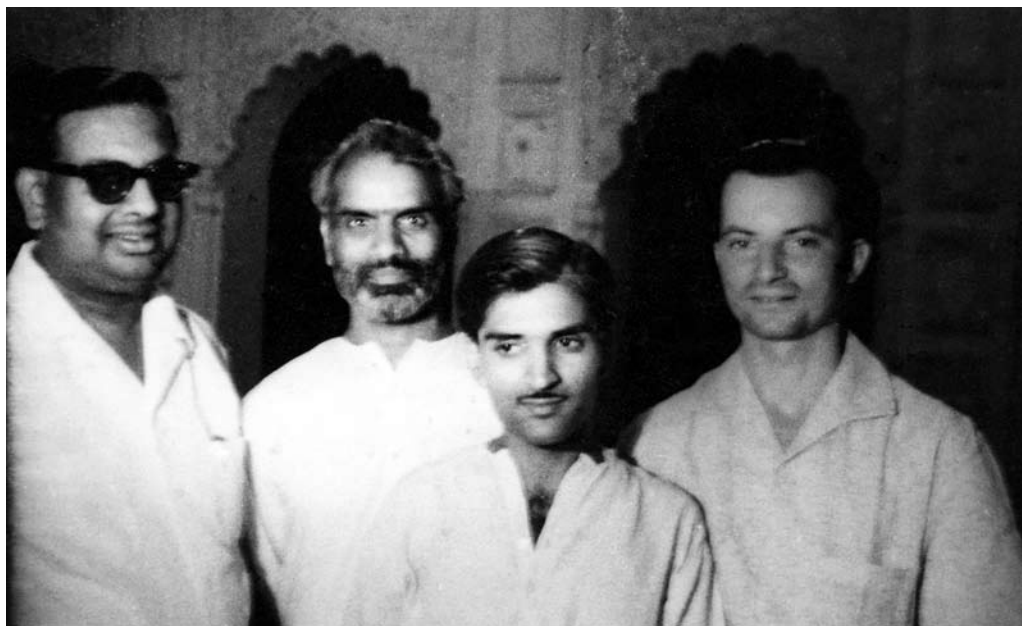
In secondary school in Kielce



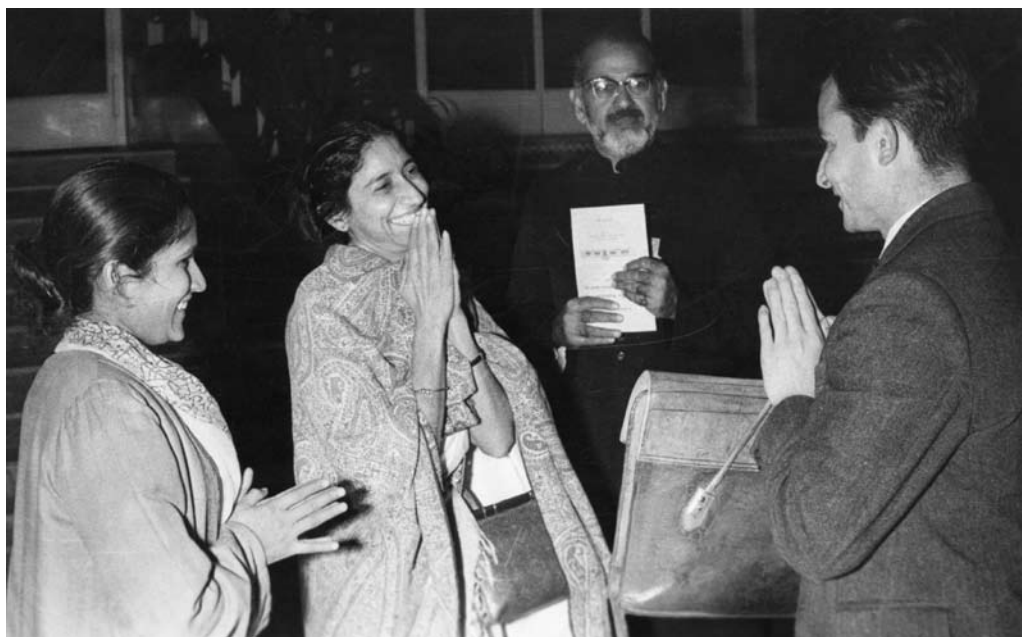
In his office at the University of Warsaw, 1970s



A student in Benares, early 1960s



With his PhD supervisor, Prof. Avadh Kishore Narain (far left), India 1966



With Kapila Vatsyayan, 1960s



With his family in Gwalior, 1990s



Ambassador's duties, 1990s



Delhi Sanskrit Academy, 2005



With Pope John Paul II



With President Lech Wałęsa



Receiving G. Grierson Award from President Shankar Dayal Sharma



On a poster in Ujjain, 2005