

STANISLAW WELLISZ (1925-2016)

Obituary

Stanislaw Wellisz (1925-2016)

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Columbia Economist Who Aided Poland's Revival

Stanislaw H. Wellisz, a Polish-born economist and longtime Columbia University professor who helped guide his native country's transition from communism to capitalism, died in New York on February 28 after a long illness. He was 90.

Professor Wellisz specialized in development economics, a field that satisfied his fascination with world cultures and his deep desire to help the poor. He helped draw up a new tariff structure for Nepal, aided Venezuela's efforts to restructure its finances and advised city planners in Calcutta and Istanbul. He was a member of World Bank missions to Iran, Jordan, Algeria and the former Yugoslavia.

Professor Wellisz's efforts to improve living standards weren't limited to developing nations. He sought to identify opportunities to start minority businesses as director of the Harlem Development Project from 1968-1969, a time when the Columbia campus was rocked by student protests against the war in Vietnam and racial injustice at home.

But it was to Poland that he devoted most of his intellectual energy throughout his career. He returned to his native country time and again, twice serving as a visiting professor and sending his two sons to summer camps there. He often said his desire to rebuild postwar Poland motivated him to study economics.

When Poland threw off Soviet-backed communist rule in 1989, Professor Wellisz returned to serve as an advisor to the new Solidarity-led government, working with Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz on a program of economic "shock therapy" to end price controls, limit industrial subsidies and reduce barriers to trade. While causing high unemployment at first, the plan laid the foundations for years of strong growth that made Poland one of the most successful post-Soviet economies.

From 1991 to 1997, Professor Wellisz taught at the University of Warsaw, overhauling the economics curriculum and helping to train a generation of post-communist economists who would later move into important roles in government, academia and business, helping solidify Poland's success. His efforts earned him an honorary doctorate from the university as well as the Order of Poland's Rebirth (Polonia Restituta), the nation's highest civilian honor.

Stanislaw Wellisz was born in Warsaw on March 28, 1925, into a family of wealthy industrialists whose interests in railroad-locomotive construction, munitions and steel powered Poland's industrial development following independence in 1918. His family fled Poland as German and Soviet troops invaded in 1939, and his father, Leopold Wellisz, served as an advisor to Polish government-in-exile on plans for postwar reconstruction, which he would never be able to carry out because of the communist takeover of Eastern Europe.

The family, which included an older brother and a sister who are no longer living, settled in New York City, where Stanislaw Wellisz attended Trinity School. He graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he also earned a PhD after spending two years in the U.K. as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Cambridge.

Professor Wellisz was the author or co-author of three books, including "The Economies of the Soviet Bloc," published in 1964, as well as numerous academic articles. At the time of his death, he was working on a book about the economics of the state with former Columbia colleague Ronald Findlay, a frequent collaborator. As chairman of Columbia's renowned economics department in 1977-82, Professor Wellisz lured luminaries such as Jagdish Bhagwati, a specialist in international trade, to its faculty.

Professor Wellisz was fluent in French, Italian and English as well as his native Polish, and his intellectual interests ranged from anthropology and literature through art and architecture. He was a charming storyteller who loved to regale guests with quirky tales of obscure happenings in distant lands, and he compiled a huge collection of slides from his travels in Asia and Africa. He was an avid skier and outdoorsman who loved nothing better than mushroom hunting in Vermont's Green Mountains or canoeing in the Adirondacks.

In 1955, Stanislaw Wellisz married a fellow Polish immigrant, the former Isabel Gajewska, who has since died. He is survived by his two sons from that marriage, Tadeusz and Christopher; a nephew, Michael Temmer; and four grandchildren. His remains will be laid to rest at the Lutheran cemetery in Warsaw. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to St. Joseph's Indian School, PO Box 300, Chamberlain, SD 57328.

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