

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT IN GDANSK

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*Oliwa — the third most beautiful
place in the world...*

What could such a scientist of the world have in common with Gdansk? All his life had been led in other regions, and the routes of his numerous travels till the year 1834 were far away from our city, which at that time was considered to be a cultural province. Yet was it justified? The local scientific traditions were older and more splendid than those of Berlin or Hamburg, for example. Also in his main speciality — research travels and geography — Humboldt had outstanding predecessors in Gdańsk. One of them was Philipp Clüver (1580–1622), a son of a merchant from Chlebnicka (Bread Benches) Street, the later professor of the University of Lejda, the creator of historic geography. The results of his scientific travels were such works as: “Ancient Germania” (1616), “Ancient Sicily” (1619), “Ancient Italy” (published in 1624), and a handbook of “Universal Geography”, popular at European universities till 18th century.

Fame equal to Clüver was cherished by a professor of Gdansk Academic Gymnasium — Bartholomäus Keckermann (1572–1609), to whom students from all over Europe came to study. Among the subjects of his treatises and lectures about all the domains of contemporary knowledge an important role played geography, which he as first divided into general and particular, and also cartography, hydrography, climatology, seismology, history of geographical discoveries, and the basis of navigation. More innovative lectures in geography were also given by Peter Krüger (1580–1639), who is famous among others from his law of cosines. His pupil was a great scientist from Gdansk — Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687), a co-creator of the oldest in the world magnetic declination changes curve, begun in 1539 by Joachim Reticus, who came here to publish “Narratio Prima” (“The First Story”) about Copernicus’ system. Works of Daniel Gabriel Fahrenheit (1686–1736), the creator of the first reliable thermometers, were also of indirect importance for

geography. We should also mention the pioneer of technical schooling in Gdansk, Paul Peter (1656–1734), the author of an important essay about the Caspian Sea, and a number of outstanding cartographers, and Michael Hanow (1695-1773) and his followers, who since 1739 had been systematically collecting and publishing the meteorological data for Gdansk and its region.

However, the nearest profile of interests to Humboldt's one was presented by Johann Reinhold (1729–1798) and his son Johann Georg (1754–1794) Forsters – the famous biologists who in the years 1772–1775 sailed around the world together with Cook. Forster senior, a half Scot half Pole, from Tczew, was a minister in Mokry Dwor near Gdansk. He implanted in his son, who was born here, the passion for nature and the knowledge of languages, of which he could speak 17. In 1765 he took his 11 year old son to an ethnographic expedition to Russia. In Cook's expedition he was the scientific manager and was helped by his son who described and sketched everything they met on their way, learning to navigate and measuring the depth of water at the same time. After coming back from the expedition Forster junior published a fascinating account of the voyage entitled "Voyage Around the World" and adorned by his own sketches.

In the years 1784–1787 Georg Forster was a professor in Wilno, where as the first one in Poland he gave lectures in palaeontology and a long time before Darwin introduced the theory of the evolution of species. He later went to live in Moguntia, and it was here that in 1789 he met 15 years younger Humboldt, who was just in the course of one of his first travels. They became friends and the next year both researchers set off together for a trip whose results were "The Views of Lower Rhine, Brabant, Flanders, the Netherlands, England and France" written by Forster and considered to be a masterpiece of travel literature. After separation the two friends wrote letters. Forster wrote a letter of recommendation for Humboldt to Trade Academy in Hamburg and after the friend's death Humboldt helped his family to get back their property confiscated by the authorities. At the end of his life he wrote: "for half a century, wherever I was led by my restless life, I have been trying to express [...] how much I owe to my teacher and friend, Georg Forster, in creating my general opinion about nature and strengthening and developing what had already been sleeping in my conscience long before the fortunate friendship with him [...]. I have been considering especially deeply the strange similarities and contrasts of my and Forster's life course..." It results from this and other opinions that Gdansk scientist was for young Humboldt a scientific leader and a model to look up to.

His "restless life" brought Humboldt to Gdansk only in 1834, and that was only by passage on the way to Königsberg from Stettin. He arrived by a Russian steamer "Ishora", spent one day here and sailed away on "Friedrich Wilhelm". His second stay between 13th and 16th September 1840 gave him a better chance to see the city and its surroundings. He was invited by the Gdansk Naturalists Association (Naturforschende Gesellschaft), which because of his 71st birthday (on 14th September) presented him with a diploma of an honorary member, and later gave a party in Sopot, in which 46 invited guests participated. Thanking for being

honoured in this way the scientist said: “among the numerous joys which nature has prepared for me [...], one of the most pleasant ones was to be able to see again the city which, surrounded by the charms of nature, brings great memories of old civilisation of the world trade, the art of the middle ages, and also great scientific works. Many grains of spiritual drives have been developed here into precious flowers. Within the Naturalists Association they were carefully preserved and developed. On this historical coast, by the almost closed sea whose most precious product — amber — has been an incentive for the nations of the South to explore the configuration of the European North, it is a pleasant duty to me to express to you dear colleagues my unshaken commitment and grateful respect.”

Also Humboldt's 80th birthday in 1849 was commemorated in the Association by a special session. After his death in 1858 a mourning ceremony was organised. The centenary of birth of the great scientist in 1869 was especially solemn. During the meeting at the House of Crafts in Sw. Duchy (Holy Ghost) street all his merits were mentioned and awards were given to the Gdansk Gymnasium students. Also the Association's collection exhibition was opened. Ten years later the collection was moved to a new museum in the Green Gate. Also at that time a yearly Humboldt's scholarship was founded. The initially small fund was soon increased, and since 1882 two 150-mark scholarships a year were awarded.

It is worth mentioning here that the first honorary member of the Naturalists Association, founded in 1742 and enjoying the care of Polish kings before the partitions, was Johann Reinhold Forster, in 1775. Also in this case had Humboldt his Gdansk predecessors.

Let us add at the end that among the Berlin friends of the scientist we can meet people from Gdansk. One of them was a painter popular at that time — Eduard Hildebrandt (1817–1869), whose legacy comprises 1350 drawings and 500 paintings in water-colours, among others the portrait of Humboldt at the age of 87, one of the last in his life...

Translation: Anna Kucharska