

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on May 5, 2009, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Omeljan Pritsak was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## OMELJAN PRITSAK

BORN: April 7, 1919

DIED: May 29, 2006

Omeljan Pritsak was a man of seemingly inexhaustible energy, broad erudition, and total dedication to scholarship in a broad range of fields. While he will probably be best remembered at Harvard and in the Ukrainian diaspora community as the co-founder and long-time director of Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute, his energy, erudition, and scholarship also found expression in a prodigious output of scholarly work and in institution-building in several countries and many scholarly fields. He was founder, editor, or an early stalwart of a number of periodical and monographic series—first in Germany, then in this country, and, ultimately, in his native Ukraine. His prodigious range and productivity is only partially captured by the published bibliographies of his works.

Pritsak was born on 7 April 1919 in Luka, in the Sambir region of Ukraine, and completed his secondary education at the Polish "First Gymnasium" of Ternopil', where for some years he was the only Ukrainian student. His higher education, with a concentration in Ukrainian and, increasingly over time, Turkic history and philology, took place at the University of L'viv, at the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv, and, after World War II (during which he became first a Red Army soldier, then a prisoner of war, then an Ost-Arbeiter), at the Universities of Berlin and Göttingen, the latter of which awarded him a doctorate in 1948.

Pritsak was invited to visit Harvard University for the academic year 1960–61 and returned to Harvard as Professor of Linguistics and Turcology in 1964. He retired in 1989.

By the time of his arrival in Cambridge, Pritsak had already become an internationally recognized specialist in historical and comparative Turkic and Altaic linguistics and a leading authority on the history and cultures of the Eurasian steppe. He was the first scholar to solve problems of succession in Turkic tribal royalty, especially in the first Turkic Islamic dynasty of the Karakhanids. At Harvard, he turned increasingly to the analysis of the Ukrainian past in its larger context, drawing on his training in the relevant oriental languages to flesh out that history with material previously underrepresented or unknown.

In 1967 Pritsak proposed the creation of a firm foundation for the development of Ukrainian studies at Harvard through the establishment of three endowed chairs (history, literature, and philology) and a research institute. This project was accomplished thanks to the efforts of the Ukrainian Studies Fund, which raised the necessary funds within the North-American Ukrainian diaspora community. The Ukrainian Research Institute was founded in 1973 and Pritsak became its first director. In 1975 he was named to the new Hrushevs'kyi Chair in Ukrainian history.

In most of his work, Pritsak was very much a structuralist. Therein lay the basis of his close collaboration with Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), especially in the *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* (The Hague: Mouton), which Jakobson edited in the mid-1960s. Pritsak also took a very pronounced structuralist view of genealogy and chronology—although his interest in these fields may have originated with some adolescent discoveries about his own birth and parentage.

He could overreach himself, as specialist reviewers of his *The Origins of Rus'* (Harvard 1981) have been quick to point out. He was impatient with critics, spending very little energy in engaging with their views. He insisted that the cultural history of the East Slavs (and for him political institutions were a part of cultural history) must be viewed in the broadest Eurasian terms, taking fully into account the experiences of Scandinavian, Turkic, Baltic, and other Slavic peoples and sources in their languages.

The great majority of those who challenge Pritsak's conclusions on the origins of Rus' themselves view history in primarily "national" categories, but—despite his dedication to Ukrainian history—he explicitly did not. It is true, however, that when asked by one of those signed below why his projected book on the Origins of Rus' would be in *six* volumes, he is said to have replied, "Because Ochmanski's 'Origins of Poland' is in *three*."

In one of his last general articles on the subject, he was particularly direct: "The history of Ukraine is not the history of the Ukrainian ethnic mass (ethnicity is not a historical subject) but the objective view, measured in linear time, of all types of states and communities which existed on the present territory of Ukraine in the past."

Nor was he a "Normanist," as is sometimes alleged. While his inaugural lecture in the Hrushevs'kyi Chair began with the story of the uproar caused by Gerhard Friedrich Müller's 1749 lecture, "Origines gentis et nominis Russorum," and his later work stressed the role of Scandinavians (among others) in the founding of "Kyivan Rus'," he steadfastly insisted that the entity that emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries was multi-ethnic and multicultural at its core.

After retirement, Pritsak became more involved in the post-Soviet struggle for the revival of academic historical studies in Ukraine, spending increasing amounts of his time there (despite a serious cardiac condition that had led to surgery as early as 1977). He became the first elected foreign member of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, and revived the Institute of Oriental Studies in Kyiv, introducing new university-level programs in that field and many other neglected areas of historical scholarship. Sadly, however, even a man of his astuteness and dynamism was unable to escape the tangled webs of post-Soviet academic politics and intrigue: these years were filled with disappointments.

By that time, however, Pritsak's major work had been accomplished. It has transformed our understanding of East Slavic history. Never again will any serious historian of the region be able to treat the history of this space as anything but the history of—in his words—a “multiethnic and multilingual” society.

Omeljan Pritsak is survived by his wife Larysa Hvozdk Pritsak; by his daughter, Irene Pritsak (by his late first wife, Nina née Nikolaevna Moldenhauer); and by two grandchildren, Lailina Eberhard and Michael Wissoff.

Respectfully submitted,

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