



Discovering the Best Criminology Program in Poland: Contemplation of the Month-long Sabbatical at the University of Białystok

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Abstract. This article traces the friendship between Professor Emil Plywaczewski and me over a quarter of a century with an emphasis on my impressions of Poland in general and Białystok School of Criminology in particular during my recent one-month stay. While I have been fascinated by the best criminology program growing from none to the current prominence, I argue that criminology's potential as avant-garde of legal reform before the passage of law and as evidence-based evaluation has not been fully developed in Poland. International criminology as a method permeates every aspect of research. As a progressive and meliorative major, criminology could further promote good and inclusive society and play a role in closing the gap between the survivalist culture and self-expressionist culture by strengthening justice-based institutional structure and the rule of law through ramping-up global connectivity among international scholars.

Keywords: criminology, inclusive society, international criminology, open society, rule of law, survivalist culture.

JEL Classification: I23, K14, K19.

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It was a long journey to visit the University of Białystok again. It took me 22 years before I re-visited the university and witnessed the prosperity of best criminology program in Poland.

1. BEFORE THIS TRIP

I met Professor Emil W. Plywaczewski in November 1997 when he received “Distinguished International Scholar Award” from Division of International Criminology, American Society of Criminology in San Diego, California. The Division in those days was relatively small and the annual international lunch was cozy. I was in my late 30s and Emil was in his mid-forties.

I had never been to Poland, but I had long fascinated by it. I heard so much about it during my college years in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the Solidarity Movement led by Lech Walesa was in the news in China, which engaged in an economic reform tightly controlled by the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Then on June 4, 1989, the Polish communist regime was forced to hold the first semi-free election of the parliament since World War II, but on the same day, the communist regime in Beijing sent tanks to crash the pro-democratic students in Tian-an-men Square. While the Polish communists were defeated miserably in the election, the Chinese communists were triumphant in its massacre. Those fast and bewildering changes sent waves of electrified news to the rest of the world.

In 1986, I left China and came to the University of Cincinnati, USA, to pursue my master's degree in sociology. The Tian-an-men tragic event changed my life perspective. I decided that I would continue to study further to get a Ph.D. degree in sociology with a concentration in criminology. By 1997, I had become a tenured associate professor at Eastern Michigan University.

Back in 1997, I was eager to learn more about criminology in Europe. I asked Emil where I could find a university or institute for my upcoming sabbatical leave and Emil recommended Max Planck Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, I was delighted to learn that Hans-Joerg Albrecht, then Co-Director of Max Planck Institute, also was present at the annual meeting. I invited him to have a cup of beer and we became acquainted.

In the fall of 1999, I went to Max Planck Institute, Freiburg, Germany, to spend four months for my first ever sabbatical leave. I used one of the weekends in November and paid a visit, for the first time, to the University of Bialystok where Emil had been working. Emil welcomed me warmly and I gave a lecture at the faculty of law, introducing the idea and the practice of community policing in the USA – one of my research focuses. Emil encouraged me to send the speech to publish in a police journal in Poland. I accepted the suggestion. The paper was peer-reviewed and published in the following year (Cao, 2001).

My first trip to Poland was short and I only stopped by in Warsaw for a few hours before I changed the train to Bialystok, where I stayed for two days. The general impression of Poland at that time was not quite sanguine. The initial jubilation with the collapse of the long-term oppressive communist regime became a history, and after a decade of democratic transition, there was disappointment because the constant salvo in a non-ending feud between and among political parties. The unemployment rates had been high. The challenges were seeing through the fog of economic downturn and very complicated and intense competitions between rival political parties. People were impatient. Some upped sticks and headed abroad for better opportunities. The Polish government had a stricter control of international migrants – a policy seems to have lasted up to today. Academics largely stayed out of the mud-slinging of politics.

Over the next 22 years between 2000 and 2022, I often saw Emil at various international conferences, mainly in the USA, but also occasionally in Europe and in China. He fed me with the new developments of Bialystok School of Criminology. In addition to the great success in dominating the literature of corruption and organized crime in transitional Poland, Emil involved himself in professional activities. He served numerous national and international professional positions related to crime and justice, and more recently to the prestigious jury of the Stockholm Prize in Criminology. Since 2001 he had been serving as a United Nations consultant for implementation of its project “Assessment of Organizer Crime in Central Asia.” He created the International Centre for Criminological Research and Expertise” at the University of Bialystok in 2016. He was also the representative of Poland in International Examination Board of the Central European Police Academy (1994 to 2012). Under his leadership and with the concerted efforts from his colleagues, the faculty of law steadily moved up in the ranking of the law programs in Poland, becoming tier 1 law program. I was happy for his successes and always regarded him as the face of new Poland.

More importantly, Emil is a visionary who has initiated various projects and programs to spread scientific criminological knowledge. Over the years, he has edited, and later co-edited, a series of canonical volumes of criminological research. Articles in these volumes are not limited in Polish, but also in German and English (see

Plywaczewski & Guzik-Makaruk, 2019). This inclusive approach is groundbreaking for Poland interested in becoming part of the democratic world. Criminologists and legal scholars all over the globe contribute their insights and recommendations on *de lege ferenda* policies and criminal justice initiatives. The topics covered are highly interdisciplinary about the current trends worldwide. Glancing over the contributors of these anthologies, they are the encyclopedia of who-is-who criminologists and legal scholars. I published one of my research in Volume VII (Cao, 2017) on the issue of crime control, ideology, and newly adopted laws in Canada. Emil also originated (international) Young Criminologist Forum which took place four times (2016, 2018, 2020, 2022) and four anthologies with papers presented at the forum are published.

In the meanwhile, I continued to work hard as a professor with an active research agenda and contributed to the expanding literature of police legitimacy, criminological theory testing, and race/ethnicity in criminal justice. In 2008, I left Eastern Michigan University, USA, and accepted an invitation to join the faculty of the newly established university as a full professor in Canada: University of Ontario Institute of Technology (it changed its name in 2018 to Ontario Tech University). I was attracted by the founding President of the University Gary Polonski's (2002-2006) vision: to become a top research university with a global significance. Academically, I have been doing extremely well. My research had become increasingly noticed and cited. I was ranked as one of the top fifty most cited scholars in criminology several times (Cohn & Farrington, 2014; Iratzoqui1, Cohn, & Farrington, 2019; Orrick & Weir, 2011; Zhang, 2017). In the most recent ranking, I am among the top ten most cited criminology authors in the world (Farrington, Cohn, & Skinner, 2022).

As I was ready for my fourth sabbatical leave, I contacted Emil in the winter of 2022, and asked whether it was possible to stay at the University of Bialystok for a month. Emil told me that he just stepped down from the deanship, but he would pass my application to the new dean, who graciously approved my visiting plan.

There are three reasons why I coveted to be at Bialystok School of Criminology. First, I had always been curious about what makes an academic program work. I got my Ph.D. degree with the help from a group of very ambitious and inspiring professors from the Department of Criminal Justice (see Cao, 2021; Cao & Burton, 2023). I was attracted to the current university because of that same curiosity. Emil has built up an internationally well-known program in Poland. Second, for the rule of law, there is a separation of power among the executive, law making, and law interpretation. In Poland, it seems that the power has been concentrated in the executive branch, and through complicated informal networks, people without official positions have huge influence on those who hold the formal positions. Third, I am also interested in the larger issue beyond criminology or law *per se*. I was curious about why xenophobia and German animosity have been so strong.

Emil and I agreed that I would give a series of seminars on the topics of international criminology in exchange of four weeks' accommodation. Emil wanted to plant the seeds of global research into the minds of his students. The topic is well within my expertise. Previously, I delivered one seminar on international criminology to graduate students at Sam Houston State University. Part of the materials was published as a research paper in Chinese (Cao & Du, 2018). All I need to do is to expand the seminar into more detailed areas of research with examples from my past 30 years' scholarly publications.

2. DURING MY STAY

When my airplane landed at Warsaw Chopin Airport on September 28, I have witnessed a completely new Poland. Like all other Western European nations, there is no mask mandate. Renting a car at the airport is convenient and full of real competition comparable to any other Western European nations or North America. The SIM card for my cellphone is unbelievably inexpensive.

Out of the airport, new high-rising buildings gave Warsaw a newfangled ambience. The only recognizable old building was the Palace of Culture and Science. Almost all of its surrounding high-rise buildings are new. As I strolled the old town of Warsaw, the variety of international food and restaurants are unbelievable.

On the afternoon of September 30, we arrived at the dormitory of the University of Bialystok where a section of it was used to host visiting scholars. Everything was perfectly ready for us to live in. Along the streets of Bialystok, we passed about ten new and/or restored prodigious churches. The gas stations have free disposable plastic groves and paper towels.

On the early morning of October 1, Emil with his friend drove us to Olsztyn to attend the ceremony for the beginning of the academic year at The University of Warmińsko-Mazurski. The driver was a former student of Emil and now the owner of a 17-person law firm. On the way back, we stopped by Szczytno, where National Police Academy is located and where Emil began his academic career. This region was part of Germany before the WWII. Most houses have ceramic roofing tiles. In contrast, houses in the US and Canada have inexpensive shingle roofs. We drove by many small villages and churches. The road is astonishingly well built, whether it is in the city or in the remote and bucolic areas.

On Sunday morning, we went to downtown Bialystok and joined the locals for the Sunday mass. The central square of Bialystok, similar to almost all Polish cities, had performance to attract donations to the war in Ukraine. Then we visited the “palace” constructed in the first half of the 18th century as a residence suitable for a man whose ambition was to become king of Poland. It was demolished in 1944 and rebuilt after the war as a part of medical university, a museum, and a park.

In the afternoon, Emil and his wife Magda took us to Supraśl, a nearby town about 15 kilometres northeast of Bialystok. It is known as the “bedroom of Bialystok” since many people working in Bialystok live there. The Orthodox Church influence is strong in this area as about 30% residents are the followers. Emil’s new house has been waiting for its finishing touch, and it has the geothermal heating system. I have never heard any of my friends in the US or in Canada, using the geothermal heating system.

On behalf of the dean of the faculty of law, Vice Dean Izabela Kraśnicka and Vice Dean Elżbieta Kuźelewska invited my wife and I to their office to have a cup of coffee on October 3. I was honored to be invited to join the Advisory Board of *Bialystok Legal Studies*. In the evening, Emil took me in his car to the faculty of law again. It was nice to see Ewa Monika Guzik-Makaruk and Wojciech Filipkowski again, and to meet Katarzyna Laskowska, Magdalena Perkowska and Aleksandra Stachelska for the first time.

My seminar was held in a packed classroom. I discussed the definition of criminology used by most North American criminologists (Cao, 2020), emphasizing that it is an independent discipline. Criminology is regarded as the *avant-garde* of legal reform before the passage of the law and it provides evidence-based policy recommendations after the law’s adoption. The goal of criminology is not to eliminate crime, but to “reduce the severity of the nature and impact of crime in both preventative and curative contexts” (Eskridge, 2009, p. 95; also see Cao & Dai, 2001; Durkheim, 1933/1898). Criminology as a major is one of the top three most satisfying majors in a recent survey of college graduates (Buber, 2022), and international criminology as a method permeates in every aspect of criminological research (Adler, 1996; Cao, 2020). Afterwards, my wife and I drove to the southwest of Poland to visit.

Our first stop was Wrocław. The city on Oder River is known for its Market Square with the Gothic Old Town Hall. Also famous is the Centennial Hall Auditorium with its giant dome and tall spire lies across the river formerly named Hala Ludowa (“People’s Hall”). It was constructed when the city was part of Germany. Iglica is a needle-like monument built in 1948 in celebrating of the “recovered territories.” Wrocław became part of Poland in 1945.

Next morning, we visited the Schindler’s museum on our way to Krakow. We spent an entire day in Krakow and another day in Auschwitz. “Arbeit macht frei” is a German phrase meaning “Work sets you free” or “Work makes one free.” The slogan appears on the entrance of Auschwitz and other National Socialist Party’s concentration camps. Ironically, after WWII, many variants and/or derivatives of the slogan were popular among the communist ruled nations, including China.

On October 7, we visited another wonder of Poland: Wieliczka Salt Mine. On our way back to Bialystok, we stopped by in Łódź. Mike is the former colleague of my wife Meiling. He insisted that we visit him. The city was

known as “the textile capital of Poland”, or “Poland’s Manchester.” Mike was an anthropology major and brought the history of the city to life. Old buildings had been refurbished and high-rising buildings are added. The central train station is brand new. Unfortunately, timing is not right because the rich Polish begin to drive private cars these days. Sassy and wry in personal conversation, Mike told us that Polish had a mixed-feeling toward Wrocław and Gdańsk. That’s why they would only recommend you to visit Krakow and are unwilling to recommend these two equally beautiful cities.

On October 12, we went to WSPiA University of Rzeszow with Emil and Ewa. Arriving at the airport of Rzeszow, we saw the NATO military base with tons of trucks, tanks, and HIMARS rocket system. The city is only 60 kilometers away from the border of Ukraine. I was the guest of honor for the special inauguration lecture of criminology as a new major at the university which would be the first criminology major in south-eastern Poland. My lecture was given at the auditorium with more than 120 students with a mixture of both undergraduate and graduate students. A translator was provided for me. She did an excellent job. The lecture went well and to my surprise, students asked some very good questions at the end. The student newspaper interviewed me and recorded the process.

There are three types of tertiary education in Poland: public, non-public, and private. The difference between non-public and private universities is that non-public universities must have an open accounting book policy, clearly showing all donations are used for the purposes of education. There’s no such requirement for the private university. WSPiA University of Rzeszow is a non-public university. The rector (president) is Professor Jerzy Posluszny who invests his own money and finds sponsors all over the world. The students pay tuition. Both Vice Rector Agata Furgala and Vice Dean Anna Świerczewska-Gąsiorowska got their Ph.D. degrees at the University of Białystok under the guidance of Emil.

On October 15, among the heightened tension between Belarus and Ukraine, we drove to the border town of Kuznica, Poland. The border between Poland and Belarus had been shut down for several months and the six ways railroads were silent. The border gateways were quiet and deadly empty. The town was very peaceful, no sign of military activity and no sign of extra police surveillance. People enjoyed the autumn weather under the sun. The entire region is poorer than those in the western part of Poland.

Poles are family oriented. It is clear when you go to the restaurant in the weekend. Almost every table has a running kid. Polish are also very religious as all churches, whether it is a Catholic or an Orthodox, are full during the weekends. In addition, most cemeteries have fresh flowers, indicating that relatives visit the tombs often. Poles are cordial and close-knit. Walking in the streets of Białystok, my wife and I are almost the only non-European faces.

Ewa and Emil took us to visit the newly opened Museum of Siberia. According to the Museum, 3 million Poles returned to Poland from all over the world, but mainly from Siberia, after WWII. The exile of Polish dissidents and intellectuals did not stop until the early 1950s. Next day, we were invited to the International Center of Criminological Research and Expertise, where many of my American friends visited before.

On October 17, all criminology faculty members and some graduate students were gathered at Department of Criminology and Criminal Law. Aleksandra prepared a PowerPoint presentation about in research at Białystok School of Criminology (see Plywaczewski, Guzik-Makaruk, & Filipkowski, 2022). Each scholar introduced their research expertise. Apparently, the criminological team has achieved a great deal, each scholar having a cutting-edge research topic of their own. One of the omissions, however, is the study of homosexuality for which my friend Amy Adamczyk (2017), John Jay College of Criminal Justice, is an expert. Emil kindly took all criminology professors and us out for dinner that night.

We drove to Torun on October 19. It was Nicolaus Copernicus’ hometown and a university in his name was there. Emil got his Ph.D. from the university and met his wife there too. After Torun, we visited Gdansk on October 21. We booked a city tour, and the guide was very knowledgeable. We were told that Wałęsa survived the Covid-19 and lived peacefully, often going to the library in his name. Next day, we visited the Museum of Solidarity. The union is widely credited for having played a central role to end the communist rule in Eastern Europe. Wałęsa was

awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, and in 1990, he was elected as the President. Poland was able to lead the largely peaceful transition because it was closely connected with the rest of the world. Pope John Paul II played a critical role in preventing a similar massacre like Tiananmen. He visited Poland three times before the communist downfall in 1989.

In the afternoon, we visited Museum of WW II. Ideologies of communism, fascism, militarism, and national socialism were widespread before the war. What united these ideologies was their common totalitarian practice with a nationalistic banner. At the end of the war, only communism survived. A nuclear bomb was exhibited, which looks as small as an ordinary bomb but its killing ability is at least one thousand or more sweeping. After WW I, the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk) was created, a city-state under the supervision of the League of Nations. Technically, it didn't belong to Germany or Poland because the city was a historic Polish city but was under the German rule for over 100 years and the majority of residents were German. After WW II, Gdańsk became part of Poland and the city's German inhabitants, either fled or were expelled to Germany, ethnic cleansing – a dark page of the Allies' post-war history.

After visiting the beautiful beach city of Sopot, we stopped by Westerplatte to pay a pilgrimage to the first blood of WW II. Westerplatte was given to Poland after WW I and it was used as the Polish military depot from 1926 to 1939. On September 1, 1939, the armed forces of Nazi Germany and Danzig Police assaulted Polish positions in Westerplatte. Humans don't seem to have learned a lesson from history!

We returned to Białystok on October 23 and had dinner at Emil's new house. Magda prepared a delicious meal for us. She was Emil's muse and acted as "an ethereal housemother." On the next day, I gave my last seminar and was pleasantly surprised by a small ceremony for the end of the seminar series. Before we left Białystok on the morning of October 25, we were invited to stop by Ewa's house for coffee. Afterwards, we drove to Warsaw.

In Warsaw, we visited Warsaw Uprising Museum and Polin Museum. It was interesting to learn that before 1956, no Warsaw uprising could be mentioned in public, a situation similar to that of Nanjing Massacre could not be mentioned under Mao's time (1949-1976). In March 1968 student-led demonstrations in Warsaw gave Gomulka's government an excuse to channel public anti-government sentiment into another avenue. The situation was used as a pretext to launch an antisemitic campaign, resulting in the removal of Jews from Polish United Worker's Party and from teaching positions in schools and universities. In 1967-1971 under secret police pressure, over 14,000 Polish Jews left — the last exodus of Jews from Poland. One of them was Jerzy Sarnecki, a college student then and now a famous criminology professor of Sweden and the committee co-chair of Stockholm Prize in Criminology (Cao, 2022).

3. CODA

My month long stay in Poland elapsed like the blink of an eye. It was a fantastic event certain to remain in my memories. I have experienced enormous joy and benefit from teaching and learning from the brilliant students and dedicated professors at Białystok School of Criminology. I cannot say that I have straightforward answers to the three questions that motivated my visit. For the first question, Emil and his colleagues have succeeded in creating the most best-known criminological program in Poland and Emil was inimitable in the process. He was the glue that had kept young scholars from falling apart in the face of political feuds and market competition. Even retired from the University of Białystok this year at the age of 71, Emil continues to be active in research. Being extremely fit from the first time we met in 1997, he was able to maintain his research productivity just as he was able to keep his weight. Looking ahead, I am certain that the next generations of legal scholars and criminologists will experience the similar sense of fulfillment I have felt as they meet the immense rise to the continual unexpected challenges of the rule of law.

The insufficient rule of law in Poland has to be regarded as the residue effect from the communist rule. It is not limited to Poland, but similar situations, to different degrees, appear in all former Soviet bloc. Similarly, economic

nationalism and xenophobia are ingrained in these cultures. Politicians are more focused on maintaining the power grip than they are on improving people's lives. Whether out of nostalgia or out of habits of minds of yore, people like simple and quick solutions. Charismatic demagogues pander to their proclivity instead of broadening citizens' horizons and lifting their vision. The bitterness toward Germany persists and politicians make use of it since Poland is scheduled for elections next autumn and the party's support has been slipping. There is a ruthless political instrumentalization of Germany by Law and Justice: they portray Germany as an enemy and Berlin as dangerous to Poland as Moscow.

Canada recognized gay marriage only in 2005. The Province of Ontario had an openly gay premiere, Kathleen Wynne, from 2013 to 2018. Even in the USA where homosexuality is less tolerant than that of Canada, gay and lesbian politicians can be open about it. In contrast, same-sex sexual activities have been legal in Poland as early as 1932. In reality, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people face legal challenges not faced by non-LGBT residents. Poland socially frowned on homosexual activity, whether it was under the communist rule when Michel Foucault visited in the late 1950s or after the democratic transitions today.

Poland is a vital country within the European Union, but for decades it has been the continent's 'terra malecognita', poorly known and badly understood. Since joining the European Union in 2004, ordinary citizens of Poland have been more self-assured about their future. Economically and technologically, Poland is a fully developed nation, but culturally, it remains in the camp of "the survivalist culture" (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Its intolerance of the poor (such as beggars and Gypsies), non-Ukraine refugees, LGBT etc. are characteristic of the survivalist culture. Thus, one foot of Poland is squarely in the modern world, its infrastructure and its economy both have been in par with other nations in the European Union. The other foot of Poland, however, is trapped in its past, not in tune with the zeitgeist of open and inclusive society (Cullen, 1994; Popper, 1945/211; Young, 2011). To close the discrepancy, criminology, as a progressive and meliorative discipline, could play a role by improving justice-based institutional structure, by instilling the concept of the rule of law into students' thinking, and by promoting global exchanges of scholars.

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