

Exact thinking in demented times. Warsaw exhibition about the Vienna Circle and the Lvov-Warsaw School

From 28 January to 28 February 2022, the exhibition *The Vienna Circle – Exact Thinking in Demented Times* was on display in the exhibition space of the University of Warsaw Library. The exhibition originated at the University of Vienna, then it was presented at Charles University in Prague and was finally shown in Poland. In Warsaw, the exhibition was expanded and significantly enriched with the *Appendix: The Lvov-Warsaw School and the Vienna Circle*. The *Vienna Circle...* exhibition was organised as part of the activities of the interuniversity network Central, which includes five Central European universities: the University of Warsaw, Humboldt University of Berlin, the University of Vienna, Charles University in Prague and Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

Where did the idea to commemorate the Vienna Circle with such an impressive exhibition come from? The Vienna Circle was founded in the 1920s by philosopher Moritz Schlick, mathematician Hans Hahn, and social activist and reformer Otto Neurath. Their areas of expertise included: how one can explain the efficiency of mathematics? What is the role of logical propositions? What is the basis of scientific knowledge?¹ The group was soon joined by outstanding young thinkers of the time, such as Kurt Gödel, Rudolf Carnap, and Karl Menger. Also, Karl Popper, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein maintained intensive contact with the Circle. Unfortunately, the history of the Circle did not last long, mainly due to socio-political reasons; the turbulent situation in interwar Austria did not favour the development of science and cultivating philosophical ideas. Hans Hahn's death in 1934 was definitely a crucial moment in the Circle's history. Neurath – like many other researchers – was soon forced into exile. Schlick was murdered in 1936

¹ https://www.univie.ac.at/AusstellungWienerKreis/WK_Presseinfo_EN.pdf



Exhibition in Warsaw

by one of his former students. The Vienna Circle had dissolved before the Nazis took over, and it never managed to regain popularity in Vienna after the war. However, it continued to exert a decisive influence on intellectual and scientific history of the 20th century.

One of the aims of the Circle was to promote a scientifically practiced philosophy – philosophy that would be devoid of empty metaphysical speculation and that would take into account the latest scientific developments and results. The aim was to create a system of empirical and rational – simply: exact – thinking that would counteract the irrationalism – and madness – prevalent in Austria at the time, whether in science or philosophy, politics or culture. In a scientific, factual approach, the members of the Circle saw hope not only for theoretical academic considerations, but also for social life. This was aptly put by Heinz W. Engl, rector of the University of Vienna, speaking at the opening of the exhibition in Vienna:

Today, the Vienna Circle would be considered an internationally influential science Think Tank. Its members stood for the free development of science, scientific and rational analysis in politics and culture as well as the modernization of the society they lived in. The achievements of the members of the Vienna Circle still have impact on today's science and research areas: the discussions of the Vienna Circle eventually led to innovations like the basics of mathematical logic as well as theoretical computer science².

² https://www.univie.ac.at/AusstellungWienerKreis/WK_Presseinfo_EN.pdf

The exhibition *The Vienna Circle – Exact Thinking in Demented Times* was presented for the first time at the University of Vienna, organised for the 650th anniversary of the founding of the University of Vienna. It was open to the public from 20 May to 31 October 2015. The exhibition was situated in the university building and curated by Prof. Karl Sigmund and Prof. Friedrich Stadler. As the curators admit, the biggest challenge for them was „to «visualize philosophy» [or maybe: philosophical ideas? – A.Ch.]: [to make] the abstract, philosophical work of the Vienna Circle accessible and understandable for a broad audience”³. In my opinion, this goal was perfectly achieved.



Exhibition in Vienna

The exhibition attracted attention with its format – it was made as a unique installation of 20-square-meter boards. As a result, the data, documents, and pictures were presented on the big screen and the audience could interact with the entire exhibition.

The boards contained biographical information about the members of the Vienna Circle and a great deal of additional information. Visitors could become acquainted with the main scientific-philosophical (but also socio-cultural) achievements of the members of the Circle, but also with the connections of the Viennese to well-known intellectuals of the time (like writers or architects). Much attention was also paid to the context in which the Circle came into being: what intellectual and cultural feats led to the formation of the Vienna Circle and how this formation fitted into the broader cultural and social context of the demented times of the 20th century. The exhibition was set in a broader social and political context, with many of the panels dealing with the pernicious

³ https://www.univie.ac.at/AusstellungWienerKreis/WK_Presseinfo_EN.pdf



Exhibition in Warsaw

cious impact of political fanaticism and antisemitism and the struggle against exact thinking that was taking place at the time. The question of what international impact the Circle had was also addressed. Indeed, it influenced the Lvov-Warsaw School. However, there was also a Prague connection.

In October 2021, the exhibition *Exact thinking...* was presented in Prague, Czech Republic, at Charles University. It was expanded to include philosophical, social and political contexts related to the history of the Czech Republic and the center of rigorous and critical thinking that operated there (for more on this, see: <https://www.ukforum.cz/en/main-categories/unilife/8107-the-legacy-of-the-vienna-circle>).

In 2022, the exhibition was finally shown in Warsaw. Visitors had the opportunity not only to learn about the history of the Vienna Circle, described above, but also to find out more about the connections between the Vienna Circle and the great Polish formation – the Lvov-Warsaw School. The Warsaw exhibition was expanded by an appendix: *The Lvov-Warsaw School and the Vienna Circle*. The curator of the appendix to the Warsaw exhibition on the Lvov-Warsaw School was Prof. Anna Brożek from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw, the head of the Centre for Research on the Tradition of the Lvov-Warsaw School.

The Lvov-Warsaw School was a Polish branch of analytic philosophy. It was founded in Lvov by Kazimierz Twardowski at the turn of the 19th century and it flourished between 1920 and 1939. However, it also has Austrian



Exhibition in Warsaw – opening by Prof. Sambor Gruzca, Vice-Rector for Cooperation and Human Resources at the University of Warsaw, and lic. dr Barbara Good, BA from the University of Vienna



Audience visiting the exhibition in the University of Warsaw Library

origins, as Twardowski was born, raised and educated in Vienna. Obviously, this does not exhaust the links between the School and the Vienna Circle. The Lvov-Warsaw School was famous for achievements in logic and its methodological applications in philosophy. Some of its members kept in touch with the members of the Vienna Circle (among others, Władysław Witwicki, Izydora Dąmbska, Walter Auerbach, Henryk Mehlberg, and Maria Kokoszyńska). On the whole, the School was an interdisciplinary endeavour. Its members contributed not only to philosophy in the narrow sense, but also to mathematical logic, psychology and the humanities. Members of the School included individuals of different social and national origins, and a large proportion of its members were women (which was unusual in the beginning of the 20th century). Although the School was founded and developed independently of the activities of the Vienna Circle, certain features were common to both formations – first and foremost, an aversion to philosophical obscurity, an emphasis on the strictness of language, and the inclusion in philosophy of logical tools and the results of special sciences.

The Warsaw appendix on the Lvov-Warsaw School was organised according to the following topics: main members, main works and main institutions of School. Overall, this is what could be seen at the exhibition. The profile and achievements of Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of the School, were presented, as well as the list and achievements of his direct pupils (and the pupils' pupils). Various branches of the School were shown: the Warsaw School of Logic (founded in Warsaw around 1918; main representatives: Jan Łukasiewicz, Stanisław Leśniewski, Alfred Tarski), the Cracow Circle (founded in Cracow in 1936, main representatives: Jan Łukasiewicz, Józef Bocheński, Jan Drewnowski, Jan Salamucha) and the Lvov School of Psychology (founded in Lvov around 1900, main representatives: Kazimierz Twardowski, Władysław Witwicki, Stefan Baley, Stefan Błachowski, Mieczysław Kreutz) and described their most characteristic features. The variety of the presented documents is noteworthy. There were photos, reprints from period newspapers and magazines, as well as copies of private notes or letters; for example, there is a fragment of a letter from Maria Kokoszyńska to Kazimierz Twardowski from 1934 in which she wrote about the way Moritz Schlick lectured (positively!). A meticulous calendar has also been prepared, showing – with specific dates and other details – what the relations between members of the School and members of the Circle looked like (participation in symposia, visits to Vienna or Warsaw, reactions to more important events connected with both formations, etc.). Attention was drawn, for example, to a reprint of the 23 June 1936 copy of „Gazeta Lwowska” (Lvov Newspaper); it published a commentary on the death (murder) of one of the founders of the Circle, Moritz Schlick.

1935

- 1st Congress of Unity of Science in Paris; the following members of the LWS took part: Ajdukiewicz, Hosiasson, Jaśkowski, Kokoszyńska, Lindenbaum, Tarski, Zawirski.

„GAZETA LWOWSKA” Nr. 141 z dnia 23 czerwca 1936 r.

Zabójstwo prof. Schlicka na uniwersytecie wiedeńskim.

Wiedeń, 22. 6. (PAT.) Dzisiaj rano w gmachu uniwersytetu został zamordowany profesor Maurycy Schlick. Zabójcą jest dr. Nelboeck, który dał do Schlicka kilka strzałów rewolwerywych. Podłoże zbrodni posiada rzekomo charakter zatargu osobistego

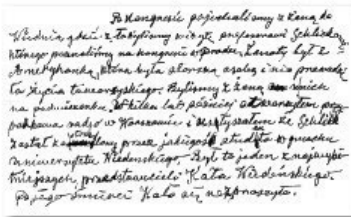
ale według pogłosek krążących w kołach uniwersyteckich, motywacyjne nie są wyłączone. Schlick był dawniej profesorem w jednym z uniwersytetów kalifornijskich a następnie w Kielu w Niemczech.

1936

- Schlick's death shocks Polish philosophers.
- 2nd Congress of the Unity of Science in Copenhagen; the following members of the LWS took part: Dąbwska, Hosiasson, Kotarbiński, Zawirski.

Daily newspaper "Gazeta Lwowska", June 23, 1936:

"The murder of prof. Schlick at the University of Vienna. Vienna, 06/22. (Polish Telegraphic Agency). This morning, in the building of the University, Professor Maurice Schlick was murdered. The killer is Dr. Nelboeck, who took several revolver shots toward Schlick. The basis of the crime is allegedly a personal dispute, but according to the rumors circulating in university circles, political motives are not excluded. Schlick was formerly a professor at one of the Californian universities, and in Kiel, Germany."



Fragment of Jan Lukaszewicz's Memories:

"After the Congress [in Prague, 1934], I went to Vienna with my wife where we visited Prof. Schlick, who we earlier met during the Congress. His wife was an American who was an elderly person and did not take part in social life. We were by them for tea. A few years later, I heard by accident on the radio in Warsaw that Schlick was shot by some student in the building of the University of Vienna. He was one of the greatest representatives of the Vienna Circle. After his death, the circle broke up."

Fragment of the meticulous calendar including the reprint from „Gazeta Lwowska” with a commentary on the death of Moritz Schlick

The curator also decided to present the charts with quotations („golden thoughts”) of the members of the School. Several boards were devoted to Rudolf Carnap's visit to Warsaw. Carnap was invited to Poland in February 1930, where he gave three lectures: *Psychology in physical terms*, *Overcoming metaphysics through logical analysis of language* and *Tautological character*

of reasoning. During the visit, Carnap attended Tarski's, Kotarbiński's and Łukasiewicz's seminars and had many private talks with a number of representatives of the Lvov-Warsaw School. This visit in Poland was clearly important to Carnap, as he recollected it later in his *Intellectual Autobiography* (published in 1963). Carnap also mentioned how impressed he was by Tarski's lectures on logic and metalogic. The repercussions of Carnap's visit were also visible on the Polish side; for example, Tadeusz Kotarbiński admitted that Carnap's remarks contributed to the development of his conception of reism.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a book that is indirectly related to the exhibition: the work by Karl Sigmund, one of the curators of the exhibition: *Exact Thinking in Demented Times: the Vienna Circle and the Epic Quest for the Foundations of Science* (New York, Basic Books, 2017). This work of nearly 500 pages provides an even more detailed account of the profiles and major achievements of the members of the Vienna Circle. The cultural, social and political context in which the formation operated is also deepened. The book is an excellent complement to the content presented at the exhibition.

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