

Our Father

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Growing up, we knew that Warsaw, our hometown, was a city that our Dad first arrived to when he was 18 years old, but we also learnt that his journey started much earlier.

We loved to listen to Dad's story of how his older brother gave him a ride in a horse wagon to Gorlice, where, for the first time in his life, he boarded a train and departed to begin his studies at the University of Warsaw. This was still before his second major surgery, when his mobility was significantly restricted by the complication from the accident and surgery a few years earlier. After an entire night spent in a crowded train, when he finally reached his destination, he found himself for the first time in a large city, uncertain where to go. We followed Dad's story eagerly and anxiously, and we shared in his feeling of relief when he realized that the University's welcome committee greeted new students and helped them find their way to the dormitories. For us, it was a story about a journey into the unknown. Having listened to it many times, we knew that it was worth it to cope with difficulties and uncertainty in order to discover the world.

No matter how his world expanded, Dad would cherish and return to his roots. He often reminisced how, as a young boy, he would climb the hills surrounding Sękowa and wistfully admire the towers of the town hall of Biecz. This medieval (13th century?) town some 17 km away from Sękowa was beyond the reach for the country kid. Later, Biecz became Dad's favorite destination when he traveled back to Sękowa.

Dad's scientific career focused on discovering the world in a very literal sense – he conducted research to explore the structure of the Earth. For us, his daughters, what mattered most was his passion to pursue the mystery he was telling us about: what is hidden under the Earth's crust?

As Dad was pursuing the answers, we loved to listen to stories from his travels. The essence of the unknown was the Antarctic, the place of magic beauty. With the attention to detail of a true storyteller, Dad recounted the trials he had to go through when crossing the equator, in order to receive baptismal rites from the hands of the Neptune and Persephone. With awe, we watched the images on the slides of icebergs at sunset, which Dad displayed on the walls of our living room. Most of the iceberg is hidden under the water, he always made sure to stress.

This hidden part of the world he would access not only through science but also through poetry. Our parents often reminisced how Dad started their life together with a suitcase full of poetry books, little yellow collection of Polish and international poets, issued by "Nasza Księgarnia".

Figuratively, this collection began in Dad's native village of Sękowa, long before Dad's journey to Warsaw. It started with the poetry of Stanisław Kret, local poet and Dad's relative, and with the books Dad borrowed on a regular basis from the neighbors' library. He read constantly, our grandmother told us, even when doing chores, like when he had to guard cows to make sure they didn't cross over into the neighbors' land, hiding with his books under a tarp when it rained. With solemn emotion and admiration, Dad reminisced frequently about his teachers in Marcin Kromer High School in Gorlice who introduced him to the world of history, literature, and geography: Prof. Sikorski, Prof. Dniestrzańska, and Prof. Motyka who when describing to his pupils the battle of Thermopylae and the death of the brave Leonidas, always pulled a checkered handkerchief and loudly wiped his huge nose.

Dad's journey was made possible thanks to the support of his entire family. Our grandmother told us that Dad's older sister Basia would deliver handmade bread and cheese to Dad's landlady in Gorlice, in lieu of the fee. It was probably just a small example of the daily challenges and perseverance needed to obtain a high school diploma and enrol at a university at the time when each pair of hands was needed to work the land.

And now let's return to the train station in Warsaw "Warszawa Główna". A couple of years later, Basia Weber, a student from Poznań, arrived at the same station. Mom and Dad got married in 1962, and spent together the next 62 years of their lives. In the early years of their marriage, marked by the post-war poverty and the communism's oppression, they found their joys and passions, inspired each other with interests in art and history, and continued to discover the world, for themselves, and later, for us.

Memories of the stories they shared with us are mixed up with our own memories. There were their treks in the Tatra Mountains and Orla Perc trail. The most challenging ridge of the Tatras, its difficulty magnified by Dad's physical disability, and by meager food supplies, consisting of powdered soup fixed on melted snow. There were Mom's tears of joy when she crossed with Dad the bridge in Venice, her first trip beyond the iron curtain, and the exhilaration of a car trip through Italy. We remember them when young and beautiful, they returned from a trip to Paris, bringing back Parisian food specialties, as well as our first pairs of jeans.

Passion and courage. We remember Dad kayaking with us, hiking, biking, playing badminton, always present and engaged, giving it his all, putting aside for us his busy career, and overcoming challenges of his physical limitations. Some of those memories we share with our children and his grandchildren.

Kindness and caring. He made it his priority to ensure that everyone is taken care of and comfortable and all arrangements always made on time.

Warmth. Always busy with serving endless cups of tea and bringing more treats. Checking on his children, and later, grandchildren, if they are warm at night. Those small gestures, which may sound insignificant, were all part of his presence in our lives. When he was already in the hospital, in and out of consciousness, he would still welcome his grandchildren when they visited them, and would apologize that he was "in such a state", unable to take care of them properly...

Our Dad.

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