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In Memory of Professor Pużyński

My whole professional life has been, and still is, inextricably connected with Professor Stanisław Pużyński. He was my first teacher, the supervisor of my PhD thesis as well as the tutor of my postdoctoral dissertation. But this is only the half of the truth – Professor Pużyński shaped my views not only on psychiatry. I became mature in his company; I have aged in his company, too.

He has always been here, but now, as He is no longer, I feel obliged to tell a few words about Him to those who didn't know Him or knew Him rather casually, only in official situations. Professor Pużyński was not an easily approachable person. It would be rather difficult to call Him “friendly” as the word is popularly understood. He was definitely not a “buddy”, and that was something I truly valued and respected. That is why I believe that any form of making so important a person in the field of Polish psychiatry more recognizable is a good idea.

I met Professor Pużyński in the early fall of 1986. I do remember that encounter. He welcomed me in His former ground-floor office at Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (later, He was occupying another office on the first floor). He wore His favourite green waistcoat made from some plush material. The waistcoat was already worn out so it must have been His most beloved part of wardrobe. I liked that – there was a real touch of class about it. One could say that, as for today, it was almost “hip”.

I am sure that in the beyond, where Professor is reading these words (and He is reading for sure as He was always reading, and everything), He is just tapping his finger against His forehead and planning how to dress me down. It was always like that – I was writing and He was calling upon me to mend my ways. I was having inspiration and He was taking me to task. I was invariably planning to abolish something and He was watching over me to make sure that I wouldn't hurt myself while doing this. It is really precious when you can depend on someone that way.

But let's return to the first encounter and Professor's shoes – the shoes were even better than the waistcoat. They were nothing more nor less than the classic suede shoes – soft, suede boots, simply a dream that couldn't have been realised by such a wistful lad I used to be. The real suede shoes... I just couldn't sit quietly by something like that. And though I do remember that Professor was saying something to me, I can't recollect what exactly He said – I used to be as much wistful as flighty. All I can remember is that Professor asked me if I were interested in pursuing academic work. Quite convinced, I replied that I was absolutely not interested in anything like that so Professor, who, like the majority of people, used to hear what He wanted to hear, said: “Very well, so you will pursue academic work”. I was very fortunate.

Years were passing by and I was just trying to get out of Professor's way. I was fiddling around, doing something but I was pretty sure that Professor wouldn't like it that much. He was constantly repeating that I was trying to hold too many posts, that I finally had to decide what to do and "devote myself". I wasn't convinced; I started to believe that science was a kind of order, and I didn't want to become a monk. But that was something Professor truly believed in – for him science was an order, even an enclosed one.

Professor left me alone for a while; it wasn't His usual practice to pester people in the corridor or examine them in front of the ward. Quite the contrary. He always asked people to come to his office where He could reprimand them, but always in private and in a very calm manner. He really kept to that. So I can't even express my astonishment to Professor's firm, and in the corridor, reaction, to my answer that I would rather wait a bit with completing my PhD. He said: "If I were taller and stronger, I would bash you over the head!". To tell the truth, it was then that I truly realised how much He cared; and I didn't have any idea that He cared so much. The next day I started the research for my PhD thesis and from then on everything went quite fast. The "physical punishment" that was luring over me worked only because it was announced with love. Never before or after did I see so many emotions written all over Professor's face. Obviously, it doesn't mean that He was an emotionless person, but definitely He wasn't lavish with showing His feelings.

There was one exception, though – the conversations about our grandchildren. Within the past 5 years we both became grandfathers and that turned out to be another thing that we had in common. The presentation of photographs (numerous of mine, single of Professor's) and questions about our grandchildren's health constituted a fundamental part of each and every meeting. We stopped, however, talking about pets the moment Professor's beloved hamster died in unclear circumstances, as far as I can remember. I wouldn't have thought that Professor would be affected that much by the hamster's death; it was one of those few moments when the cover He used to hide behind, vanished.

It almost goes without saying that while writing about the deceased one should mention only honourable things. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be even Professor's silhouette if I omit the thing that Professor himself considered a great fault and weakness – as a compulsive smoker for many years, He despised himself for that and absolutely wasn't able to accept that defect. Having been then an enthusiast of nicotine myself, I asked Professor a few months after He gave up smoking how He was dealing with that, and He said: "Dealing with it is nothing difficult but finding a new point in life again – that's a different story...". I'm not sure if it was the result of such a declaration but soon after that I had a dream about Professor as a forestry worker (most probably that was a reminiscence of the green waistcoat, which I couldn't recollect seeing for many years then). Dragging on a cigarette, He invited me to His forester's lodge. I told Professor about that dream the next day. "My friend", He said, "what a beautiful dream you had! Tell me about that once again; I can smoke without any pricks of conscience only in your dreams ...". I was retelling Him that dream many times.

Obviously, Professor Puzyński was also an author, consultant, full and honorary member, supervisor and what not, but I just want to give priority to Professor's true face He revealed in informal situations so in those moments when only few were allowed to share with Him. If it hadn't been for his professional accomplishments, he wouldn't have been an authority for me, that's pretty clear. By if he hadn't been the man I think he was, I would have never been able to learn from Him the most important things. To use the language Professor would definitely approve of – it's not about the didactic but the formative role. Looking back, that is what I believe I'm left with while waiting for our next meeting.

Lukasz Świącicki