

Vinegar and willows – from aspirin to friendship

A tribute to Andrzej Szczeklik

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We used to call him Andrew. Andrzej was too much for a mid European tongue, living closer to the French language than to Polish pronunciation. Spelling and writing his family name correctly took years.

It all began in December 1978 – high mountain area during deep snowy winter, Davos, Zauberberg, Deutsche Heilstätte, Sanatorium of Hofrat Behrens, Hochgebirgsklinik Davos-Wolfgang in Switzerland, refuge and well-known chest hospital of international reputation, especially for patients with a disease we now call severe asthma. Therapy at that time was almost nonexistent, except for systemic steroids in nearly lethal doses. A young medical doctor met his Polish colleague on the occasion of a symposium on aspirin-induced asthma, a distinct subgroup of that syndrome. On stage, an attractive and charming Polish professor, qualification in internal medicine, allergologist, already a name in some rare types of asthma and idiosyncrasies that I never heard about, splendid appearance, fluent English, scientific lecture of superb quality, slides of top layout and design, discussion with my Swiss colleagues in Italian and French. He even apologized for badly understanding and not speaking German! Good joking Polish intellectual, really? My God! That's who I wanted to be when I grew up and eventually became an adult scientist.

Since Andrew strictly pointed out that I could not start from the top and my former medical director and head of Hochgebirgsklinik was interested in scientific results, I was sent to work and we ended up in a close cooperation with the Copernicus Academy of Medicine and Andrew Szczeklik. Our joint interest was nonallergic asthma and aspirin-induced asthma and everything that had to do with the syndrome using the selected patient groups we had in Davos. The target was to clarify stepwise the pathophysiology, biochemistry, clinical picture, and the natural history on the basis of a nationwide and then European database, later called AIANE. Together, we developed diagnostic and therapeutic procedures

that are still the basis of clinical work worldwide. The results gave rise to numerous scientific symposia, publications, and books. Doing all this, Andrew had this admirable attitude of bringing people together, lightening up their minds, stimulating their work, and focusing their activities, although we were separated by the iron curtain.

In hospital and laboratory, we had a wonderful time. Being an open-minded, helpful, and friendly character at first sight, Andrew was one of the hardest and most disciplined workers I ever saw when it came to real work. His striking ideas and many fruitful discussions always lead to a result, a project, the future.

Coming to Davos every year, Andrew Szczeklik soon started to bring his family with him which means a fully packed Polish car with his wife Maria and three little children of about 2, 6, and 10 years-old arriving after about 15-hour trip in Davos. We became friends more and more and after work we spent a nice time in our house in Davos. We shall never forget about his wife Maria telling us about queuing the whole day in different places of Krakow for getting the basic food for her family. As far as we could contribute, we helped the Szczeklik family a little by sending parcels with all the things that they were missing during these hard times in Poland.

When coming to Davos, Andrew's wife – Maria – would always pack the car full with her growing family and later, when the situation in Poland slowly improved, she would smuggle some Polish delicacies.

Passing the border, Andrew never knew what his wife had packed between the shoes, clothes, and skiing equipment. One day after his arrival, he asked my wife where he could probably buy a "jet bag" in Switzerland. "A what?", asked my wife, since she had never heard about this before. "This is a kind of a coffin you put on top of the car to be able to carry much more luggage with you," he said. And so we organized a jet bag and the Szczeklik family had less difficulty with the packing.

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It was a wonderful and particularly intensive time that we could spend together, watching the children grow up and become impressive, strong personalities. We also have good memories of our visits to Krakow, both for business and private meetings. Andrew was so proud to show us around this historical town. Visiting Krakow regularly for about 25 years, we were more and more surprised to see how greatly it developed, becoming the modern centre of the Lesser Poland with a wonderful historical heart.

In summary, science in Andrew's life was one side of the medal, the other was a man devoting himself to art, political and social affairs, and – in the last years – more and more to philosophical questions and theses. The portrait of Andrew would not be complete without seeing him in his private life, in his beliefs, in his country, in his city, in his family, in his church, which all seemed to me the centre and the soul of his family. All this left a deep impression in my memory.

Besides his merits in medical sciences, this kind of catharsis was the duty of his life and in the end – his great achievement. It will be the legacy of a brave, dedicated, and a wise patriot.

My wife and I are proud to have known him. Thank you for being our friend. Bye, bye Andrzej!