

My Master, Professor Kornel Gibiński, MD, PhD (1915–2012)

Pro memoria

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“Death can be delayed, but it is inevitable... It is the surest thing in the world that each of us will die. Why should we be frightened about death? It is a natural part of life. One should be afraid of illness but not of death.” These words come from a short interview which Professor Kornel Gibiński gave editor M. Goslińska after the death of Pope John Paul II. In the same interview, when asked if afraid of death, Professor says: “They still let me come to the hospital although I do not work anymore. What else can I do in life? I am 90 years old.”¹

I would like to comment on Professor’s words as a witness to his work, as his successor, one of his closest disciples, and a long-time coworker. Professor Kornel Gibiński actually worked in the Department of Gastroenterology in Katowice-Ligota, although not full-time, yet with great dedication until he was 90, offering us his great knowledge and experience, aiding decision-making in difficult cases, as well as conducting endoscopies with enviable confidence and exquisite gentleness so very much appreciated by the patients. Despite his age, he actively participated in the academic life, and the organizers of conferences and congresses would never stop to invite him to deliver keynote lectures. He would regularly travel to Warsaw and Cracow to participate in the committee meetings of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Polska Akademia Nauk – PAN) and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (Polska Akademia Umiejętności – PAU). One could often see him in our library where he would follow most recent publications in medical literature. He published a lot himself, in the last 20 years of his life focusing mainly on the problems of honesty and reliability in research. It was very difficult to keep pace with him, also in the literal sense: although forced to support himself with a walking stick after the unfortunate fall that

resulted in breaking his femoral neck bone, he still moved with agility that would make many a younger colleague pant.

A man of exceptional knowledge and incessant activity, he kept a distance to himself at all times; he was endearingly modest and possessed good sense of humor. This is how he reacted to the idea of naming after him the Central Teaching Hospital in Katowice-Ligota: “I have been asked if I agree to accept this honor. I thought to myself – had anybody asked Władysław Biegański, Tytus Chałubiński, Witold Orłowski, Andrzej Mielecki, Ludwik Rydygier, or Jan Mikulicz-Radecki to agree to such a nomination? At that time the room was brimming with kind feelings, so I believed it would be unkind to reject this rather illusive proposition. [It is an allusion to the celebration of his 90th birthday when Senator Krystyna Bochenek promised to apply to the authorities of the Silesian School of Medicine to name the hospital after him.] I answered jocularly that such honor is usually given posthumously; as the procedures usually need some time, I shall try to make short work of it.”^{2,3}

The procedures went, however, smoothly and, in September 2006, Professor could participate in the celebration of unveiling the plaque with his name on the building of the Central Teaching Hospital. He lived another 6 years, though the last 2 were marked by enormous suffering, which he bore with great humility. He passed away on 31 March 2012. We paid our last tribute to him on 4 April in the Cathedral of Christ the King in Katowice. His last journey took him to Cracow where he was born.

Professor Kornel Gibiński belonged to the generation whose lives were determined by the most dramatic war experience of the 20th century. He was born in a family with long patriotic and humanist tradition. Born on 7 September 1915 in

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Cracow, he graduated from the Jagiellonian University Faculty of Medicine in 1939, short before the outbreak of the Second World War. He began his professional career as a student when in 1935 he started to work in the Department of Physiology of the Jagiellonian University Faculty of Medicine, first as a volunteer and then as a junior assistant.⁴

During the Nazi occupation, he worked on voluntary basis in the 2nd Department of Internal Diseases, Jagiellonian University, while making his living as a family doctor in Cracow. In 1941, he married Wanda Ostrowska, a student of medicine whose studies were interrupted by the war. On 2 July 1944, he was arrested by the Nazis as a member of the Resistance Army and after a short incarceration in the Montelupich prison in Cracow, he was sent to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp to work in the quarry, and then – as a physician – he was sent to the Bautzen camp.⁴

After liberation, he returned to Cracow in May 1945 and started work as a senior assistant in the Department of Physiology and in St. Lazarus Hospital. In June 1945, he received doctoral degree after defending his dissertation, which he had finished before the war under the supervision of Professor Jerzy Kaulbersz. In November 1945, he was asked by Professor Aleksander Oszacki, his supervisor during the war, to join him in rebuilding the Wrocław University School of Medicine. After the sudden death of Professor Oszacki, he worked in Wrocław under the supervision of Professor Edward Szczeklik, first as an adjunct and then as an assistant professor.

In 1949, he made his habilitation at the Medical Faculty of the Wrocław University, and in 1954 he became the youngest professor in Poland. He received the title of full professor (professor *ordinarius*) only 8 years later, at the age of 47.⁵

In 1953, he joined the Silesian Medical Academy, which was opened 5 years earlier, and became involved in the development of the 3rd Department of Internal Diseases in Bytom (moved to Katowice in 1961), which was to run courses for fifth-year medical students. He headed the Department for 21 years. He organized the first endoscopy unit in Upper Silesia, which trained physicians from all over Poland. Soon his Department became one of the most important internist centers in Poland, while Professor himself, after residing in Upper Silesia for nearly a year, became the regional consultant for internal diseases. His authority was increasingly recognized both in the country and abroad as reflected by new functions and responsibilities that he was asked to fulfill in the subsequent years. He was elected vice-rector for research at the Silesian Medical Academy (1957–1959); he was director of the Institute of Internal Diseases at the Academy for nearly 10 years; he served on university committees; and, finally, he fulfilled critical functions in scientific institutions and societies.^{4,5}

In 1974, in a new building of the Central Teaching Hospital in Katowice-Ligota, he organized one of the first departments of gastroenterology in Poland, of which he was head until retirement in 1985. It became a world-famous center for gastroenterology. The Polish Gastroenterological Society was headquartered there, and the Professor was its founding father, first president (1976–1985), and then its Honorary President. Soon, the Polish Society became the member of the World Organization of Gastroenterology and of the European Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy, where he was vice-president in the years 1982–1986 and 1978–1982, respectively.^{4,5}

Professor Gibiński was also the member of the Polish Radiological Society, Polish Society of Internal Medicine, Polish Society of Physicians, New York Academy of Science, Royal Society of Medicine in London, International Society of Chronobiology, The Purkynie Society in Brno, and the World Health Organization Committee of Experts in Smoking and Health (1975–1982). He was also the member of the PAN (from 1964 – corresponding member; from 1973 – full member); active (full) member of the PAU (from 1990); long-time chairman of the PAN Committee for Experimental Therapy (1970–1991); honorary chairman of the Katowice branch of the PAN; as well as the founding father, chairman, and honorary chairman of the PAN Committee of Ethics in Science (1992) and the PAU Commission on Medical Ethics (1992–1998). He also initiated and coorganized the work of the Ethical Council at the Committee for Scientific Research (1997), as well as of the Bioethical Commission at the Silesian Medical Academy (1982). The latter was one of the first 3 initiatives in Poland that preceded the official state system introduced later to control experiments on humans.^{4,5}

Professor Gibiński got 5 honorary doctoral degrees: from the Silesian Academy of Medicine, the Jagiellonian University, the Medical Academy in Wrocław, as well as the Medical Universities in Łódź and Poznań. He also became honorary member of many Polish and international scientific societies, among others of the Polish Society of Internal Medicine and the Polish Gastroenterological Society. He was also awarded numerous honors including the Commander's Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Auschwitz Cross, Medal of the Commission of National Education, the first "Gloria medicinae" medal, Jędrzej Śniadecki Medal, and the Medal of the 600th Anniversary of the Jagiellonian University. The Professor was also holder of the most prestigious Silesian honors: Wojciech Korfanty Prize, Juliusz Ligoń Prize, and *Lux et Silesia*.^{4,6}

His bibliography comprises an impressive number of nearly 500 original papers published in renowned Polish and international journals in the fields of internal diseases, enzymology, cardiology, clinical pharmacology, gastroenterology, and ethics. He is the author of the first Polish

handbook on gastroscopy and a number of handbooks on endoscopy. There is no doubt that he was a man of vision in medicine: he inspired and directed the development of gastrology, cardiology, nephrology, isotope diagnostics, and clinical pharmacology. He was the pioneer of endoscopic gastroscopy. For years, he worked in clinical enzymology, a new branch of study and research that facilitated the development of diagnostic procedures in myocardial infarction, as well as liver and biliary tract diseases.⁵

Professor Gibiński educated a substantial number of specialists in internal diseases and gastroenterology. He supervised 43 doctoral and 15 postdoctoral research students, of whom 10 became full professors, the majority now hold chairs of various departments, and all have their own disciples and followers.⁴⁻⁶ They are all proud to have belonged to the “School of Gibiński”, which was a leading internist school in the second half of the 20th century in Poland. I was extremely lucky to become its member at the very beginning of my professional career and to learn, under the watchful and inspiring leadership of the Master, how to use reason and heart, that is, not just to broaden my knowledge and unravel the secrets of research but, first of all, to become a good physician and to acquire the skills of thorough examination, careful observation, accurate diagnosis, proper symptom interpretation, and conversation with the patient. Assisting Professor Gibiński in his daily ward rounds was for us the best lesson in practical holistic medicine. The good of the patient and the desire to bring relief from suffering would always guide all his professional activities. No new advances in technology or the greatest scientific achievements may ever overshadow this aim in the professional life of a physician. Fidelity to the principles as embodied by Professor Kornel Gibiński – an excellent scholar, great physician, and an exceptional man – is the most valuable thing he could ever leave us.

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