

# My remembrance of Professor Tadeusz Orłowski

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*Iamque opus exegi, quod nec Iovis ira nec ignis  
nec poterit ferrum nec edax abolere vetustas*  
– OVID

When we reminisce about Professor Tadeusz Orłowski, we usually think of his great contribution to the development of internal medicine, nephrology, dialysis treatment, and certainly transplantology. The grandeur of Professor Orłowski is undoubtedly related to his attitude, both as a doctor and a leading figure of the scientific life, and a person for whom the principle *Salus aegroti suprema lex* was not merely a phrase to be repeated on various occasions. Thus, Professor Orłowski took an active part in establishing medical ethics in Poland, being a true example, since *verba docent, exempla trahunt*.

He created a system known as “orłowszczyzna” (the Orłowski system). This concept encompassed discipline, punctuality, reliability and precision. It also meant putting the patient’s well-being before other matters and problems, and last but not least, great restraint with regard to one’s own benefits. I mentioned his reliability and punctuality, which were indeed legendary. The rounds would begin at 8 a.m. sharp (if someone’s watch showed different time, one could be sure it was fast or slow). Everyone would rise as he came in (what a pity this custom is currently obsolete). When a patient was to be discharged, his case history had to be ready and on the Professor’s desk (completed properly and with a discharge abstract).

During the rounds, Professor Orłowski would examine the assistants on different medical aspects concerning individual patients, usually in the corridor after having left the patients’ room and in the presence of students. It could be stressful as it was inappropriate for the assistants to appear ignorant in front of those whose knowledge they would test later on. One way or another, it was a very strong stimulus, which

compelled one to educate oneself continuously, while each individual patient was a separate “case report” (just as in the columns of the *New England Journal of Medicine*). Usually, the representatives of other medical fields would not be present, however, back then internal medicine was not as divided as it is today. Moreover, the Professor’s expertise went far beyond the scope of the internal medicine *sensu stricto*.

I mentioned that Professor Orłowski had high expectations regarding the patient case histories. Today, this may be seen as undue meticulousness; however, those expectations did serve a purpose, one of them being linguistic correctness. Professor Orłowski would carefully review the case histories, paying attention to this particular aspect, which also meant avoiding the use of foreign terminology whenever it was possible. Likewise, he would focus on the correctness and accuracy of scientific information and documentation. He would read the submitted research papers very carefully, paying attention to the reliability of figures and their compatibility with the content. For example, if a paper mentioned 35 patients and there would be 34 or 36 corresponding items in the figure, the author’s chances were poor. Nowadays, some would undoubtedly shrug their shoulders hearing this. However, the question remains whether the so often described instances of scientific unreliability, including those regarding the persons who have taken important posts in the academic and scientific world, are actually not the aftermath of lower standards governing scientific insight and criticism?

Professor Orłowski, therefore, taught us discipline, continued education, meticulous documentation and an impeccable attitude to the patient. He could be found at the hospital also during the weekends, and the Saturday rounds for those patients who were in the worst condition, were considered an established routine. Obviously, every evening he would call the doctor who was on duty.

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Back then, the access to literature was rather limited. Often on Sundays we would go to the Main Medical Library to order various items and only to find out, after a long waiting period, that most of them were not available. Fortunately, Professor Orłowski received the Current Contents (CC), which at that time was a true rarity. The Current Contents, fastened with a chain in the library (*sic!*), was a potential source of information on what was currently happening in science (obviously for those who were ready to spend some time each week to order the copies and often pay for the delivery). Either way, the success rate, based on my experience at least, was not too high, only about 10–15%; however, even this was worth the trouble. The additional advantage of the copy ordering lay in the fact that one would receive them in big envelopes with a metal “butterfly flap” at the back, which could then be used for mailing one’s own papers to foreign journals, that way they were qualified as “printed materials”, hence postal charges were considerably lower. At that time the copies received in such envelopes were a significant source of medical information, and Professor Orłowski had an impressive collection of them. Every week he would give out several of them to the members of our team, who would then report on their content at the weekly scientific meetings at the Department, and since 1974 the Transplantation Institute.

Professor Orłowski had a truly stout heart, he would always face adversities with courage and never give up. He underwent over 30 surgical procedures in his life, of which he talked half jokingly. He could distance himself from many matters, of which others spoke in a deadly serious manner. However, it was never with regard to a patient, who would always come first.

I recall an episode from the summer of 1983, when I received a message saying that my paper had been accepted for presentation at the international conference of the Experimental Hematology Society of Baltimore, and that I had been granted \$500 to cover the participation costs (at that time it would be enough to cover the costs, provided that the understanding organizers waived the registration fee). I was very excited by that unquestionable success, I entered the Professor’s office thinking that he would congratulate me. Instead he asked me who would stand in for me at patients’ beds while I would be abroad, and whether I had already arranged it. On every similar occasion he would always emphasize our priorities regarding the patients. Obviously I did go to Baltimore, but the lesson I learned about the necessity to control one’s emotions produced a positive effect.

Professor Orłowski would judge people by their work input and attitude towards life, not by their political views, social background or their connections. His personal standpoint strongly manifested itself in the late 1960s, the period of the infamous anti-Semitic campaign, when he tried

to support his colleagues, who had fallen victim to it. He would not give in to unfair pressure and if such a situation occurred (for example in order to speed up the kidney transplantation or include somebody in a dialysis treatment program), he would suggest that the inquirer gave the name of the patient to be removed from the list of those waiting for the same life-saving procedure.

Professor Orłowski was the embodiment of adherence to principles. If he was not convinced that an action was right, he did not hesitate to take a different stand, even if he would be in the minority. In this he resembled de Gaulle who used to say: *I was right whenever I was in the minority*. It well depicts the Professor’s character. With such an attitude he would often expose himself. It is a well-known fact that he held the position of the Department of Medical Sciences Secretary at the Polish Academy of Sciences (Polska Akademia Nauk – PAN), subsequently of the Associate Scientific Secretary (which at that time meant much more than just a title). It is beyond all doubt that he was an excellent candidate for much more important posts, and yet they were never given to him, certainly because of his uncompromising attitude, as a result of which he had many opponents. For he would never be guided by cold calculation and personal profits but by what was truly valuable, and in particular for the institution he worked for.

He would find a quick, accurate and brilliant riposte for every situation, and where others erred or wasted their time, he was the first to identify and describe the heart of the matter. I remember that during the scientific board meeting at one of the institutions, when the decision on whether to allow a certain candidate to present his doctoral thesis was to be taken, someone expressed their doubts whether such a thesis actually qualified for a doctoral degree at all. As a result we had a long discussion and several board members expressed their opinions, which naturally were divided. In the end, Professor Orłowski took the floor asking why the discussion had not taken place when the candidate was to be admitted into the doctoral program, since then it was the time to articulate such doubts, and not now when the candidate had almost completed the program. It was an obvious point, thus the discussion ended, *Roma locuta, causa finita*.

Professor Orłowski once told me: *One day you too will be in charge of an institution. Please remember that you will have two paths to choose: be the so called “good uncle” to everyone, turning a blind eye to low standards and negligence, etc. I would not advise this, as you will lead the institution to a collapse and you will be rightly blamed for it by all. If you choose the other path, which will require you to demand discipline and order, you stand a good chance of achieving the desired aims through a well functioning institution. Certainly, you will have enemies, but that is the price worth paying.*

As the president of the American Association of Medical Colleges said in his speech at the inter-

national conference “Conflict of interest and its significance in science and medicine”, organized by us in 2002, *keeping one’s interest in check is the very essence of the academic integrity*. Professor Orłowski was an excellent example of this principle and through his attitude he confirmed that despite growing commercialization of science and medicine and the erosion of the scientific information credibility, which was also related to a conflict of interests, at least the leading figures of the academic world should remain independent and remember that the search for truth should always be the main concern for a scientist. Doctors should provide treatment without yielding to commercial pressure. Of this too Professor Orłowski was a perfect example, even though he supervised many scientific grants, he would never collect remuneration for it. He conducted research, treated patients, taught students, and he did all that independently. Moreover, he conducted clinical studies, also from an independent position. The study on the beneficial effect of promethazine on the kidney allotransplant survival or the new method of clinical immunosuppression, i.e. the joint administration of the thymic tyrosine hormone and cyclophosphamide, also after a kidney transplant, can serve as an example here.<sup>1,2</sup>

Professor Orłowski could easily inspire others and his judgments were remarkably accurate. During the period of my graduate internship I conducted research on cellular immunity using the so-called leukocyte migration inhibition test. I ran the necessary tests in the laboratory which also served as the Professor’s coatroom (there was a locker inside, so we would often meet when Professor Orłowski was changing, while I was centrifuging leukocytes). It was then that I produced a research paper, which I showed to the Professor and I asked him where I should submit it to. He suggested the *Cellular Immunology*. I was really surprised and I did not believe in what I had heard, since at that time the *Cellular Immunology* enjoyed the highest prestige. I was indeed full of skepticism, nevertheless I placed three copies of my research paper in the envelope with the “butterfly flap”, I went to the Main Post Office at the Świętokrzyska Street... and after a year the paper came out!<sup>3</sup>

As a former director of the Institute of Immunology and Experimental Therapy at the PAN in Wrocław, I should also mention Professor Orłowski’s significant contribution to the development of this institution, which came in sixth in the last ranking prepared by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, out of over 60 evaluated research institutions in Poland. Professor Orłowski actively participated in the Institute’s work, practically since the beginning of his activity at the PAN, supporting the efforts of Professor Ślopek (a longtime director of the Institute) who wanted to acquire new premises for the Institute. For many years Professor Orłowski was a member of the Institute’s Scientific Board and

its Honorary President for life. Despite his old age and health problems he would come to Wrocław, just a few years ago, and stay in the Institute’s guest rooms, paying no attention to the fact that both the trip and guest rooms’ standards were in no way compatible with those that should be provided for a personage of his rank. In reality neither luxuries nor amenities mattered for Professor Orłowski, especially if he devoted his time to a concept which, in his opinion, was worth it.

*There are two distinctive phrases in Poland: something pays off and something is worthwhile. If something pays off, it means that it brings profit, generates income and that it was a good deal. On the other hand, if something is worthwhile, it pertains to certain values. Naturally, not everything that is worthwhile pays off. Undoubtedly however, and I am absolutely sure of that, not everything that pays off is worthwhile in life.* These are the words of a great authority, Professor Władysław Bartoszewski, and I am convinced that they also describe the outlook that Professor Tadeusz Orłowski had on life.

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