

## OBITUARY

**Professor Wojciech Rowinski (1935–2014)**

Maciej Kosieradzki

Medical University Warsaw, Department of General and Transplantation Surgery, 59 Nowogrodzka St, Warsaw, Poland

On March 14th, after a year of brave struggle with acute myeloid leukemia, 2001–2003 ESOT president, Professor Wojciech Rowinski passed away.

Born in 1935, his childhood was not spared from the horrors of World War II. When in the mood, he used to tell me about bombings, and also about playing in the ruins of Warsaw leveled down by the Nazis.

The son of a famous radiology professor, after the divorce of the parents, he was raised by his mother, a modest math teacher, in a feminine home, and adopted honor, sincerity and truthfulness as elementary virtues.

In the midst of the years of Stalinism, when asked by the head of his college why he wouldn't join the communist youth party, he simply answered: "You know I can't. I'm a churchgoer."

He used to say his choice of professional carrier was mostly a matter of luck: Inspired by his older sister, who was already a medicine student and with the wild card of being the best student of the college in hand which granted him entry to any university in Poland, he entered medical school. He graduated from the Medical School of Warsaw in 1958 and spent 2 years of postgraduate internship in the Institute of Hematology with no salary at all, making his living on medical editorship. There he met his first mentor, Dr Andrzej Trojanowski, a surgeon who had taught him everything on physical examination of patients, "from head to toe," an ability he cherished and built up over his entire life and put a lot of effort passing it to us years later.

In 1961, Dr Rowinski began surgical internship at the Royal Wolverhampton Hospital in the UK. In spite of the peak of the Iron Curtain and Cold War, he came back to Poland a year later to begin his residency in the 1st Department of Surgery in Warsaw, as a volunteer.

When his boss, Professor Jan Nielubowicz, got an offer for a research fellowship from Department of Nephrology at Peter Brent Brigham Hospital, Boston, all his attendings declined the offer to go along with him. Dr Rowinski, then a young resident, asked if he could go and was accepted.

Thus, in 1964, he went to Harvard Medical School—a leading center in renal transplantation at that time—and worked as a research fellow with John Merrill and Joseph Murray and forged a lifetime friendship with Nicolas Tilney. During his forthcoming visits to the United States, not only he became a fellow of ASTS, but his straightforwardness and likability won him the friendship of Mark Hardy,



John Najarian, David Sutherland, Barry Kahan, and many other prominent figures in transplantation.

After he got home in 1965, preparations for the kidney transplantation had already been set in motion, and on January 26, 1966, Danusia Milewska, an 18-year-old nursing student with renal failure, got her kidney transplant from a deceased donor, a donation after cardiac death. Wojtek Rowinski assisted in surgery and took care of her after the first successful transplantation in Poland.

At the same time, Wojciech Rowinski was also an extremely prolific researcher. As with majority of Dr Nielubowicz's employees, he worked mornings in surgery and afternoons (which often lengthened into nights) in the animal laboratory of experimental surgery. As early as in 1967, by immunizing horses and rabbits, he developed anti-human lymphocyte serum and globulin ready to be used in animals and humans, and assessed its effect on skin, kidney, heart and liver rejection in pigs and rats.

When the 1st Department of Surgery moved to another hospital in 1976, Dr Rowinski suffered a forced break in his transplantation adventure until 1981, when he became the head of the Department of General Surgery of Child Jesus Hospital, which soon turned into General and Transplantation Surgery. Until his retirement in 2006, he remained the head and *spiritus movens* of the department, which performed approximately 100 renal, 15 pancreatic, and 40 liver transplantations a year. However, when I think what was so special about him, I see accountability, diligence, and profound humanity. He was never in a hurry in front of his patients and knew them all very well. When he was leaving work late in the evening, he used to make a quick round

before he left. Once, unaware that he had knocked off, I called him half an hour later to give him an update. Even then, he listened to me patiently and then asked if I know what was the potassium of Mr X or when Mrs Y last had her bowel movement and that I better check on that once again.

On the other hand, we were allowed to seek his advice regardless of the hour of the night. He cared for his employees too: He helped to advance our careers, promoted PhDs and docentships, and organized lucrative contracts in the Middle East when a surgeon's salary in Poland hovered around \$30 a month. When two of his students were arrested for participation in anticommunist strikes in the 1980s, he rescued them from being expelled from the medical school and gave them a job afterward.

He always remembered who in the Coorenor project loves Polish traditional plum chocolates, and that last time they met, he gave Dr Sollinger a new tie, which he liked very much. He was fond of making small gifts such as these.

Dr Rowinski started his nearly 50-year-long career in transplantation when there were no legal regulations, no established financial support, and society was, at best, cautious about this method of treatment. He actually fathered our Transplantation Act and all its amendments, made sure criteria for brain and circulatory death were established, and with the help of Janusz Walaszewski, created a national coordinating system for multi-organ recoveries which later evolved into Poltransplant. He encouraged the development of many transplantation programs across the country, designed formal residency training of transplant physicians that became the base for EBSQ examinations, founded, and

for some time presided over, the Polish Transplantation Society, and authored nearly 300 publications indexed in PubMed. After his "retirement" (although as far as I know he never really retired, working 12 to 14 hours a day for the sake of transplantation), he designed nationwide surveys of attitudes toward donation and transplantation, gave dozens of lectures, met with Catholic priests and politicians, and managed to triple donation rates in two slowest regions of the country.

Without his relentlessness and perseverance, our system would probably still be struggling half-way from the point we know now. He never cared for gratitude or financial compensation for what he did, and he never made a lot of money on surgery.

And yet he fathered the transplant organization, which has saved the lives of more than 24 000 patients so far and is capable of performing 1200 kidney, 300 liver, 100 heart, and 50 pancreatic transplants a year as well as hand and face transplantations.

At the end of his life, he himself became a transplant patient after bone marrow transplantation for leukemia. That gift of a year of life meant so much to him and his family; after his condition took a turn for the worst, his wife Joanna still wrote a touching thank-you letter to the anonymous donor.

Charles H. Bennett, an information physicist, believes that when a man dies, a lot of his true being is preserved in memory of his relatives, friends, and consequences of his deeds. This said, Dr Wojciech Rowinski, our teacher, mentor, and friend, is not gone, but will remain in our loving memory forever.