

Memorial Minute in honor of Piotr Decowski
Read by Malgorzata Pfabe, at the November 19, 2014 Faculty Meeting

Dear colleagues:

As you know, Professor Piotr Decowski, a highly respected member of the Physics Department for more than 20 years, died in Warsaw, Poland, on May 14, 2014. All who knew and loved him, his family, students and friends are deeply saddened by the premature death of this brilliant physicist, who was deeply involved in research and teaching.

Piotr was born in Lwow in January 1940, shortly after the second World War started when Lwow was occupied by the Soviet Union. Before the second World War Lwow belonged to Poland; today it is in Ukraine. In 1939 Piotr's father, a PhD microbiologist, and an officer of the Polish army was evacuated to Romania and later to France, Switzerland, and finally to England. Piotr's mother with her two sons managed to join the family in occupied Poland. Piotr's father came back to Poland in 1947 when he saw his younger son, Piotr, for the first time. In 1947 the government announced the first amnesty for those who opposed the development of communism in Poland or fought on the western front. Many people returned to Poland and got into prison. Some, like Dr Decowski were lucky to avoid this fate. At the age of 6 Piotr entered elementary school and later graduated to high school. He was always an excellent student. His literature teacher was sure that Piotr would become a writer and that mathematics and physics would not to be for him!

In 1956, as a 16 years old high school senior, Piotr won the first prize in the national physics competition, called the Olympics in Physics. In the previous year he got second place. This was the beginning of his future academic career. Winning the Olympic diploma opened the possibility to choose any university and field of study Piotr wanted. He chose to study in the department of physics at the University of Warsaw. Over the next 5 years he was one of the best students in his class. He specialized in experimental nuclear physics and got his Master's degree in 1961, and his PhD in 1967 from the University of Warsaw. Immediately after getting his Master's degree Piotr became a member of the research and teaching faculty in the department of physics at University of Warsaw. He kept this association until 1990 when he joined Smith College.

During his academic career, he traveled a lot and carried on his research in many excellent nuclear physics laboratories in Europe and the USA. He had to travel to perform his experiments because at this time Poland did not yet have any higher level accelerator. His first long stay abroad was in the sixties at the Joint Institute of Nuclear Research in Dubna, USSR, an institute with which the University of Warsaw collaborated. While in Dubna, Piotr was never afraid to help his Russian colleagues by bringing for them, journals, books and music that were forbidden in the USSR. Once he was asked to bring several issues of Time magazine. He found a Time cover page with a picture of Lenin, based on a movie about him. He put together many other issues of Time covered by the one with Lenin. Lenin's picture assured the Russian custom officers that everything was fine! Nobody even looked at what was hidden deeper in his suitcase!

Piotr got married in 1972 to Ineke and had two sons. The older, Patrick, is a professor of physics in Amsterdam. The younger Olaf is a mechanical engineer.

During his many scientific trips Piotr spent five years working at the department of physics of the University of Utrecht in Netherlands, and cooperated with German scientists in Juelich. Some of his experiments were performed in Grenoble, France. He worked also in the National Cyclotron Laboratory in Michigan State University and had a close contact with UMass Amherst and Stonybrook. In more recent years Piotr worked at Stanford Linear Accelerator and Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility.

Piotr's research work resulted in four books: The Atomic Nucleus, Encyclopedia of Contemporary Physics, Encyclopedia of Technology, Encyclopedia of Physics, and in over 100 articles published in peer reviewed international journals. His works were extensively cited. Some of his recent papers were done in collaboration with Stanford and Jefferson Laboratories and were related to major questions, sometimes strange like, for example "How Strange is the Proton?" Piotr did also two major physics textbook translations from English to Polish. The high quality of Piotr's research resulted in attracting several grants from the National Science Foundation.

During his tenure at Smith he spent his sabbaticals and part of his summers at Stanford in the Jefferson Lab. In summers he used to take his students with him. His Smith College students built and tested particle detectors, worked on data analysis and developed very useful computer software. He showed that bright and committed undergraduate students can indeed participate in valuable research. Piotr's students were always welcome in the laboratories where he worked. Piotr was an excellent scientific collaborator and everybody liked to work with him. Once, during a collaboration meeting at Stanford when he said that he would spend his next sabbatical there, he got a standing ovation.

Piotr was always very generous with his time. He did a lot of service for Smith and for his profession. Because of his wisdom he was asked to do a lot and he never said no.

He served as the Head of the Nuclear Physics Division of the Institute of Experimental Physics at Warsaw and later served as a Deputy Director of the Institute of Experimental Physics. He was also the Secretary General of Polish Physical Society. While at Smith, he participated in the work of many important committees. He also served as chairman of New England section of American Physical Society and a president of Smith chapter of Sigma Xi.

At Smith Piotr become one of the best and most popular teachers. Students liked his classes and were happy to work in his laboratories. Thanks to Piotr's knowledge and wisdom the physics department made some important curricular changes under his leadership. This amazing and wonderful teacher was always able to get students interested in the material he was teaching. Many students chose physics as their field of studies because Piotr was able to make it extremely interesting. Two weeks ago the physics department organized a symposium to celebrate the life of Piotr. Eighteen of Piotr's former students came and some presented their scientific work demonstrating how they used the knowledge and skills learned from him. They are a living legacy of Piotr's life. His students would truly "walk through walls for him."

Piotr's involvement in research and his excellent teaching brought him many national and international medals and awards. He got awards for his PhD and his habilitation theses. For twenty years of excellent teaching and research, Piotr was awarded the Golden Cross of merit and the highest Polish medal for education.

Piotr had many hobbies. He loved music, dancing, theater, traveling, skiing, kayaking and swimming. He was very popular among his friends and colleagues. Everybody wanted to work with him and spend their free time with him. He was a gentle leader, always helpful and knowledgeable. His foremost pleasure was staying in his summer place in Mikolajevo, in the northern part of Poland. Every summer in order to popularize science, Piotr and his friends organized a series of public science lectures for the local community in Sejny close to Mikolajevo. He remained academically active until the very end. His latest work in collaboration with the Catania Laboratory for Nuclear Physics will be published shortly.

I believe that many of us, especially Piotr's students feel lucky that our paths crossed with his and that we had a chance to learn from him and benefit from our interaction with him. We have all been touched by his brilliance and his gentle human spirit.

Although his life was cut early, memories of this wonderful man will stay with us forever.

Malgorzata Pfabe
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