

## In Memoriam: Roman Laskowski

Nearly six months have passed since Professor Roman Laskowski – Romek to his friends – died, and it is still hard to believe that I will no more see his lean figure hovering over the heads of passersby in a Kraków street. I do not even remember when I first met him – it seems that I knew him always. And I always admired him – as a scholar and as a man. His outstanding achievements in the field of Polish and Slavic linguistics – and he was one of the best contemporary Polish linguists of truly international renown – have been appreciated by several generations of Slavicists. And not only.

An English philologist, who on several occasions tackled the Polish language using intuition of a native speaker rather than theoretical knowledge about the system, I felt honoured by his invitation to become assistant editor of *Studies in Polish Linguistics*. His brainchild, the journal was launched in 2004. I remember very distinctly the day when Romek came to see me in Collegium Paderevianum and shared with me his idea of founding a journal that would become a forum on which both Polish and foreign linguists could present the results of their research and discuss scholarly issues of common interest. He said the forum would be open to proponents of all theoretical frameworks, working within all linguistic paradigms. It was his open-mindedness, the readiness to consider views and attitudes of “the Other” that I always appreciated so much. I felt both shy and happy to accept the invitation, even more so that he was then known as a pioneer of generative phonology and the author of the first work on the Polish sound system written within the generative model, while I was still ploughing through the intricacies of the cognitivist theory of language. It was much later that he wrote in the review of my paper written for SPL: “I agree with your conclusion: intuitive component is unavoidable in our interpretation of polysemy. It is a long time since I stopped believing in the possibility of making a description of language that would be based upon strict taxonomizing.” And I was happy once again: professor Laskowski agreed with my conclusion!

Ten years have passed since the publication of the first issue of SPL. In the *Introduction*, written on behalf of the editorial board, Romek wrote: “We would like to acknowledge the debt of gratitude to the authors for taking the risk of having their contributions published in the periodical under organization.” These were the beginnings. With Romek serving as editor-in-chief SPL became a full-fledged scholarly periodical of high international reputation;

on the list of its contributors one can find names of scholars representing all linguistic paradigms and all stages of academic career, and among members of the editorial board there are prominent linguists of international renown, many of whom were Romek's disciples and/or his personal friends. He served as editor-in-chief until 2012; celebrating the tenth birthday of SPL would have given him much pleasure, as would the high rank of 8 "ministerial credits" awarded to its contributors, who now certainly consider having their texts published there as a privilege rather than a risk. When in 2012 we (meaning Romek as editor-in-chief and myself as assistant editor) transferred our duties to younger colleagues, Romek sent an e-mail, inviting the new editor, professor Ewa Willim, and me to celebrate with a glass of wine the inauguration of the new team taking charge of the periodical. He said he would propose the place and the date as soon as he got back home. At that time we could not know that the celebration was not to be...

All those who met Roman Laskowski, however briefly, or who had the privilege of being his friends, respected him as a man of great courage. Indeed, he did not hesitate to stick to and to express his opinions – personal, professional or political – whatever the cost and against all odds. In general, he was very tolerant, but did not tolerate ignorance or chutzpah, and announced his objections openly, even if this meant bad looks from people more inclined to vote for a compromise. He was very active in the Solidarity movement (as deputy chairman of the Solidarity branch founded at the Kraków section of the Polish Academy of Sciences and member of the all-Poland Solidarity negotiations committee for all sections of the Polish Academy of Sciences in the country, which meant constant harassment by the militia and security forces. Arrested under Martial Law, he was released only to join immediately the activities of the underground Solidarity. Member of the Małopolska Regional Committee, head of the Committee's program team and founder of the underground periodical *Biuletyn Małopolski*, he was finally forced to leave the country. In Sweden, where he became head of the Department of Slavic Languages at the University of Gothenburg, Laskowski worked as a researcher, academic teacher, and ambassador of the Polish language, Polish culture and Polish scholarship. In particular, he pursued the issue of the status of Polish amongst emigré children. The monograph presenting the results of his research provides ample evidence for the fundamental thesis that underlies contemporary linguistics: the priority of dynamic over static meaning.

In the years following his return to Poland in 2001 Romek combined academic work with social and political activity; he became co-founder of the social movement called Movement for Democracy (*Ruch na Rzecz Demokracji*). The e-mail correspondence dated from March 2007 and concerning the then ongoing process of *lustracja*, initiated at our University, clearly shows Romek's principled courage and determination. I felt – and still feel – privileged to have been one of the addressees of those letters.

Saddened by the news of his death, many representatives of Slavic linguistics in Poland and abroad wrote to the present editor-in-chief of SPL, recalling Roman Laskowski as their mentor, always willing to help younger scholars with his experience and expertise. Professor Hèlène Włodarczyk, head of the Slavic Studies at the Sorbonne, who first met him in Kraków when she was a young doctoral student, remembers her appreciation of “a brilliant young professor’s” advice. The prominent Polish phonologist Professor Jerzy Rubach reminisces about how much he appreciated talking to Romek about phonology, the love of which they shared. Professor Gerd Hentschel of the university of Oldenburg uses his perfect Polish to recall some of the anecdotes that Romek told him when they met, in Germany or in Poland. Marisa Rivero of the University of Ottawa revives her memories of his visit to her university. Many of those who – like Professor Barbara Bacz of the University of Laval – might have not known him well, remember him fondly... But the memories go beyond Romek’s outstanding professional expertise and extraordinary personality. His friend and colleague, the Russian linguist Elena Paducheva, remembers Romek as “an incarnation of honor and dignity,” and the Swiss Slavicist Daniel Weiss recalls him as “the ideal incarnation of a Polish nobleman”. Indeed, Romek’s impeccable manners matched the nobility of his mind and soul. He was a noble man – in every sense of the word. Anna Wierzbicka has called him a Good Man, and the two capitals speak for themselves.

My last meeting with Romek was in a Kraków hospital – I came to visit an in-patient, and he had arrived for his checkup. His physical suffering was visible, yet his spirit was high. It was certainly difficult for him to get up from the hospital bench, but he did get up anyway. He could not think about staying seated when talking to a woman... This was Romek – indefatigable and persevering, a true gentleman.

After Romek’s death Professor Włodarczyk wrote: “To be in Kraków in future and not to be able to phone him will be sad indeed.” It will be sad – not to be able to phone or see Romek – for all those who were lucky to know him.

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