

Professor Jerzy Szapiro

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Professor Jerzy Szapiro was born on 7 February 1920 in a family of Jewish physicians. He had an elder brother who was also a medical practitioner. His youngest son Jacek is a neurosurgeon, and thus continues the family's medical tradition in the third generation. After graduating from Warsaw's Duke Poniatowski grammar school in 1937, Jerzy Szapiro enrolled at the Warsaw University's Faculty of Medicine. His grade record book had a stamp stating "place in odd-numbered seats", which meant he had to listen to lectures while standing behind the last row of seats in the lecture hall. What he gained during his university days, in addition to education, was a scar on the head – a grim memento of a run-in with members of the right-wing National Youth movement.

Inevitably, with the advent of the Holocaust, Jerzy's ghetto in the university's lecture hall was replaced with the walled ghetto in Warsaw. Initially, Szapiro worked as a medical trainee in the Jewish Hospital in Czyste. After the establishment of the Jewish ghetto, he relocated to the typhus unit of the Stawki hospital. He continued his medical studies in secret courses organized by Prof. Juliusz Zweibaum, and even held the function of head of the medicine students' club.

During that time Szapiro first met his future mentor and friend Jerzy Choróbski, who came to the ghetto hospital to perform a surgery in a patient with paralysis of the lower limbs caused by a tumour located in the spinal canal.

He left the ghetto in November 1942 with his parents and his brother Marek. The family survived thanks to the generosity of spirit, courage and determination of the Petri family living in the Warsaw's district of Wawer, who were later recognized as Righteous among the Nations. Two years spent hiding in the cellar brought Jerzy pulmonary tuberculosis.

After the WWII, Szapiro continued his medical studies and, on the last day of March 1947, he was awarded his medical diploma. The following day he reported for work at the Neurosurgery Department headed by Associate Professor Jerzy Choróbski.

In 1949, Jerzy Szapiro married Maria Danuta Książkiewicz, also a medical practitioner.

During the next several years spent working at the Department he held weekly scientific meetings which included lectures mainly based on reviews of medical literature, English studies in particular. Also, in collaboration with Prof. Greniewski, he organized teaching courses for assistants in the field of cybernetics, which was regarded as a bizarre scientific discipline in Szapiro's days.

In 1951, Szapiro defended his PhD thesis "Makropsje i mikropsje jako równoważnik napadów padaczkowych" ["Macropsias and micropsias as an equivalent of epileptic seizures"] in which he claimed that the recognition of certain mental signs as purely primary is a consequence of an erroneous interpretation of the phenomenon. The claim was not particularly well-received by specialists in the field.

In 1954, he was awarded the academic title and post of Associate Professor (docent).

In the meantime, due to his pulmonary tuberculosis, Szapiro underwent thoracoplasty, which was considered a radical surgical procedure at the time.

Year 1956 saw a change in the position of Head of the Neurosurgery Department in Łódź. Professor Lucjan Stępień was transferred to Warsaw and the position was taken over by Jerzy Szapiro, an Associate Professor at the time. It was not until 1961 that he was awarded the title of Professor Extraordinarius. He became full professor (Professor Ordinarius) in 1976.

Jerzy Szapiro arrived in the Department half-way through the academic year after spending several months in neurosurgery centres in England, where he developed detailed plans about the operation and scientific profile of the Department which he was to head for many years to come. At that time, the Neurosurgery Department in Łódź was already a well-established and successfully functioning medical centre with numerous staff including several 2nd grade specialists. It was a period when Polish neurosurgery was backward compared to many foreign countries in terms of diagnosis and treatment of vascular diseases. Therefore, Prof. Szapiro devoted the first years of his work in Łódź to catching up with the rest of the world. To his undeniable credit, he was able to inspire not only the entire staff working in the Department, but also head staff at the Radiology Unit, to pursue this goal. He was the initiator and co-organizer of the Neuroradiology Laboratory which became Poland's first unit to perform cerebral artery angiography on a routine basis. The new Laboratory opened up new possibilities for the treatment of vascular diseases of the brain in Łódź. The Neurosurgery Department and the Neuroradiology Laboratory in Łódź soon attained a leading rank in Poland.

Many radiologists and neurosurgeons were sent to Łódź from other medical establishments to complete training in the technique and interpretation of angiographic examinations. In fact, the Department in Łódź was the first medical centre in Poland to perform complete intracranial resections of cerebral aneurysms.

In the second half of the 1950s researchers in Łódź focused chiefly on vascular topics, mainly the problem of inadequate cerebral circulation and the assessment of activity and efficiency of collateral circulation in such cases. Both the area of research and the original approach used in investigating these medical problems, which were intensively studied worldwide at that time, caused a rise in scientific activity not only among the Department's assistants but also medical practitioners working in other departments and units engaged in this line of research. Two years later research teams introduced a methodology of study and harmonized their scientific collaboration. Starting in 1958, the number of articles published by the Neurosurgery Department's staff in Polish and foreign journals began to rise. Over the next decade it exceeded 50, while the number of conference papers and presentations was even higher. One of the most spectacular outcomes of collaboration between physicians of different specialties was the monograph entitled "Z zagadnień fizjopatologii krążenia krwi w mózgu" ["Issues in the

physiopathology of cerebral circulation"] edited by Prof. Szapiro and published by the Łódź Scientific Society, dealing predominantly with haemodynamics. There were also two habilitation theses and one doctoral dissertation within this line of research.

Another major study area in the Department was, largely due to day-to-day medical practice and social demand, craniocerebral injury. In the initial period researchers concentrated on the status and role of angiographic examinations in the diagnosis of post-injury compressive complications and intracranial hypertension syndrome both secondary to injury and of other aetiologies. Approximately 20 articles relating to this area of neurosurgery were published in Polish and foreign journals. In addition, it was a prominent topic of the Department's teaching activity, mainly in post-graduate courses. Major scientific interest in craniocerebral injury also resulted in three doctoral and two habilitation theses prepared by the Department's staff. Particularly interesting in the Department's research into injury are works discussing deceptive symptomatology of intracranial complications and multiple compressive complications.

Finally, the third major area of study in the Department was intracranial hypertension. Among a number of publications and reports, the most prominent topic was cerebral gliomas, studied for many years by the Department's staff under the supervision of Prof. Szapiro. The studies, based on thorough clinical analyses, were discussed at two conferences organized by the Polish Society of Neurosurgeons in Łódź: in 1966 and 1978. Cerebral gliomas were also analyzed in two doctoral dissertations. Intracranial hypertension, in turn, was addressed in numerous studies investigating tumours of other than glial origin and intracranial compressive processes of non-cancerous aetiology. A total of five doctoral dissertations were produced within this line of research.

A special place among Prof. Szapiro's scientific interests was occupied by the problem of "misleading symptoms", i.e. signs which are seemingly incompatible with the location and nature of the focus of compression. The issue was addressed in a number of his publications, and supplemented with research into pseudotumor cerebri. It is, in fact, one of the leading topics discussed in the monograph authored by Prof. Szapiro and published in 1972 in English, entitled: "Essays and Studies in Neurosurgery and Reflections at Random". The scope of the monograph is not restricted to reports on laborious clinical studies but also includes the author's thoughts on clinical situations that are inconsistent with traditionally accepted schemes.

Crucially, the Department duly recognized the importance of conducting research in teams comprising representatives of various medical disciplines as valuable from the point of view of teaching and scientific merit. The multi-disciplinary approach was manifested in several dozen studies. Long-standing academic cooperation between the Neurosurgery Department and the Radiology Unit resulted in five doctoral dissertations. Also worth mentioning is the close cooperation with neuropathology specialists, which proved extremely productive and fruitful due to the admirable personality of the late lamented Associate Professor Andrzej Głuszczyk and his successor Dr Janusz Alwasiak. As for the area of oncology, one doctoral dissertation and one habilitation thesis concerned the spinal cord and its diseases.

In the early 1960s, attention began shifting to problems associated with extremely grave conditions, with efforts undertaken to resolve certain problems in cooperation with anaesthesiologists. It was made possible thanks to the permanent presence of anaesthesiology specialists: initially Associate Professor J. Wąsowski and later also Dr M. Graczyk and Dr B. Błaszczak. It was a period marked by intensive clinical and experimental studies into gas exchange in the brain in patients suffering from intracranial hypertension. For example, the habilitation thesis of Prof. Jerzy Brzeziński was completed in collaboration with the Neurosurgery Department in Lund. Intracranial hypertension and extremely grave conditions were discussed in yet another doctoral dissertation prepared in the Neurosurgery Department and four doctoral dissertations written by anaesthesiologists and supervised by Prof. Szapiro. The same topics dominated the Round Table Conference organized by the Department jointly with the Neurology Department in Bydgoszcz. The Conference was held in 1974 to mark an anniversary of the establishment of the Bydgoszcz Branch of the Gdańsk Medical Academy.

In 1968, after Prof. Szapiro was unfairly and unjustly forced to resign as Head of the Department, Jerzy Brzeziński (still an Associate Professor at the time) was appointed to the position.

It was not until 19 May 1981 that Prof. Szapiro received a letter from Prof. Antoni Kotewko, Rector of the Łódź Medical Academy, in which he was informed that the Senate Committee and the Senate of the Łódź Medical Academy had decided to rectify the undeserved decision issued in 1968. The decision was thus recognized as groundless and caused solely by political factors.

The authorities of the Academy were obliged to appoint Prof. Szapiro to the position of Head of the Chair of Neurosurgery, if such a unit was ever to be established within the structure of the Academy.

The existing Institute of Diseases of the Central Nervous System and Sensory Organs, however, did not provide for such a function. Promises were made to Prof. Szapiro and Prof. Brzeziński that the Chair of Neurosurgery headed by Prof. Szapiro would soon be created. According to plans, the Chair was supposed to comprise the Neurosurgery Department to be run by Prof. Brzeziński and the Angiology Unit to be supervised by Prof. Goetzen. The plans were never implemented, though. Following the imposition of martial law in Poland, in view of commonly known support for striking students expressed by Prof. Szapiro on a number of occasions and the passive attitude of his team of assistants, the Rector never implemented the Senate's resolution passed in May 1981. Given the circumstances, Prof. Szapiro, while still a member of the Neurosurgery Department's staff, accepted the offer of becoming the Administrator of the Anaesthesiology Unit. He held the position for three years.

After retiring in 1984, Szapiro remained scientifically active. For example, he co-authored the work on "Prognostic Factors in Microvascular Decompression for Trigeminal Neuralgia" which was published in 1985.

Throughout his scientific career Professor Szapiro amassed 108 publications including 25 in foreign scientific journals, an album monograph "Essays and Studies in Neurosurgery and Reflections at Random" (1972) containing conclusions from the most important experiments and thoughts, as well as essays addressing issues which often go beyond strictly medical topics.

He gave a lot of lectures both in Poland and abroad (USA, UK, France).

Professor Szapiro supervised 19 doctoral dissertations and 12 habilitation theses. He mentored more than a dozen neurosurgeons, several of whom are professors and/or heads of hospital departments in Poland and abroad (UK, Germany).

Professor Szapiro was a Founding Member of the Polish Society of Neurosurgeons and, from 1990, an honorary member of the Society. He was also a Correspondent Member of the French Society of Neurosurgery (from 1961) and a Correspondent Member of the American Society of Neurosurgeons (from 1970). He participated as a member in the activities of the Neurological Sciences Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN).

In 1966 he was granted Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, while on 7 February 2010, during his 90th birthday celebrations, he was honoured with the Commander's Cross of the same Order.

Last year, on 3 May 2011, Professor passed away – to report for his Eternal Duty Shift.