

## Professor Marian Zembala (1950–2022) In memoriam

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Professor Marian Zembala, MD, PhD — an outstanding Polish cardiac surgeon and transplant surgeon, scientist, long-time academic teacher and educator of young people, director, and also a great lover of music, poetry, theater, painting, and sailing. He was born on February 11, 1950, in Krzepice near Częstochowa. He graduated from the Medical University of Wrocław in 1974 with honors and received the Primus Inter Pares award of the Polish Minister of Health, with a possibility to choose the place of work. He chose the Heart Surgery Department of the Medical Academy in Wrocław, which was his dream. Alongside his clinical work, he developed his scientific interests. In 1979, at the age of 29, he defended his doctorate with honors. His work in the Wrocław Clinic also provided an opportunity to go for his dream internship abroad, e.g. to the hospital in Utrecht, the Netherlands, where he worked under the supervision of Prof. F. Hitchcock (1981–1985). During his stay in the Netherlands, he initiated the largest post-

World War II program of Polish Heart Poolse hartpatientjes naar Nederland, under which more than 500 Polish children with severe congenital heart defects were operated on free of charge between 1981 and 1992. For this ambitious project, he received an honorary award from Utrecht University and an award from the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Józef Glemp.

He returned to Poland in 1985, accepting Prof. Zbigniew Religa's offer to work in the team in Zabrze. This was the beginning of the next stage of Prof. Zembala's professional life — together with his mentor, Prof. Zbigniew Religa, he co-created cardiac surgery and transplantology in Zabrze, which he successfully developed for the next 30 years, especially after taking over the chairmanship in 1999. Over the years, the Department has become a leading Polish center with the widest range of cardiac surgical procedures performed in adults and children. The achievements of Prof. Marian Zembala are imposing and very well known. The main



**Figure 1.** Prof. Marian Zembala

areas of his professional interests focused on modern treatment of valvular heart disease, ischemic heart disease, pulmonary embolism, heart failure, mechanical circulatory support, and heart and lung transplantation in adults and children. His deep belief that limits are there to be crossed made him a pioneer of many modern treatment methods, which he successfully introduced into clinical practice in Zabrze. He performed the first lung transplantation in Poland (1998) and simultaneous heart and lung transplantation (2001).

Prof. Marian Zembala was also active at the European and global levels for many years, including being the President of the European Society for Cardiovascular Surgery (ESCVS) from 2010 to 2012, and the first Polish scholar to be the President of the European Association of Cardiothoracic Surgeons (EACTS) (2017–2018). He was a member of many national and international societies, editorial boards, committees and commissions, and a corresponding member of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In 2018, he received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the Piast Silesian Medical University in Wrocław, i.e. his alma mater. He was also an Honorary Professor of the Silesian Medical University in Katowice. Author and co-author of more than 2000 publications, IF: 638.596; H-index: 33. Professor Marian Zembala received many awards and distinctions. The most important ones include: Papal Medal Benemerenti "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" (2012), Commander's Cross Polonia Restituta (2011), Saint Camillus Award (for activities for the city of Zabrze, 2010), and the Order of the Smile (2005), which was one of the most important awards for him because it was granted by children. The relationship with the region was also important to Prof. Marian Zembala. Even though he was not a Silesian by birth, for over thirty years he has been actively involved in the life and development of the Silesian macro-region, which he considered his little homeland. Prof. Marian Zembala was very successful as an organizer of health care in Poland, holding such positions as chairman of the Scientific Council to the Minister of Health (2008–2015), national consultant in cardiac surgery (2011–2016), and others. In 2015, he was appointed as the Minister of Health of Poland; he was known for always looking for solutions across divides.

In 1993, he became the Director of the Silesian Centre for Heart Diseases in Zabrze, a position he held until his death. The hospital became his second home. With the dynamic development of the hospital, the then modest headquarters turned out to be too limited, and he decided to change it. Today we are fully aware that the expansion of the Silesian Centre for Heart Diseases in Zabrze is his life's work. Together with his associates, he created one of the best and most modern centers for treatment of cardiovascular diseases in Poland. His great dream came true. We all knew it. The greatest success, and at the same time the fruit of great determination in action is the newest building,

which will be opened at the end of May this year. It will also be a kind of a closure that will cement Prof. Zembala's great life achievements.

Apart from medicine, sailing was one of the greatest passions of Prof. Zembala. As a young man, he worked with young people from correctional homes. He also introduced cardiologists and cardiac surgeons to the beauty of sailing, inviting them to the so-called Cruises for the Heart. He believed that sailing taught humility, which is also very important in the work of a physician.

Prof. Marian Zembala was also sensitive to art — he loved theater, music, and poetry. On the one hand, he was tireless and determined in pursuing his goals, on the other, he was extremely sensitive to human suffering. He devoted his professional life entirely to serving sick people. He was incredibly demanding not only of himself but also of others. He was an extraordinary and persistent man, but at the same time warm-hearted. He fought fiercely for each patient, sometimes making seemingly irrational decisions, which later proved to be right and saved not only the patients' lives, but often their families as well. He was also a great ambassador of Polish science and medicine, a master and a guide for those who treated and were treated. His career was full of enough achievements for several lifetimes. He was a titan of work, often forgetting that sometimes you need to eat and sleep. Above all, Prof. Zembala loved his family and patients, who responded to his love. In 2018, he suffered a massive stroke, which, despite confining him to a wheelchair, did not prevent him from continuing to work and fight for the well-being of patients. He also always said that he would never have achieved such success if it wasn't for the people he met along the way. An important part of his life was also the memory of the pioneers.

It was his dream to sail on a long voyage after his retirement. We deeply believe, Professor, that you have just set sail on that voyage, your last voyage. We will miss you very much.

Ahoy, Dear Professor! Ahoy Dear Friend!

We bid farewell to a Great Man, a Wonderful Physician, a Loving Son, Husband, Father and Grandfather.

Thank you for everything. You will always remain in our memory!

Community of the Silesian Center  
for Heart Diseases in Zabrze

### Article information

**Conflict of interest:** None declared.

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