

Memory and Beyond: Remembering Prof. Adam Szymusik

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I am privileged to have the task of remembering the founder of our Association. It is only fitting that on the 10th anniversary of our association, as we dedicate this meeting to “Memory and Beyond”, we remember the man whose vision created this association. I am particularly grateful to the members of Professor Szymusik’s family for accepting the invitation to attend this session. My friend and Chairperson of the Polish branch, Prof. Jacek Bomba, can testify how many times I nagged him with questions whether they have been invited and will attend.

I realize that many of those present knew Adam Szymusik much better than I did and therefore I will only say a few words about my impression of him, on those few occasions I met him.

I come here from Paris where I attended an international conference, an important event in which a number of Very Important People took part. All those spoke and acted in a Very Important Manner to make sure that we realised how Very Important they indeed were.

Adam Szymusik I knew never acted in such a Very Important manner, though being the Chairperson of a large department in a very prestigious University surely entitled him to it. Perhaps he did not know how to act like that or perhaps did not want to. True, I never met him in an official event, only in social settings. He was very informal, sprawled in an armchair the way you saw him in the picture, smiling and acting “one of us” rather than “One of Them”. And there always was Stasia next to him, quiet but always there, her silent presence very much felt.

Then I spent a day with both of them visiting the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv and was struck by his sharp mind. When I met my cousin

in Jerzy (Prof. Jerzy Aleksandrowicz) I told him about it and said: “I never realised how intelligent Szymusik is”, to which Jerzy replied: “Of course, you don’t get into that position unless you are”.

Now I will move on to the second part of my talk and take a look at the progress of Adam Szymusik’s vision, the Israeli-Polish dialogue. Ilana (Dr. Kremer) spoke at length about the work we did and the insights we gained. Each of us realised that we had a personal “agenda” for joining and I spoke about mine when we met in Nazareth. Symbolic occasion, perhaps, in view of that city’s special history, because I spoke about confronting “the Pole in me”.

I will not repeat what had been said on those occasions, instead I will present an imaginary report to the founder of our Association (if we ever meet again) of what happened to his vision of a Polish-Jewish dialogue. His wish was to oppose not only Polish anti-Semitism but also what he called “anti-Polonism”, the one-sided, stereotyped Jewish view of Poles as incurable anti-Semites, a view which pained him considerably. Wisely, he turned to Israeli colleagues, assuming that among the large Israeli community of people with Polish roots he will find some willing to engage in such a dialogue and perhaps assuming (rightly, I believe) that Israeli Jews will be more sympathetic to Polish struggles for national emancipation and to Polish suffering under occupation. Why psychiatrists? For the simple reason that psychiatrists were the ones he could engage. Had he been a journalist, he would probably try to engage journalists. But, knowingly or intuitively, he made a good choice, because we, mental health practitioners,

are trained (with variable success) to face painful truths, and to recognise denials and other devices distorting reality.

Today we know that he was right. We have a vibrant, committed organisation with its own traditions and style. Even the frictions we have experienced are a testimony to our deep emotional commitment. Moreover, the Polish-Jewish dialogue is proceeding on a wide front of which we are merely a part. The surprisingly large number of young, gifted people attending the Faculty of Jewish Studies at the U.J., the Christian-Jewish Dialogue Days organised yearly by the Polish Church, the "Hevreh" Society organised by Protestant Poles for helping lonely Shoa survivors in the former Soviet Union, the debates conducted by Father Musial's followers, Zuzanna Radzik's Center for Dialogue

and the youth exchange programme initiated by our friend Andrzej (Dr. A. Cechnicki): this is merely a partial list of an ongoing process. That does not mean that all is well and centuries-long prejudices have been wiped out. Dr. Radzik told us in Nazareth about the unbelievable depth of ignorance and prejudice among ordinary Poles; the same degree of ignorance could be found among many Jews (I call it: "the 'Chmielnicki was not a Pole' syndrome"). The Israeli youth visits organised by the Ministry of Education are often an educational failure in spite of efforts by some colleagues to remedy the situation.

So, summing up my report to Professor Szymusik:

"Yes-sir, the mission is proceeding very well, and, No-sir, the mission is not completed".

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