

IN MEMORIAM

Professor Bernard Bezubik (1919–2006)



It is an honour to write this tribute about Professor Doctor Bernard Bezubik (1919–2006) who died earlier this year in Poland, aged eighty six. Professor Bezubik was a mentor, teacher and friend to many as well as an outstanding person and an excellent scientist.

I first met Professor Bezubik in 1962 when I commenced my Masters' studies in the Parasitology Labora-

tory of the Warsaw University. After completing my PhD with Professor Bezubik, I subsequently joined his Department of Parasitology as a research scientist. I remember Professor Bezubik as a person who took a real interest in his students and their families.

As one of his first students and co-workers I remained in a close contact with Professor and his family over the years, and right up to the present day, even though I now live in New Zealand. Every year my family and I would receive a card and a letter in which Professor Bezubik described the activities of his wife, two daughters and four grandchildren. In fact, it was the non-arrival of regular Christmas card last year (2005) that first alerted me that the Professor was not well. I knew immediately that the Professor was not well and when I contacted his older daughter, Ewa, I was saddened to discover that he was quite unwell and, in fact, was fading away quite rapidly.

Professor Bernard Bezubik was born on 17 November, 1919, in Ostasze, in East Poland. As a young man growing up in Poland Bernard Bezubik was working as a teacher when World War II began (September 1939) and Poland was invaded, first by the Nazis from the west and later by the Russian Red Army from the east.

Bernard Bezubik joined the Polish Home Army (AK) to fight against the occupying forces. AK represented the armed forces of the Polish Government exiled in London for the duration of the war. In 1944, when the Red Army "liberated" Poland Bezubik was arrested and deported to a camp in Diagilev, close to Riazan, in Russia. Because of his rank in the Home Army (he was a lieutenant by that time) he was elected as a group leader by his colleagues. They recognized that he was the strong leader they needed in order to withstand the

constant humiliation and inhumane treatment they were regularly subject to by the camp officials.

Under these difficult conditions, and in a clandestine manner, foreign language courses were organised and he taught German. As was his lifetime habit, he led this group by example and took English lessons alongside his fellow prisoners. He realised that giving his fellow prisoners something positive and useful to do would counteract the indoctrination that they were constantly subjected by the Soviets. For a young, but mature, man it was a life lesson in communism and taught him about what a totalitarian system does to a country and its people. Bernard Bezubik retained this knowledge all his life and it was imprinted deeply in his mind. Thanks to the activity of his fiancé and his family in Poland, and active help from the Polish Ambassador in the Soviet Union, Professor Henryk Raabe, B. Bezubik was freed after three years in the Russian camp and returned to Poland.

In 1947, he commenced studying Veterinary Science at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and graduated from this University as a veterinarian. During his studies Bezubik worked in Lublin with zoologist, Professor Zdzisław Raabe, who was the son of Professor Henryk Raabe. After graduation B. Bezubik undertook a PhD in the Agricultural University in Warsaw under supervision of the well known parasitologist, Professor Witold Stefański. He was awarded his PhD in 1956.

From 1960–1961 Bernard Bezubik worked in Beltsville, USA, as a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow. His stay in Beltsville allowed him to learn new methods, meet new people and, most importantly, convinced him that his and his students' future was experimental parasitology. In Beltsville, Doctor Bezubik was immediately recognized as a very talented and capable scientist and so, at the end of his stay, he was offered a permanent position as a scientist. Needless to say, he refused the offer as he believed he was needed in Poland. When he returned to Poland he took the view that anybody who decided to stay permanently in the West was not a good Polish patriot. I had a number of discussions with him about this, arguing that scientists work for the entire scientific community and not specifically for their own country, but he remained unconvinced. His response was that all Poles were needed in their own country for as long as the system brought in from the Soviet Union existed.

In private conversations Doctor Bezubik declared that neither socialism nor communism would last for ever as he

maintained that it was not based on solid philosophical foundations. I was told a number of times by others that his opinion was that the people of Poland would have enough commonsense to see this and he also believed that even Party members were not true believers in the system. He called them radishes – red on the outside and white inside.

In 1961, when Professor Zdzisław Raabe was a Director of the Institute of Zoology in the Biology Faculty at Warsaw University he asked Doctor Bezubik to join him in the Institute. As accommodation was very scarce in Warsaw at that time, because many buildings were completely destroyed during the war, he shifted to Warsaw leaving his family behind in Lublin. It was a very difficult time for him but, finally, the whole family was able to move from Lublin to Warsaw.

In 1963, while at the Institute of Zoology, Doctor Bezubik defended his habilitation and received a position of docent. The docent position does not exist in many countries in the West but in Poland, and many parts of Europe, it is an obligatory requirement for obtaining the status of an independent teacher and scientist. As soon as he defended his habilitation he was then able to develop his own Department of Parasitology.

In 1969, he was nominated Associate Professor and, in 1979, obtained the scientific degree of Full Professor at Warsaw University. The title, Professor, in many countries, is considered a position but in that part of Europe it is the highest degree a scientist and university teacher can receive. People being awarded this degree always receive it in a large and important ceremony attended by the president of the country, together with the members of the government and Polish Academy of Science representatives.

Professor Bezubik started his research at the time when classical, systematic parasitology was the main stream of this branch of knowledge. However, as mentioned previously, he realised that the future of parasitology lay in experimental research. He, therefore, ensured that the great majority of his students and co-workers undertook experimental parasitology, mainly studying the physiology of the host-parasite relationship using immunoparasitology techniques.

The Professor was also a champion of “small science”. He believed that the most important data and the best ideas do not necessarily require vast amounts of money and equipment. Readers may not know that it was in his Department that the idea of using UV rays to attenuate parasites for vaccine preparation was developed. Until that time X-rays had been used by Scottish scientists to attenuate the infective larval stage of nematodes. Initially, the sun was used as the source of UV rays and, as well all know, weather conditions are not always co-operative so the UV lamp was used. The lamp had the advantage of being able to give exact exposures of UV light giving very positive results. This method was never patented as the Professor believed that patenting hampers real curiosity-driven development. He argued that the results obtained and the interpretations made by scientists, no matter how big or fundamental, should be freely shared by all people as brain power does not have a price.

During his stay in the USA Professor Bezubik became convinced that the successful development of research in his Department would involve in co-operation with the best laboratories in the West. Thanks to his personal involvement and his ability to diplomatically, but convincingly, argue his case, the first agreement of scientific co-operation between Iowa State University (ISU), in the USA, and Warsaw University, in Poland, was signed. As a result, scientists from the USA could come to work at his laboratory and Polish scientists could go there to learn new technologies and ideas. Later, other Universities signed similar agreements with ISU as well as many scientific centres. He also maintained good contacts with Glasgow University and Universities in Zurich and Berne in Switzerland.

Another well thought out and executed idea of Professor Bezubik was to obtain a Maria Curie-Skłodowska grant from the USA. This was the first grant awarded to a Polish scientist and this facilitated co-operation with the USA considerably. Professor Bezubik was always very open to co-operating with scientists from other countries, including the Soviet Union. He invited many of them to his Department. A particular skill of his was the ability to be tolerant and to differentiate between the political systems these scientists lived under and their science.

The Professor was very active in organizing and participating in international seminars and conferences. He received invitations from many different countries to give lectures and seminars. For example, just before he retired he was invited to give lectures at Moscow University. He lectured in Russian, which was highly appreciated, as they did not need a translator. More importantly, his knowledge of Russian meant that scientists, could speak and discuss with him personally. Direct discussions would not be possible otherwise as nobody trusted the official translators at that time.

Professor Bezubik was a member of the Parasitology Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Vice-Chairman of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Parasitology of Polish Academy of Sciences, Vice-Dean of the Biology Faculty at Warsaw University. As a Vice-Dean he was liked by students as he always interpreted rules and restrictions in their favour. He will be remembered by many of those who graduated but particularly by those who developed difficulties during their studies. His understanding of their personal difficulties and his commonsense was well known, recognized and appreciated.

Professor Bezubik was a very talented linguist. He had a good command of English, German and Russian and his ability in this regard was admired highly by us all. A particular skill he had the ability to easily switch languages during a conversation if the meeting involved international participants. He would even help the professional translators who were translating simultaneously during international meetings.

Thanks to his knowledge of English, *Acta Parasitologica Polonica*, the major Central-European Parasitology Journal began to be published exclusively in English, thus, promoting

Polish science abroad. From 1953 till 1970 he worked as Secretary General, and later as Vice-Editor in Chief of *Acta Parasitologica Polonica*. Thanks to the Professor, this journal is now known as *Acta Parasitologica*, indicating its international character.

As a well known scientist Professor Bezubik was awarded honorary membership of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Parasitologie, the Helminthological Society of Washington and the World Association for the Advancement of Veterinary Parasitology.

During his lifetime Professor Bezubik was known as being anti-communist and was very outspoken on this matter. As the Head of the Department, Vice-Dean and member of numerous committees at Warsaw University and Polish Academy of Sciences, he never tried to hide his opinion about the political system that the Soviet Union tried, unsuccessfully, to introduce to Poland. He explained to us that the government and the system in Poland were brought, as he said, on the bayonets of the Red Army. His popular, and also very diplomatic, saying about a possible candidate who was a Party member and who wanted to work in his Department was, in direct translation, "Party membership does not make a candidate inferior but at the same time it does not make a person superior enough to gain my positive opinion and support". Needless to say, in his group of co-workers, non Party members' numbers grew. Because of his anti-communist attitude none of the staff were ever approached by Party activists or encouraged to join the Party and, as well, nobody going abroad on scientific trips was ever contacted by people wanting to gain additional information about laboratories and systems in the West. I well remember how during ICOPA IV in 1978, when I was a Deputy Secretary General and the Professor Secretary General, I was approached by an undercover policeman and asked to join them in order to help organize biological warfare against the West. Naturally, I knew who I should go to seek help and protection from this kind of activity. Professor Bezubik was furious when I explained my problem and told me he would make sure it would never happen again. He kept his word.

Professor Bezubik was also a very good organizer and knew how to deal with difficult situations. Before ICOPA IV, which was being held in Warsaw, we did not have enough paper to publish the necessary scientific articles for that meeting. There was shortage of many products in Poland at that time, and paper was considered a very sensitive commodity. This was because the authorities thought that paper would be used by the growing anti-government opposition to print "illegal" materials. Once again I asked Professor Bezubik for help and he went to the highest level making an appointment to ask a Central Committee member of the Polish United Workers' Party (note the word "communist" is not included in the title of this organisation) to intervene. Needless to say, we soon had an adequate supply of the much needed paper.

His ability to attract grant money was appreciated highly by us all. This meant that we could not only do post-doctoral studies in the best laboratories overseas but also conduct very high quality research in our Department. In fact, we some-

times became an object of jealousy by staff from other departments.

Professor Bezubik was a compassionate person. When people had financial difficulties, as our salaries were very low, he was always willing to help us out. For that purpose he kept a confidential fund called Palma, from which we could borrow money in an emergency. In addition at Christmas, the Professor made sure that everybody who worked hard received a bonus. He always tried to do his best for his students and co-workers. All members of his Department were treated like his family. We were often invited to his home where his wife, Mrs Irena Bezubik, a pharmacist, served us excellent food and, it should be mentioned, made special homemade drinks for us. During that time the Professor would entertain us by telling jokes, including some that were quite political. He was an excellent joker and his jokes could be understood even when he translated them into another language, which I still find difficult to do even after many years of working in an English speaking country. His hospitality was well known at the University and we were often invited to have morning coffee with the Professor. He was usually in his office very early each day and kept his door open so that the first person to arrive was invited to have coffee with him. He prepared it himself, always without sugar or milk.

Professor Bezubik was an exceptionally skilled typist, even though he typed with only two fingers. He was meticulous about typing all his own work and never gave anything to his secretary to type for him. I remember, he used to tease us about how poor we all were at typing.

In our Department we not only undertook experiments in the laboratory but also carried out field studies. The Professor always wanted to know what parasites were present. Sometimes the field study sites were located quite a distance away from Warsaw and involved very long days. Sometimes we even worked in the dark. As the Professor was the only who had a car he often drove us home, just to make sure everyone was safe. I could see how tired he was at the end of these trips.

The Professor was not only interested in our scientific progress but also wanted to know about our families and any difficulties we were having. He was our teacher, our friend and our mentor. Sometimes when we were having trouble getting our larvae to grow Professor Bezubik called us all a "happy hour" so we could talk and joke our frustrations with our work away.

Poland was always different from other, so-called, Eastern Block Countries. But it was different thanks to the people like the Professor who had strong opinions about what was right and wrong politically. I believe that is why the collapse of the Soviet system first started in Poland. Fortunately, Professor Bezubik lived long enough to see Poland become a free country. Understandably, he was decorated with the Home Army Cross and was officially recognized by the free and elected Polish Government as a soldier. I must say that belonging to the Home Army has been recognized now but, over the time Professor Bezubik was a member, the fact was that if some-

body belonged to the Home Army it was very dangerous; it might have involved imprisonment or even being killed, as happened to many at that time. I was able to speak with the Professor about these matters and saw how visibly happy he was that Poland was free. Although, I am not sure if he would be entirely happy with what is developing now, but his commonsense would always prevail regardless of the system.

In recognition of his contribution to teaching research, and the successful development of education in Poland and the Warsaw University, he was awarded the Order of Merit and received the title of Distinguished Teacher, something given to only a very few. He was also decorated with the Cavalier's Cross of the Rebirth of Poland on behalf of the Council of the State. He also received awards given to him by the President of the Polish Academy of Sciences and, in the case of the Ministry of Education, as many as three times.

Many of Professor Bezubik's students are working as successful teachers and scientists in many Research Institutes and Universities in Poland and abroad. During his 40 years of being employed as a teacher and researcher he served as the major supervisor for more than 100 Masters' degree students.

In Poland, at one time, the Professor was the only supervisor who had 11 PhD students of whom three would later receive a position of docent and became Full Professors. That gives him a very special status as few scientists achieved these degrees. Over his career the Professor published more than 130 papers and articles.

Most importantly Professor enjoyed life. He worked hard but he also knew how to enjoy life to the full. He was a social drinker but never to excess. A habit of his was to enjoy a glass of beer just before going to sleep. He liked classical music, he was an avid bridge player and was very good at it; he particularly liked the Culbertson Convention.

Many years before retirement he bought a piece of forest covered land in a place called Wilga, where he built his summer house. He spent time there with his wife and the rest of his family, including his friends from Poland and other countries. He enjoyed relaxing there and picking mushrooms growing on his land gave him immense pleasure. The Professor remained loyal to his friends and friends remained loyal to him. Some of them, like Dr Hwang from Beltsville and others would travel from the USA and other countries just to see him and have discussions with him.

The Professor would start his work early and was able to work long at night but he always had a nap at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I admired how fast he would fall asleep and wake up exactly 30 minutes later. Latterly, when he went down with cancer the naps were longer and longer as the Professor became weaker and weaker. His mind was active and he remained conscious until the last moment.

The evening he died he knew that his daughter Ewa, a highly qualified medical specialist, needed to stay in the hospital longer than normal but he waited for her to come and, as soon as she arrived, he passed away peacefully on 25 January 2006.

Professor Bezubik will be missed by all of us. He will always be remembered as a good friendly man who was easy to speak to, who always had time for all of us and who gave us good advice during our difficult times. We all are grateful for his guidance, his friendship and time we spent with him. We were all honoured to be his students, his co-workers and members of his family. Professor Bezubik was a fine man who will be sorely missed by his family and everybody who knew him.

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