Stefania Jabłońska (1920–2017)

Stefania Jabłońska passed away on May 8, 2017 after a long life that was dedicated to the development of dermatology as a specialty and, even more so, to the development of dermatology as a science-based medical discipline. Her life was extraordinary and reflective of the changing political world during unusual and critical periods especially in Poland, but also in Europe and the world as a whole. To write an obituary for this exceptional person is a challenging task. Therefore, we try here to convey to the readership the impressions of a close life-long international friend (SK), of an ardent medical student from Prof. Jabłońska’s department (MH), and of a close — at that time junior — collaborator and friend (TK). Although we imagined that this approach might illuminate completely different aspects of her life, in the end we remembered many similar characteristics. The quotations come directly from Stefania’s correspondence with one of us (SK).

Stefania Jabłońska was born in September 1920 into a Jewish academic family. Her father “was an economist with many international contacts”. He traveled to many countries and he was a cosmopolitan gentleman. Stefania’s mother was a dermatologist who had trained in Kiev and who worked in a modern hospital in Warsaw. Stefania grew up in an international atmosphere and she met many foreign guests at home. She did not do too well in school, having many different interests, but she was very determined to study at the university, as her parents had, and she ultimately began to study medicine in Warsaw in 1938. “After the war started [the Second World War, Sept 1, 1939] the university was closed I and my sister [Irena Hausmanowa-Petrusewicz, who later became a prominent neurologist] decided to continue our study in Lvov where the Polish University was still working.” After the outbreak of the war in June 1941, Stefania fled the advancing German troops with a group of Polish students to study in Kharkov and Frunze (Soviet Union), where she graduated in September of 1942. She was subsequently “conscripted” into the army where it was, in her words “almost impossible to survive”. It was not until after the war that Stefania learned that her dear sister, Irena, was indeed alive and living in Warsaw, that their father was killed during the Soviet occupation, and that their mother had died in the Belzec extermination camp.

After the war, and in a completely different political environment, Stefania trained for a year in skin physiopathology in Leningrad (today’s St. Petersburg), where she met Olga Podwysockaja, a creative dermatology researcher, who enticed her into dermatological research. When Stefania returned to Warsaw, she was, thus, highly motivated to follow in her mother’s footsteps and become a dermatologist. She worked with Professor Marian Grzybowski, who was head of the Department of Dermatology, and had the good fortune to be able to leave Warsaw for some time to go to Philadelphia to work at the University of Pennsylvania. Stefania was very successful at Penn, where she established relationships with many friends and colleagues at various American medical centers, and she subsequently received several offers to stay in the US. Times in her home country had changed, however, and the University of Warsaw, in the capital of the Soviet Block’s Poland, was seeking

new leaders for its departments. Shortly after Stefania returned to Warsaw in 1949, Prof. Grzybowski was arrested for political reasons and he later died while in prison. Although very young, Dr. Jabłońska was asked to become Professor Grzybowski’s successor. She decided to take on this challenge and, at age 29, Stefania became one of the youngest chairpersons in dermatology in Europe. During subsequent years, Stefania developed her department into a world-renowned center for clinical dermatology and she had a major influence on the development of dermatology world-wide. Stefania led her department and insured its success for more than 40 years, despite several radical changes in the political environment in Poland during this period.

Stefania’s achievements, however, go far beyond that. Early on, probably during her initial exposure to the research in Leningrad and in Philadelphia, Stefania developed an intuition to recognize upcoming scientific breakthroughs. She was also smart enough to understand that, in Poland, she alone would not have sufficient resources to participate in these new developments. However, Stefania was an excellent clinician who attracted many patients from all over Poland, who were transferred to Warsaw to be seen by Professor Jabłońska. Moreover, she established and maintained close relationships with many leading scientists in Europe and the US, and she convinced them to work with her to uncover the bases of skin diseases.

This collaborative approach was highly successful and Stefania was responsible for major breakthroughs in at least 3 areas, which all found their way to modern dermatology text books. (i) She and her coworkers (especially T. Chorzelski) were among the very first to understand the heterogeneity of autoimmune bullous diseases, and they were instrumental in developing tools for a precise classification. (ii) Together with an international consortium, she developed new classifications for sclerodermatous connective tissue diseases, and she defined new subsets of this complex group of ailments. (iii) Her most important, ground-breaking achievement was her work linking HPV infections with the development of skin cancer, as exemplified during the course of epidermodysplasia verruciformis. The identification of the oncogenic potential of HPV infections provided some of the impetus for the development of vaccines and a major reduction (if not the ultimate extinction) of the burden of uterine cervical cancer. The importance of these discoveries has been recognized by the Robert Koch Award attributed to her and Prof. Gérard Orth (1985), the Nobel Prize awarded to another close collaborator, Prof. Harald zur Hausen (2008), and the Lasker Award recently presented to Douglas Lowy and John Schiller (2017).

Prof. Jabłońska’s successes were always based on the very careful clinical investigation of many patients, the systematic analysis of their symptoms coupled with a deep understanding of the histopathological alterations underlying these diseases. She combined this knowledge with an intrinsic drive to identify underlying mechanisms by applying state of the art technologies that had been developed in laboratories in different countries. Her international network of friends, colleagues and coworkers was impressive and it provided a foundation for her exceptional achievements. She once said “my closest contact with Western dermatology was through Alfred Marchionini whom I owe everything I have achieved”. During the war (1938), Dr. Marchionini, after becoming a renowned dermatologist, fled to Turkey to escape the National socialist regime. He returned to West Germany after the war and, in 1950, he became Professor of Dermatology and then rector of the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich. Marchionini was very much recognized for reaching out to the West after the war, and he simultaneously maintained a friendly relationship with Warsaw. Professors Jabłońska and Marchionini both served on the International Committee of Dermatology in the late 1950’s. In 1965, after Prof. Marchionini’s death, Otto Braun-Falco became chair in Munich, and he also became a very close friend of Stefania. They met at international conferences on numerous occasions, and Stefania visited the department in Munich many times.

Prof. Stefania Jabłońska was a highly recognized and highly valued member of the international community of investigative dermatologists. She was one of the founders of a modern view of skin diseases that is based on a detailed understanding of pathophysiology, an approach that is central to the scope of the JID to this day. She was also a great teacher and life-long mentor, not only in Poland but also for many former trainees abroad. It was amazing to observe how her personality and her keen sense of analysis/synthesis created imprints on her interlocutors, wherever they interacted. Probably because of her experiences in her parents’ home and her wide-ranging international contacts, Stefania developed a strong personality that frequently fostered interesting and sometimes also passionate discussions. She often cared little for social, hierarchical conventions and she was unconstrained by these “norms,” despite of her always impeccable and distinguished appearance. Stefania’s mantra was to be candid and to always let you know what she was thinking, and she was always thinking!

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