

IN MEMORIAM

Agnieszka Draber-Mońko (1931–2018)

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My meetings with “Mrs. Professor” – reminiscences of a former student

Professor Agnieszka Draber-Mońko was born on December 20, 1931 in Sochaczew, Mazovia (Poland). She was the fourth of five daughters of Barbara and Kazimierz Draber. Her childhood took place during the extremely difficult period of the Second World War, the time of Poland’s occupation by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. As a teenager, she lost her father, who was sent to a Nazi extermination camp in 1943, and for years no one in the family knew where and how he died. After the war Agnieszka graduated from high school and studied biology, first at the University of Wrocław (for 2 years), then at the University of Warsaw. She graduated in 1956 and the subject of her M.Sc. thesis (University of Warsaw) was studies on the occurrence of flies of *Phasiinae* (*Diptera*) near Warsaw, with particular emphasis on the Kampinos Forest (Mońko 1957). During the entire period of her professional life, Agnieszka was associated with the Zoological Institute (later named Institute of Zoology, presently Museum and Institute of Zoology of the Polish Academy of Sciences or MaIZ PAS for short), located in a prewar building in Warsaw, at Wilcza 64 Street. It is the same building where in November 1944, just after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, almost all pre-war collections of insects, stored in the National Nature Museum located there at that time, were burned by the occupying forces (<https://miiz.waw.pl/pl/podstawowe/574-historiamiiz>).

Details of the next stages in the professional career of Prof. Agnieszka Draber-Mońko, and a review of her scientific achievements, was presented by Dr. Waldemar Mikołajczyk in his recollections of “Jagoda”, as friends used to call her (Mikołajczyk 2018).

I met Agnieszka for the first time in the spring of 1994. I wished to learn about the systematics of tachinid flies (Diptera, Tachinidae) for the purposes of my planned doctoral dissertation. In the same year Agnieszka received the title of professor and, I think, thanks to the closing of a certain stage of her professional career, she had a bit more time to meet and conduct a kind of mentoring in the field of systematics of these parasitic flies. My visits with Agnieszka at that time were frequent and they started basically in the same way. First, I called her and made an appointment, then I went to the MaIZ PAS located in the center of Warsaw and reached the reception desk located on the ground floor, where a phone call to Agnieszka was usually made to announce my arrival. At the end of the corridor on the second floor, behind a row of insect cabinets filled with the achievements of several generations of naturalists, there were bright wooden doors and behind them, to the right, another brown door directly to her room. Just a knock, knock... and a high “please come in” on the other side, and I was with “Mrs. Professor”, that’s how I called her then.

The first things that attracted my attention upon entering Agnieszka’s room were the books, countless publications, and manuscripts arranged on tables and her desk. Agnieszka’s room was truly a naturalist’s workshop... On the left side, high shelves stretched along two walls, on which one could find the world literature on calyptate flies.

The volumes of the *Catalogue of Palaearctic Diptera* and numerous other books stood there, evenly arranged. One could see there also the green, 13-volume series on the *Insects of Mongolia*, the red covers of the *Manual of Nearctic Diptera*, and dozens of other books, geographical atlases, and even thick binders with the works of various dipterists whose names I did not recognize at the time. Reprints were received on a frequent basis in response to postcard requests (Fig. 1).



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In the center of the room, parallel to the standing bookshelves, there was a small, dark-brown desk. On its left side was the place where Agnieszka usually worked. On the opposite side of the desk, next to the window, there was a light-coloured wooden secretary with numerous small drawers in which was stored information about the flies of Poland. Already by then, in the mid-90s when computers were beginning to be widely used, this catalogue seemed to be an element of a departing era but we used it many times with much success during our meetings. To the right of the wooden secretary was a “food corner”, with a sink and water faucet and a fairly narrow rectangular table standing near it. Water was boiled on this table and we worked there too, peering down the black, old stereo microscope of a well-known German company that stood there. We used it often to see the morphological details of

the dipteran we were determining. On this table "science was also whirling" in the form of a large number of boxes with carefully arranged flies, microscopic preparations, and small glass vials with alcohol in larger jars that the Professor had used in her work. Just above the table, on the wall, there was a cupboard full of similar treasures, and there were also kitchen accessories stored in it: cups, spoons, plates, sugar and various types of tea, which Agnieszka served to guests visiting her laboratory. Along the western wall there was a small table with a computer, and further, to the left of the entrance door, stood another bookcase tightly filled with binders and books. Above the computer hung a round clock, noiselessly measuring the time of our meetings. This was the kingdom of Agnieszka, which she carefully and consistently built for many years, almost until the last weeks of her work. I repeatedly observed how she complemented the potential of this space by adding newly published works of colleagues and other dipterists, complementing her binders, and somehow managing this small space very effectively. It was extraordinary for me to see that she could perfectly control such a large collection of books and various publications.

To my astonishment, as it happened many times when determining various specimens of flies, Agnieszka aptly pointed out the binder with the necessary literature and then found the paper she was looking for; some keys to the determination, drawings or other necessary information. I was really fascinated by this and I suppose that I could not match her in this ability, because she had an excellent visual memory and, what is even more important, everything was perfectly arranged in her mind, and this is a feature of outstanding people. It happened quite often that after analyzing the minute details of some interesting fly that we were determining, she would say "wait, wait, I have seen this somewhere", focused her attention and often hit the heart of the problem. That is how we worked. What took her minutes, would take me hours. The first fly that I determined under Agnieszka's supervision was the characteristic *Eriothrix rufomaculatus*

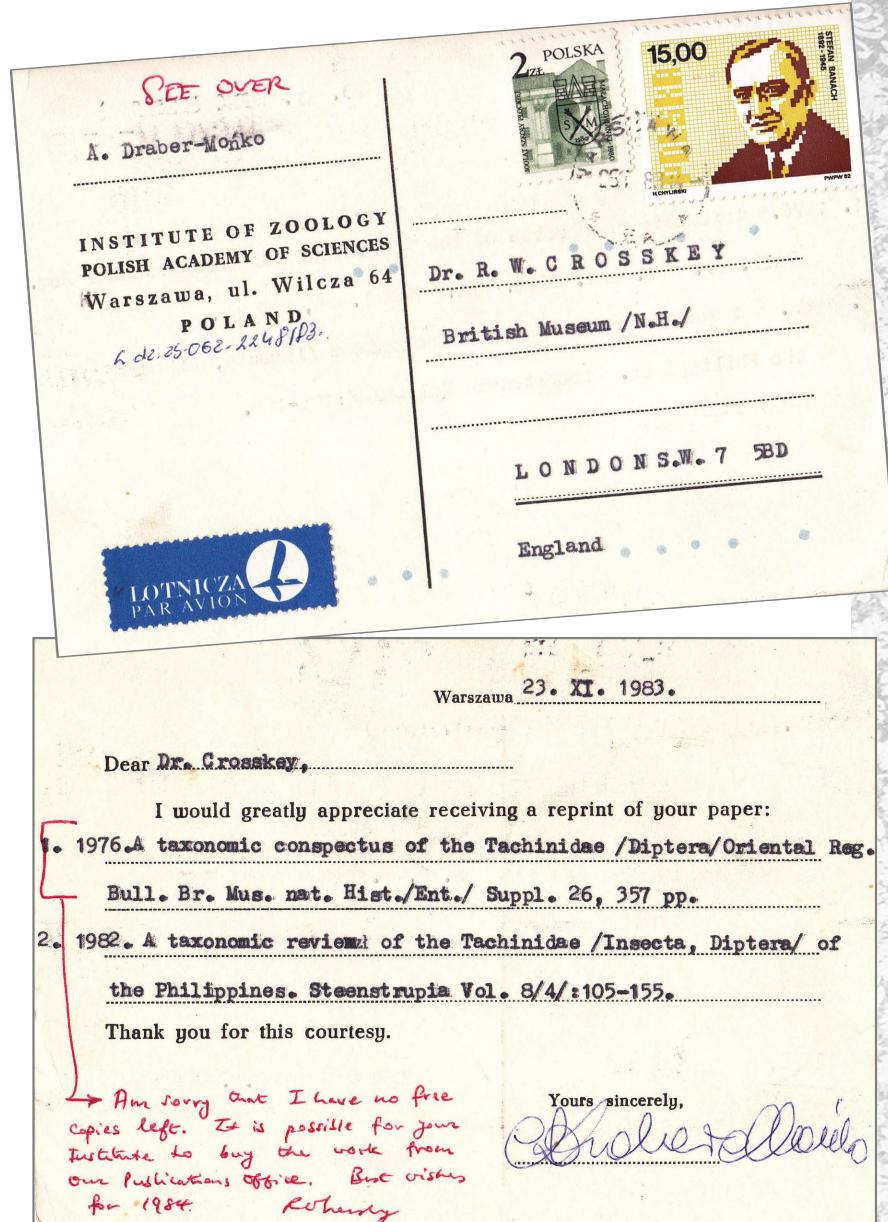


Figure 1. Postcard dated 1983 to Roger Crosskey at the British Museum of Natural History (London) requesting tachinid literature.

(De Geer), from the collection of Dr. hab. Jan Karczewski. I cannot say that it went with flying colours, but I think I finally passed the test because in time dozens of other flies followed and I got better under her careful supervision.

Our meetings also had their rituals. After sharing the latest news and solving the systematic problems that had initiated my visit, we often took a break and sat down for a meal. This took place at a small square table positioned as an extension to her desk, above which a lamp stood with a long metal shoulder and a blue lampshade. It was amazing that often during our arranged meetings, Agnieszka prepared culinary surprises; e.g., fish stews or vegetable salads, brought from home in small plastic containers and accompanied by bread and some fruits... We drank tea and feasted – you cannot call it anything else. I always tried to reciprocate the hospitality of my professor with my own culinary “surprises”, but most of the time they were only sweets or grapes. I never dared to present my own culinary experiments... During the meal there was always a theme to our conversation. I usually listened and Agnieszka told stories about people and various events related to work at the Institute, or about her field trips. She talked about hunting for flies in exotic Mongolia or mentioned her research in Poland: expeditions to the xerothermic Nida Basin, or the massif of Pieniny, or the unusual chirats (rare geological formations made up of characteristic rock piles cemented together) in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains. Although we were divided by the “space” of almost two generations, Agnieszka was open and friendly to me, sometimes joking, but most of all we were connected by stories about flies, interesting places, and fantastic species of Diptera that must be found in Poland. After listening to such stories, I drove enthusiastically to the Białowieża Forest, to the Bieszczady Mountains, or to the Świętokrzyskie Mountains in search of my dreams. Sometimes I caught some of those flies and, of course, I bragged to my professor. She accepted it with joy and clearly enjoyed my successes. One such mission was to catch a specific tachinid fly from the Białowieża Primeval Forest, of which only two specimens were present in the MaIZ PAS collection. These two individuals are badly damaged and despite many attempts are still undetermined. All that is known is that they belong to the tribe Blondelinii and were caught in the Forest in Moericke (yellow) pan traps. After that day when I learned this information and was given the “order” to find the species, I spent months in the Białowieża forest but the puzzle is still unsolved...

Among the most frequently discussed topics, we can mention stories about cooperation with Dr. hab. Jan Karczewski and his innovative, at the time, scientific concepts and research in the Jędrzejów Forest district (southern Poland). An insect cabinet with almost all the material collected by him has always been in the corridor outside the door leading to Agnieszka’s room, as I remember. We used it often, whenever there was a need to see a specific specimen or observe an important feature.

Another topic that Agnieszka sometimes mentioned was the sad story of Dr. Jan Witold Pawłowicz, who on the eve of World War II was studying the fauna in the Tatra Mountains (the only Polish mountains of alpine character) and tragically died September 1939 on the front line in the first month of the war. It was an unfortunate circumstance that in 1938 Pawłowicz was in Berlin at the VII International Congress of Entomology and gave a lecture there, and the summary of the proceedings that was published in March 1939 is in fact the only published trace of his Tatra Mountains research (Pawłowicz 1939), the rest of the material being lost during the war and occupation time.

I was not only inspired by the memories of Mrs. Professor but was also entertained by anecdotes from her life. I remember the story about an airport, which I heard several times. This happened in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, when the country was known as the Mongolian People’s Republic, “a friendly country from the socialist area”. As Agnieszka was passing through Customs to return to Poland, she and other passengers were searched for smuggled goods. Her personal belongings were thoroughly inspected and some items were dismantled into parts. This procedure eventually destroyed Agnieszka’s lipstick, where the agent probably hoped to find illegally exported diamonds. Of course, diamonds were not present...

The great passion of Agnieszka was the breeding of flies. She made a lot of such breeding experiments while writing her monograph on the Calliphoridae for the Polish Fauna series (Draber-Mońko 2004). I think that this monumental work is one of the most important results of her scientific work. This study took over four years and it was not an easy-to-prepare publication. Agnieszka summarized the achievements of really many authors, including the keys, descriptions of all known developmental stages, and illustrated it with more than a thousand drawings. The volume containing this publication exceeded 650 pages. She mentioned to me several times, thinking about the calliphorid larvae she had reared on liver, that “it did not smell like violets, but it was definitely worth doing”.

During one of our conversations, I also learned that the first flies that Agnieszka determined were hover flies (Syrphidae), but at the Institute she could not work on this family because it was already being studied by someone else. She also admitted that she liked butterflies. However, despite early fascinations with other insects, throughout her professional life she worked with calyptrate flies, as one of four scientists working at the MaIZ PAS. She worked there with the long-term head Prof. Przemysław Trojan, Prof. Regina Bańska, and Dr. Waldemar Mikołajczyk.

After a longer break in our contacts at the beginning of the present decade, I met Agnieszka at the funeral of Prof. Trojan and we agreed on a date for my next visit to the MaIZ PAS. It was 2015. Agnieszka was at that moment, I noticed, a bit pensive. When we met, I learned that she had buried her only child, daughter Grażyna (1958–2014), and that she had been struggling with a serious, incurable disease for several years. She asked me for discretion, but I knew very well that the situation was really very serious. She told me about the difficult treatment, its prospects and various problems, but also about the publications she had written and about her plans for the near future. She still had a lot to do... That day she gave me her collecting net she had used for years to catch flies, and red leather covers for glass insect containers. I accepted the gifts with some concern, not knowing what would happen in the near future. Although Agnieszka devoted a lot of time to treatment, she primarily worked. I sometimes felt bad that I was taking so much of her time. I knew that she had been working for several years, with her characteristic determination, on the Tachinidae of North Korea. Although the country is currently inaccessible, Agnieszka was systematically reviewing each subfamily based on material in the MaIZ PAS collected by staff members during six expeditions to North Korea between 1959 and 1990 (Draber-Mońko 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017).

During our unforgettable time spent together I vividly remember one visit in the winter of 2016 when we were sitting together trying to identify a tachinid I had caught in Georgia. After passing the Palaearctic key of Tschorasnig & Richter (1998) back and forth several times, we determined that it was a member of a genus we had not seen before. It seemed almost certain that the identification had been correctly carried out, despite some problems we had with couplet 332 of the key. Just to be sure, Agnieszka quickly found in her resources the original work describing the species *Ziminia masiceraeformis* (Portschinsky). She proceeded to read the original description in Latin while checking the characteristics of the species. Moments like these were really the quintessence of our meetings, and I will remember them to the end. I admired her knowledge, persistence, versatility and logical progression in which she proceeded when identifying difficult specimens. Our love for the systematics of flies was something that absolutely joined us!

The last time I met Agnieszka was on April 10, 2018, when I visited her room for the proverbial 15 minutes, for some publication and a fly larva that I had to photograph. Agnieszka, however, worked relentlessly on a summary of the achievements of Dr. hab. Karczewski. As it turned out later, it was to be her last scientific mission. It was, in fact, somehow overdue work that she still wanted to complete. It was her desire to summarize in English the work of her colleague, to make his achievements known to a broader circle of readers. Our 15 minutes stretched into more than four hours as we talked about everything, and in fact it was largely Agnieszka’s monologue. She talked about herself, about her life and work. Only then did I learn about her father’s death in the death camp during the

Second World War. She never did find out where exactly he was buried and I felt that even after all these years it was emotionally difficult for her. She talked about her education in the post-war period.

Also during this last meeting Agnieszka admitted to me that she had been cleaning up and organizing her room for some time, this room where she had been working for so many years, and was handing out sets of her publications that still remained. I was personally deeply stirred by the simplicity of the last things. We said goodbye banally in front of the building in which she lived, where I had driven her around 9:00 p.m. I wished her strength to continue her work and to finish the publication about Dr. hab. Karczewski. Agnieszka asked me, somehow more urgently than usual, to send greetings to my wife Monika and daughters Maria and Lena. It was raining, and I was afraid to think that maybe we were seeing each other for the last time, and I was deluding myself that maybe we would get some new chances...

Professor Agnieszka Draber-Mońko died on May 28, 2018 in Warsaw, after finishing her paper on the achievements and research of Dr. hab. Jan Karczewski that she had been working on when I last saw her. She was buried on June 7, 2018, at plot U IV4-14-6 in the North Cemetery in Warsaw, in Wólka Węglowa, where her family and friends said goodbye to her for the last time.

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