

Dear Friends,

It is with profound regret that we have to report the death on 9 February of Prof. Maria Orwid, an outstanding figure in Polish psychiatry and psychotherapy, an extraordinary woman who was known and respected not only in Poland, but across European and American family psychotherapy circles.

She was born in Przemyśl in 1930. The war brought an abrupt end to her happy life in a large, loving family. Almost all her assimilated Jewish family was murdered. This was a vastly traumatic experience for her, but at the same time made her immensely sensitive to issues of freedom, power, exclusion and belonging. After the war she settled in Krakow, where in 1953 she graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the Jagiellonian University. She became involved with the Krakow Psychiatric Clinic while still a student.

She believed that it was psychiatry that saved her life after the experiences of the Holocaust, and perhaps for this reason was very devoted to medicine in general and psychotherapy in particular. She studied under and later worked with Prof. Antoni Kępiński, whose vision of the human being greatly influenced the development of psychotherapy in Krakow. Under his supervision, in 1957 Orwid took part in a pioneering study into post-camp trauma in former prisoners of KL Auschwitz, and she also wrote her doctoral thesis on issues related to concentration camps. Towards the end of the 1980s she launched her own research on Holocaust survivors with a team of colleagues, and subsequently created the first programme of therapy for Holocaust survivors and their children in Poland.

At the same time, throughout her professional life she worked constantly to develop youth psychiatry, propagating a modern, integrated model of treatment based on the therapeutic community, psychotherapy and family therapy. In the mid-1960s Orwid trained in youth psychiatry at the Tyson Unit at the London Institute of Psychiatry, then headed by Dr Wilfred Warren, the British founder of this branch of psychiatry, and in group therapy under Dr Bob Hobson. She herself was the founder and director until her retirement in 2000 of the Children and Adolescents' Psychiatric Clinic at the Jagiellonian University's Collegium Medicum in Krakow.

She taught several generations of students, psychiatrists and psychotherapists, supervised numerous Ph.D. theses, and herself wrote over 160 scientific publications. Her influence on the evolution of psychotherapy, and in particular family therapy, in Poland, cannot be overestimated.

She was a marvellous ambassador for Polish psychotherapists, forging and maintaining contacts with world leaders in family therapy, including its founder practitioners, among them Lyman Wynne, Helm Stierlin, Yrjo O. Alanen, and Mony Elkaim, all of whom were her personal friends. She was committed to and instrumental in bringing pre-eminent therapists to Poland, to Krakow, to give lectures and hold workshops, so enabling her younger colleagues to learn from true masters. She was a founder member of the International Family Therapy Association (IFTA) and an honorary member of the European Family Therapy Association (EFTA). She cooperated actively with the Deutsche Akademie für Psychoanalyse, and her work in this field was recognised with a gold medal from the Akademie. She was also a founder member and for many years an executive member of the World Association for Dynamic Psychiatry. She organised many scientific conferences and symposia, including the world family therapy congress, held in Krakow in 1990, and the world dynamic psychiatry congress in 2005.

She was a co-founder and honorary president of the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Society, which works to confront painful aspects of shared Polish-Jewish history. She was at once Jewish and Polish, and this dual identity enabled her to see things from a double perspective, which was an enriching quality in discourse and allowed her to avoid over-simplification in her approach to difficult issues. She was very proud of both her Jewish identity and of the Polish tradition and myths with which she identified. Another area in which she was deeply involved and a valuable contributor was Polish-German dialogue. An expression of appreciation for her input into Polish-German dialogue was the Medal of Honour awarded to her by the president of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Her role in the Polish professional community was also of great significance – she was one of the founders of the Psychotherapy and Family Therapy Section of the Polish Psychiatric Society.

She was a fine lecturer with a rare talent for succinct expression of important issues, while not neglecting the wider perspective. Only recently, at an evening session at the Chair of Psychiatry, she spoke on the discourse of trauma, masterfully linking psychiatric aspects with the historical perspective, and knowledge of sociology, philosophy and art.

Those who knew her knew that she rose above convention and disciplinary boundaries, was open to others, and faithful in friendship. She appreciated interesting conversation and was welcoming of the many colours of the world. She was generous, loved giving presents, and was keen to share her experiences with others. It was she to whom young research assistants at the Krakow Clinical

Hospital owed their chance to attend the best scientific conferences. On the occasions when we could not afford a hotel room, we used to sleep on the floor in her room, and she would treat us to dinner.

We often talked about passing. She was not afraid of old age or of dying; the only thing she hoped to avoid was a slow deterioration and death, which would be hard for others and herself. And in this respect fate was merciful to her. Only not to us. For us her death has come much too soon.

On behalf of the Polish Family Therapy Association

Barbara Józefik, Bogdan de Barbaro

Krakow, 20 February 2009