

## Professor Aleksy Poniżyński (1928–2017)

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Prof. dr hab. med. Aleksy Poniżyński was born on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1928 in Bukówiec Górny in the province of Wielkopolska. When the second World War came in September 1939, he was about to attend the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of an elementary school in Bukówiec. During the Nazi occupation, he worked as a farmhand. After the war, he continued his elementary education in Leszno, where he also completed secondary school; in 1951, he graduated with honors from an agricultural high school in Bojanowo.

During the years 1951–1953, Professor Poniżyński attended classes at the Faculty of Zootechnics of the Higher School of Agriculture (now known as the University of Life Sciences) in Poznań. The knowledge and experience gained there in the areas of animal anatomy, physiology, and pharmacotherapy would later allow him to become one of the pioneers of Polish experimental cardiac surgery. The knowledge of animal anatomy steered his interest toward the use of animal-derived valves (deer valves) for treating human patients. At the time, he was one of the first people in Poland considering the use of these valves in clinical practice. After graduating from the Higher School of Agriculture in 1953, he began his studies at the Medical Faculty of the then Medical Academy (now: Poznań University of Medical Sciences), which he completed in 1959, receiving the Doctor of Medicine degree. While still a student at the Medical Faculty, he began his career as a surgeon and researcher at the Department of General and Experimental Surgery of the Medical Academy, where he was employed from 1957 to 1960. His interests were already gravitating toward diseases of the circulatory system and the methods of treating them, which were still under development at the time. Therefore, in 1960, he began working at the Department of General and Thoracic Surgery of the J. Struś Municipal Hospital in Poznań, where he remained until 1973. It is worth noting that this department, lead by Professor Jan Moll, was conducting some of the most advanced research work on cardiac surgery in Poland. During his stay there, Professor Poniżyński completed his 1<sup>st</sup> degree specialization in general surgery in 1963 and 2<sup>nd</sup> degree specialization in general surgery in 1969. He also continued his scientific development and was granted the degree Doctor of Medical Sciences in 1968.

In 1973, he decided to transfer to the Clinic of Cardiovascular Surgery of the Medical Academy, located in Poznań on ul. Długa and known at the time as the “Pawłow” Hospital. It was there that he began to promote academic, university-based cardiac surgery in Poznań. In extremely difficult conditions, he performed his first cardiac surgery

procedures. His scientific work led to his habilitation in 1978 – awarded for conducting a study on the usefulness of intra-aortic counterpulsation in the treatment of acute circulatory failure in animal models.

A key moment in the Professor’s career came when the Academy decided to establish the Clinic of Cardiac Surgery in Poznań toward the end of the 1970s. As the greatest expert in cardiac surgery in Poznań, Professor Poniżyński was asked to assume the post of Director of the Clinic of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgery (under the auspices of the Institute of Cardiology of the Medical Academy in Poznań), founded in 1980. The first years of the Clinic’s operation coincided with a very difficult time for Poland. The newly appointed director had to face numerous challenges as martial law was introduced, and medicines and equipment were lacking. The Professor never gave in to these difficulties. Thanks to his personal contacts in Kiel, Germany, funds were gathered for the Clinic to acquire a modern heart-lung machine (Fig. 1). This enabled a significant improvement of treatment safety and the introduction of new types of procedures.

The Clinic of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgery continued to operate in very difficult conditions. It had to share with other Clinics a single operating room that did not conform to

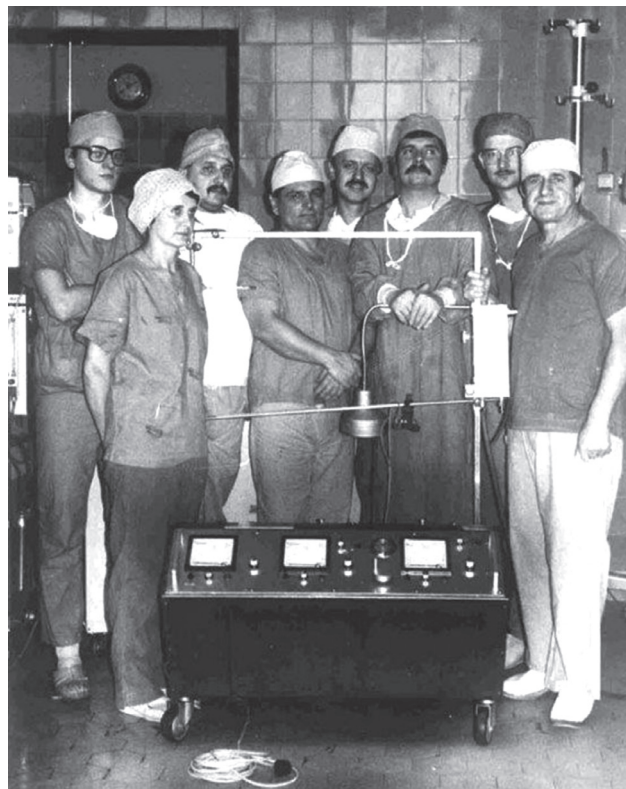


Fig. 1. Professor Poniżyński with his first team

modern standards. Despite these obstacles, the Professor managed to organize the construction of a new wing for the hospital, devoted to the needs of cardiac surgery. His work was continued after his retirement in 1998, and the building he helped create saw the installation of two state-of-the-art operating rooms with transplantation facilities.

During his career, the Professor took part in internships in Europe's best cardiac surgery centers. Especially close were his ties with the Clinic of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery in Göttingen, Germany, to which he was invited several times (in 1977, 1983, 1988), and the Clinic of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgery in Kiel. He was a member of many scientific associations in Poland and abroad and a co-founder of the Club of Polish Cardiac Surgeons. For many years, he was a cardiac surgery consultant for the region; for some time, he also served as a national consultant in this field.

Throughout his career, Professor Poniżyński performed thousands of cardiac surgery procedures (including the most challenging ones). He spent thousands of hours at the operating table, at the expense of his own health.

At the same time, he remained active scientifically. He authored and co-authored approximately 200 scientific

papers, mostly devoted to cardiac surgery, which were published in books and scientific journals in Poland and abroad. He obtained numerous patents, some of them for: a cardiac defibrillator, a controlling/monitoring device for a mechanical circulatory support pump, and the use of autologous blood in open heart surgery. His scientific work was met with appreciation; in 1981 he received the post of docent, and in 1989 the Council of State awarded him the title Professor of Medical Sciences. In 1997, he was granted full professorship at the Medical Academy in Poznań.

He supervised 9 doctorates and 1 habilitation; under his guidance, 8 surgeons completed their 1<sup>st</sup> degree specialization in general surgery, 2 completed their 2<sup>nd</sup> degree specialization in general surgery, and 5 completed their specialization in cardiac surgery.

In conclusion, it should be underscored that Professor Poniżyński's priority was always the health and lives of the people under his care. His conduct was greatly appreciated, and he was immensely valued and respected by both his patients and their families.

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