Władysław Marek Turski (1938–2013)

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Professor Władysław (Wlad) Turski passed away on July 18th, 2013. We lost our teacher, senior colleague, and good friend. That was about half a year ago. It took me a long time to gather my thoughts and come to some terms with this loss. In the meantime, on numerous occasions I tried to dial his number, as so many times previously, seeking advice, opinion, discussion, or simply a good chat—in vain now. . .

As with many colleagues of his generation, Wlad came to computing science from another discipline: he studied astronomy. His first serious encounter and the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the challenges and opportunities offered by computing came when in 1960 he had the chance to use a computer at Jodrell Bank to simulate the behaviour of the Draconids (a meteor shower). In fact, astronomy-related computations continued to be a part of his professional activity for another few years. He took up a position at the Computing Centre (later to become the Institute of Computer Science) of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and gradually became fully involved with programming. He took part in the development of KLIPA, a symbolic programming language for the Soviet-made URAL-2 computer, and designed SODA, an original operating system for the Polish ODRA-1204 computer—both well-known and appreciated by the international community at the time, with his talk on KLIPA at the ACM National Conference in 1963 being perhaps the first computing science presentation in the US by a person from the Soviet block. This very practical line of work continued when he moved to the Institute of Mathematical Machines in 1972.

In the meantime, he became an active member of the international computing community. In 1965 Wlad was elected a member, and a year later the scientific secretary of the famous "Algol group", IFIP Working Group 2.1. A few years later, together with other signatories of the "minority report" criticising Algol 68, he left the group and co-founded a new elite IFIP Working Group 2.3, where the basic ideas of programming methodology and software engineering crystallised. He was one of those who pushed forward a view of computing science where practical issues motivated developments of solid foundations and a crisp, precise, mathematical approach to software specification, design and construction. Articles and books he published contributed to these developments and demonstrated the practicality of such an approach. A visible sign of Wlad's international prestige and recognition was the IFIP World Congress 1977 in Toronto, which he chaired. Many of the people he worked with at that time came to Warsaw for ETAPS 2003 where we organised a special event to honour Wlad's 65th birthday. He lectured all over the world, but especially cherished his contacts with the British computing community, including a few years spent at Imperial College. He was a Fellow of the (British) Royal Academy of Engineering and one of very few Distinguished Fellows of the British Computer Society, of which he was rightly very proud.

At home in Poland, in 1977 Wlad moved to the University of Warsaw, joining the Institute of Informatics, formed a couple of years earlier with his active participation. He served as the director of the institute for a few years, later as Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics, Informatics and Mechanics of the University of Warsaw, also as a member of the University Senate and an influential member and chair of numerous committees at the faculty and university level—a highly active and visible figure at the University. First of all though, he was

one of the key people who laid the tradition of the excellent computer science curriculum at the University of Warsaw. Generations of Polish (and not only Polish) students learnt the basics from his textbook "Informatics: A Propaedeutic View." We, his students, knew him as an excellent lecturer and demanding professor, who would never agree to anything below the highest standards and quality of teaching and study.

In 1980, at the first opportunity to build a professional organisation truly independent from the authorities in Poland at that the time, Wlad was one of the co-organisers of the Polish Information Processing Society. He became its first President, and was then the first named Honorary Member of the Society.

Wlad's activity for the benefit of the professional computing community in Poland was very much in line with another, perhaps unexpected line of work: he was a frequent contributor to Polish periodicals, publishing regular columns, where he commented not only on developments related to computing, but also on some wider aspects of social, cultural and economical life. These columns were always very much in Wlad's typical style of writing. Just like his scientific publications, they presented views that reached deep into the essence of the matter at hand, often leading to unexpected and controversial conclusions and ideas. They were also perfectly phrased, sharp and witty. He was a perfectionist when it came to issues of language. More than once he rejected an article or a thesis solely because they were inadequate linguistically. He actively fought for the quality of the language used in science as well as in everyday life. This was always important for him, even if clarity of thought was put first.

Wlad was a prominent editor of a number of scientific journals and monograph series. His involvement with Acta Informatica and Information Processing Letters was perhaps most visible—both lasting some 40 years. He joined the editorial board of Information Processing Letters soon after the journal started in the early seventies. Together with David Gries, he remained the only IPL editor who has stayed with the journal since then—leading it as Managing Editors most of the time, supervising and initiating necessary changes, always making sure of the highest quality and standard of IPL publications. We owe IPL as we know it now to them.

Wlad Turski was one of my professors at the University of Warsaw when I started my studies in the mid-seventies. After my PhD I worked elsewhere, but we met on numerous occasions in Poland and abroad. When I returned to the University of Warsaw in the early nineties, he was a senior, experienced colleague for me, a reliable guide in the labyrinth of university matters. This was especially important when in 1996 he was elected the Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics, Informatics and Mechanics, and I became the Director of the Institute of Informatics. Many projects carried out then benefited from his insightful comments and support, and many failures were avoided thanks to his warnings and wise advice. He also invited me to join the Editorial Board of IPL, and later entrusted me with the privilege of leading the journal when he and David Gries decided to phase out their activity, resign as Managing Editors, and serve as Advisory Editors, on whose help, support and experience I could always rely.

Wlad's last years were marked with progressing illness, which limited his physical activity—but never his mental powers. It always amazed me how sharply he saw things, how fast he grasped new ideas, and how accurately he could diagnose problems, troubles and real issues to be resolved. Until his final days, he was the person I sought advice from. I admit, I sometimes bothered him more often than I should have: I simply enjoyed talking to him. He was a person of impressive, very extensive knowledge, and true erudition, easily discussing facts, stories and ideas related to history, culture, and science. Each conversation with him had its detours, often in quite unexpected directions, sometimes funny, sometimes important, always interesting. I will miss this very much.

This is also how Wlad is remembered by his numerous colleagues and friends from all over the world. I received many e-mails and letters, recalling him as a great man of science, a gifted lecturer, an experienced professor, and a helpful editor, but also as a great companion, a wonderful person to spend time with, full of life, humour, jokes and good stories.

The world is a poorer place without him. . .

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