

Paweł Okołówski

Professor Zbigniew Musiał (3 III 1936 – 27 II 2025).

(Speech at the Funeral Home at the Military Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw, 6 March 2025.

Translated by Paweł B. Musiał i Marek Kądzielski)



It is difficult to part definitively with the body of a loved one, as our sense of closeness is tied to their physical presence. Closeness is physical, and today we have lost it. As his friend Bogusław Wolniewicz would say, “Zbysio has left us.” And I, too, feel that a part of myself has vanished along with the atoms of Zbigniew Musiał. Yet, some of his atomic structures have forever nestled within our souls.

He was a righteous and needed man – this is perhaps the simplest way to describe the Departed. Or, to put it differently, he was a one-man orchestra.

I knew Zbigniew Musiał for 40 years – two-thirds of my life and almost half of his. The university brought us together – a docent and a student under the same guiding star: Wolniewicz. By the 1990s, when I began working at the university, we would meet every week during office hours. During those meetings, he shared the story of his life with me. Why did he do this? Now, I realise it was for a significant reason. In the second decade of our rapport, he became my academic advisor;

in the third, my life mentor; and in the final decade, my friend and master – paradoxical as that may sound. I never stopped addressing him as “Professor” because that particular form of love would not allow it. And in the last ten years, he took joy in my publications as if they were the performances of a child.

Throughout his 89-year journey, he encountered enough horror to fill several lifetimes with its weight. He believed in the existence of the devil, but only as a part of human nature, and he tended to be a pessimist. Nevertheless, he regarded his own life as a happy one. He took pride in his family and, most recently, in his great-grandson. He smiled constantly and joked – almost to the very end – especially at his own expense. His sense of humour, as we know, was distinctly English. Even on 19 February, already on his deathbed, he said to me: “*The doctors want to consult a psychiatrist about me.*” – “*Well, the psychiatrist probably needs it.*”

He was a child of war (the Germans used his six-year-old blood to develop a polio vaccine – an illness he contracted but soon overcame with natural immunity). After the war, despite his limp, he became an excellent marksman. In his youth, he studied physics in Leningrad¹, he was also a musician for Edyta Piecha and experienced firsthand the tragedy of the Soviet Union from the inside. Later, at the request of Władysław Gomułka, he became a Russian-language interpreter for the general secretaries of the Eastern Bloc, including Brezhnev. He brushed against both the Himalayas and the Mariana Trenches of power and humanity, encountering white and black emperors and popes. Few people are granted such experiences, and even fewer manage to emerge from them unscathed.



¹ (Footnotes added in the printed text) He was born in Sieraków, then lived in Poznań and Koszalin, from 1965 in Warsaw, from 2020 in Milanówek; studied physics and philosophy in Leningrad (1955-1959), philosophy at the University of Warsaw (1960-1963); and completed assistant internship at the University of Łódź (1962-1965). He worked for 40 years at the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw (1965-2005), belonged to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) for a decade and a half (1965-1981) – for the (illusory) idea of “doing something good for everyone”. He defended his doctorate in 1974 and obtained his habilitation in 1984. He also taught philosophy at the Higher School of Promotion in Warsaw (2001-2005). Since 2020 – Chairman of the Board of *Fundacja Katedra Bogusława Wolniewicza* (Bogusław Wolniewicz Chair Foundation).



In Leningrad, 1957



In Milanówek, 2022

He was a hunter – at one point, the longest-serving one in Poland, with 70 years of experience. He shot – or, as the proper term goes, harvested – over a thousand wild boars. This means he spent thousands of solitary nights in the forest. “*Hunting is a great art,*” he told a journalist in 2008². One could add it is art that goes straight back to the Palaeolithic, to the caves of Chauvet, yet one that also honours quantum physics – after all wild boars and deer fall under the exact statistics of the Cosmos, as do quantum particles. At home, however, for the last seven years, this hunter nurtured a friendship with a rabbit named Kicuś, along with his cherished carp and ide fish on his plot of land. Only deep within his soul, was he a philosopher, albeit one driven by obligation. Yet he was a true philosopher, capable of perceiving the skeleton of reality beneath the haze of impressions, illusions, and idle chatter. Minds like his no longer exist. Daily, he preferred the role of a handyman, taming every rebellious piece of metal with his drill or grinder with finesse. In the company of friends, he could transform into a silver-tongued Homer or Tetmajer. All his friends knew this. And oh, how he cooked! *Game à la Musiał* will forever remain the pride dish at my table, symbolising the very essence of the taste of life itself. None of us can hunt, speak, repair, think, or eat quite like he did.

² Cf. J. Łapińska, *Krew to farba*, „Przegląd”, 48/ 2008.



Animals from Chauvet's cave, Wikipedia



On the hunt

He took me under his wing as my academic advisor a quarter of a century ago. As a supervisor and mentor, he was liberal – only occasionally condescending or sharp – but he was also generous, often gifting me with his carefully crafted sentences. He tolerated both the elaborate flourishes and the lack of style in my writing, even though he disliked both. Linguistically, he was exceptionally discerning. It annoyed him when people would “*dostawać lub wysyłać maila*” [In Polish, the correct form is “*dostawać mail*” (to receive an email) and “*wysyłać mail*” (to send an email). Using “*maila*” is a common mistake that does not align with grammatical rules]; and he found the phrase “*human resources management*” repulsive – especially when used in universities. He even authored an article³ on the subject, proposing a natural and elegant alternative: “*managing personal teams*”. He adored the prose of Chekhov, Shalamov and Waldorff.

³ *Kilka uwag do nazwy “Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi”, Promenada. Magazyn młodych profesjonalistów, May 2003*



As I realised back then, his tactical and strategic abilities in dealing with people were unmatched. Professor Musiał was **a tailor of antagonisms**, a master of harmony, and a genius in both his relations with others and within his own soul. He never cared about an academic career; he loved the forest and a few people – among whom I was fortunate to be included. He enjoyed being at the centre of social attention but also generously offered his favours. Above all, he served as a natural connector for personal teams, such as between Professor Wolniewicz and me. He used to repeat that “true greatness lies in recognising the greatness of others.” It could be said that he was the one who saved the entire **Wolniewicz school of thought**, profoundly influencing my own path. Without Musiał, there would probably be no continuation of the great branch of Polish philosophy that originated from Elzenberg. He made three notable contributions to this field: pioneering analyses of Stalinism, occultism, and tribalism (his contribution to the theory of community). Zbigniew Musiał was a steadfast rationalist – yet he acknowledged the most significant elements of human nature, addressing the irrationality of religion, love, and chance with spontaneity and beauty. His wife, the love of his life, was his support and role model. “It looks like we even like each other,” he would say with his characteristic sarcasm as he looked at a newly taken photograph of himself and his wife.



With his wife Danuta, Bogusław Wolniewicz, Ewa Wolniewicz-Warska, Anna and Paweł Okołowski, 2016

For the past several years, he had been gravely ill – suffering from countless ailments, the worst of which was leukaemia. Although in a desperate situation, he would take the skin off any animal – and not only an animal – he could never do the same to himself. He starved the leukaemia, a process that lasted a month and a half, but he succeeded – three days before his birthday – “*so that no one would have to wish him what he truly desired.*” He would repeat indignantly, “*even the Romans pierced Christ’s crucified body with a spear.*”



With his protégé, on his 88th birthday

He passed away. We managed to say our solemn goodbyes in February. He often quoted Jerzy Waldorff, to whom he was similar in many ways: *“God strikes the elderly either in the legs or in the head, but rarely both at once.”* In his case, God struck his blood and bones, leaving his mind sharp. On 27 January, we were still discussing metaphysical and ethical matters, his thinking showing no trace of leukaemia, although for years, it had made it difficult for him to breathe. He said he was not suffering much. Later, he quoted Horace in Latin, Dostoevsky in Russian, and recited English rhymes. On 7 February, with great solemnity, he shared secrets about his life I had never known. His nature, which consisted of reconciling opposites, led him to a deadlock and stupor: he wanted what he did not want and did not want what he wanted. Two segments of his brain checkmated each other, and their harmony was crowned by an implosion. In light of this, the only words that come to my mind are those of T.S. Eliot: *“This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper.”*⁴ I am certain that if Zbigniew Musiał had desired a “bang”, he would have brought it about. Yet, behind this almost two-month-long whimper lies the foul shame of our civilisation.

He once told me he could not imagine life among people other than Christians. Although he declared that he did not believe in God, he lived in a godly way because he believed in fate as a higher power. God and Fate are one and the same.

I bid you farewell publicly, Professor, in your style – which may seem inappropriate to the mourners – by sharing a joke. However, it was something you appreciated. And the gathered must only know that Zbigniew Musiał’s wife, Mrs Danuta, carries the maiden name *Sielanko*. During my last visit to the Musiałs’ home last autumn, my son remarked:

“Life is not a Sielanko; it’s more like a Musiał – you must live it.”

[A pun that plays on the similarity between *“Sielanko”* (which comes from *“sielanka”*, meaning a pastoral or idyllic life) and the *“Musiał”* surname, which means *“must”*, implying the necessity or inevitability of life’s challenges.]

The Host replied: *“The important thing is not to leave behind just compost.”*

- *“You left, Your Grace, a garden. I would say – in a beautiful Polish style.”*

Majstersztyk (masterwork, from German Meisterstueck) – your favourite word.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 1925

May nothingness grant you solace! Rest in peace, with God's light upon you! Amen.



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