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In memoriam Paweł Piotr Liberski (1954-2025)

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August 19, 2025 has marked the passing of Professor Paweł Piotr Liberski, who died suddenly, unexpectedly, and far too soon at his home in Łódź, attended by his wife, Professor Maria Respondek-Liberska.

Paweł was one of the most vibrant figures in Polish science, an eminent scholar, excellent physician, neurologist, and neuropathologist. Those privileged to knew him will remember a remarkable man of uncommon intelligence, fond of red jackets and colorful suspenders, forever sprinkling quotations from Shakespeare, Bulgakov, or Tolkien. People like him are few.

Paweł Liberski was born into an artistic family of well-known painters. You can come across works by Professor's father, Benon Liberski, in museums in Poland, while the melancholic Pierrots painted by his mother are sometimes found in art galleries. There is no doubt that a childhood spent among his parents' paintings and their vivid milieu, shaped his Renaissance-like curiosities.

Professor Liberski graduated from the Medical Academy in Łódź in 1979. However, a year earlier during a student placement in Vienna, he had already made a name for himself as an unusual student, obsessively interested in a scarce group of diseases: transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, later known as prion diseases, to which he devoted his entire life. He completed

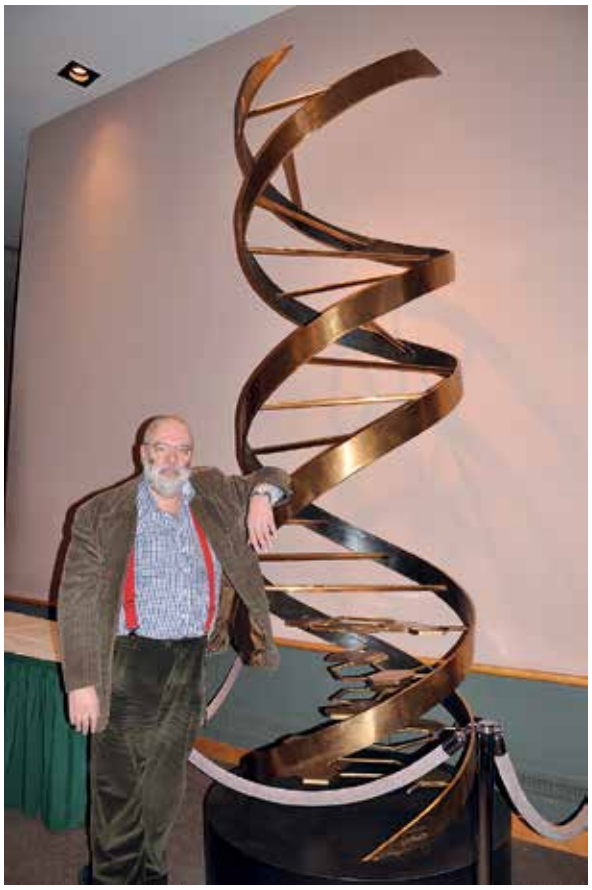

Photo 1 and 2. Professor Paweł Liberski in Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, Long Island, New York, 2010.

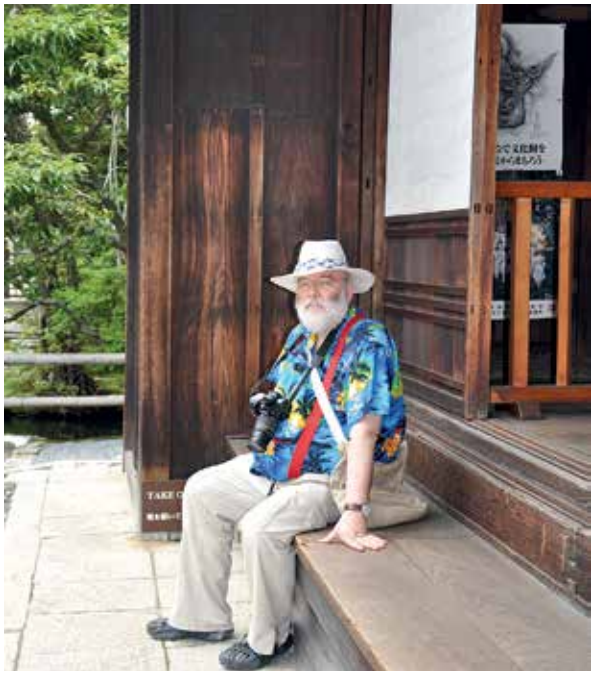

Photo 3. Professor Paweł Liberski in Kyoto, 2013.

Photo 4. Professor Paweł Liberski in Lisbon, 2019.

specialist training, firstly in neurology and later in neuropathology, and as a 39-year-old scientist, he received the title of Professor from Lech Wałęsa in 1993, which in those days was considered an extraordinary achievement. He served for many years as the Head of the Department of Molecular Pathology and Neuropathology at the Medical University of Łódź. From 2002 to 2008, he was the University's Vice-Rector for Research, and he also established the National Reference Centre for Prion Diseases in Poland. In the 1980s, Professor Paweł Piotr Liberski was a Fogarty Visiting Fellow in the laboratory of Nobel laureate D. Carleton Gajdusek, with whom he later worked together and maintained a friendship for many years. He also became acquainted with another Nobel laureate, Stanley Prusiner, with whom he often sparred over the nature of the infectious agent in prion diseases. His acquaintance with Carleton Gajdusek, who collected the art of the indigenous peoples of Oceania, along with his artistic roots, undoubtedly influenced his interest in ethnographic art as well as painting, especially Picasso and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Apart from his interest in art, Professor had another passion: battleships, especially Japanese ones. His extraordinary offices, both at home and work, are filled with ethnographic artefacts, works of his artistic parents, thousands of elephant figurines, and a vast library of rare and precious books. His scientific and professional interests focused on prion diseases, brain tumors, viral diseases of the central nervous system, and neurodegeneration. From the very start of his career, he turned to transmission electron microscopy, achieving significant advances in visualizing viral particles and virus-associated structures in neurological diseases. Nevertheless, his lasting legacy lies in the research of ultrastructural features of prion diseases. I had the privilege to work closely with him for over twenty years, supporting his scientific endeavors until the end of his life.

Professor Liberski authored more than 400 scientific papers and over 40 books; his works have been cited around 20,000 times, and his h-index stood at 47. In an era in which we try to measure everything, convert research into profitability, and reduce a scholar's stature to a point score, not these – impressive they are – that attest to the greatness of a person. In my view, the real measure lay in the fact that when I went to an international conference and said I worked with Paweł Liberski, everyone knew whom I meant, "The guy in the red suspenders"; sometimes a sarcastic touch in his humor, yet they also knew his work and understood that he studied the ultrastructure of prions. They knew if he was not attending the sessions, he was most likely found in a museum. Another sign of his recognition and charisma was visible on August 19; as I wrote the painful messages informing our associates, co-workers, and friends about his death, within minutes, an hour or two at most, dozens of replies reached us from around the world: messages and phone calls from Australia,

Hawaii, Canada, the United States, and across Europe. These were not formulaic or impersonal condolences, but sincere expressions of disbelief: "Paweł? Our Paweł", as he was often called, "has passed away?" They were accompanied by heartfelt memories, thoughtful anecdotes, and even photographs. Among the leading international neuropathologists gathered at his funeral was Professor Herbert Budka who travelled from Vienna to accompany his former student, and later friend, Paweł on his final journey. The presence of Professor Budka was a further testimony of Paweł's prominence. Another measure of a person's greatness is nobility and generosity. Professor Liberski was extremely generous. There was not a trace of envy or jealousy in him. He shared everything he had: his knowledge, his contacts, and sometimes even his food, though perhaps a little less willingly. Small wonder that he helped shape so many careers; many of his students now hold senior positions in science and medicine. And I think all of us, at some point of our careers, have heard his favorite line from The Matrix movie: "(...) I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to walk through it." Most of us did walk through that door, even if we were far from being such birds of paradise in science as Professor was. Forever, I hope, we all will remember who opened that door for us.