

An Advancer of Science

PAWEŁ GRIEB

Medical Research Center, Warsaw
Polish Academy of Sciences
pgrieb@cmdik.pan.pl

One could tell anecdotes about Prof. Witold Andrzej Karczewski for hours on end. As an excellent researcher, a strict boss, and an erudite humanist, he worked to promote science awareness and was devoted to public service

Professor Witold Karczewski, the present author's own boss, sage, and teacher, passed away on 22 June 2008. He had been born in Lwów (now Lviv) in 1930. He studied medicine in Wrocław, moving to Warsaw just before graduating. He worked at the Medical Research Center of the Polish Academy of Sciences from 1954 to 1991 and climbed up through all the successive rungs of a research career, from a professorial assistant up to full professor and deputy director for research (also with a short tenure as acting director himself). He remained linked to Wrocław, earning his PhD (in 1961) and the rank of assistant professor (in 1965) there from the Ludwik Hirszfild Institute of Immunology and Experimental Therapy.

Prof. Karczewski was a neurophysiologist, chiefly an electrophysiologist. His most prominent achievements as a scientist are classic papers about pulmonary reflexes, the outcome of his time spent at New College at Oxford University and his work with the eminent British physiologist John G. Widdicombe. Later he studied the mechanism generating the respiratory rhythm and the impact of the brain cortex on respiration. He met regularly, both professionally and personally, with a number of research colleagues in Western Europe. Prof. Karczewski was also an enthusiast of cutting-edge research methods: his lab used computers back in the mid-60s, i.e. from the very beginning. He supervised nine doctorate dissertations and several DSc (*habilitacja*) degrees, and most of his protégés continue to work in research – although unfortunately abroad.

The Boss and his Gang

I must admit that the professor could sometimes be a strict boss – although his strictness was always

fair and justified. He had an extraordinarily well-developed sense of humor and a special kind of relations with his closest associates. Staff members of his Neurophysiology Team were required to address him as the “Boss,” a fact that distinguished him from all other Polish professors I have known. That was a source of hard-to-conceal surprise for many outside observers, especially since he was not a tall man but all of his assistants were beanpoles above 180 cm in height. He, in turn, called us his “Gang” – not without a certain pride, it seems. One could tell anecdotes about him for hours on end. In essence he was quite tolerant and definitely somewhat fond of us.

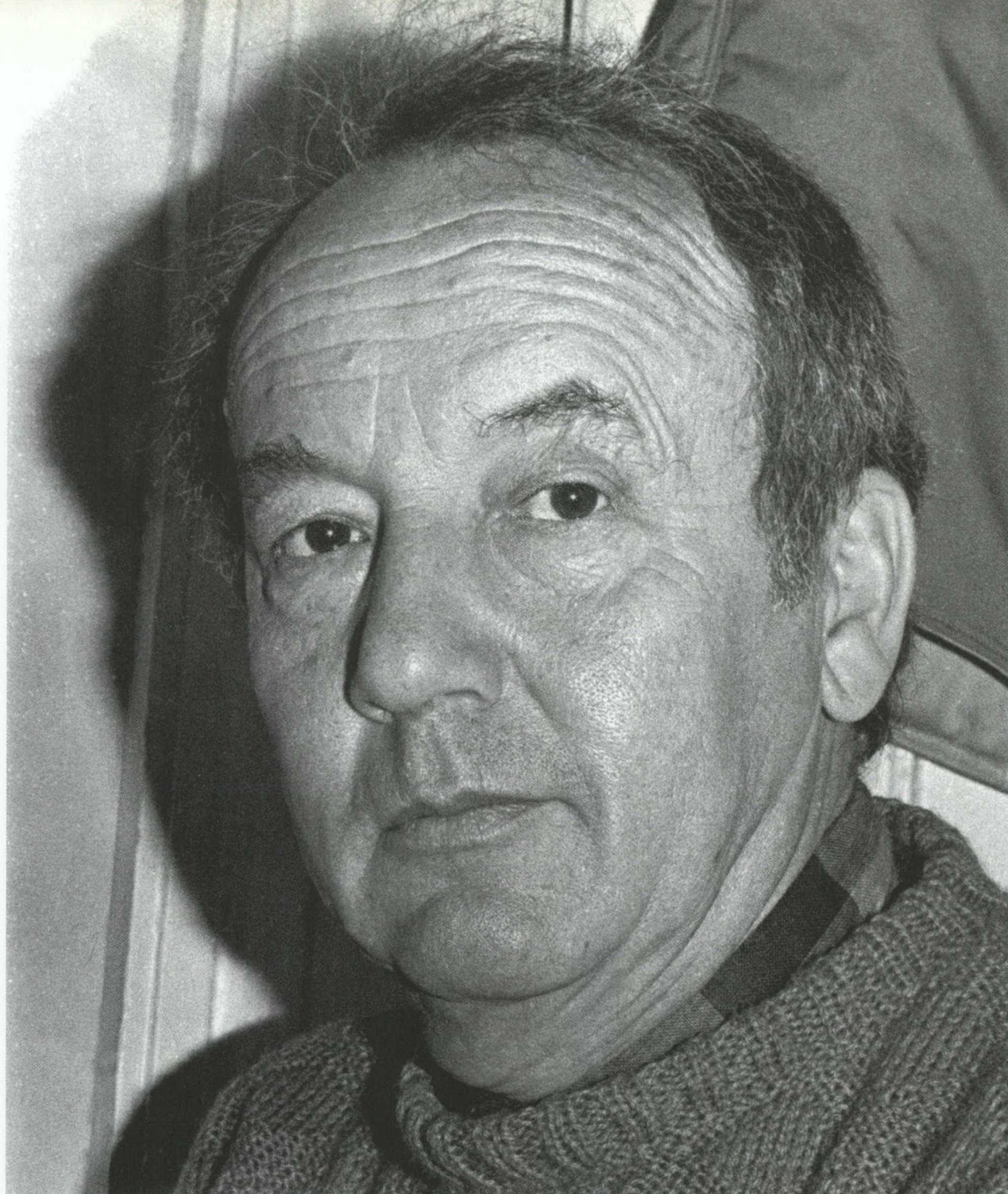
Aside from his medical education and his thorough knowledge of his field of science, Prof. Karczewski was also an erudite humanist. An avid aficionado of poetry, he would sometimes cite fragments of verses by Gaczyński or Mayakovsky. He was also a lover of Masurian lake-district landscapes and an impassioned sailor, even serving for a time as Commodore of the Polish Academy of Sciences Yacht Club. He loved his family very much. He also loved his dogs, with whom he quite simply never parted – each of his successive pets came to work regularly with its master.

For the good of science

As the general situation in Poland worsened in the late 1970s, Prof. Karczewski's engagement in research waned somewhat, to be supplanted by public activity. Nevertheless, his scientific work did not completely cease for quite a long time, his last co-authored research paper appearing in print in 1993.

Karczewski was an enthusiast of cutting-edge research methods: his lab used computers back in the mid-60s, i.e. from the very beginning

Public service was Prof. Karczewski's second passion. It grew out of his activity in research-related societies: the Polish Physiological Society and the Warsaw Learned Society, reactivated after years of nonexistence. In autumn 1980 he became a founding member and vice-president of the Society for the Support and Advancement of Science (TKPN), an independent, interdisciplinary society focused on general issues of



Panel Grieb's private archives

Prof. Karczewski was a top-caliber neurophysiologist, but also an erudite humanist greatly devoted to public service

the organization and function of science within society, research ethics, and state research policy. After martial law was imposed in Poland in December 1981 the TKPN was banned by the communist authorities, yet did not cease its activity. One of the products of the underground discussion it fostered, with prominent contributions made by Prof. Karczewski, were reports on the true condition of Polish science and concepts for its reform, subsequently utilized by the negotiators of the Solidarity side of Poland's Round Table talks.

Satisfied reformer

In 1989 Prof. Karczewski became a member of the Polish Committee for Science and Technology, and then in 1991 he became chief of the Polish State

Committee for Scientific Research (KBN) and a minister in Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki's cabinet. He held the post of minister in four successive cabinets, an unprecedented achievement in Polish politics. That enabled him to follow through with the reform of Polish science, above all to consolidate a grant-based system of funding, a fact that gave him great satisfaction. In connection with the KBN's 10th anniversary, he told journalists: "Back when we formed the KBN we assumed that we would be ruthless in enforcing good scientific work, while paying for it well. Unfortunately, we were only allowed to do the enforcement part. We were given a stick but not a carrot. Nonetheless... I am proud of it."

I, too, am proud of my Boss. May he rest in peace. ■