

IN MEMORY

Dr Maria Witkiewiczowa
October 15, 1895 – April 28, 1983



Maria Witkiewiczowa, née Hamerska, was born on 15th October 1895 in Lviv, in the family of a higher government official of the General State Attorney. She received a good all-round education, completed by the study of foreign languages (English, German, Russian and Latin). Her special interest in natural philosophy she deepened studying at the University of Jan Kazimierz in Lviv in 1917–1921. In that time, still being a student, she was employed there, first as a demonstrator, then as a junior assistant in the Section of Mineralogy. At that university, in 1923, she earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree, writing a thesis entitled: “Old-red of the Podole”. Later, from the 1st July 1923 to the 30th September 1924 she was a research assistant in the Department of Mineralogy and Petrography in the Faculty of Chemistry of the Lviv Technical University.

After having got married in 1924 to professor Roman Witkiewicz, director of the Department of Machine Measurement in Lviv Technical University, she stopped her professional work for the home duties, bringing up her two daughters, Maria and Ewa. Relatively quiet and steady life lasted until a memorable night of the 3rd July 1941, when bad-famed organization SS Security Echelon (Schutz-Staffeln) with its Special Troops (Einsatzkommando), in collaboration with Gestapo, committed a bestial murder on 20 Lviv professors. Just then Dr Maria Witkiewiczowa lost her 55-year-old husband and 43-year-old brother, professor Edward Hamerski, who was a director of the Department of the Infectious Diseases of the Little Animals at the Academy of Veterinarian Medicine in Lviv. Soon after that, she was thrown out of her house with her children to the brother’s basement flat, where she was living until the liberation. In those tragic days, when she remained practically without any means, she found help from her friends. Thanks to their intercession, she was employed in the Institute of the Typhoid Researches in Lviv. After the liberation, she worked first as an assistant in the Petrol Section of the Lviv Institute of

Technical University, and later as a research assistant in the Department of Mineralogy of the Lviv University.

To Wrocław she did come in the late spring of 1946 and just on 15th July 1946 she was appointed to the post of research assistant in the Department of Mineralogy in the Department of Natural Sciences of the University and Technical University in Wrocław, and on 8th September 1947 she was nominated as an lecturer.

Dr Maria Witkiewiczowa vividly engaged in the post-war current of rebuilding of the Polish Science. She proved to be an excellent organizer. From just the beginning of the Department of Mineralogy and Petrography of the Wrocław University, Dr Maria Witkiewiczowa hold all the organizational and administrative affairs. Being the only person in Wrocław, apart from living in Kraków and coming to Wrocław Prof. K. Maślankiewicz, who had higher mineralogical and petrographical education, she led until 1961 all the courses and many lectures on mineralogy, crystallography and petrography. At that time, she prepared a didactical collection of minerals, rocks and thin sections. A lot of them she did collect by herself during students outdoor activities to describe them precisely in the laboratory and later catalogue them. Her reliability and perfect acquaintance with foreign languages would help her to complete her knowledge, and to make her lessons interesting and in touch with the newest scientific investigations. In a very short time she became an unquestioned authority for younger employees of science, whom she often helped with doctorates, not only in the Department of Mineralogy and Petrography, but also in other geological departments. She also did not spare time to the students, who always gladly and numerously came to her lectures, and often supervised their Master’s theses. She was an irreplaceable consultant when viewing thin sections under the polarization microscope. Thanks to her many-sided pedagogical talent, many-years’ experience and contacts with other scientific centers, she could not only educate others scientifically, but also help them with organizing defences of Master’s and Doctor’s theses, advising benevolently even on such matters as, for example, clothing or preparing a good cake – often baking it on her own. Some of us still remember her delicious cakes, like a dactyl or nut torte, let alone an apple pie, which added splendor to many departmental ceremonies.

To these days it has been passed among us, how one day a new student asked a woman, dressed in a dark denim apron and bustling with a wiper about specimen – taking her on as a cleaning lady – for wiping his dusted after holidays desk. She did of course do it and then – to the students’ surprise – after having changed the apron into more elegant clothes, as if nothing had happened, she began a lecture.

Despite many professional and home duties, Dr M. Witkiewiczowa undertook a lot of social functions. In the

years 1950–1953 she was a tutor of the student groups and through some years was a deputy to the Council of the Department of Natural Science. She actively worked in scientific societies of Wrocław, e.g. in the Polish Society of Naturalists of Mikołaj Kopernik, or Wrocław Agenda of the Polish Geological Society, where in 1951–56 she was a secretary.

Yet the biggest work for the Wrocław University she used to do from the 1st October 1961, when she was appointed to the post of custodian of the Mineralogical Museum, where she had been working for ten years until she retired, but also later, if only her health allowed her, she often came to continue an already begun enterprise. Just thanks to her, most of 20 000 minerals, which came to Wrocław after the war turmoil, were ranged and ordered according to the chemical classification. She also prepared Polish labels for most of the specimen, deciphering written often in a tiny gothic German names of the minerals and the places of their finding. That was she, who also prepared a full range of thematic exhibits in the museum. In arranging them, as much as in renewing the museum in 1964–1966, after which the exhibitions could be rendered to visitors, other employees of the department helped her actively, especially Dr Andrzej Grodzicki and mgr Michał Sachanbiński (now professors).

In spite of many duties and the reverses of fortune (the death of her husband and brother, the loss of the family house, the up-bringing of the children, the sudden death of

her older, then just married daughter, help with up-bringing of her orphaned grand-daughter etc.) she did keep buoyancy, warm-heartedness and kindliness. For her organizational, pedagogical and social work Dr M. Witkiewiczowa was awarded Chevalier Cross of the Order of the Polonia Restituta, the Gold Cross of Merit, the Medal of National Education, the Medal of the Constructor of City of Wrocław, the Medals of X-, XV-, and XX- years of PRL (Polish People's Republic) and many awards of the Rector of the University of Wrocław.

We recollect this unique personage on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of her death and 300-years of the University of Wrocław, in whose postwar history she deserves a prominent place in the group of its builders. Although she did not earn herself any high scientific degrees, she helped many petrologists and mineralogists in Wrocław to acquire them. It is the pride of the teacher, also of the academic teacher, when her cleverest students succeed in surpassing her. We recall Dr Maria Witkiewiczowa just in times, when ruthless aggressiveness in action is often called assertiveness and such qualities as modesty and humility are recognized by some people of "rat racing" as incompetence. Maybe she knew, from her life experience and practical wisdom, that just for these virtues you can get the most points on the most important list, which is even beyond the Philadelphian one?!

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