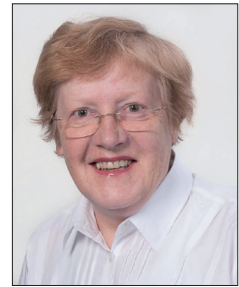


From Wrocław to Tromsø

BARBARA GASIOR-CHRZAN

*Department of Dermatology, University Hospital of Northern Norway, NO-9038 Tromsø, Norway
E-mail: barbara.gasior-chrzan@uit.no*



Barbara Gasior-Chrzan originates from Poland. Read her interesting story about her career as a dermato-venereologist starting in Wrocław, her decision to leave her country for Northern Norway and the adventurous journey in an old car with summer tyres in late autumn. Apart from being very good at her profession she is also very successful in fishing (see Fig. 2). Enjoy!

At the meeting of the Nordic Dermatology Association in Tampere in August 2013, people found my story interesting and Agneta Andersson encouraged me to write it down, which I agreed to do.

I was born in Poland. The enthusiasm of freedom post-World War II was quickly dampened when communism changed the political map in Poland. Many people lost their property and the country was terribly destroyed. As the country borders changed, many Polish people were moved from the Eastern part of the country to the Western part. Soon they realised that knowledge would best benefit their children's future. Therefore, in addition to school, many children took part in extracurricular activities, such as sports, music, dance and theatre. I played the violin and practiced recitation for 7 years.

I later studied medicine at the Medical School in Wrocław (which was called Breslau before World War II) and graduated with the Rector Prize. During my studies the political movement of 1968 swept through Europe and after that many Jewish students emigrated to Scandinavia or the US.

During the last 2 years of my studies I worked as a volunteer at the Dermatology Clinic in Wrocław, visiting an outpatient department twice a week. I was later employed at the Clinic, where I specialised in dermato-venereology with Prof. Jozef Kubicz as my supervisor. Profs. Stefania Jablonska, Tadeusz Chorzelski and Andrzej Langner from Warsaw were my censors.

The Dermatology Clinic in Wrocław was established in 1877 with Heinrich Kõbner as first Chief Director. Many renowned dermatologists have since been working there: Albert Neissner, Josef Jadassohn, Max Jesner and Heinrich Gottron. The current Head of the Department is Prof. Jacek Szepietowski. This famous clinic was left untouched by the almost total destruction of Breslau during World War II, and today visitors can almost hear the footsteps of these famous people.

When I worked there, the department had as many as 120 beds. The pet projects of the department were immunodermatology, allergology, mycology, dermato-histopathology, occupation dermatology, light treatment, and from 1977 also dermato-surgery.

In the beginning of my career, a full spectrum of venereal diseases, such as syphilis, was not uncommon. Various stages of skin tuberculosis were also occasionally detected, but this has disappeared during the last 40 years in Europe.

I was lucky to work with dermatologists with great knowledge of the subject and I learned much from them. Part of my job was radiation therapy for non-melanoma skin cancers and haemangiomas, as well as treatment of warts. Once a week I additionally worked as a doctor at the Women's Hospital outside of Wrocław, where I was primarily responsible for examining prostitutes for venereal diseases. Together with other colleagues I also worked in the pharmaceutical industry to evaluate new products. With the use of patch testing we also investigated workers exposed to chemicals in other industries. To earn some extra money, 2 afternoons per week I worked with rehabilitating people suffering from alcohol addiction.

My doctoral studies focused on lysozyme (muramidase) anti-bacterial enzyme, which can be found widespread in human body secretions and also in animals and some plants. The aim of my thesis was the effect of egg white lysozyme from hens on wound healing in humans and guinea pigs. I found the idea for this work in the Bible, Book of Job where it is described how, after God tried Job, dogs licked his wounds, which then healed quickly. Now we know that dog saliva is rich in lysozyme.

The problem was to get pure lysozyme in adequate amounts for the experiments. For this reason I bought a lot of fresh eggs and started to extract the enzyme myself. Only the hen

egg white is rich in lysozyme, but not the yolk. The yolk was nevertheless used for something completely different: homemade yolk liqueur! The experiments required the addition of lysozyme every 4 hours and since the laboratory animal facility was located near an old cemetery, I had to cross the cemetery in the middle of the night, which were very stressful events!

Each year 500 medical and dentist students were taught dermatology at our department. The department was a very busy place, with residents required to spend the night at the hospital when on call, covering consults for emergency patients.

In 1976, Prof. Stefania Jablonska organised a symposium on immuno-dermatology and renowned dermatologists from Europe and the US came to Wrocław. We should remember that this was when the iron curtain still divided Europe, so it was a big event and a turning point for our department. We developed a personal contact especially with German dermatologists. Shortly after the Wrocław symposium, Prof. Gerd K. Steigleder from Cologne invited some of us to a dermatology meeting for German-speaking countries. I was then invited to spend 3 months in his laboratory and received help with laboratory instruments to continue with my project. Much thanks to Prof. G. Stuttgen I participated in the World Congress in Dermatology in 1986 in Berlin.

The political situation in Poland grew more and more tense. The increasing conflict between the Communist Party and Solidarity deepened and General Jaruzelski eventually declared

martial law. Although I had never been politically active, my personal situation became rather difficult. I therefore decided to try working abroad for some time.

After an invitation from Prof. Edvard Falk, at that time Head of the Department of Dermatology in Tromsø, I left my home and my family to travel to Norway. I left in mid-October 1988 and went through Finland in a Skoda car equipped with summer tyres. I did not know that winter in the north of Scandinavia began as early as October or sometimes even in September. The only thing I knew from the encyclopaedia was that Tromsø was a city north of the polar circle with a beautiful bridge. Daylight was scarce, it was raining, the landscape became stranger and stranger with almost no traffic or houses. The journey was long. I had no radio, so I started to sing all the songs I knew. I arrived in Tromsø on a Sunday evening just as the bell in the Catholic Church started to ring.

At the start I got a one-year contract. The Dermatology Department in Tromsø at the time had 18 beds, as well as an outpatient department. There was a modern light treatment unit, possibility for allergy testing, and small dermatosurgeries were performed. I could not work as a dermatologist due to official regulations. I needed to undergo diploma recognition first, which usually took 3 years.

Almost everything around me was different. The language, of course, but everyone spoke English, so there were no communication problems. The food tasted differently and I started to learn how to cook. Gradually darkness embraced the Arctic.



Fig. 1. Group photo of the personell at the Department of Dermatology, University Hospital of Northern Norway in Tromsø in the year 2000. In the front line in the middle is Professor Edvard Falk, at that time Head of the department.



Fig. 2. Barbara performing one of her favourite pastimes: Fishing!

I had a romantic image of Scandinavia based on the stories by H.C. Andersen and Selma Lagerlöf I had read as a child. I remembered the story of the girl with the matches who froze to death on Christmas Eve while people passed her by.

My first Christmas and New Year I spent alone and I felt lonely. Someone told me that to make friends with Norwegians was like trying to get ketchup out of a bottle. You hit the bottle over and over and suddenly it all comes out at once!

I have been employed at the Department of Dermatology, Institute of Clinical Medicine at the University of Tromsø as an Associate Professor since October 1988. After diploma recognition in 1995 I also started working as a clinician with rare cases as my special interest. Occasionally, I worked as a dermatologist in Finnmark and I had the opportunity to get acquainted with the Sami culture. I was once invited to a wedding and I was the only foreigner among 600 Sami guests. I am still in touch with the Dermatology University Clinic in Wrocław. A wide variety of rare skin diseases can be observed there. My main activity is teaching dermatology to medical students. I am also occupied with the history of dermatology and I continue to study the connection between psoriasis and diet.

As a hobby I am studying ancient history and my other interests are classical music, theatre and fishing. My whole adult life has been devoted to dermatology. Dermatology is developing and new technologies are coming. Thanks to basic research, treatment methods of skin diseases have changed to be more comfortable and more effective, giving patients a better quality of life. Modern dermatology is more than just a skin rash. Dermatology is part of the whole field of medicine. Thanks to global communication it is much easier to keep contacts and exchange knowledge and experience with dermatologists from other countries.

Time is running very fast and this year marks the 25th anniversary of my work at the Department of Dermatology at the University of Tromsø. In 2015, the department will celebrate its 40th anniversary since it was established. Over the years, Tromsø and the world have changed. The university, hospital and our department have changed as well and we have changed. Everywhere we have been working, a small piece of us has been left, a tiny footprint or fingerprint.