

CHRONICLE

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PROFESSOR BOGDAN BALCER (1936-2018)

The first days of January 2019 brought the sad news of the death of Professor Bogdan Balcer – archaeologist, researcher of the Neolithic, specialist in prehistoric flint industries, mountaineering enthusiast (Fig. 1), and passionate cyclist... The best cyclist among archaeologists and the best archaeologist among cyclists (Fig. 2). A man of many passions, among which archaeology and sport always featured prominently.

We bade him farewell this year on 17 January, a sad and grey winter day. We did so first at a funeral Mass in St. Augustine's church in the Muranów district of Warsaw, when we were all deeply impressed by Professor Machnik with his loud cry of "Bodziu!", and later on at the cemetery in Ursus near Warsaw, where Bogdan Balcer was laid to rest alongside his parents. Those joining his wife Róża, his son Maciej, and his closest family in bidding him farewell included a large number of colleagues, friends, collaborators, and followers. Among those who gave eulogies were Professor Jerzy Maik, the Head of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Professor Romuald Schild, the former Head of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Professor Ryszard Grygiel, the Head of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź, and Dr Janusz Budziszewski.

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Bogdan Balcer was connected with Warsaw throughout his life. He was born there (16 December 1936), graduated from the prestigious Stefan Batory Lyceum in 1953, and later received a degree in archaeology from the University of Warsaw. His links with Warsaw

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Fig. 1. Mountains, the Tatras in particular, were one of Bogdan Balcer's early passions. On the Orła Perć trail in the early 1960s. Photo from M. Balcer's private collection

continued throughout his professional career: first (1957-1972) in the State Archaeological Museum, and later (1972-2006) in the Institute of Material Culture History (now the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology) of the Polish Academy of Sciences. However, Warsaw was also a place of childhood trauma for him: while living with his parents on Ogrodowa street, he endured the first few days of the Warsaw Uprising and survived the Wola massacre (beginning of August 1944), before being forced out of the city after the uprising was crushed. He recalled this time in the memoirs which he published towards the end of his life (Balcer 2015, 24).

After the war, the family took up residence in Ursus near Warsaw, and this was precisely where Bogdan's great adventure with sport began: in 1950, merely 14 years old, he embarked on his first cycling trip to Kraków (Balcer 2015, 337), and two years later started regular training, ultimately becoming a professional cyclist. In their recently published book *Sportowe dzieje Ursusa (Sport history of Ursus)*, Robert Gawkowski and Jacek Wiśniewski acknowledged Bogdan Balcer as "one of the best cyclists in Ursus in the mid-1950s" (Gawkowski, Wiśniewski 2017, 84-90). Owing to his many successes in cycling, but also because he was tall of stature, Bogdan earned himself the nickname of the "giraffe from Ursus" (Balcer 2015, 351).

The archaeological studies he undertook in 1953, and particularly the participation in excavations which they entailed, began to interfere with his professional sporting career at a certain point. Over time, new interests emerged: mountain trips, underwater archaeological research, travels... Nevertheless, what remained unchanged was the “fighting spirit” and the “finish” which Bogdan referred to many times – the desire and ability to fight until the very end, the persistence in pursuing goals.

An archaeological site that became a particular and important place for Bogdan Balcer was Biskupin, which he first visited as early as 1954, to participate in a student training camp. It was there that he was given the nickname “Bodzio the cyclist”, since he had cycled from Warsaw to Biskupin by bike. He was also attached to Biskupin for personal reasons: as he recalled, at Biskupin “a few couples began their road to marriage, including me and my Róża” (Balcer 2015, 93). The research at Biskupin (site 4) was also the subject of his early publications (Balcer 1963; for a full list Bogdana Balcer’s publications see: *Archeologia Polski*, vol. 64, in print).

Krzemionki Opatowskie came to be another “place on Earth” hugely important for Bogdan Balcer. He not only participated in the excavations (led by doc. dr hab. Jan Kowalczyk



Fig. 2. Bogdan Balcer – the best archaeologist among cyclists – in an “echelon” formation during road races. Sękocin near Warsaw, 1982. Photo from M. Balcer’s private collection

in 1969-1970), but also in kind of an archaeological experiment, namely the realisation of a movie entitled *Prastary skarb/Ancient treasure* in which Bogdan impersonated the flintknapping Master's assistant. He later described these experiences, among many others, in *Z otchłani wieków* (Balcer 1969a) and in *Wiadomości Archeologiczne* (Balcer 1969b).

Bogdan Balcer was connected with research on Neolithic flintknapping for almost his entire professional life. These studies, which he undertook on the initiative of docent Jan Kowalczyk, were continued and developed further under the direction of Professor Stefan Krukowski. Most of his publications were devoted to flintknapping, including his outstanding doctoral dissertation on the role of the Świeciechów-type of flint which he defended in 1973 and which was published two years later (Balcer 1975). As emphasised by Professor Romuald Schild "Bogdan did not invent the Świeciechów flint, nor – as is widely known – did he discover its outcrops, but he was the first to understand its paramount importance in Polish prehistory. He was also the first to launch excavations in the flint mine at Świeciechów itself [...] (Schild 2002, 7).

Among Bogdan Balcer's most prominent publications one should also mention *Ćmielów – Krzemionki – Świeciechów. Związki osady neolitycznej z kopalniami krzemienia*, Sum.: *Ćmielów – Krzemionki – Świeciechów. Relations between the Neolithic settlement and flint mines* (Balcer 2002). As Professor Stanisław Tabaczyński wrote "This is [...] a unique study, which is based on an immense collection of flint artefacts and which addresses the issues of raw material acquisition and processing, the exploitation of flint tools within the site, and the export of surpluses, analysing them in a full cultural and socio-economic context" (Tabaczyński 2006, 11). The study was met with great interest in archaeological circles, and in 2003 was rewarded with the Erazm Majewski Prize in the field of archaeology.

What Bogdan Balcer himself valued the most were source publications, which constitute a significant part of his work. He also ascribed considerable importance to the excavations he conducted at the sites of Zawichost-Podgórze, Dist. Sandomierz (1962-1964) and Świeciechów-Lasek, Dist. Kraśnik (1967), the results of which were promptly and thoroughly published. This is why the book he published with Jan Machnik and Jan Sitek, *Z pradziejów Roztocza na ziemi zamojskiej*, Sum.: *Prehistory of Roztocze and Zamość Region* (Balcer et al. 2002), was particularly important for him.

Perhaps to counterbalance the previous dominance of flintknapping, Bogdan Balcer focused his attention in the last period of his research activity on issues pertaining to prehistoric building. He addressed them in one of his last books: *Budownictwo mieszkalne i gospodarcze w neolicie ziem Polski*, Sum.: *Dwellings and utility constructions in the Neolithic of Poland*, (Balcer 2012) – an important and much needed publication summing up the current state of research in this respect. He also worked on preparing his memoirs – mentioned here more than once – for publication, which eventually happened in 2015 (Balcer 2015) thanks to the support from the Konrad Jażdżewski Foundation for Archaeological Research. This publication fully revealed his narrative ability and accuracy of style,

which had already manifested themselves before in the many papers he had written for the *Z otchłani wieków* journal, among others. These papers were distinguished by a serious – but free of pathos – approach and professional integrity. They also demonstrated his talent for the popularisation of science, which can be discerned in even his earliest papers, like those on prehistoric fishing published in *Wiadomości Wędkarskie* (Balcer 1960; 1961).

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Bogdan Balcer crossed the finish line on 30 December 2018. But he will continue to live in memory of many of us as a direct and modest man, one who was open and warm-hearted. A good and kind colleague, a man with passion and passions.

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