

In memory of Professor Zdzisław Opial

The 60-th anniversary of the birth of the late Professor Zdzisław Opial, who died in 1974, passes on September 30, 1990. The same year also marks thirty years since he obtained the degree of assistant professor at the Jagiellonian University. As time elapses, many things fade from memory, but it is very difficult to forget the outstanding personality of Z. Opial. Even at first sight it was possible to notice the characteristic difference of this tall, slim, almost ascetic figure, conspicuously modestly dressed. His slightly bent head and the concentrated expression in his eyes revealed something akin to youthful rebellion or, perhaps, shyness and delicacy. Z. Opial seems to have had a Don Quijote quality in his character — he always was ready to stand up for a cause which he thought to be right. He was shy but brave at the same time, particularly when it was necessary to fight or to help somebody. He was modest but ambitious. This apparent contradiction was one of many astounding features of his reach personality. Even more surprising was his mathematical inventiveness. He did not imitate his master. He was different from his colleagues. While the typical method for Professor Ważewski's school was going forward step by step along the path marked out by logical leading ideas, Z. Opial often attacked a problem by startling construction which unbelievably shortened the proof and whose source could not be determined. There was something of a prestidigitator's show in it. As by magic, Z. Opial would create from nowhere an ingenious auxiliary function, which unexpectedly allowed the proof to be finished with lightning speed. This astonishing approach to mathematical problems was not at odds with his didactic talent and interests. His lectures and papers were always clear and beautiful.

Z. Opial was an outstanding mathematician having significant scientific achievements. Nevertheless, it often seemed that this field was too narrow for him. His interests were manifold — history, philosophy and literature attracted and fascinated him. He was actively interested in didactics being convinced that the future of mathematics depended on how the younger generations would be educated and, consequently, on the professional qualifications of teachers and syllabuses. He was also interested in the history of mathematics being of the opinion that no field of science could properly develop without the knowledge of its roots. He dreamt of founding a group of young, able mathematicians who would work out the bibliography of Polish mathematics and biographies of our predecessors. A good knowledge of several foreign languages helped him a lot in his work. In short — he was not only very talented but also hard working. He had many plans. He could achieve a lot. His death was a shock for us all. He was only forty-four.

W. Mlak