

Jan Koteja: an appreciation and some memories

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I never met JAN KOTEJA. I came to know him, a little, through several years of correspondence which began when I asked him to participate in a symposium at an International Congress of Entomology (VANCOUVER, 1988). His initial reluctance turned to enthusiasm partly through my encouragement, but mostly through his own high spirits. Our correspondence continued as we worked on his contribution and on the symposium's publication (KOTEJA 1996). I also learned more about JAN KOTEJA from his son, PAWEŁ, who stayed a few days with me in Storrs on his way to do research in Canada. We talked most of one night, about everything; and it was clear to me that the father's enthusiasms and humor were in good hands.

Our correspondence continued about ten years. It began as so many professional letter exchanges do, with professional and scientific matters addressed to "Dr. KOTEJA" and "Dr. SCHAEFER"; and moved (as too few such correspondences do) to accounts of children and houses and quirky observations. In his last letter (May 1996), Jan announced the arrival of a fifth grandchild, and the imminent arrival of a sixth; and wondered "what is more important; total number of children or their combined age, or, maybe, sex ratio." He went on to suggest "a computer program, obviously in Windows (because of their pictures)." I told of the arrival of my own sixth grandchild, and calculated that at this rate of increase, in 40 generations (1000 years) the entire earth would be covered with my descendents.

Earlier, when had mentioned to me that a letter to him had taken four years to travel from Warsaw to Cracow. "It was a professor appointment. Maybe I am now a general or something without knowing it." And he complained to me that when he fixed his roof he was assessed additional taxes, "because of the 'increase of richness' and 'elevation of life standard' and this is actually true – we can sleep now without danger of being overflowed by rain." He calls this experience "falling off the roof even before climbing it."

It is this humor and this creative ability to see things at new (and strange) angles which appealed to me. More, it is these very qualities, I believe, that yield fine original

scholarship. It is one thing to study different organisms or different periods of history or different works of literature, in the same way that similar ones have been studied in the past. It is quite another thing to see these – whether organisms or periods or works – in a new way, in a different light, from an overlooked angle. Thence come new ideas and new approaches. Having a sense of humor means seeing things as most do not see them, and seeing things as they themselves might not wish to be seen. Describing things seen this way – seen at an odd angle, in an unusual light – requires good clear simple writing. JAN KOTEJA's papers are models of this way of thinking and this way of writing.

This way of thinking and writing is exemplified in his contribution to the Vancouver symposium (1996). His paper bore one of the most interesting titles, and opened with perhaps the most arresting opening sentence, I have read: Describing the earliest coccoids, Jan's piece was called, "Scale Insects (Homoptera: Coccinea) a day after"; and began, "A day before, the scale insects had two tarsal claws and their mates were flying creatures; thus they were not yet scale insects." What better way to begin an account of the earliest coccoids? What better way to begin a description of how the precoccoids became the protococcoids, and these eventually today's coccoids?

His imagination is also shown in his paper (KOTEJA 1987) on woody coccoid galls in Australia where, he suggests, such galls developed as a protection against fire.

Again, there is "Inclusion WrosteK," or "Paleoentomological Newsletter and Workshop," which Jan edited (and founded?) for years. I have about 20 numbers (1989-1999), and they are imbued with Jan's humor and intelligence. "Inclusion" began simply as "Paleoentomological Workshop," each issue with a different vignette in the upper left-hand corner. In one number, in that corner Jan wrote "no idea," and further down the page comments "the idea of what to place in the corner has not come. Sorry." In that same issue, he remarks that someone has suggested "Inclusion WrosteK" become a newsletter (which of course it did). Jan expressed the reservation that someone would then have to gather and copy the material and, if that did not happen, it "would be better to call it at once EPHEMERA instead of INCLUSION." (Having myself presided over the spiraling downward of "The Heteropterists' Newsletter," and found more and more people enjoying it and fewer and fewer contributing, I know what he meant.) As "Inclusion" became a newsletter, it included more and more material (bibliographies, accounts of meetings, lists of paleoentomologists) not written by Jan. But "Inclusion" never lost the fresh spontaneity and charm with which it began.

From time to time Jan mentioned other entomologists in his letters. "... Dr. [YURI] POPOV visited Cracow a few days ago... a very clever, educated and friendly man. I see all hemipterologists must be so" (May, 1988); and again, of PAVEL ŠTYS, "He is really a very friendly man, and I have arrived at the conclusion that all hemipterists are so: (October 1987). Because all hemipterologists *are*, in fact, very clever, educated, and friendly, one sees here how perceptive JAN KOTEJA was. "MICHAEL KOSZTARAB... is very polite, kind, friendly and willing to help people" (June, 1988). And he wonders (January 1988) how a clever but very busy Mr. GORCZYCA finds time to do research.

From time to time there appears in his letters a sense that JAN KOTEJA felt himself somewhat isolated, somewhat separated from his colleagues; and therefore happily surprised when these colleagues were friendly to him (note how often that word occurs in the quotations above). Almost poignantly he thanks me for writing friendly letters that encourage him, as if such encouragement were scarce. Once he told me that he was rather an old man, “have never been abroad (once in Budapest), my English is poor... and my knowledge of the Hemiptera, as a whole, is, as yet, very poor.”

His letters to me are from an ageless man, a man full of knowledge, humor, wisdom: the letters of a man whose body may have travelled little, but whose spirit encompassed the world.

REFERENCE

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Received: September 16, 2005

