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Photo by Marcin Kluczek

Professor Ida Kurcz (1930–2024)

The First Lady of psycholinguistics in Poland

passed away on January 25, 2024 in Warsaw

Ida Kurcz was born on September 13, 1930 in Łódź, but she lived in Warsaw almost all her life (also during World War II). She graduated from the Klementyna Hoffmanowa née Tańska Humanities High School in 1949. Immediately after graduation, she completed a one-year journalism course and worked for two years at the Książka i Wiedza Publishing Cooperative as a junior editor. She sat the exam to be enrolled in the psychology course at the University of Warsaw (UW), but (just like the other candidates) later found her name on the list of the Social Sciences School instead.¹ She was enrolled in year two of the UW

¹ In 1949, as the communist authorities fought against “bourgeois ideology,” closed-down university courses (including psychology, sociology, philosophy and pedagogy) were replaced with the So-

psychology course in 1950. She was a student of Professor Tadeusz Tomaszewski, under whose supervision she produced her master's thesis (*O dwojakiej funkcji słowa jako bodźca* [*On the Dual Function of Words as Stimuli*], 1954) and her doctoral dissertation (*Generalizacja semantyczna ruchów dowolnych* [*Semantic Generalization of Intentional Movements*], 1962). When she was still a psychology student (in 1951), Tomaszewski hired her (and Janusz Reykowski) as an assistant junior lecturer at the UW General Psychology Department. She worked at the University of Warsaw until the end of 2000 (part-time from 1981), going through all the stages of an academic career. A fellowship at Minnesota State University in the United States in the 1962/1963 academic year confirmed Ida Kurcz in her decision to choose language as her research specialization. Her postdoctoral (habilitation) dissertation (*Psycholingwistyka. Przegląd problemów badawczych* [*Psycholinguistics: Research Problem Overview*], 1976) marked the birth of psycholinguistics in Poland, as a new interdisciplinary academic field with new research methods and new approaches to linguistic issues. The Psycholinguistics Team/Unit, which she formed in 1971 and headed within the UW Institute and later Faculty of Psychology (up to 1993), became a respected center of research from the fields of general psycholinguistics, developmental psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics. Leading researchers from all over the world came to visit, while Ida Kurcz was invited to give lectures at various universities in Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan and Australia. International conferences were held there as well, to mention *Knowledge and Language* (with guests from 16 countries), a conference that yielded a volume of the same title published by North Holland Publishing (1986, editors: I. Kurcz, G.W. Shugar, J. Danks) as well as two volumes in Polish published by Ossolineum (Volume 1: *Wiedza a język. Ogólna psychologia języka i neurolingwistyka* [*Knowledge and Language: General Linguistic Psychology and Neurolinguistics*], 1986, eds. I. Kurcz, J. Bobryk, D. Kądziaława; Volume 2: *Wiedza a język. Język dziecka* [*Knowledge and Language: Children's Language*], 1987, eds. I. Kurcz, G.W. Shugar, B. Bokus). In 1987, PWN published Ida Kurcz's professor monograph titled *Język a reprezentacja świata w umyśle* [*Language and the Mind's Representation of the World*], in which she proposed a model, widely respected around the world, of how the human mind processes information. This model was also presented synthetically in the prestigious volume *Psychology of the 1990's* (edited by K.M.J. Lagerspetz and P. Niemi). Another model developed by Ida Kurcz, i.e. her model of human linguistic knowledge (2004, 2006), which covered linguistic competence and communicative competence as well as the manifest and latent components in each, is increasingly being referenced by cognitive psychology theoreticians; most recently, people representing applied psychology (particularly specialists dealing with language

cial Sciences School. This was mentioned by Ida Kurcz (2016) when she recalled these events and the role played by Maria Zebrowska and Tadeusz Tomaszewski in the founding of psychology studies at UW, see I. Kurcz "Jak psychologia wyprzedziła inne nauki" ("How Psychology Outdistanced Other Sciences") in the book *Nasz Uniwersytet. Wspomnienia pracowników Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* [*Our University: Reminiscences of University of Warsaw Staff Members*] (2016, pp. 195–197).

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and communication process disorders) have also started drawing upon it.

The changes in research problems at different stages in the development of psycholinguistics were presented most thoroughly in Ida Kurcz's monograph *Język a psychologia* [*Language and Psychology*] (1992), her original university textbook *Psychologia języka i komunikacji* [*Psychology of Language and Communication*] (first edition 2000, new edition 2005), and also a textbook edited jointly with Hanna Okuniewska, titled *Język jako przedmiot badań psychologicznych. Psycholingwistyka ogólna i neurolingwistyka* [*Language as the Subject of Psychological Research: General Psycholinguistics and Neurolinguistics*] (2011). In these publications Ida Kurcz outlined the evolution of researchers' approach to language, successively treated as a code, grammar, discourse, universal grammar and theory of mind, and also language as a tool serving the mind in various manifestations of the communicative function. In all these different approaches, Ida Kurcz's work played and continues to play a major role. This is true of her research projects carried out at the University of Warsaw and those implemented later (from 1981 to 2005) at the Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS), where she founded the Psycholinguistics and Cognitive Psychology Lab, or even later (from 1996) at the SWPS (today: SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities). Ida Kurcz's unique activity made a mark at each of these organizations.

Ida Kurcz's work was concentrated around two areas: normative and experimental research. In 1967 she published "Polskie normy skojarzeń swobodnych na 100 słów z listy Kent-Rosanoffa" ["Polish Free Association Norms for 100 Words from the Kent-Rosanoff List"], while the years 1974–1977 saw the publication of five volumes of a frequency dictionary of the Polish language (*Słownictwo współczesnego języka polskiego. Listy frekwencyjne*), developed by a team comprising Ida Kurcz, Andrzej Lewicki, Jadwiga Sambor and Jerzy Woronczak. This team (which was joined by Krzysztof Szafran) also prepared two synthetic volumes of the frequency dictionary (*Słownik frekwencyjny polszczyzny współczesnej*), which were published in 1990. In the experimental part of her activity, Ida Kurcz conducted research (in association with Joseph Danks from Kent State University) on listening comprehension of texts, also in terms of comparisons between languages. The results of this research were released, among other publications, in the monograph (written with A. Polkowska) *Interakcyjne i autonomiczne przetwarzanie informacji językowych. Na przykładzie procesu rozumienia tekstu czytanego na głos* [*Interactive and Autonomous Processing of Linguistic Information: The Example of the Process of Understanding Texts Read Aloud*] (1990). She also studied mental representations of sociopolitical concepts, in particular conducting research on ethnic stereotypes (see the monograph *Zmienność i nieuchronność stereotypów* [*Variability and Inevitability of Stereotypes*], 1994). She also considered bilingualism in her work (among other projects, she edited the volume *Psychologiczne aspekty dwujęzyczności* [*Psychological Aspects of Bilingualism*], 2007). She was the scientific editor of the 2005 Polish edition of

J. Berko Gleason and N. Bernstein Ratner's *Psycholinguistics*. The translators included Ida Kurcz's students and associates from the UW Faculty of Psychology and the PAS Institute of Psychology. Her closest collaboration was with her most accomplished student, Professor Jerzy Bobryk. Together they edited several collective works, e.g. *Akty semiotyczne, ich wytwory i mechanizmy* [*Semiotic Acts, Their Products and Mechanisms*] (1992), *Percepcja i interpretacja społecznej i politycznej sytuacji w Polsce* [*Perception and Interpretation of the Social and Political Situation in Poland*] (1997), and *Psychologiczne studia nad językiem i dyskursem* [*Psychological Studies on Language and Discourse*] (2001). In 2010 Bobryk published what might be called a guide to his mentor's work, the book *Krótką historią psycholingwistyki. Ida Kurcz* [*A Brief History of Psycholinguistics: Ida Kurcz*]. Jerzy Bobryk's untimely death (in 2016) was a painful blow to Professor Kurcz, and one from which she never fully recovered.

Ida Kurcz's contribution to psycholinguistics and—more broadly—to psychology is hard to overestimate. She was the scientific editor of the Polish edition of P.H. Lindsay and D.A. Norman's *Human Information Processing* (*Procesy przetwarzania informacji przez człowieka*, 1984). She selected and was the scientific editor of texts from several volumes of the textbook *Traité de Psychologie Expérimentale* (edited by P. Fraisse and J. Piaget) for the Polish edition, *Zarys psychologii eksperymentalnej* (1991). She wrote two original chapters (“Uczenie się i pamięć” [“Learning and Memory”], “Język i mowa” [“Language and Speech”]) for the textbook *Psychologia* (1975) edited by Tadeusz Tomaszewski. She published one volume, *Pamięć, uczenie się, język* [*Memory, Learning, Language*] (1992, vol. 3) in the four-volume textbook *Psychologia Ogólna* [*General Psychology*] (ed. T. Tomaszewski). It is to her as a co-editor that we owe books on action theory: *Studia nad teorią czynności ludzkich* [*Studies on the Theory of Human Actions*] (ed. I. Kurcz and J. Reykowski, 1975) and *Psychologia czynności. Nowe perspektywy* [*Psychology of Action: New Perspectives*] (ed. I. Kurcz and D. Kądziaława, 2002). She was a co-editor (with K. Skarżyńska) of the Polish edition of Arthur S. Reber's and Arthur S. Reber and Emily S. Reber's *Dictionary of Psychology* (*Słownik Psychologii*, 2000, 2005). She co-edited (with A. Falkowski) the “Procesy Poznawcze” [“Cognitive Processes”] section of *Psychologia: Podręcznik akademicki*, a university textbook edited by Jan Strelau, and also wrote the chapter “Język i komunikacja” [“Language and Communication”] for the same book. At Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne publishing house, she opened the *Psychologia. Teksty źródłowe* [*Psychology: Source Texts*] series of which she was the editor and which aimed, as the blurb stated, “to create a teaching aid in the form of collections of the most important, groundbreaking articles that defined new research directions in their time and continue to influence psychological thought.” Listing all these achievements serves to illustrate the veritably titanic magnitude of Professor Ida Kurcz's activity as the author/co-author of textbooks and editor/co-editor of volumes that have been so important for the development of psychology in

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Poland. One should also add that for many years she was also the committed editor-in-chief of the *Polish Psychological Bulletin*. She was also a foreign member of the editorial team at *L'Année Psychologique*, and a long-time member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the journal *Psychology of Language and Communication*, founded in 1997 at the UW Faculty of Psychology.

Professor Ida Kurcz founded two major research centers, as mentioned earlier: the Psycholinguistics Unit at the UW Faculty of Psychology, and the Psycholinguistics and Cognitive Psychology Lab at the PAS Institute of Psychology. She held many important posts within the structure of the University of Warsaw. Besides heading the Psycholinguistics Team/Unit (1971–1993) at the UW Institute of Psychology and later the Faculty of Psychology, she was also head of the Rudiments of Psychology Unit at the UW Institute of Psychology (1971–1976) and the Psychology and Teacher Training Unit for courses other than psychology (1975/1976). In the years 1977–1978 she was deputy director for teaching at the Institute of Psychology, and from 1978 to 1981 deputy director for research of the Institute of Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy. She headed the Cognitive Psychology Chair at the UW Faculty of Psychology in the years 1990–1998.

Professor Ida Kurcz is well-known and valued as a researcher around the world. She was a member of Polish scientific societies (Polish Psychological Association [PTP], Polish Semiotic Society [PTS]) as well as foreign ones (she has been a member of the Société Française de Psychologie, the International Society of Applied Psycholinguistics, the European Society for Cognitive Psychology, and the International Association for the Study of Attention and Performance). She held several posts within the PTP, being its chair in the years 1978–1979 and also a member of the Auditing Committee and the International Committee affiliated with the PTP Executive Board. She represented the PTP in the International Union of Psychological Science. As the PTP's delegate to the General Assembly of the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations in Edinburgh in 1982, she was elected vice-chair of the Federation (a post she held until September 1984). Professor Ida Kurcz was a long-time member of the Committee on Psychological Sciences (today: Committee on Psychology) of the Polish Academy of Sciences and was active in the Committee's Presidium. Her research, teaching and organizational work was always highly valued in the community. She received a Gold Cross of Merit in 1973, and a Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta in 2011. In 2004 the Polish Academy of Sciences' Division I for Social Sciences awarded Ida Kurcz the Władysław Witwicki Prize for her textbook *Psychologia języka i komunikacji* [*Psychology of Language and Communication*]. In 2018 the General Assembly of PTP Delegates awarded her a Medal of Merit "for contribution to Polish psychology." The medal was presented to her and the 11 other recipients at a ceremony held on October 16, 2019 at the University of Warsaw's Faculty of Psychology. Professor Ida Kurcz's most recent activity was focused on working on the Council (and before that on the Board) of

the Tadeusz Tomaszewski Foundation for the Development of Polish Psychology.

Ida Kurcz's students and associates from the UW Faculty of Psychology, the PAS Institute of Psychology and the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities have always been grateful to her for creating a friendly atmosphere conducive to academic discourse, and for the insightfulness and integrity of her opinions, those favorable and especially those critical, which served to add more depth to many academic quests. This gratitude was expressed by everyone on a daily basis, but also more officially during this great mentor and leader's jubilees. To recap: Ida Kurcz's 70th birthday was celebrated with a special issue of the *Polish Psychological Bulletin* in 2000 (vol. 31, No. 2), titled *Knowledge of Language and Knowledge of the World* (eds. B. Bokus, J. Bobryk, G.W. Shugar). In 2006 the University of Warsaw hosted a special academic session titled *Language, Cognition, Social Relations* and dedicated to Ida Kurcz, Józef Koziński, and Adam Frączek. The session coincided with the 35th anniversary of the Psycholinguistics Unit and the 30th anniversary of the publication of the book *Psycholingwistyka. Przegląd problemów badawczych* [*Psycholinguistics: Research Problem Overview*] (see the conference proceedings in *Kolokwia Psychologiczne*, eds. B. Bokus, M. Goszczyńska, K. Skarżyńska, vol. 15, 2006).

The jubilee celebrating Ida Kurcz's 80th birthday and the 40th anniversary of the publication of her text "The Influence of Grammatical Habits on Sentence Recognition" in *Advances in Psycholinguistics* (eds. G.B. Flores D'Arcais, W.J.M. Levelt, 1970) was marked with the volume *Studies in the Psychology of Language and Communication* (2010, ed. B. Bokus). The texts for this book were contributed not only by researchers from Poland and other centers around Europe, but also from the United States, Canada and Japan. Professor Ida Kurcz's 90th birthday fell during the COVID-19 pandemic, so we celebrated this jubilee² online at the University of Warsaw, the Professor taking part from her home. Congratulations were offered by university presidents, deans and institute directors, journal editors-in-chief, representatives of publishers, scientific societies and foundations, friends, students, associates and family members. The University of Warsaw Choir joined in the celebration with a wonderful concert dedicated to the Professor.

To our great regret, there will be no further meetings with our Mentor. On January 25, 2024 Professor Ida Kurcz passed away in her sleep at her home in the Mokotów district of Warsaw. Our conversations with her, not only about psychology, will be greatly missed. We will miss her open-mindedness and kindness as well as her incontrovertible charm as the First Lady of psycholinguistics in Poland. With sadness and a sense of huge loss, we say goodbye to a great researcher and a noble human being! Her passing marks the end of an important era in the development of Polish research.

Barbara Bokus

² A report from the jubilee, by M. Kielar-Turska, was published in *Psychologia Rozwojowa*, 2020, 25(4), 113–116.