

IN MEMORIAM

Professor Dr Alina Skirgiełło (1911-2007)

Professor Alina Skirgiełło, the founder and editor of *Acta Mycologica*, passed away on 10 October 2007. Her death has dealt a severe blow not only to Polish mycologists, but also to many of her friends and colleagues worldwide.

Born in Klynce, Ukraine, on 3 November 1911, Skirgiełło attended schools in Białowieża and Grodno as her family followed her forester father. In 1931, she entered Warsaw University, where she studied natural sciences, graduating six years later after the completion of the diploma dissertation in mycology *Polish terrestrial tube fungi* supervised by Professor Bolesław Hryniewiecki at the Department of Systematics and Plant Geography. Skirgiełło soon joined the Department, first as a scholarship holder of governmental foundations and later as a lecturer (1 January 1939). The war, however, forced her to work as a gardener. A member of the Polish Home Army, she was active in the resistance movement. It was largely through her efforts that the valuable book collection and herbaria of the Department were saved from annihilation by the Nazis.

In 1945 Skirgiełło returned to the Department of Systematics and Plant Geography, Warsaw University, as a senior lecturer, and remained affiliated with it until her retirement in 1982. The thesis *The Genus Russula in Poland* earned her a doctoral degree in 1948. She was appointed reader in 1954, extraordinary professor in 1964 and full professor in 1972. She was head of the Department from 1960 until 1979, served as pro-Dean and Dean of the Faculty of Biology, Warsaw University, between 1963 and 1975, and Director of the Institute of Botany, Warsaw University, between 1975 and 1979.

While actively engaged in research and teaching at Warsaw University, Skirgiełło was also deeply committed to other causes. She belonged to the Polish Botanical Society, acting, for instance, as the treasurer of the Board (1955–1977). She was a long-time member of the Committee of Botany, Polish Academy of Sciences, and became the Polish correspondent of the Committee for Mapping of *Macromycetes* in Europe in 1960. In 1966, she organised the Fourth Congress of European Mycologists in Warsaw, encouraging the development of professional contacts between Polish researchers of fungi, still very few at the time, and those from abroad.

Skirgiełło established the Mycological Section of the Polish Botanical Society in 1956 and presided over it almost until her death. Research meetings, seminars and trips organized by her encouraged the exchange of information and brought the academic community closer together. The Section met regularly in Warsaw and, as the circle of mycologists in Poland grew, in Wrocław, Łódź, Kraków, Poznań and Lublin, as well as during successive conventions of the Polish Botanical Society.

She also founded and was a long-standing editor of two publications, important for the Polish academic world: the series *Mycota* within *The Flora of Spore Plants in Poland* and the journal *Acta Mycologica*. She advocated the idea of a multi-volume study devoted to the entire Polish mycoflora with contributions by Polish mycologists as early as after the war.

Wishing to investigate poorly examined parts of Poland, she organized field trips for the few Polish mycologists, collected, together with her students, herbarium material for monograph studies and made every effort to attract young people interested in collaborative work. She assembled a beautiful and impressive library of mycological publications, one of the most important of this type in Poland, in the Department of Systematics and Plant Geography, Warsaw University. The 27 volumes of *Grzyby (Mycota)*, edited by her and published within *Flora roślin zarodnikowych Polski (The Flora of Spore Plants in Poland)* in co-operation with the Institute of Botany, Polish Academy of Sciences, Kraków, between 1960 and 1999, was one of the fruits of her work. They provide determination keys as well as descriptions and figures of all species in a given group of fungi that had been reported from and could be found in Poland. Skirgiełło did her best to encourage potential contributors, was the research editor of all volumes and the author or co-author of six. Three volumes were published in English.

Acta Mycologica, founded by Skirgiełło in 1965, meant much for the development of mycological studies in Poland. It was initially published annually and later on bi-annually while Skirgiełło remained editor-in-chief until 2001. The journal has played a key role as an international print forum and a place of research exchange for Polish mycologists of all specializations as well as for lichenologists.

Skirgiełło published as many as 150 studies, including 80 research works dealing mostly with mycology as well as with paleobotany and the history of botany. *Macromycetes* were her particularly favourite research interest. Monograph studies on the Polish species of the *Boletales* (1960), cap *Aphylophorales* (1967), *Russula* (1991), *Lactarius* (1998) and *Pluteaceae* (1999), are her most influential publications on these fungi. A talented painter, Skirgiełło illustrated the books with her own colour figures of fruitbodies.

Skirgiełło was the author of several descriptions of rare macromycete species and their lists from underexplored areas where, as has been mentioned, she organized special research trips. She published a series of works on the distribution of higher fungi in Europe between 1965 and 1986. She also edited and published (1961-1980) a series of studies on the brown-coal flora in an opencast mine in Turów, including fungi, and, in conjunction with Hanna Czczott, flowering plants.

A dedicated and conscientious teacher, Skirgiełło for many years lectured in botany, especially mycology, and the history of botany, at Warsaw University. Some of her publications were addressed specifically to students and lovers of fungi. She was the author of an invaluable textbook for the determination of lower fungi (*Grzyby niższe*, 1954), which was of great help to young mycologists interested in these fascinating organisms that were still poorly examined in Poland at the time. She prepared an extensive chapter on fungi in the academic textbook *Rośliny zarodnikowe (Spore Plants*, four editions 1960-1986) and compiled a bibliography of Polish mycological publications (1988) as well as many biographies of Polish and foreign botanists or mycologists. Numerous essays, brochures and boards that she designed or made for schools hoped to advance the knowledge of fungi. She also worked with the editorial boards of general and specialist encyclopaedias, translated botanical works into Polish, including *Mykologie, Grundriss für Naturwissenschaftler und Mediziner* by E. Müller and W. Loeffler (*Zarys mikologii dla przyrodników i lekarzy*), two editions 1972, 1987, organized numerous exhibitions of edible and poisonous fungi, offered

advice and assistance to many institutions and commissions as an expert mycologist.

An active participant of international symposia and conferences, Skirgiełło was the only person to have attended all Congresses of European Mycologists, from the first in Brussels in 1956 to the fourteenth in Yalta in 2003. Although absent at the 15th Congress in St. Petersburg in September 2007, only one month before her death, Skirgiełło submitted a joint abstract with her students. Her presence at the congresses was greatly appreciated: she was vice-president in Copenhagen (1970), Avignon (1974) and Budapest (1978), and president in Bologna (1981) and Oslo (1985). She also took part in the first four International Mycological Congresses, participated in many conventions of mycologists from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Baltic States, and attended the X-ème Congrès International sur la Science et la Culture des Champignons Comestibles (France, 1978). Her notes and impressions were always made available to Polish botanists at research symposia and in published reports in *Wiadomości Botaniczne (Botanical News)*. She was a member of the International Mycological Association and of the European Mycological Association. In 2004 she became a honorary member of the European Mycological Association. She received several medals, orders and rewards, including a honorary membership of the Polish Botanical Society and the Committee of Botany, Polish Academy of Sciences. Her surname is remembered in the name of fungal genera and species: *Skirgiellia* Batko (1978), *Skirgiellopsis* Batko (1978), *Laboulbenia skirgielloae* Balazuc (1975) and *Urocystis skirgielloae* Piątek (2006).

Professor Alina Skirgiełło has left behind many disciples in all research and academic centres across Poland. Polish mycologists many of whom studied under her supervision owe her a great deal. Her impressive organizational skills, catching professional enthusiasm and remarkable ability to inspire interest in mycology stimulated her colleagues and students. She founded and was editor of publications that have become important places of scholarly discussion. Her presence in the academic life will be long missed.

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