

In memory of Professor Maria Podgórska

Bartosz Witkowski^a



Source: photo by Maciej Górski

On 2 December 2022, professor Maria Podgórska passed away unexpectedly at the age of 73. Her whole professional career was connected with the SGH Warsaw School of Economics (SGH). Professor Podgórska was a renowned and commonly liked scholar, known to the entire econometric society in Poland. Being her successor in the position of the director of the Institute of Econometrics at SGH, but most of all – having the honour of being her friend – I would like to share a few words about her brilliant research, and, most importantly about what kind of person she was.

Professor Podgórska obtained her PhD in 1976, then her post-doctoral degree in 1991, and the title of professor in 1999. The pace at which she earned the professorship is stunning, given that at the same time she was the director of the Institute of Econometrics at SGH (1993–2019), the head of the Probabilistic Methods Unit in the same institute (1994–2013) and the dean of the undergraduate studies at SGH (1992–1993). It should be emphasised that the organisational aspect of her job became additionally challenging at the beginning of the 1990s, when SGH was completely restructured.

At the same time, Professor Podgórska was an active teacher. She supervised numerous master theses and eight PhD theses. She actively taught a number of courses which concentrated on her scientific interests: econometrics, Markov models

^a SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Collegium of Economic Analysis, al. Niepodległości 162, 02-554 Warszawa, e-mail: bwitko@sgh.waw.pl, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0940-0265>.

and their applications, probabilistic methods and financial mathematics. Since the aforementioned reform of the SGH, the students decide which courses to participate in and are free to select their teachers. It was a common occurrence that more students were willing to participate in Professor Podgórska's courses than the available number of seats permitted, despite the high level of her tests and exams. The students were well aware that participating in her lectures was worth the effort. She also co-authored seven handbooks, some of which were written in collaboration with her students or former students. This says so much about this incredible person: it was typical of her to co-operate with younger generations, to provide every possible opportunity to support them and, most of all, she strongly believed in them.

Last but not least, Professor Podgórska remained an active scholar throughout her professional life. Her scientific interests varied and, to some extent, transformed over time. At first her research mostly concentrated on probabilistic models and Markovian processes, then her interests gradually drifted towards financial and, in particular, actuarial mathematics. At the same time, she started collaborating with the Research Institute for Economic Development at SGH which lasted for over 25 years and resulted in a substantial number of publications based on the results of analyses of the economic situation mostly in Poland. She was the author and co-author of a few dozen articles and five monographs, which attests to the fact that her research was indeed extensive.

To me however, the above-mentioned facts are far less important than knowing what kind of person she really was. First of all, Professor Podgórska always appreciated and respected others. Rarely would she criticise others, never would she do any harm to anyone. In fact, the opposite was true: she would devote most of her energy to helping others. While her academic record is impressive, reaching the top of the scholar's career, it is worth noting not just *what* she achieved, but also *how* she did it and what she was able to do with it. As the director, she would always allocate the small budget that the Institute received to those who were working on their PhDs or post-doctoral degrees, allowing them to cover publication costs and participate in any necessary conferences.

She would pay particular attention to the youngest people she worked with. The pioneering initiative of writing a book together with her students is just one such example. At the same time, she always took all the possible measures to provide support to young scholars in their academic careers. One of her plans was for the young employees to take over the Institute of Econometrics. Step by step, young professors in their forties or even thirties would become heads of units. Professor Podgórska believed that, just as the reform of the SGH at the beginning of the 1990s was performed by her and the then younger generation of scholars, it was also time for young scientists to decide about the school's future. Therefore, she resigned from

the position of the director of the Institute as she felt it was high time to let the next generation take over, while she saw herself as a mentor and advisor. Professor Podgórska always supported her employees and showed her appreciation for the fact that the next generation is more knowledgeable in some areas than her and her generation. Others might find it a reason for envy, yet for her it was something to be proud of. She understood that it was the natural course of events – she would remain the mentor with extremely valuable experience and routine, while the younger generation, brought up in a computerised environment, would be technically more efficient and knowledgeable. While this mindset seems logical, it does not seem common among scientists. Was Professor Podgórska right to have adopted such a policy? Well, the Institute of Econometrics currently employs 7 university professors and 4 full professors in their forties who are likely to conduct research for another 20 years and who reached their scientific goals thanks to her support. In addition to Professor Podgórska's publications, this is also part of her legacy.

She worked until September 2022 and decided that she would finally take some well-deserved rest. Still, we would spend a lot of time – sometimes hours – discussing different issues on the phone: university policies, politics, children, dogs... In fact, it would probably be easier to mention what we *did not* talk about rather than what we *did*. Her unusual intelligence, knowledge, respect for others and great sense of humour made her the perfect interlocutor. I will miss these talks just as much as I will miss her.