

# **| Dorota Wrońska-Dąbrowska**

(13 January 1976 – 9 May 2023)

When NMW Director, Łukasz Gaweł, e-mailed employees with the news of Dorota's death, our rooms and studies fell silent for a long time. We all wore black to the evening's opening of the *NMW Collects. Purchases from 2017–2022* exhibition.

"I will always have only a few people so that I can never get over their loss"<sup>1</sup> – this sentence formulated by Elias Canetti served as a motto of my conversations with colleagues from the NMW after Dorota's passing, as I was writing this text. Her position required her to collaborate with most departments of the museum, so there were numerous such interactions.<sup>2</sup>

Dorota Wrońska-Dąbrowska worked at the museum for 25 years. As head of the Public Procurement Department, she was at the epicentre of the NMW's endeavours. She was the perfect embodiment of the pivotal role played in each museum by people, who – although their work is not scholarly or related to exhibitions – create the foundation for such activity, thus creatively contributing to the institution's operations and success.

For us, Dorota was a demon for work in her tiny room strewn with papers, where she worked, desk to desk, in a unique tandem with Bożena Pobikrowska. Now, her empty chair, endless stacks of documents and projects that came to a sudden halt – as if suspended mid-progress – confronted us with the tragedy of an untimely death. In a natural reaction, we collected what remained of her in our memories and emotions. Both big things and small crumbs of reality. Traces of her thoughts and actions preserved in the e-mails.

Dorota was associated with the National Museum in Warsaw throughout her professional life – ever since she took the position of clerk at the Legal Department on 6 January 1997. She went on to work as a public procurement clerk at the Director's Office, then specialist, head of the Loans Department (2004), and finally head of the Public Procurement Department (2009–23). She contributed to projects that had a crucial impact on the NMW's institutional development.

From the chronological standpoint, the first one was the rearrangement of the Gallery of Ancient Art as part of the Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment 2014–20. Owing to her function, Dorota was part of the team tasked with completing this endeavour and took care of handling public procurements. This was the first time the museum applied for European funding and had to follow new procedures and EU guidelines. Dorota's team members took note of her involvement in training, additional reading and consultations with employees from other museums. Tenders, requests for quotations and ordering services to be provided in the EU standard were also required in individual components of the project: promotion, multimedia, digitization, conservation, etc. The work was intense, complex and stressful. Dorota was an oasis of peace in this stream of change – she analysed all problems

<sup>1</sup> Elias Canetti, *Księga przeciwko śmierci* [The book against death] (Sejny, 2019), p. 55 [tr. Aleksandra Szkułłapska].

<sup>2</sup> In the format adopted for this text, "we" stands for the many people who agreed to talk to me – and everyone who was moved by her death. This text would not have happened without you all – thank you.

with her coworkers to get to the bottom and consult them further to find solutions. Her professionalism shone in strategic debates – her focus on the issue at hand and finding a constructive solution, in deliberation with lawyers.

The rearrangement of the National Museum in Warsaw's Gallery of Ancient Art became a reality. It was preceded by structural and arrangement alterations in the exhibition rooms, the construction of innovative multimedia stands – showing the secrets of art created by ancient civilizations. Dorota, with an iron fist, was one of the employees who managed tender procedures, contracts, settlement of funds, verification of completion reports and invoices associated with these works. From the administrative level, she contributed to showcasing ancient artworks from the NMW collection in their full glory.

The opening of *Solstice. Nordic Art 1880–1910* on 18 November 2022, an exhibition organized in cooperation with the Gothenburg Art Museum (Göteborgs konstmuseum), was the last one Dorota attended. She was happy that the complex process of acquiring unique works from Norway and Iceland came to fruition.

What was she like? Everyone we asked unanimously listed qualities such as steadfast character, composure, conciseness, firmness, a sense of conscientiousness and reliability. Her internal balance, discretion and tact that helped her tone down conflicts. Her cheerfulness and energy. Her patience in guiding us through the complexities of public procurement, her generosity in the face of other people's mistakes and openness to the needs of others. At work, she made liberal use of her own creativity and vast knowledge. She was passionate about constant learning and kept taking on new challenges. With her law studies at the European University of Law and Administration, she intended to broaden and academically crown her competence. She was not lacking in motivation, strength or curiosity, and would have graduated if her life had not been cut short.

An important project that owed its procedural correctness and organizational manageability to Dorota was "HEREDITAS. Digitization and accessibility of the National Museum in Warsaw's collection." Co-financed from the Operational Programme Digital Poland, the endeavour lasted until October 2023. This type of work required cooperation with a law firm selected to supervise the project and with specific departments of the NMW in the scope of individual contracts. As a member of the HEREDITAS team, Dorota completed accounting courses.

What about Dorota outside of work? She was born in Warsaw on 13 January 1976 as the first daughter of Urszula, née Lubecka, and Zenon Wroński. She had younger siblings: sister Agata and brother Paweł. She was also creative when not working – each year, she made advent calendars for her daughter. Even when Barbara grew into adulthood, she could not imagine the pre-Christmas period without this tradition, so Dorota continued to make them. She was fond of scrapbooking, the art of decorating albums with photographs and family memorabilia – the effects were admired by those around her.

Her daughter introduced her to amateur rowing, which brought her ample joy and satisfaction. Dorota lived life to the fullest – a rare personality trait. She loved travelling (especially to Italy) and dogs (she had three chihuahuas). She read a lot. She loved spending time with her family, celebrating these moments. She collected cookbooks and enjoyed cooking both with and without recipes. She was a vegetarian, which was her statement against the suffering of animals. She ordered Fania Lewando's amazing *The Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook* for Christmas and tried out her recipes with enviable ease. She offered advice to those who were new

to plant-based cuisine and generously shared her kitchen experience. Many of us remember the taste of her dishes at Christmas or Easter gatherings at the NMW.

Dorota's pancakes were truly unparalleled, surpassing all her other talents, even the expertise with which she organized tender procedures and her brilliant sense of direction around legal loopholes. Perhaps paradoxically, in the conversations we had after her passing, the pancakes were what that truly moved us. Some would conclude the exchange saying "I think I'll make some pancakes at home today in her honour!" Pancakes were Dorota's way of showing feelings – at least most of us see it like that. And she was very generous with feelings. Her daughter thinks that Dorota pampered her, that she could even pamper a stone.

Many of us gathered at Dorota's funeral. Yet, as we stood, deeply sad, in a flood of flowers, armed with red roses, we did not feel an end or a sense of an ultimate parting – we were rather confused at the sudden decision of Fate that took her away from us. At the cemetery, Dorota's partner, Waldemar Janusz, once also associated with the museum, paid his tribute to her by saying "Sleep..." and this Renaissance concept of death as eternal sleep, known from so many funerary marble sculptures and serene expressions of figures resting on tombstones, has made our mourning for Dorota somewhat more bearable.

Anna Kielczewska

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska