

# From Warsaw to the Canadian Prairies

By Wojciech P. Olszynski, MD, PhD, FRCPC, CCD

It was in 1974 that our dreams were fulfilled. The students of the Class of 1974 completed their studies at the Polish Medical University in Warsaw and young doctors were anxiously looking for jobs. Though not without some difficulties, I was fortunate to be offered an internship and then a junior assistant position at the prestigious Institute of Haematology. Haematology was never my passion, but the opportunity to work at a research institution was tempting: the colleagues were exceptional and the professor was renowned for being very demanding. A demanding professor can make your life miserable but, later on, also more rewarding. In my case, I was really pushed to start a specialty in internal medicine, and, between my first and second degrees in internal medicine, I started and completed my PhD degree. In addition, our professor was expecting us to perfect our English, publish papers, and present lectures.

All of this was happening while my wife, whom I had met in medical school, was herself very busy fulfilling the expectations of her mentor in the cardiology ward at the Centralny Szpital Kolejowy, in Miedzylesie, Poland.

It is hard to imagine now, but somehow, in between all of this, we managed to have our first child, our beautiful daughter Magdalena, born in 1976. My wife did not take very much time off and, with the great help of our family, Magda thrived while we continued to work and study. Those who remember the 1970s in Poland know very well that, between us, my wife and I had something like five or six jobs in order to make ends meet. But when you are young, in an amazing way, you even manage to have a social life and to have a “good time” now and again.

Little did I know that dramatic life changes were just around the corner. First, in 1980, our lovely twin boys, Martin and Paul, were born and my wife decided to stay home with the children. I was busy with my specialties and doctorate degree, anticipating the traditional reward:



To instill in our children Aristotle's belief that "education is an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity", we brought them to visit Oxford and Cambridge.

a one-year research grant in London, England. After being accepted by the Wellcome Borough Foundation in London and receiving a research grant at the Royal Free Hospital, however, Poland plunged into the darkness of Martial Law. Cruel rules made our dreams seem to fade away, at least initially. But I asked myself, “Why can I not go to England?” We still have to study, to work, to continue research despite political struggles and military rule.

It took me one month to resubmit my papers and, to many people's surprise, I was given permission to go—but without my wife and children. Following long hours of discussion, we decided that I would go by myself first, and re-evaluate our options as necessary. The first months were very tough; the research was interesting and took up all of my days, but not having my family with me was extremely difficult (and included my first Christmas alone, in 1982, far from my family). In the meantime, my wife applied numerous times for permission to join me. The response was always the same: “Permission denied”.

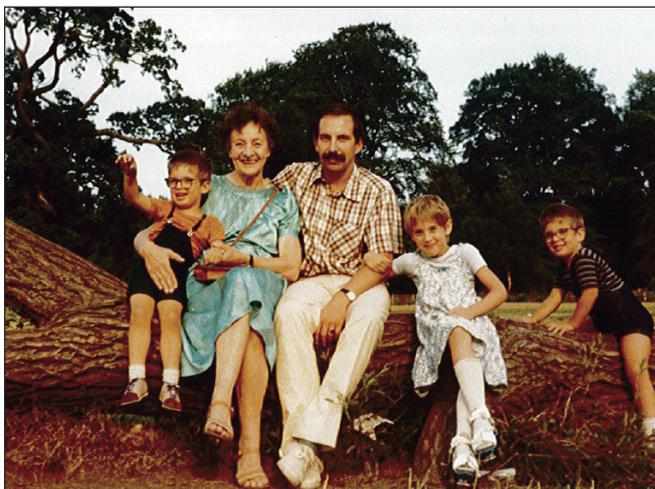
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Then something happened, something that in my view qualifies as a miracle. In February 1983, the Pope insisted on the suspension of Martial Law in Poland for one week. During those five days, my wife and children received permission to visit me in England. I promised myself that if they came, we would have to find a way to have a “normal” family life and the opportunity to continue our medical careers.

That very special day came, and we were finally together again! I was extremely happy, although even that was disturbed from almost the very beginning by the fact that I was invited to come to Canada after completing my research project in England. We were not prepared to make this kind of decision, though of course it was tempting and this type of proposition was a dream to many.

At the same time, a Catholic parish in Saskatoon was celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and decided to sponsor a Polish family to come to Canada. One of my colleagues from the Institute of Haematology in Warsaw was already in Canada and during a night shift in the Emergency Room admitted a member of the Parish Council. This was perhaps the first—though certainly not the last—time that “Polish connections” served our family, and my colleague mentioned a Polish family in England that he thought might be interested in coming to Saskatoon. For many weeks, while our children were sleeping, my wife and I would stay up and discuss our future. Leaving everything behind—including our families—would not be easy: communication with Poland was still very restricted, and refusing to go back there would make us refugees with no rights. The practical realities of our decision were mixed with emotion, but finally a decision was made. After completion of my research, I presented our plan to the Head of the Haematology Department of the Royal Free Hospital. We received a warm farewell party and blessings on the way to the unknown.

We landed in Saskatoon in October 1983. An unforgettable welcome made the first days in our new country much



The last chance for my mother to be with the family before we departed Europe for an unknown time.

easier. Soon the time to start thinking about my professional career was upon me again. My wife stayed home with our children and I was supposed to study for my first exam: the Canadian Council Medical Evaluating Exam (CCMEE). Passing this exam allowed foreign graduates to apply for internship or residency programs in medicine. The exam took place in February 1984 but the results were not available until May. At that time my wife and I switched roles, with me staying at home with our children and my wife studying the English language and preparing to write the CCMEE herself.

Although happy to have passed my exam, there were no positions available and there was not much cause for optimism until the next term; almost an entire year to wait. My persistence paid off, however, and I was eventually offered an opportunity to start a residency program in Regina, though only for a six-month position. Remembering the old saying—“When opportunity knocks, invite it to stay for dinner”—I accepted this position instantly.



United across generations: the extended Olszynski family.

The decision was made on Friday, and on Monday I was assigned to start neurology service at Plains Health Centre in Regina. Getting by those first few months was not easy for me, both from a professional perspective—the medical system was quite different between Poland and Canada—but also from a personal one. Again I was forced to leave my wife alone with our seven-year-old daughter and three-year-old sons. Once again, however, we were fortunate and an aunt came from Poland to help while I was promoted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year residency program in Saskatoon.

Another turning point in my career was just about to happen. When in Saskatoon, the Head of the Rheumatology Section called me to discuss my future. He took time to go over my curriculum vitae and expressed his willingness to help me become a rheumatologist and work with him at the University of Saskatchewan.

We decided that rheumatology would be selected for my first elective. As I mentioned before, haematology was never my passion and the opportunity to work as a rheumatologist was quite appealing, particularly with a mentor of this class (Dr. Earle DeCoteau). From that point on, my goal was to pass the necessary exams, finish the residency program and then the fellowship in rheumatology, and finally, start as an Assistant Professor in that specialty. Everything was going smoothly: I was finishing my rheumatology fellowship (which was granted by The Arthritis Society [TAS]), and my wife successfully passed the necessary exams for the family medicine program.

Then, one day, my mentor advised me that the University was expecting one more year of fellowship before a position would be available for me.

This was a pivotal moment in my career. While I had practiced in an academic environment all those years, something told me that it might be time to explore other options. That very day I was able to contact the owners of a newly-built medical office in downtown Saskatoon and negotiations began. In the meantime my mentor left rheumatology practice, but despite a position becoming available for me, I had made my decision to start private practice. It did not take long for me to realize that the setting was well-suited to me. An affiliation with the University allowed me to maintain teaching responsibilities and very soon a community-based research program was underway with the creation of the Saskatoon Osteoporosis Centre attached to my general rheumatology clinic.

The following years were very satisfying, filled with clinical practice, injection clinics in hospitals, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and research projects that very soon expanded into rheumatology trials. When asked if I like to be the boss, my answer was always the same: “No, it is not important for me to be the boss—but it is very important not to have one.”

Over the last decade, a new era of biologics in the therapy of rheumatic diseases has given me the opportunity to provide a unique service for Saskatchewan—a community-based Arthritis Infusion Centre (all services in one location). The practice, with all of those services, has been located at the same place for 23 years and, recently, a new partner joined our Rheumatology Associates, giving me hope that we will be able to continue to provide services for our patients, as well as carrying out research and teaching.

Reading this history, it is hard to resist the conclusion that incidents over which we have little control play a significant role in our lives, unless this is all preordained somewhere.

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