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A memoir about Dr. Ryszard Piasek – a Poznań filmmaker

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Abstract: *A memoir about Dr. Ryszard Piasek – a filmmaker, reporter, social activist and film producer.*

Key words: History, Poznań, Ryszard Piasek, Documentary Film, Historical Film

Dr. Ryszard Franciszek Piasek [Fig. 1], son of Irena and Cyryl, was born on July 16, 1943 in Poznań. He died on October 13, 2022. Piasek was a filmmaker, reporter, social activist and film producer, a man curious about the world and people. He was referred to as ‘Poznan’s Tony Halik’. With the exception of Antarctica, he visited all the continents of the world with his camera. His documentaries show the beauty of the world, as well as the lives and actions of the people he met. Indeed, his motto in life was to be close to people. He used to say, “to show a foreign culture you have to touch the problems of ordinary people”. He knew that only then would it be possible to show their daily lives and the ideas to which they were devoted. In India he met Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Father Marian Żelazek, in Africa – Cardinal Adam Kozłowiecki and Dr. Wanda Bleńska. He immortalized these encounters on camera in the form of documentaries: *Kalkuta, miasto Matki Teresy* (Calcutta, the City of Mother Teresa), *Misjonarz* (Missionary), *Kardynał w buszu* (Cardinal in the Bush), *W sercu Afryki* (In the Heart of Africa), *Pożegnanie z Ugandą* (Farewell to Uganda), *Dokta*. From his travels he would bring back hours of recorded footage, from which later, in the comfort of his home studio in the attic of his family villa on Kartuska Street in Podolany, Poznań, films were made. Many of them formed fascinating documentary series including: *Z kamerą przez Amerykę* (With a Camera through America), *Stolice i metropole świata* (Capitals and Metropolises of the World), *Skarby Ziemi Świętej* (Treasures of the Holy Land), *Na drogach i bezdrożach Afryki* (On the Roads and Wilderness of Africa), *Oblicza Izraela* (Faces of Israel), *Śladami wspaniałej przeszłości* (In the Footsteps of the Glorious Past), *Miejsce Polski w świecie* (Poland’s Place in the World).

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Fig. 1. Ryszard Piasek in his home office in Podolany, Poznań (family archive of Ryszard Piasek)

I met him in 1992 during my history studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (hereafter AMU), and, because I am a historian of the ancient world, I was involved in the filmmaking process almost from the beginning. This is because history was of extraordinary interest to Ryszard Piasek, especially ancient history. His dream was to set out with his camera on the trail of Alexander the Great... First I was in charge of analog, then digital editing of the films, wrote commentaries, helped with sound design, and provided consultation on history. Ryszard Piasek brought a lot of footage and it was difficult to choose the most beautiful and interesting shots. He would leave this task for me, but he always made sure that the whole thing was in accordance with his concept – always detailed and accurate. I am glad that I was able to accompany him in significant number of his film projects. My first edited film was created in 1996. *Stambuł* (Istanbul) from the *Stolice i metropolie świata* (Capitals and Metropolises of the World) series. I also participated in his one trip that resulted in a film. It was June 2000, and I, then a doctoral student, was on a one-year research fellowship in Fribourg, Switzerland. I invited Dr. Piasek to Fribourg to film places marked by Polishness in French-speaking Switzerland.



Fig. 2. Ryszard Piasek in front of the Ignacy Paderewski monument in Morges (Photo by K. Królczyk)



Fig. 3. Ryszard Piasek against the backdrop of the Fribourg, Switzerland panorama during the shooting of the film *Polskie ślady w romańskiej Szwajcarii* (Photo by K. Królczyk)



Fig. 4. Ryszard Piasek and Katarzyna Balbuza on the Chapel Bridge (Kapellbrücke) in Lucerne (Photo by K. Królczyk)

The film, which was made at the time, is titled *Polskie ślady w romańskiej Szwajcarii* (Polish Traces in Roman Switzerland) and contains fascinating images from Fribourg, Lausanne, Morges, Vevey, Chillon Castle, among others. However, we visited many more places at the time [Figs. 2-4].¹

Ryszard Piasek began his first studies, at his father's insistence, at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering of Poznań University of Technology (master's degree 1968). He then moved to Lublin, where he began his second studies, at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin (master's degree 1972). It was there that he met then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, who taught a seminar in ethics. He also earned his

¹ Reminiscences from this trip were described by Ryszard Piasek in a two-part article titled: *Polskie ślady w romańskiej Szwajcarii*, published in *Na skraju. Gazeta mieszkańców Podola i Strzeszyna* 6(40), 2000, p. 12 and 7(41), 2000, p. 12.

doctorate there (1975). At the same time, he worked at the Institute of Physics at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (until 1972), and then at the Institute of Molecular Physics of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Eventually, however, he decided to return to his hometown of Poznań and to his *Alma Mater*, the Poznań University of Technology, to work here at the Department of New Learning Technologies. In 1979, he held a one-year scholarship in Paris at the Catholic Institute. He worked at the Polytechnic until 1996, serving as head of the Pedagogical Training of Academic Teachers at Poznań University of Technology. Even then, however, he was already professionally involved in filmmaking.

During his professional life, he experienced several technological breakthroughs in the field of film production, which is meticulously documented in the legacy he left behind. His childhood interest in photography translated into building his first slide projector. He was 13 years old at the time and a fifth-grade elementary school student. He produced his first films, first educational and scientific, in the second half of the 1980s, when he worked at the Department of New Learning Technologies at the Poznań University of Technology. The films ‘grew’ out of his search for modern forms of academic teaching. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he began to take an interest in travel films. In 1986 he set up his own professional film studio, *Zespół Filmowy Videonik* (Videonik Film Team). He made his first long-distance trip in 1989 to the United States, which he recorded in his first series of twelve films titled *Z kamerą przez Amerykę* (With a Camera Across America). Later he turned his attention to other countries, other continents. He eventually gave up his academic work to devote himself exclusively to filmmaking and his passion – learning about new people, cultures and countries. Years later, he will consider this decision the most important in his life². His filmmaking has oscillated around travel, historical and missionary themes. He is the author of more than 130 films.³ Rich and varied in both content and filmmaking techniques, the footage, including the films themselves, were donated by the Family of Ryszard Piasek to the Faculty of History of the AMU. We plan to make them available to lecturers for teaching purposes, to students for research purposes. I personally take care of this large collection together with Prof. Jacek Zydorowicz of the Faculty of Anthropology and Cultural Studies at AMU.

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² Who is who w Polsce, biographical lexicon with about 12,000 biographies of famous Polish personalities, partly with photos, ed. I, Zug 2000, p. 1519.

³ This is an approximate number. The exact number of films are currently being determined.