

Obituary: Alina Teresa Wiercińska (1931–2019)

Born on 22 October 1931 in Warsaw, Alina Teresa Wiercińska was the daughter of Wanda Bertha Vogt and Aleksander Morat, head of the Foreign Exchange Department at the National Bank of Poland. Alina spent her early days in a large home surrounded by a gorgeous garden in Radość, a green outskirts of Warsaw. After the onset of World War II Alina's education was limited to courses organized by the Polish Underground State and run by the Cecylia Plater-Zyberg independent all-girls school, so she completed her secondary level with some delay in 1951. In the same year she started working in the Human Resources Department at the University of Warsaw and soon thereafter became secretary of the Institute of Zoology.



Alina Wiercińska

In the cold winter of 1952 at the university's main gate Alina met Andrzej Wierciński, a young physical anthropologist who had just started his academic career as the assistant of the reverend prof. Bolesław Rosiński, Chair of Anthropology at the Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences. Although at the very beginning Alina maintained some distance from the poor young researcher whose belongings didn't exceed two suitcases and who was living in a house destroyed during the war (with a ladder in place of stairs), after a while she fell in love with him and eventually they were married in 1954. The marriage not only changed Alina's personal life but also affected her career trajectory, as her husband's work led to her interest in physical anthropology. She eventually enrolled in an MA programme in biology at the University of Warsaw and graduated from the University of Łódź (1962) on the basis of her thesis entitled *Anthropological Analysis of Dental Faculty Students at the Kasr El Aini University in Cairo*. The topic was the output of her visit to Egypt in 1957–1959 where Andrzej received a scholarship from the Egyptian Ministry of Education and initiated long-lasting Egyptian–Polish collaboration concerning anthropological studies of both ancient and modern Egyptian populations.

After graduating, Alina was hired by the State Archaeological Museum in Warsaw, her primary workplace until her retirement in 2011. Beginning in 1966, for the next forty years she was the head of the Department of Anthropology there, taking part in dozens of archaeological expeditions, sometimes with her husband, and studied thousands skeletons from various sites, ranging from the Neolithic until the modern times. She became one of the pioneers in research on cremains that were widespread in Poland from the Late Neolithic until the advent of Christianity in the Middle Ages.

As archeological expeditions became Alina's passion, she was active in exploring such sites as Żywa Woda in NE Poland, 1956 and Kije in southern Poland, 1960–62. Furthermore, she joined the Scientific Group of Polish Middle Ages Studies followed by the Polish–Czech investigation of isolates in 1969, and her later research focused on Old Ritualists of the Augustów and Suwałki districts.

In the mid-1960s, Alina Wiercińska together with her husband took a part in a large programme of archaeological works at Medieval sites in Poland, financed by the state as a part of celebrating Polish Duke Mieszko I baptism millennium (966). One of target sites was Wiślica, with a wooden castle and a church witnessing transition from a proto-state to early state. Based on research of the waste assemblage of human remains from that town, Alina received her PhD (1968) and habilitation (1980) at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

In 1970s and early 1980s Alina's research focused on the analysis of body proportions in past human populations. Apart from many archaeological projects in Poland that she participated in, she also received several scholarships to study human remains from several institutions abroad such as the museums in Ptuj and Ljubljana in Slove-

nia (1970), the Institute of Anthropology at the Université Bordeaux I, the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine and the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (1973), the Institute of Anthropology at the Gutenberg University in Mainz (1974), the Institute of History at the Georgian Academy of Sciences in Tbilisi (1979), as well as the Smithsonian Institution (1981, 1986).

At the same time, the scope of Alina's research began to grow outside of physical anthropology towards the philosophy of culture and philosophical anthropology. This interest led her to accept a teaching position at the Pedagogical University in Kielce in 1975 (which later transformed into the Jan Kochanowski University). In 1992 Alina became the head of the Department of Modern Philosophy at the Faculty of Management and Administration. Between 1996–2008 she was also a professor at the Pedagogical College of the Society for Public Education, particularly involved in promoting lifetime education through EUCEN – European Universities Continuing Education Network.

Although very busy with teaching students in these two educational institutions and continuing work on human remains from archaeological sites at the State Archaeological Museum, in the 1990s and 2000s Alina was also engaged in service as the editor of the series *Miscellanea Philosophica* published by Jan Kochanowski University and co-editor of the journal *Studies in Historical Anthropology* published by the University of Warsaw and the State Archaeological Museum (2001–2006). Beginning in 1983, for twenty years Alina also co-organized international workshops as part of the Multidisciplinary Team for Research on the Peculiarity of Man, a joint initiative by Alina and her husband Andrzej Wierciński.

In spite of her engagement in teaching and service, Alina kept studying human remains from archaeological sites. Her last long-time project examined human remains from Nemrik 9, a Pre-Pottery Neolithic site in northern Iraq, excavated by a Polish team from the University of Warsaw in 1985–1987. After years of careful cleaning and restoring elements that were usually broken into small pieces, Alina studied the skeletons from Nemrik with a broad international team of researchers, and finally the results were published in a special volume of *Studies in Historical Anthropology* titled “Human remains from Nemrik 9 and other Near Eastern sites” (2006) and then as a long summary paper in *Paléorient* (2015). Working on this important collection of human remains Alina became interested in Near Eastern bioarchaeology and supported the initiative of launching the journal *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* (2007) that emerged from the special Nemrik volume of *Studies in Historical Anthropology*. Even after her retirement, Alina served the new journal as a member of its editorial board.

Alina was devastated by the death of her beloved husband Andrzej in 2003, but kept working in two academic institutions and in the State Archaeological Museum

until the age of 80, when she decided to retire. Her health collapsed after a stroke in 2013, but she never complained and enjoyed every day spent with her children and grandchildren. Alina Wiercińska died on 25 December 2019, at the age of 88 years.

Both her personal life and academic career were the consequence of an accidental meeting at the gate of the University of Warsaw almost seventy years ago. If Alina hadn't met Andrzej there, she would have perhaps continued her career in university administration or become a physician, as her early plan was to study medicine. However, she enjoyed both her 49-year-marriage and being involved in studies on the human past. Initially, Alina remained in the shadow of her husband, supporting his career and raising children, keeping the bills paid, and organizing daily life activities. However, when their children had grown up, she found her own path in academia, focusing not on a fierce competition and publish-or-perish approach, but on networking, mentoring students and young researchers, and providing space for friendly discussions between people representing different approaches and disciplines. Alina did not publish the book she had dreamed about but did none-the-less contribute to many academic disciplines, as without her organizational skills and positive attitude towards people, some important research projects would not have been realised. This may also be said about *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*, a journal that she supported wholeheartedly in its critical early years.

Mateusz Wierciński, Arkadiusz Sołtyśiak, and Izabela Wiercińska