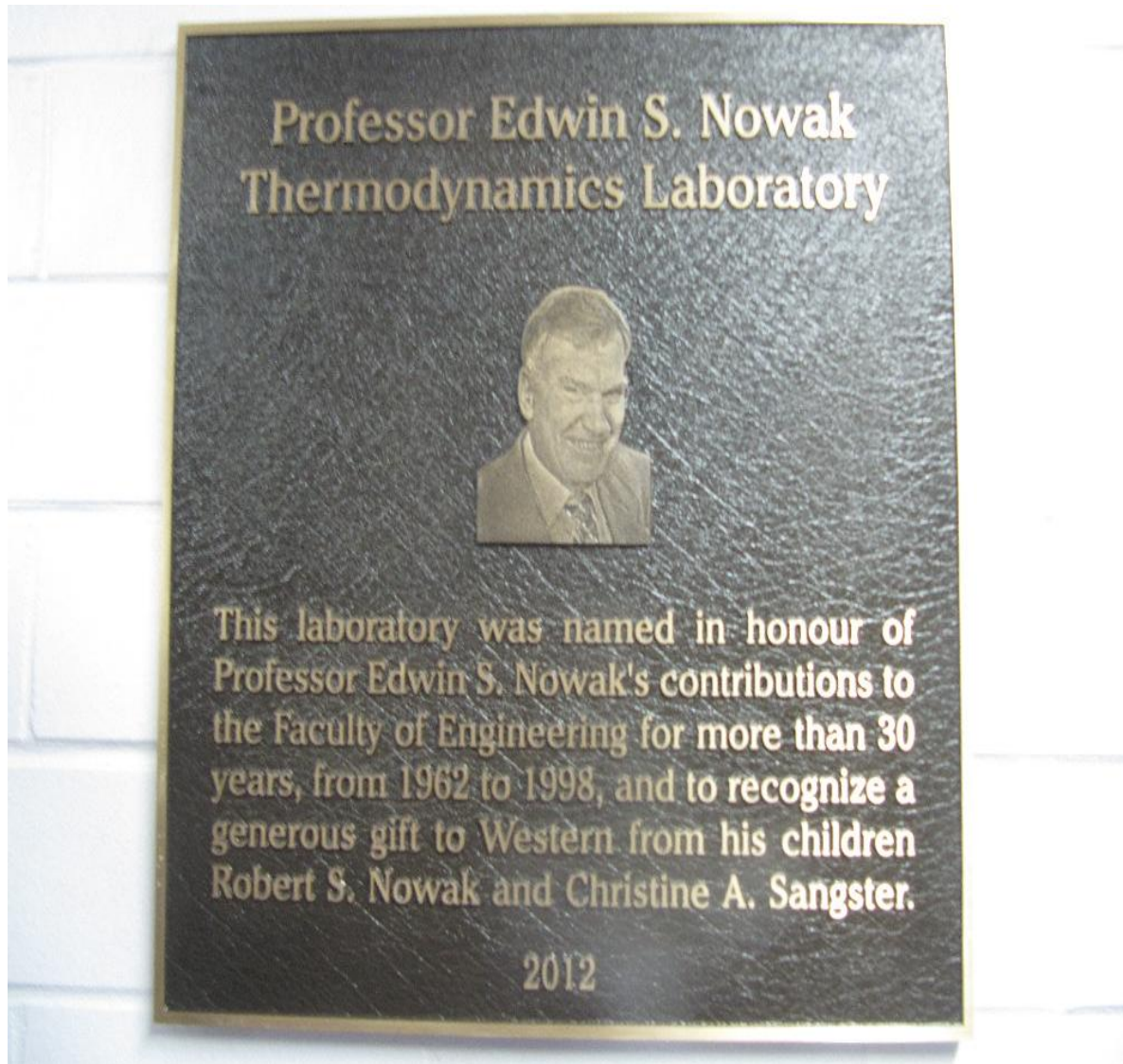


A Remembrance Of Professor Edwin S. Nowak - Coordinator of the University of Western Ontario Multi-Disciplinary Accident Research Team

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On November 2, 2013, a plaque was unveiled in the Thermodynamics lab of the Spencer Engineering Building of the University of Western Ontario to commemorate the naming of the lab in honour of Professor Edwin S. Nowak.

To me Professor Nowak was important because, as the Coordinator of the UWO Multi-Disciplinary Accident Research Team he was the person who decided to hire me on October 1, 1980 and I began my career as a road safety researcher and motor vehicle accident reconstructionist. In fact, there were several hats on his head at that time.



Spencer Engineering Building at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada where Professor Nowak taught many new engineers.

Edwin S. Nowak was a professor in the Mechanical Engineering Department at the University of Western Ontario, in London, Ontario. He was also a supporter of the Polish free (Catholic) University in Lublin, Poland in the 1970s and 80s, at a time when communism pressed a large and heavy thumb down on anyone or anything that might rival its dictatorship.

As a fresh graduate of the Psychology Department at Western in 1979 I struggled to find employment in my chosen field at a time when Ontario was in a recession. After a year of taking several unpleasant employments I decided to give up on Ontario and head out to Alberta where business was booming. In the summer of 1980 I had already visited Calgary for a week where I came to appreciate the difference in opportunity. When I returned home I vowed to raise a little money from work and move to Alberta for an extended stay, whatever it would take until I found employment. In the process I made a difficult decision to leave my steady girlfriend behind, which was difficult. But then out of nowhere I met Professor Nowak.

Initially I believed I was somewhat at odds with Professor Nowak's "Polish" thinking when I observed his apparent support of persons of his own background. While I would support my Polish background in my quiet ways I did not believe that we should present ourselves as better than anyone else. As coming from an immigrant family I observed the subtle discrimination against my parents and it affected me in a somewhat less than expected way. I saw discrimination in all its shades. Not only the discrimination that was leveled on our family but the discrimination that our family and our Polish community could also dish out against those who discriminated against us. I reasoned that all discrimination was wrong from whatever direction it came. And if I was hurt by it then equally, my discrimination against others hurt them in an equal manner. I was helped in reaching this altruistic view through my interaction with many children of my age from various backgrounds and through the various moral TV shows of my early 1960s era (Father Knows Best, Bonanza, etc.) As I passed through my years of schooling I began to question the behaviour of many around me and this was part of the reason I eventually chose Psychology as my university major; despite the apparent impracticality of it.

So here I was, meeting a Professor who seemed to be interested in only mechanical , engineering things, while supporting a discrimination of others by his Polish brethren, grouping together to support persons of their own kind, rather than reaching out to persons of all the nationalities and religions that made up our adopted home. It was not necessarily wrong in my mind but it was not the manner of achieving the worldly peace that I envisioned as so important in our world.

While I had difficulty landing a job in my chosen field of Psychology I was also too proud, dignified and above it all to seek help from a fellow countryman such as Professor Nowak. I believed I was egalitarian, and totally against anything suggesting nepotism or cronyism. That is why, when I first met him at a garden party in support of the Catholic University of Lublin, I never approached the issue of employment, or any help from him to find it. Our discussions were reserved as I introduced myself and discussed my plans to head west. When he asked me to visit his office in the next few days I believed it was just a social visit and never imagined it was a job interview. As he passed away several years ago I will never know what motivated him to hire me while it seemed no one would give me an opportunity. There I was, after over a year of futile searching for a job in my field, and giving up on finding a job in Ontario, I was preparing to head off to Alberta, where jobs seems to be plenty, when out of the blue came this offer to join a road safety research team in my home town. I had just made a painful decision to leave behind a steady girl-friend (hopefully for a short time) and there was this large carrot waved in my face. If you take it you can stay at home. Why would I not stay? I gladly accepted the offer. Through no fault of Professor Nowak it eventually turned out to be a bitter-sweet decision, but it was the obviously correct choice for that time.

And so began a ten year distant relationship with Professor Nowak who turned out to be pre-occupied with the demands of the Engineering faculty and did not have the opportunity to operate the day-to-day activities of the UWO Multi-Disciplinary Accident Research Team.. The Team was actually run by Professor Nowak's associate, Dr. Alan German. Beginning in 1980 Alan and I were the only two full-time investigators at the time while a secretary operated much of the administrative activity. The team was in between contracts from Transport Canada and we were just activating a new "Light Truck and Van" study for which I believe I was hired. Eventually a Defects Investigator was hired and there were always summer students employed with the Team and there were Fourth Year Engineering students interacting with team members as they worked on projects related to accident research.

Periodically, Professor Nowak would come down to the Accident Research Team office for a meeting, to sign for expenditures, or to plan an upcoming event. The Accident Research Team needed the co-operation of local police forces in the area to conduct its

studies so it developed a "Consultative Panel" made up primarily of local police chiefs, inspectors, and the like. Annual meetings were arranged with the Consultative Panel during which we presented brief presentations high-lighting our year's activities, and then there was always the annual dinner, which the local police were pleased to attend. Professor Nowak always commenced the proceedings and then passed the torch onto us to fill in the details.

Dr. Robert N. Green, a local coroner, was also a member of the Accident Research Team who, from what I could see, was a close friend of Professor Nowak. As a medical specialist Dr. Green was responsible for liaising with local hospitals so that we could obtain medical information on the injured and deceased victims of our studies. Other Engineering faculty such as Professor Ian Duerden, from the Materials Department, were also closely involved in areas such as material failures and Professor Duerden made several presentations at these meetings.

Professor Nowak was always pleasant and soft spoken. He had a short number of jokes that he would use that, after many meetings, I got to know quite well. His favour joke was to say: "The University President and I are on a first name basis. He calls me Ed and I call him Sir". A rather innocent joke and that is what he portrayed. He was never forceful but always thoughtful, to the point of being distant, as he was prepared to listen and then nibble around an issue without being direct. He allowed the more forceful personalities of Dr. German and Dr. Green to run things while he would thoughtfully agree, in a low and contemplative voice.

During our initial meetings when we were in private discussions I tried to speak in Polish to him even though my Polish was not great as I never received any schooling and my only knowledge came from my parents and local polish community. As he was active in the support of the Lublin University and he moved around other Polish supporters I expected he would be at ease in such conversation. I soon found out that Professor Nowak also appeared not to be fluent in the language as he would respond in English, or perhaps he recognized my own limitations. What the actual situation was I do not know as he simply may not have been comfortable speaking Polish to me. In any case, any mention of Poland was minimal or non-existent throughout my knowing him.

Professor Nowak was always known for his absent-mindedness, especially by his secretaries. I believe this had more to do with his pre-occupation with the depths of thermodynamics than due to any deficiencies in his actual mental capabilities. Again, he allowed his secretaries to run his affairs, reminding him of his obligations to be here or there. He appeared to be the most difficult person to find whenever a secretary needed something signed as it became a regular occurrence in the Accident Research Team office that some secretary with a worried and frazzled look on her face would rush in and claim "Have you seen Professor Nowak? Is he here?" It was never of my concern.

Behind that veil of slow-mindedness I came to appreciate that he was very much awake to the goings on around him. He seemed to be willing to allow the lesser matters to be taken care of by those who found them important, while he quietly observed the bigger picture.



This Laboratory (Spencer Engineering Building Room 1076) is named in memory of **Professor Edwin S. Nowak** and his contributions to teaching and service at Western University for more than thirty years.

He had a distinguished career as a Professor of Mechanical Engineering from 1962 to 1998 and made fundamental contributions in the area of Thermodynamics. He was also the founder of Western's Multidisciplinary Accident Research Team (1974 to 2008).

After ten years with the Team I received an offer by a forensic engineering firm to join them. As an Accident Reconstruction Consultant with the firm I was to be their specialist in motor vehicle accident reconstruction. The opportunity to study collisions in greater depth and having a definite impact on the conclusions was something that I was missing in the quick turnaround of cases required for Transport Canada. The pay at the engineering firm was much more than I was receiving at a research assistant's salary and Professor Nowak indicated the Team contract could not meet that offer. I had to make a decision which led me to leave the team in 1990. At the end of those ten years, while I initially walked in aimlessly, my path had been set in concrete as I truly found the direction I wanted to go. Psychology was the scientific study of behaviour and here was human behaviour that was important to study. But far more importantly, my activities and training were morphed in a different direction. My daily examinations of damaged vehicles and accident sites focused my attention on the physical evidence accompanying these tragedies. Rather than being an observer of human behaviour I became an observer of physical evidence. Broken glass, buckled metal, roadway gouges, tire marks, everything you could imagine was of value to me.

What Professor Nowak gave me was an opportunity to study this physical evidence and learn from it. Not that he envisioned it that way, but that is how it resulted. By giving me that position it channelled my investigative interests. It perhaps became more than Professor Nowak or the Team needed or expected as I had begun to spend more time on individual cases, taking more photographs and more measurements than perhaps Transport Canada required for their research studies. Perhaps Pandora's box flew open .

It may be circumstance and fate but I owe most to Professor Nowak for indirectly saving the most important relationship of my life, that of my wife, Sue. You see, my wife is that "steady girlfriend" that I almost left behind in 1980. If Professor Nowak had not come along at the moment he did I would have been leaving for Alberta within a week or two. There were general plans that once I became established in Alberta then somehow Sue would follow me. But that was more wishful thinking than a solid plan. Thirty-three years later I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without the unconditional support of my wife. So Professor Nowak will never know this, but I know it, and I am forever grateful.

After I left the Accident Research Team in 1990 I had little contact with the Team members as new individuals stepped in. I had heard that Professor Nowak was in poor health for a number of years but he persevered before his eventual passing. Recently, a former Team member who now works as a Defects Investigator for Transport Canada informed me that there would be a ceremony in honour of Professor Nowak on November 2, 2013, in which a plaque would be unveiled and the Thermodynamics lab would named after him. This investigator was going to take a plane trip from Ottawa just to attend the unveiling. I was impressed with that devotion. I was certainly wanting to attend and I did.



Gathering at the Thermodynamics Lab on February 2, 2013 to unveil a plaque in honour of Professor Nowak.

Thinking back at my first impressions of Professor Nowak's involvement in the Polish community, over the years I had the opportunity to delve into the history of my Polish background beyond what my parents were able to describe from their own lives, and I developed a better appreciation of why Professor Nowak would venture to support persons of his own Polish background.

In about 1795 Poland ceased to exist and its people struggled under the tunes of Fredrick Chopin to regain their existence. It was not until the end of the First World War before Poland reappeared on the European map. Even then the country's existence was tenuous as the more powerful forces of Germany and Russia were a constant threat. My parents' village was in the very far south-eastern corner of Poland where the Polish and Jewish populations were outnumbered by a Ukrainian society that itself was longing for an independent nation. A Ukrainian nation that the governing Polish were not willing to concede. No nation, including Poland, can claim total innocence in its historic actions.

In the savage madness we like to call the Second World War my parents' village was totally cleansed of Polishness as my mother's family was shipped out to Siberia where some perished from the cold and starvation and the rest suffered immensely.

At the start of the Second World War my father was barely too young to join the army and he spent the first years of the war's nights in the village trying to hide while local Ukrainian militia murdered any remaining Polish residents. In between the sweeps of the eastern front, Polish soldiers around him were either fighting the Soviets and then fighting the Germans. He was captured by German forces three times and taken to Germany territory, only to escape each time, hiding by day and moving by night, to return to the village where his parents still survived and needed his help. When he eventually fought to free Poland of Nazi occupation his only choice was to join the Soviet forces. While many countries were freed of their oppressors as a result of the end of the war, Poland was simply re-occupied by the Soviet Union and remained a country in name only as it was imprisoned by the communist system until only recent times.

Hearing these stories as a young boy and man made less of an impression on me as I had "more relevant and important" matters to attend to in Canada. I experienced

nothing of the hardships of my parents' generation. But when one needs to struggle for one's existence it becomes a strong unifier. To many Polish descendents in North America Poland was still not free as long as it was under communist rule, and it was important where ever possible to squeeze out a little bit of that freedom . Catholicism was banned in that atheist society but a Catholic University was somehow tolerated if funded by outside money. Interestingly, it might have been a way for the communists to bring western money into the country if the University of Lublin thrived.

So, in all this misunderstanding, I have come to an appreciation that Professor Nowak was not attempting to advance some sort of superiority of the Polish culture so much as fighting a kind of freedom fight in support of an oppressed Polish society. Everyone should deserve the opportunity to live their life freely, including those of a Polish background. In watching Professor Nowak's son, Robert, give a brief speech I came to see how a young "New and Improved" Dr. Nowak has taken his father's place as a well-adjusted, highly-skilled, family man who I am sure will live up to his father's legacy.



Robert Nowak giving a short speech at the dedication of the Thermodynamics Lab in honour of his late father.

I remain unimpressed with the path taken by many of those around me and will continue to be vocal and critical when I see the ugliness of those who possess an insatiable appetite for power and money, that causes so much hardship around us. But I will always remember Professor Nowak as a pleasant and decent man to whom I am grateful for giving me a decent chance and, perhaps unwittingly, for preserving the happiest relationship that I possess with my wife.



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