

The Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre

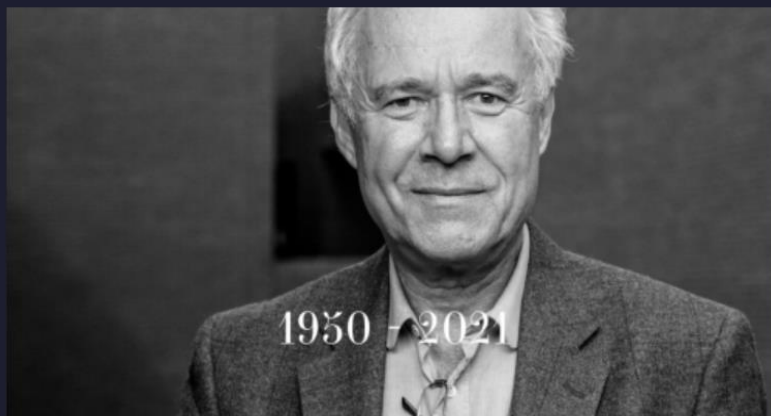
is the only theatre in the world with a retractable roof, which allows Shakespeare's plays to be performed in the open air, as they were five centuries ago.

Designed by Venetian architect Renato Rizzi, it is now home to Continental Europe's largest Shakespeare festival and widely recognized as a 21st century architectural masterpiece.

The theatre exists today because one man, Professor Jerzy Limon, willed it into being.

It is his vision, determination and inspiration we pay tribute to here.

THE AMERICAN FRIENDS OF THE GDANSK THEATRE FOUNDATION



JERZY LIMON, OBE (1950-2021)

It was Professor Jerzy Limon's dream to build a new Shakespeare theatre on the site of the Fencing School, built by the English traders who lived in Danzig, now Gdansk, in the early 17th Century. Shakespeare's plays were performed there by troupes of English players, circa 1610. Against seemingly insuperable odds, Jurek persisted---and his dream became a reality when the Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre opened in 2014.

Jurek's many friends in the United States mourn his sudden death, from COVID, on 3 March 2021 . The American Friends of the Gdansk Theatre Foundation send their heartfelt condolences to his widow, Justyna, and two children, Julia and Tomasz.

A man of quiet strength, boundless energy, great intellect and infinite charm, Jurek was beloved by those fortunate enough to have known him.

He had a sense of humor, and of the absurd, too.

AN EXCEPTIONAL LIFE

Jerzy Limon was a renown scholar, novelist, stage director and visionary. He was a professor of English literature at the University of Gdansk, and founder of the Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre and the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival, now the largest summer festival of its kind in Continental Europe. His academic works were translated and published by Cambridge University Press.

Jurek's many honors included Poland's Gloria Artis (2006); the Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta (2011); the Erazm and Anna Jerzmanowski Prize, awarded by the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (2015). Two years ago, Great Britain's Shakespeare Birthplace Trust honored Jurek with its prestigious Pragnell Birthday Award, citing him as one of Shakespeare's "great European apostles."



OBE presented by the British ambassador

In 2014, Queen Elizabeth II recognized Jurek's contribution to the arts by appointing him an honorary member of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). The Prince of Wales is the Theatre's longtime Patron, having hosted dinners honoring its major donors at High Grove and Clarence House and with a royal command performance of *Hamlet* at the Globe Theatre in London.



If you'd like to see what's so exciting about the Theatre, watch this BBC report, which includes interviews in English with both Jurek and architect Renato Rizzi.. There are lots of others on YouTube; search for *Gdansk Shakespeare Festival*.

JUREK AND HIS AMERICAN FRIENDS

In 1994, when Jurek asked Charles Krause to form the American Friends, he was sure much of the money to build the Theatre would come from the United States. The development consultants we retained were optimistic (as they always are).

Alas, we quickly learned raising money for a non-existent Shakespeare theatre in Poland (Poland?) was not every American's idea of a cause they wanted to support. It took several years until we finally found a small group of Polish-born Americans in Chicago, and Barbara and Andrew Kapusto in Washington, who were interested.

In 2003, we were ready to re-launch the American Friends in proper fashion. If we could just get the two first ladies, of Poland and the United States, to attend a fundraising dinner in Washington, I was sure it would be a success.

I had met Jolanta Kwasniewska, Poland's first lady, a couple of times with Jurek, so we dared to ask her if she would come for the dinner and invite her friend, Laura Bush, too.

It took several months but she did.

And we were given a date: 4 October 2003.



From left: Charles Krause, Laura Bush, Jolanta Kwasniewska, Jurek Limon

**Have you ever tried planning and hosting a \$750 per couple
black-tie dinner for 350 people, with the first ladies of
two countries as your honored guests?**

With six weeks' notice?

**Don't, unless you have someone as well-connected and
hard-working as Barbara Kapusto by your side;
an impresario like Jurek ready to fly in
actors and musicians from Europe;
and a cause you really believe in.**

*The dinner at the Folger library was very special. I was very happy and
proud to be a small part of this event. The first ladies, the ambassadors.*

*The setting was amazing with the shelves of books, beautiful flowers,
ladies in long gowns and men in dinner jackets.*

*They all enjoyed the period music and Shakespeare's sonnets
recited by well known Polish actors. I remember even the dinner menu was kind of
Elizabethan. Jerzy Limon's speech-lecture was great and memorable*

I wonder if there is a record of it. The Library's archives?

It was about why Shakespeare is relevant today.

---Barbara Kapusto



Sunday, 4 October 2003: Our dinner at the Folger Library

GODDESS FORTUNE

Before a meeting, Jurek would often smile his most mischievous smile and ask the help of Goddess Fortune (Fortuna), the ancient Greek goddess of good luck who turns up in many of Shakespeare's plays.

Being in the right place at the right time never hurts.

But unless you're ready to make the most of it,
it can all be *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Jurek's successes came because he had wonderful ideas, inspired confidence; and always delivered more than seemed humanly possible. Still, Goddess Fortune may have had something to do with Izabela Roman's move to Chicago as a young research scientist.

Izabela and Jurek had been friends since high school in Poland. By the time we organized the American Friends, it was *our good fortune* that she had a lovely home near Chicago; was willing to invite other well-educated Polish Americans to fundraising events; and become vice president of the American Friends.



In 2012, Jurek presented a plaque to Arie and Bozena Zweig, Chicago friends of Izabela's, thanking the Zweigs for their generous contribution to the Theatre

Izabela now divides her time between the United States and Sopot, the Polish summer resort on the Baltic coast near Gdansk.

I am still in denial. I do not imagine my world, my Sopot, without Jurek; without dinners with him and his family; his polite questioning about my comings and goings; his jokes...his belief that all our contemporary problems can be found in Shakespeare's plays. He would prove it with exact quotations. He would tell me about the next important play to be performed at the Shakespeare Theater and plans for the next Shakespeare festival.

Last night, Charles, you asked me to write something about Jurek and my first thought, this morning, was that maybe my memory of an unusual Spring day, in the early 1980s in NYC, would be worth sharing. Jurek was on his way to Washington DC ...most likely to the Folger Library, or on his way from Washington to Gdańsk. He asked me to meet him in Manhattan on the steps of the New York Public Library.

He wanted to tell me about a very exciting discovery. So I waited for him, trying to find him at each entrance...there are so many steps there. When he arrived, I could tell by the mysterious smile on his face that this was, indeed, very important. We went to a bar to talk, drinking whisky, I suppose.

Jurek described what he had found, just a few months before, in the Gdańsk Library. There, in a stack of other old documents, he came across some letters dating from the early 17th century, written by a British actor ---John Green, John Wayde or Willam Roe, I 'm not sure which --- asking the Gdańska Rada Miejska (City Hall) for a permit to perform English dramas in Gdańsk.

Jurek thought his discovery was worth pursuing.

He was dreaming that one day it might be possible to locate the exact place where the actors performed and even reconstruct their theater. I admit that Jurek's excitement (and possibly some whisky) influenced me, a down-to-earth scientist and not a dreamer, in such a profound way that for the next 40 years I shared Jurek's dream.

And I tried to help him, as much as I could, make his dream come true.

And, it happened.

Today, the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theater is a monument to Jurek Limon's persistence and enormous effort, overcoming incredible difficulties....administrative, logistical, financial etc etc.

It's the legacy of a special person, who influenced everyone he met in the most profound way.

I hope that William Shakespeare is giving Jurek a big hug now.

I will miss him as long as I am here and he ..there.

Just wait for me, Jurek...please.

---Isabela Roman



ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

In 2012, Prince Charles hosted the second of two dinners for the Theatre's major donors, this one at his London residence, Clarence House. This was special because the Prince only hosts "private" dinners at Clarence House, which means for people or charities he feels particularly close to. Jurek could always put everyone at ease and the Prince clearly enjoyed his company.

To my right in this photograph is Jurek's wife, Justyna; to my left, Pawel Adamowicz, the mayor of Gdansk, and his wife, Magdalena (the mayor, a great supporter of the Theatre, was assassinated two years ago); to the mayor's left, Prince Charles; and Jurek Limon

Growing up in Detroit, even after interviewing many heads of state for *The NewsHour*, I could never have imagined I would one day dine as Prince Charles' guest in both of his residences and meet him several other times.

All because of the Theatre and Jurek.

I can confirm the Prince detests the British media.



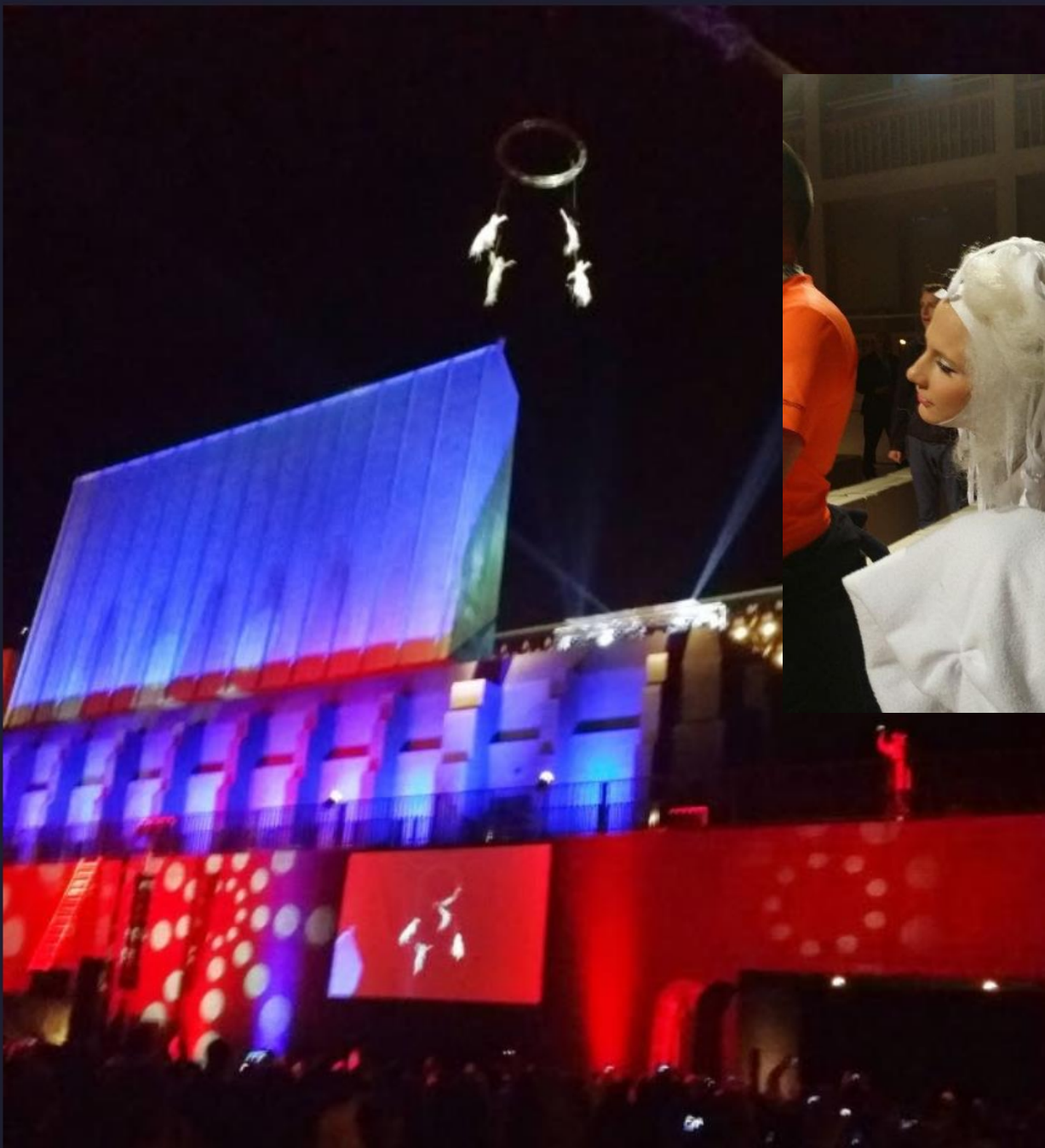
SEPTEMBER 2014



The Fencing School, circa 1610

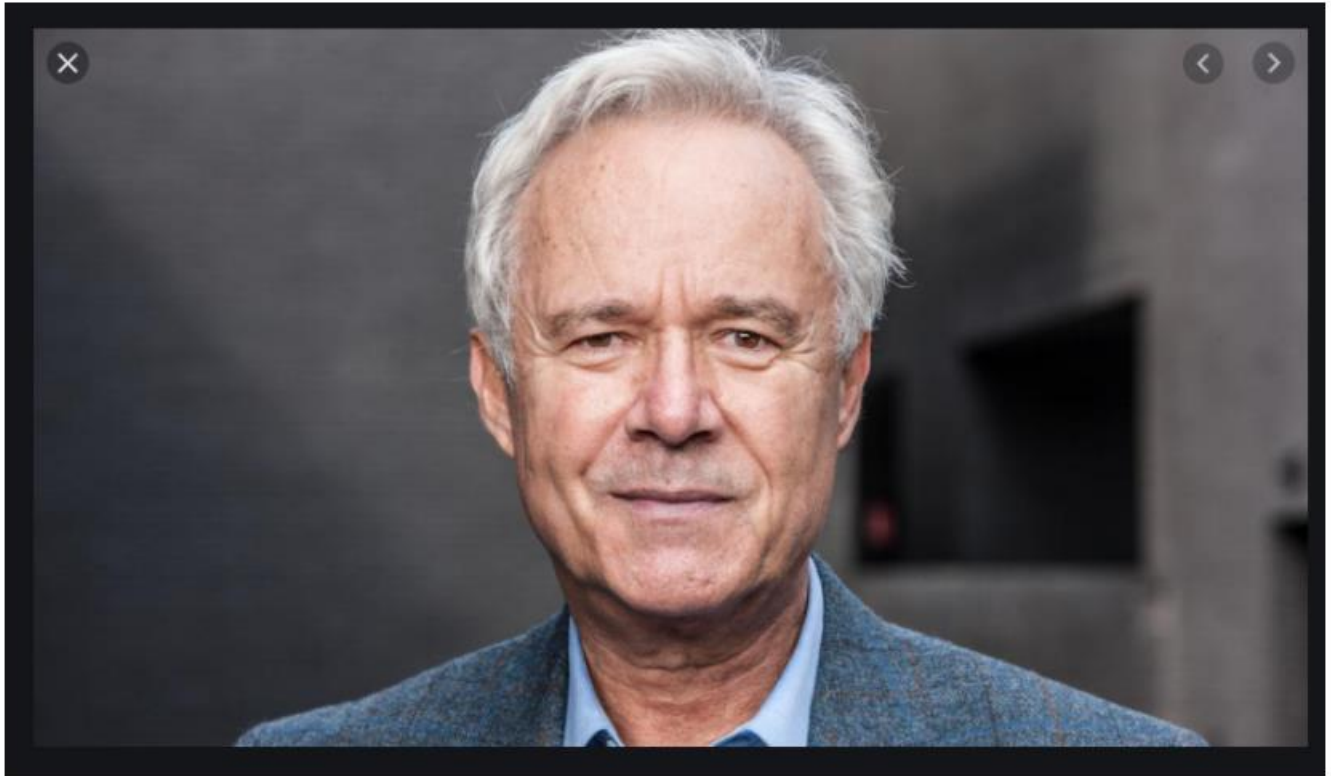
Thirty-four years after he found the letter proving that troupes of English players did, indeed, perform Shakespeare's plays at the Fencing School in Danzig/Gdansk; approximately 30 years after he located the exact site where the Fencing School once stood; 25 years after Solidarity defeated the communists; 23 years after Jurek formed the Gdansk Theatre Foundation; and 20 years after the American Friends was created to help; the Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre opened in September, 2014 and Jurek Limon's dream became a reality.

That weekend, the Globe theatre's international company performed *Hamlet* where it had been performed 500 years before; Prince Charles announced that Jurek had been appointed a member of the Order of the British Empire; and that Saturday night, the Theatre itself became the centerpiece of an amazing choreographed spectacle, which included the loveliest white swans hoisted through the new Theatre's open roof into the night sky--- all of it the vision and gift of Jurek Limon.





A FINAL WORD



Jurek Limon was that rare combination, a serious scholar, a visionary, a charming diplomat, a great showman---and a wonderful friend.

I often thought of him as a 21st century Renaissance man.

We first met in 1990 or 1991. I was in Gdansk for *The NewsHour*, reporting on the changes then occurring in post-communist Poland. Someone told us about a professor at the University of Gdansk who hoped to build a Shakespeare theatre in the city of Solidarity, where Lech Walesa led the shipyard strikes that marked the beginning of the end of communism in Poland, and a pause in the Cold War.

It just so happened (Goddess Fortune?) the professor and his wife, Justyna, were planning a fundraising reception one night while we were in Gdansk. As outlandish as the professor's idea seemed, the reception itself would be an example of private philanthropy in a country where, just a few years before, anyone caught trying to raise private money to build a Shakespeare theatre would have been thrown in jail or sent to a mental hospital.



It was at that reception that I first observed Jurek's magic, his amazing ability to pull the most unexpected of rabbits from the most unlikely of hats. What I imagined we would find at the reception was a group of those rotund, meat-and-potatoes shipyard workers who cheered Walesa on during the strikes. What we found, instead, were 30 or so elegantly dressed women in long gowns and perfectly groomed men in dinner jackets; we could have been in London, Paris or New York.

Only Jurek could have found them and brought them together, just like he found Prince Charles, Jolanta Kwiesniewska and Donald Tusk, Poland's former prime minister and, until recently, president of the European Council---all of whom he improbably pulled from unlikely hats to help make the Theatre a reality.

Still, it wasn't easy. Communist Poland's laws and bureaucracy were Kafkayesque and post-communist Poland's weren't much better. It sometimes seemed as if the laws were deliberately contradictory, to stifle initiative. Creating the public-private partnership that finally built the Theatre was, from what Jurek told me, a Herculean task. And Goddess Fortune certainly wasn't with Jurek the day he discovered the site where the Fencing School was once located; it had long since been paved over and was being used as a parking lot by the SB, Poland's dread secret police.

Could anyone ever say No to Jurek?

The SB tried for a long time and made things very difficult. But, in the end, they gave up some of their parking spaces. I couldn't. Not when Jurek came to Washington in 1994, a scholar in residence at the Folger Library, and asked if I would help set up a 501-c-3, which he suggested we call the American Friends of Gdansk Theatre Foundation,.

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Thus began a relationship with the Theatre, a close friendship with Jurek and perhaps the most interesting journey of my life. It was a journey that lasted for more than a quarter century until this month (March 2021), when I couldn't believe what I was hearing when I was told Jurek had died of COVID in Gdansk. Added to the deep, deep sorrow I felt then---and feel now, as I write these words---is the realization that an important chapter of my own life has also come to an end.

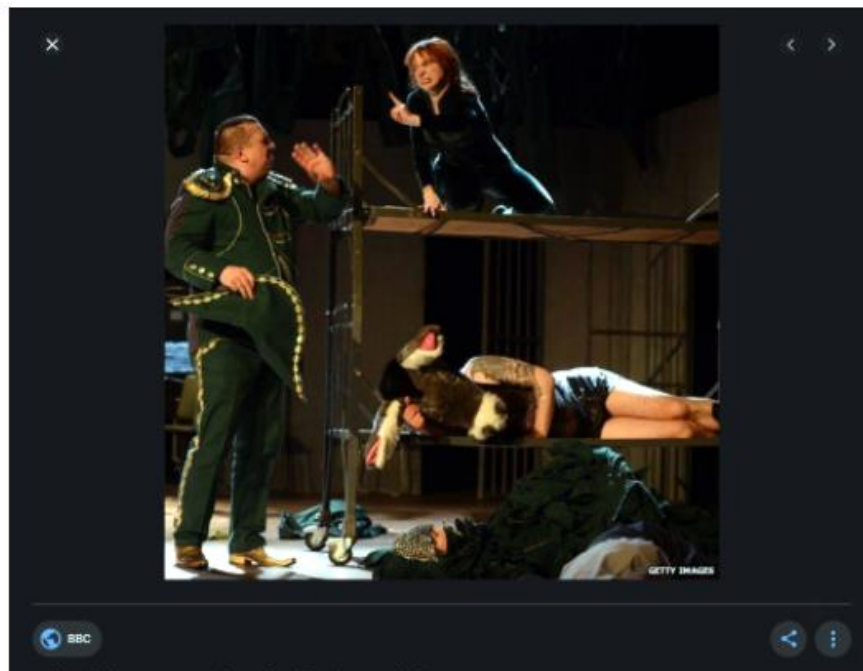


And I know I'm not alone. As Izabela wrote, Jurek was a very special person who profoundly affected those who knew him---Justyna and his immediate family, of course. But also his students; the thousands of actors who've performed at the Festivals and on the Theatre's main stage; his devoted staff; and the audiences from all over the world who've come to the Theatre and the Festival, now in its 28th year.

It was Jurek's idea to bring productions of Shakespeare's plays, from as far away as Japan and the United States, to Gdansk each summer to perform, first in abandoned warehouses in the shipyard and, after 2014, in the new Theatre itself. I've seen and heard Shakespeare's plays performed in Polish, English, Russian, Hebrew, Japanese, Finnish, German, Rumanian, Flemish and I don't know how many more languages. Visually

stunning performances---even if the audience couldn't understand the language they were performed in.

Jurek lived for Shakespeare and thought it important these foreign productions be seen in Gdansk, sometimes with subtitles, often without. But he never objected when I would say the Festival and Theatre were about more than Shakespeare. They're also about implanting Western culture and values in a country that can't change its always-precarious geographical location; too easily accepts hier-archical authority; and seems unable to rid itself of the prejudice, paranoia and intolerance that continue to animate its domestic politics and relations with the world.



We last exchanged emails a few days after New Years. Jurek told me he thought he would retire from teaching at the University and managing the Theatre this year; he'd used the last, lost year, due to COVID, to write another book, *Shakespeare and the Seven Deadly Sins*; that Justyna was researching and writing a book about her family; that Julia had graduated from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland and was home taking an online graduate course; that the Theatre was still closed; and the political situation in Poland was a "disaster.

"I really do not understand how people in various democracies (can) elect leaders who are just beyond any reasonable criteria," he wrote. "This is a major flaw in democracy. Perhaps, an enlightened monarchy is a solution, although I am fully aware that to an American that must sound like a preposterous idea

"I have lost my faith in the wisdom of the people, and I think there are issues too important for the people to decide," he continued. "The level of frustration here is comparable to what you went through the past four years."

Were I still a working journalist or an analyst at the State Department, I would be telling anyone who would listen that if my dear friend Jurek Limon has given up on Poland's post-Cold War political system, we better do what we can, as fast as we can, because a divided and demoralized Poland, or worse, a political upheaval in Poland, would complete the project Trump wittingly or unwittingly began four years ago. Having turned over the casino to Putin, an untethered Poland is a wild card the Russians will know how to play; a card that almost guarantees we'll lose the hand.

Without Jurek, I worry about the Theatre, too.



Even though the city of Gdansk and the provincial government provide much of the Theatre's funding, and most of the money to build it came from money the European Union gave Poland to support cultural projects, it was my impression Jurek managed to keep the Theatre's programming safe from political meddling.

He also guaranteed its artistic excellence.

Sadly, there's nothing we can do to bring him back. But there are things we can do to safeguard his legacy. The Theatre and Festival should be better known in the United States. And they should be recognized as a national treasure in Poland.

Whenever Jurek came to America, Polish diplomats at the embassy in Washington or consular officials in Chicago would treat him as an honored guest. But it was my impression they never fully understood the value of cultural diplomacy, generally; or appreciated what the Shakespeare Theatre and Festival in Gdansk could do for Poland's image, internationally.



For the same reasons the American Friends had so much trouble raising money in the United States *before* the Theatre was built (a Shakespeare Theatre *in Poland?*), its architecture and programming would be real eye-openers now, if more Americans and people outside of Europe knew about them. They are evidence of Poland's impressive post-communist transition and an important addition to Poland's surprisingly varied and sophisticated cultural life.

The Shakespeare Theatre and Festival
now belong to Gdansk, to Poland and the world.
Together, in Jurek's memory, we must
cherish and protect them.

RIP, Jurek

—Charles Krause
Your American friend

