

Lech had a way of making people around him share the passions that he had, and he had the stuff that legends are made from. He made us love bread, he made us love biking and he made me love his sister more than I could have without his perspective.

When I first met Lech 23 years ago in Paris, I was struck by his wide grin that stretched clear from Wroclaw to St. Louis, even before Panera was founded – and his “firm” handshake, which was strong enough to knock a man off of a mountain. He lit up the room with his energy. Then, the next thing we knew, Kasia was saying goodbye as she left to work in Southern France for the next month. We looked at each other dumbfounded, wondering how she could leave us together without a language in common and without knowing each other. We each loved her, and that was all she felt we needed. It was like a test to see if the two guys she loved the most could get along. During that summer, getting to know Kasia through Lech’s eyes made me love her more than I could have imagined. I had never met a brother who loved his sister as much as Lech loved Kasia. And that touched me deeply. Who could ask for a more remarkable brother.

When we walked in our simple clothes to be married in the fancy Paris city hall, we didn’t think about the material things that we didn’t have, we thought about how lucky we were to be together. Lech was my best man and he presented us with a big loaf of bread at the threshold after the wedding. The bread was offered so that we would never go hungry, and we never have.

Lech’s passion for bread extended throughout his life, from baking bread for half of the city of Wroclaw to baking a babka for his friends and family. Some say he may have secretly baked bread for Kings and Queens. Who know? He grew sourdough in his

kitchen and experimented with new ingredients, many of them “secret” ingredients. I don’t think even he would remember some of them. He looked at every loaf of bread as if it were the first bread he had ever seen or tasted. When he went to his first radiation treatment after his first back surgery, the nurses said they had to give him a tattoo where they would target the radiation. I asked him what kind of tattoo he wanted. I told him he should pick a tattoo that defined who he was. Without hesitation, he said, “Like a loaf of bread.”

When Lech returned from Florida with his family in 2002, we were so excited, because we had not seen them very much in the previous 5 years. After being away for so long, he was so excited to spend time with his niece and nephew. The first thing he did when visiting us was to play soccer in the front yard with Alexander. When he looked at Mayah, he could see Kasia when she was younger, and he always loved joking with her and just looking at her pretty smile. After all, we all know how much the Zalewski men love to look at pretty girls. Oh boy!

When Lech found out he had cancer, he started wondering whether he had been a good husband and a good father. He was worried that he would not live long enough to make sure that he made an impact on his family, so he quickly focused on them. With his teenage son, Konrad, he made sure he spent quality time with him – skiing, biking, visiting colleges, talking man-to-man. With his little Nunia, he tried to be gentle and playful. He enjoyed watching her dance and play, and he was so amazed at how intelligent and imaginative her conversations were, like one about how rainbows start at the North Pole and end at the South Pole. His time with his children was well spent and he was a remarkable father.

Irena was truly the love of Lech's life. In that youthful summer in Paris, we talked about girls often. He had had enough of "average" girls and wanted someone special. When Kasia and I met the young couple again in Poland, he told me how he had found Irena and how happy he was with her and their little son. Looking at pictures during the past week and a half, I noticed that he seemed most happy when he was sitting next to her – usually making faces. And speaking of faces, boy did he ever love making faces – the uglier the face, the better. It was hard to get him to keep his tongue in his mouth for a photo op. Oh boy! That's the sign of a remarkable husband.

In Poland, Lech's first car was one of the smallest cars that I had ever seen. He used to carry the baby carriage on the roof. The car was so vertical, I thought it would topple over. Once, I asked him how long it took for the car to go from 0 to 60 miles per hour. He said he had the car for two years, and it still didn't go 60. Lech's last car was a black Toyota Camry. He was so proud of how fast it would accelerate that he called it the "Rocket". Demonstrating this speed put fear in the hearts of all who rode with him, but it represented how he lived his life – slow and simple at first, then increasing into an exciting thrill ride.

Biking was another of Lech's passions. When he lived in Holbrook, he once showed me his bike. "Okay," I thought. "It's a bike. What's the big deal?" But to a true biker, the bike was the most prized possession. Lech used to go out on his bike for hours at a time, often worrying Irena who thought he had been run over by a car. After he returned from Florida, I decided to bike with Lech and see what it was all about. So, we started riding together on weekends. The rides got steadily longer. The longer the ride, the more excited Lech became. And even though I was a novice to him, he always waited

for me at the top of the hills. Sometimes, he had enough time to eat lunch AND dinner up there. I tried my best to keep up and eventually was almost at his speed. Even when we biked 100 miles – a “Century” ride – I struggled to keep up. After 3 years with cancer, he was still stronger than I was. Oh boy!

Although we would like to forget the cancer, Lech’s ruthless attitude toward this enemy defined his life: he always looked at the bright side of life and lived with passion, finding humor in everything. I remember the many trips with him to visit doctors and the visits to Lech when he was in the hospital. No matter how much he was beat up by the cancer or the surgery, he kept a positive attitude and had a joke to tell. The nurses would ask him how he was doing, and he would answer in his New York accent, “I’m fantastic! How you doin’?” It was not enough for him to be doing just “ok”. He had to be Terrific! Fantastic! Extraordinary! If they had to remove his kidney, he said, “Terrific! I still have one. Why do I need two?” If they had to give him a stem cell transplant, he said, “Fantastic! I’ll be healed in time for the summer biking season.” When we finished the 100 miles biking, Irena and Kasia looked at him sternly and said, “How do you feel?” What else could he say but, “Extraordinary!”

Life will not be the same without Lech. Every one of you had a personal relationship with him. For me, I lost my best friend – the one I could talk to about anything, the one who accepted all my faults and never said a word about them, the one with whom I could share the passion of life. The things that are most important for us to remember about Lech are these passions – for bread, for biking, for his friends and family, and for life itself. Those memories will continue to make us smile and to bring a tear to our eyes. Oh boy! What a remarkable man!