

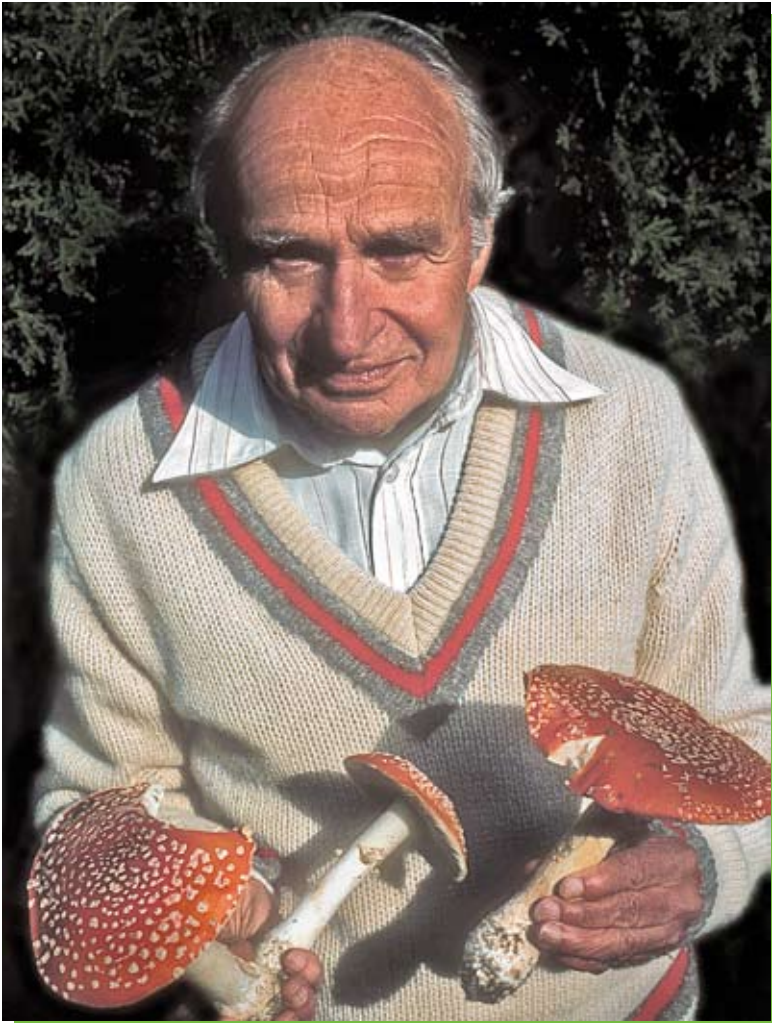


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ADAM F. SZCZAWINSKI, A Botanical Pioneer in British Columbia

Abstract

ADAM FRANCISZEK SZCZAWINSKI (1913-2006). Born and educated in Lwow, Poland. Attended University of Lwow, 1932-1937, where he obtained Magister Filozofii in Botany; lecturer, Commercial College in Lwow, 1936-1939; instructor, University of Lwow, 1937-1939. Enlisted in Polish Army in France, April, 1940; served as Director of Education, Polish Air Force, H.Q. London, 1944-1946; Flight Lieutenant, Royal Air Force 1946-1948. Emigrated to Canada, 1948. Ph.D. (1953) at Department of Botany, University of British Columbia, Vancouver (was first Ph.D. recipient in botany at UBC.) (Ph.D. dissertation: *Corticolous and lignicolous plant communities in the forest associations of the Douglas-fir forest on Vancouver Island*. Lecturer, Department of Botany, UBC (1953-1955). Curator and Head of Botany Division, at British Columbia Provincial Museum [now Royal British Columbia Museum] (1955-1975); served as Acting Director on many occasions; Lectured widely throughout northwestern North America; responsible for planning and implementation of Museum complex opened in 1968; with Dr. V. J. Krajina and others, developed Ecological Reserves program in British Columbia; retired July, 1975. Extensive collecting in British Columbia and Yukon; duplicate specimens housed at Royal BC Museum (V) and UBC. Continued development initiated by Clifford Carl of Museum Handbook and Occasional Paper series; a founder of *Synesis*, a research journal published by the BCPM; founding member of Canadian Botanical Association; authored and co-authored Provincial Museum Handbooks: *The Heather Family of British Columbia* (1962), *The Orchids of British Columbia* (1959), *Guide to Common Edible Plants of British Columbia* (1975, with G. A. Hardy) and *Mushrooms of British Columbia* (1976, with R. J. Bandoni, first author). Also, co-authored *Flora of the Saanich Peninsula* (1973, with A. S. Harrison); National Museum series (4 volumes), *Edible Wild Plants of Canada* (with N. J. Turner) and *Common Poisonous Plants and Mushrooms of North America* (with N. J. Turner).

Adam Szczawinski (“s-cha-vinski”) was fondly known as “the mushroom man” to the thousands of people who flocked to the BC Provincial Museum for mushroom identifications in the years when he was Provincial Botanist, from 1955 to 1975. A vibrant and colourful man, he can truly be characterized as “a mover and shaker” in the world of botany and in the protection of British Columbia’s ecosystems.

Szczawinski was born on October 21, 1913 in Zubrza by Lwow, Poland. His father was a forester of a large estate, and he spent much

Nancy J. Turner, School of Environmental Studies,
University of Victoria, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2
(email: nturner@uvic.ca)

of his boyhood in the woods and countryside around his home. He obtained a post-graduate degree in botany at University of Lwow, and served as a lecturer upon his graduation. His work was interrupted by the Second World War. Lwow was soon under Russian occupation, and he became active in the Polish underground. He was imprisoned by the Russians, but escaped to France, where he joined the Polish Army. When France collapsed, he was imprisoned once again, this time by Germans. Again, he escaped, making his way to Britain, where he soon joined the Polish Air Force at its London headquarters¹. He rose rapidly through the ranks, becoming the Director of Education, and one of the personal advisors of the Air Officer Commanding Head of the Polish Air Force with the rank of Acting Wing Commander. After the war ended, he joined the Royal Air Force, remaining until 1948. He had married a young Scotswoman, Mary M. McAlpine, and together they decided to emigrate to Canada.

They arrived in Vancouver in 1948 and settled on farmland in Richmond. They worked hard, growing potatoes, corn and flowers, but found it impossible to compete with established farmers with their machinery and cheap labour. Times were very hard; even a job as a ditch digger was not to be had. For a brief time he worked as a boiler fireman for a cannery, but had to leave when the inspector discovered he had no fireman's ticket². Finally, he decided to try for a position as a botanist, but was told that, although he had the equivalent of a Ph.D. in botany from Poland, he would have to take his doctoral studies over again. He was accepted as a graduate student in the Department of Botany at the University of British Columbia, working under the Czech ecologist Dr. Vladimir Krajina. He and Mary struggled through on his minimal salary as a laboratory instructor, and he did his doctoral research on corticolous and lignicolous lichens of old growth coniferous trees in the Nanaimo River valley. Graduating in 1953, he continued at UBC as a lecturer until 1955, when he assumed the position of Curator of Botany

¹ Szczawinski's experiences during the Second World War were recounted by Cecil Clark, in *BC Botanist's Flight to Freedom was No Easy Road*. *Victoria Colonist*, June 24, 1956.

² This and other stories about Szczawinski are recounted by Peter Corley-Smith (1989) in *White Bears and other Curiosities. The First 100 years of the Royal British Columbia Museum*. Victoria: Royal BC Museum.

at the BC Provincial Museum, under the directorship of Dr. Clifford Carl.

The museum at that time was located in cramped quarters in a wing of the “musty” Legislative Buildings. As soon as he arrived, Szczawinski and Carl began to develop a vision for a new museum—one that would educate students and the public alike; one that would excel in its collections and documentation of all aspects of British Columbia’s natural and human history; and one whose staff would undertake effective and important research and interpret the results in first-class exhibits in a world-class building. He set about, with Dr. Carl, Charles Guiguet, and Wilson Duff, the curatorial staff of the museum, making this vision a reality. They worked together as a team, giving public lectures, recruiting new staff, and raising the profile of the museum—“selling” the idea of the need for a modern museum that would showcase British Columbia to the world. In one year, Szczawinski gave 72 public lectures around the province. His sharp sense of humour, eastern European accent and Old World charm endeared him to audiences. Virtually single-handedly, he made plants and mushrooms a popular subject for British Columbians.

In spring and summers, he travelled the province, doing botanical surveys and collecting for the museum, usually with Charley Guiguet or Cliff Carl, and often also with other colleagues. His work in the Cassiar Mountains of northern British Columbia and along the Alaska Highway resulted in the first systematic plant collections from this region. He also began a study of plants of the Saanich Peninsula. His collections formed a major component of the Museum’s herbarium. He was very happy during these years. In his 20 years at the Museum, he used only three days of sick leave. He never took a formal holiday, and his hours certainly were not “9 to 5.” He recalled, “I work at home, I work all the time, this was my hobby, my profession and my recreation. So I didn’t need to go for holiday because I travelled... some people say I have the best job in British Columbia because I [had a] paid holiday constantly.”³

In 1959, he and Vladimir Krajina presented the findings of

³ Personal interview with Adam Szczawinski (transcript), by Peter Corley-Smith, November 1985. Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum.

his doctoral research at the IX International Botanical Congress in Montreal, and he also guided a 10-day field trip on Vancouver Island for Congress attendees. That same year, he began a campaign that nearly cost him his job. Coming from Europe, where there were few wild places left, he saw an urgent need to preserve large areas of wilderness in British Columbia. One, in the Cassiar Mountains, was particularly magnificent. Its herds of caribou and other large mammals, and its fragile alpine meadows and other montane ecosystems, were seen by Szczawinski as highly deserving of government protection. He publicly lobbied for establishment of a large wilderness reserve there. However, the area was also being surveyed at that time for its mineral deposits, and the government had hopes of developing it for mining. Szczawinski's recommendation for a wilderness preserve caught the attention of the national media. Premier W.A.C. Bennett was not pleased; he sent a message through Dr. David B. Turner, Deputy Minister in the Department of Recreation and Conservation, and Clifford Carl for Szczawinski to stop opposing the government, or he would be dismissed. Far from dampening Szczawinski's enthusiasm, it challenged him to even more outspokenness. He told Carl, "Mr. Bennett is doing me a great favour by forcing me to get a better job." He promptly contacted the media, and there were more headlines: "Provincial Botanist Muzzled by Premier." Bennett, realizing that he could not intimidate Szczawinski, tried softer approaches, but, as Szczawinski recalled, "I said there's nobody going to shut me up as far as conservation is concerned in the province. I was educated and my duty is to tell the government..."

Eventually, Mr. Bennett relented, and invited Szczawinski to his office. There, he was very cordial and congratulated him on his dedication and on the wonderful job he was doing at the Museum. Not one to pass up an opportunity, Szczawinski seized the moment. "Museum? You call that a museum?" he said to Bennett. "Sir you know it's about time British Columbia got out and had a proper museum!" Bennett, perhaps even further impressed by this audacity, assured him that he shouldn't worry, that the government would do everything possible. Later, in 1963, Szczawinski was invited to a government reception at the Empress Hotel. In the reception line, as Szczawinski

approached the Premier to shake hands, Mr. Bennett said, “My friend, I have very good news for you. You are the first to know: We are going to build you a new museum!” Without hesitation, Szczawinski smiled and asked, “How big?” The Premier answered, “You tell us what you need and we’ll try to do it.” Thus, the dream of a new museum came to be a reality. It was opened officially by Premier W.A.C. Bennett on August 16, 1968.⁴ Its curatorial tower featured two floors dedicated to botany, including a large, modern herbarium to house the rapidly growing plant collection.

The Szczawinskis enjoyed a happy marriage. Mary gave birth to Alan, their only child, in 1956. Then, when Alan was only 10 years old, Mary died suddenly from a heart attack. Her death was a heavy blow, but Adam determined to persevere, both as a parent and with his career. From then on, Alan accompanied him on many of his speaking engagements and field trips. Today Alan works in the Department of Highways, and he and his wife, Barbara, are still very close to Adam.

One of the accomplishments of which Szczawinski is particularly proud was persuading the government, in particular Minister of Lands and Forests, Ray Williston, to undertake the dedication of one hundred of the most critical natural areas of the province as Ecological Reserves as a Centennial project. After many conferences and meetings, with the help of David Turner, Deputy Minister of Recreation and Conservation, David Borthwick, Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests, Vladimir Krajina at UBC and many other supporters, the Ecological Reserves Act was passed in 1971—the first of its kind in Canada. The Ecological Reserves program is still a major component of the Province’s protected area strategy, with a total of 134 reserves, protecting a wide variety of native species and habitat types throughout the province.

Another major contribution is Szczawinski’s overseeing the writing and production of many volumes of the Provincial Museum Handbook series. Most of these, including his own, are now out of print, but from the ’60s through the ’80s, the Museum handbooks and monographs were the major source of information for those interested in British Columbia’s flora and fauna. Together with his colleagues at UBC, especially Dr. Robert Scagel, he also developed *Sjestsis*, the research

⁴ op. cit.

journal of the Provincial Museum. This journal served as a publishing outlet for the province's researchers in anthropology and natural history, until publication was stopped in 1985 due to budget cuts. Szczawinski was also one of the founding members of the still-active Canadian Botanical Association, and was the first regional director for western Canada.

Szczawinski maintained good relationships with his staff, and with the students who worked in the Botany Division. He has always appreciated dedicated, hard-working people. He was known around the Museum as one who did not hesitate to speak his mind honestly, who made judgments fairly and wisely, and who supported innovative thinking.

On his retirement in 1975⁵, the Adam F. Szczawinski Book Prize in Botany was established at the UBC Senate through the Department of Botany, by his friends and colleagues. It is "awarded annually to a student with high academic standing in the field of mycology in the Department of Botany." In 1983, he was honoured by his colleague Dr. Al Funk, in having a genus of lichen-forming Coelomycetes named after him, *Szczawinskia*.⁶ Since his retirement Szczawinski has continued his life-long work with plants, writing (with N. Turner) a series of four books on *Edible Wild Plants of Canada* as well as a book on poisonous plants and mushrooms of North America. He has never fully quenched his thirst for knowledge; currently he is taking a series of courses in philosophy, geology, environmental studies and history at the University of Victoria. This gives him an excellent opportunity to keep in touch with young people, which is what, he maintains, keeps him young.

⁵ see Humphrey Davy 1975. Spokesman for 'Nature' Retires. Victoria Times, June 28. page 30.

⁶ Funk, A. 1983. *Szczawinskia*, a new genus of the lichen-forming Coelomycetes. *Syesis* 16: 85-88.

Sadly, after this article was submitted, Dr. Adam Szczawinski passed away, in Victoria, on Friday, June 2nd, 2006. He is survived by his son Alan Szczawinski, his daughter-in-law Barbara, and three grandchildren: Jacob, Maxwell, and Kira.

Our sympathies go to his family.