

An interview of Jonas Satkūnas, a long-time employee and former Director of the Lithuanian Geological Survey, by Stanisław Wolkowicz, Editor-in-chief of *Przeгляд Geologiczny*

Stanisław Wolkowicz (S.W.): We have known each other for many years now, and sometimes spent long evenings somewhere far away in the African bush discussing everything; we have solved world political problems with relative ease. But I don't quite know what your passion is, what you do as a hobby. How is it with you in this respect?

Jonas Satkūnas (J.S.): I think that hobbies can be closely related to one's profession, but they might also be completely different. Even more, I think that hobbies are like a road with several parallel lanes, and with curves, hills and slopes. Hobbies are born, and then change like everything else in life and nature. We, as geologists, know very well that the only one permanently stable phenomenon in nature is continuous change. I have to admit that my passions have been changing, or perhaps, it's better to say evolving with new experiences and discoveries. As my old friend Igor Zekster (this was long before the Russian war against Ukraine) from the hydrogeology institute in Moscow used to say *Life is beautiful, but it will surprise you yet* and only many years later do I understand this statement.

In 1980 when I started my geology studies in Vilnius University, I actually had only one dream: to see as many

remote, wild and old historical places in the world as possible; however, at that time, as all we understand, all our big world was only the Soviet Union. Our studies, indeed, gave us the first glimpses of remote geographical places outside Lithuania. We had training courses in the Urals, trips to the Pamir mountains and also a wonderful 5 months of work with a gold prospection party in the Altai mountains. But this was not enough: we were hungry to see more mountains, and in all the spring vacations of our studies we organised adventures to the mountains of the Caucasus, Chibiny on the Kola Peninsula, and even to the Barguzin (Baikal region) mountains. During this last trip we had to sleep for several nights on the ice of lake Baikal, and the entire trip in cold and deep snow lasted for 22 days. But it was great to risk life and to get stronger and wiser. This was actually, in my present understanding, my first hobby.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, new horizons opened, and this allowed incredible experiences exploring many places in the world, during international projects, conferences and field trips. So the hobby of travelling became work. Though it was work, however, I must admit it was very, very nice work. We sometimes joke, that as American indians believe that after death they dream to find them-



Fig. 1. Dr Jonas Satkūnas (second from right) with a team of lecturers and participants at the Geohazards training course organised by the PanAfGeo 2 Project in Cameroon. In the backdrop is the Ekom-Nkam waterfall, known from the Tarzan movie. Photo by Stanisław Wolkowicz



Fig. 2. Few items: local stone axes, spearhead, iron axe, obsidian knives from Ethiopia. All following photos by Jonas Satkūnas

selves in the Land of Eternal Hunting, so in a similar way geologists dream of finding themselves in the Land of Eternal Field Trips. So geological travelling was, and remains, an exciting part of life. Then, I must admit, a new page of hobbies opened, and more and more I catch myself telling stories about travels in the world. I am invited to schools, local communities, different organisations, to give lectures or to write popular articles. Especially successful is a lecture about Africa – its geology, mining and people.

S.W.: But journeys have a way of coming to an end one day. And then what?

J.S.: Journeys are amazing, but returning back home, to a green, very often wet Lietuva (it literally means *rainland*, as the Lithuanian word *lietus* means rain) gives real happiness.

So, I have to confess, my main hobby became my farmstead, where I was born, spent all childhood, and hope to live in until the end of my days. The farmstead is in Molėtai district, with a great number of lakes located in picturesque morainic relief of the last Vistulian glaciation. The skies, which I became used to in remote mountains, are there, but in recent years the snows have becoming an increasingly unique rarity and comfort. Also I take part in a number of activities of the Molėtai municipality by lecturing, organising geological excursions, contributing to the local newspaper and other publications. For example, a book about Molėtai was recently published, to which I contributed a chapter about geology and geomorphology. I am chair of the commission for awards of the Molėtai municipality, for example giving the title of Citizen of Honour of Molėtai.

S.W.: This is very interesting: a geologist, a globetrotter, a university researcher, a long-time director of the Lithuanian Geological Survey, is now a farmer in the countryside. What did you do after fulfilling your official duties, because you are still very active professionally, on the farm in your picturesque village.

J.S.: Yes, our farm is located in a village named Žibėčiai (Zybecie, as was written in Polish maps) which could be translated as Sparklers, as *žibėti* in Lithuanian means *to sparkle*. A legend says that this name originated from a small bonfire, visible at night, on the hillside, that helped strangers to find their way without becoming lost.

We do not make much agricultural production on the farm, however we have to care for meadows, wetland and forest, cope with beavers and wild pigs, observe many wild animals and birds. I have planted an area of forest: 6800 oaks and 2800 spruce trees.

S.W.: So you're this kind of farmer (a little) with a wink, and you're actually a bit of an ethnographer, both on the local and global scale.

J.S.: The collection of ethnographic items started with displays in the barn of old objects found on the farm and in its vicinity. There are even a few very old stone axes (Neolithic or early Iron Age), one of which I found in my childhood on our farm. This is a particularly valuable item which we demonstrate, and which shows that people have been living there since the prehistoric Stone Age. Then, in our village is a mound (hill fort), and next to this place is a cemetery from the seventh century, where were found a number of iron axes and spear heads. We possess a few of them in our collection.



Fig. 3. Carpentry products by J. Satkunas

It is allowed to have these archeological-artefacts in our private collection, as they were found in own private property; the localities where they were found are well documented and these artefacts are available to archaeologists. They have visited our collections, and also we make joint expeditions with them in the vicinity. We have found also several coins showing the date 1666. We have showed these coins to a numismatist of the National Museum, a leading expert on ancient money, and he concluded that most these coins are false and were fabricated in Romania and Kaunas. A nice discovery, and history is funny at times.



Fig. 4. Copy of the skull of Mrs Ples – a 2.15 mln years old *Australopithecus africanus* from the Cradle of Humankind, South Africa

So everything tells the history of our place. We have collected also historical facts and documents from archives and recorded everything in a booklet about the village of Žibėčiai. It is interesting to note that in inventories of the estate in Alunta, to which belonged our village, we can trace the family name Satkūnas back to 1661.

Our village, too, is in the middle of the Aukštaitija region (in Polish this is Aukštut). As you know, there are 4 main ethnographic regions: Zmudz, Aukštaitija, Dzūkija and Suvalkija (or Sūduva) and all of them use different dialects. I am very proud of my Aukštut dialect and always speak it when I am in the Molėtai district (even when attending some official events). We even collect very particular words, different from grammatical Lithuanian. Neighbours and friends seeing our modest exposition started bring to it their findings too.

And now the barn is full, and there is a need to extend the room.

In another part there are exotic weapons and other items from different countries around the world, thanks to international groups and activities. Actually currently this collection may be called *cold ammunition*. Even you sometimes kindly contribute, with a spear or knife from remote places in Africa where I was not able to visit.

S.W.: Oh sorry, this is where I have to protest a bit! Often this is due to the fact that you used to travel only with hand luggage, into which it is difficult to put the huge brass axe you bought in the Brazzaville market. You gave it to me to transport to Europe. To this day I remember the amazement of the Congolese customs officer who told me to open the suitcase in which I was transporting this beautifully crafted tool.

J.S.: There are also items from South America, Japan, Malaysia, Canada, Middle Asia and so on.

S.W.: What about geological specimens. Are they not interesting to you?



Fig. 5. Geological exposition

J.S.: Geological collections are part of the fatal destiny of most geologists, as usually we take, piece by piece, rocks and minerals from everywhere where we can find them. To be honest, I did not plan to make collections of minerals, but they naturally “came” to me and it became obvious that we had to make an exposition. Now, geological items occupy another room in our farm, and this room is called the Geological Museum.

However, despite a few exotic fossils and minerals, the most important part of it is a nearly complete collection of sedimentary rocks and fossils commonly found in Lithuania: limestone, dolomite, clays, anhydrite, gypsum, sections of cores and so on. Visitors (not geologists) are surprised by the variety of the Lithuanian geology, which is not generally visible, as underfoot the country’s rocks are hidden beneath glacial deposits, of simple sand and clay.

My wife Indrė very kindly takes care of, and enthusiastically guides visitors to our museums, and especially in summertime we have guests nearly every weekend.

S.W.: Well, that’s right, you run such an open house, you receive guests often, but you have sometimes talked about how you like to share with your friends, your neighbours, your know-ledge of historical, geological subjects. Sometimes I had the impression that you were running a kind of cultural and educational activity in your house, or perhaps in your village.

J.S.: Yes, we have our village community, actually of 6 families, and we are always communicating for pleasure and to help each other. But for certain events we have gatherings of 50–60 people: for celebrating New Year, 8th March, St Jonas (Midsummer) day and other events. For 15 years we have organised excursions (we call them national expeditions) for two days in July. We have our own bus, and altogether there travel about 20–25 persons. We produce a special excursion booklet, a guide on geology and history, curiosities of the area which is being visited. For instance, in 2020 we organized an excursion to Suwałki Landscape Park, where

I introduced, to our villagers, the Belt of Yotvings, a particularly outstanding product of our common work with the PGI, the performance of which we coordinated with my close friend Professor Marek Graniczny. It was great to remember and visit places of common research, and make an overnight stay in the PGI monitoring base in Sidorówka.

Then, we made an inventory of all the geological heritage sites of the Molėtai district: erratic boulders, hills, springs, and organized excursions to see these sites.

S.W.: I know you have another hobby. A few years ago, I sent you a photo of a lovely sculpted chair that I bought somewhere in a market in Malawi. A few days later you sent me a photo of a chair of similar design that you had made with your own hands. A remarkable skill – carpentry.

J.S.: Another pleasant activity is woodwork, to make tables, chairs, shelves, and beds for our needs and for friends. I am happy that my wife also actively contributes to the woodwork so we work in our workshop together. I feel that I have inherited this passion because my grandfather was a good carpenter, but he died just few months after I was born. So how can this happen?

The wood we use is usually oak or ash—hard wood that we take from our forest. It was funny when we were asked to make a table and few chairs from pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and Indrė, who usually undertakes polishing of the surfaces, was very dissatisfied, as the pine wood was too soft.

S.W.: Thank you very much for the interview, and I hope that despite this latest hobby you can still order 5 beers at the bar for you and your friends.

J.S.: I, also, thank you for this nice conversation and confirm that the number of my fingers is constant, and they are all still in place.

Jonas Satkūnas and Stanisław Wołkowiec