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REVIEW ARTICLE

WHAT THESE EMAILS TAUGHT ME: A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON MENTORSHIP FROM PROFESSOR PIOTR SZEFER

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ABSTRACT

This reflective article traces my correspondence with Professor Piotr Szefer from 2005 to 2022 and considers how steady mentorship can shape a scientific life. My first fortunate contact and email exchange began with his request for a reprint of my paper in 2005. It continued through his kind acceptance to examine my doctoral student in 2012, his prompt administrative help in 2015, his willingness to serve as my professorship assessor in 2019, and his generous congratulations on my promotion in 2022. Across these moments he combined intellectual rigor with humility and encouragement. I describe why I admire his scholarship, his character, and his sense of community, and I express my gratefulness for recognition given at critical times. The record shows that knowledge is not measured by fees or rankings but by the lives of scholars it strengthens and the standards it upholds.

KEYWORDS

Mentorship, scientific character, ecotoxicology, academic life

1. A Brief Introduction About Professor Piotr Szefer

Professor Piotr Szefer of the Medical University of Gdańsk is a leading figure in marine environmental chemistry and food chemistry whose scholarship spans biomonitoring of trace elements, ecotoxicology and analytical methods. He authored landmark monographs including the Elsevier volume Metals, Metalloids and Radionuclides in the Baltic Sea Ecosystem and the CRC Press book Mineral Components in Foods that synthesize mechanisms, methods and health implications across environmental and dietary pathways (Szefer, 2002; Szefer and Nriagu, 2006). University records note a prolific output of roughly 360 works, including books and numerous journal articles and chapters, reflecting sustained leadership in his fields. His community service includes long-standing roles within the Polish Academy of Sciences' Committee for Exploration of the Sea, where he has served in elected positions including vice-chair (Medical University of Gdańsk, 2016). Professor Szefer's scientific impact is also visible in citation indices and author profiles that document thousands of citations across environmental and health sciences (as on 4 October 2025; Scopus (2025)'s H-index= 41 with > 5395; Google Scholar (2025)'s H-index= 52 with 829 citations). According to the Scopus database, this article "Polarographic determination of microgram amounts of thorium(IV)", is the earliest publication recorded for Professor Szefer (Szefer, 1977). It also appears as a single-author paper, marking an independent start to his scholarly record.

Professor Szefer's contributions have been formally recognized with national scientific honours, notably the Wiktor Kemula Medal of the Polish Chemical Society and the Ignacy Łukasiewicz Medal, distinctions reported by the university and highlighted on the Medical University of Gdańsk's official social feed (Medical University of Gdańsk, 2018a, 2018b). Together these records portray a scientist whose rigor, breadth and public service have shaped trace metal ecotoxicology and related disciplines for decades, in the past and for the future.

2. My Fortunate Contacts With Professor Piotr Szefer

My first fortunate contact with Professor Szefer arrived in 18 July 2005 when he wrote to request a reprint of my paper on the 'Byssus of Perna viridis as a biomonitor for zinc' (Yap et al., 2003). The email went as:

Dear Dr. Yap, I would greatly appreciate receiving a reprint of your paper (preferably in pdf format if possible) entitled "Bysus of the green-lipped mussel Perna virids (Linnaeus) as biomonitoring material for Zn" by Yap et al. published in Russian Journal of Marine Biology 31(2), 102-108 (2005).

Thank you very much.

With best regards,

Piotr Szefer

A senior, well-known and well-recognized scholar took the time to read my work and ask for it directly. That small act carried quiet weight. It told me that careful methods and precise claims have a home beyond local recognition, in which the data generated solely from my Ecology Lab which is incomparable to any well-equipped labs of any research institutions.

In 2012, I invited him to serve as an external examiner for my doctoral student. He replied with practical questions about duties and examination procedures, then accepted and shared his curriculum vitae. The tone was formal yet warm, exact yet kind. The lesson was clear. Serious work and human decency belong together.

In 2015, I sought scanned documents for administrative purposes. He responded promptly, twice, ensuring I had what was needed. The task was simple, but the manner mattered.

In 2019, I asked if I might nominate him as an independent assessor for my professorship application in my university. He agreed at once and stated his confidence that I was a suitable candidate. He asked only for the formal invitation and the full profile of my academic record. His confidence steadied me after the earlier disappointment of 2014.

In 2022, I wrote to share that I had been promoted. He replied with congratulations that honoured the labour behind the title and wished me continued growth in research and teaching. I answered from the heart that good knowledge cannot be measured with money. His own conduct had already taught me that lesson.

3. Admiration For Scholarship

I admire Professor Szefer's academic intellectual standard, which I first came to know through his papers. On 30 September 2025 he was

recognized on the World's Top 2% Scientists list in the career-long category as one of the Medical University of Gdańsk's most influential scholars, whose publications are among the most frequently cited (Medical University of Gdańsk, 2025). In fact, Professor Szefer has appeared on the World's Top 2% Scientists list since 2020 in the career-long category (World's Top 2% Scientists Network, 2025a). With humility, I note that my name has also been included since 2020 in the same career-long category (World's Top 2% Scientists Network, 2025b). Seeing such recognition across the world's leading scientists, including Professor Szefer, helped me clarify the academic standard I strive to meet. Inspiration and admiration matter in sustaining that standard; both are widely acknowledged as drivers of discovery and rigorous scholarship when anchored in ethical purpose and community responsibility (O'Grady and Richards, 2011; Petersen, 2024). Based on my experience in trace-metal ecotoxicology and a close reading of his body of work, I judge that Professor Szefer ranks roughly within the top 0.2% of scientists in this field since the early 2000s. This is my professional assessment rather than an official ranking.

His studies on trace metals in molluscs model the discipline required to match inference to evidence and to treat uncertainty responsibly. Our correspondence confirmed that the same discipline governs his mentoring. He never uses superlatives as a substitute for judgment. He recognizes achievement without flattery, asks concrete questions about next steps, and keeps attention on the quality of work. This makes collaboration feel purposeful and teaching feel honest.

I also admire the way he frames titles and positions. For him the title Professorship follows from conduct rather than the other way around. In 2019 he wrote that he believed I deserved the professorship and was ready to assess my case. In 2022 he congratulated me with warmth that emphasized responsibility more than prestige. The implicit teaching is that a title is a tool to serve a community, not a mirror to admire oneself.

4. Admiration For Character And Community

Character appears in small consistencies. Over twenty years, Professor Szefer answered quickly, spoke plainly, and helped without fuss. When I invited him to examine a thesis, he asked what would be useful. When administrative items were needed, he provided them. When assessment was required, he undertook it. When congratulations were in order, he offered them. The pattern is humility in action.

He uses reputation to open doors rather than to guard them. In academia this choice is not automatic. It reflects a human-centered ethic of stewardship in which scientific authority serves people and institutions rather than status itself, an orientation urged for the scientific community more broadly (Ramirez and Cayón-Peña, 2017). Recent reflections in the laboratory sciences also argue that character formation is not peripheral to research quality but foundational to it, linking traits like honesty, reliability, and generosity to the daily practice of good science (Schwartz and Yap, 2023). I have tried to adopt the same ethic with my students and collaborators. State the purpose clearly. Share credit fairly. Match praise with specific guidance. Keep promises. Treat administrative details as part of scholarly care, not distractions from it. In short, build the community you wish you had as a young researcher.

5. Gratefulness

I am grateful for recognition at the right moments. In 2019, Professor Szefer's readiness to serve as assessor and his confidence in my suitability arrived when my confidence needed repair. It did not replace the work. It gave the work meaning. Such timely recognition matters because gratitude reliably sustains motivation and engagement, outcomes well documented across cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs (King and Datu, 2018). I am grateful that in 2012 he accepted the external examiner role, which strengthened my students' training and signalled that our lab's efforts met international standards. I am grateful for the practical kindness of 2015 which reminded me that collegiality includes simple acts done well. I am grateful for the 2022 congratulations that placed my promotion inside the longer discipline of study, teaching, mentorship, and supervision. In academic settings, explicit gratitude and recognition are not niceties but professional necessities that reinforce belonging and performance (Howard et al., 2025).

I am grateful also for the way he respected my voice and values. When I wrote that knowledge cannot be measured with money, he did not debate the point. He had been illustrating it for years by the way he engaged. That example now guides how I advise early-career scholars who feel crushed by journal quartiles and fees. We meet institutional requirements without allowing them to define the worth of our work. The worth lies in the clarity of methods, the honesty of claims, the care for students, and the usefulness to society. Cultivating gratitude helps sustain this posture by strengthening internal locus of control and well-being, both of which support deeper academic engagement (Cui et al., 2023).

6. Concluding Remark

This reflective note is a small archive and a large compass. From a reprint request in 2005 to congratulations in 2022, it shows how steady mentorship cultivates both knowledge and character. It proves that scholarship matures best where standards are high and hearts are generous. I carry Professor Szefer's example into my research and writing, my mentorship, and my leadership, in both academia and non-academia. When I am tempted to measure myself by numbers alone, I re-read these emails and return to first principles. Work hard to avoid any misconducts in science. Do careful work. Tell the truth even though sometimes it is not clever to do so. Support others. Share what you know even though sometimes someone could take a free ride. In that practice, knowledge finds its true measure in the lives of scholars it steadies and the communities it serves.

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