17.

JAN WOJCIK

Conferring with Dick Popkin

In order to understand my debt to Dick Popkin one needs to understand a bit about the circumstances of my life in July of 1990 when I attended the month-long research seminar on Les Trois Imposteurs in Leiden. While trying to come to grips with a painful divorce and the death of one of my children, I was pursuing my Ph.D., despite the general pessimism about the possibility of finding a tenure-track position at the end of the road.

I had never before traveled outside of the United States. I had never participated in an international research seminar. I had no conception of the responsibility of each participant to contribute to the success of the enterprise. My self-esteem was at an all-time low, and I was acutely aware that I knew almost nothing compared to Dick and the others at the seminar. My southern ears had great difficulty with foreign accents. I was never fully at ease, always on guard against committing some intellectual faux pas. I was most comfortable when alone; I fell immediately and madly in love with Europe and enjoyed strolling the streets of Leiden or sitting at an outdoor cafe soaking up the atmosphere.

When I look back, I find it rather remarkable that Dick never took me aside to tell me either to shape up or ship out. Instead, he and Julie treated me with the utmost courtesy and friendliness throughout the month, and Julie went out of her way to include me in sight-seeing expeditions (where I felt a bit more comfortable than in the seminar setting). Neither so much as hinted that my behavior was peculiar at best. Dick never suggested that I was failing to take full advantage of the opportunity I had been given. He may have wished privately that he had accepted someone who had been better able to contribute to the intellectual growth of the seminar participants instead of me, but if so he kept his wishes to himself.

In retrospect, I realize that the month that I spent in Leiden was the turning-point in my effort to put my life back together. Although
I was incapable at that time of appreciating the opportunity that the seminar offered, I did, for the first time in what seemed like ages, have something to think about other than my own grief, inadequacies, and failures. Beguiled by windmills and canals, I began to look ahead rather than back. Ultimately, I completed my degree and (against all odds) was offered a tenure-track position in the philosophy department at Auburn University.

In the spring of 1995, I helped to make arrangements for Dick to give a talk here at AU. I was tied up with classes until shortly before the time for him to read his paper, when I trotted over to the appropriate building in time to introduce him. Afraid that he might not remember me well enough to recognize me, I offered my hand and said, “Hi, I’m Jan Wojcik, and it’s a real pleasure to have you here.” I realized how much I had matured professionally when I saw his look of surprise, quickly followed by a marvelous twinkle in his eyes. “My goodness,” he exclaimed. “You have changed!”

That change was in large part due to his having accepted me as I was that July and his not placing demands on me that I was in no shape at that time to meet, and I want to take this opportunity to thank him.