

Moments and Meanings

Remembering Professor Oberhammer

Gerhard Oberhammer (1929–2025) was an Austrian Indologist, Emeritus Full Professor at the University of Vienna and Full Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. After his initial studies in Innsbruck (German philology, history, philosophy), he turned to comparative linguistics and Sanskrit and continued his further education in Paris at the Sorbonne. He began his academic career as a research assistant in Vienna in 1955 and in 1957–1959 conducted research in India (University of Madras). From 1967 he served as Full Professor at the University of Vienna and acted as Dean of Humanities from 1983 to 1987, while also heading research institutes at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His work focused on Indian philosophy (Sāṅkhya, Nyāya, Vedānta), Hinduism, and the hermeneutics of religion. He made significant contributions to the study of logic, epistemology, and soteriology in Indian traditions, produced a major dictionary of Indian philosophical terminology (1991–2006), advanced research on Yoga, Nyāya, and Vedānta spirituality, pioneered the study of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta–Pāñcarātra connections, developed the concept of “religious hermeneutics”, and founded the Sammlung de Nobili, the De Nobili Research Library (1966), to promote interreligious research.

This biographical note might be brief but the faculty members of the Kraków Indology shared a long-lasting, special bond with the Professor. It all began with the World Sanskrit Conference in 1990...

Iwona Milewska: Our interaction with Professor Gerhard Oberhammer began over thirty years ago. The first meeting in person took place in 1990 during the VIII World Sanskrit Conference, held in Vienna.

Those were the times when we, the Polish scholars, were for many years totally isolated from the Western World. This was due to the fact that in the post-war Poland we had to study and work in a “socialist manner”, which meant that we were deprived of any direct contacts with our colleagues from the West, we had no access to academic books or journals published outside the communist bloc, we could not travel easily across Iron Curtain. There were no scholarships available for students or scholars either. Moreover, there was no Internet yet!

Though in 1980 the “Solidarność” movement had changed to a large extent political situation in Poland, even ten years later the conditions in Polish universities were not easy, at least in the economical aspect. Our salaries did not allow us to easily travel abroad be it for leisure, to enhance professional qualifications or to attend academic events. Often the attendance fee allowing participation in foreign seminars or conferences was a mountain that could not to be scaled by people from our part of Europe.

However, just then it happened that one of our students, Jakób Stuchlik, decided to continue his Indological studies in Vienna, under Professor Oberhammer. Before the conference, which was planned to take place in Vienna, he approached Professor and asked him whether it would be possible for some of his teachers from Kraków to participate in the conference without paying the obligatory attendance fee. Professor Oberhammer’s decision was so generous that five of us managed to go to Vienna and meet scholars of Indology from all over the world. This proved to be a huge steppingstone in revitalizing and re-building Indology in Kraków on modern, professional lines. The faculty members who got the chance to go to Vienna were Cezary

Galewicz, Agata Lenard, Iwona Milewska, Halina Słowik-Marlewicz and Lidia Sudyka.

While in Vienna, we thanked Professor Oberhammer for his munificent gift and presented him with a short note on Indology in Kraków, highlighting its long history and tradition. We also invited Professor to visit Kraków without much real hope that he would actually take up the offer. However, we were wrong. Professor did come to Kraków and since that first visit he became our great supporter not only in professional aspects. He helped every and each one of us to develop her or his professional career but at the same time he was a great adviser as far as our private lives were concerned.

Not much time passed before the idea to organize an international conference to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Indology studies in Kraków was born. The conference, namely the International Conference on Sanskrit and Related Studies, was held in Kraków on 23–26 September 1993 (Fig. 1) and was the very first of many great events to be placed in Kraków since then. It is befitting to recall here Professor Oberhammer's words from his Opening Address. He said, "It is a happy occasion, not only because it reminds us of a full century of Indological activity in Kraków, but also because it supplies us with the opportunity to become personally and scholastically reacquainted with each other after a long period of enforced division." He continued his speech by saying, "Upon the invitation of the University of Kraków and the Oriental Institute, European Indology meets for the first time in Eastern Europe. For the first time we are able to engage in conversation with our colleagues in this richly provided cultural space, a conversation of which we hope that it will be fruitful and lasting." His words were to become true in future.

The conference was a huge success. Many eminent Indologists not only from Europe but from all over the world took part. For us all, the small group of then young scholars, and for our students, it was the true beginning of the re-born Indology in Kraków. After years of stagnation, the Jagiellonian University could once again boast of an Indology centre of global consequence where high level research takes place. It enabled us to have contacts with colleagues from all over the

world, to get acquainted with main trends in modern research and to get access to best library resources. We will always remember that it was Professor Oberhammer who helped us to achieve this.

I could recount many more details of our past and our present professional situation, but one must stop somewhere. I have written this very short note on the events from the past just to remind everybody how did it all begin. However, I must add that one of the most important fruits of the 1993 conference in Kraków, which was the direct result of our opportunity to attend the Vienna Conference, was our first academic publication: the very first number of *Cracow Indological Studies* which appeared two years later, in 1995. Its first Editorial Board had five members: Przemysław Piekarski, Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz, Cezary Galewicz, Iwona Milewska and Lidia Sudyka. The journal is published regularly since then and is recognized as an important academic imprint by the global Indology community. As may be seen, Professor Oberhammer was again the person who helped us to begin this scholarly venture as well.

I have no doubt that all of us feel extremely grateful to this man who was not only an outstanding scholar, but who took on the role of a “Father” to all of us, offering us advice both on professional and private matters.

Looking from my personal, private perspective, I would like to stress that every time when Professor Oberhammer visited Kraków or I went to Vienna on being invited by him for various seminars and library queries, we had long discussions concerning not only Indological problems but also private dilemmas. During my first visit in Vienna he, knowing that I am interested in Indian epics, enabled me to meet Professor Madeleine Biardeau, one of the most important scholars in this field. Since then, I was in direct contact with her. She sent me several very illuminating letters written in her own hand, letters which I have kept till now. Moreover, she shared with me her publications, both old and new, which were obviously not available in Kraków at that time. It was not only her that I met personally thanks to Professor Oberhammer. All such contacts were and still are invaluable to me. Even in the last years, when Professor could not come to Kraków any

longer, he would call me quite often, and he always had something important to say. As far as I know he did the same for other colleagues from our Department of Indology in Kraków.

I will never forget him and his contribution.

The only words that come to my mind when I think about Professor are and will always be THANK YOU and this THANK YOU is definitely not enough.

Lidia Sudyka: After the two conferences, in Vienna and Kraków, a ‘tradition’ of Professor Oberhammer’s annual visits to Kraków was soon established, always at the same time of year. At the beginning of May, he would spend over two weeks in Kraków, delivering lectures at the Institute and meeting individually with each member of the Kraków Indology department (Fig. 2). It was a time for reflection on what had been achieved over the course of the previous year.

We did not need a university system to evaluate our academic achievements because it was Professor Oberhammer who assessed our work, taking into account not the quantity of our publications, but their quality. He quickly made a note of the conditions in which we worked, in particular the shortcomings of our library. Those were not days when the internet provided access to a wealth of sources. Thanks to Professor, the library of the Institute of Indology in Vienna soon opened its doors to us. I remember the long hours spent studying books, selecting pages that absolutely had to be copied, and the triumphant returns to Kraków with material that could then be studied at home.

It was thanks to Professor Oberhammer that I became acquainted with Siegfried Lienhard, an undisputed authority in my field of specialisation, Sanskrit *kāvya*. Thanks to Professor Oberhammer I was present in Vienna on several occasions when Professor Lienhard was there delivering lectures, and I had the opportunity to discuss a wide range of topics with him. I learned a great deal from these conversations, as well as from our subsequent correspondence.

But it was not only our academic successes or failures that interested Professor Oberhammer. He knew our families and was always

curious about our daily lives. One might say that we matured academically in the warmth of his attention and presence.

Professor Oberhammer's formative role in mentoring faculty members at the Department of Indology in Kraków and overseeing their academic development was recognized by the Jagiellonian University when he was awarded the Jagiellonian University Medal of Merit in the year 1998 (Figs 3, 4).

And what he did for each and every one of us will remain forever etched in our memories and hearts.

Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz: For us, the scholars of the Indology Department, and for the journal *Cracow Indological Studies*, there was no single individual more crucial than Professor Gerhard Oberhammer. Our first contact with Professor dates to the VIII World Sanskrit Conference in Vienna (1990) when some of us met him for the first time. As this was just after Poland had regained independence from the communist rule (1989), we decided to organise first international Indological conference in Poland. But it was Professor Oberhammer's suggestion that we should take advantage of this historic opportunity and mark our presence in the world. True to his mentorship qualities and broad vision, apart from inviting some of us to Vienna in 1990 and introducing us to global Indology community, he strongly supported our idea of organising an international conference in Kraków. Thanks to his recommendation, many distinguished scholars came to Kraków for the 1993 conference and many academic friendships were established. The success of the conference prompted us to publish the contributions as the first volume of the newly conceived *Cracow Indological Studies*. Neither the conference nor the journal would have been possible without Professor Oberhammer's vision and mentorship.

However, Professor Oberhammer's support was not limited to this. He made a long standing commitment to visit our department frequently to give lectures, but he also agreed to work with some of us on our academic projects, which led to us acquiring our subsequent academic degrees. His constant support, lasting for thirty years, shaped

our academic work and significantly contributed to the development of our department.

In 2019, we dedicated the 21st volume of *Cracow Indological Studies*, titled *Gurum upapadyāmahe*, to Professor on his 90th birthday; this was our humble way of expressing our gratitude.

My personal collaboration with Professor Oberhammer began in 1991 when I was invited to Vienna for the first time. After completing my PhD, I was invited by Professor Oberhammer to join the team working on Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra literature and to collaborate on a large project of the Austrian Academy of Sciences titled *Tāntrikābhidhāna-kośa. A Dictionary of Technical Terms from Hindu Tantric Literature* (TAK), involving many scholars from different countries. The collaboration of Professor Oberhammer with several scholars from our department was also continued as part of the agreement between the Austrian Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN).

I owe Professor seminal insights into the world of the religious-philosophical milieu of pre-modern India, especially of the early Vaishnava tradition. It is he who introduced me to the technique of an in-depth reading and close analysis of Sanskrit texts. We spent on these readings many hours in Vienna, in Kraków, and later in Innsbruck. His invitation to the TAK project also enabled me to redirect my line of investigation into early Vaishnava tradition and connect my textual studies with the field research in South India.

I will never forget our long hard work, always concluded with dinner, which was a great opportunity to continue our academic discussions, but also to gossip and spend a more relaxed time entertained by Professor's witty stories. I consider it a special privilege and a token of our master-apprentice friendship, which lasted for thirty years.

Ewa Dębicka-Borek: As a representative of the 'second generation' of Polish Indologists who came to know Professor Oberhammer more closely, my professional collaboration with him began relatively late, in the mid-2000s, when I started working on my doctoral dissertation on the Pāñcarātra tradition under the supervision of Prof. Marzenna

Czerniak-Drożdżowicz. I first encountered him, however, several years earlier, when I was still a student of Indology. I remember how, one day, a lecture hall filled to capacity, not only with students who, like me at the time, probably understood very little of what Professor was saying about Rāmānuja, but also with Polish academics who were themselves already lecturing on India, and who came to our Institute specifically to listen to him. The atmosphere left no doubt that we were dealing with someone exceptional and important to our teachers.

In this first memory of mine, the Professor appears as a multifaceted figure: close in age to my grandparents, fragile and delicate, with extraordinarily thick glasses perched on his nose, yet at the same time vivacious and energetic, joking with the audience and even personally passing chairs across the study-desks. What I then perceived as unconventionality, I now recognize, in hindsight, as the embodiment of qualities that, in my view, defined Professor Oberhammer: a curiosity about research and curiosity about other people.

When, after several years, for a period of time I had the honor of visiting the already retired Professor annually at his family home in Innsbruck to discuss progress of my research, each time I was equally struck by his scholarly erudition and attentiveness, as well as his sharp sense of humor, his lack of judgment toward me, his unwavering support, and, even in times of my crisis, his belief that what I was doing was meaningful and valuable.

Whenever I doubted myself, I was greeted and bade farewell with the phrase “Yes We Can!” popularized by Barack Obama. Contemporary world events were among the many topics we returned to during breaks from scholarly work, alongside reflections on our respective family histories—which originated, both literally and figuratively, in entirely different worlds—and conversations extending well beyond the scope of academic research. Years later, whenever I say “Yes We Can!” to encourage someone in need, I find myself repeating Professor Gerhard Oberhammer’s phrase.

In memory of Professor Gerhard Oberhammer, a key figure in our lives, who supported, shaped, and encouraged us to pursue the work we continue to carry out today.

Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz, Ewa Dębicka-Borek,
Iwona Milewska and Lidia Sudyka
Kraków, 26 May 2026



Fig. 1. Professor Gerhard Oberhammer with his wife at the opening of the International Conference on Sanskrit and Related Studies, 23–26 September 1993, Collegium Novum Hall, Jagiellonian University, Kraków.



Fig. 2. A farewell to Professor Oberhammer at the Kraków railway station in 1997 (?). Standing next to the Professor are Iwona Milewska and Lidia Sudyka.



Fig. 3. Professor Gerhard Oberhammer receiving the Jagiellonian University Medal of Merit (1998).



Fig. 4. Celebrating the award of the Jagiellonian University Medal of Merit. Next to Professor Oberhammer: Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz, Iwona Milewska, Lidia Sudyka, Halina Marlewicz, Przemysław Piekarski.