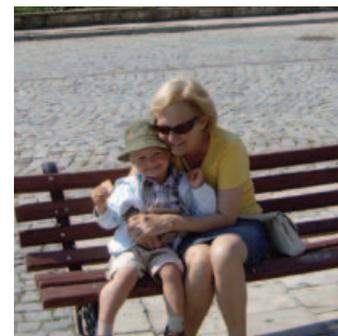




Me and my family



Holidays - picking mushrooms



My grandchild



**Janina Teszna  
Poland**

My name is Janina and I am 56 years old.

I have two daughters who are already grown up and one grandson who is four years old. For 30 years I have worked as a teacher – specialising in Polish philology. I was teaching in the biggest school in Stalowa Wola, an industrial city with about 70.000 inhabitants in southern Poland. Today I am retired, but I work in the socio therapeutic day room helping children to prepare their homework and supporting them with difficult situations in their lives. When my disease progressed I wanted to find out more about it and got in touch with the Association of Rheumatic People and their Friends – a Polish patient organisation. I read about the Stene Prize on their website and decided to share my life story and battle with the disease during my active working life with other people.

# Janka

**Like a wild beast  
Misfortune befell  
the man  
And fixed its terrible  
eyes on him...  
– It waits –  
Will the man turn  
away?**

**C. K. Norwid**

She had taken the same route, every day, for years; two kilometres on foot. She would enter the school building a quarter of an hour before the first bell and immediately disappear in a crowd of children, who were often still sleepy because 7 a.m. is an ungodly hour to begin lessons. She was a school counsellor. Back then, in the 1970s, this meant that she would be landed with the most difficult problems and the children that nobody else could cope with. She would assist, support and advise others – on how to deal with unruly Jaś, or how to comfort tearful Marysia.

The same routine, day after day, year after year...

And then, after ten years of employment, just before the holidays, a surprise: promotion to the post of deputy head! This was a great distinction, a source of pride; it was the biggest school in town.

Janka was capable and diligent; she would surely manage.

However, after the first year in her new job she was completely worn out. But at least the summer holidays had arrived, so she decided to spend more time with her children and accompany them on a summer camp, where the kids could rest and Janka could work. Despite her many responsibilities, she would try to find a little time for herself. Her holiday was coming to an end and yet she felt extremely tired. To cap it all, she had an awful pain in her hands and feet and had no idea why. She lost her appetite and returned from the summer camp pale and thin. She decided to see a doctor, but wasn't even registered with one – she had no time to be ill. The doctor prescribed painkillers, which helped a bit, though not for long. Several more visits to the doctor did not improve the situation, and the pain became increasingly unbearable. September arrived, and the new school year presented a major challenge. After all, she couldn't admit she was ill, because they would put her on sick leave.

Her job meant everything to her and was wonderfully fulfilling. Under no circumstances could she resign, for she had proved herself and so many people were counting on her. There was so much going on at school, and nothing could stand in the way of Janka achieving her goals. But misfortune befell her, the illness – rheumatoid arthritis.

The pain became impossible to bear. Her knees, elbows and wrists became swollen. She covered them with long sleeves and a long skirt, but pain cannot be masked. She couldn't show anyone how bad things were, but it was obvious. She was emaciated and aching all over. Every day she would rise at dawn – two hours before the alarm would wake the rest of the household – in order to exercise her joints a little, slowly dress, and prepare breakfast for her husband and children. They, too, did not know what was really going on. Janka told them little and she never complained. All the time she hoped that a miracle would change things for the better.

**“She would do her make-up with difficulty, her daughter would help her put on her jewellery and she would choose her clothing carefully in order to look presentable.”**



*Leisure time with horses*



*Supporting pupils and their studies*

Successive visits to other doctors in the town did not help much either. She took more and more tablets, but the results were lamentable. She would do her make-up with difficulty, her daughter would help her put on her jewellery and she would choose her clothing carefully in order to look presentable. Each morning she would greet everyone at school with a smile, ask them how they were and wish them a good day. She had to walk up three flights of stairs, check if all the teachers had come to work, organise replacements for those who hadn't, then supervise lessons in person, take phone calls, attend meetings, give extra lessons to children with learning difficulties, and many other tasks. Someone remarked: 'it's a real madhouse'. But it was a madhouse in which you did not have time to think about pain or illness – this meant she was less terrified, sometimes even happy and fulfilled. Another three years passed. The pain became more frequently unbearable, the tablets stopped working, and despite many visits to the doctor in her home town, no one seemed able to help her. Not once was she referred for specialist tests, even though her disability was becoming increasingly evident – she limped on account of her rigid knees, and could only hold a pen or piece of chalk with great difficulty. Yet she always came to school. In winter, when there were huge numbers of absentees, Janka

would appear at her post every day, without fail, at the same time. Where did she get the strength? Only she knew.

During the next holidays, with the help of sympathetic friends, she visited a clinic in a larger city. She described her suffering to the professor, who nodded his head with understanding, took a few deep breaths and said, calmly, "I will look after you". From that moment she felt a huge relief, although the pain did not lessen at all. She did the tests the professor had recommended. It turned out that the illness was at a very advanced stage, and that the only way to reverse it would be to drain the joints and treat them with gold. She took comfort in the fact that it was the holidays – perhaps by September she would be better and would not have to justify her frequent trips to anyone. She would return to work as if nothing had happened. The worst thing was that she had to ask her local doctor to carry out the gold injections. How did he react? The conversation was not altogether pleasant, but he did the injections nonetheless. Improvements took place very slowly, and at school, after the holidays, she would pick up gossip here and there, that she was being replaced with a "better model", or at least a healthier model. They would say: "something strange is happening to that woman, she seems to be hiding something". But a few people, who were friendly with

Janka, knew the real story. When something finally changed, and the pain became momentarily less intense, her hope was that she would not have to resign from her job after all. Now and then, some "sympathetic" soul would inform her that the appointment of a new deputy was being planned and that at some stage she would be dismissed. But it didn't happen, because Janka began to feel much better and was no longer the 'lame headmistress', as she was called by the spiteful pupils – and, unfortunately, not only by them.

A time came when she began to feel better and she signed up for postgraduate studies in Polish literature and a course for teachers taking integrated classes, such as the classes that were being established in the school. She felt the need to test herself through work with special needs children; she understood them better, and taught them up until her retirement.

After several years of gold injections she had to discontinue the treatment, but fortunately new methods of treating rheumatoid arthritis emerged, and these proved to be equally effective. It was amazing that she had managed to fulfil all the responsibilities that she had consciously placed upon her own shoulders. She had done so in order to face up to the illness. It is hard to imagine, but for the twenty years that she

was ill, she did not take a single day of sick leave. Each annual check-up confirmed her ability to work – such was the nature of the check-ups. And yet, perhaps it was good that it was so.

Janka found the strength to fight the illness thanks to hard work. Not for one moment did she think of giving up. She fought every night, every day, and after thirty years of employment, including twenty with the illness, she took retirement. But she isn't resting. She works at a social therapeutic centre, helping children with their studies; she talks, assists, comforts those who need it. How would her illness have proceeded had she not worked or if – God forbid – she had taken a disability pension? It's hard to say.

She found within herself an enormous strength to fight the illness, and it was this that enabled her to follow her career path. She tapped into a formidable willingness to struggle in the face of adversity. She was, and continues to be, full of hope and humility. And now she thanks God for each passing day.

*Translated by Verbalis GmbH*