FIREFIGHTERS

EXTRAORDINARY HEROES

Katarzyna Bartyńska

Małgorzata Wencowska

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Introduction

As part of the project titled "Taking Positive Action: Strengthening the Mental Resilience of Young Rescuers," carried out by the Beyond Borders Foundation and funded by the Erasmus Plus program, we visited fire stations in Florence and Pisa. We spoke with firefighters with extensive professional experience as we wanted to present various perspectives on psychological support and burnout in the service.

Our goals are to present various perspectives and analysis on psychological support, burnout, and PTSD in the firefighting service. We invited Marizio Maleci, Paolo Bernardini, Simone Vegni, and Anna Cedro to participate in the discussions. The initiator and coordinator of the entire project is Małgorzata Wencowska, President of the Beyond Borders Foundation. The interviews were conducted by Katarzyna Bartyńska.

Małgorzata Wencowska - Graduated from the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Law and Administration and the Higher School of Professional Skills in Pińczów - Faculty of Nursing. As the founder and President of the Beyond Borders Foundation, she implements and coordinates numerous international projects focused on youth education and support, psychological prevention, stress management, burnout prevention, and the use of innovative methods and new technologies in education. Personally, she is an incurable optimist, social activist, and polyglot. A person with a big heart, she lives by the maxim: "A person is worth as much as they can give to another person."

Maurizio Maleci - A retired firefighter, former commander of the Fire and Rescue Unit in Florence, responsible for crisis communication (media relations) for the Regional Fire Service Headquarters in Tuscany, and technical manager of crisis communication for the National Fire Service Headquarters in Rome (photographic documentation, video, video editing, live satellite

broadcasts). He created innovative first aid courses for firefighters (CPR, AED, training in trauma management for adults and children), qualified in Urban Search And Rescue Group and CBRN interventions, consultant for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and United Nations Agencies. He is also an academic lecturer in health-related subjects at the Italian Higher School of Public Administration in Rome, an instructor in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), Automated External Defibrillator (AED), and trauma patient management, responsible for the design of gas turbine installations. Currently, Vice President of the Associazione Nazionale Vigili del Fuoco section in Florence, a journalist, Cavaliere della Repubblica, and 4x4 vehicle driving instructor in work environments. A person with total dedication and passionate for the fire service.

Paolo Bernardini – A firefighter and psychologist. Graduated with a degree in Psychology from the University of Florence. He is a member of the Associazione Nazionale Vigili del Fuoco Corpo Nazionale in Pisa. Authored numerous publications on psychological support in rescue services and the fire brigade. He has been tireless in providing psychological help to fellow firefighters, by helping them to cope with occupational stress, trauma from difficult rescue operations, and personal problems that may affect their work and metal wellbeing. In addition to his numerous other contributions Mr. Bernardini also conducts training for firefighters on stress management, relaxation techniques, and identifying of burnout symptoms as well as He offers advice and consultations both individually and in groups, helping to manage emotions and trauma.

Simone Vegni – Experienced firefighter. Member of the USAR (Italian Urban Search and Rescue Group). Participated in rescue operations after the earthquake in Turkey in 2023. He has completed numerous courses in technical and medical rescue and search-and-rescue operations, including advanced training in rescue equipment and crisis intervention

Anna Cedro – Psychologist and firefighter. I a lecturer at the State Fire Service School in Poznań, as well as a member of the Psychological Support System of the State Fire Service in Poland. She graduated in Management Psychology and conducts classes on group communication and assertiveness for firefighters. She is also a PhD graduated from the Poznań University of Economics, at the Department of Organization and Management Theory.

Katarzyna Bartyńska - Psychologist, firefighter, and paramedic. Is a member of the Psychological Support System of the State Fire Service in Poland, lecturer at the State Fire Service School in Kraków, an academic teacher in subjects such as first aid and training methodology. She is a member of the Emergency Medical Team (EMT) of the Polish Center for International Aid (PCPM). First aid instructor for fire service units in the project supporting the construction and development of the rescue system in Ethiopia, led by PCPM in 2016. She is also graduate of psychological training in crisis intervention and promoter of psychological knowledge on the use of biofeedback methods in stress management training within the fire service.

All the interviewees share their profound experience gained on the front lines of rescue operations or in providing psychological support. Every day, they face a variety of dangers—from fires and natural disasters to traffic accidents. Their work requires physical endurance and strong mental resilience to stress, along with the ability to make quick decisions in high-risk environments. This enables them to effectively save lives and property while operating in the most extreme and unpredictable situations.

Their passion for firefighting is the driving force behind their daily work. It is what makes them fully committed to their service, always ready to improve their skills and knowledge while improving and updating their qualifications. They participate in training, symposia or international events, and constantly seek new methods and technologies that can enhance the

efficiency of their rescue efforts and the mental resilience of their fellow professionals.

Their experience and passion for firefighting complement each other. The experience gained on the front lines allows them to better understand the dangers and respond more effectively in crisis situations. . At the same time, their passion drives them to continuous development and the pursuit of new solutions, which raises the quality and effectiveness of their professional work, as firefighters and or psychologists.

Our first meeting took place in a beautiful fire station on Via Giuseppe la Farina. It is one of the four units protecting Florence. As soon as we passed through the station's gate, we felt as though we were longtime friends. Perhaps the fact that we are firefighters ourselves shortened the distance between us, or maybe it was the world renowned Italian hospitality, openness, and cordiality that created an atmosphere of kindness, mutual understanding and brotherhood. As we entered the unit, we saw firefighters laughing and joking. One of them, dressed in civilian clothes with a bag thrown over his shoulder, was sincerely bidding farewell to his colleagues — it was clear that he was someone special that day. It was his last shift before a well-deserved retirement. It was evident that this man had left a significant part of his life here. In Pisa, the firefighters also welcomed us with heartiness and great interest in the project's topic. This best illustrates how important maintaining psychological support and building mental resilience are to them.

MAURIZIO MALECI

Firefighter, technical manager of communication in crisis situations for the National Corps of the State Fire Service, university lecturer, journalist.

Photo 1. Author Maurizio Maleci - from personal archive.

„ Are you sure you want to become a firefighter? Excellent. Welcome to the best job on earth."

Kasia: Good morning. First of all, I would like to thank you very much for meeting with me. And thank you for sharing your invaluable experience and knowledge. How long have you worked as a firefighter?

Maurizio: I became a firefighter in 1987 and served until 2017. Before that, I worked in the army fire brigade for a year and in an oil and gas project for nine years. In the years 1985-1987 I was participating in the works connected with construction of a pipeline from northern Russia to the borders of Hungary.

K: So working as a fireman wasn't your first job? You already had various professional experiences before you joined the service.

M: Yes, it was my second job.

K: Thirty years in the structures of fire brigade. Is it common practice in Italy to be a firefighter for so long?

M: It's changing right now because the labor market has changed. It's a little different than it was in my day. I can say that my experience is rather short, because usually firefighters were finishing service after 40 years. They joined the service very young as their first job, and remained in service until their retirement. So they had an extensive amount of expertise and work experience.

K: Firefighters often act in extreme conditions, which is a physical burden for a body. Keeping in good shape and staying mobile for thirty or even forty years of service seems to be a challenge.

M: Yes, this job is very difficult physically, and requires a lot of effort to maintain athleticism at a satisfactory level. Our bodies are changing, but we are obliged to run, swim, and keep our bodies in very good shape physically in order to manage the demands and mobility requirements, which may occur during action.

K: Do you notice any difference between the fire brigade that you joined in 1987 and the one that you left in 2017? And was it at the same institution?

M: Yes, some things have changed. Firstly, the guidelines of a firefighter's work have generally changed. Firefighters now have to know everything and be able to cope with a wide variety of situations. But this is absolutely not complaining. This is the reality. This is the reality because the world has changed, and the threats have changed. So the firefighter has a duty to change. In effect, we had to double the training period. Originally, it was 3 months - now it lasts 6 months. The topics taught and discussed in the first period of training had to change and be expanded to include nuclear, chemical, biological threats and others. I was here when September 11 happened from the afternoon and the morning of the next day. Suddenly the range of the responsibilities changed.. At that time, the forces of the National Fire Brigade in Italy dealt with nuclear threats, but the specialization in chemical or terrorist threats did not exist. In the morning a fax came (because fax machines were used in those days) with the following statement: "These are your tasks now." We had to learn what are the threats, chemical, and radiological among others. Today I can tell that we have achieved a really good (or high) level of rescuer training. All firefighters first receive basic training when they join the service. Then they participate in two more levels of training. We also have high-altitude rescue, which includes several levels of specialization, with each firefighter graduating school with the first - basic range of knowledge and skills. It was similar with medical preparation. I was one of trainers preparing medical training programs. In the description of our tasks, it was said that we are prepared to give aid, but we realized that we knew too little about emergency medical services. So we started cooperating with doctors and nurses, and then started taking more courses. Now all firefighters are certified first aid responders. In Italy, emergency medical services are provided by a different institution. Sometimes when a problem occurs medics are not always on-site. Who will help if the firefighter is injured? So we started developing medical training as well, and revised basic textbooks. We removed specialized issues that applied only to rescuers or nurses, and we copyrighted the medical course specifically for firefighters. It is now being used in all regions of Italy. It was

my personal goal to achieve it, and I became an instructor. I teach BLS and course of action in cases of children`s injuries.

K: Can such comprehensive, substantive preparation be beneficial to firefighters from a psychological point of view? The most stressful feeling is probably the sense of helplessness in the face of danger. The more firefighters can do, the less often they will experience helplessness.

M: It is necessary to continue to develop in various specializations. Of course, it is not possible for firefighters to know everything, but each one must have basic knowledge. Then, it is necessary for firefighters to have specific specializations. This is the direction in which we are developing the fire service in Italy. It is not possible for one person to have all specializations, but as a team we can. In each unit there are people who, except handling the basic "everyday" work of a firefighter, are sometimes engaged in specialist operations. This takes place several times a month. Of course, it is also important that everyone keeps basic skills at a high level, so they keep working as "regular firefighters", performing everyday duties.

K: Procedures are extremely important because they provide a plan of action in a crisis situation and suggest what, how, and when to do them. But sometimes even all these procedures and rules are not enough to cope with the work.

M: Yes. This is very difficult. Regarding procedures, we must understand that procedures are only recommendations. These are the best possible recommendations to manage a situation, but still crisis situations can be very different. I remember an old firefighter, when I was still working in the army, who told me, „Buddy, in 46 years of service - I have never seen two identical actions." This is very important and fortunately in Italy, we benefit from it a lot to learn from experienced firefighters. It is important to keep in touch with "old" firefighters so they can talk with young firefighters and share with them their experiences. This cannot be learned in theoretical courses. Of course, training is very important and we can never stop training and improving, but

we also need to benefit from the knowledge, wisdom and practical experience of other rescuers.

Photo 2. Author Maurizio Maleci - from personal archive.

K: Aren't these experiences currently completely different? You said that times have changed, so maybe the experiences have hanged too?

M: Yes, but a firefighter is always alone when faced with a crisis. This hasn't changed. Young firefighters should be open to what their older colleagues want to tell them. It's not necessarily about the actions, but more about what's happening in our heads. Such information is a very valuable source of knowledge that young firefighters should use. We have an emotional and rational part of the mind and therefore can draw on the experiences of others. Knowing how our friend performed in some assignment, I can wonder how to use it in my own way. "Old" firefighters, of course, cannot have the attitude :

"I know best." It's more about showing: "See, this is my experience - you can benefit from it. I'm sharing it with you. Take this as good advice for your future job."

K: That sounds like an extremely valuable relationship between two people. A little like between a student and a master. I think this is one of the very important ways to build the mental resilience of young firefighters. Having such relationships with teachers and older colleagues.

M: Yes, that's exactly right.

K: You mentioned earlier that a firefighter must maintain high level of physical fitness, be healthy and athletic. How important is mental resilience and mental preparation, to doing this work?

M: Very important. In my opinion, this is an area that we need to develop in firefighter training. It seems to me that we are reluctant to talk about the problem of mental support, but of course that does not mean that it does not exist. It is necessary to start studies on the psychological preparation of young firefighters so that they are ready to face various situations, are able to make the best decisions, and correctly recognize priorities. This is really very important.

Photo 3. Author Maurizio Maleci - from personal archive.

K: Could one of the reasons for the resistance to talking about mental help be the stereotype of a firefighter - a tough person who doesn't gets emotional? Does such a stereotype exist in Italy?

M: Yes. People think that a fireman can solve any problem. This makes it necessary for the instructor to show the truth at the earliest stage of training. A fireman is a human being. He's not a super hero. It's very important to realize that as instructors we need to influence these people. We should always strongly advise to ask yourself questions: Why? Who am I? This should be emphasized, not only as part of the training, but as an element of everyday work, in relationships and in conversations between the instructor and the

young firefighter. One more important thing. There is a song in Italy that you may have heard it: "Il pompiere paura non ne ha..." - It's not true.

K: What do these words mean?

M: Firefighters are never afraid, they don't feel fear and they don't know what fear is... It's exactly the opposite. Feeling emotions is what saves firefighters' lives. Feeling fear, checking safety, and understanding what the instructor wanted to share with them.

It is also worth saying that in society the work of a firefighter is assessed very positively and we are very happy about it. People always react friendly to firefighters. They welcome and greet them. Not like they do when they see policemen. This is, partly, a consequence of the time it takes particular services to respond to reports of the need for help. Such as what were the statistics before the common emergency number was introduced? Police – 2 minutes. Emergency – 2 minutes. Fire Department - 30 seconds. This, of course, has a very big impact on society's perception of us, but we have to really try to maintain this level of trust. We can do this, among others, through very good training and professionalism in work. In addition, it is very important to maintain humility and respect for other people. Be able to listen what this man needs. Not just to gab and gab and gab "in my opinion, in my view, from my perspective...". The training of firefighters should develop towards focusing on each other and heating what they tell us.

K: You are talking about being interested in another person

M: Yes. This is really very very important.

K: A firefighter must therefore be: physically fit, healthy, athletic and also be a good listener when talking with other people... a lot of requirements and it seems to be quite difficult to achieve.

M: Yes, but remember that this is a consequence of teamwork. Being a policeman is more of an individual job. The doctor is probably at the top of the

individual profession. Very often, in a team of doctors and nurses, the doctor is at the forefront. Firefighters are a team and teamwork teaches real listening and focusing on others and not just on yourself. The commander, as the one responsible for the team, should be able to listen and know the opinions of his people. Ultimately, he is the one who makes the decisions and is responsible for them. But he should know everyone's opinion. This is how it was done when I joined the service in 1987, this is how it is done now... it was also like this in 1947, when my mother's parents were firefighters. My mother says that I decided to become a firefighter when I saw my grandparents in...fireman's uniform at the age of 2. And I got my first fire truck - a small one made of metal - when I was 5 years old... I think it was a medical truck, the one with a flag and a bell.

K: So you have a very long history of the presence of fire brigade in your family. Sometimes such traditions are a very strong pressure. Was it difficult to decide to become anything other than a firefighter ?

M: Being a firefighter is probably in my DNA, but of course, life sometimes requires us to make different choices, the effects of which we see only after some time passes.

K: Could you tell us why the profession of a firefighter is perceived as psychologically difficult?

M: I think the psychological burden should be considered in several aspects. The first difficulty is the response to the alarm itself. Especially in the middle of the night. When you are sleeping and suddenly you are violently awakened by sound and light. When that happens, what is In our heads? The mind is then in such a state that it is hard to make conscious, rational decisions. Therefore, it is very important to take care of our mental condition earlier, during daily service, and minimize matters that burden our minds. This is one of the reasons why defusing is so important. When we go to the incident, many questions come to mind. What will happen? What should I do? What will be the most appropriate course of action? There are also very difficult

questions. Will I be able to manage? Am I at a good enough level? On the one hand, these are very difficult questions, but on the other, very necessary. However, once we reach the place of the incident, our mind somehow resets. This is because we are completely absorbed by the action and the situation. We don't have time to consider this aspects. These problems may appear after the activities are completed or the next day. Especially if the rescue operation did not end with a "happy ending" and further questions begin to appear in our heads. Did I manage? Did I do my best? This has its origins in this belief - the stereotype that a firefighter can cope with everything, including during operations. Of course, we should analyze the rescue operation later, but look out! – it cannot be assessed after the fact, saying "it was wrong" or "you should have done something different at that moment". Rather, we need to collect all the information so that we can be even better prepared during the next intervention. If we are able to work in this way, we will probably be able to minimize the mental burden on firefighters. Of course, this does not mean that it will completely disappear, because it all stays in our heads... in our minds. Psychological support is very important because something remains with us from every difficult action. Psychological support should help prepare the firefighter and his psyche to be in the best possible condition for next action.

K: Can we focus for a moment on what is happening at the action spot? What psychologically difficult situations do firefighters have to face there?

M: It depends very much on both the situation and the firefighter. It's not always the same because each of us can be great in one situation and be weaker in another. That is why it is so important for firefighters to work as a team and know each other. It is important to stay in good relationships and through relaxed conversations during "peaceful shifts" to get know in advance who can manage the best in particular situations the best. For example, I have no problem with a serious car accident or a major fire, but it is very difficult for me to see an injured child. That's why my commander, whenever possible, does not send me first during incidents with children. We need to support each

other and manage the situation so that we can work as best as possible. This is only possible if we have good and honest contact with each other every day. I need to know what is difficult for you if we work together.

K: It seems to be crucial to have good contact with each other, based on trust, and to know the strengths and weaknesses of the people with whom I form a team.

M: Yes, and there is one more important thing. We don't talk about interventions "outside"... with other people.

K: Why?

M: Hm... Because if, for example, here was a fire and we found a victim who burned... I will, of course, tell the family that we had a hard day. But I can't tell them the details... It would be too hard for them. Right now, in the fire brigade, the use of psychological help is a bit difficult in some regions of Italy. We have a team of specialists, but they are in the headquarters in Rome. We can call them, but they cannot meet us as quickly as we would like. For example, if today during my duty I have an action... a heavy action, then on the next duty I will want to talk to other firefighters. I will want to express what I feel and what is on my mind regarding this situation. "Clear" yourself a bit from these emotions.

K: But isn't it like that, that in an environment of strong firefighters and colleagues on shift, it is difficult to admit that something has touched us or that we have a problem with something? Aren't firefighters afraid that their colleagues will think that they're weak if they talk about it?

M: No, no, no. Yes, the stereotype exists. But we know well how it really is. The reality is completely different. A fireman may cry. He can talk. He can speak out about his problems. Of course, we also joke sometimes and that can also help us.

K: Once I saw such a sentence as: "Whoever was a firefighter never stops being one. It gets inside you, into your DNA and becomes a part of you" - This is your sentence. What does it mean to you?

M: It means that you become a firefighter forever. Being a firefighter gets into your blood, it becomes reflexive. This is a consequence of my first firefighter training. I always say that training includes knowledge, improving skills, but beyond all, learning how to react. To explain this, I sometimes use this anecdote: Over 2,000 years ago, people used horses, e.g. for work and travel. One day they came up with the idea to use them in battles. After all, they are very strong animals. So if I take a very strong warrior, put him on a very good horse and give him a very long spear, I will be able to kill my enemies. Sounds like a great idea. Well... At first everyone died. Horses and people. They were defeated... What happened? What went wrong? Almost all warriors were right-handed and had to use their left hand to steer their horses. This shows the importance of proper preparation and training for the success of the operation. Integration of all skills simultaneously is crucial. During training, I "insert" in head procedures and principles of conduct, I also teach automatic and reflexive actions and this already changes our minds by changing the way of thinking and perceiving. For example - what does a fireman do when he gets on a boat? Or to a bar? He instinctively checks where the life jackets are or where the fire extinguisher is. See - this is one of the changes in our thinking. Because we are prepared and trained to help other people, we remember this and pay attention to it. It becomes a lifestyle. That's why I believe that you become a firefighter forever.

K: There is also a dark side of being a firefighter. Sometimes it is difficult to keep the line between work and personal life. It is mentally challenging to leave what happened during the operation at the place and not take it home. To not think about it, to not remember the situation, to not feel those difficult emotions...

M: This is the hardest part...

K: I guess so, because firefighters very often ask me, as a psychologist, how to do it.

M: Yes, it's a very difficult task to separate it. It's probably possible because we mostly want to protect our families. Some things we cannot tell them because they may be dangerous for our loved ones, too drastic. Of course, we talk about what happened to us at work, but without details. We must protect our families because they are not prepared to take on such an emotional burden. If it's right or not... I don't know... I don't have an answer to that. Me and all my friends do this...

K: What then is left for a firefighter to do to relieve tension and stress after a difficult operation? Earlier you mentioned good relationships with your colleagues and other firefighters. What else helps?

M: I can't answer this question completely. I think we ask ourselves this question too rarely. For a long time we believed that this stress and mental burden were necessary and that it had to be this way. Only recently have we realized that this is a problem. When I was still on active duty, I was very firmly approaching our superiors to make changes because we needed support. Sometimes we met with misunderstanding or heard arguments that there were no problems in the service at work.

K: And personally as a firefighter? What advice would you give to others that helps you deal better with stress?

M: I think it is very important to have specialists in the team. If I talk to my colleagues, I can vent to them, and they will listen to me and help me with contain my emotions. But the specialist will whisper me the answers. The specialist will offer me suggestions that I can use. The most important thing is to first realize your problems. If I don't notice my problems and don't ask for help, then no one can do it instead of me. This is the first step - realizing the problem. If I don't reveal it, there may be a discussion with myself in my head: "I may have a problem, but I can help myself" - and it develops and grows. If

I don't ask for help and others notice that something is wrong and have to intervene, it is usually already very hard. Very often the problem is no longer psychological, but psychiatric. And this could end really badly. Psychological support should not be equated with the help of a psychiatrist - this is a very wrong direction. The psychiatrist sees problem in a completely different way than a psychologist. A psychiatrist looks from at the problem from a medical perspective. From the perspective of support and available solutions, the psychologist sees the context and helps find a way out of the problem. Solving a problem with a psychiatrist may start with one dose of medication today, a second dose in a year, then a third dose, until the person becomes dependent on them. Medication by itself may not get to the root of the problem. If I take medication to suppress the symptom, it will not go away. I have to ask myself: why? And understand the causes so that you can solve the problem.

K: If I have a problem but I don't want to admit it, the problem grows and it becomes more and more difficult for me to keep it in a secret - a vicious cycle is created. Do you think that such situations of avoiding confrontation with problems can lead to burnout? What does burnout mean to you?

M: I think that knowledge about burnout is not very widespread in Italy. Of course, the problem is present because during various activities we get "things" that stay in our minds. If we cannot maintain the appropriate level of commitment and energy, we will be like a dead battery. The most important thing is to recognize early symptoms and be able to recharge your batteries. The possibility of cooperation and using the knowledge of other nationalities, as it for example, takes place in the project of the Beyond Borders Foundation, is a very good solution. Of course, I recognize that the context may be different in other countries, but the problem of burnout is present and the same everywhere. We can really learn what is happening to a person, how others react and what ideas and solutions they have. As well as getting to know good practices, and adapting them to the needs of your own society and group is essential. The most important thing is that burnout is not just a problem in the

mind. This is a complex topic with many aspects, including those related to security. If my mind is not efficient enough, not at 100%, I might take a much higher risk during dangerous situations. I need my mind to be 100%, maybe even 120%. From this perspective, learning more about burnout is very important to keep yourself safe.

K: Many students at the firefighting school tell me that they are afraid of the first difficult action. They are afraid of how they will react and if they will manage. What could you tell them? How can they cope?

M: That's a very good question. If I find the answer, I will probably win the Nobel Prize. I think we have to begin with the relationship between teacher and student. We should break the wall that divides them and reach an agreement. As a teacher, I transfer knowledge and information not because I am paid for it or because I have to examine you about it. I give you this knowledge because it is important for your safety.

K: This is the message between the lines "I'm doing it because I care about you"

M: Communication is very important. As I said, as a teacher I prepare my students. But for me to do this effectively, I need to have a very good understanding with them. I cannot treat students as a people at large, but I must try to reach them individually as well. Student by student. If I can get into the student's mind and influence his reactions, he will see that I am not uncaring to him. He will also become interested in a teacher. If a student asks questions, then I will prepare and answer them. I don't always have to have an immediate answer ready. No… Sometimes when I talk to students I say, "That's a very good question… give me one day. I will look for an answer and try to give it to you. In this way, we break down this wall and the belief that it is so easy to "put something into a student's head" and "influence him".

K: It sounds like it's a process. The process of teaching, building relationships, trust...

M: It is crucial to have a good approach during training. If I don't have a good attitude, I'll just be wasting my time. Week by week. However, if we manage to establish good contact with students, teaching them will be much more effective. Good contact between teacher and student is the highway to optimizing the school. Sometimes the teacher himself is not prepared for this. Recently, we have been talking a lot about preparing students, but it is very important to also develop and train competent instructors. Remember that even a very good firefighter does not always mean a very good instructor.

K: Yes, sometimes it is very difficult to combine these two functions in one person.

M: We should teach instructors how to conduct training effectively. The second important thing is to immediately start developing very good communication skills.

K: You are an academic teacher and you have contact with young people. Some say that the new generation needs more psychological support than previous generations. Do you think so too? Could this mean that the new generation is mentally weaker?

M: First of all - it's definitely not weaker. The whole society is changing. Now a new firefighter starts the service with very precise questions about the job and expectations. In the past, people were more likely to become firefighters because they had family traditions related to this profession and felt a calling to this service. It's a little different now. Society and social relations are changing a lot. We used to talk to each other a lot more. Now we have various devices, which of course are very good and useful. They should not be demonized, but unfortunately they also make people talk to each other less directly. If we now look from the outside, we can easily find two friends who are using their phones instead of talking to each other. This is very contrary to the rule of developing team communication. Practically, this means that people simply have less social support and may therefore be weaker in the face of various problems. If I don't talk to others, I won't be able to share what

I think and feel, and then everything stays in my head. Therefore, we need specialists - psychologists, who are members of the team, so that you can have normal everyday contact with them and build a relationship. Not only when a problem arises, but whenever you just want to be with someone, play football, drink coffee. If we have such friendly relationships, it is easier to start talking about difficult issues. Psychologists help because they open your mind and show a different perspective. This is very important because the problem of social isolation will only get worse in the future. Fortunately, Italians are quite good at establishing relationships, but the problem will certainly grow – us included. We are very happy to see how things are done in other countries and benefit from ideas that we can adapt to our needs. Some commanders are very open, but there are also those who are difficult to convince. Perhaps the second ones are "stuck" in the stereotype that firefighters have no problems. And the truth is that firefighters have many different problems and sometimes really serious ones. When several of them come together at the same time, it can cause burnout. When I started my service, I spent 3 years outside of Florence. It was a time when I got up at 3 or 4 in the morning, got on the train, and when I got home I could only go to sleep. Then the next day, do the same and the same again. There was basically only one thought in my mind - that I was very, very tired and physically exhausted. And physical fatigue led to worse mental functioning. My batteries were "draining" very quickly.

Photo 4. A bench commemorating Enrico Testi in the Rescue and Firefighting Unit in Florence, via Giuseppe la Farina

K: There is a special bench in the unit in Florence that I wanted to ask about. Is this a special place?

M: Yes, this bench even has a plaque commemorating Enriko Testi. We have a few benches next to the place where we park our cars, but this one is special - because it was Testi's bench. We joke that it's because his butt is imprinted there. But seriously - Testi brought an extremely important thing to the fire service - very good communication. In those times, the number of interventions was not as high as it is now. There were also more rescuers on duty. There was time to sit together and discuss issues, problems, concerns. When I returned to Florence in 1989, after three years in northern Italy, there were four teams of firefighters in the largest unit. In other units, there were two teams. The number of interventions per year in Florence was approximately 600-700 per year. Now there are less teams and the number of interventions is almost 14,000 per year. So firefighters start their duty in the morning and they are constantly driving somewhere and... the bench is often

empty. I believe that the problem is the lack of psychological support. This bench is our own psychological support - of course not "professional". You can probably also humorously say that it is a bit "rough", but the most important thing is that we talk to each other. When a new firefighter was arrived, we were calling him "to the bench" and had a chat. Now, when a new firefighter arrives, the bells immediately ring and he is gone because he had to go to the incident. Of course, we try to maintain the habit of talking. When there are not so many trips, sometimes at night, we sit down and share our thoughts and sometimes we create new ideas.

K: It seems that good communication and common conversation is like a cure for many problems.

M: It is the base for changing something. It is not the final solution, but it is necessary to find this solution. I wouldn't call it a cure. Communication is more like water - necessary to take medicine. Conversation is the path we should follow, because if I have good contact with colleagues and specialists, I can talk openly about problems, without barriers, fears, or resistance. A team of specialists coming from the headquarters to provide support is a solution that has many limitations. Questions arise: Is there something wrong with us that they come just to us? Will we be judged? Am I suitable for the job? I remember that when I went for periodic tests, the most important question was if I was still suitable. And it was very stressful because firefighters are afraid of being transferred to the office. Therefore, I believe that support from psychological specialists should be provided by people from inside of our structure.

K: Do you have psychological tests to check your fitness for service?

M: Yes. Always at the beginning - before entering the fire service and, and then every two years, together with medical examinations. They used to be every year, but due to high costs this has changed. We do not have such specialists in our structures, so these tests must be held by external institutions and this, of course, costs money. I remember when I was in

Albania as a firefighter during the Kosovo war. We stayed right next to the border in a very large camp for over 5,000 people from Kosovo.

K: Refugees?

M: Yes. We were there to ensure "safety" as firefighters because 5,000 people were in tents and it could have ended very badly. There were only seven of us and we also supported a hospital run by the Italian Military Red Cross. It was an area where there was a high risk of cancer due to the toxic remains of bomb explosions. After this experience, the Ministry of Internal Affairs decided to send us for extra periodic examinations. Fortunately, none of us had it, but thanks to these tests we managed to diagnose other health problems early in one of our colleagues. Thanks to early detection and treatment, everything ended well. Therefore, I believe that firefighters should be regularly examined. Other tests should also be mandatory, such as physical fitness tests. Of course, we all swim, run and go to the gym, but that it is not obligatory as for example, it is in France, as I know.

K: In Poland, firefighters also have to pass mandatory physical fitness tests every year. But maybe if there are no obligation to pass annual physical fitness exams, would people will be more willing to take care of their physical fitness? Perhaps they would have an internal motivation?

M: I take care of my physical condition because it is my job. It's important that I can help others, but above all, it's very important that I take care of myself. E.g. to be able to run away quickly when necessary. I'd better be able to run fast than to roll.

K: You have great professional experience. You talked about, among other things, activities in Kosovo and I know that these were not the only international activities in which you participated. Can you tell us a little more about them?

M: I have several experiences from international operations to which I was sent as a firefighter. I was in Albania during the Kosovo war. When the Morini

border was opened to a small town Kukes where huge numbers of people arrived in desperate conditions. They only used wooden carts as a means of transport. As I have already mentioned, we co-organized a camp there with about 5,200 refugees. In the camp, we were also taking part in assistance in the take-off and landing of helicopters doing MEDEVAC – the means of the transport of the wounded from the battlefield. There were only seven of us there, but we managed to ensure fire safety and we also tried to establish cooperation with the fire brigade that operated in the area. My additional task was to participate in all UN and NATO meetings. I was a intermediary in communications between the government in Tirana and our headquarters in Rome. I was also replacing a friend who was taking care of helicopters when he needed a break. Fifteen very intense days. I have two more interesting details from that time. When we saw the refugees' carts, they were all beat up. So we made a model and calculations including, for example, what the diameter of the wheels should be, etc. All this was done in order to repair as many of them as possible so that in the case of a forced evacuation, we could use them. The second interesting fact is that we were the only ones allowed to go from the camp to the drinking water point, which was located on the border, because we were unarmed. The road to the border was very dangerous due to numerous mines. Other international experiences include participation in CBRN exercises in Tunisia as a representative of the Italian Fire Department. Then, for two years, I was a communications and video management consultant at OPCW with the United Nations Agency for Destruction and Unconventional Chemical Weapons. Later, I led people trained by OPCW during exercises in Thailand. In fact, I also had other tasks, but due to the state secrecy restriction I cannot talk about them.

K: In one of our conversations, you said - "I thought I had seen everything and then the incident with the Costa Concordia ship happened." Can you tell us more about this operation?

M: That's true. It was 7 years before I retired, and I really felt like I had experienced everything as a firefighter. I had experience with typical urban actions, earthquakes, floods, what else can happen to me? And then this... a 400-meter ship was lying on its side. As the coordinator of rescue services cooperation, I sent two colleagues to the place of the operation. Two days later I replaced them with two others. The situation was very difficult. There were 3,000 passengers requiring evacuation and assistance at night, and the ship was very "unsafe". In addition, searching for people lost on board, having had to walk on walls because the ship was lopsided heavily. And there was a risk that the ship would suddenly start sinking. Thanks to great coordination and cooperation together with the university, we quickly created a laser-radar detection system that was able to warn us in advance that the ship's position was changing. In parallel with the managing of the rescue operation, we tried to cooperate with the media, which were not allowed to be close to the crash site for safety reasons. We actually created our own television network. We recorded videos and "edited" them, created and shared press releases and interviews by working with broadcasters from all over the world such as; England, France, Germany, Spain and Arab Countries. Talking bac about rescue operation, many people were saved. It was a very touching experience. From water and in the darkness, came up the terrified faces of people for whom what was supposed to be a great and ceremonial celebration turned into the worst nightmare of their lives.

K: Thanks to you, the area of documenting rescue operations has developed significantly. A lot of the actions Re being recorded from different perspectives, which is extremely valuable material.

M: At the beginning I had to break down a lot of walls. My colleagues were very reluctant. They said "no movies, later it could be used against me." But after some time and many, many conversations, we managed to slowly change our approach. Of course, such recordings have many uses. They are very valuable for students and during training, because they can see the actual

action and not just its sketch or description. And also to conduct investigations. In Italy, firefighters are also obliged to verify the cause of the fire and prepare material for the court. At the end of my service I was responsible for the cooperation of emergency services in all of Tuscany.

K: We covered a lot of information, centering around topics related to psychology, psychological support and professional burnout of firefighters. To sum up, we can definitely say that this is a very difficult and demanding profession. Good preparation for doing it, requires a lot of effort. Especially, cooperation and good communication between firefighters should be developed.

M: Yes. In my opinion, it is very important to emphasize that psychological issues cannot be isolated from firefighting issues. This is one aspect. Just like at school, you can't separate history and geography because they are interlaced. All the fields are interconnected and you need to notice this to understand them well. It's similar with psychology and firefighting. Someone might say that firefighter training is a technical matter. It's also a psychological issue. These are so closely related that separating these issues is a very big mistake. It is equally important to emphasize that an expert in psychology should be a member of the team. It should be available every day. Because if a firefighter decides to ask for help today, he should not receive information that someone will talk to him in a week. The psychologist should be available and should be a friend. However, both issues are interconnected and critical for the success of the mission as well as the physical and mental well-being of all firefighters.

K: When I started working as a psychologist, I often encountered distrust from firefighters. They also often told me "you're not a firefighter - what do you know about this work?" Now, it is different. I think that distrust was replaced by a relationship based on mutual trust and cooperation. But I often come back to this sentence and wonder how with all the difficult things they have

experienced that very often they cannot express them in words. What are the most difficult incidents that firefighters can deal with at the place of action?

M: Hmm... the hardest things... For me, the hardest was 1993, when a car bomb planted by the mafia exploded in Florence. 5 people died and an art gallery was destroyed. When we got there, at first we didn't realize that there was also a private apartment there. In this apartment we found a young couple and their two daughters. The younger one had the same name as my daughter and was of a similar age. I try to remove the bad part of this experience from my mind, but it is not completely possible, because it has become a part of me. You can't delete images from your memory like from a flash drive. Fortunately for me, I also see other aspects of the experience. Not only the bad and most difficult ones.

K: This is, among other things, our work as psychological specialists. We try to teach people that difficult experiences that became part of us, cannot be deleted, so we must learn to live with them so that they do not cover the rest of the world. I'm glad you're talking about it, because it's very valuable that firefighters can hear it from someone who is also a firefighter and has experienced it in person.

M: In such cases, the psychological preparation of firefighters is very important. Fortunately for me, I studied psychology a lot and knew how to ask for help. I know the story of a man who took part in the operation after the bomb explosion and avoided this place for five years.

K: Sounds like a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

M: Yes, if you are not educated and prepared, it may be difficult to notice what is happening to you. You may think, "It's no big deal, I'll go there tomorrow." And the next day it doesn't get any easier and you put it off forever. It turns out that with time it doesn't get easier and lighter as you expected.

K: Yes, we should definitely teach firefighters how to recognize the symptoms and signs, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and what to do next. This

seems to be an essential element of psychological preparation. Looking at you I forgot that you are retired. You still work a lot, and are professionally involved.

M: Yes, you only get old when you stop using your mind.

K: Finally, I would like to ask you about what you could tell young firefighters who are starting to work in this profession. What advice would you give them?

M: Being a firefighter is the best job in the world. But please don't become a firefighter... unless you're sure that's what you want. Because this is not an ordinary job. Of course, like in every other job, we have defined working hours, we get paid for our work. But to be a firefighter, you have to be convinced of it, because it will influence your life and because you won't be able to just stop being a firefighter. Are you sure you want to become a firefighter? Excellent. Welcome to the best job on earth.

PAOLO BERNARDINI

Graduated with a degree in Psychology from the University of Florence. Author of numerous publications on psychological support in rescue services and the fire brigade.

Photo 5. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

"Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand."

– Confucius

***In memory of Enzo Gonelli**, who passed away in 2020 – my first commander, friend, and a person who supported and motivated me to take on new challenges and overcome difficulties. We spent 20 years of service together, participating in various operations. He was the one who accepted me into the fire service and later encouraged me to pursue studies in psychology. He was my commander and mentor. I am grateful to have known him. See you soon, my friend.*

Kasia: Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. I am convinced that the material and your experiences described within it will be valuable guidance for young firefighters starting their careers in this challenging profession. Could you start by telling us a few words about yourself? What do you do in the fire service?

Paolo: First of all, thank you very much for inviting me to this conversation. I feel honored, and I am very glad that you are giving such importance to this endeavor. Thank you for everything you do. Aside from being important for young firefighters, as you mentioned, it is also very important for me. I am happy that I can share something from my perspective. As you requested, I will start by introducing myself. My name is Paolo Bernardini, and I started my firefighting career a long time ago – in 1979. Initially, it was kind of an internship, a practice that I completed in the fire department. In 1985, I officially joined the ranks of the professional fire service, and until 2020, I served as an officer. I am very proud that until the age of sixty-one, until my last day of service, I was an active officer, responding to emergencies both as a rescuer and as a driver of a heavy fire truck

Photo 6. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: I know that you are also a psychologist.

P: Throughout my professional career, I was always primarily a firefighter and only later a psychologist. My career path took this direction because I felt the need for psychological support and simultaneously noticed a gap in this area within the service. This realization pushed me to deepen my knowledge and engage in psychology professionally. I had always been interested in it and read a lot on the subject, but becoming a psychologist is something I owe to Enzo Gonelli. Enzo was a close friend of mine who, unfortunately, passed away

during the COVID pandemic. He was also my boss and shift commander. He motivated me and emphasized that I should develop myself, study psychology, and support my colleagues in this way. I would very much like to dedicate this interview and the material that will come out of it to him. Balancing these two professions was not easy for me because, by choice, I often worked night shifts to go to the University and study after my shift. I completed my bachelor's degree, then a master's degree, and for a year, I did an internship in a hospital while simultaneously being a firefighter. I managed to pass the exam and get listed as a licensed psychologist, but it required a great deal of commitment, time, and hard work.

Photo 7. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: It’s quite rare to combine two significant professions simultaneously. Rare and extremely valuable because you have insight into both perspectives: firefighting and psychology. You experience many difficult situations related to the job and at the same time can use psychological knowledge to understand your reactions and those of others.

P: Yes, that has always fascinated me. Pursuing studies at the University somewhat slowed down my career because I remained in the same position for 20 years. I did have opportunities for promotion, but then I wouldn't be able to study. It was a very conscious choice because I was primarily interested in psychology for the everyday firefighter, the officer who goes to the incidents.

K: Have you noticed that as a psychologist, you start to perceive and understand certain things differently? Sometimes intuition suggests one thing, while psychological knowledge suggests something entirely different?

P: My studies helped me a lot. Intuition is one thing, but psychology gave me the knowledge and skills to professionally assess situations and respond appropriately. Above all, I gained tools for professionally assessing situations and the state of another person. Combining psychology and rescue work gave me a much better insight into situations and the dangers that might be lurking for individual firefighters and the entire team. Psychological preparation allowed me to respond professionally and appropriately. I knew whether to intervene immediately or if it could wait. And after which operations such a meeting must take place as a matter of course. Psychology primarily helps you to be flexible and better assess situations from a higher level.

K: As a psychologist, I encountered a situation where a firefighter's colleagues and superiors said that psychological help wasn't needed yet, that it could wait, and maybe things would improve on their own. When I met with this person, I realized that immediate intervention was necessary, and psychological support was needed right away.

P: Yes, as psychologists, we have professional assessment tools, not just for individual firefighters but sometimes for the entire team.

Photo 8. Autor Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: I'd like to return to your story for a moment. The profession of firefighting is often passed down from generation to generation, associated with a tradition that we cultivate and are proud of. Was that the case for you?

P: There were even studies in Italy showing how widespread this phenomenon is. It's quite common. Personally, I didn't have firefighting traditions in my family, but I really wanted to pass it on to my sons. I once took my older son to one of the firefighting training sessions. I intuitively felt that he might like it. I wanted to instill a passion for the fire service into him, and I succeeded.

He was so fascinated that he took the tests and managed to get into the service on his first attempt. I also have a second son. In his case, I realized that psychology doesn't always allow us to predict everything. As a father, I thought I could instill the same passion for rescue work with him. I took the same approach and showed him the same path, but he said to me, "No, Babo, non sei per me." "No, Dad, this isn't for me." Let me just clarify that Tuscany is the only region where Italians call their dads "babo." My son also said that the firefighter's job would cost him too much emotionally, he saw this already during the course.

Photo 9. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: I must point out the incredibly mature and responsible attitude of a young person.

P: Yes. As a father, I'm very proud of both my sons. I'm proud of the first one for deciding to become a firefighter and the second one for having the courage and maturity to openly admit, "this isn't for me." After his decision, I see that he can skillfully assess his emotional state and psyche.

K: In Italy, a firefighter is a highly respected profession, isn't it?

P: The perception is really very positive. Here, if you're a firefighter, you're seen as a trustworthy, decent person.

K: Is there a stereotype of a firefighter in Italy? An idealized and unrealistic image? In Poland, this stereotype is very strong.

P: First of all, stereotypes are sociological constructs created by society. They can be both positive and negative. Of course, there's a stereotype here that a firefighter is brave and never afraid, but I absolutely disagree with that stereotype. A firefighter feels fear, and that's how it should be. They should feel all emotions because, without them, they aren't fully aware of the situation they're in. Stress is necessary for evaluating what's happening.

Photo 10. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: This is the second time I've heard from an experienced firefighter that stress is very necessary, whereas the young students I meet in classes often want to eliminate it completely.

P: I've noticed that this stereotype is already being built among children. When schools visit the fire station, they show beautiful, uniformed men, beautiful trucks, and tell stories of great rescues. That's when the stereotype of the perfect firefighter is born. Of course, we're pleased that we're well regarded, but we try to explain to the children even then how things really are, so as not to reinforce that stereotype. We talk about responsibility, the challenges of the job, and that everyone can be afraid; no one is perfect. There's also another stereotype – the macho firefighter – perfect, strong, masculine. I'm referring to men, though it should be noted that there are more and more women in the fire service. According to my knowledge, about 100 women serve in various

fire stations across Italy. In Pisa alone, we have six. It's still a small percentage, considering we have about 30,000 firefighters in total. I'm very interested in what motivates women to choose this profession. In various conversations and interviews, they mention facing discrimination from these macho men, who said, "a woman's role is to prepare the sauce at home, not to go on a rescue mission." This macho myth needs to be debunked because if they got into the service, passed the fitness and psychological tests, they must have been better than many men. Today, we have such diverse tasks and technical solutions in firefighting that women certainly find their place in the ranks of the fire service. It's not true that only a big and strong man can become a firefighter

K: When a young person starts working, they should have an opportunity to talk openly about what is difficult for them – that should be natural. I think a stereotype might make it harder for them to speak honestly about their problems. Do you agree?

P: There's a lot of talk now about breaking these stereotypes. Young people entering the service are very aware that the stereotype is false, and a firefighter can experience emotions they weren't prepared for. They also know they can talk about it openly and share their observations.

K: So, to sum up – a person who asks for help and talks about difficulties is not a weak person.

P: I must say firmly that the times when I started my career and the current times are radically different. Early in my career, if someone had doubts, fears, or felt different emotions, almost all the older firefighters would say, "Look at this softy; there's no place for you here." We were discriminated against as young boys. But now, I see my son, I see young firefighters when I conduct training – it's a completely different psychological level, a different maturity. They are aware that a psychologist and professional support are normal things. A radically different approach over the past twenty-some years. I conduct a lot of consultations and talks with firefighters. Young men often come and

openly share their experiences, saying, "Listen, I went through something like this, is it normal?" Of course, it's not perfect, and there's still work to be done, but the perspective on one's psychological state is entirely different today. Also, remember that our firefighter training structure is entirely different from Poland's, and psychoeducation was practically non-existent for a long time.

K: We can say that you're a pioneer of this change, can't we? You introduced psychoeducation into firefighter training.

P: Yes. Initially, the nine-month firefighter course didn't include any psychology lessons. I intervened in this matter at the headquarters, wrote a program, and conducted psychology lectures for firefighters. I had to justify why it was so important to include at least a few hours of psychoeducation as part of standard training. I also made it the point of honor that every member of USAR should have psychological training, and I've been working on this since 2009.

I also created something we called "sportello da scorto" – a listening room. A place that still exists today, where firefighters can talk and receive support. My colleagues know that there are shifts here, and they can call, send a message, or arrange a meeting with a psychologist colleague. I'm spreading this solution, and young firefighters are aware that no matter what region they work in, someone is ready to listen to them and take them very seriously.

K: That's a great initiative. Ideally, such places should be in every region as part of the entire psychological support system.

P: Sometimes it's hard to push through our needs because often the managerial positions at the headquarters are held by people who aren't firefighters. These are mainly engineers who don't fully understand our problems – the frontline firefighters. We even named this the "syndrome of a firefighter being misunderstood by an engineer." Of course, I greatly respect the management for their knowledge and academic titles, but I must admit they lack the ability to see things from the perspective of an ordinary

firefighter. Erik de Soir– a firefighter and psychologist – dedicated his work to this very topic: the lack of understanding between firefighters and engineers. Even though these two groups are essentially one body as a fire service structure, they are unable to understand each other and are not compatible. But we also have some successes because this year, we have four psychology specialists at our headquarters in Rome.

K: I agree with you that good communication with superiors is the foundation for functioning well at work. I would like to ask you about firefighters. What do you think about the statement that a firefighter is someone with a high need for adrenaline?

P: The need for adrenaline should be distributed according to the Gaussian curve. We shouldn't have too much or too little. Certainly, a firefighter is someone who has a greater need for strong sensations, but they must realize that the right level of adrenaline ensures clear judgment of the situation and making the right decisions. Of course, adrenaline excites us, but we cannot be dependent on it. Going on a call and only feeling adrenaline is pathological. I'm speaking from my own experience. As a driver, knowing what kind of incident I was heading to, I felt very high arousal, but it was the kind of adrenaline that allowed me to see the road clearly so as not to cause an accident. And, of course, it would stay with me for some time after returning.

Photo 11. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: Do you think it's possible to control adrenaline? Adrenaline is like an inner command to run, act, do something now, immediately!

P: A firefighter must know how to manage adrenaline. Of course, each of us has different personality traits and ways of acting, so everyone should learn to control it from their own perspective. The path to managing adrenaline lies in being aware of how we function under pressure and stress. The greater self-awareness, the better self-control.

K: And better self-control means greater safety.

P: Yes, if we're responding to an incident, and we feel fear, uncertainty, and on top of that, there's a high level of adrenaline that we can't control, the effectiveness of the firefighter's actions may decrease. But a bit of excitement is absolutely necessary.

Photo 12. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: This can be described as openness to experience. A firefighter should be someone who experiences new things, faces difficult challenges, but manages the surge of adrenaline and doesn't act rashly or take unnecessary risks.

P: That's why we should set high standards for commanders, including in psychological competencies. A commander should be able to assess not only the actions of firefighters during an operation but also their cooperation. It's not enough to be good only in technical aspects. The commander must harmonize with the whole team and be able to see more than an ordinary

firefighter. For example, they should recognize when someone has too much adrenaline, even if they're working very well, because they may be exceeding their limits, accumulating an energy debt, and will need to decompress.

K: The nature of threats in Italy is quite different from those in Poland. Could you talk about the challenges firefighters face? One of these challenges is certainly earthquakes, which don't occur here.

P: Seismic zones in Italy correspond to the density of rescue units being established. Areas more prone to earthquakes have a concentration of units and institutions related to civil defense. The biggest earthquake was in 1908 in Messina and the surrounding areas, and another very large one occurred in 1976 in the Friuli region, where about 3,000 firefighters were involved in rescue operations.

In 1992, a national civil defense system was established across the country to organize and coordinate aid to populations affected by earthquakes or other natural disasters. In Italy, we talk about protection and defense. Protection is associated with more passive, preventive actions, while defense is more active, related to combating an already occurring threat. The backbone of defense is the fire department.

K: Could you talk about the psychological difficulties that firefighters face when responding to earthquake-related operations?

P: From my experience, almost every firefighter who responds to an earthquake needs to talk, to receive support, to release the emotions associated with it. They usually start by describing how catastrophic the event was. Then the conversation moves to what they saw: severely injured people, fatalities, elderly individuals. Of course, the most dramatic cases involve children, when they're rescuing or recovering dead or injured victims. From my own and my colleagues' experiences, I want to say that when we deal with a fatality, the adrenaline we experience during the operation helps soften the shock associated with the fatality, but it doesn't alleviate the emotional

difficulties stemming from the reactions of the victims' relatives. It's relatively easy to move past the sight of a fatality, but being on the scene with the victim's family is an enormous challenge. I talk a lot with my son about the operations he's involved in. Sometimes, I assess what he tells me from a psychological perspective. He's been working for two years now, and one of the more difficult incidents he experienced was a car accident involving an elderly couple. The woman died on the spot, and her husband survived, but they had to extricate him from the vehicle. For my son, a very intense experience was witnessing how the man said goodbye to his wife, how he kissed her. He said it was very sad and difficult. All they could do was respect that moment and give him time for the farewell.

K: It must have been hard to accompany another person, to watch them suffer so much and not be able to do anything...

P: Yes, it's not that simple. Neither seeing a fatality nor witnessing someone lose a loved one. Personal feelings come into play for each of us.

K: Fortunately, large-scale disasters don't happen often. Do firefighters encounter similar psychological challenges during more routine operations?

P: As firefighters, we categorize incidents as ordinary and extraordinary. Sometimes, an operation that initially seems very simple can turn out to be quite complex, depending on the level of difficulty, duration, and other factors. I once participated in a very straightforward operation to extinguish a grass fire. A routine task, nothing special. However, it turned out that within those tall grasses, we found a car with a mother and her two children inside. When we opened the car, we found that all three had died. I personally experienced a visual shock and a sudden rush of adrenaline because we absolutely did not expect that. And, of course, a million thoughts came up: if only we had responded faster, if only we had found them sooner, could we have saved them? You know, there are no answers to these questions because perhaps the deaths occurred earlier and nothing could have been done, but it's hard to stop your mind from being bombarded by a thousand hypothetical questions.

For me personally, it was the most traumatic event. It was a mother, a 10-year-old child, and a 3-year-old child. It was one of those cases where I couldn't bear to look at them. I did everything that was required of me, but I tried to avoid looking at them as much as possible.

K: This is one of those situations where we experience very strong stress. How does it affect a firefighter?

P: Stress is primarily a psychophysical factor. As a psychologist, I'm very aware of this and can talk about stress in a thousand ways. It can be analyzed from the perspectives of various fields: neuropsychology, psychoimmunology, endocrinology. But I always consider stress very subjectively because it cannot be generalized. Of course, there are general principles of how stress works, but much depends on individual factors: experience, psychological makeup, character, the intensity of the event. I always assess stress very individually in relation to the specific person and situation.

K: What are the costs of neglecting your mental health? What happens when we don't pay attention to stress, expose ourselves to it, do nothing about it, and neglect our mental well-being?

P: The costs are borne by both the individual rescuers and the entire organization. To better manage stress, it needs to be trained like any other skill. Initially, the most important thing for firefighters is to train them all in this area and show them that stress is normal. Everyone experiences it. Stress has been, is, and will be – an integral part of our lives. It's also important to make them aware that if a rescuer neglects certain preventive actions, various consequences can occur that will cost them emotionally, such as burnout. Here, I'd like to pause and highlight the distinction between traumatic stress, burnout, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). Massimo Pikozzi, who was a psychologist and criminologist, pointed out that burnout is related to the specific work we do, how often we do it and for how long, and its intensity, all of which are occupational factors.

Of course, it doesn't only affect firefighters. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) relates to a person who was exposed to a traumatic event as a stressor. However, in my opinion, firefight ers are also often exposed to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. These phenomena don't exclude each other, and a person can be affected by all three conditions independently. That's why I strongly emphasize the importance of education and prevention in this area.

Photo 13. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: Is it possible to rest more effectively and better manage stress to minimize the risk of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Chronic Fatique Syndrome or burnout?

P: I return to the old Socrates' saying, which I repeat often and mentioned at the meeting in Krakow: "To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom". Psychology knows many techniques for better coping with stress. One of them is SIT – Stress Inoculation Therapy, used in cognitive-behavioral approaches. It works a bit like a vaccine. It's based on the premise that if we proactively

prepare for difficult, stressful challenges, it may be easier to confront them when they arise. This preparation includes training and exercises designed to simulate harsh conditions, so the rescuer can experience how their body and mind react. If, after such preparation, a firefighter goes to a similar operation, they will roughly know how they might react. This is very similar to how phobias are treated. If someone is afraid of flying, by practicing "step by step" and analyzing the patient's reactions in increasingly challenging situations, we eventually bring them to a point where they can manage that fear.

Photo 14. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: People often expect that when they go to a psychologist, they'll make things better, easier, and more pleasant. But what you're telling me is that the

psychologist's job is often to put a person in a difficult, demanding, and frustrating situation.

P: Exactly. "Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand." This means active participation.

K: What you're saying highlights a clear difference between popular psychology and true science. Between lay intuition and a trained specialist. There's a common misconception that a psychological approach is gentle and soft, but in reality, it's the opposite. To achieve a result, you have to re-immerse yourself in the experience – including all hardships and difficulties.

Could you tell us what firefighters do to relieve tension and stress after an operation?

P: The first stage should be peer support based on honest conversations between firefighters. If firefighters notice any difficulties in themselves or their colleagues, they should talk to a psychological specialist. After a very severe earthquake in 2009, a unit was established within occupational medicine to provide psychological support to rescuers. I worked there from 2013 till 2015. It was very intense work. We conducted numerous analyses and reports on the needs of firefighters and the necessary solutions that should be implemented. Unfortunately, in my opinion, they weren't all realized as we expected. Then in 2019, after the earthquake in Albania, I was involved in organizing psychological support for firefighters. Currently, the fire service has an agreement with the Red Cross, and we use external specialists. In my opinion, this isn't the best solution because a psychologist helping in the fire service should know the structure well and be a part of it. After the earthquake in Turkey, USAR team firefighters were required to attend meetings organized within the current system, but despite this, they still report a need for contact. A psychologist with firefighting experience finds it much easier to connect with and understand a firefighter who is seeking help. Don't get me wrong. Red Cross psychologists are undoubtedly very good specialists, but I believe that

apart from them, there should also be psychologists working permanently in the fire service.

K: Do you conduct something like a debriefing after difficult operations?

P: Yes, both individually and in groups, especially as a part of the "listening room" activities. I must also emphasize that firefighters come not only with professional problems but also ask for consultations on personal or family matters. Firefighters who have seen me often recommend such meetings to others. Of course, they don't receive ready-made solutions to their problems from me, but they do get suggestions to think about, sometimes a different perspective on the problem.

Photo 15. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

Photo 16. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: In my opinion, this is a very important connection. You can't be an efficient, effective firefighter and cope well with professional stress if you're struggling with problems in other areas of life – personal or professional. Balance must be maintained.

P: That's why it's important to be sensitive to your colleagues within pairs (in firefighter nomenclature, the two people assigned to each other are called „buddies") or the teams we work in. If I notice that someone has a problem, I should try to help him/her. In the context of such peer relationships, it's easier to notice that something is wrong because we know each other well. If someone is always cheerful and suddenly starts behaving differently, the first person to notice that change will be the closest colleague. Friendly observation and caring for each other is the most important thing. We should also train firefighters to recognize early symptoms of decline in functioning or undesirable reactions, such as PTSD or burnout.

K: Do you see that firefighters used to cope differently than they do now?

P: Yes. The difference is enormous. I can say this from my own experience when I was a firefighter and from current observations of young rescuers, including my own son. One of the differences is how firefighters fulfilled their need for social support. There used to be meetings, sometimes in the dining room, sometimes as briefings after an operation. Almost always after returning to the station, they wouldn't go to sleep but would talk for a long time. Now, the younger generation isolates themselves more, talks less, and spends more time on their phones instead of with another person. I don't want to judge which is better. I'm just noting a clear difference. The the environment used to be much more closed off. Everything was handled within the group, which may have resulted from the previously mentioned stereotype of the strong macho man.

K: You also have extensive experience as a rescuer. Could you share a story of a difficult operation you had to deal with and what helped you the most?

P: I remember many such operations because I worked as a firefighter rescuer for many years. I worked in the same team for almost 20 years, so we were very close-knit. One of the operations that stands out in my memory was the explosion of fireworks. As a result of this incident, four people died, and their bodies were dismembered. The gruesome sight of blood or body parts didn't affect me as much as the image of a young boy, or rather his face. He looked like he was sleeping. The body wasn't intact. I experienced what we call in stress theory "Freeze." Our psyche in a highly stressful situation chooses one of three reactions – it's called 3 x F: Fight, Flight, or Freeze. When I saw that boy's face, peaceful with closed eyes, I couldn't move. Then my commander, who realized what happened, approached me. He gently said, "Paulo, this is also part of our job…" That woke me up, and I knew I had to keep going. The loss of life by such a young person in the blink of an eye left a mark on me. It wasn't a visually traumatic sight for me but psychologically. The hardest part may not be the sight, but what you think at that moment. Another time we were responding to a car accident. At the scene, I saw a wrecked vehicle

identical to my son's car. Just imagining that it could be my son emotionally destabilized me. That fear that in a few seconds, I might see my son…

K: Did you continue to work on that operation, or was it no longer possible?

P: In the first moment, I made sure it wasn't my son. I also reported it to the commander. This was in accordance with procedures.

K: What do you do to stop thinking about work incidents when you're at home? To maintain a boundary between work and home. Could you advise other firefighters on this matter?

P: You have to learn to separate professional life from personal life. You have to be aware that when we return home to a family that supports us, we need to protect them. Some stories might be too traumatic for our loved ones, or we might make them worry about us too much. When we talk about difficult operations, our loved ones might not know how to respond. This can have doubly negative consequences. We'll feel misunderstood, and they'll feel helpless. If we decide not to talk about work at all, that's also not a good solution. A person who is closed off suffers from his/her emotions, and loved ones feel an increasing distance. We really have to individually assess how much we can share with our loved ones about what has happened to us.

K: Maybe it's good to have someone like Paolo, a psychologist specialist, in the room next door at work, where I can talk about a difficult incident. That way, when I return home, I won't need to revisit it. It's like we're performing emotional decontamination.

How do you view the actions of the Foundation, which openly addresses the issue of psychological support and prevention for firefighters?

P: I view it very positively. And not out of politeness. Just the fact that you've come has sparked a lot of interest and naturally created another opportunity to talk about promoting mental health. Many people have already asked me

with curiosity what we're working on. Thanks to such initiatives, we truly reach a very wide audience. Your presence itself is a form of spreading this topic.

K: Are burnout and psychological help still taboo topics?

P: No. Definitely not anymore. Maybe in the past, when people confused a psychologist with a doctor, it was. Now we know well that a psychologist helps us cope better. I still emphasize during training the difference between a psychologist, a psychotherapist, and a psychiatrist. These are not synonymous professions. A psychologist is there to support us, not to treat illnesses.

K: Do you have any advice or ideas on how the Foundation could help and support rescuers even better?

P: International exchange of experiences, joint training, and conferences are extremely valuable. Even in the first meetings, I noticed quite a few differences between us as firefighting psychologists from Italy and Poland, for example, in terms of debriefing. The ability to discuss these differences, observe how specialists in other countries work, and how they understand certain issues is important. Understanding why certain approaches, techniques, or methods are used in one country and are controversial in another. The definition of debriefing was first formulated in 1983 by a psychologist, and later in 1999, the CISM (Critical Incident Stress Management) method appeared, which is included in the concept of debriefing. I would very much like to engage in a substantive discussion about professional methods of support and psychological debriefing with psychologists in other countries, such as Poland. I'd like to discuss many topics with them: supportive actions at various stages of an operation, preparing a firefighter before a critical event occurs, managing during the event, and post-crisis intervention. Debriefing should be used very cautiously because some studies indicate that it may exacerbate symptoms or retraumatize the person. It also cannot be used as a standalone technique but as part of a whole process. There's really a lot we can still learn. The actions of the Beyond Borders Foundation are very helpful in this, and thanks are due for that.

Photo 17. Paolo Bernardini - from personal archive.

K: I agree with you that we can do a lot of good for the mental health and well-being of the firefighter community. I hope that our international cooperation will continue to grow.

I wanted to thank you very much for the conversation and for sharing personal stories. This meeting was very moving and educational for me. Thank you.

SIMONE VEGNI

Experienced firefighter. Member of the USAR - Italian Urban Search and Rescue Group. Participated in rescue operations after the earthquake in Turkey.

Photo 18. Simone Vegni - author P. Bernardini

"My actions are meant to bring order to immense chaos..."

Kasia: Hello Simone, thank you so much for agreeing to meet and talk with us. Can you start by telling us how long you've been a firefighter?

Simone: I started my career as a volunteer firefighter in 2001, and in 2013, I joined the professional service. In 2021, I became a member of the USAR team.

K: It seems that since 2021, there haven't been any other disasters involving search and rescue teams besides the earthquake in Turkey.

S: Yes, that's correct. That was my first international deployment as a USAR member.

Photo 19. Training ground for search and rescue teams at the Fire and Rescue Unit in Pisa – author K. Bartyńska

K: I can imagine that the time from receiving the news of the earthquake to actually arriving at the disaster site was full of tension and stress, and that was just the beginning of all the tasks you had to undertake.

S: Absolutely. I can even say that it was doubly stressful for me. Firstly, because it was my first international deployment. Secondly, the mobilization happened the day before my son's birthday. On one hand, I felt that I should and wanted to go as a firefighter, but on the other, it was a tough decision on a family level. Of course, my family understands what my job entails; they know I find fulfillment in my work and they support me greatly. But it was also a very emotional situation because as a father, I wanted to be with my son too.

K: Are there situations where USAR members decide to stay in the country and not participate in international operations?

S: Here, it's organized in such a way that when I get the offer to go, I can decline, citing reasons such as poor mental health, important family matters, or personal issues. There's no obligation to go if someone feels at that moment that they shouldn't. Of course, the sense of professional duty is so strong that it's very rare for someone to say they won't go. I've never refused, but the option is there.

K: What else was difficult and stressful about the deployment to Turkey?

S: I was worried about whether I would manage and perform well. I didn't doubt my skills, but I wondered if I would be able to handle that particular situation. Would everything go well, would I understand everything, and would we complete the tasks we were sent there to do?

Photo 20. Autor Maurizio Maleci - from personal archive.

K: Have you ever worked as a rescuer in an earthquake in Italy?

S: Not in an earthquake, but as a firefighter, before joining USAR, I participated in operations after a gas explosion and a building collapse. Of course, it was a much simpler scenario due to its scale—it was just one building, not like after an earthquake where there are dozens. After reaching the building, we extricated an elderly man who didn't survive the explosion. Later, we managed to rescue his wife, but unfortunately, she also passed away later due to her injuries.

K: Do you remember what you first saw upon arriving at the disaster site in Turkey?

S: We arrived at night. What I saw didn't look like an earthquake but a war zone. We had to transport ourselves from the airport to the location where we set up camp during the night. The first hours after the earthquake felt like scenes from a movie. So many casualties. Another strong memory connected

to what I saw was the constant blaring of sirens. At first, it really bothered me. Later, I got used to it. The impression of war and the wailing sirens stayed in my mind for a long time, even after the operation. Fortunately, that initial shock didn't last long. During every USAR training, we were taught that our actions are meant to bring order to immense chaos, so I quickly shifted into work mode and got used to the sights and sounds. That memory from the training helped me pull myself together internally. I thought, "I'm here because my knowledge is important. I'm not here by chance. I have a very specific task. USAR needs people like me so we can provide help." From that moment on, I think I was very focused on the tasks and work.

K: What other challenges did you face during the operation? From what I understand, it was very cold.

S: I would divide my actions in Turkey into two phases. Since I'm an electrician, my first task was to prepare the power supply and set up the camp. It was a huge responsibility that rested mainly on me. The awareness that the functioning of the entire camp depended on whether I connected the wires correctly was very overwhelming. Second, it was indeed very cold, and for the first few days, we also had problems with food supplies. On top of that, there was extreme physical exhaustion. Because of the cold, we decided to sleep two people in one sleeping bag to keep warm. At times, it was so cold that it was impossible to fall asleep. Once I finished the tasks related to synchronizing the camp and logistics, I was assigned to rescue operations.

K: How do you all get along in USAR? In Poland, the firefighters in the search and rescue teams support each other a lot and are very close.

S: It's the same here. In Tuscany, we all know each other not only professionally but also personally. We know who has what hobbies, what skills they have, and how they can be helpful if needed. But when it comes to working with members from other groups, it's always a bit harder. At first, we had to find our rhythm. Once we did, we worked well together without any animosity. Professionalism and responsibility prevailed.

K: And what does psychological support look like for USAR firefighters?

S: On-site, we didn't have any psychological support. We were there alone—just rescuers. It's a real shame. I believe that a psychologist should accompany us on such missions.

K: But after you returned, from what I understand, there were meetings with a psychologist.

S: Yes, the first psychological support from the Red Cross psychologists took place a few weeks after we returned.

K: After landing back in Italy, did you go straight home without any psychological debriefing or consultation?

S: No, no one checked on us to see if we were okay or if we needed to talk to a psychologist. But we were met with enormous media interest. Personally, it bothered me a bit. I felt like a trophy that everyone wanted to take a picture with. Interviews, congratulations, photos, TV... But later, when the spotlight faded, we were left to fend for ourselves. I feel that the support we received was insufficient, so I called Paolo. First, because we've known each other for a long time, and second, because I have great trust in him. I knew that as a firefighter, he would understand me.

K: How do you now assess your experience in the Turkey mission?

S: I feel that my knowledge and skills helped those people. I feel that my work is useful, and I have a great sense of satisfaction.

But for a long time after returning, I couldn't look at or hug a child. I'm not sure why. In a way, I still struggle with it. I have this fear that something might happen to the child. I haven't fully overcome that yet. To give you an idea of how difficult this experience was, let me tell you about a recent incident. A group of schoolchildren visited our station. One of them had Asperger's syndrome. There were about 20 of us, but somehow that boy latched onto me. He kept trying to stay close to me, hugging my pants, holding my hand. I

spent the entire time with this boy, who at the end hugged me and kissed me on the cheek, and I started crying. My reaction was definitely a consequence of what I saw and experienced in Turkey. At the same time, I'm very proud of what I was able to do there. I feel immense personal and professional satisfaction because my work is useful and has great meaning. It allows me to grow.

My family is also a great support for me. In Turkey, there were so many traumatic experiences. We saw death virtually everywhere. I talk a lot with my wife, who knows how to listen and support me. It's very important to me when I hear her say, "I'm proud of you; I'm glad I'm your wife." It gives me a sense that my professional and personal life are in harmony. This is important for every firefighter.

K: Do you think that your difficulty in looking at children or hugging them might be because your mind doesn't want to recall anything related to what happened in Turkey? There were so many difficult experiences there that your mind says, "I don't want to go back to that."

S: Yes. I worked through this with Paolo, and we talked about it a lot. As a father and head of the family, I instinctively try to ensure the safety and meet the needs of my loved ones. When I went there, I saw so many deceased, sick, and seriously injured children that my mind said, "Enough." One time, we cleared a room where we found a family lying in bed—all of them deceased. The father was holding the child in his arms. You can't forget that. You can't just walk away from that sight. I never suspected myself of such sensitivity. I'm rediscovering and getting to know myself. As Paolo said, "Know yourself..."

But there's one more thing I want to mention. During USAR exercises in Pisa, during the simulation of operations in the rubble, various sounds and noises were played that are present during actual operations. I was the only one who recognized the sound of a child crying amid the noise. I'm now very sensitive to it.

K: Perhaps it's not even a matter of individual sensitivity. Maybe some situations are so intense that they leave a mark on anyone, no matter how resilient they are.

S: Yes. Another burden during such a deployment is that when you work here as a firefighter, you have a 12-hour shift and then return home to safe, warm conditions, meet your family, and know what will happen. There, you go knowing the basics, but they almost never reflect what you will see at the disaster site. Reality is always more drastic than the stories. Secondly, the difficult conditions—cold, difficulties in coordinating operations. The third factor is the length of the deployment. In theory, we know how long we'll be gone, but often that time is extended. That's what happened in Libya—we were supposed to go for 7 days, but we ended up staying longer.

K: It seems justified, then, to check if rescuers are developing post-traumatic stress disorder after such experiences. Is that happening?

Paolo Bernardini: Unfortunately, we still have to remind people that these are very important issues that need to be addressed immediately, not weeks later.

In 2009, in Viareggio, Tuscany, there was a dramatic mass incident. A train carrying gas tanks exploded. The smoke from the fire was visible from 20 kilometers away. Many firefighters were involved in these very difficult operations, and many felt unappreciated by their superiors. The central office mainly handles administrative and office matters, but they should also ensure support and care for firefighters after such difficult actions.

K: In your opinion, how should psychological support for firefighters on such missions be organized?

S: A psychologist should be available on such missions. We already have doctors and nurses accompanying us. It would be enough to have just one psychologist with us. Although each of us is aware of our tasks during operations and we support each other, seeing such immense suffering and

feeling the professional pressure, openly talking about problems is really difficult. If a psychologist were there, maybe it would be easier to focus on work and get through it all. Secondly, there should be support after returning. For me, the meeting that took place was too late. It's important to check right after returning whether everyone is okay, both physically and mentally. I absolutely believe that psychologists in the fire service should be firefighters. Only then will psychological help be tailored to the needs of the rescuers.

K: Support is important on every level: peer support, understanding and recognition from superiors, but also specialized help that goes beyond friendly concern. Working with a psychologist can help separate the past from the present and an experience from a memory. A specialist can help you find your footing after returning home and see and accept that life goes on despite the enormous tragedy that has occurred. As Maurizio said, once we experience a traumatic event, we can't erase it like data on a pendrive, so we must learn how to live with it as part of our history.

I wanted to thank you both very much for this conversation. It was incredibly moving and, in my opinion, extremely important. Simone, I want to wish you, above all, to regain balance and peace after these difficult experiences. Thank you very much for showing the work of a firefighter from your personal perspective.

ANNA CEDRO

Psychologist at the Warrant Officers Schools of the State Fire Service in Poznań, PhD in Management Sciences, firefighter.

Photo 21. jr. capt. Anna Cedro, 3rd edition of the project "Passion, Knowledge, Values". Author – ff. Cadet Daniel Majerski, State Fire Service School, Poznań.

"An action is the culmination of what firefighters are here for. It gives meaning to their readiness."

Kasia: Ania, thank you so much for the conversation. I do similar work at the firefighting school in Kraków, so I'm very happy that through this conversation, we can express our perspective on the psychological preparation of young firefighters. Could you start by telling me how long you've been working at the Warrant Officers Schools of the State Fire Service in Poznań?

Ania: I've been at the school since 2001, but I've been involved in teaching since 2004. That's when my adventure with education in psychology began. I became a firefighter in 2005. I started by teaching group communication and assertiveness because I'm a graduate of post-diploma studies in psychology in management. Then I completed clinical psychology and expanded the scope of the classes I teach. I also defended my PhD, which focused on the role of professional competencies in shaping organizational commitment among firefighters, at the Poznań University of Economics and Business, in the Department of Organization and Management Theory.

K: From your perspective as a psychologist at the school, and perhaps also personally, could you tell us who a cadet is? Who is the person we work with—a young firefighter, a student?

A: I have the feeling that today's cadets are people who really consciously choose a fire school. They have enormous opportunities on the job market to choose various professions, sometimes much easier, safer, or better paid. However, if they choose to become firefighters, it's often because they've encountered rescue work in their earlier education or in their life space and have been bitten by the rescue bug. These are people with a mission and passion for rescuing, often with several years of experience in volunteer fire departments. I think this is the dominant group now. There are also people who have firefighters in their families and know that the profession is not boring, and cadets need action—they don't like monotony.

K: And besides passion for firefighting, what else can be said about them?

A: Cadets have a wide range of interests. They are ready to dedicate themselves, to work for others, and they eagerly get involved in various charitable activities. Very often, they are the initiators of these actions. It's also worth noting that these are very athletically gifted individuals. They achieve impressive results in competitions at the national level and often internationally as well. There are also those who have completed their studies, which is interesting because fire schools (except for the Fire University) are post-secondary schools, so in the hierarchy of Polish education, they are lower than universities. Nevertheless , these young people decide to spend two years of their lives in a fire school to finally start a professional career at a slightly higher level.

K: These two years in a residential school are a very important time. Do you think that this period has a significant impact on their future professional and personal lives?

A: I think it has an enormous significance. This is a time when they transition from late adolescence into adulthood. They decide to spend two years in a small space with a fairly large group of people and to submit to orders, which they, of course, perceive differently. In a way, they give up their independence, which is so important for a young adult, but it's their choice and a piece of personal sacrifice to become a firefighter.

K: Cadets then and now—20 years ago and today. Do you think the needs or expectations of young people have changed?

A: Today's cadets are often people who have completed higher education, so their educational level is simply higher. They are also more willing to provide feedback. In the past, cadets felt that subordination was the only acceptable stance in service, and that was it. They might express opposition indirectly at most. Now, cadets feel that they can say what is okay for them and what is not. This, I feel, is new and challenging for the service, where we need to learn that whether someone agrees with me or not is just

feedback and does not stem from a lack of discipline but from respect and trust present in the relationship between two people.

K: I agree with you. Many times I've encountered views among "old school" officers that if someone speaks their mind, they simply aren't cut out for the fire service because they can't adapt. I also agree that it's about treating another person with respect.

A: Yes, and if we look at it that way, it's an opportunity for the service.

K: An opportunity?

A: Because then it will be about the person, not about being a cog in the machine. Then it will also be team-oriented, based on intrinsic motivation to function well in groups or on shifts. If we only rely on an autocratic style of management and communication, this rigidity will sooner or later cause a disturbance.

K: Instructors in schools face a big challenge in this regard.

A: Yes. On one hand, rescue operations are changing, so they must continuously develop their expertise, but they also need to develop social skills and be willing to talk to young people and accept their perspective. On top of that, cadets are more technologically adept than we are because they were simply born into this space of new technologies. My generation had to learn it, so we don't have it in our blood like the young do. Cadets are creative and opened to new ideas.

K: You seem to like cadets and your job.

A: Oh yes, definitely. I like it because they bring constant challenges, you can't get bored with them or rest on your laurels because working with them is demanding. And I like challenges. Going back to the question of what the modern young person is like, the instructors teaching more technical skills have some very interesting observations. Firefighters on active duty also notice this, probably in your school as well, that in terms of manual skills

and spatial thinking in a technical context, it's worse. This applies to simple tasks like handling equipment or even connecting hoses. Indeed, in technological matters, cadets are more "savvy," but when it comes to manual skills, it's often worse. This is probably a civilizational change, but above all, an important piece of information for fire education—that we need to work with slightly different skills and develop different competencies in cadets.

K: What values do we want to teach these young people?

A: Hmm... I wonder if values can be taught at all. Maybe some people aspire to teach values, but in my opinion, we can develop and awaken those that a person already has. When new cadets arrive at school, we discuss in workshops what the values in service are and what their individual values are. It turns out that their individual values are very consistent across the group. For them, family, love, sacrifice, helping, and passion are important. Fire schools should work on creating an environment that fosters the expression and development of these values associated with helping and working for others. As for teamwork, the development of these values should be done by building trust and engagement, but a wise engagement, with respect for oneself and others, and respect for private space. In other words, working around values—sacrifice, engagement, passion, trust. The aspect of helping or sacrifice is important, but at the same time, very challenging...

K: Values in service cause there to still be many people eager to become firefighters.

A: Today we can say that we have a worker's market, not an employer's market. Various services are struggling with staffing shortages. I think people must find something more than just money in this work because compared to the market, the pay is not that attractive. If you don't build motivation on something more than just financial issues, you won't work with a "good" firefighter.

K: You talked about individual values in young people entering the service. Are they consistent with the values presented by the fire service as an organization?

A: When we prepare a firefighter for their oath, it's a very solemn moment, especially in fire schools. Firefighters are imbued with this solemn atmosphere, accompanied by their closest families. That moment of collective swearing-in is extraordinary. Before that, there's the national anthem, then the oath's wording is spoken in the presence of the flag. It gives you chills. But the organizational reality is what it is. The culture of every organization has an official layer and an "underlying" one. When we work with people for a longer period, various behaviors emerge. Especially in an organization like ours, which is hierarchical with a rigid structure, things can happen that don't always align with what should be official. A person appears - with all their strengths and weaknesses, which can sometimes be frustrating for a young firefighter.

K: Should a psychologist in the service also be a firefighter?

A: Maybe I'll start with whether a psychologist is needed at the disaster site. I see it as the firefighter-psychologist being simply another rescuer. On-site, full knowledge from psychological studies or psychotherapy schools isn't needed, but competencies and knowledge in crisis intervention and psychological support are. So, a firefighter-psychologist is needed where there is simply no other such rescuer or where there aren't enough rescuers. Sometimes, the psychologist is someone you can just "lean on," enhancing the sense of security and collective competencies. It's like how firefighters feel more confident when a paramedic is in the team, even though every firefighter is medically trained. If there's a psychologist, there's someone who can help them substantively in matters of psychological support. In a crisis situation, it's good to rely on someone we see as an authority in a given field—in our case, in psychological rescue.

As for whether a psychologist should be a firefighter...? I'm not even sure how to think about myself because I think I'm more of a psychologist than a firefighter. But for me personally, being a firefighter, participating in training and exercises, gives a lot of insight into what a firefighter encounters. These are specific conditions, and it's good to know them. The availability of a psychologist in the service is, in my opinion, very valuable. There's an old interview with firefighters about one of the early psychologists involved in the creation of the Psychological Support System in the State Fire Service. The firefighters say so nicely: "Ms. Marta is a firefighter, and she knows how to approach us, knows what we deal with there, so she's a bit better than an ordinary psychologist..." It always touches me, although it's not entirely true because, as psychologists in the service, we're not better than an "ordinary psychologist." However, if by being firefighters we build greater trust or weaken those defense mechanisms expressed in the statement that "if someone hasn't been in the service, they won't understand what I'm talking about," then it's very important that we are more credible for firefighters as psychologists in the service.

K: For me, the aspect of identifying with the service is important, too. When we are inside these structures, it's easier for us to identify and develop this firefighter identity in ourselves and others.

A: I'm looking at myself now—I'm wearing a uniform. Just that already builds identification and classifies me into a specific group. Just the fact that we have a common dress code gives me a lot. Because behind that come other norms, norms of behavior appropriate for the service. Wearing a uniform definitely builds identification with the organization. It matters to me.

K: Do cadets use psychological support?

A: Of course they do, but not so much that there's a continuous line outside my office door. Well, maybe if there's a psychology test or they're trying to improve their grades before the end of the year. Regarding consultation

work, it should be remembered that the people who start school are healthy individuals—meeting the norms for mental health—so these individuals generally function properly. If problems arise related to life events, then they come for consultation and advice. They usually involve relationship issues because this is a period for forming very important romantic relationships, sometimes difficult family relationships, but also in the platoon or in the dorms. Cadets are willing and open to talking to a psychologist.

K: The stereotype of the tough firefighter who doesn't ask for help was once very strong. I have the impression that young people today are more aware of the need to care for mental health. I also feel that downplaying mental health problems or stigmatizing people who seek help is simply in bad taste—not trendy.

A: There's a report on firefighters from the early 2000s. One of them already said back then that going to a psychologist is a normal thing. But I wouldn't be so sure that firefighters are entirely comfortable with this topic. It's definitely easier for them to consult a psychologist, but I'm not sure they would be as willing when it comes to a psychiatrist. Mental illnesses, including those related to depressive states, are still a difficult subject, and I still feel that firefighters don't have that peace of mind that it's "okay" to seek help from a psychiatrist because they are just like any other doctor. I don't think everyone feels that way.

K: Depressive states are quite common—most people experience at least transient depressive states.

A: There is a procedure in the Polish fire service for cooperation with Mental Health Clinics under the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, allowing a firefighter to quickly consult a psychiatrist after being referred by the service psychologist if needed. Just the existence of this procedure is good because it models certain behaviors. In the culture of the organization, an

important message appears: "If you're in crisis, you're not alone—we want to help you."

K: That's also a message from the organization to the firefighter—"we care about you because you're important."

A: Yes. The American aviation mindset speaks to me a lot—"the pilot is important, not the machine." It's hard to train a pilot, so they are an invaluable resource. In the fire service, the same message is crucial: "Through their experience and knowledge, a person is an invaluable resource," so we need to take care of that resource as best we can, in such a mentally taxing profession, particularly in matters related to mental health.

K: What does a psychologist teach at the fire school?

A: As far as basic training is concerned, that is, initial training, we educate on what stress is, what consequences participating in actions can have for firefighters, especially in traumatic events, and what consequences firefighters will face if they don't cope constructively with stress. During the basic course, we provide information on how the service—especially the psychological support system—helps firefighters. There is also a component that shows that the firefighter's functioning in a team is essential—like their communication skills, for example. This is the beginning of fire education. Later, elements related to command and team management appear, to properly perceive the role and function of a commander—which is my "hobby horse." These are the main areas: stress (traumatic stress, the consequences of occupational stress, such as burnout), psychological support, functioning in a firefighting team, and command.

K: Can we, as specialists, influence the building of psychological resilience at all?

A: Yes—we can have an impact. If there's a chance for firefighters to stop for a moment and reflect on their functioning in a team, in the professional sphere, or during rescue operations, and if they have the opportunity to see

that there are different ways to cope with stress, then there's a chance that they will be able to choose or start improving the ways that work for them. Therefore, when we teach self-care and show that it's a vital part of healthy functioning in the service, and if this knowledge is followed by action—resilience will strengthen. When we talk about or show what is dangerous, that's also building resilience by informing which paths not to take because resilience can also be lowered.

K: The title of this project is "Positively to action." Do actions have their positive aspect?

A: I remember from my childhood when my Dad used to say that when firefighters go to an incident, it's always a place where something difficult is happening. Firefighters go to where a community is struggling with something. The ambulance might go to a woman in labor, which has a more positive connotation. It might seem that it's hard to find something positive in a difficult situation or tragedy, but they are going there to help someone cope better or to start the process of dealing with the danger. This element of helping a community in a situation where the community cannot manage is positive. On the other hand, what firefighters dislike the most is inactivity and helplessness. Even in the difficult conditions of an action, they feel they are doing something. Most often, firefighters cope with stress through action, so as long as they can act and do something—counteracting the harmful effects of the event they responded to—they feel it's something positive. False alarms, where there's little to do, are very unpleasant for firefighters—contrary to what one might think. The tension associated with waiting and responding to an alarm cannot be discharged. Although they go to an incident when someone is in trouble, an action is the culmination of what they are here for. It gives meaning to their readiness.

K: Psychological support can also help with helplessness. Sometimes, when nothing can be done technically, in a firefighter's way, all that remains is contact with another person and providing them with psychological support.

A: For firefighters oriented toward action, it's often very hard to understand that for the injured person, accompaniment, the presence of another person, is invaluable. That in moments when nothing can be done, just being there can be enough. The ability to contain sadness is a difficult skill, but a very valuable one. It's not easy for those focused on action to understand, which is why education is so important. Even where there is a sense of helplessness and the impression that nothing can be done, accompanying another person in their suffering remains.

K: An important aspect of a firefighter's work is also the support they give each other.

A: This is a very important aspect of their work and a very important piece for the psychologist's work. The technological change we've experienced has made it increasingly difficult for people to communicate face-to-face, and we're increasingly seeking support in the virtual space, yet firefighters do not operate virtually but in reality. Making a leap to talk to a person I see, giving them open feedback, is a very important skill that may not always be well developed today. This is an area to "build," because socially, we've changed, and the competencies of teamwork and collaboration may no longer be dominant. At the same time, these competencies are very much needed by firefighters because, in difficult situations, it's hard to rely on or ask for help from someone you don't really know, even though you spend 24 hours on duty with them but don't talk. You need to have trust to share a difficulty. Telling someone what didn't go well for me or what I'm struggling with requires a previously good relationship. This area is strongly emphasized by psychologists during psychoeducational sessions. Also,

during crisis interventions and emotional debriefings after difficult actions, service psychologists reinforce the scope of mutual support in the team.

K: Simply recognizing the emotions that firefighters feel can also be protective in difficult situations and contribute to building resilience.

A: The ability to recognize and name your emotions is very important. It's also important to accept that after difficult events, I can't feel normal—because that would be "abnormal." I really like the saying that in a crisis, it's not the reaction that's abnormal, but the situation. If you realize that what's happening to you is a reaction, you're not as afraid or you don't repress that reaction as much. Normalizing the symptoms and behaviors that appear in firefighters in a difficult, crisis situation is, in my opinion, very important.

K: I feel that firefighters often suppress the initial reactions and emotions that arise in difficult situations.

A: Because that's how defense mechanisms work, and that's okay, it helps to survive. But it's clear that if a person doesn't allow themselves to express emotions, they build up inside and can cause problems in the long run.

K: It's probably hard to recognize emotions, and if you don't recognize them, it's hard to manage them. I also feel that emotions often get misinterpreted for firefighters, making it difficult for them to differentiate between, for example, anger and sadness, anger and guilt. Do firefighters struggle with identifying emotions?

A: I wouldn't say this difficulty is specific to firefighters. It's generally very difficult. That's why I really like working with the body because even if you can't name the emotions, they come out through the body, and you can notice them in the body. Getting to emotions through the body seems to be an easier path for firefighters.

K: I wonder if you would choose the job of a psychologist in the fire service again.

A: Yes, yes! Because I'm now maybe not in the final stage, but in the middle stage of my life, I often reflect on whether what I do makes sense and whether it's valuable to me. I feel very grateful for this job and for what it has offered me. There have been times when it was very difficult, and I wondered why I was doing it, but those moments were actually few. All in all, I really like working in the fire service and think it's incredibly valuable. Of course, there are difficult aspects of it. Despite being a professional who tries to set boundaries between service and personal life, the difficult experiences that happen in the service also affect me. It's not that simple because the service is closely intertwined with the personal lives of firefighters and mine as well. I'm also very committed to this job because I see its meaning. I would definitely choose it again. I'm glad to be a firefighter-psychologist. This job also gives me the opportunity to collaborate with passionate people. I enjoy being around and being inspired by people who have various "rescue passions." And I also have a firefighter husband who keeps bringing me some news and very much inspires me to explore new areas.

K: I think I could say exactly the same as a firefighter-psychologist. It's a very interesting job, bringing a lot of satisfaction. Thank you very much for the conversation and the extremely valuable reflections. I'm sure that in this way, we are bringing closer the perspective of psychological support and contributing to building the psychological resilience of our firefighters.

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