Dr. Kazimierz Pollak, M.D., Ph.D. – orthopedic surgeon, the last assistant to Professor Franciszek Raszeja

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Abstract

Dr. Kazimierz Pollak, M.D., Ph.D. was a student of the renowned serologist and immunologist, Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld, and an assistant to Professor Franciszek Raszeja, with whom he provided assistance to the sick in the ghetto. On 21 July 1942, when assisting Professor Raszeja, he was shot by the SS members when operating on the well-known pre-war art merchant Abe Gutnajer.

Key words: Kazimierz Pollak, Ludwik Hirszfeld, Franciszek Raszeja

Streszczenie

Dr n. med. Kazimierz Pollak był uczniem znanego serologa i immunologa prof. Ludwika Hirszfelda, a także asystentem prof Franciszka Raszei, z którym ofiarnie niósł pomoc chorym w getcie. Zginął 21 lipca 1942 roku zastrzelony przez esesmanów podczas operacji znanego przedwojennego marszanda Abe Gutnajera asystując profesorowi Raszei.

Słowa kluczowe: Kazimierz Pollak, Ludwik Hirszfeld, Franciszek Raszeja
The circumstances of Professor Franciszek Raszeja’s death in the Warsaw ghetto are known. The biography of the famous Professor is also well known. However, little information has been preserved on his assistant, dr. Kazimierz Pollak, who was also killed when assisting Professor Raszeja during an operation. A few documents and family souvenirs helped to save the memory of the life of a talented young doctor and a courageous man.

Kazimierz Pollak was born in 1908 in Brody, in the then tarnopolskie province in Podolia (now Ukraine). His parents were Róża Pollak (née Nussbaum) and Ignacy Pollak, director of the sickness Fund for the Podolia. He had three siblings: Adolf Wojciech, born in 1900, died in 1951 in London (captain of the Polish Army; decorated with the Cross of the Valor for his bravery in the Polish-Bolshevik War; he was involved in the September campaign of 1939 and then went to England to fight alongside the allies), Jan born in 1902, (a mechanical engineer; National Army officer; he was killed in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944), Zofia born in 1905, died in 2001 (a Romance philologist by education, wife of the famous Kraków-based painter Aleksander Moranński; during the occupation she was involved in secret teaching).

Just before World War I, the Pollak family went to Vienna, where all the siblings attended schools. They returned to Poland in 1919.

Kazimierz Pollak completed his medical studies at the Jagiellonian University in 1933. After graduation, he received military training, and was subsequently directed to work at the State Hygiene Facility in Warsaw in the Department of Bacteriology and Experimental Medicine, whose director was the well-known bacteriologist and immunologist, Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld [1].

In 1935 he obtained a research grant from the Count Jakub Potocki Foundation. The Foundation was established by way of testament left by Count Potocki dated 22 September 1934. Count Potocki supported the creation of the Council Institute in Poland for many years; it was opened in 1932. The first Management Board of the Institute was composed of Professor Adolf Wojciechowski, among others - he was the first co-editor of the Polish Orthopedics and Traumatology journal and President of the Polish Orthopedics Society (1931-1938). Count Potocki left a large portion of his estate, e.g. the properties at Brzeżany and Helenów, to a foundation which he set up to support the research and treatment of can-

Fig. 1. Family photo taken in Brody, 1920s. First row from the left: Kazimierz, mother Róża (née Nussbaum), father Ignacy Pollak; second row: Adolf Wojciech, Zofia, Jan.
Cancer and tuberculosis. Article 7(1) of the Foundation's Statutes stipulates the following: „The first priority should be to support work aimed at developing knowledge and treatment in the field of combating tuberculosis and cancer and other diseases which spread in Poland, particularly those which are dangerous to humanity.”

The national scholarship was granted to Kazimierz Pollak, in accordance with the Statute, for research on cancer [2]. The research scope was similar to the interests of Professor Hirszfeld, who then studied blood serological groups and the antigenic property of normal and cancerous tissues [3]. That was the reason for the proposal of research, which was carried out under the direction of the Professor.

The result of the year-long work of the scholarship holder was an article entitled ‘Research on normal and cancerous fibrin’, published in the scientific journal “Experimental and Social Medicine, Volume XXI, Issue 3-4, 1936 [4].

Next year Pollak continued his research and published further research findings.

He obtained a doctorate in 1938. Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld was his supervisor.

 Probably in 1939 Kazimierz Pollak married Babetta (family name unknown) who also lived in Warsaw.
Another medical interest of Dr. Pollak led him to change his specialty to surgery. The outbreak of World War II, paradoxically, contributed to his deepening of surgical and orthopedic knowledge alongside the already famous Professor Franciszek Raszeja.

Prior to the war, in addition to engaging in scientific activities, Professor Raszeja also participated in the political life of the country. In 1937 he was one of the signatories to a manifesto drafted by eleven University of Poznan professors in protest against the so-called „ghetto benches“. At that time, 700 professors throughout Poland demanded that university authorities respect and show tolerance towards national minorities. They strongly condemned the outrageous speeches made by the National Democratic youth, who demanded from the university authorities that the students of Jewish origin sit in separate benches in the lecture halls.

In August 1939, Professor Raszeja’s captain was called up to the Polish Army and appointed the commanding officer of the Military Hospital in Łódź. In December 1939, he reached Warsaw and was at the disposal of the commanding officer of the Ujazdowski Hospital, col. prof. Teofil Kucharski. He sent him to one of Warsaw’s military hospitals as the head of the Department of Surgery of the Polish Red Cross Hospital at 6 Śmolenka Street, where Professor Raszeja opened a 30-bed Orthopedic Ward. Dr. Kazimierz Pollak, already working at this hospital, became one of the Professor’s assistants. At the ward, they treated Polish Army soldiers and civilians [5].

Prof. Hirszfeld has been actively involved in helping those in need since the first days of the war. He was involved in
The establishment of a blood center at the Ujazdowski Hospital, as the Institute for Blood Transfer and Preservation was bombed during the first air raid and the need for transfusion was enormous. When, during the first months of the occupation the Nazis banned Jews from walking along Aleje Ujazdowskie, then called Siegessstrasse, Hirszfeld ignored this order, which in the light of the racist Nuremberg laws was also to apply to him. During the first days of the occupation, he was dismissed from work at a State Hygiene Department, which was taken over by a Nazi official, Dr. Robert von Kudicke, a former acquaintance from Heidelberg. The first months of the occupational isolation Hirszfeld spent at home in the Saska Kępa district. In February 1941, he was forced to move his family behind the walls of the Jewish quarter [6]. He met his recent associate, Dr. Pollak, who was already treating patients in the ghetto hospital, and organized secret consultations.

Adam Czerniaków, the head of the Jewish Community, entrusted Hirszfeld with the appointment of a Health Council which was to make a hopeless attempt to combat typhus fever epidemic. In 1941, together with Professor Raszeja, he established a secret blood donation center for Jews confined in the Warsaw ghetto. Dr. Pollak was the connection between the former boss and the current one, and with his help prof. Raszeja was in constant contact with the ghetto. They secretly provided food, medicines and vaccines to the ghetto [5].

As reported by the family, despite his Jewish origin, Dr. Pollak was initially allowed to stay outside the ghetto without problems and to work in a hospital. However, he decided to stay in the ghetto with his wife, whose parents, probably for health reasons, were unable to attempt an escape, and the wife did not want to leave them.

Early morning on 21 July 1942 Franciszek Raszeja made a request to the German police commander for a pass to the Warsaw ghetto for a medical consultation. Dr. Pollak asked him for the consultation - it was not the first time he did it. The patient was supposed to be Abe Gutnajer, a known art merchant, one of the biggest antiquarians of the Second Republic of Poland, the organizer of auctions and exhibitions of Polish painting; he was living at 26 Chłodna street. It was there that all persons present (Franciszek Raszeja, Kazimierz Pollak, Abe Gutnajer, his family and a nurse) were murdered during an operation by the SS members led by SS-Sturmbannführer Hermann Höfle. Only Abe Gutnajer’s granddaughter survived as she hid under the bed. The tragedy took place on the eve of the deportation of the Warsaw ghetto Jews [7].

An account of the murder was related by Władysław Szpilman who included it in his memoir published after the war. He claimed that Gutnajer was shot when he was under...
anesthesia on the operating table [8]. According to Marek Edelman, this and other crimes committed on 21 July 1942, were intended to intimidate the ghetto population so that they would not mount resistance during the deportation planned for the following day [9].

Dr. Zbigniew Lewicki (later a colleague of Wiktor Dega during the Warsaw Uprising) who worked in the same hospital as Professor Raszeja, gave the following account of the circumstances of the death of his colleagues:

(…) "I worked at that time as a urologist at the Polish Red Cross Hospital at 8 Red Cross Street in Warsaw, where Professor Raszeja also worked. It was 21 or 22 July 1942. On that day at about 11 p.m., the commanding officer at the hospital called me, col. dr. Zygmunt Gilewicz and informed me that Professor Raszeja did not yet return from the ghetto. (…) on the second day I managed to obtain a special pass to the ghetto from the official doctor for Warsaw. In the office that verified the pass at the entrance to the ghetto from Nalewki Street, I was given the address where the consultation took place. I went to this address at Chłodna Street near the Charles Borromeo Church. The house was completely empty. I found only a caretaker over there, who led me to the second floor and showed me the apartment in which Professor Raszeja and the doctor who asked him for the consultation - dr. Kazimierz Pollak were murdered. From the caretaker’s account it followed that everyone present, including the patient were shot to death. It was the first day when the mass murder of Jews in the ghetto began. In search of the bodies I went to the Jewish cemetery, where the groundskeeper showed me a pit, to which a number of the bodies of people shot were put the day before. All the bodies were covered with lime but, after a short search, we were able to find the Professor’s body. He was clothed, but without shoes and documents; we found some small x-ray films in the pocket that probably showed the bones to be operated. (…) It was not so easy to take the body out of the ghetto, and we managed to do that only thanks to the kindness of the employees of the City Cleaning Facility who were permitted to enter the ghetto. I got to City Cleaning Facility and they sent a garbage truck in which I moved the body to the Red Cross Hospital. At the entrance to the hospital there was a small chapel where we left the Professor’s body. Before I departed, I called the hospital to communicate that we were coming, and all hospital staff gathered at the chapel. This was around 5.00 p.m. Dr. Bolesław Hrywecki, a surgeon, was there at that time. (…) [10].

The bodies of the murdered dr. Kazimierz Pollak and the nurse could not be identified and moved from the ghetto, thus remaining in the collective grave at the Jewish cemetery at Okopowa Street.

On 30 July 1942, their death was reported by the underground weekly newspaper, the "Information Bulletin", stating that: "The deportation will probably take several weeks. During the murdering of Jews, several Poles who were in the ghetto on official duties were killed as well. An outstanding surgeon, University of Poznan Professor Raszeja was murdered. He was called to the ghetto for a medical consultation and he had an official pass” [11].

Kazimierz Pollak’s short but extremely hard-working life resulted in interesting research on cancer treatment and tuberculosis, as well as on surgery and orthopedics. Even when faced with danger, in extremely precarious circumstances of the occupation, a human in need was always a priority for him. He did not hesitate to help dying and ill fellow brothers. Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld wrote in his book titled „A History of one life” a short but very poignant sentence about Kazimierz Pollak: "He was valued and liked by his colleagues. He was providing medical care in the camps with dedication and courage.”
References

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