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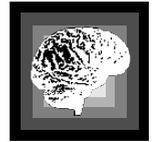


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Abstract

The T4 euthanasia programme within Nazi Germany has been well researched, but much less is known about the extermination of psychiatric patients in Nazi-occupied territories during the same period. In Poland 20,000 mentally ill patients were deliberately killed during the German occupation. This paper traces the history of one psychiatric hospital, Zofiówka, in Otwock, south-east of Warsaw. The hospital once served the Jewish population of Poland and was the largest, most prestigious neuropsychiatric centre in the country. It is now in ruins and said to be haunted by ghosts.

Keywords

Jews, massacre, Nazism, Poland, psychiatry, 20th century

Introduction

The mere scent of the woods of Otwock, Poland, with their abundance of oaks, firs, juniper bushes and pine trees, was in itself enough to cure patients suffering from mental illness (Jellenta, 1935: 58; Załączny, 2011: 403). The climate of Otwock, it used to be said, was more therapeutic than any medication (Jellenta, 1935: 56–60). This extraordinary reputation led to the establishment, by 1938, of 98 spa resorts and two psychiatric asylums in that region (Załączny, 2011: 408). One of these institutions was Zofiówka, a hospital for nervous and mental disorders founded in 1908 (Otwock Administrative Office, 2006). Forty-two acres of land were purchased by the Towarzystwo Opieki nad Ubogimi, Nerwowo i Umysłowo Chorymi Żydami (TOUNUCZ, the Jewish Organization for the Indigent Nervous and Mentally Ill) thanks to a generous donation by its patron, Zofia Endelman, for whom the new facility was named (Ilnicki, 2008: 107). Jewish patients from all over Poland came for the cure, and their expenses covered by TOUNUCZ if the family could not afford to pay. The hospital initially had 95 beds, which grew to about 300 by the beginning of World War II. By then, Zofiówka had become one of the largest neuropsychiatric centres in Europe (Jellenta, 1935: 94).

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Samuel Goldflam

The first Director of Zofiówka was neurologist, Samuel Goldflam (1852–1932) (Domżał, 2010). He had studied with Carl Westphal (Holdorff, 2005) in Berlin. He later went to Paris to the Salpêtrière Hospital, which boasted the world's first Department of Neurology; its Director was Jean-Martin Charcot (Kumar, Aslinia, Yale and Mazza, 2011). Here, Goldflam worked with Joseph Babinski (Skalski, 2007), noted French neurologist of Polish descent. On his return to Poland, Goldflam developed a reputation for rigorous assessment. He was a clinical scientist who observed his patients meticulously, gathering extensive information before attempting a diagnosis. He is perhaps best known for 'Goldflam's sign' which is a tremor of the lumbar region that he described in 1900 (Goldflam, 1900). He attributed the tremor to a nerve reflex, but it is relevant not for neurology but for urology, as a diagnostic sign of glomerular nephritis (Poletajew, 2012).

Goldflam's neurological fame rests on his studies of reflexes and his descriptions of newly discovered diseases such as myasthenia gravis (Herman, 1952). He was also interested in the various causes of spasticity. In all, Goldflam published more than 100 scientific works, review papers and social commentary. Some of his writings sound familiar to modern ears, for example: 'Our endeavor is to obtain as many grounds as possible on which to facilitate the recognition of early periods of a disease. This is of great therapeutic importance.' (Herman, 1952: 495).

Goldflam initiated work therapy at Zofiówka, encouraging patients to serve in the kitchens, sewing rooms, and farms of the hospital. Work therapy was an idea generally attributed to German psychiatrist, Hermann Simon (1867–1947) who introduced the concept in 1905 in Gütersloh, Westphalia (Wertham, 1930).

Polish writer and poet, Cezary Jellenta (1861–1935), came for a rest cure to Otwock towards the end of his life. In his chronicle of Otwock, he described how every patient worked at Zofiówka, how this ensured calm and serenity and created a social bond among the patients. He said it gave a rhythm to the day (Jellenta, 1935: 91–96).

Goldflam, whose name is still honoured in present day Otwock (a street is named after him), continued as Director until 1926.

Jakub Frostig

After Goldflam, Gotlib Kremer and then Rafał Becker briefly assumed the directorship of Zofiówka. From 1932 until a year before the outbreak of World War II, Jakub Frostig (1896–1959) was Director (Herczyńska, 2007). Frostig had studied with Wagner-Juaregg (Haas, 2002), Schilder (Bowman and Curran, 1941), Gertsman (Triarhou, 2008) and von Economo (Triarhou, 2007). In 1932 when he became Director of Zofiówka, he was on the editorial board of the Polish psychiatric journal, *Rocznika Psychiatrycznego*, and had published a textbook of psychiatry, *Psychjatrja* (Frostig, 1933). He is best known for pioneering insulin therapy of schizophrenia in Poland (Frostig, 1938a; Frostig, 1938b; Frostig, Persyko and Persyko, 1938; Frostig and Wortis, 1938) and is also credited with originating the concept of electricity-induced narcosis (Frostig et al., 1944).

A psychiatric scandal with a twenty-first century ring to it occurred at Zofiówka during Frostig's directorship. His deputy, Isaac Frydman, was accused of molesting young women patients and of soliciting sexual favours from female job-seekers in exchange for offers of employment. The case was dropped for want of sufficient evidence (Spacerownik Otwocki, 2012: 14).

In 1938 Frostig was recruited to the USA to work at the Harlem Valley State Hospital. Escaping tragedy by a hair's breath, he went on to lead a successful professional life in the USA. In August 1939, one month before his country was invaded, he co-authored an article in the prestigious journal, *Science* (Lewy, Himwich, Frostig and Spies, 1939).

The year 1939

Włodzimierz Kaufman replaced Frostig as Director of Zofiówka.¹ Soon after crushing the Polish army and overrunning Poland in 1939, the German occupying forces began the extermination of psychiatric patients in the Warthegau, the region of Western Poland that was officially annexed to the Reich (Nasierowski, 2006). These so-called *Aktions* coincided with the beginning of the *T4 Aktion* in Germany proper (Seeman, 2005; Torrey and Yolken, 2010). The routine was similar in all Polish psychiatric hospitals in the Warthegau: first, Polish hospital directors were dismissed and German physicians were put in charge. Patients were forbidden to leave the hospital. They were divided into three categories: (a) Jewish patients, (b) chronically ill patients, (c) patients fit to work. The Jewish patients were shot straightaway (Strous, 2008).

Chronic patients were also murdered. In the first few months they were simply shot. Later, they were brought to sealed bunkers and asphyxiated with carbon monoxide gas. Later still, specially outfitted gas vans were used for the purpose, and the patients were gassed during the drive to what was to be their grave in a pre-selected forest site (Nasierowski, 2006). It is estimated that 13,000 patients were killed in Polish psychiatric hospitals during World War II. An additional 7000 are thought to have been deliberately slaughtered in family care centres, paediatric centres, rest homes, homes for the aged, and other similar locations (Nasierowski, 2006).

In the part of German-occupied Poland not incorporated into the Reich, the so-called 'General Gouvernement', the process was somewhat different. A German physician, Jost Walbaum, was put in charge of all hospitals (Sterkowicz, 1989), and existing heads of hospitals were kept in place, reporting to him.

Kaufman continued to manage the administrative affairs of Zofiówka. Some of his staff fled eastward in 1939, hoping for safety in Russia. They were replaced by medical personnel fleeing from the Warthegau. Zofiówka continued as a Jewish hospital. Jewish psychiatric patients from the rest of the General Gouvernement were transferred there and, initially, hospital discharges were still possible.

The year 1941

The Jewish ghetto in Otwock (which included Zofiówka) was established on 15 January 1941. Under the pretext of an alleged typhus epidemic, no one inside was allowed out. At that point, Zofiówka was sealed, even though more patients continued to be transferred in. Conditions deteriorated badly; the wards were overcrowded; patients had no heat, no food, no medicine. Out of a total of 406 Zofiówka patients, 210 died of hunger, infection and cold between 1 June and 16 November 1941 (Webb et al., 2009).

Until Operation Reinhard (the code name for the murder of all Jews in the General Gouvernement), paying guests from the ghettos of Otwock, Warsaw and Radom were permitted to come for a period of rest and recuperation at Zofiówka and the spas of Otwock. This was only possible for the very few Jews who were able to afford it. The funds, and also those from a café (Café Variété), set up on the grounds of Zofiówka in December 1941, were used to offset the costs of running the acute wards (Webb et al., 2009).

Stanisław Adler recalls in his book, *In the Warsaw Ghetto*:

Every one of us who had been living in the ghetto for a few months deserved, to a lesser or greater degree, to be sent to Zofiówka, but only the wealthy could afford that oasis of tranquillity. Before the war, nobody of sound mind would have gone near a mental hospital to find rest but now a stay in Zofiówka became most desirable to many people.

Not even the howling of the mentally ill day and night could disturb their rest, or the fact that the non-violent patients wandered in the gardens and woods and became involved in conversations with the paying guests. (Adler, 1982: 108)

Adam Czerniakow, head of the Warsaw ghetto Judenrat (Jewish Council), kept a daily diary in which he described brief periods of rest spent at Otwock, in its healing atmosphere, away from the pressures of his impossible role; for example: ‘July 13, 1940. I am to leave at noon for Otwock for a rest until tomorrow morning’ (Czerniakow, 1979: 174). The German authorities provided a car in which he could travel back and forth (Engelking and Leociak, 2009: 248), but not for long. Czerniakow committed suicide on 23 July 1942, the day after the beginning of the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto (Lichten, 1984: 88–89).

Adela Krukowska Tuwim (1872–1942)

When in Otwock, the Czerniakows may have visited Adela Tuwim, a relative by marriage. Much has been written about Adela recently (Kordel, 2013) because in Poland the year 2013 was the year of Julian Tuwim, her son and Poland’s great poet (Dembowski, 1956; Polskie Radio, 2013). Adela’s husband had died in 1935, and she became psychotically depressed; she attempted suicide and was admitted to Zofiówka when Jakub Frostig was still Director. She and her poet son had always been very close, but, in September 1939, Julian Tuwim left her behind when he and his wife fled Poland, ending up eventually in New York. Julian continued to send money, letters and parcels to be delivered to his mother, who lived outside the institution, in private care. She lived on Reymont Street, down the road from Zofiówka (which was at 10 Kochanowski Road) in the home of Apolonia Rybak, a paid caregiver. Reymont Street is a main street in Otwock,² and in 1941 the part of Reymont Street where the Rybaks lived was incorporated into the Otwock ghetto. Ms Rybak moved Adela out of the ghetto area to a house belonging to Mr Kazimierz Kowalowski, director of the Otwock fire brigade. In January 1942, Julian Tuwim in New York received a last letter from his mother. Not until after the War did he find out about her final days.

On 19 August 1942, all 8000 inhabitants of the Otwock ghetto were either shot on the spot or rounded up and put onto trains for Treblinka (Perechodnik, 1996: 33–50; Webb et al. 2009). The day before, word of this had reached the personnel of Zofiówka. Many of the staff and patients fled. Dr Kaufman and most of the other physicians took potassium cyanide after accompanying between 110 and 140 patients to the courtyard where they were summarily shot. The two Dr Millers escaped from Otwock and committed suicide in an adjoining town. The few patients who managed to escape into the Otwock countryside were found by local residents and most of them were handed over to the Germans (Engelking, 2011: 436–439).

It is not clear how Adela Tuwim evaded the round up and found her way back to the former Rybak house on Reymont Street. Calel Perechodnik, a Jewish policeman in the Otwock ghetto whose life, like that of other Jewish policemen, was temporarily spared during the August round up, wrote in his searing memoir of what went on in Otwock:

... the ghetto was surrounded by a mob that participated in a formal hunt on Jews, a hunt according to all the rules of hunting – with beaters or without them. Did many Jews perish at their hands? Countless ones! In the best case, the beaters took money from Jews, designed to lead them only to the gendarmes. It was in any case a sentence of death. (Perechodnik, 1996: 97)

Adela was found and shot. Her body was thrown off the balcony and landed in the front yard where she was buried by Apolonia Rybak and her son, Jerzy Rybak, a Polish partisan. After the war, Julian Tuwim exhumed her body and buried her in the family plot in the Jewish cemetery in Lodz (Zajac, 2013).

Ruins

The buildings of Zofiówka at 10 Kochanowski Road in Otwock have stood empty now for many years. They lie in ruins (Seeman, 2014) and have become a favourite destination for tourists, photographers and graffiti artists (Avalnferi, 2009–2013; Fotoimpresje, 2011; Połajewska, Siwińska and Utek, 2011). Moans and shrieks are heard among the ruins after dark, to the extent that the site has taken on a supernatural life. Ghosts, the souls of the dead, are reputed to roam the corridors: ‘... edging your way down into the blackness everything stands still. You can hear yourself breathing. Every little sound makes you jump. And once the torch beam settles on a set of mysterious metal hooks protruding from wall the tendency is to panic. All of a sudden, ghosts feel so real ...’ (Webber and Wight, 2013: 31 Oct.). Ghostly apparitions have even been filmed: a strange white light moving rapidly in the basement of an abandoned building was captured on camera (Gaęta, 2012: 17).

The significance of Zofiówka

The ruins of Zofiówka stand as a monument to barbarity. Impossible for psychiatry to understand is the fact that the perpetrators were not deviants, not psychologically impaired according to any standard definition. They did not have a history of childhood abuse. They were not under the influence of a powerful exogenous chemical. They were, by all accounts, ordinary people. Bandura (1999, 2002) suggests that collective violence results from a combination of factors. He classifies these factors as: (a) moral justification for the acts (‘we have to kill them before they kill us’), (b) displacement of responsibility (‘everyone was doing it; we were only following orders’), (c) delegation of the most barbarous tasks to others (Germans making Ukrainian and Lithuanian guards do the dirty work), and (d) dehumanizing the victims so that killing them was akin to stepping on a spider (‘nothing but scum and vermin’). The events of Zofiówka also remind us that, throughout the ages, the mentally ill have occupied society’s lowest rung (Bhugra, 1989: 1).

The ruins of Zofiówka lend themselves to a multiplicity of symbolic meanings (Dale and Burrell, 2011: 120). They represent the transitory nature of progress and achievement, suggesting that advances are eclipsed by deterioration and decline (pp. 111–12). Decline, nevertheless, holds a fascination of its own. Ruins attract viewers (p. 113). In the twenty-first century, people no longer come to Otwock for rest and cure but, rather, to marvel at the spectre of man’s inhumanity to man, so impossible to comprehend that it invokes, necessarily, the supernatural. Haunted houses in literature always have something sinister to hide (Tatar, 1981: 169). Zofiówka, too, has its unsavoury mysteries. Coming to terms with its history may help to disperse the ghosts.

Notes

1. Stefan Miller, referred to in various reports as Director, was actually the ward chief. Also on the medical staff was Miller’s wife, Irena Themerson Miller, sister of well-known *avant garde* film maker Stefan Themerson (Giżycki, 1987).
2. Named after Władysław Reymont (1867–1925), a Polish novelist who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1924. His best-known work is the four-volume novel *Chłopi* (The Peasants); Alexander, 2005: 28.

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