

## Medical Care in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski in the years 1939-1945

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### Summary:

At the beginning of war, numerous bombings caused heavy military and civilian casualties. Both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts administered first aid to the wounded. Military operations, poor living and sanitary conditions coupled with poor nutrition, promoted recurring epidemics of typhoid fever. Lack of medicines or vaccines made treatment of these diseases even more difficult.

Many distinguished doctors, deported from Great Poland, worked in hospitals in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski. Underground organizations were spontaneously formed and a lot of local doctors belonged to or collaborated with them.

This article presents the difficult working conditions of the medical personnel. Special attention is given to the dedicated service of Girl Scouts.

**Key words:** World War II, medical care, Girl Scouts, underground medical service, underground organizations.

### Medical care of the wounded in the first days of war

With the first hours of war came the necessity to organize the best possible medical care to all casualties, injured civilians and soldiers, throughout the country. It was no different for the Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski area. Members of the Polish Red Cross (PRC), with the help of doctors Maria Brandt, Stefan Lewandowski and Jan Pigulowski, prepared a medical-sanitary aid point in a railway station building.

The hospital in Ostrowiec and local pharmacies [1] equipped it with the necessary medication and dressing materials. Scouts and PCK medical service cared over the wounded. This situation lasted until September 4, 1939, when the Germans bombed the railway station. Anna Kolodziej, who was a senior girl scout at the time, describes these moments in the following way: "The sirens announced an air raid around noon. Bombs are falling onto both military transports;

one of them hits the railway station building. The airplanes return twice more. Finally, they fly away; the smoke and dust falls and cries of the wounded can be heard from the transport's side. The youth is the first to come to victims' aid.

Many people are killed, even more are injured and requiring assistance. There are 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds among these young boys and girls. All instructors, parents and railway personnel present at the scene run to help. Some dress the wounds, others transport the injured by carriages to a nearby hospital on Foch street. Some scenes are hard to believe: a young, 15-year-old boy scout, Celestyn Kaminski, with a Red Cross band around his arm, tries to stop the bleeding from a stump of soldier's leg, which was amputated above the knee. In a moment, the boy takes out a hunting knife, cuts the skin, puts a tourniquet on, dresses the wound and sends the wounded man to the hospital. Girl scouts take them to the hospital and stay there as volunteers. Help arrives at the station. Civil Defense

Staff sent professional medical aid. Nuns and priests came as well” [2].

Girl scouts served at the station for two more days. In the evening of September 6th, the commander of Scout War Emergency Service – Bogusława Januszówna, aka. „Wilga” – received an order from civilian and military authorities to resolve the Emergency Service.

As the medical and administrative staff of the Social Insurance Company was evacuated (including the hospital) on the same day and only one doctor, dr. Maria Brandt, remained at the scene, commander „Wilga” sent eight girl scouts aged 14-16 years to help at the hospital. A senior girl scout, Jadwiga Kolodziejówna, corroborates that in the following way: „[...] we, 14 – and 16-year-olds, were sent to help at the City Hospital by our commander, Bogusia Januszówna. There were four of us, youngest girl scouts, by the names of: Ania and Jadzia Kolodziejówny (14 and 15 years old), Wanda Sławska (16 years old) and Wanda Turczyńska (15 years old). Our qualifications included sanitary training by PRC and medical training in the Scouting and Guiding Association. Hospital staff was evacuated eastward.

Only one doctor remained, dr. Maria Brandt, one barber surgeon, one nurse practitioner who, with our help, were supposed to provide medical aid to the Polish soldiers fighting at the front of Ilza, people from a railway station in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski and civilians wounded during air raids. Twenty-four-hour-long duty periods were extremely difficult due to problems with sewerage system and lack of electrical lighting. Because of blackout, evening and nighttime surgeries were performed by the light of handheld oil lamps in the ground floor corridors and the cellar. We received the Germans at the hospital, burned our uniforms, including badges.

Only then, did we change from our scout uniforms into white coats. Germans took the first and second floor of the building and we moved our wounded to the ground floor and corridors. I will never forget participating in a shocking experience of leg amputation (stump and the rest of the leg in a bucket). German doctors helped with the operations. Dr. Brandt showed a great deal of dedication and endurance. One night,

after a month of hard work, dr. Brandt told us that we would not be able to work at the hospital anymore because of our young age. Then, as bombings subsided and conditions normalized, senior staff showed up.”[3]

Polish Red Cross became involved in care for the wounded. PCK was the only Polish organization that was resolved by the Germans. Its main activities included sanitary and medical care, registration and processing information. The Principal Protective Council (Rada Główna Opiekuńcza, RGO) supported these activities. When the first transport of people deported from Poznań, Kalisz and Konin arrived in Ostrowiec in 1939, PRC provided them, with the help from RGO, with accommodation and food. Additionally, it supplied children with clothing and medical aid [4].

## Health conditions in the city

War led to worsening of health situation of city residents. Lack of heating and warm clothing, poor nutrition and severe working conditions influenced an increase in incidence of diseases, particularly the gastrointestinal ones. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and typhus fever were spreading. Vaccines and medicines were scarce. In March 1940 the city center was considered a danger zone due to an epidemic of typhoid and typhus. Barbed wire and police posts surrounded it. Police issued passes and permits to move around at a set hour [5]

Town citizens were seized by fear of typhus fever epidemic, which engulfed neighboring villages. One of the exiled, Karol Kandziora, describes it in his memoirs in such manner:

„Hunger and cold are the two scourges that trouble us during winter. During the third severe winter in 1942 we are additionally tormented by a typhus fever epidemic. Villages near Świętokrzyskie Mountains are particularly affected. There is a detention camp for Russian prisoners, prisoners of war – starved and held there in severe conditions. They die in large numbers. A small group of them managed to escape. Lice left behind by the prisoners did their part. Mortality is high among the ill. Hospitals are overcrowded. Schools are closed to prevent spreading of the epidemic. Lack of

medicines and sera makes it difficult to combat this plague. Various other infection-related diseases multiply. Human bodies, exhausted and worn-out by long-lasting poverty and poor living conditions, are weak and susceptible to illness. Thanks to dr. Skibicki, also an expatriate, who bustled around patients with uttermost care, the evil was eliminated in a relatively short period of time” [6].

In 1939, Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski had 30 017 inhabitants including 36.9% of Jewish population. Very severe sanitary and medical conditions prevailed in this environment. In February 1940, a typhus fever epidemic spread in the Jewish district. Therefore, inhabitants were prohibited from leaving this place 24-hours per day except for two designated hours. A sanitary commission was appointed to combat the epidemic. An infectious diseases hospital, managed by dr. Dawid Majer, was organized in two prayer houses near the synagogue. The epidemic was extinguished in April 1940 [7].

Meanwhile, two railway transports of Jews expatriated from Vienna arrived in Ostrowiec. There were two doctors among them, who provided medical care to local community in exchange for food. They were located in several villages of the Opatow district. A ghetto, inhabited by 15.8 thousand Jews, was formed in 1941. A Jewish Council (Judenrat), appointed by the occupation government, was burdened with the responsibility of providing them medical care. Difficult sanitary conditions, population density and hunger promoted outbreaks of numerous diseases. As a result, a three-month-long typhus epidemic broke out in March 1942.

Two hospitals functioned in the ghetto. The last patients of the first hospital were murdered during pacification on October 10, 1942. Some of the healthy Jews were placed in a work camp near Ostrowiec Plants, on the meadows of Cze-stocice. The other ceased to exist in the spring of 1944 [8].

At the beginning of war the following doctors were working at the Jewish hospital: Maurycy Abramowicz (father), Abram Jelen, Ludwik Grabcki, the Malingers (he — an internal medicine specialist, she was a dentist), Ludwik Wacholder (dentist), Rosa Schier (otolaryngology specialist),

Moses Schier (radiologist), Kohas Szaffer (pediatrician) and Dawid Majer (gynecologist).

## Medical care for civilians

City authorities, supervised by a German commissioner, were obliged to provide medical and social aid to town citizens. A 60-bed hospital with three wards: internal medicine, surgery and gynecology, was located in a two-store building on Foch street. Pharmacy, an x-ray lab, physiotherapy and administration offices were also situated there. Dr. Bronislaw Wagner was the hospital director [10] and dr. Jozef Blazsur was its head doctor. Poznan University of Medical Sciences professor, Kazimierz Nowakowski, who had been exiled from Poznan, became the head of surgical ward. His assistant was dr. Roman Drews. Dr. Wacław Mayer, the head of a gynecology and obstetrics department in Poznan, was appointed as the head of gynecology ward [11].

### An expatriate described the hospital in his memoirs:

„A quire small, but modern hospital of the Social Insurance Company in Ostrowiec, was initially designed to contain 80 and later 100 beds. After being converted into a combat hospital, it had to accommodate 800 wounded, almost all of them severely, patients. Considering this degree of overcrowding, patients with light gunshot wounds were not admitted. After several days it was possible to reduce the load to 600 and from that point the number of wounded gradually decreased. Some were discharged and others were buried.

In December (1939), at the time of his stay, number of patients varied between 200 and 300. The most severe and the lightest cases departed and the heavily wounded, stable patients remained, although many of the disabled were to never recover. The hospital functioned in an increasingly more efficient manner and, from the initial bloody hell that lacked everything, transformed into a smoothly running mechanism. Beginning with the doctors, who raised their qualifications and skills astonishingly. This school released excellent surgeons, renown post-war doctors to organize aid provided by the society, which spontaneously contributed all that was needed, from simple but sufficient

means of preservation to the entire necessary equipment. Such solidarity and sense of selflessness were common.” [12]

In the summer of 1944, during fights at the Sandomierz outpost, Opatow hospital was cleared and its entire equipment, together with patients, invalids and elderly, were evacuated to Ostrowiec. Social Insurance Company Hospital, containing 120 beds, was overcrowded. There were 400 patients hospitalized there, including Jews.

Professor Franciszek Labedzinski, an expatriate from Poznan, was the director of the infectious diseases hospital in Ostrowiec. Hospital staff during years 1944-45 included: the head of the department, assistant, head nurse, three nurses, an intern, paramedic and three charwomen; hospital administration employed: a commissary, a janitor and an office boy. Hospital properties were cared for by a matron, a cook and a kitchen aid [13, 14].

In 1933, the Health Care Management Office was renamed a Social Insurance Company. Mieczyslaw Bogdanski became its director and dr. Stefan Szybner – the head doctor. During occupation, Company's property was only slightly affected, but the number of doctors who worked there decreased, as some of them followed mobilization orders and traveled eastward at the commencement of war. Jewish doctors: Leon Bajgelman, Abram Jelen and Moses Schiber (who later returned), were among them. The Social Insurance Company encompassed the entire Opatow County. Dr. Jan Pigulowski was its director during the time of occupation, dr. Stefan Szybner was the head doctor and Leonid Zurakowski was the country doctor.

The Germans appointed a commissioner, Teodor Schroeder, to hold control over the Company. In addition, a PRC facility was located in Ostrowiec. Many doctors, besides working in a hospital, had their own practices. After moving the Jewish doctors into the ghetto, the number of staff decreased. Shortage of medical staff was partially filled by employing several exceptional specialists resettled to Ostrowiec from Poznan [15,16].

The following doctors worked in Ostrowiec during the second World War: Maria Brandt (surgeon), Adam Burda (dermatologist), Stanislaw

Chudzicki (internal medicine specialist), Włodzimierz Doktor (surgeon), Jozef Duda (internal medicine specialist), Eugeniusz Dziewulski, Izabela Filus (internal medicine specialist), Zygmunt Filus (internal medicine specialist), Aurelia Foremniak (internal medicine specialist), Mieczyslaw Karwacki (internal medicine specialist), Eustachy Kawinski, dr. Kusmierczyk-Bielski (gynecologist), dr. Lesmanowa (gynecologist), Stefan Lewandowski, Zofia Machowska, Maciej Morawiecki (gynecologist), Roman Partyka (surgeon), Maria Piotrowicz (internal medicine specialist), Krystyna Rach-Mayer, Waclaw Mayer, Smolarkiewicz, Zbigniew Smoliński (pediatrician), Bronislaw Wagner, Zygmunt Weglinski, dr. Zbychczak (otolaryngology specialist), Adam Zarychta (internal medicine specialist), Adam Wardzynski, Jan Jurek, Leonid Zurakowski<sup>17</sup>. Pharmacies in Ostrowiec were managed by Henryk Widmanski M.Sc., Mr. Palkezy M.Sc., and Mr. Wagner M.Sc.

They supplied both the hospitals and the partisans with dressing materials and medicines.

Many civilians from Ostrowiec owed their lives to the hard, responsible and often dangerous work of those people.

## Underground health care in Ostrowiec region

Underground organizations sprung up spontaneously. Polish Peasants' Battalions, People's Army, People's Guard, National Armed Forces and National Military Organization were formed. ZWZ-AK was the largest underground structure in terms of personnel and organization. Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski, under code name „100”, was a ZWZ-AK headquarter for the Opatow region [18].

Germans controlled health care throughout the war. Medical personnel were obliged to inform the Gestapo of all wounded patients. Failure to do so or providing aid to the wounded and the Jews was punished by death or deportation to a concentration camp. Most doctors in Ostrowiec belonged to or collaborated with the resistance. Risking their lives, doctors helped everyone regardless of origin or religion. They dressed the wounded partisans in their private practices, houses and in hospitals. They traveled to field

hospitals and hideouts, operated with their own instruments and treated using their own reserves of medicines. Many nurses not only cared for the wounded and sick partisans, not only assisted surgeries, but also served as liaison and colporteurs, transported weapons for the resistance and conducted underground medical training under the auspices of PRC.

The following doctors actively participated in the resistance: Roman Drews, Leonid Zurkowski, Zygmunt Filus, Zofia Machnicka, Aurelia Foremniak, Eugeniusz Dziewulski, Stefan Lewandowski, and dr Krzemien. Underground paramedic training was conducted by dr Helena Wolf, aka. „Anka”, the head of the Regional Sanitary Service in Ostrowiec [19].

Despite German supervision employees would receive sick leave, referrals to sanatorium treatment, certificates of false employment as nurses and orderlies, which protected against deportation and forced labor.

Unfortunately, many health care employees fell victims to repressions. Among 29 hostages hanged in the market square on September 30, 1942 were the following people: Jozef Duda (town doctor), Witold Wroblewski (Social Insurance Company secretary), Henryk Widmanski (Company pharmacist) and his son, Jan Widmanski, Jozef Dziennik and Jozef Szymczyk (Company employees), Zenon Smolenski (owner of pharmaceutical storehouse and member of Polish Military Organization) and Jozef Trepczynski (Head of the Municipal Social Welfare Board).

**Karol Kandziora, a man resettled from Great Poland, reminisces in his book *Memoirs from exile*:**

„on September 30, 1942 twenty-nine innocent people were hanged at the market square. One of the convicts, Dr. Duda, was brought from a Gestapo prison, where he had been held from the moment of his arrest. He was so beaten, he could not walk on his own. On the eve of the execution he was transported to the municipal

prison. Tortured bodies were hanging in public until the evening. They were later thrown on a car platform and taken away to a common grave prepared by the cemetery. The carriage driver recounted that before being thrown into the grave, clothes were torn off of the bodies, which remained in shirts and socks only. Dr. Duda's entire body wore the signs of terrible beating and tortures” [20].

Fates of many other doctors were equally dramatic. Dr. F. Grabecki and dr. A. Chmielnicki, drafted in September 1939, died in Katyn. Dr. Włodzimierz Doktor and dr. Grzyb, who came from Szewna near Ostrowiec, were arrested by the Gestapo on June 11, 1940 and sent to a concentration camp in Oranienburg, where they later died [21].

In summary, it must be said that medical care in Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski was organized very well. There was no shortage of doctors, as the absentees were replaced by those resettled from Poznan and Vienna. Medical and nursing assistance reached the civilian town citizens, the Jews closed in the ghetto and the partisans hiding in the forests. Despite enemy repressions, actions of the medical personnel were not limited to treatment as means of saving lives. The work of girl scouts deserves special recognition, as they provided aid to the wounded and sick civilians and prisoners of war under severe conditions.

Although contact with mutilation and death was incredibly traumatic for them, they helped the doctors with great courage, responsibility and dedication. They organized escapes from the hospital for lightly wounded soldiers, saving them from certain death. After the Warsaw uprising they organized an infectious diseases hospital for the evacuated inhabitants of the capitol.

The roles of all those people, both the known and the unknown by their names, who helped people come into this world, recover, survive the war or die with dignity during the inhumane times of World War II, cannot be overestimated. The least we owe them is our memory.

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