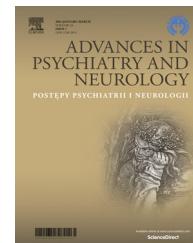


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Review/ Praca poglądowa

Polish psychologists towards eugenic projects[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The revival of disputes on establishing eugenics as an independent scholarly discipline triggered current discussions on euthanasia, cloning and in vitro fertilisation. At the edge of the 19th and 20th centuries, people marked with eugenic risk were considered unproductive in terms of the state undisturbed functioning. Usually, such assumption was enough to have the stigmatised person forcibly sterilised.

After WW I, Polish elites encountered the modern idea that the newly born Polish state had a chance of fast development thanks to eugenics. Soon, the negative one that applied much cheaper methods replaced positive eugenics. It was enough to legitimate sterilisation, giving consent to contracting marriages and having abortions in order to successively eliminate the factors contributing to 'the deterioration of hereditary traits'. In 1930–1935, large efforts were made to pass a Polish eugenic law, which eased off a little following Hitler's signing the Nuremberg Laws. Negative consequences of eugenic laws were more and more explicit, and discussions with regard to passing a similar legislation in Poland were carried on until WW II.

How is it possible that, despite considerable pressure supported with examples of smooth passing the eugenic laws by other states' parliaments, the Polish eugenic law was never passed?

It is hard to justify any form of accepting negative eugenics taking place after 1936. Regardless of the motives underlying the tacit attitude of the Polish psychologists towards eugenic projects, from the time perspective their silence should be assessed negatively.

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[☆] The paper is an enriched synthesis of the views presented in the texts of T. Rzepa and co-authors listed in the bibliography.

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Introduction

In the context of the current discussions on such vital problems as euthanasia, cloning, in vitro fertilisation, etc., there is a revival of disputes initiated by Francis Galton (1822–1911) from the moment of establishing eugenics as an independent scholarly discipline. Examination of mental talents and their inheritance in famous families led Galton to a conclusion that a nation's intellectual level may be raised by perfecting the innate traits of its members. He believed the idea should be promoted by the national government, providing financial support to marriages contracted by genetically valuable persons (positive eugenics), at the same time not permitting marriages between people without such values or the disabled (negative eugenics, which later – mainly in the Third Reich – evolved into the racial hygiene). Galton [1], being a declared supporter of the positive eugenics, meant to have reproduction controlled in such a way so that each subsequent generation could excel the previous one, inheriting the valuable traits that guarantee better adaptation to the environment and elimination of negative genetic deviations [1].

In the world

Thus, the presented assumptions of eugenics could hardly be considered dangerous by the citizens living at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in view of the fact that, according to the cultural tradition prevailing customs and religious standards, parents were expected to thoughtfully participate in the process of selecting spouses for their offspring. From that perspective, Galton's eugenic ideas may have been treated by his contemporaries as a scientific proof justifying the tradition of arranging marriages.

The eugenic ideas, referring to the social Darwinism propagated by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), met with a particularly favourable response in the United States flooded by massive immigration. It was mainly Charles Davenport (1866–1944), a biologist researching the laws and limits of inheritance, who contributed to the assessment and selection of newcomers. In 1910, he founded the Eugenics Record Office – an institution for gathering statistical data on genetically impaired families. It was managed by Harry Laughlin (1880–1943), a teacher of agriculture experimenting with cattle and maize breeding, who in 1936 was awarded *honoris causa* title by the university in Heidelberg for his work in the science of 'race hygiene'. Davenport and Laughlin had properly trained pollsters who visited mental hospitals, prisons, orphanages, hospitals or schools for the blind and the deaf to identify useless individuals and then to segregate and stigmatise them. Usually, it was enough to have the stigmatised person forcibly sterilised, which had been legitimised in the state of Indiana since 1907, in Connecticut – since 1909 and successively in the other states and other countries [2–5].

People marked with eugenic risk were the ones considered unproductive in terms of the state undisturbed functioning, usually chronically ill (epilepsy, mental illnesses, heart

diseases, tuberculosis, etc.) and venereal diseases (mainly syphilis and gonorrhoea). This category also included the so called sexual perverts, the blind, the deaf and the mute, the mentally and physically disabled, alcoholics, addicted tobacco smokers, drug addicts, beggars, criminals, prostitutes and also the poor and persons with 'unfavourable ethnic origin'. At the same time, they tended to disregard the fact there was no evidence that defects, diseases or even bad habits or low financial status may be transmitted by genes [6, 7].

In the atmosphere of general support, eugenics advocates were perceived as progressives caring for the citizens' health status and the nations' adaptive capabilities. They tended to treat their mission as a noble thing to do, and intentions harboured by most of them had nothing in common with the Nazism, which is nowadays associated – stereotypically and irresponsibly – with eugenics and its supporters [4, 5]. Naturally, noble intentions may not be ascribed to those eugenics supporters who, after passing on (1 January 1934) the German law on "Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring," lobbied for passing similar laws in their own countries, even though they realised the meaning of the growing number of court decisions regarding sterilisation and the volume of cruel consequences. At that time, it was already common knowledge that the law served the state, but not the nation. After all, journalists in the Third Reich proudly and openly quoted the eugenics office supervisor, Prof. Fritz Lenz (1887–1976), who said, *inter alia*, that sterilisation is far less expensive for the state than supporting the people affected by hereditary diseases. They also quoted the professor's calculations, according to which in order to obtain a really valuable Germanic race, it would be necessary to sterilise all the "cacogenic" citizens, i.e. one tenth of the whole German society [8, 9].

It was known then that the mortality rate during the sterilisation process, often carried out in an unprofessional and unhygienic manner, was very high. It was also known that sterilisation may lead to serious behavioural disorders and that there are no genes responsible for inheriting unemployment, poverty, orphanhood, indecency or unwillingness to work [5]. There were even calculations saying that even if it was planned to achieve a 4-fold decrease in the number of cases of manic-depressive psychosis (i.e. from 0.04% to 0.01%), which in those times was indisputably considered hereditary, "it would be necessary to perform diligent sterilisation of 50 generations of the sick, which would take 1250 years" [10]. Therefore, the negative side of the negative eugenics was already revealed in the 30s of the 20th century. However, all the information and findings did not stop the eugenics transforming into *Rassenhygiene*, especially in the areas seized and occupied by Nazis during WW II.

In Poland...

Just after WW I, the Polish elites encountered the modern idea that the Polish state reborn in 1918 had a chance of fast development thanks to eugenics. Answering the question what needs to be done to make it true, Leon Wernic

(1870–1953), a venereologist and the leading supporter and promoter of eugenics, specified the following proposals:

- (1) Sustaining 'appropriate population density, sufficient for the country's defence';
- (2) Supporting 'reproduction in positive, talented families' by legislation and appropriate means;
- (3) Limiting 'reproduction of degenerated individuals, idiots, cretins, criminals and heavily burdened' [11].

There is only a thin red line between nobleness and wickedness, between positive eugenics and the negative one as well as between the negative eugenics and *Rassenhygiene*. Quite soon, it turned out that implementing proposal number two was too costly. Equally soon, it was found out that elevated deliberations on 'the nation's revival' or 'implementing a rational population policy' may easily be replaced with the first proposal, defined as bringing up 'people to fight', i.e. soldiers [12]. As a result of this reduction in proposals, soon the positive eugenics was replaced by the negative eugenics that applied much cheaper methods. It was enough to legitimate sterilisation, giving consent to contracting marriages and having abortions in order to successively eliminate the factors contributing to 'the deterioration of hereditary traits' [11].

To that end, in more than a favourable atmosphere, the Polish Eugenic Society for Fighting Degenerative Diseases was established in 1922. The Society was at first dominated by physicians, especially venereologists and dermatologists. Soon, the Society was joined by renowned psychiatrists (e.g. Jan Mazurkiewicz, Witold Łuniewski, Oskar Bielawski, Jan Nelken) and anthropologists (e.g. Jan Mydlarski, Kazimierz Stołyhwo). The Society's members included also politicians and social activists, women's movement activists and writers (e.g. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, Jan Lechoń, Antoni Słonimski). In 1939, the Society had more than a dozen branches and nearly ten thousand members, the most active ones being psychiatrists. The Society members were even the successive ministers of health, i.e. Witold Chodźko and Tomasz Janiszewski, who served in 1918–1924. Also the Ministry of Health employees belonged to the Society. Therefore, it is not surprising that the drafts of the Polish eugenic law received exceptional attention and support in the Ministry, and that the Society regularly obtained considerable funding for its development. Due to the subsidies from the state budget, the Society members gave lectures, published their own brochures and magazines ("Mental Hygiene" and "Race Issue from the Point of View of Social Health," renamed as "Polish Eugenics"); also, they participated in international eugenic conventions [13, 14].

In the years 1930–1935, intensive efforts were made to pass a Polish eugenic law, which eased off a little following Hitler's signing the Nuremberg Laws (15 September 1935). Nevertheless, the Nazi law on sterilisation was published almost immediately in "Mental Hygiene" [6]. The law gave way to unlimited possibilities of abuse and concerned everyone that "most likely could be expected to have offspring burdened with serious hereditary defects, physical or spiritual" [6].

Even though negative consequences of implementing eugenic laws were more and more explicit, discussions and

heated disputes with regard to passing a similar legislation in Poland carried on until the onset of WW II. Leon Wernic [7, 11, 15, 16], the leader of the eugenic movement, was particularly eager and persistent in lobbying for the law. He was supported by representatives of the intellectual elite as well as politicians and social activists. Therefore, a question arises how it was possible that, despite the considerable pressure supported with examples of smooth passing the eugenic laws by other states' parliaments, the Polish eugenic law was never passed.

There were surely many factors contributing to that; the major of them including the invincible attitude of the powerful Church and the members of parliament representing the national movement [9, 10, 12]. These circles criticised the successive drafts of eugenic laws as non-compliant with the natural laws, stating that based on results of research on animals, they were thoughtlessly applied to humans. It was said openly that the law was a slight to 'personal, family and national life' of the society, infringing the fundamental right to freedom.

Generally anti-racial attitudes were dominant in the Polish society [9] and they were effectively supported by the media [17]. The public was aware of anti-sterilisation protests of German scholars and scientists as well as of the research results proving that sterilisation may lead to mental disturbances and social pathologies (recurrence, addictions and prostitution). Journalists made jokes, positively received by the public, and mocked 'racial purity and hygiene'. Here are some examples of daily newspaper titles: "What kind of nose did your aunt have?; What should a 'purely-bred' German bride look like?; Nordics' surnames end with '-ski'".

Thirdly, even though Polish psychiatry was under a powerful influence of German psychiatry – since many doctors obtained their degrees in Germany, where they also had their clinical internships and apprenticeships [18] – most of them rejected the Nazi variant of eugenics. The fundamental debate on the eugenic law was held in 1936, in the course of the 16th Scholarly Convention of Polish Psychiatrists. That was the time when the leading psychiatrists – Witold Łuniewski (1881–1943) and Jan Mazurkiewicz (1871–1947) – openly pointed out the cruelty of the German eugenic law and undermined the hypothesis on inheriting psychosis [19].

Voice of the Polish psychologists

In the 20s and 30s of the 20th century, opinions expressed by psychologists on socially relevant issues were more and more often considered binding. In Poland, most heed was paid to opinions expressed by renowned psychology professors, such as Władysław Witwicki (1878–1948), Stefan Baley (1885–1952) and Stefan Blachowski (1889–1962). However, they did not take a stand on the issue of the eugenic law. Is their silence to be understood as their lack of interest in the problem or their consent to resolving the issue? Although there are no sources of information that would make it possible to answer this question, we may reflect on the reasons for that silence as they may also help explain

similar attitudes taken by the leading psychologists in other countries.

As a result of the *Zeitgeist* of that period, the Polish psychological practice was a novice and actually it was developing successfully only in two areas, i.e. (1) schooling psychology, extending its area of interest to occupational psychology; and (2) psychometrics focusing on working people and work environment, including labour hygiene. The current of mental hygiene developed separately, partially overlapping with the above-mentioned areas of psychological practice, psychiatry and academic psychology. The curriculum of university studies in psychology did not prepare for practising the profession of a psychologist. Meanwhile, there was a fierce fight between the supporters and opponents of applying psychological tests, while the whole world was already test-crazy. Thanks to several courageous psychiatrists and psychologists, psychoanalysis started to take its first steps in Poland [18, 20]. In the light of such a psychologically immature spirit of the times, the first argument justifying the silence of the psychologists regarding eugenic law must refer to their indispensable concentration on key occupational problems. Consequently, even the socially relevant issues were pushed aside and treated as the realm of lawyers and politicians.

Polish psychologists tended to believe it was right to take the so called non-interference attitude, the precursor of which was Kazimierz Twardowski (1866–1938), the founder of Polish humanities and the Lwów–Warszawa school of logic. He believed that a scholar's behaviour should be a proof that he has a full control of his self-realisation as a scholar and as a citizen, while both roles cannot be merged. As opposed to scholarship which is common property – he maintained – one's worldview is a personal matter of each man. Therefore, a scholar may not invoke their worldview in the course of performing their academic tasks, nor may they prove that their worldview is right by referring to their own scholarly authority [21]. Thus, psychologists taking the non-interference attitude were interested in social and political issues only in private capacity, refusing to engage publicly in matters, such as the eugenic law.

The reason for the silence kept by the psychologists may have been that – similarly as the social activists – they, too, perceived mainly the positive aspects of the eugenic movement. And so, they saw the possibility to enrich the public awareness, health care extension, hygiene improvement as well as crime and poverty control. In this context, the psychologists may have even felt obliged to support the eugenics promoters. After all, they talked about improving the quality of the nation's life, which corresponded to the main ideas of the renowned mental hygiene movement, to which the psychologists subscribed. Similar support was given by the psychologists to psychometrics and career counselling which were developing at that time. Maybe their faith in positive results being the outcome of the subsequent useful initiative obscured their ability to discern the dark side of eugenics?

Psychologists may have assumed that the problems of eugenics and the law demanded by eugenics supporters fell within the area of interest of psychiatry since psychiatrists

dominated the circles of the eugenic activists. However, this argument is less convincing since only some articles of the known eugenic laws regarded illnesses (including mental illnesses), while the majority regarded psycho-social problems underlying adverse phenomena, such as conflicts, ostracism, discrimination, stigmatising or prejudice.

We may assume that the psychologists were convinced that the eugenic ideas and measures were right, seeing examples of improvements made in the area of the society and state functioning, coming from the countries which had already implemented the eugenic law. Consequently, they decided that demonstrating an opposing attitude would be tantamount to parochialism, conservatism and having no understanding of progress; what is more, it could be considered as reluctance to support the nation's development and the Polish state's interest.

Even if we assumed that the reconstructed reasons for the silence were noble and they justified the Polish psychologists, this excuse would have applied only until the mid-thirties of the 20th century, when the social, medical and psychological consequences of implementing the Nuremberg Laws became known, including the racist law on the Reich citizenship, protection of German blood and virtue. Year by year more and more information was coming on the developments in (not only) the Third Reich with regard to the persons to whom the eugenic laws applied. Therefore, it is hard to justify any (also tacit) form of accepting negative eugenics as well as the criminal, though legal, activities connected with it, taking place after 1936. Regardless of the motives underlying the tacit attitude of the Polish psychologists towards eugenic projects, from the time perspective their silence should be assessed negatively. Sadly, this time they failed...

Authors' contributions/ Wkład autorów

TR – study design, data collection nad interpretation, acceptance of final manuscript version, literature search. MS – study design, data interpretation, literature search.

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Ethics/ Etyka

The work described in this article have been carried out in accordance with The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) for experiments involving humans; EU Directive 2010/63/EU for animal experiments; Uniform Requirements for manuscripts submitted to Biomedical journals.

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