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Aleksander Rosner (1867–1930)

Aleksander Rosner was one of the most progressive Polish gynaecologists and obstetricians, a professor, and for many years the head of a university department and clinic. He had been apparently interested in medicine above all else from early childhood, and this is far from strange given the family traditions. Aleksander's father was Antoni Rosner, a professor of Dermatology at the Jagiellonian University, his grandfather on his mother's side, Dawid, was known for his surgical prowess. His uncles Maksymilian and Ignacy were also doctors. The first had a practice in Kołomyja, the second was a town doctor in Lvov. In other words, Aleksander almost grew up with medicine from the very cradle. Indeed, the Rosner household itself was an exceptional one, for here science met with art, medical professors with literary figures and artists; famous journalists and actors were also frequent visitors. Anton's wife, Amelia née Ohrenstein was very influential in the formation of the children's character, as a ward of Countess Marcelina Czartoryska, she was a woman of exceptional intelligence and extensive knowledge, who devoted a lot of time to charity and social works.

The marriage was to produce many children. Aleksander, the second in terms of age, had six siblings – two brothers and four sisters. He was born in Cracow on the 26th of February 1867. His initial education was at home under the guidance of his mother and governess; being from very early childhood an

avid reader he would lap up the interesting conversations of the adults around. Later he became a pupil of the famous St. Anna Secondary School, where he was to sit his school leaving certificate. Immediately afterwards he enrolled at the Medical Faculty of the Jagiellonian University. He distinguished himself through his straightforward diligence and conscientiousness, his desire to prove to himself – and maybe first and foremost to his colleagues, that the son of a professor was not studying medicine simply by chance and because of family connections. That explains why he obtained the highest possible marks for all his examinations – *maxima cum laude*. He was to finish his medical degree in 1889 and on the 1st of January 1890 he was awarded a Ph.D. in the medical sciences. He set off immediately on an academic tour of Europe, visiting the leading research centres in Berlin, Paris and London. Having good marks and a most excellent opinion he was given a state scholarship. He was as equally attracted by the fundamental sciences, particularly physiology, as the clinical ones. As his contemporaries recalled, Aleksander was most himself when doing everything at once. Full of wavering and indecision, he saw that he would have to quickly find the right route and help was to unexpectedly come from outside. For ultimately it was to be the opinion of Professor Maurycy Madurowicz that swayed matters – a frequent visitor to the Rosner house. Madurowicz advised the young doctor to specialise in gynaecology and obstetrics. Aleksander was persuaded, deciding initially on a one-year preparatory term of practice in the surgical clinic run at the time by the brilliant surgeon Prof. Ludwik Rydygier. Having gained sufficient experience he obtained an assistant post at the clinic of Professor Madurowicz. A period of intensive clinical work had arrived and the time to gain experience. This was to see fruit in the post-doctoral thesis he successfully defended in 1895 and the very high mark he obtained. He subsequently set forth on another trip of a few months, around the leading clinical centres in Europe. Upon his return, he gained an assistant professorship with the right to lecture, albeit without proper remuneration. His first unsupervised post was at the School of Midwifery.

It soon became apparent that Aleksander Rosner was able to combine medical practice with academic work, teaching with organisational duties. His rapid advancement was consequently of no surprise. Already in 1902 he was an associate professor while, following the death of Prof. Henryk Jordan, he was entrusted with the Jagiellonian University's gynaecology-obstetrics department and clinic in 1907. In conjunction with this he was appointed a full professor. Aleksander Rosner was to head the department and clinic right up until his death in 1930. He was twice honoured with the prestigious function of dean of the University's Medical Faculty.

He devoted almost every moment of his free time when not performing medical matters, to the construction of a new clinic building. The conditions

in which patients were treated and in which they gave birth were difficult and at time tragic in their deficiencies. Cramped and damp rooms in no way reflected the requirements of modern medicine. There was no doubt that only a purpose-built and specially designed building could meet doctor and patient expectations, and first and foremost the expectations of Aleksander Rosner himself. The first time the matter had been seriously considered and started to take shape was in 1904 when Prof. Henryk Jordan was still alive. The special commission called into being then had A. Rosner among its members. Following Henryk Jordan's death, it was to be the responsibility of Rosner to first obtain permission for construction, then to draw up the necessary designs and plans, finally to purchase a suitable plot in relation to localisation and size. For it was well understood that a significant undertaking like this would have to serve many generations, and last for years. This was understood by the Jagiellonian University in giving their support to the project; equally favourable was the response to the idea on the part of the Cracow municipal authorities. In 1910, after numerous attempts and negotiations, an almost ideal location was found on the meadows bordering the university botanical gardens, amidst trees and orchards. And then, just when everything was almost ready, Vienna unexpectedly opposed the project. The dynamics and scale of the project had obviously been noticed in the Habsburg capital, where it was considered that a 'provincial' university was not worthy of such an investment. When, finally, after months of discussion, explanations, negotiations and pressure the building project was agreed to and passed, World War I broke out. Everything was suspended given the dramatic events of the moment. The funds that had been allocated were withdrawn and quickly transferred to the needs of the army.

The end of the war and the restoration of the Polish state after over 120 years of partition, placed the problem of building the clinic in a new and better light. As the initial plans had disappeared without a trace during the war years, A. Rosner found two first-rate masters – Stryzkievicz and Stryjeński for the project. He set off with them on a trip around Europe to find suitable models for the clinic to be based on. Finally a design was to be drafted that exceeded anything that had previously been known. This was the quintessence of existing modern solutions, a well thought-through construction, one that was functional, done with flourish, and situated in a splendid garden location. Aleksander Rosner canvassed for every amount, for every vote favourable to the project, gaining the support of Józef Piłsudski himself, the head of state. There were, however, difficulties almost from the very start. The size of the undertaking to this day leaves an impression, at the time it almost overwhelmed one with its magnitude. As is always the case, the envious and jealous are never far away from such matters. Rosner was personally accused of creating a 'veritable palace' at a moment when widespread poverty raged,

that the real clinical needs were much less and that the entirety was rather the manifestation of excessive, over exuberant ambition. These accusations and ordinary caustic remarks certainly affected A. Rosner but by ignoring them he consistently overcame the various difficulties and assembled subsequent sources of finance. Delays could not be avoided, however, and the construction work several times came to a complete halt. Thanks to his will and determination it was resumed every time. Unfortunately, the professor was not to see his masterpiece in its full glory. As if with foresight he was supposed to have said 'I feel that I'm erecting this not for myself.' No one took these works seriously. Aleksander Rosner died suddenly of a heart attack, on the morning of the 6th of January 1930. The building work was only to be completed in 1936. War was to break out three years later. The building survived and serves patients and those giving birth to this day.

A. Rosner's academic interests were broad. He paid special attention to matters connected with physiology and the pathophysiology of the reproductive organs. He also involved himself in various questions of their anatomy and developmental histology. He was able, as few others could, to combine the basic and experimental sciences with medical practice and clinical theory. Hence one may easily talk of a multidisciplinary approach, using the terminology of today: an interdisciplinary approach to the research he undertook.

One should mention here that some of his most modern and original contributions were those that derived from many years of investigation and clinical observation, resulting in new perceptions in the field of the structure and constitution of female reproductive organs. Starting out from the results presented earlier by Loewenfeld, Martius and Tandler, and presenting his own from this field of achievement, as well as critically confronting them with those premises found in the world subject literature, he questioned the concepts in force for constitution (structure) as advanced by Sigmund Freud. Aleksander Rosner claimed that the constitution is for each individual an unchanged value. What can and does undergo change should be related to the concept of condition. He based his statements on the then established evolutionary relations as well as on the range and character of the neurohumoral correlation.

He based his concept of constitution (structure) thus understood on three fundamental groups of features, these being morphological, functional and evolutionary. These were the starting point for a correct establishment of the border between norms and pathology in the construction and functioning of the female sexual organs. This in turn led to practical clinical conclusions. He presented his views in a separate monograph entitled *Studja nad konstytucją narządów płciowych kobiet* [Studies in the construction of women's sexual organs] published in 1918. At the same time a French translation appeared, thanks to which it gained a justifiable international dimension.

Aleksander Rosner was aware that his understanding of theoretical questions could not be considered final. It was rather a research proposition which strove to modernise clinical diagnosis, with an unequivocal pointer as to the individualised nature of each case. For these were not dogmatic solutions but merely methodological proposals, ones open and waiting for all necessary changes and, as the future was to prove, changes were necessary. There can be no doubt whatsoever though that, thanks to A. Rosner, gynaecology gained an important and valuable basis for a modern and comprehensive look at the subject of the physiological function and pathological dysfunction of women's reproductive organs.

A. Rosner was to use a classification method derived from the theoretical basis of constitution in his research into the development and clinical picture of the myoma of the uterus. In the work entitled *Mięśniaki macicy i ich usadowienie w świetle nauki o konstytucji* [The myoma of the uterus and their location in the light of knowledge on constitution] he proposed the thesis that their development and positioning are strictly linked to the given constitutional type. He also saw the possibility for the occurrence of such dependencies in other diseases, including cancerous illnesses above all.

A. Rosner was to receive much recognition for his experimental and comparative attempts to establish the causes and mechanisms responsible for the development of twins. In particular his experimental works on the females of South American armadillos was to gain notable positive appraisal, positively evaluating both the methods and the independent conclusions drawn by the Polish academic. Towards the end of his life Rosner chose another research field, one connected with the problems of fertility in the light of research into metabolisms. He attempted to show in these the relationship which may occur between obesity and disturbances in the menstrual cycle, as well as the tendency for spontaneous abortions. He also referred to the phenomenon of infertility and sexual frigidity as a result of being overweight.

Of notable significance was his research into the introduction of the exposure of a uterus attacked by a cancerous process to an absorbed dose (of radium). He extensively corresponded with European academics for the whole of his life, including with the two-time Nobel Prize winner Maria Skłodowska-Curie. Thanks to her support and engagement A. Rosner obtained in 1928 100 mg of radium and, as the first in Poland, used it in the treatment of cancers. In this light, one needs to see him as one of the pioneers of gynaecological oncology in Poland.

It is impossible not to talk of the gynaecological-obstetric surgery which A. Rosner so rated. In his opinion even the best theoretical scheme or the most progressive experimental works gave little to medicine if they did not find an application in practice, at the bed of the patient. Having experienced

a short although most successful surgical internship he followed with interest the latest reports in the world subject literature. It was A. Rosner himself who conducted the first resection of a uterus using the Wertheim Method, as equally giving a series of important pieces of advice modifying the procedures for the removal of the uterus using laparotomy.

A. Rosner certainly did not neglect his teaching duties, considering the teaching of students and young people to be one of the most important of his professional obligations. It was with the very idea of students themselves that he wrote the most excellent academic textbook, many times cited as a model, *Ginekologia* [Gynaecology]. In the introduction the author wrote:

It seemed to me that every Pole should bring to the miraculously resurrected Fatherland as a gift the labour of his professional work. My offering is modest: for its force and magnitude as a work would only be the sum of the efforts of individuals. (A. Rosner *Ginekologia – podręcznik...*, [from:] W.P. Kolka, *Klinika Położniczo-Ginekologiczna...*, p. 69)

The logical arrangements of the chapters, the accessible language, the mastery in the presentation of materials and the ability to present the complicated in a simple and accessible way made this book one of the most modern works of its day, made it into a monument around which and out of which an entire clinical school were to be well educated. Everyone who read it would have to marvel at the author's talent and craft even today, while subsequent generations of academic teachers still have to measure themselves with the Rosner tradition in creating their own materials and textbooks. This was foreseen by Władysław Jakowicki, who wrote: 'This textbook will be for many a year the staple work for Polish doctors and students, and for the teaching world – it will be a model for how works of this kind should be written.' One may confidently state that with this splendid publication A. Rosner left himself a lasting monument in the history of medical teaching in Poland. When academic circles, in sorrow and reflection, bid farewell to this prematurely deceased professor, the eminent anatomist Kazimierz Kostanecki, speaking on their behalf, said about the departed A. Rosner:

The exceptionally rare combination of the great academic and the teacher of genius. For numerous of his pupils the said lectures will be remembered, delivered with an exceptional gift for words, an understanding of the psychology of the listener, bursting with dazzling comparison, exact and logical and yet with it engaging, captivating, illuminating with their true pearls of brilliant and refined wit. (K. Piotrowski, *Ś.p. Aleksander Rosner...*, p. 3)

Such was he remembered, such did he remain in human memory. And this is hardly surprising. He was a splendid speaker, and his talent as a lecturer was equalled by his prowess with the pen. He was erudite, well read in Polish poetry and literature, able to quote extensive fragments of Mickiewicz,

Słowacki, Asnyk and Wyspiański by heart; he aroused admiration with the elegance and pertinence of his sentences, his startling punch lines, the mastery by which he conducted conversation. In the obituary published in the pages of *Nowiny Lekarskie* was written: 'What we have lost in the deceased will strike us to the full when we experience the absence of his noble authority, his speeches listened to most attentively during congresses.'

In the life of Aleksander a source of great happiness and love was his wife Józefa Osiecimska, whom he married in 1898. Their joint house was to become, like that of his parents – Amelia and Antoni – open to many guests and friends. Here would come his wife's uncle, the physiologist of world renown Napoleon Nikodem Cybulski, the eminent neurologist and psychiatrist Jan Piltz, Kazimierz and Włodzimierz Tetmajer, Stanisław Starowieyski, the splendid painter Julian Fałat and many others. He was very close friends with Leon Wachholz, a friendship struck up from the second year of university, the professor of court medicine.

The serious illness and death of his beloved wife was to cast a huge shadow over Aleksander's life. During these extremely difficult moments he experienced immense kindness and support, about which he was often to recount. Józefa was to leave behind three children – Tadeusz, Maria and Andrzej. Much help in the bringing up of the children was to shown at this time by Wanda Estreicher, a member of a noble line which had provided Polish culture and science with many luminaries. The Estreicher family was related to the Rosners and often visited each other. Now they supported the widower and his children.

A. Rosner in keeping with his wife's memory continued to run an open house, organising evening events during which poetry would be recited along with fragments of prose, and music would be listened to. It would happen that over 100 guests would gather. Amongst those who attended this unofficial salon, though one quite well-known within Cracowian circles, was Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński. Here discussions were held, with the merriment going on sometimes late into the night. A. Rosner actively participated in all of it. He clearly pronounced his judgements on things in a straightforward manner, sometimes embellishing them with an anecdote or joke.

As in matters of science he had no fear of expressing his views on matters of the arts, even if they were at odds with general feelings and convictions. Courage and an uncompromising approach to life were not for him merely a private domain. When World War I broke out he volunteered to serve in a fortress hospital. He considered it his duty as a doctor to help the wounded and injured regardless of the side they fought on. A. Rosner's gesture was talked about and commented on. He even bought gifts for Christmas 1914 for all the Russian prisoners-of-war. The matter reached Vienna and caused, delicately speaking, disapproval amongst the military authorities. When the professor was called

before the head doctor of the Austro-Hungarian Army he proudly and even intrepidly dealt with the questions asked. For A. Rosner's behaviour was not, as they attempted to present it, a manifestation of pro-Russian political views. It was simply the reflex reaction of a heart exuding a deep humanitarianism, dictated by the conviction that every man, and in particular those for whom fate had dealt out loneliness, should, far from their nearest and dearest, find support. This was difficult for the propaganda-sated military clerks to comprehend. In the same way that a certain tsarist postal official in Minsk found it impossible to understand that his position and uniform did not excuse him from responsibility for the words expressed before the outbreak of the war. When the Russian clearly started to jeer the Polish nation and language, A. Rosner without any ceremony slapped the slanderer in the face. He did not leave the ban issued in 1898 by the Prussian authorities on the planned conference in Poznan of Polish doctors and naturalists uncommented upon. Outraged by such behaviour he sent a short note about the anti-Polish attitude displayed by Berlin to the whole of Europe, both to the editing boards of medical journals as equally to those of the daily press.

Aleksander Rosner never shirked from his duties in the service of medical society. He was for many years the chairman of the Polish Gynaecological Society and three times held the presidency of the Cracow Medical Society; while from 1916 to 1926 he was chairman of the highly respected city institution that was the Volunteer Rescue Society.

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