

Józef Oettinger (1818–1895)

‘**H**ardworking to the limits of possibility, sincere, obliging to colleagues, charitable to all, so has died, blessed be his memory, Oettinger, having won himself widespread affection and the greatest of respect’ – with such words, in the presence of a crowd of mourners, the eminent Jagiellonian University professor and his sincere friend, Napoleon Nikodem Cybulski, bid farewell to the deceased. And nor were the words that flowed merely out a sense of occasion but ones that fully reflected Oettinger the man, as he remained in human memory. For he was one of those people whose lives beautifully attest that learning and nobility of character are incomparable despite life’s difficulties and twists of fate.

Józef Oettinger was born on the 7th of May 1818 in Tarnów. His father, Izrael, was a merchant, his mother Karolina née Adler, a housewife. This life journey only just undertaken was to be marked with tragedy. The deaths of his father and, soon afterwards, his mother were to leave the barely 5-year-old Józef an orphan. He was taken care of by his uncle Jakub Adler, a Cracow merchant who lived in the Kazimierz district of Cracow. It was here the young boy grew up and attended school. In 1834 he finished secondary school and passed his school leaving certificate. At the time, as with many young people, he did not have any precise plans as to what to do next. He was drawn equally by the humanities as the natural sciences. He took a keen

interest in philosophy and decided on this as a course of study. In 1836 he enrolled at the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Philosophy. After two years he changed faculty and started to study medicine and he was to remain true to this discipline until the end of his life, although philosophy, as the future was to show, was still to play an important role in his life. The years of his degree were ones of work and sacrifice. In order to keep himself Oettinger was forced to give private lessons and, as he had a gift for explaining things, he had no lack of students. Having finished his degree on the basis of the dissertation *Josephi Struthii medici Posnanesis vita et duorum eius operum [...] bibliographico-critica disquisitio [...]*, he was awarded the degree of doctor of medicine in 1843. This was an exceptional dissertation for the times, largely because of the subject it dealt with. For the young doctor had reached out for not the latest clinical achievements nor had he immersed himself in questions of pathology, nor searched for fulfilment in the field of anatomy or the latest diagnostic techniques, but had absorbed himself in the old documents of centuries ago in order to write a piece about the most eminent Polish doctors of the Renaissance era. The work was most favourably received, the best confirmation of which was it being awarded the Józef Jakubowski Foundation Prize. It is worth emphasising that this foundation, set up in 1833, was dedicated to supporting young researchers whose works showed an originality or significant input in the development of the medical sciences. During the course of the first ten years of its existence it had not awarded a single prize. The first recipient of an award was to be J. Oettinger.

Having a Ph.D. he obtained in 1844 the position of assistant, understudying at the Old Orders Hospital in Cracow, and was soon to be given a full post of assistant. He supplemented his medical education with a Ph.D. in surgery in 1850. He found himself completely at home with hospital work, gaining an opinion as a good diagnostician, and showing total commitment in his work with patients. It is of no surprise therefore that in 1853 he was appointed to the important post of assistant head of a ward. The period of his service as a doctor, to which he was most committed, coincided with the burgeoning political developments of the day.

In 1848 Europe was engulfed in a wave of revolutionary acts which have gone down in history as the Revolutions of 1848. The old political order established following the defeat of Napoleon I was shaken to its core. In many countries the old order fell, adherents of new constitutional monarchies came to the fore. Within the Polish lands ripped apart at the end of the eighteenth century by the three partitioning powers, the slogans of freedom and independence rang out high and loud, with conspirators preparing an armed uprising. This revolutionary turmoil was not to pass Cracow by and the city was seized by excitement. Proclamations were written, discussed, and political

meetings called. Many believed that it would be here and then that the independence lost half a century earlier would be regained. Józef Oettinger did not want to stand by indifferent and so entered the make-up of the national Committee called into being by Polish patriots. Together with Abraham Gumpłowicz he created a political grouping and directed it, representing the progressive Jewish intelligentsia, which believed in the necessity of a joint fight with Poles for the independence of the country. Oettinger proclaimed the need for universal equality in law for all regardless of provenance or belief; he was an advocate of wide ranging autonomy for Galicia and Cracow. He wrote at the time: 'Only through a pure democracy based on the principle of freedom, equality and brotherly love can the highest goals of any society be achieved.' He felt himself to be – and spoke openly about this – a Pole and an Israelite. He believed that within freedom and the mutual respect of traditions and the law would lie the well-being of the reborn fatherland. These hopes were, however, to turn out to be in vain. Vienna had no intention of supporting any 'rebellious' appeals. Resistance was crushed with force and military order was imposed.

In the meantime life moved forward. Oettinger did not interrupt his work for a moment. Fulfilling his duties he still thought about the history of medicine particularly as he had been offered the possibility of lecturing on the subject in place of the sick Prof. Fryderyk Hechl. He gained great satisfaction from taking the classes, he devoted himself to the history of medicine with a passion, he read extensively and made copious notes. That he wished his future to be permanently connected with the University is borne out by the attempts already undertaken in 1852 by the Jagiellonian University's Medical Faculty to persuade the Austrian authorities to give Oettinger the department following the death of Prof. Hechl. Unfortunately Vienna did not give its approval. Remembering how involved this Cracow doctor had been in national matters together with his brave and, as they were termed at the time, subversive views, they had no mind to tolerate such individuals and especially ones dabbling in teaching and the teaching of history to boot! Oettinger was not to give up easily, however, particularly as he had behind him the majority of the then Faculty Council. Ten years later he managed his post-doctoral degree, submitting the study *Umiejętność lekarska wobec szkół, a w szczególności wobec urojonej szkoły dawnej i nowej. Badanie historyczno-krytyczno-lekarskie* (Kraków 1863) [The doctor's skill in relation to schools, and in particular the imaginary former and new school. Historical-critical-medical research], a most competently worked piece, combining in it both the history of medicine as well as a philosophical approach to the problems presented. And although he had to a large degree used in it the works of other researchers, something he made no secret of, it stood out noticeably against the backcloth

of the then works on the history of medicine through its innovative form and excellent research methods. With the modesty typical of him, that his work should serve others, he saw the book as first and foremost a textbook for students and junior doctors. He himself formulated the matter thus:

When the notion for the present work first came to me it was already then designed for You; and when I had completed it like dawn glowing pink there came the beautiful hope that in the solemn edifice of our joint mother - the ancient Jagiellonian University, we will meet each other eye to eye, and from mouth to mouth we will mutually strengthen, spur on and fortify science. (J. Oettinger, *Umiejętność lekarska...*, p. V)

It is not strange therefore that the Medical Faculty supported and passed this first post-doctoral examination on the history of medicine in the Polish Lands. But here again the unwillingness of the Viennese ministry of education was to make itself felt, for it refused to ratify the decision of the Faculty Council. And here the matter did not concern merely the 'former sins' of the spring of 1848, but matters far fresher. For Doctor Oettinger in 1861 had been in Vienna as a member of a Cracow Jewish delegation and in its name had given a speech in which he announced the need for the rebirth of a joint homeland for Poles and Jews. The Austrian authorities considered this to be yet another act of disloyalty and a manifestation of subversive republican views. When a year later the question of his post-doctoral degree came up it was again blocked. This is how contemporaries commented on these incidents:

Despite the fact that to the complete satisfaction of the professorial gathering he fulfilled the required formalities and despite the faculty providing the most favourable presentation to the ministry, from which the confirmation of assistant professors depended, the then minister of state Schmerling issued a negative reply, not providing any further justification for the refusal. (S. Janikowski, *Potwierdzenie docenta...*, p. 56)

It seemed with the said that the case of the 'disobedient historian of medicine' had been buried for good. However, and here possibly for the first time ever, fate was to smile to him. In 1867 Emperor Franz Joseph was forced to carry out wide ranging reforms within the empire following the complete defeat of the Austrian army in the war with Prussia. The numerous nations over whom he ruled gained their desired autonomy, everywhere could be felt the breath of freedom; the process of Germanization was stopped. The Council of the Medical Faculty for a third time approached the ministry on the matter of Oettinger and this time it turned out successfully. In 1869 Vienna confirmed the earlier post-doctoral degree and gave the Cracow academic an assistant professorship but... only in a private capacity: in other words without any pay whatsoever. The path to a full professorship was long and fraught with obstacles in the form of regulations. Despite the altered political situation he still bore the mark of a man not worthy of the trust of the Austrian

authorities. Finally in 1873 he was given the title of associate professor but without a salary. A professorship was successively denied him, something that was taken in Cracow academic circles to be highly unjust. Oettinger was to continue to work and lecture after retiring. The last years of his life, seriously ill, he was to spend in domestic privacy. He died on the 2nd of October 1895 in Cracow.

The way in which Oettinger's contribution to academic life, medical circles and within Cracow society was valued and admired is best illustrated by the beautiful address given in his honour to mark his 70th birthday by the professor of court medicine Leon Blumenstock-Halban. The words were as follows:

You have performed numerous and varied services in and around our society. As a young man you appeared as a champion of freedom, combating ignorance wherever you found it; you raised your articulate voice to resolve the dissension between the children of a single mother; you worked for the good of the city, covered up the cracks when the plague struck and laid the foundations for a new hospital in this our city. (L. Blumenstock, *Uroczystość jubileuszu...*, p. 267)

After Oettinger's death numerous obituaries and short reminiscences about the deceased appeared. In the Warsaw *Gazeta Lekarska* was written: 'He was an exceptional worker in the medical arena, a meritorious researcher of the Polish language, a lover of truth and freedom, a righteous citizen. Glory to his memory!'

There is no doubt that J. Oettinger achieved much, with an equal measure of zeal and devotion he utilised knowledge and talent in the treatment of patients, lectured the history of medicine to his students, researched the history behind the medical profession and acted socially as well as being keenly interested in politics. He left behind a rich written legacy. He considered the most significant to be the work he devoted to the history of medicine, as did others. His life's dream, unfortunately, was never to be realised, this being the creation of an extensive synthesis, a great monograph – the first work of this calibre to be written by a Pole. He was to work on this intensively for many years leaving over three thousand pages of manuscript and hundreds of pages covered with notes and cuttings from varied reading sources. The today yellowed paper covered with his characteristic slanting hand still makes an impression on the reader, proving Oettinger's erudition zeal and devotion. So why, except for two fragments – *Rys historii medycyny powszechnej* [An outline of the history of universal medicine], for such was the author's decision for a title – has it never been published? What has caused the state of affairs whereby this enormous effort has never found realisation in the form of a multi-volume book? It is difficult today to answer the questions unequivocally. Maybe the critical comments of an anonymous reviewer did for it, who

left his notes in the margins of numerous pages of the manuscript; possibly Oettinger himself considered the work to have outgrown him and simply his strength failed; maybe he just did not have the health or enough of life left? There is no doubt that there are many mistakes both technical shortcomings as well as matters of content. Frequent repetitions and often overly verbose sentences at times try the reader's patience, in a word it was not a good piece for reading and certainly needed thorough editing. This would have called for a lot of time, time that Oettinger simply did not have. This in no way changes the fact that it was he who was the first to undertake such an ambitious project. One had to wait about fifty years until Władysław Szumowski published his *Historia medycyny filozoficznie ujęta* [A history of medicine philosophically formulated], which although distinctly differing from Oettinger's work, undoubtedly betrays its borrowings of general schemes from the aforementioned work.

Important for *Rys dawnych dziejów Wydziału Lekarskiego Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego od założenia tegoż w r. 1364 aż do reformy dokonanej przed Komisją edukacyjną w r. 1780*, the first part of which J. Oettinger published in 1878, has, in many places, added and ordered the earlier considerations of Józef Brodowicz, Józef Majer and Fryderyk Skobel. This was a true homage to the history of medicine at the Cracow Alma Mater, a debt repaid to a university that he had felt so connected to for so many years. He was, unfortunately, not to manage the subsequent parts.

Józef Oettinger understood and valued his work with historical sources, as is borne out by the publication in 1880 of *Zapiski lekarskie ze stulecia XVI* [Doctor's notes from the 16th century], that is accessed and edited archives with the oldest historical records of the Cracow Academy, in which he hunted down the most minute of traces of medical history. The interesting and educational transcript of somewhat minor facts, which could appear to be of little significance, in their harmony create a colourful patchwork of the past. He personally devoted time and care to the texts of Hippocrates, which he initially translated from the canonical translations of the French researcher Emil Littré, though later he was to make direct use of the originals.

J. Oettinger did not avoid being judgemental and sometimes categorically so when it came to the past and present of the medical profession. One such work is most certainly *Rzut oka na najcelniejsze nabytki doświadczenia lekarskiego na tle dziejowym* (Kraków, 1870) [A look at the most relevant acquisitions of medical experience viewed historically], being a transcript of the lecture of the same title. In it he expressed his historiosophical views as to the mechanisms which ruled earlier and which also influenced the development of both medical thinking and practice. He did not manage to avoid errors and contradictions, as well as overly broad generalisations for which he

came in for criticism. Looking at the content of the lecture it is difficult not to agree with his critics. However, one should not forget that within this field of a fusion of medicine, history and philosophy it was Oettinger who was one of the pioneers in Poland, laying open a hitherto almost untraveled trail.

Oettinger can be considered without doubt one of the fathers of the history of Polish medicine. His name is permanently written into the tradition of science and culture of Poland, he is present in the history of medicine and that of the Jagiellonian University. That he had such reverence for the writing of history and considered it an important addition to the education of every doctor is the best seen in his work on Polish medical nomenclature. Here he was able to fully and in a practical way utilise his historical knowledge, taking part in work on the monumental *Słownik terminologii lekarskiej polskiej* [A dictionary of Polish medical terminology].

And in the same way that he cared to preserve for posterity the legacy of generations past, he equally cared about those things that were contemporary to him, near to the environment in which he lived and worked. For it is beyond doubt that the Cracow Medical Association to a large degree owed its inception in 1866 to him. Hence it is of no surprise that he was elected its first vice-chairman to eventually take over its highest office of chairman in 1871. No less devotion was J. Oettinger to show to *Przegląd Lekarski* [The Medical Review], the official journal of the Association, within which he published and contributed numerous studies, most willingly engaging himself in the arduous work of editing. This journal was to serve, and serves subsequent generations of those who have devoted themselves to the art of Aesculapius.

J. Oettinger's medical vocation was intertwined throughout the whole of his life with his social work and service to the country. Already in the 1850s he entered into the Municipal Government, within whose competencies he supervised the sanitary conditions within Cracow. He was also to travel not the easiest of routes, leading to the ratification of the municipal statute of immense service in the construction of a modern legal order. In 1866 he was elected as a member of the City Council and was to serve right up until 1890, which illustrates the trust and support he enjoyed. While sitting on municipal assembles for all of these years he concentrated his efforts on denominational matters, questions connected with education and the schooling system, as well as the management of hospitals and sanitary problems. His energy and devotion in countering the cholera epidemic which broke out in 1866 was to bring widespread respect and admiration. In his lectures and specially produced leaflets he gave advice and indicators on how to protect oneself from the ravages of the disease. It is certain that J. Oettinger's contribution was significant in limiting the spread and alleviating the severity of the epidemic. This was to be remembered for years. Finally it was thanks to his efforts that

the Old Orders Hospital was modernised and enlarged: a hospital which had well chronicled itself in the history of Cracow. Issues of belief, the spirit and conscience were close to him. It is chiefly thanks to his initiative that money was collected for the construction of the reformist synagogue in Cracow. He openly proclaimed the need for a tightening of the bonds between the Jewish and Polish nation. It was his view that Polish should be introduced in the Jewish School in the Kazimierz district as the second language of instruction. He took an active part in work on the new statute for the Jewish Community in Cracow. It comes therefore as no surprise that in 1883 it was he who was elected to represent the Israelite community.

Bibliography

L. Blumenstok, "Uroczystość jubileuszowa prof. Józefa Oettingera", *Przegląd Lekarski* XXVII (19), 1888, pp. 267–268; A. Bodzoń, J. Lisiewicz, "Oettinger Józef", [in:] *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. 23, pp. 584–586; N.N. Cybulski, "Przemówienie nad grobem prof. Józefa Oettingera", *Przegląd Lekarski* XXXIV (41), 1895, p. 590; S. Domański, "Prof. Dr Józef Oettinger (wspomnienie pośmiertne)", *Przegląd Lekarski* XXXIV (42), 1895, pp. 593–594; R.W. Gryglewski, "Rys historii medycyny powszechnej Józefa Oettingera", *Archiwum Historii i Filozofii Medycyny* LXXIV, 2011, pp. 18–28; S. Janikowski, "Potwierdzenie docenta dziejów lekarskich w Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim", *Przegląd Lekarski* VIII (7), 1869; J. Oettinger, *Umiejętność lekarska wobec szkół, a w szczególności wobec urojonej szkoły dawnej i nowej. Badanie historyczno-krytyczno-lekarskie*, Kraków 1863; "Prof. Józef Oettinger" [posthumous recollections], *Gazeta Lekarska* XXX (41), 1895, p. 1083; J. Strojnowski, "Józef Oettinger, pierwszy habilitowany docent i profesor historii medycyny na polskim uniwersytecie", *Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki* XV (1), 1970, pp. 57–69.