

Polish refugee anaesthetists and the global circulation of medical knowledge

Michał Adam Palacz

School of Education, Humanities and Languages, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford,
UK

E-mail: mpalacz@brookes.ac.uk

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Editor—There were no professional anaesthetists in Poland before the Second World War. General anaesthetics were administered by nurses, nuns or junior members of the surgical team and the range of drugs and machines available to them was very limited. The open inhalation of ether or chloroform remained the most common method of general anaesthesia. Local anaesthetic procedures were, in turn, performed by operating surgeons themselves. Anaesthesiology was recognised in Poland as a separate specialty only in 1952, and although the number of specialists steadily grew, many provincial hospitals still lacked full-time staff anaesthetists until the 1970s.¹

Polish refugees trained in wartime Britain were among the first anaesthesia specialists in post-war Poland. Meanwhile Polish doctors who permanently settled in the UK helped in developing anaesthetic services within the emerging NHS, whereas those who re-emigrated from Britain in the 1950s contributed to the global circulation of modern medical knowledge by practicing anaesthesia in various countries of post-war settlement.

I have identified 24 Polish refugees who arrived in Britain during or immediately after the war and were subsequently trained as anaesthetists (Table 1). More than half of them completed medical studies at the Polish School of Medicine (PSM) at the University of Edinburgh. The PSM was an autonomous medical faculty established in 1941 under the auspices of the Polish government-in-exile in order to train medical officers for the Polish Army and to prepare cadres for the post-war reconstruction of healthcare services in Poland.² Influenced by the British model of medical education, the PSM was the first Polish medical school to introduce lectures on anaesthetic methods in the undergraduate curriculum. In accordance with pre-war Polish legislation, graduates of medical schools were obliged to undertake a one-year internship in a hospital before permanently registering as medical practitioners. Graduates of the PSM undertook their mandatory internships in well-equipped British hospitals which gave them a further opportunity to gain more advanced knowledge of anaesthesia.¹

Two refugees trained in Britain became pioneers of modern anaesthesia in post-war Poland. Bolesław Rutkowski (1915-2012) was born to a Polish family in Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution, his widowed mother settled in Romania, where Rutkowski completed five years of medical studies before volunteering to join the Polish army in 1939. He escaped to Britain in the summer of 1940 and two years later passed his final exams at the PSM in Edinburgh. He then served as a medical officer

in the 2nd Polish Corps in the Middle East and Italy. When the war ended, he found a job in a British military hospital in London where he learnt modern techniques of anaesthesia. The young doctor tried to bring his mother and stepfather from Romania to Britain but when these efforts failed he decided to move to Communist Poland where his family was allowed to resettle. Rutkowski left Britain in 1948 and found employment at the Institute of Oncology in Gliwice (Upper Silesia). There in a hospital storage room he discovered a modern anaesthetic machine, donated by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which was unused and mislabelled as a device for intestinal irrigation. He quickly established himself as a specialist and assisted in anaesthetic procedures in various Silesian hospitals. Rutkowski later became the first chief anaesthesiologist in Upper Silesia and is regarded as a pioneer of pain management in Poland.³

Stanisław Pokrzywnicki (1909-1993) was a son of a physician assistant from Kutno, near Łódź. He graduated from the University of Warsaw in 1936 and during the war escaped to Britain via Romania, Lebanon and France. He served as a medical officer in the RAF and after demobilisation trained as an anaesthetist under Robert Macintosh in Oxford. He returned to Poland in 1947, smuggling on the ship an Oxford Vaporiser machine and a supply of curare which had been introduced in Britain the year before by Thomas Cecil Gray.^{1,4} Pokrzywnicki's specialty was initially treated with scepticism in Poland and when he administered curare during an intestinal cancer resection in the Kutno District Hospital a surgical colleague looked at the procedure with horror. Pokrzywnicki allegedly told him then 'not to be interested in anaesthesia; a surgeon is no longer responsible for it'.¹ Pokrzywnicki was eventually appointed to Poland's first chair of anaesthesia at the Military Medical Academy in Łódź. He introduced a two-part postgraduate examination, modelled on the British Diploma in Anaesthetics, and throughout his career helped to educate around 900 anaesthetists. At the behest of the Polish Ministry of Health he also trained local specialists in Mongolia.^{1,4}

Unlike Rutkowski and Pokrzywnicki, most Polish refugee anaesthetists decided against returning to post-war Poland. Some of them permanently settled in Britain and worked as specialists in the emerging NHS. Two Polish refugees, Józef Łomaz and Adam Szurkowski (alias Adams), were among the fifteen out of 52 candidates who in 1953 successfully passed the first ever fellowship examinations of the Faculty of Anaesthetists of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.⁵⁻⁶ However, beginning a

professional career in post-war Britain was not always easy for the Poles who were faced with many challenges and occasionally suffered from prejudice and discrimination. Like many British citizens hard-pressed by the post-war economic crisis, some Polish refugee anaesthetists re-emigrated to the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand where it was easier for them to obtain suitable employment. Others joined the Colonial Medical Service.⁷ Szurkowski/Adams, for example, was appointed a Temporary Medical Officer in Nigeria, while Łomaz served as a specialist officer in Sarawak and the Federation of Malaya.⁸⁻⁹ Another refugee, Jerzy Miecz-Cyrkowicz (alias George Francis Conway), worked for the Colonial Medical Service as a consultant anaesthetist in Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, Malawi and the Seychelles before finally settling down in Kenya.¹⁰ Polish refugee doctors trained in Britain thus helped to diffuse modern knowledge and techniques of anaesthesia to all corners of the world. Wartime displacement paradoxically enabled them to pursue career options that otherwise would not have been available.

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REFUGEE	BIRTH	GENDER	RELIGION	PRIMARY QUALIFICATION		POST-WAR SETTLEMENT
N1	1902	male	Roman Catholic	1926	Lwów	UK
N2	1911	female	Jewish	1936	Bologna	UK
N3	1909	male	Roman Catholic	1936	Poznań	New Zealand
N4	1909	male	Roman Catholic	1936	Warsaw	Poland
N5	1912	male	Roman Catholic	1937	Warsaw	Canada
N6	?	male	Roman Catholic	1938	Warsaw	UK
N7	1912	male	Jewish	1938	Bologna	UK
N8	1914	male	Roman Catholic	1938	Lwów	Canada
N9	1912	male	Roman Catholic	1942	SJU Beirut	UK
N10	1915	male	Roman Catholic	1942	PSM Edinburgh	Poland
N11	1908	male	Jewish	1943	PSM Edinburgh	UK
N12	1909	male	Roman Catholic	1943	PSM Edinburgh	USA
N13	1916	male	Roman Catholic	1944	PSM Edinburgh	UK
N14	1911	male	Jewish	1946	PSM Edinburgh	UK
N15	1917	male	Roman Catholic	1946	PSM Edinburgh	UK
N16	1915	male	Roman Catholic	1947	PSM Edinburgh	Canada
N17	1916	male	Roman Catholic	1947	PSM Edinburgh	UK
N18	1917	male	Jewish	1947	PSM Edinburgh	Sarawak / Malaya / Australia
N19	1918	male	Roman Catholic	1947	PSM Edinburgh	Canada
N20	1910	male	Roman Catholic	1948	PSM Edinburgh	Nigeria / Uganda / Zambia Malawi / Seychelles / Kenya
N21	1918	male	Roman Catholic	1948	PSM Edinburgh	USA
N22	1918	female	Jewish	1949	PSM Edinburgh	USA / Australia
N23	1918	male	Roman Catholic	1949	LRCP/MRCS	Nigeria / UK
N24	1925	female	Roman Catholic	1951	LRCP/MRCS	UK

Table 1 Some of the Polish refugee anaesthetists trained in wartime Britain

LRCP/MRCS = Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of London and Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons of England

PSM Edinburgh = Polish School of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh (1941-1949)

SJU Beirut = Saint Joseph University of Beirut

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