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Maurycy Urstein: forgotten Polish contributor to German psychiatry

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Summary

Polish psychiatrist Maurycy Urstein (1872–1940) is nowadays almost forgotten. He is not mentioned in the history of Polish psychiatry which only partially may be explained by the fact that his most essential works were published in German language. His scientific oeuvre contains dozens of publications, including four monographs on catatonia. Urstein was an ardent advocate of the autointoxication theory of psychiatric disorders, fierce opponent of psychoanalysis and enthusiast of the use of biological methods of treatment in psychiatry. Both some eccentric views and specific personality probably equally contributed to his almost complete isolation among psychiatrists in the interwar Poland.

Key words: history of medicine, catatonia

Maurycy Urstein was born on 21 September 1872 in Warsaw, in the family of the merchant Stanisław Urstein (1832–1914) and Balbina née Przedborska (1851–1934) [1, 2, 3]. He had many siblings – elder brother, Ludwik (1871–1939) was a distinguished pianist and accompanist, younger brother Józef (1884–1923), called Pikuś, is remembered as a comedian [4]. Maurycy's uncle Ludwik Przedborski (1857–1911) was laryngologist and social activist in Łódź.

Maurycy Urstein began his education in Warsaw, after 4th class moved to Danzig where he received his matriculation certificate in 1893. In autumn 1894 he entered the medical faculty of Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. To earn for his living he worked as a journalist and a translator. His translation of famous Young Poland novel *Śmierć* (“Death”) was a publishing success [5, 6].

In 1900 Urstein presented his doctoral dissertation and received a doctorate in medicine. His dissertation concerned the pseudobulbar palsy [7]. Material to this work was collected in the Warsaw polyclinic of Samuel Goldflam and the neuropsychiatric clinic of Friedrich Jolly in Berlin. Goldflam was the author of classic description of myasthenia and it was Jolly who introduced its name in 1895 [8]. The better part of Urstein's work are case histories. **You can see the influence of Goldflam, one of most outstanding neurologists of Poland and Europe, whose works were famous for meticulous case studies.**

After the graduation interests of Urstein were not yet focused on psychiatry. His first publications appeared in the Polish and German medical press – these were reports

from medical congresses and abstracts from German and Russian medical journals. The first work of Urstein more closely related to psychiatry was the German translation of Charlton Bastian's monograph on aphasia, which was released in 1902 [9]. Urstein stayed in Germany researching and expanding his knowledge of psychiatry as a volunteer various facilities for mentally ill and psychiatric clinics. In the years 1903–1913 he participated in numerous conferences of German psychiatrists. In 1903 he went to Emil Kraepelin's clinic of psychiatry in Heidelberg. It was an event which greatly influenced his future career.

1899 saw the release of the 6th edition of Kraepelin's handbook, *a breakthrough in many ways*. Based on his catamnestic studies, Kraepelin simplified the classification of psychoses, dividing them according to their course, into dementia praecox (including hebephrenia, catatonia and paranoia) and manic-depressive psychosis.

While moving from provincial Dorpat and taking over the chair in Heidelberg, Kraepelin had an established position in the psychiatrists' community. Physicians from all over Europe and beyond were visiting the clinic in Heidelberg (and later Munich), headed by Kraepelin. Among Polish doctors Maurycy Bornsztajn, Witold Łuniewski, Antoni Mikulski and Piotr Pręgowski practised under his guidance.



Fig. 1. The photograph of Maurycy Urstein (ca. 1928) in the collection of Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro (the collection of press photographs of daily newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, PH/FOT.46462). The signature is from [33].

H. Maurycy Urstein



Fig. 2. Pupils and co-workers of Emil Kraepelin (standing, 3rd from the right) in Munich, 1906. The same row, 4th from the right Maurycy Urstein, first from the right – Alois Alzheimer. Courtesy of Eric J. Engstrom (Berlin); the negative in Oskar Diethelm Library, Cornell Medical School, New York, with permission.

In Heidelberg Urstein was in the place where the most recent problems of the contemporary psychiatry were formulated and investigated. Heidelberg school researched, i.a., the differentiation between the manic-depressive psychosis and dementia praecox, the nosological position of melancholia, and the importance of mixed-states.

At this time Kraepelin became interested in the influence of cultural differences on the occurrence of various psychiatric disorders. In December 1903 he travelled to Java and visited the psychiatric hospital in Buitzezorg, which resulted in the article “Vergleichende Psychiatrie” (“The Comparative Psychiatry”) issued in 1903, being the foundation of a new field of psychiatry – the comparative, or transcultural psychiatry.

The first Urstein’s encounter with Kraepelin was episodic one, because in June 1903 Kraepelin was called to chair in Munich and was busy with the moving. The position of Urstein also was changed. Shortly he was drafted into Russian army due to the outbreak of Russo-Japanese War and sent to Central Asia. Before the appointment he validated his diploma in Kazan. *Keeping in mind conversations* on transcultural psychiatry he had with Kraepelin, he decided to carry a comparative research regarding the psychiatric disorders among the Turkic peoples. The evidence is his correspondence with Kraepelin, which survived to modern times [10].

In August 1904 Urstein arrived to Saint Petersburg, from where he went to military hospital in Ashkhabad. The next year and the half he spent in Turkestan, Bukhara Province and Transbaikal. In *Gazanjyk, Turkmenistan*, he organized a small ward for the mentally ill [11].

After the war Urstein immediately returned to Heidelberg clinic, working in the academic year 1906/1907 as volunteer-assistant under the successor of Kraepelin, Franz Nissl [12]. In the summer of 1906 he worked also in the psychiatric clinic in Munich. On the clinical meeting he presented a lecture entitled “Contribution to comparative psychiatry”. In his report he found psychiatric disorders less common in Central Asia. He rarely saw alcoholic psychoses, the course of syphilis was generally mild, the cases of neurosyphilis were rare and so were suicides. Regarding dementia praecox he noted the difficulties in making a diagnosis in people being “mentally at a lower level”. The effect was a significant number of mentally ill incarnated in prisons [11].

On 24th April 1908, the first day of the Congress of German Psychiatrists, the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler delivered a lecture in which he proposed to replace the term dementia praecox with the name of schizophrenia [13]. Urstein was the only Pole in the group of over two hundred physicians present at the congress. He *also participated in the debate* which took place after Bleuler’s historical lecture [13]. As he recalled years later:

“(…) at the congress of psychiatrists in 1908, when Bleuler wanted to introduce the term schizophrenia, I drew attention to the fact that the name can not be used in many cases, having all the cardinal features of dementia, while the term catatonia can be applied as well” [14].

The next year the first major work of Urstein was released, the monograph *Die Dementia Praecox und ihre Stellung zum manisch-depressiven Irresein* (“Dementia praecox and its relationship to the manic-depressive illness”) [15]. While collecting

the material for this and three following monographs, Urstein carried by himself wide-ranging, lasting several years catamnestic research on the patients of psychiatric institutions, diagnosed with forms of psychoses which couldn't be clearly classified in terms of Kraepelinian dichotomous division.

Urstein was proving that the separation of dementia praecox and the affective disorders is not clear and that many cases of psychoses may be seen which begin as manic-depressive psychosis but over the years take a course similar to that of dementia praecox. When diagnosing dementia praecox he paid attention to the syndrome called "intrapyschic ataxia" (somewhat corresponding to the disorganization syndrome, used today). Urstein attributed the authorship of this term to himself until the Viennese neurologist and psychiatrist Erwin Stransky fiercely defended his priority [16]. Urstein claimed that he borrowed this term unconsciously without knowing the work of Stransky [20]. In later works he referred to „intrapyschic disharmony”.

The book met with great interest from European psychiatrists. Its reviews appeared in almost every major German-language medical journal. Reactions to the book of Warsaw physician varied from favorable to critical, but everyone emphasized author's diligence and perseverance in collecting the clinical material. Least favorable were Kraepelin's pupils: Dreyfus published the extensive review in which he pointed out the author's hastiness in diagnosing circular symptoms, and gave this work no major significance [17].

Following monograph *Manisch-depressives und periodisches Irresein als Erscheinungsform der Katatonie* („Manic-depressive and circular psychosis as the manifestation of catatonia”) was released in 1912 [18]. Most of the clinical material used in this study came from Heinrich Laehr's psychiatric asylum near Berlin. In this and subsequent works Urstein consistently avoided the Bleulerian term schizophrenia, using the term catatonia instead.

Urstein advocated the hypothesis of endocrine etiology of schizophrenia, close also to Kraepelin very popular in the 2nd decade of the XX century. In 1913 the German psychiatrist August Fauser announced, that using so-called Abderhalden method, based on false – as it turned out later – Emil *Abderhalden's theory* of defense enzymes, he was able to differentiate between manic-depressive illness and schizophrenia. Urstein referred Fauser's announcement in Polish and German press, seeing in it a confirmation of his own hypotheses [19].

In the next monograph *Spätpsychosen, katatoner Art* („Late psychoses of catatonic type”) Urstein presented the cases of psychoses with an onset in the menopause [20]. On the basis of forty histories he discussed the symptomatology, etiology, differential diagnosis, course and prognosis in these patients. He attributed a special diagnostic value to “somatic-nihilistic” delusions, which he found only in cases of late catatonia.

During the World War I Urstein was appointed as a physician to the Russian army and sent to the Western Front. It wasn't wasted time for him, as he investigated war psychoses and disorders caused by traumatic damage of the central nervous system [21].

Prepared for publication before the war, the fourth monograph *Katatonie unter dem Bilde Hysterie und der Psychopathie* („Catatonia in the form of hysteria and psycho-

pathy”) was published only in 1922 [22]. In this work Urstein stated that catatonia as nosological entity encompasses not only paranoid, manic-depressive, presenile and degenerative forms, but also hysterical and psychopathic ones. The author defended his earlier views on endocrine-gonadal etiology of catatonia.

As a Russian subject, Urstein could not count on an academic career in Germany, however, he took advantage of scientific development, offered to him by German psychiatry: he published articles in scientific journals, participated in congresses, examined the patients in well-organized psychiatric institutions. Throughout this time he remained in touch with the latest trends in German- and world psychiatry, which at least partially was reflected in his own publications.

In the 1920s the psychoses with cyclical course, developing into state resembling schizophrenic defect, used to be referred as the „Urstein psychoses” (Ursteinpsychosen in German) [23]. This term can be found mostly in the contemporary German and Scandinavian psychiatric literature. Danish psychiatrist Erik Strömngren (1909–1993) recalled:

„The Polish psychiatrist Urstein (1909) gave a penetrating and extensive description of a number of cases which started with typically manic-depressive attacks and later on developed into a state which could not be distinguished from catatonic schizophrenia. Although this was not a very common course, all experienced psychiatrists had seen cases of this kind. This was of great theoretical interest since it seemed to indicate a relationship between the two major psychoses, which at that time were regarded as being more or less mutually exclusive. When the shock treatments were introduced in the 1930s the Urstein’s riddle was solved. Many of these formerly chronic catatonic-like psychoses reacted favorably to the new treatments, leaving no trace of a schizophrenic personality change and, in some cases, unveiling a definite manic-depressive disorder” [24].

A few publications of Urstein referred to treatment of psychiatric disorders. From his published works one can conclude, that he attempted to treat numerous disorders with the endocrine organ extracts. He had a critical attitude *regarding psychoanalysis* – so had a Kraepelin. An opportunity to learn about Urstein views on psychoanalysis was his report from one of the medical congresses, in which he discussed the achievements of the psychoanalytic movement:

(...) the whole direction of Freud from the very beginning took a monstrous form, for a long time should have been regarded obsolete (...) psychotherapeutic effects can be achieved without entering the realm of sexuality and (...) after all, it’s impossible to find everywhere the sexual factors. The explanation of words and dreams, from which Freud always tries to squeeze the sexual elements, is so arbitrary, to such an extent fantastic, that one can only regret that professionals defense such a mysticism [25].

After the World War I, Urstein settled in Warsaw and opened a private practice. Soon he became a delegate of the Emigration Office and behalf of this institution traveled in the years 1921 and 1923 to the United States. During these trips he gave lectures in New York and Chicago, presenting his views on the “epileptic form of catatonia”. He also published a book in which he described from the psychiatrist’s point of view the famous case of two young murderers Leopold and Loeb [26].

When Urstein stayed in the United States, in Warsaw the assassination of the first president of Polish Republic, Gabriel Narutowicz, took place. The assassin, Eligiusz Niewiadomski, was sentenced to death in one-day trial. He was executed one month later. The experts to assess the mental state of Niewiadomski have never been called. After his return to Poland, already after the trial and execution of Niewiadomski, Urstein issued a booklet entitled *Eligiusz Niewiadomski w oświeceniu psychiatrii* (“Eligiusz Niewiadomski in the light of psychiatrist’s diagnosis”), in which he expressed the opinion that the killer of the president was mentally ill [27]. The diagnosis of psychosis was based on the conversations with his acquaintances and trial transcripts, so the conclusions seem to be highly speculative. Witold Łuniewski published an unflattering review of this work [28]. Urstein’s booklet did not remain unnoticed in Poland’s hot political atmosphere after the killing of Narutowicz. Some journalists used the authority of Urstein designating Niewiadomski as a mentally ill person, while the supporters of the National Democratic Party violently attacked the author, putting particularly strong emphasis on his Jewish origin [29].

In the years 1926–1927 Urstein traveled to the Scandinavian countries, visiting the psychiatric hospitals in Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo. He gave several lectures at the meetings of the Norwegian Psychiatric Association, one of which was in memory of Kraepelin, deceased in 1926 [30]. For a time he worked in the Gaustad hospital in Oslo, dealing with the relationship between chronic diseases of teeth and psychiatric disorders and attempting to treat mental illness with hormonal preparations – extracts of the pituitary- and pineal gland, thyroid, thymus, ovaries and testes [31].

In 1928, Urstein traveled to Brazil and in years 1929–1930 to Argentina. He gave numerous lectures, was interviewed by the press, gave opinions in on high-profile murder cases. He published a book in Spanish entitled *Criminalidad y psicosis* (“The crime and the psychosis”), later translated also into Polish and Portuguese, in which his views on the catatonia with particular emphasis on the „psychopathic forms of catatonia” were provided in the popular way [14] After returning to Poland he published no more scientific works. His popular articles quite often appeared in daily newspapers (for instance, in “Kurier Warszawski”) – these were articles popularizing the latest medical discoveries, and correspondence from his travels.

In the independent Poland the factor limiting his opportunities for an academic career may have been his Jewish origin, but it seems that it wasn’t crucial in his case. There is a lack of direct evidence that might shed light on his almost complete isolation from the Polish medical community. Diligent and inquiring, he was certainly predisposed to the scientific research. It is possible that the psychological factors got in the way. From violent polemics published against the unfavorable reviews of his work one can conclude for his low resistance for criticism. He was often criticized for an uncritical attitude and *immoderate attachment to his own hypotheses*.

Without any hospital job, *his income would come mainly from private practice*. Testimonies indicate that it was successful. Perhaps via his brother Ludwik he made friendly relations with several Polish musicians. He was a doctor of Paweł Kochoński and Karol Szymanowski. The correspondence of the latter contains many interesting facts about the character and the personality of Urstein. The psychiatrist diagnosed

overtired Szymanowski with neurasthenia, forbid him to drink and smoke, furthermore he treated him with “glands”, i.e. the hormonal extracts [32]. The relationship became loose about 1929 when the diagnosis of tuberculosis was made, which is known as the cause of Szymanowski’s ultimate death. Szymanowski and his wife had a grudge against Urstein that he in all the years of care wasn’t able to diagnose the underlying disease properly.

About Urstein’s private life little is known. He professed the mosaic faith. Married to Maria nee Fabian, the couple divorced without having any children [33].

The outbreak of World War II found Urstein, then 67-years old, in Warsaw. It is likely he continued to practice. When Ludwik Urstein died in 1939 on a heart attack, Maurycy stated death of his brother [34]. In the beginning of April 1940 the building of the *wall* around the Warsaw Ghetto started. Maurycy Urstein didn’t survive to the obligatory resettlement to the ghetto. He died on April 4, 1940 [33]. The cause of death is unknown, the news of death and burial were given only in August 1940 in “Gazeta Żydowska” (“Jewish Newspaper”), issued in the ghetto [35]. He may have been buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Wola, but the grave has not survived. At least two Urstein sisters, Franciszka and Stefania, were deported from the ghetto and perished in Auschwitz [36].

German-language works of Urstein works are still cited in the psychiatric literature, mostly those relating to catatonia and borderline between affective disorders and schizophrenia.

Маурыцы Урштейн – забытый польский соавтор немецкой психиатрии

Содержание

Польский психиатр Маурыцы Урштайн (1872–1940) сегодня почти забытый. Его не вспоминают в польской психиатрии, что частично может объяснить факт, что был немецкоязыковым автором. Его наследство охватывает несколько десятков работ, в том числе четыре монографии посвященные кататонии. Был сторонником автоинтоксикационной теории психических нарушений, яростным противником психоанализа и энтузиастом биологических методов исследования и лечения в психиатрии. Личность Урштайна, как и эксцентричность его некоторых взглядов, причинялись в равной степени его почти полной изоляции от польского психиатрического общества.

Ключевые слова: история медицины, кататония

Maurycy Urstein: vergessener polnischer Schöpfer der deutschen Psychiatrie

Zusammenfassung

Der polnische Psychiater Maurycy Urstein (1872-1940) ist heute fast völlig vergessen. Er wird unter den Schöpfern der polnischen Psychiatrie nicht genannt, weil er hauptsächlich ein deutschsprachiger Autor war. Seine Werke umfassen einige zehn Arbeiten, darunter vier Monographien über Katatonie. Er war Anhänger der Autointoxikationstheorie der psychischen Störungen, ein entschiedener Gegner der Psychoanalyse und Anhänger der biologischen Behandlungsmethoden in der Psychiatrie. Seine Persönlichkeit, wie auch seine unkonventionellen Ansichten trugen im gleichen Ausmaß zu seiner völligen Isolation vom Milieu der polnischen Psychiater bei.

Schlüsselwörter: Geschichte der Medizin, Katatonie

Maurycy Urstein : oublié polonais contributeur à la psychiatrie allemande

Résumé

Le psychiatre polonais Maurycy Urstein (1872-1940) est presque oublié aujourd'hui. On ne le mentionne pas dans l'histoire de la psychiatrie polonaise et cela on peut justifier un peu car il a publié ces ouvrages principaux en général en allemand. Il a publié quelques œuvres y compris quatre monographies consacrées à la catatonie. Il a été défenseur de la théorie de l'autointoxication, enthousiaste des biologiques méthodes thérapeutiques en psychiatrie et adversaire de la psychanalyse. Sa personnalité spécifique, l'excentricité de ses opinions contribuent probablement à son isolement presque total des psychiatres polonais.

Mots clés : histoire de la médecine, catatonie

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