

## **Rafał Becker: psychiatrist, eugenicist, Zionist**

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### **Summary**

In the interwar period the eugenic ideas gained the status of a scientific theory and become attractive to a wide range of physicians. Among them were doctors of Jewish origin who perceived eugenics as a tool in the fight for biological rebirth of the Jewish nation. Polish – Jewish psychiatrist Rafał Becker (1891–1939?), the author of dozens of scientific papers, was the most famous eugenicist among Jewish psychiatrists, not only in Poland but also in Europe. After graduation in medicine at the University in Zurich and training in the psychiatry clinic Burghölzli under the guidance of Eugen Bleuler, Rafał Becker became interested in the question of epidemiology of mental disorders among the Jews. In the interwar period, dealing with the statistics of mental disorders among Polish Jews, and directing a psychiatric hospital “Zofiówka” in Otwock, he significantly contributed to the development of medical care for the mentally ill Jews in Poland. Becker’s scientific ideas were greatly influenced by the work of Alfred Adler and Ernst Kretschmer. The article presents the life and scientific achievements of Becker, with particular emphasis on his views on eugenics.

**Key words:** eugenics, history of psychiatry, Polish Jews

In many cases it is impossible to separate the biography of a psychiatrist from theoretical issues with which he dealt [1]. This relationship is clearly visible in a case of Rafał Becker. Becker is sometimes referred to as “the most prolific and influential of the Zionist psychiatrists” [2], and his works are often cited and discussed in the contemporary literature [3, 4]. Biography of this physician was not addressed in a separate paper so far and information about him available in the literature is inaccurate or even incorrect [5].

The aim of the study is to present the views of Becker and to demonstrate, on the basis of collected source material, how the origin, social environment, religion and political views affected his research attitude.

Rafał Becker was born on 27 March 1891, in Nowe Miasto nad Pilicą. He was a son of Gregor (Herszek) and Helena (Gilla) née Witz [6–8]. His family was very

poor. When he was six, the family went to Saratov in search of a better life. There he completed eight classes of a Russian state gymnasium.

At this time, there were university admission quotas for Jews, Poles and other minorities in the Russian Empire. This was probably the main reason why Becker went to medical school in Switzerland. In 1911, he joined the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Zurich. In 1917 he completed studies devoted to the epidemiology of the ocular syphilis and presented his doctoral dissertation prepared at the Faculty of Ophthalmology [9].

After graduation, Becker began to work as a volunteer in a psychiatric clinic Burghölzli directed by Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939). Under his guidance he specialised in psychiatry and neurology [10]. During this period Becker's financial position was very difficult. Bleuler, who was aware of it, helped him to get apartment rent exemption. However, this proved to be insufficient, and Becker was forced to resign from the Burghölzli. Farewell note from his colleagues written in the hospital chronicle was laconic and somewhat ironic – “he wore his horn-rimmed glasses when he had a difficult case [...] spoke very quickly and inexplicably, he was very willing to help. He left the hospital early in a summer to bring aid to the patients in need elsewhere” [11]. After working in Burghölzli, Becker practiced as a general physician in the municipal hospital in Solothurn, in a private institution for the mentally ill “Friedheim” in Zihlschlacht, and in the asylum in Königsfelden near Zurich.

In Zurich he became interested in the issue of the prevalence of mental illness among the Swiss Jewish diaspora. His research showed that in the years 1900–1904 Swiss Jews were, on average, twice as likely to develop mental illness as Protestants or Catholics [12].

In 1918 and 1919 he published two booklets on mental disorders among the Jews: “Die jüdische Nervosität, ihre Art, Entstehung und Bekämpfung” (“The Nervousness among the Jews: its types, origin and the fight against it”, 1918) and “Die Nervosität bei den Juden: ein Beitrag zur Rassenpsychiatrie” (“The Nervousness among the Jews: the contribution to racial psychiatry”, 1919) [13, 14]. In these works, consistent with a prevailing belief in the greater predisposition of the Jews to mental disorders, Becker argued with the idea that racial factors would be responsible. He ascribed the critical importance to political and economic factors. Moreover, he claimed that the later marriages in the traditional Jewish society promoted neuroses, and thus contributed to the “degeneration”, i.e. to the onset of organic pathology and its aggravation in successive generations. At the same time, he saw no danger in the tradition of marriage between related persons, considering it as contributing to the strengthening of favourable genetic traits. He also argued that the tendency to assimilate and the associated pressure on university education had a damaging effect on the nervous system of Jewish youth. He described this impact in terms of Adlerian inferiority complex of the Jews. In his opinion, assimilation caused the increase in incidence of alcoholism and syphilis among the Jewish population. In summary, it can be said that in his opinion “the Jewish nervousness” was the result of emancipation, assimilation and acculturation of the Jews.

While still a student in Zurich Becker approached the Zionist movement. He gave his views at meetings of academic Zionist societies “Hechawer” in Zurich and “Makabea” in Lviv [13, 15]. Already residing in Poland he published articles promoting Zionist ideas – e.g. in “Chwila” (published in Lviv) and “Nasz Przegląd” (published

in Warsaw). The preface to his work “Zagadnienie rasy żydowskiej w świetle teoryj” was written by the neurologist Zygmunt Bychowski (1865–1934), father of the famous psychiatrist Gustav Bychowski, delegate to the Zionist congresses and activist of the Zionist Organization in Poland [16].

Becker perceived the Zionist movement as the only solution to psychological and health problems confronting the Jewish community. In his opinion, bringing the quality of life to the level attained by Western societies would prevent the deterioration of the mental condition of the Jewish people. Therefore, he proposed that a sanatorium for neurotic Jews be founded in Palestine, which would help many of them to recover mental health [17].

In September 1919, in Zurich, Becker married Ires (Sophie) Schein (1893–1943) from Yekaterinoslav. Shortly after the wedding the couple left Switzerland and moved to Warsaw. There, Rafał Becker volunteered for the Polish army. In the curriculum vitae submitted to the military commission he admitted that he speaks Polish a little, as he left Poland being a small child, but he “learns now and hopes to master it again in a short time” [8]. His application was accepted, and he was sent as a second lieutenant physician to a hospital at the POW (Prisoner-of-war) camp in Strzałkowo, where he worked as the head of the internal ward. After few months he was attached to a hospital at the POW camp in Szczypiorno, and then to a field hospital in the Poznan region. In 1920, he was transferred to the 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (later 5<sup>th</sup> Podhale Rifles Infantry Regiment). In 1922, he served as a doctor at a local garrison and in the army recruiting command in Sambor. With the end of the war, he was transferred to the reserve in the rank of lieutenant [8].

In 1921, Becker had his diploma recognised in Poland. Already leading a civilian life, he began to practice in Kosow Huculski, and then in Stary Sambor. After two years he moved with his family to Różan in the Maków powiat.

His interest in psychiatry was still alive, and when the opportunity came, Becker returned to the psychiatric practice. In 1927 he became a full-time physician in the psychiatric institution “Zofiówka” in Otwock [18, 19]. He held this office until 1932, when Jakub Frostig (1896–1959) became the director of the hospital through a competitive process.

“Zofiówka” was established in 1908 on the initiative of the Society for the Mentally and Nervously Ill Jews, first president of which was the Warsaw neurologist Samuel Goldflam (1852–1932). The Society was formed in 1906 on the initiative of Adam Wizel (1864–1928), the head of the psychiatric ward in the municipal Jewish Hospital “na Czystem” in Warsaw. In 1907, using a donation of 7,000 rubles from Zofia Endelman, the Society bought the 30-morgen square in Otwock, where a 40-bed pavilion for mentally ill men was built in 1908. The first physician managing this institution was Aleksander Tumpowski (1870–1910). In 1910, the second pavilion was built, with 40 beds for women. During the first years of its operation, especially during the World War I, “Zofiówka” struggled with major financial difficulties, which were solved only after Poland’s independence was restored. In 1925, the Society received a loan from the Warsaw City Hall, which was used to finish the third pavilion with 60 beds in May 1926. Only then it was possible to employ a permanent physician, and Rafał Becker was appointed to this position. In the years 1910–1926, “Zofiówka” employed non-resident physicians only, who were commissioned to consult the patients. In 1926, 164 patients were hospitalised in the institution.

After taking the new position, Rafał Becker vigorously began to modernise the Otwock institution, while still continuing his scientific activities. He introduced new forms of medical history reports, sought to create a laboratory and workshops for patients. He wanted to improve the fate of mentally ill Jews in Poland. His hitherto experience in this field was recapitulated in the article published in 1927: "Every physician, whose activities require a closer contact with the Jewish mass, could state a great number of mentally ill Jews, left without any medical care, in conditions often contradicting basic requirements of physical and mental hygiene, to the great moral and material damage for their environment" [20, p. 7]. Major part of his publications, which appeared not only in Polish, but also in Yiddish and German, comes from the period of work in "Zofiówka". His main area of interest remained the issue of mental illness prevalence among Jews [21–24]. He also studied statistics of crimes committed by the mentally ill Jews [25, 26], and wrote about tuberculosis amid patients of psychiatric institutions, being particularly interested in the problem of reducing its incidence rate [27, 28]. In his opinion, occupational therapy (ergotherapy) was an effective method for rehabilitation of the mentally ill patients [29]. He continued to examine the anthropological questions. In 1927, he published the work "Zagadnienie rasy żydowskiej w świetle teoryj" ("The question of Jewish race in the light of theories"), in which he presented in a popular way contemporary views on the anthropological and racial issues. He drew a distinction between the physical race and the ethnic race, and rejected pan-Aryan and pan-Germanic theories as standing "beyond any scientific level" [16 p. 6]. In the same year, he became a member of the board of the Society for the Study of Physical and Mental State of the Jews, established in Warsaw [30]. The Society included prominent representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia: Meir Balaban, Zygmunt Bychowski, Samuel Goldflam, Henryk Higier, Moses Schorr, Henryk Szpidbaum. Furthermore, Becker was a member of the Polish Psychiatric Association and took an active part in the meetings of Polish psychiatrists [23, 27]. He also maintained contacts with the German-language psychiatry, for instance, in May 1929 he took part in the congress of German psychiatrists in Gdansk [31].

Analysing the hospital data, Becker concluded that mental disorders, particularly schizophrenia and bipolar affective disorder, occur more often among the Jewish people than other nations. Up to 60% of Jews hospitalised for mental disorders were diagnosed with schizophrenia. However, in his publication from 1931, Becker rejected his earlier view on the crucial role of environmental factors, writing: "I am currently too deeply convinced of the organic substrate of these diseases to maintain my [...] views on the psychogenic origin of both schizophrenia and manic-depressive psychosis among the Jews" [23, p. 71]. He sought the explanation in the constitutional theory of Ernst Kretschmer (1888–1964), which, as we now today, was not confirmed and was proved to be false.

Becker, like many other Polish physicians of the interwar period, advocated eugenic solutions [32]. In 1927, at the first congress of the Society for Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population (TOZ) Becker gave a speech in which he stated: "Since among the Jews most common are [...] inherited psychoses, the issue of rational propaganda of eugenic views should be considered as an exceedingly important task [...] it is primarily about the awareness regarding so-called negative eugenics (negative Eugenik). The purpose of this propaganda should be to familiarise among the widest circles of Jewish community the motto that reproduction of

handicapped elements has to be eliminated by appropriate regulation of the fertility. The notoriously mentally ill, retarded or affected by a severe form of epilepsy, incorrigible alcoholics and morphinists should not marry; to avoid bringing into the world genetically burdened offspring. The physically handicapped people, e.g. cripples, people with underdeveloped organs, such as deaf or blind, and individuals with sexual anomalies, like sadists, masochists and homosexuals, should also not to be allowed to enter into a marriage" [33 p. 115–116].

In his later works Becker did not propose solutions along the lines of negative eugenics. He also did not participate in the discussion on the eugenic law ongoing in the late 1930s in the Polish medical community.

In 1932, after his departure from "Zofiówka", Becker established a private sanatorium in Otwock for the mentally ill, with 10 beds, which he later moved to Świder in 1936. The description of the sanatorium provided in commercials indicated that mainly neurotic disorders were treated there [34]. However, the psychotic patients were also admitted, who, according to newspaper advertisements, were treated with the malaric therapy and insulin coma, the latter "according to the Viennese method" (i.e., in accordance with strict instructions of the method's inventor, Manfred Sakel).

Becker's published works have met with some recognition in the West. Psychiatrists and eugenicists from Europe referred to them in their books and articles. They were cited, among others, by Otmar von Verschuer (1896–1969) and Hans Luxenburger (1894–1976), who was the first to conduct studies on schizophrenia in twins. One of the later Becker's works was summarised in Alfred Ploetz's (1860–1940) journal "Archiv für Rassen – und Gesellschaftsbiologie". The referent falsified the conclusions reached by Becker and attributed to him the conclusion absent in the original, namely, that Jews were more prone to certain types of crime, particularly theft [35]. It was consistent with the anti-Semitic sentiments growing in Nazi Germany and might have also contributed to Becker's failure to publish subsequent works on mental disorders among Jews – his last work on this subject was published in 1932 [36].

Since 1934 Becker could not publish his works in German psychiatric journals due to the change of the Press law (Schriftleitergesetz) that prohibited the publication in the Third Reich by persons of Jewish origin, residing both in Germany and abroad [37].

The circumstances of Rafał Becker's death remain unexplained. Family word-of-mouth says that Rafał died of a stroke shortly after the German invasion to Otwock in 1939 [38]. In the documents of the Mutual Aid Fund at the General Government Chamber of Health it was reported that Rafał Becker allegedly died on 30 March 1941 [39]. Other sources mention only that Becker died during the German occupation [5, 40, 41]. A different version we can find in memories of Stefan Waydenfeld (1925–2011). According to them, his father, Władysław Waydenfeld (1890–1946), was interned along with Becker in a Soviet prison camp in Krzemieniec and attempted to escape with him, but Becker could not endure the difficulties and died of a heart attack on the first night after leaving the camp [42]. After the war, Rafał Becker was officially declared dead. The witnesses testified in court that he died on 4 November 1940 in Świder, of natural causes [43].

On the basis of the testimonies of the same witnesses it can be established that Rafał Becker's wife was shot in the Otwock ghetto in October 1942, after its liquidation, which was carried out by the Germans and Ukrainians working together in

August 1942. Two daughters, Erika and Nina, were hiding during the German occupation in Warsaw, because they were forced to flee Otwock because of blackmailers (szmalcownicy). Erika's husband perished in the Warsaw Uprising. Nina and Erika were hiding in a basement in Żoliborz. In the final stage of the Warsaw Uprising the city was destroyed by the occupiers. Germans searched every house. They often threw grenades into cellars, to check if there were people hiding inside. So it was this time. Nina was killed in a grenade explosion. Pregnant Erika survived with a help of a German doctor, and in 1946 she emigrated to France with her son [38, 44].

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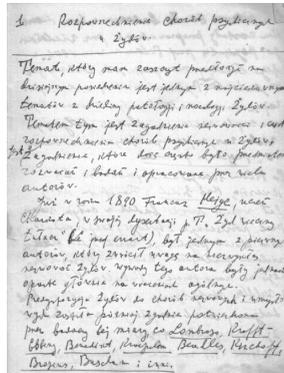
Rafal Becker wearing uniform of the lieutenant of the Polish Army and his wife Ires, the beginning of the 1920s. Courtesy of Bruno Spoerri from Zurich.



Rafal Becker in the 1920s. Courtesy of Ch. Selubski-Stolowicki.



Rafal Becker with his wife, daughters Erika (born in 1921) and Nina (born in 1926). Probably Otwock, 1926. Courtesy of Ch. Selubski-Stolowicki.



Manuscript of the lecture delivered at the meeting of the Polish Psychiatric Association in Zofiówka in 1927. Courtesy of Ch. Selubski-Stolowicki.



Rafal Becker in the 1930s. Courtesy of Ch. Selubski-Stolowicki.

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