

The scientific path of Jakub Frostig in the light of his correspondence with the leading representatives of world psychiatry – from psychoanalysis and phenomenological approach to biological psychiatry. Part 1. Towards psychoanalysis and phenomenological approach

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Summary

Jakub Frostig (1896–1959) was one of the most active Polish psychiatrists of the interwar period, with broad scientific interests, maintaining close scientific contacts with the leading specialists of world psychiatry, from the German – and English-language areas. This aspect of his activity is presented in the two-part publication based on new sources, which have never been used before, especially on the correspondence with Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966), Max Müller (1894–1980) and Adolf Meyer (1866–1955), spanning several years. In addition, the German-language work of the psychiatrist and its reception in this language area are described in more detail for the first time. The first part of the article discusses the little known participation of Frostig in the Polish psychoanalytic movement and his attempts to popularize psychoanalysis in Lviv in the 1920s, as well as the philosophical inspirations of his work from the early period of his scientific activity. Frostig's ambitions and chances for a scientific career did not always go hand in hand. The work presents the causes of these discrepancies, which limited his career in the period before and after his emigration to the United States in 1938.

Key words: Jakub Frostig, history of psychiatry, forerunners of Polish psychoanalysis

Introduction

For a medical historian, letters of physicians are a special kind of source material. These are often the only sources that allow us to trace the process of creating and transferring scientific concepts. The unofficial nature of scientific correspondence is conducive to speculation and polemics. On the other hand, it should be remembered that these sources are not always available, often preserved by chance and fragmentarily.

The historiography of world psychiatry includes critical editions on the preserved letters of some eminent representatives of this field. The multi-volume edition of the collected correspondence of Emil Kraepelin has been completed [1]; the exchange of letters between Sigmund Freud and Eugen Bleuler has been recently published [2]. In 2004 appeared a two-volume edition of selected 277 letters by representatives of German-language neuropsychiatry, found in over a dozen archives [3].

In Polish historiography of psychiatry, letters are rarely used as a source material. It is caused in part by the damage that the World War II caused in the Polish archives, both private and public, which was greater than anywhere else. Among others, the archive of the Polish Psychiatric Association was completely destroyed. Family archives were also destroyed or dispersed. What has been found and published so far is an important contribution to the history of interwar psychiatry in Poland [4, 5].

To present the history of Polish psychiatry in an international context, it seems very important to trace and study the unpublished sources of this kind. So far, no such attempts have been made or they have proved unsuccessful; it is enough to say that none of the numerous publications on the history of Polish psychoanalysis that appeared in the recent years have cited letters of Polish psychoanalysts.

Jakub Frostig was one of the outstanding young Polish psychiatrists of the interwar period [6]. His two-volume textbook on psychiatry, published in 1933, continued to be in use by adepts of this field for years after the war [7]. It is known that while writing his textbook, Frostig established scientific contacts with psychiatrists and neurologists from abroad: Emil Kraepelin, Oswald Bumke (University of Munich), Karl Bonhoeffer (University of Berlin), Cécile and Oskar Vogt (Institute of Brain Research in Berlin), Mieczysław Minkowski and Eugen Bleuler (University of Zurich), Ernst Kretschmer (University of Marburg) and Eugene Minkowski (University of Paris).

As a result of this research, Frostig's correspondence with Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939) [8], Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) [9], Max Müller (1894-1980) [10] and Adolf Meyer (1866-1955) has been traced [11]. In total, one letter from Frostig to Bleuler, 20 letters exchanged between Frostig and Müller, 17 letters between Frostig and Binswanger, and 13 letters between Frostig and Meyer were found. Inquiries placed with other collections – the Kretschmer Archive, Vogt Archive, the Historical Archives of the Max Planck Institute for Psychiatry in Munich (containing personal archives of Kraepelin, Bumke and other German psychiatrists), as well as Frostig's family archive in the United States proved unsuccessful.

The new information found in the letters has been referred to Frostig's academic biography. For the first time, German-language publications of the psychiatrist, especially his monograph on schizophrenic thinking [12], were discussed in more detail. After the inquiry in German-language medical journals, it was possible to present the reception of this work in the German-language area. Based on available sources, Frostig's theoretical work has been placed in the broader context of the phenomenological approach of German-language psychiatry, the main representative of which was Ludwig Binswanger. The exchange of correspondence with Müller and Meyer confirms the pioneering role of Frostig in the popularisation of insulin coma treatment.

Origin and education

Jakub Frostig was born on 25 March 1896 in Belz in the Sokal district of Galicia as a son of physician Henryk (Hirsch) Frostig (1861-1926/30) and Rachel (Rosa) Lea Frenkel, primo voto Baseches (1858-1930) [13, 14]. He had sisters Augusta and Anna and a half-sister Fanny. He received secondary education at the Stanisław Staszic VI Gymnasium in Lviv [15]. Little is known about his school years, but it seems worth noting that one of his teachers was Bronisław Bandrowski (1879-1914), a student of Kazimierz Twardowski, one of the first propagators of the theory of Edmund Husserl in Poland [16]. Bandrowski taught philosophy in the higher grades of the Gymnasium. No wonder then that in his first scientific works Frostig sought to apply phenomenological ideas in psychiatry.

After passing the graduation exam with distinction, Frostig began studies at the University of Vienna, which were interrupted with the outbreak of World War I. He was appointed to the Austrian army and fought on the Russian front. He resumed his studies in 1918 and passed the first rigorosum exam in October 1919. In the archives of the University of Vienna there is no information about any further exams and eventual promotion [17]. However, it is known from the official press that he was promoted in 1921. Frostig completed studies in psychiatry and neurology under Julius Wagner-Jauregg (1857-1940), Paul Schilder (1886-1940), Josef Gerstmann (1887-1969), and Constantin von Economo (1876-1931) [18]. His psychology teacher at the University of Vienna was Adolf Stöhr (1855-1921). These lectures must have had a significant impact on Frostig's scientific work, since he later dedicated his work about schizophrenic thinking to Stöhr [12]. During his studies in Vienna, Frostig underwent a training analysis with Otto Fenichel (1897-1946); it was before 1922, when Fenichel resettled to Berlin.



Image 1. Jakub Frostig in the 1930s.
Photograph from the family archive
of Thomas Frostig

Practice in Lviv and the monograph on schizophrenic thinking

From 1924 to 1932, Frostig worked in Lviv. In 1924, he tried to register his medical practice there. He experienced problems because he only had a copy of the University of Vienna diploma at his disposal. In 1925, he presented to the General Directorate of Health Service of the Ministry of Interior a certified copy of the diploma of the University of Lviv for the degree of Doctor of All Medical Sciences from 10 July 1924. In 1926, Frostig, together with Stefan Baley, worked as a hospitant (volunteer) in the Department of Nervous and Mental Diseases at the General Hospital in Lviv, under the Chief of medicine Aleksander Domaszewicz. In this department, fever therapy "ac-

cording to own experience” and hydrotherapy were applied from 1923 [19]. In 1926, Frostig gave a lecture “On new directions in psychiatry” at the Lviv Medical Society, while in a scientific circle connected with the department he delivered “Lectures on psychoanalysis” and “On the constitution” [19]. In the following years, until 1932, he most probably ran a private practice in Lviv and served as an expert witness in court.

On 24 December 1924, Frostig was admitted as an active member of the Polish Philosophical Society. In a letter asking for admission he wrote: “I am a psychiatrist by profession, and scientifically an employee in the field of psychopathology. I consider it necessary to maintain constant contact with philosophical thought, the neglect of which greatly affected the progress of my field” [20]. Frostig made efforts to be a visible member of the society. On 5 March 1927, Baley wrote to Twardowski: “Dr. Frostig could give a lecture on the subject of analysis of one case of forensic psychiatric expertise” [21].

It is known that every year Frostig travelled abroad for two months to update his knowledge in the Western clinics. During his scientific trip in 1931, he gave a lecture at a psychiatric clinic in Zurich, as evidenced by a thank you letter sent to the head of the clinic, Eugen Bleuler¹:

Dear Professor!

In this way, I would like to express my deep gratitude for your presence during my talk in Burghölzli. It was extremely important for me to be able to present such a delicate problem as the schizophrenic disorder to the most eminent experts on these issues, and a factual discussion with you gave me many ideas as to the direction of my further scientific work. I allow myself to send you a copy of my work through the publisher G. Thieme in Leipzig. I attach a medical history to this letter, with which I am trying to illustrate some clinical problems. Unfortunately, due to an unfavourable coincidence, the two most interesting stories that could best illustrate the phenomenological approach in my method, will not be published until the beginning of the next year. I would be very grateful, if after reading the work you would be kind enough to give me your opinion.

I would like to emphasize once again that my work has been conceived as a preclinical and that its perhaps intricate and overly precise way of expression is a natural consequence of the methodology of my work, which is intended not only for clinicians but also for logicians. I had to protect myself as much as possible against accusations of inaccuracy and ambiguity, which are directed towards psychologists – not without reason – from a philosophical point of view.

Thank you again for your kindness.

*I remain with great respect.
Very devoted to you,
Frostig [8].*

¹ Letter from Frostig to Bleuler, Lviv, 30.07.1931.

In June 1931, during his stay in Zurich, Frostig contacted Ludwig Binswanger². Binswanger was the head of the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen in the canton of Thurgau since 1911, the founder of the analysis of human being (*Daseinsanalysis*), and, next to Jaspers, the main representative of the existentialist approach in psychiatry. The starting point for Binswanger's scientific work was the psychoanalysis and the phenomenological approach of Husserl and Heidegger.

Since the end of the 1920s, Frostig had been working on a psychiatry textbook, finally published in 1933 [7]. His first works were published in Lviv: a psychoanalytical study of stage fright in a professional musician [22], two articles in German [23, 24], and, above all, a monograph *Das schizophrene Denken*, published in Leipzig in 1929 [12]. This work was generally positively reviewed. A detailed query has brought more than a dozen reviews. The work was noticed, among others, by Fenichel [25] and Arthur Kronfeld [26]. Surprisingly, the work has even been translated into Japanese [27]. Binswanger, who was friendly towards Frostig and agreed with him on the main theses of his work, did not publish a separate review, but he referred several times to Frostig's theses in his work *Ueber Ideenflucht* [28].

In a letter from January 1932, Frostig thanks for the review of Erwin Straus' work³ and asks for a copy of *Ueber Ideenflucht*, attaching reprints of reviews of his work by Kurt Beringer and Wilhelm Mayer-Gross. The letter shows the willingness of the Polish psychiatrist to follow German-language works from the field of phenomenological psychiatry on a regular basis and, unfortunately, perfectly illustrates his way of writing – intricate and difficult to translate⁴:

Dear Director!

It's only now I can thank you most graciously for sending me your work. I agree with your criticism of Straus to such an extent that I have nothing to add. When it comes to the "event" (Ereignis) problem, the point of view of animal psychologists is very interesting. They talk about the "field structure" (Feldstruktur) of perception and individual "transmissions of meaning" (Sinngebungen). In animals, "giving sense" assigned to particular parts of the structure field is so elementary that it illuminates the problem much better than the issues discussed by Straus. Especially the "sinking" (Zurückversinken) of the individual parts of the field structure in the "unnoticed" (Unbeachtete), "non-existent" (Nichtexistierende) is very informative. The use of a genetic point of view should be interesting in this respect.

Your point of view on psychotherapy is not entirely clear to me. Do you completely disregard in the pathogenesis of neurosis the drive conflict, the conflict between the ego ideal (Ichideal) and the repressed (Verdrängten)? Do you think that the only psychotherapeutic

² Letter from Frostig to Binswanger, Lviv, 10.06.1931.

³ The work mentioned here is [29].

⁴ Letter from Frostig to Binswanger, Lviv, 29.01.1932.

mechanism that can be considered is the recognition of overcoming with the strength of the spirit (Überwindung durch den Geist)? Do you not include to neuroses primitive reactions resulting from the drive conflicts? Because our butcher's neurosis can be regarded as such! I would have a small request to you. Your work on the flight of thoughts (Ideenflucht) appeared in Schweizer Archiv. Unfortunately, I do not have access to Schweizer Archiv. I would be very grateful if you would be so kind to send me this work, which I would return later. Regarding our conversation, I send you the critiques of my work by the same post. Some are completely incomprehensible, as were the criticisms of Beringer and Mayer-Gross, who misunderstood the preclinical nature of the work. I am asking you to send back the reviews after reading them, because I do not have duplicates [9].

According to the critique by Mayer-Gross quoted in the letter, the title of Frostig's work promises more than the work itself offers; the combination of Husserl's phenomenological method and Henri Bergson's intuitionism seems to him "unbalanced", and the adopted method generates artificial problems. Mayer-Gross showed that only some formal thinking disorders of patients with schizophrenia are of interest to Frostig, namely grammatically correct, meaningless sentences produced by some longer-suffering patients are analysed. Mayer-Gross complained that "from time to time the lecture goes in a strange, almost poetic direction". He saw the greatest value in the last two chapters of the work, in which Frostig drew an analogy between schizophrenic thinking and the thinking of healthy people in situations of disturbance of affect or sleep [30].

The other reviewers presented the main assumptions of the work and commented on it in an unambiguously positive manner. What draws one's attention is the fact that most of the reviewers belonged to a younger generation of psychiatrists who graduated after the war. What stands out, is the opinion of Erwin Stransky, a representative of the previous generation of Kraepelinian psychiatrists:

The author tries to capture thinking disorders in patients with schizophrenia using phenomenological terms. For this purpose, he uses the language of modern psychology, embedded in speculative psychology, which, although well-rooted in the minds of the young generation, remains unfamiliar to a purely clinical approach. I have repeatedly commented on this kind of innovation and I do not want to do it again. The great men of our profession, both psychiatrists and neuropathologists, have never been philosophical minds, their psychology was pure clinical psychology, sometimes humble experimental psychology, the spirit of "pure" philosophy was foreign to them; I have always believed that I am an epigone and student of these wonderful people to whom we owe the fact that psychiatry has become a full-fledged clinical science, while innovators want to introduce us into philosophy; in my opinion, it can yield no clinically useful results. In fact, the author seems to evaluate purely clinical facts

that have long been discovered by others, as well as clinical psychology and experimental psychology; this is a phenomenon common to almost all modernists. However, I will not repay in tit for tat and will admit that the author has put enough effort into his arduous intellectual work, in which I am unable to participate; Kraepelin (and other great men), according to some accounts, also do not do better with the works of our modernists. I am therefore justified. In any case, this work is interesting and worth reading [31].

The harshest criticism of Frostig's work came from the German psychiatrist Hans W. Gruhle:

The analyses that have been made so far from Husserl's point of view seem to me to be of little fruit. Jakob Frostig looks for logical classifications for the psychology of philosophical thinking, but, in my opinion, he proposes nothing new. He states, for example, that "a schizophrenic's manner of expression steers away from the signalling of collective structures in the meaning notation aimed at group fulfilment" (p. 56). His other observations are similar: simple facts are surrounded by uselessly complex expressions [32].

In the Polish medical press, the monograph was reviewed, among others, by Gustaw Bychowski [33]. The Warsaw psychiatrist welcomed the coincidence and similarity of Frostig's theses with the results of his own research, presented several years earlier in the work *Metaphysik und Schizophrenie* [34]. Frostig limited the bibliography in his work literature to the most important positions, to avoid disturbing the clarity of his lecture; it is therefore not known whether he was inspired by the work of the Polish colleague, whose academic career was similar to his own. Both of them were of Jewish origin, they had studied in Vienna and Zurich, were interested in art and philosophy. Bychowski and Frostig luckily avoided the fate of most Polish psychiatrists during World War II. For both of them emigration to the United States turned out to be salvation.

It is worth noting that Frostig and Bychowski were the only Polish psychiatrists who published more extensive works in German in the interwar period, and that both met with interest and recognition. It is not known whether, apart from the similarity of their biographies and scientific interests, they also had friendly relations. They could have gotten to know each other after the relocation of Frostig to Zofiówka, for both of them attended the meetings of the Warsaw Branch of the Polish Psychiatric Association. It is possible that Frostig was not familiar with Bychowski's work before announcing his monograph; he omits it in the extensive bibliography of works used while working on the textbook.

Many years later, the work *Das schizophrene Denken* was quoted by Roman Ingarden [35, p. 499], but no discussion of this work could be found in the philosophical press. There are reasons to suppose that the work was unfavourably received in the Lviv philosophical community. In his journals, Kazimierz Twardowski mentions meetings with Frostig several times; Frostig belonged to the Polish Philosophical Society and

gave numerous lectures in the psychological section, including two in 1930, when he presented the results from his monograph. Most of the opinions formulated by Twardowski were unfavourable: "Today, when Frostig spoke as a doctor and did not pretend to be a philosopher, one could listen to his argumentation with interest, even though the manner of its delivery was very poor both in terms of diction and language" (22.05.1926); "Today he tried among others to show the root of some philosophical views and schizophrenic symptoms, so he got into philosophising. His reading was very poor, and sometimes worse than very poor" (29.05.1926); "What a confused mind, and at the same time, what a confidence and what a braggart he is! A long discussion after the lecture, in which [Leopold] Blaustein and [Salomon] Igel, and partly myself, set about him vigorously" (15.10.1927); "Today's lecture was prolonged and unintelligible, delivered in poor Polish" (31.01.1931) [36].

Taking into account an informal and private nature of Twardowski's notes, it can be assumed that Frostig's attempts of phenomenological approach to psychiatric problems were met with critical assessment of the majority of members of the Polish Philosophical Society, if they considered it worthwhile to become acquainted with them at all. The question whether it was the reason why Frostig did not publish his works on this subject in Polish, remains unanswered. Nothing has been found in the archives of Kazimierz Twardowski, which also include the correspondence concerning "Ruch Filozoficzny" edited by him – no letters from Frostig are included. Only in the preserved Twardowski collection there are two reprints of Frostig's articles [37].

In August 1935, Frostig wrote to Binswanger about his work on the role of phenomenology in psychiatry based on Jaspers' theories⁵. This work has not been published anywhere. On 7 May 1937, at the meeting of the Cracow Branch of the Polish Psychiatric Association, Frostig was to give a lecture entitled "The question of phenomenology in psychiatry". Abstracts of this lecture have never been found anywhere either.

The most significant discovery concerning Frostig's relations with the Lviv philosophical community was made by Thomas Schnelle. According to his findings, Ludwik Fleck (1896–1961) was friends with Frostig during his activity in Lviv [38]. In his groundbreaking work *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935) [39, 40], Fleck does not refer to the work of the psychiatrist, but an excerpt of Frostig's monograph referred to by Schnelle illustrates the similarities in the philosophical thinking of both physicians:

The expression social group is defined as any group of people connected by a common intention. So a group of mathematicians is a group with a very specific, mathematical mentality. One and the same person can belong to very different groups of people. (...) The collective resource of the group is constantly changing, and along with it the criteria of truth (...). Only in relation to the collective resources of a given group can we define a certain state of affairs as correct or as a personal error [12, p. 23; 38, p. 74].

⁵ Letter from Frostig to Binswanger, Otwock, 09.08.1935.

The excerpt from Frostig's work presents its key thesis: the fundamental disruption in schizophrenia is the inability to update collective structural products and the corresponding realisations (*Bewusstheiten*) [12, p. 84]. An analogy can be drawn to the basic concept of Fleck, based on the thinking collective (*Denkkollektiv*) as "a community of people connected by the exchange of thoughts or mutual intellectual interaction" [39].

Psychoanalytic practice

It is known from several sources that Frostig practised in Lviv as a psychoanalyst. This fact is usually overlooked in studies on the history of Polish psychoanalysis. His name appears only in Magnone's commentary to the correspondence of Herman Lieberman with Helena Deutsch; Frostig consulted Lieberman [41]. In other recent studies on the history of Polish psychoanalysis, Frostig appears only rarely [42]. However, Frostig's role seems significant, especially since after the end of the World War I, the emigration of Ludwik Jekels and Herman Nunberg to Vienna and the departure of Jan Nelken to Warsaw, it is difficult to name other practising psychoanalysts in Galicia. The fact of Frostig's training therapy under Fenichel is also significant. Fenichel was a recognized psychoanalyst, a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. In the case of the majority of Polish psychoanalysts of the interwar period, no information on training analysis is available. We only know that Jekels' analysis was carried out by Freud, Bychowski was an analysand of Freud and Bernfeld, while Nunberg underwent analysis with Federn.

The information about training analysis with Fenichel probably originates from Frostig himself. Fenichel was a Viennese, a year younger colleague of Frostig from Vienna University. Perhaps both physicians were in touch later; as mentioned earlier, Fenichel reviewed the work on schizophrenic thinking.

It is also known that Frostig knew Alfred Adler. Indeed, in his first work, the *Analysis of concert stage fright*, he criticized Freud's theories and pleaded for Adler's individual-psychological method [22].

In Lviv, the actress Irena Solska (1877-1958) was a friend of the psychiatrist. She mentioned Frostig several times in her memoirs. It is known from this particular source that in 1923 she visited psychiatric hospitals, including Kulparkow, where her guides were Frostig and Domaszewicz. She describes Frostig as a zealous advocate of psychoanalysis. It is known that the first manuscript of Solska's memoirs (which she wrote until 1935) was written in the form of letters to Frostig, but it was lost in the Warsaw Uprising. The information that Solska was a patient of Frostig, which appears here and there, has insufficient foundation in the sources⁶.

Freud and Adler's theories have been extensively presented in the textbook by Frostig. For some Polish psychiatrists who reviewed the work this was a major flaw;

⁶ Frostig's artistic interests facilitated friendships in this environment. Frostig reviewed i.a. painting exhibitions in the newspaper "Chwila". It is known that Frostig knew Bruno Schulz, and that this was a close acquaintance, may be demonstrated by the fact that Schulz gave Frostig the portfolio of his *Booke of Idolatry*.

for Maurycy Bornsztajn, a committed advocate of psychoanalysis, it was treated by Frostig in an “ambivalent” manner [43]. It is difficult to say today to what extent the psychoanalytic and biological approaches were balanced in the textbook. What is certain, is that in the 1930s, medical students and training psychiatrists had at their disposal three modern (i.e. published after 1920) psychiatry textbooks in Polish, one of which, written by Aleksander Piotrowski, virtually omitted psychoanalysis [44], while the other two – by Bornsztajn [45] and Frostig – gave a fairly comprehensive and objective summary of Freud’s theory.

In addition to the psychiatry textbook, Frostig also wrote about psychoanalysis in the daily press. A series of articles on psychoanalysis appeared in a Lviv newspaper “Chwila” [46]. He also contributed to other popular magazines [47].

The reasons why Frostig did not devote himself to psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to a greater extent could not be determined. It was probably due to his changing personal and professional situation, which we refer to in the second part of the article.

Frostig himself wrote to Binswanger about the reasons for the abandonment of his philosophical work⁷:

Writing in a publication about some differences in the concept of phenomenological analysis would be, in my opinion, pointless. Maybe in the near future I will be able to visit Switzerland again. I hope that we will clarify many things in a personal discussion.

Following the world psychiatric literature of the recent years, one finds it regrettable that the interest in theoretical problems has significantly decreased, and the recognition of your and Minkowski's work has not changed anything. In any case, it must be said that phenomenological discoveries have not penetrated into psychopathological thinking.

I believe that it is a necessity for phenomenological psychopathology to include all psychopathological phenomena. But this work would take a lifetime. I do not think it makes sense, unless psychiatrists undergo theoretical training in the humanistic and psychological sense. In any case, I feel lonely, especially in the Polish research environment, and it seems to me that because the German intellectual world has become dumb and unreflective, any further work goes to waste [9].

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