

Pioneers in Health

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Ludwik Rajchman, international health leader

Ludwik Rajchman was a man caught up in the whirlwind of international politics. He suffered from the conquest of his country, Poland, by both Nazism and Communism yet managed to rise to eminence as a leader of the Health Organisation of the League of Nations and then of UNICEF.

Ludwik Rajchman, director of the Health Organisation of the League of Nations and main promoter of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), is one of the forgotten figures of international public health. It is not hard to see why. After the Second World War, the "League experiment" was considered a failure and most of its accomplishments, including the Health Organisation which was generally considered to be one of the most important achievements, were forgotten along with it (1). As for UNICEF, though Rajchman was the author of most of its principles and launched many of its post-war campaigns, he retained the position of chairman only until 1950. In the political context of the cold war, it was difficult for a Polish citizen to be the head of an organization whose very

existence depended on the generosity of the United States government. But even in Poland Rajchman has tended to be forgotten: he never went back to live there after 1945 and kept a rather low profile as Polish delegate to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Furthermore the Communist government preferred to present the State Institute of Hygiene (Państwowy Zakład Higieny), which Rajchman had founded and directed until 1933, as a mainly post-war body and therefore one of the regime's own achievements, apparently forgetting that the Institute had known its greatest glory in the 1920s and 1930s as a world-renowned scientific centre.

Who then was Rajchman? Ludwik Witold Rajchman was born in Warsaw in 1881 in what was then called the "Congress Kingdom", which was nothing more than the Russian-annexed part of a totally partitioned Poland. Those were the years of

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Ludwik Witold Rajchman, 1881–1965.

Photo by courtesy of UNICEF.

particularly active tsarist repression following the abortive insurrection of 1863: all young Poles were obliged to attend the strict Russian *gimnazjum* and forbidden to own Polish books or even speak Polish. This only resulted in turning all of them into sworn patriots, most of them into regular conspirators, and many of them into precocious participants in “social works” such as underground education and publishing. Rajchman belonged to all three categories. At home, he led a fairly glamorous existence, for although the family knew times of material hardship, the Rajchmans belonged to the intellectual and artistic elite of Warsaw. Rajchman’s father Aleksander was editor of a musical and literary magazine and launched the building of the city’s first symphony concert hall, of which he became the administrative director. His mother Melania was a

journalist and a prominent figure in the feminist movement. “Thursday Black Coffee” — or open house at the Rajchmans’ — was an appreciated weekly event attended by such well-known figures as Paderewski, Grieg, and Richard Strauss. The child prodigies Artur Rubinstein and Mieczysław Horszowski both made their début at the Filharmonia, as the concert hall was called.

Starting out

Rajchman finished school at the turn of the century and, although at first intending to study law, ceded to his parents’ wish that he become a doctor — provided he was allowed to do so in Kraków. The University of Warsaw had been completely Russianized, while Polish institutions within the Austro-Hungarian partition (Galicia) enjoyed far greater autonomy. Galicia was also a land of refuge for the tsarist opposition, which sought to recruit the students of the Jagiellonian University (Kraków), many of whom came from the “Congress Kingdom”. Rajchman thus became involved in student groups “sponsored” by Józef Piłsudski’s Polish Socialist Party and took an active part

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in organizing open university courses and libraries. When he returned to Warsaw to begin his medical practice just after the Revolution of 1905 (which was of great importance not only in Russia but in Poland also) he was arrested at a Socialist Party meeting and sent to prison — in Warsaw

luckily, not in Siberia like his sister and many of his compatriots. He spent several months there, until his parents-in-law could effect his release, and then left for Paris to study microbiology with Mechnikov and

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Levaditi at the Pasteur Institute. In 1910, he returned to Kraków for a year to work with his professor of bacteriology, Bujwid, at whose suggestion he added his name to a list of 164 candidates for a position to teach bacteriology to doctors at the Royal Institute of Public Health in London. Much to his surprise his name was chosen, and he promptly dropped everything in order to learn English with what turned out to be a rather charlatan teacher, for when he arrived in England none of his new colleagues could understand a word he was saying. However, his mastery of the English tongue in later years was remarkable.

In London he worked with the founder of the Institute, Sir William Robert Smith, and was editor of *Bacteriological Notes*. In 1913 he took up a research position with the Medical Research Committee, where, on the outbreak of the First World War, he concentrated particularly on dysentery.

Holding the line in Poland

With the peace came President Wilson's Fourteen Points, and the Poles' dream of independence finally came true. In the fall of 1918, before the armistice, Rajchman and

his wife and three children made their rather perilous way back to Poland over mined seas, through revolutionary Germany, and amid wandering German and Bolshevik soldiers. Rajchman knew that his country was plagued by epidemics of all kinds, but especially by typhus. He went straight to the embryonic Ministry of Health (Poland was officially reborn on 11 November 1918) and arranged for the unfinished building of a mental institution to be used as a State Institute of Hygiene. Meanwhile, with a colleague he followed the retreating German army, managed to buy some of their laboratory equipment (of which there was none to be had in Warsaw), and set it up in a few rooms near the future Institute. The situation in Central Europe was dire and constituted a major threat to the entire continent. Most of the epidemics—cholera, dysentery, typhus, typhoid, and relapsing fever—were coming from Russia, but given the strained diplomatic relations existing since 1917, no one had much hope of dealing with the Bolshevik authorities. Furthermore, it was through Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania that the diseases were infiltrating into Western Europe and since Poland was the largest and most affected of the three, it was up to her to halt the advance. Humanitarian organizations flowed in: the Red Cross, the Quakers, and (mainly) Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration, which was to play a fundamental role in Poland's reconstruction. But these organizations were not enough—especially when the Red Army attacked Poland in 1920. In January of that year there were, in Poland alone, 100 000 cases of typhus with 12 000 deaths (2). By 1922 there had been an estimated 4 million cases in Poland, while in Russia, where typhus was endemic, the figure was between 25 and 30 million (3).

When Paderewski, then Prime Minister of Poland, went to the first session of the

League of Nations in January 1920, he took Rajchman with him to expose the seriousness of the situation. At that time Rajchman was leading the efforts being made to bring the epidemics under control. The League decided to create an Epidemic Commission, in which Rajchman took part. Subsequently, no doubt partly in recognition of Poland's remarkable feat in swaying the epidemic tide, he was appointed director of the League's Health Organisation.

The Health Organisation

The Health Organisation was in fact something of an accident. Originally, it had been thought that the Office International d'Hygiène Publique (OIHP), set up in Paris in 1907, would be incorporated into the League. But the USA, which belonged to the OIHP, had backed out of the League and formally opposed the idea. The French, for their part, were keen on keeping the OIHP rather more French than international in flavour. The simultaneous existence of two international health institutions created problems of rivalry, conflicting interest, and redundancy, but they were smoothed out largely by Dr Thorvald Madsen, who acted as Committee Chairman of both the Health Organisation and the OIHP (4).

Rajchman and Madsen became fast friends and together laid the foundations for the new organization. As its director from 1921 to 1939 (with, even in 1936, a staff of only 12 and very little funding), Rajchman built it into an institution of world acclaim. Besides calling on an international network of remarkable specialists, who collaborated in experiments and carried out surveys, Rajchman set out to revolutionize the notion of international public health as it had been conceived of up to then. In 1922 one of his colleagues recalled that he submitted a memorandum "setting out the principles

which, in his view, should guide the activities of the Health Organisation. He showed that, although the Organisation had till then devoted most of its energies to the struggle against epidemics, it would to an increasing extent take an active part, and in many cases the initiative, in all international action undertaken to solve problems of health, such as measures for the reduction of social evils and infant mortality and for the organisation of health and rural hygiene services" (5). Under the Health Organisation's auspices too, Thorvald Madsen and Sir Henry Dale would carry out their work on international biological standardization (6), while the previously ignored fields (internationally at least) of nutrition, housing, and education would be added to the list of fundamentals of public health.

Throughout his time as director, Rajchman travelled extensively (mostly to China), thus becoming an increasingly political figure within the League. Indeed, the notion of "technical assistance" has often been

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attributed to him (7) through the help he recommended be given to China after his first trip there in 1925—help not just in terms of health but in terms of finance and transport also.

With the mounting political and ideological tension of the 1930s, Rajchman's position

in the League and *vis-à-vis* the Polish government became increasingly uncomfortable. He was no more liked by the reactionary generals who took over in Poland after Piłsudski's death than by the League's French Secretary-General, Joseph Avenol, whose sympathies would lie with the Vichy government (8). He had made certain people uneasy from the start by insisting that Germany and the USSR participate in international health matters though they were not yet members of the League, and his outspokenness on the Manchurian and Ethiopian issues, coupled with his socialist views and Polish-Jewish background, had made him a *bête noire* to numerous regimes and individuals. Rather than wait to be dismissed, as some of his secretariat colleagues had been, Rajchman preferred to resign at the end of 1938 and move to France, which he believed to be relatively protected from the gathering storm.

In the wilderness

This was not to be, of course, and in June 1940 he left for the USA and continued his activities (taken up in September 1939) as Polish delegate to the Allied powers for humanitarian affairs. Arranging for relief supplies to reach German- and Soviet-occupied Poland was no easy matter, but the USA, being still neutral, had some leverage. When Rajchman's role became superfluous in December 1941, he accepted a proposal of T.V. Soong, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, whom Rajchman had come to know on his missions to China, to become his adviser in Washington. It must have been, however, a frustrating period for him. He was cut off from health activities and progressively lost faith in the Polish government in exile after the death of its Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski in 1943.

Moreover, while continuing to advocate American support of the Chinese cause, he was becoming more and more uncomfortable in his association with Chiang Kai-shek's regime, to the point of giving up his post at the end of 1943. At the same time, he foresaw the new Russian imperialism in Central Europe and was aware that numerous friends and family members were being murdered by the Nazis.

When preliminary plans for UNRRA and the United Nations began to be drawn up, Rajchman could once more usefully turn his mind to public health.

In September 1943, he published an article in *Free World* entitled "A United Nations Health Service — why not?", in which he suggested that a health service be established under the future United Nations, financed by an international "health tax" to be paid by all member countries. The tax, figured Rajchman, would come to 1% of each country's health budget. "Let us admit," he wrote, "that only 'Freedom from Want' can secure really adequate health for everybody. Until people are adequately fed, no medicine or hygiene can keep them strong. The important thing to bring home is that, by and large, health is purchasable at a price varying with changing economic and social conditions. To determine this price and to plan and act accordingly is the function of national health agencies. The function of the United Nations Health Organisation would be to assist these national services, when requested, in a vast field of common endeavour requiring imagination and initiative."

The ideas sketched in his article brought many enthusiastic responses and early in 1944 he was asked by UNRRA to review and advise on their policy for dealing with post-war health and refugee problems. The memorandum he submitted in March led

directly to the establishment of a Health Office in Washington to serve UNRRA as well as a European UNRRA Health Commission in London to coordinate UNRRA and allied military operations (9).

As the war drew to an end in Europe, and the tragic Warsaw uprising was defeated, the continent's geopolitical future became clearer. It became more and more apparent that Stalin had used his cunning for the profit of the USSR and that Churchill and Roosevelt did not regard the central European nations as being of much account in the scheme of things. Soon the allies withdrew recognition from the Polish government exiled in London in favour of the provisional government that had been set up in Lublin and was backed by the USSR. It was obvious that the Lublin authorities were the people to deal with if one wanted to get anything done in Poland — which Rajchman, as a fervent patriot, definitely did. Besides his aspirations in the field of international public health, he was determined to help reconstruct his shattered homeland. Thus, when asked by the new regime to represent Poland at UNRRA, after an initial hesitation, he agreed.

Delegate for Poland

“Lots of people thought he ought not to accept,” reminisced Philip Noel-Baker years later (10), “because the government was Communist, but he said: ‘They won’t beat me or restrict me in my actions. They promised to give me a very free hand. If I’m their delegate, I have a place in the assembly of the UN, I have an official status, I can *do things*. Without it, I am Rajchman, ex-Director of the Health Committee of the League, and no use to anybody’.”

Rajchman returned to Poland in July 1945 and immediately set out to secure help and credits for its devastated economy while naturally taking a particular interest in health matters and in the fate of “his”

Rajchman’s philosophy in international public health: promote self-help and believe that international collaboration is possible and can rise above political and personal ambitions.

Institute of Hygiene where he had been known long before the War as “Tata” — Polish for papa.

Though Poland, with over 6 million deaths, had unquestionably been the worst hit of the European countries, the health situation of the entire continent was serious: malnutrition, physical handicaps, rickets, tuberculosis, syphilis — the list could go on and on. And yet, in the summer of 1946, with the onset of the cold war and the controversy over UNRRA’s political role, the USA announced its intention to withdraw from UNRRA — against the American Secretary-General La Guardia’s personal will. This in fact meant the end of UNRRA, since the American contribution amounted to three-quarters of its finances.

No role in WHO

At the same time that UNRRA was being wound up, an international health conference was being held in the USA that would lead to the founding of the World Health Organization. Rajchman, however, had not been asked to participate in it.

Why? Howard-Jones has suggested that, since everything after the war was supposed to be bigger and better than before, people were seeking new faces (11). But he has also advanced another and more probable

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reason — that Rajchman was not wanted because he knew almost too well what he was doing, did not hesitate to speak his mind in face of naïve ideas in matters of health, and was known for his dauntless determination to get things done. Rajchman's notions of public health, particularly as illustrated in his *Free World* article, were likewise deemed by some to be — as he himself put it — “fantastically revolutionary” (12). This second theory would seem to be supported by the fact that Madsen, another prominent expert in international health between the wars, was also excluded from the preliminary WHO talks. Rajchman's experience would have made him a very likely candidate for the Organization's directorship, and the fact that he could not have any part in it at all came as a bitter disappointment to him. But the political climate cannot be underestimated either: the cold war had begun, Rajchman was a Polish citizen, and Poland was a Communist country.

According to Noel-Baker, Rajchman did play an indirect role in the creation of WHO. “I sat on the subcommittee of the Security Council which drafted the Constitution of WHO,” he recalled (10) “and with

Dr Rajchman's advice I put a great many of his ideas into the WHO Constitution as it exists today. It is Rajchman's work via me.”

Creation of UNICEF

Paradoxically, however, it was perhaps this rather unfair turn of events that pushed him to realize the idea he had had during the war of creating a special organization for children (13). When La Guardia announced the end of UNRRA in Geneva, Rajchman immediately proposed using the residual funds for a child-feeding programme. Thanks to his well-known talent as a lobbyist, he managed to dissipate what hesitations there were and the resolution was unanimously passed. But apart from the resolution and a promise from La Guardia of US\$ 500 000 with which to begin operations, everything remained to be done.

It was first and foremost a question of time: UNRRA would put an end to its deliveries in March 1947, so the International Children's Emergency Fund would have to be ready to take over. La Guardia presented the proposal to the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations, a special subcommittee was designated, and Rajchman, as its head, began working on a resolution to be submitted to the UN General Assembly for final approval in December. The US State Department's support was crucial: given the war-ruined economies of Europe, only the USA could make UNICEF possible. Back and forth between New York and Washington, Rajchman sought to convince as many people as he could of his very concrete ideas for UNICEF, which would be incorporated into the resolution.

“Dr Rajchman was convinced that the basic responsibility for programmes had to be that of the governments,” recalled the young

State Department official who helped him with the resolution and later worked for UNICEF himself (14): “UNICEF’s function was to strengthen the permanent child health and welfare programmes of countries receiving UNICEF’s assistance — not to lay down the law to them, but rather to enhance their own capacities to improve the situation of their countries’ children on a long-term basis. He was especially conscious that fundamentally it was the relevant Ministries and their officials who would bear the ultimate responsibility for the successes or failures of programmes.”

With the support of La Guardia, in addition to that of Herbert Hoover and Maurice Pate — both of whom Rajchman had known since the American Relief Administration days in Poland after the First World War and with whom he had collaborated in relief efforts in Washington in the Second World War — the resolution encountered no opposition when it was presented to the General Assembly. Rajchman was designated chairman, and he saw to it that his chosen candidate, Maurice Pate, was named director.

Shaping the new agency

According to one of his UNICEF colleagues (15), Rajchman had four major “obsessions” concerning the new organization’s activities: penicillin, BCG vaccine, milk pasteurization and pulverization, and DDT. Through technical assistance he sought to provide countries that had been cut off from the rest of the world with the latest scientific discoveries. This meant supporting national programmes for constructing milk plants and drug factories and ensuring that milk became a regular part of children’s diets. Because he wanted UNICEF to have a lasting effect and not just be an *emergency* supply programme (though that was what its

name implied), he insisted from the start that the receiving country participate, even if symbolically, in the cost of the operation and undertake to carry it through. For example, the Emergency Fund would deliver milk or pay for the building of a pasteurization plant, only on the condition that the government in question be willing to make milk an obligatory part of the school lunch. Similarly, when it came to testing and treating people for syphilis and yaws, UNICEF saw to the children and mothers while the national authorities were responsible for the rest of the population.

Needless to say, UNICEF almost immediately went beyond its original mission of simply providing extra food. Many people thought that it was stepping onto WHO ground, which to a certain extent it was. But this was inevitable: Rajchman, as former director of the Institute of Hygiene and the League’s Health Organisation, would never have been content with feeding programmes. It meant

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that much friction arose in the early days between UNICEF and WHO. One thing must nevertheless be remembered: while WHO was empowered to carry out studies and research, UNICEF could provide the *material* means for a country to fight its ills. A joint committee was soon set up between the two organizations, and, thanks to individuals who lent their expertise to both,

the differences were eventually smoothed out and their respective roles defined — UNICEF being responsible for goods, medical equipment, and payment of medical personnel and WHO acting as consultant and technical arbiter (16).

To give real meaning to life and deep satisfaction to the individual, effort alone is not enough. It must be coupled with sacrifice and social service.

One of the best examples of cooperation of this kind was the International Tuberculosis Campaign, the largest international vaccination operation ever carried out. The Danish tuberculosis specialist, Johannes Holm, who was consultant to WHO, had begun to prepare an immunization campaign for Poland and Czechoslovakia to be administered by the Danish Red Cross. Rajchman, who had wanted to become involved in anti-tuberculosis measures on a big scale, contacted him, and the collaboration which resulted was responsible for vaccinating 14 million people in 23 countries in under three years. Holm recalls that it was Rajchman who coordinated the campaign at the international level and insisted on maximum decentralization of operations by suggesting that teams of young people be specially trained and sent to the various countries to carry them out (17).

Resignation

Rajchman's direct participation in UNICEF as chairman and Polish delegate came to an abrupt end in 1950. There can be no doubt that he had distinctly socialist sympathies

while in no way being a communist and still less an ideologue. He belonged to the generation of Poles who had grown up in a completely partitioned country, who had witnessed the intoxicating excitement of the rebirth of their country, and who had participated in its reconstruction only to see the cataclysm of the Second World War. In 1945 Rajchman was, in my opinion, determined to help his country in the best way he knew: in health matters. When the political tensions of the 1950s became too great, however, he could no longer deal with such questions in isolation. Thus, when the Soviet delegate walked out of the UNICEF session to protest against the United Nations' non-recognition of Communist China, Rajchman, as Polish delegate, was more or less obliged to follow suit. In any case, he considered that according to the true principles of international cooperation an organization like UNICEF should still help a country's children irrespective of the nature of its government, and the only way to do so was to come to some sort of understanding with the local authorities. But in 1950 this kind of attitude was seen as compromising, and Rajchman resigned as chairman, sensing that he could no longer win support for the organization. He then had to give up his position as Polish delegate as well, when Poland, following the directives given to all the "satellite" countries, asked the UNICEF mission to leave its soil. The supporters of Senator McCarthy had already made veiled accusations against Rajchman, and he left the USA to settle in France. He maintained his links with UNICEF through his involvement as Vice-President of the Centre International de l'Enfance, which he had helped Robert Debré to set up in the late 1940s. This also allowed him to continue helping Poland, which was readier to collaborate with a French-backed institution than with one dependent on American support.

Rajchman's philosophy in international public health could perhaps best be summed up by two notions: the first being that one should promote selfhelp wherever one can; the second that one must believe that international collaboration *is* possible and can rise above political and personal ambitions. As he wrote to his grandson in 1952 (18):

“A life as long as your grandfather's has taught him that effort to achieve things is not enough. It must be coupled with sacrifice and social service, or else it will fail to give real meaning to life and deep satisfaction to the individual. A glorification of individual freedom is bound to degenerate into hypocrisy and mendacious caricature of real values.” □

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