The Vilnius Section of the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society in 1924–1939

Sekcja Wileńska Polskiego Towarzystwa Otorinolaryngologicznego w latach 1924–1939

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ABSTRACT:
The medical society associating doctors dealing with diseases of the ear, nose, larynx and pharynx in the territory of the Republic of Poland was registered in 1921 as the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society. The Society’s Vilnius Section was established in 1924. We know the most about the Vilnius Section of the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society because the protocols of the section meetings have been preserved. According to the protocols, 58 sessions were held during the 16 years of the Vilnius Section’s existence. During the entire period of the Section’s activity, over 250 different clinical cases were demonstrated, and more than 30 papers, inventions, new therapeutic and surgical methods were discussed and presented. Colleagues shared their experience gained abroad, internships held in foreign centers; participation in congresses in Poland and abroad were discussed. On September 26–29, 1929 as part of the 13th Congress of Polish Doctors and Naturalists in Vilnius, the Vilnius Section organized the VIII National Congress of the Society and a Section meeting.

KEYWORDS: history of medicine, otorhinolaryngology, Vilnius

STRESZCZENIE:

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: historia medycyny, otorynolaryngologia, Wilno

The first medical societies in Poland were established in the 17th and 18th centuries, but their real development took place only in the following centuries [1]. In was in the 19th century, specifically in 1805, that the Vilnius Medical Society was established. The first president of the society was Jędrzej Śniadecki. In 1820 it was transformed into the Warsaw Medical Society, headed by August Ferdynand Wolff [2]. The 19th century saw a robust growth of medical sciences, which led to the emergence of medical specialties. Doctors became aware of the need to integrate the environment in order to exchange scientific ideas and experiences. The first Laryngological Society was established in Germany in Berlin in 1862, and the first Otological Society was founded in America in 1868 [3, 4]. The first association of otolaryngologists in Poland was the Laryngological Section, founded in 1889 by Teodor Heringg, the head of the then Rynolaryngology Department at St. Roch Hospital. The section operated at the Warsaw Medical Society [5]. In 1912, the Warsaw Otolaryngological Society was established. In 1920, the aforementioned laryngological organizations merged to form the nucleus of the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society. On December 22, 1921, the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Poland approved the statute of the new organization, entering it into the register as the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society [6]. Following the creation of a nationwide organization, sections of the Society were arranged. The first to be founded was the Warsaw Section, established simultaneously with the Society. In 1923, the Lviv Section was created, in 1924 – in Lodz and Vilnius, in 1926 – in Poznan and Pomerania, and in 1928 – in Cracow [7].
We have the most information about the Vilnius Section of the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society because the minutes of its members’ meetings have been preserved. This was mainly due to human courage, a civic attitude, a deep conviction about the need to preserve historical testimonies, a sense of gratitude towards those who came before us, and doing historical justice to the pioneers of otorhinolaryngology. Our gratitude should be expressed first of all to Konstanty Pigulewski, the last secretary of the section, who kept the records during the occupation and transported them from Vilnius to Warsaw. Then he handed them over to the last chairman – prof. Czesław Czarnowski. In turn, on December 9, 1981, prof. Cz. Czarnowski gave them to doctor Zbigniew Szlenk (Fig. 1.).

In 2017, the protocols were formally submitted to Prof. Kazimierz Niemczyk. They are currently contained in the museum collections of the Chair and Clinic of Otorhinolaryngology, Head and Neck Surgery (Fig. 2.).

The constituent meeting of the section was held on June 2, 1924. It was attended by 10 people, the founders of the section. At that time, the society comprised 65 members, including 44 belonging to the Warsaw Section [8]. According to the data of the statistical yearbook, there were 21 doctors dealing with ear, nose and pharynx diseases in Vilnius in 1921–1928 [9]. The founding members were:

- Chairman – prof. Jan Szmurło,
- Deputy chairman – dr. Samuel Lewande,
- Secretary – dr. Tadeusz Wąsowski,
- Treasurer – Aleksander Samuel Libo.

At the meeting, the first Board of the Section was appointed:

- Chairman – prof. Jan Szmurło,
- Deputy chairman – dr. Samuel Lewande,
- Secretary – dr. Tadeusz Wąsowski,
- Treasurer – Aleksander Samuel Libo.

In the subsequent years, the chairman of the section was the Head of the Otolaryngology Clinic of the Stefan Batory University. This function was performed by: prof. Tadeusz Wąsowski and prof. Cz. Czarnowski. The deputy chairman was dr. Florian Feliks Świeżyński, the secretary was dr. Jan Bielunas, dr. Benedykt Dylewski, dr. Konstanty Pigulewski, dr. Józef Świtek, the treasurer – dr. Władysław Szałewicz and dr. Fajngold Noach Nuhym Leon Wolkowsky, who infamously left his mark in the history of the Clinic [11].

It was also agreed that the meetings would be held once a month on the first Tuesday after the first day of the month at 8:00 p.m. From 1926, they were virtually always organized on Sundays. According to the minutes, the meetings were not held regularly, there was also a summer break. It was initially agreed that the monthly premium would be PLN 1, i.e., PLN 12 annually. For comparison, the fee for medical activities in the Vilnius and Nowogródek Medical Chamber was: for a visit at the doctor’s office during office hours, as long as it did not last longer than 30 minutes – in Vilnius – PLN 8, in other places – PLN 6, for minor procedures, e.g., bloodless removal of foreign bodies from the ear, nose – PLN 25 in Vilnius, PLN 15 in other towns [12]. The earnings of doctors at that time were highly diversified. In 1927, they were as follows: a full professor earned 755 zlotys, associate professor – 613 zlotys, assistant professor – 312 zlotys, senior assistant – 255 zlotys, junior assistant – 206 zlotys. The minimum monthly income of a doctor at that time was calculated (housing, fuel, light, food, clothes, underwear, cultural needs, etc.). It was established that the minimum income for a dependent lone physician, i.e., shortly after graduation, should be PLN 320, an independent beginner – PLN 650, married with one child – PLN 1250, married with three children – PLN 1800 [13].

The discussion on the amount of the contribution was conducted periodically at the meetings of the Section; there were plans to make it dependent on seniority. At one of the meetings, prof. J. Szmurło proposed to increase the monthly fee to PLN 2, but the members of the Section would also receive a subscription to the “Polish Journal of Otolaryngology”. At the national congress in Ciechocinek in 1936, it was left to individual sections to determine the amount of the fee. Despite the small number of members (the section consisted of 10 to 15 members), “membership fees were rather scarce”, especially during the crisis, “in view of the unfavorable conditions of medical practice”. Meetings were
Minutes from the founding meeting of the Vilnius Section of the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society (from the collections of the Chair and Clinic of Otorhinolaryngology, Head and Neck Surgery, Medical University of Warsaw).

The turnout at the meetings was not too high. The meetings were attended by approximately 10 members.

According to the protocols, there were 58 sessions held during the 15 years of the Vilnius Section’s existence, although the protocols from 1938 are missing. Most likely they were lost in the historical turmoil, especially since some of the pages were stored “in bulk”. At each meeting, the section secretary read the minutes of the previous meeting and voted on its adoption. The meetings were sometimes held jointly with the Vilnius Medical, Pediatric and Ophthalmological Society. Reports from joint meetings were also published in the “Polish Journal of Otolaryngology” and “Diary of the Vilnius Medical Society”. There were readings and demonstrations of cases from otorhinolaryngology and related fields, as well as discussions of interesting cases from private, clinical and social clinics and outpatient clinics. Most of the clinical cases were demonstrated “live”, while those that could not be demonstrated were discussed. This was usually done “on the fly”: the first meeting involved the presentation of an untreated case, while further meetings consisted in discussing the employed treatment and its effects. Experience was discussed and shared. It was an objective and substantive discussion, which sometimes even involved seeking advice on proceeding in a concrete clinical situation. There were demonstrations of cases that were treated unsuccessfully, so that it would be possible to learn “from others’ mistakes”; other solutions were discussed. Reading the protocols leaves a distinct impression that it was the patient’s well-being and providing help, rather than self-promotion, that came first.

It is worth recalling at this point fragments of protocols:

- “Then Prof. Szmurlo demonstrates a 20-year-old girl with a large tumor on the upper mandible with significant cervical metastases. Examination of the excised specimen allowed to diagnose a sarcoma. The mandibular tumor, as well as the cervical metastases, were excised, but with partial success, because the tumor developed around the large vessels in the neck and overgrew them, and therefore it could not be completely excised. Currently, the neoplasm is developing again on both sides of the neck, and is being destroyed by diathermy. Unfavorable prognosis” (Meeting on January 17, 1928);
- “Prof. Szmurlo discusses a fatal outcome that took place at the clinic 10 days ago. The patient was operated on 2 years ago due to cholesteatoma and labyrinthine fistula. After a radical operation, the patient’s condition improved. There were now headaches, suppuration of the ear. A deep ulcer was present on the auricle, granulation tissue appeared in the middle ear cavity, the labyrinth wall was exposed. Remaining residual hearing, the static labyrinth reacts to irritation. After opening the wound, hyperplasia was removed. The patient started to feel better, but after 10 days pain recurred. A kind of necrosis was observed near the cochlear wall. Temp. – 38°. The labyrinth no longer responds to irritation. Hearing altered. Stiff neck. Lumbar punctures without result. Surgery of the outlet of...
labyrinth was performed under local anesthesia. Puncture of the brain and cerebellum did not yield any results. Temperature on the 3rd day t° – 40°. Lumbar puncture resulted in fluid without significant pressure – cerebrospinal fluid culture did not bring any results. Puncture of the lateral ventricles produced no fluid. The patient died. No meningitis was found on autopsy. Lateral ventricles empty, signs of encephalitis. At the top of the pyramid between the meninges, a small, pea-sized cyst with a liquid, yellow content. Assoc. Swieżyński asks whether other organs have been dissected. Assoc. Lewande asks if there was an image of ac. encephalitis. He is familiar with this case from the Jewish Hospital. After removal of the granulation tissue, there developed paresis of the facial nerve but it quickly subsided. There could be a suspicion of sepsis. Was encephalitis the result of the puncture? Assoc. Czarnowski recalls the case in which the autopsy showed symptoms of cerebral edema. Assoc. Lewande points out that such a chisel may be of importance when the sinus is already exposed; in experienced hands, an ordinary chisel is not dangerous. A conchotom with a flat spoon is suitable for the sinuses” (Sitting on 23. 01. 1927) (Fig. 6.).

New treatment and surgical methods were demonstrated. At the meeting on November 15, 1936 “prof. T. Wąsowski will demonstrate an ear biomicroscope that enables the vital examination of the tympanic membrane and the Proetz-Le-Mec apparatus for the treatment of the lateral sinuses of the nose”.

If any of the colleagues presented a case with surgical treatment, and the method was not commonly known so far, they were asked to organize a demonstrative surgery for doctors. November 16, 1930 prof. J. Szmurło introduced a patient after labyrinthectomy. After the professor’s speech, dr. S. Lewande turned to prof. J. Szmurło to ask “if he would be kind enough to organize demonstrations of surgery on the labyrinth for the doctors”.

Colleagues shared their experience gained abroad; internships at foreign centers were discussed. It was known that in Vienna, participation was allowed only for minor procedures and
during outpatient examinations. In Paris, interns leave without substantive supervision. It was only possible to learn something, as it follows from reports, at professor’s G. Portmann in Bordeaux. Here is an example of one of the courses organized in Paris by prof. G. Portmann (Fig. 7).

The Vilnius Section, as part of the 13th Congress of Polish Doctors and Naturalists in Vilnius, which took place on September 26–29, 1929, arranged the VIII National Congress of the Society and a section meeting (Fig. 8). It was an event of paramount importance to the Society and the Section, and it was arranged at a meeting of the section. It was noted that the Otolaryngology Section was represented in large numbers not only by representatives of Otolaryngology Clinics and colleagues from the capital, but also by otolaryngologists from the provinces of various parts of the country. The attendees from the Lviv Clinic were: prof. T. Zalewski, doc. A. Dobrzański and assoc. K. Szumowski, from the Poznan Clinic – doc. A. Laskiewicz, from Warsaw – prof. F. Erbrich. Only the Krakow Clinic did not send its representatives. In addition to the program lectures, a number of papers from other fields of medicine was delivered. In the wake of the interest and lively discussion, several readings had to be dismissed from the agenda.

During the Section, the participation of section members in national and foreign conventions was presented. On January 30, 1936, the subject of the 11th National Congress, which took place in Krakow on September 15–16, 1935, was discussed at the meeting. The main topic of the Congress was: “Pathology of the larynx and trachea. Ear-intestinal syndrome”. It was concluded that “in terms of cordiality and hospitality, the Cracow Congress is very successful”. At that meeting, the resignation of prof. J. Szmurla from the function of the president due to health condition was discussed. The discussion was so heated that the meeting ended at 11:00 p.m.

The members of the Society’s Vilnius Section took an active part in the works of the “Polish Journal of Otolaryngology”. In the years 1926–1936, the editorial office was located in Vilnius, and its editor-in-chief was prof. Jan Szmurla. Throughout its 15-year activity, the Vilnius Section of the Polish Otorhinolaryngological Society was one of the most active and made a considerable contribution to the development of otorhinolaryngology in Poland. The reason for this is that it was made up of outstanding specialists such as professors: Jan Szmurla, Tadeusz Wąsowski, Czesław Czarnowski. It is thanks to their talent, diligence and dedication that otolaryngology in Vilnius achieved a superior level for the standard of those times.

References
