

Rafael Joseph Czerwiakowski ***the father of Polish surgery***

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Summary

Rafael Joseph Czerwiakowski was the first professor of Surgery in Poland. He studied in Padua and Bologna and visited France and Germany before his appointment in 1779. He taught anatomy and surgery and collected many surgical instruments. He is also remembered for his writings on surgery. This article briefly reviews his life and work.

Résumé

Raphaël Joseph Czerwiakowski fut le premier Professeur de chirurgie de Pologne. Il étudia à Padoue et Bologne et visita la France et l'Allemagne avant son nomination, en 1779. Il enseigna l'anatomie et la chirurgie et il rassembla de nombreux instruments chirurgicaux. Il est également célèbre pour ses écrits sur la chirurgie. Cet article décrit brièvement ce que furent sa vie et ses travaux.

In Poland, as was common in the rest of Europe, surgery was, for many centuries, not seen as a truly medical subject. Of course there were famous surgeons, such as Ambroise Pare, and there were special schools for surgery, for example in Montpellier in France, but generally surgeon did not mean physician. This situation began to change in the 17th and 18th centuries, with a different attitude towards education, the beginnings of clinics and the development of medicine itself. Surgery found its way to universities and took its place in the realm of medical sciences.

From its very foundation in 1364, the University in Cracow, (which became known as the Jagiellonian University), included a medical faculty. However, the faculty had to wait for over four hundred years for its first chair of surgery. In the late 1770s, when great reforms in the field of education were taking place, the medical faculty underwent major re-organisation, with the aim of achieving the best modern standards in the teaching of medicine. It was vital to find a well-educated surgeon who would be able to organize the first chair of surgery and surgical clinics in the history of Poland. Fortunately, such a man was at hand. His name was Rafael Joseph Czerwiakowski.

Born in 1743, Czerwiakowski was, in his younger days, devoted to the idea of priesthood and saw his life as a monk in the Piarist convent. However, he discovered an interest in medicine and was given permission to go abroad to study. He completed full courses of studies of medicine, first in the University of Padua and then in Bologna.¹ As a young physician he worked for three years in the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome. When in Italy, he focused on the subject of surgery and decided to go to Germany and France, where this discipline was thought to have achieved a high level. It was not surprising that, when the authorities of Cracow University were searching for a physician with a deep knowledge of surgery, Czerwiakowski was the first candidate. He was in fact the only candidate.

Thus in 1779, when the Chair of Anatomy, Surgery and Obstetrics came into being, Czerwiakowski became its

Professor. His inaugural lecture had the significant title *'The argument on surgical instruments'*. Czerwiakowski claimed that the collecting and progressive building up of surgical equipment was the foundation of modern surgery, a truth not so obvious for physicians in those days. Very soon afterwards, in 1780, he opened the first surgical clinic in Poland. This was located in the Saint Barbara College in the Small Market, very close to the centre of Cracow. The surgical clinic started with a small room with space for only two beds. In a few years' time, the clinic was able to take about a dozen patients in three rooms. In the Saint Barbara College Czerwiakowski started regular lectures on the subjects of anatomy and surgery and here he conducted the very first postmortem autopsies in Poland, in public, in the spring of 1780. From that point, modern (that is to say, late eighteenth century) surgery was finally established in Cracow. However, it soon became clear that the Saint Barbara College was inadequate for the needs of the surgical clinic and in 1789 it moved to the St. Lazarus Hospital.

In St. Lazarus, Czerwiakowski deepened his knowledge of anatomy and surgery, taught his students, and constantly worked on many modifications of surgical instruments. From this period comes a set of four cauteries, a mouth gag, and a pair of forceps for crushing bladder stones, which represent a lamentably small part of Czerwiakowski's surgical instrument collection. At one time this totaled about two hundred items, but during the 19th century most of them wore out and were simply thrown away. Those instruments remaining are now housed in the Museum of the Faculty of Medicine at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.²

While Surgery was the main field, it was not the only one in Czerwiakowski's medical practice. Czerwiakowski's name is associated with the history of obstetrics. He was a founder of an obstetric ward in the surgical clinic and a school for young girls who were taught the basics of pregnancy and delivery so they could act in the future as qualified midwives to help women in childbirth.

Czerwiakowski's practical skills found their theoretical presentation in a multivolume work *Surgical dressing of common organs, parts 1-6*, now recognized as the first professional book on surgery published in Poland. Issued in the years 1816 and 1817, it presented a complete and very modern picture of what was then a new academic discipline.³ It represented his life's work and was a scientific testimony for those who came later.

He spoke on surgery on many occasions, considering it to be one of the most important fields of medical sciences. He wrote, in the form of an open letter to the Polish King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski, a short text entitled *Dissertation about nobleness, need, and practical use of surgery*.⁴ Printed in 1791, it gave a precise and clear view of the value and significance of theoretical and practical surgery. This dissertation became well known among Polish physicians, making its author famous.

Without doubt, he was the pioneer of surgery in Poland. He provided the basis for Cracow's school of surgery, which was later to be represented with distinction by such personalities as Rust, Mikulicz, and Rydygier.⁵ He placed great emphasis on the practical and theoretical knowledge of his pupils, giving special attention to innovations in techniques of operation. He died in Cracow, in 1816, from tuberculosis, but even today his name retains significance and a place in the history of Polish medicine.⁽⁵⁾

References

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