



TESTIMONY OF THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE SUPREME COURT ABOUT THE FORGOTTEN HEALER – THE CASE OF J.T. PNIEWSKI FROM PUŁTUSK (POLAND)

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ABSTRACT In highly hierarchical societies with a materialistic focus on science, healers may be an aberration. The article contrasts the available historical and scientific data on the nineteenth Catholic prelate from Pułtusk with a lawyer's unique memories. S. Szrednicki, the First President of the Polish Supreme Court in Poland (1917–1922), described the prelate J.T. Pniewski as a person of extraordinary social sensitivity and a healer, to whom sick people who were disappointed by mainstream medicine turned en masse. There is no trace of information about healing in Pniewski's biographies. Selective memory about healers presumably makes it difficult to learn about healing. The recently identified and credible archival descriptions of healers, however, may inspire further research and critical discussion.

KEYWORDS : Healing, Spiritism, Witness Records

Back in the 1970s, in the rural areas of the White Forest (northern part of Mazovia in Poland), stories about travelling to visit Pułtusk for miraculous healings were common. The memory of the details, however, has faded. Pułtusk is an old town and a local administrative centre, which became known to the wider public after the fall of a meteorite in 1868. The White Forest was a poor area with underdeveloped transport routes [1,2]. In the first place, considerations on the origins of the healing stories in Pułtusk led to the interpretation that they allude to the greater opportunities of the metropolis, as imagined by the poor peasant population. This seems to be confirmed by a fruitless search for healers from Pułtusk on the Internet. In monographs devoted to Pułtusk and the surrounding area [3–5], as well as in the monumental biographical dictionary of about a thousand prominent individuals associated with this city through birth/death, education, living or work [6], there is not a single mention of a healer. The aim of the work is to present a nineteenth-century healer from Pułtusk in light of historical/scientific studies and a credible contemporary observer.

The Figure Of J.T. Pniewski In Light Of Scientific Studies From The Twentieth And Twenty-first Centuries

John Thomas Pniewski (JTP) was born on 12 December 1773 in an impoverished noble family [6]. His father was Josef Pniewski from Wólka Zaleska (located 25 km from Pułtusk) and his mother, Marianne née Gzowska. They had five daughters and two sons. The father's surviving will from 1792 documents his interest in beekeeping, as it included, among other things, 40 hives. JTP was ordained Catholic priest in 1803. He graduated from the Theological Faculty of the University of Warsaw, having read theology, and was awarded the title of candidate of holy theology [6,7]. He was a canon of the Catholic cathedral chapter in Płock and prelate of the collegiate chapter in Pułtusk. In 1830, he became the parish priest and dean of Pułtusk and held these positions until his death [6–9]. In the 1830s and at the beginning of the 1840s, he was the regent of the Theological Seminary of Pułtusk, founded in 1595 [10]. JTP died on 12 March 1858 in Pułtusk and was buried in the basement of the collegiate church. His epitaph is located on the southern wall of the right nave. 'The parishioners of Pułtusk appreciated his piety and helpfulness and saw him as a candidate for altars' [6,7]. The Biographical Dictionary [6] also includes a quote from Skowronski's article [11]: 'So far (i.e. at that time, almost 100 years after his death – author's note), the Catholics of Pułtusk kiss the wall in the porch of the collegiate church, where the deceased is buried, pray at the cross with inscriptions in foreign languages – the priest's foundation'. The cited article contains only one mention of JTP and is devoted to another priest killed by the Gestapo in 1939, bearing the same surname as JTP [11].

Memory Of The Priest And Healer J.T. Pniewski By The Judge S. Szrednicki

In 1849, Stanisław (Pomian-) Szrednicki (1840–1925) together with his older brother Władysław began their studies at the District School in Pułtusk and lived in a boarding house. In his memoirs about that period of his life, written when he was vice president of the district court in Piotrków Trybunalski, i.e. after 1881, he presented JTP on two pages as one of the most original characters of Pułtusk [12]. 'He was the embodiment, the embodiment of virtue and piety'. Living in his canonry, JTP occupied only two modestly furnished rooms like a

hermit and gave the remaining rooms free of charge to old widows and poor students. His flat was always open and could be visited by anyone without the obligation to make an appointment or state their purpose [12]. Prelate Pniewski was commonly considered a healer. If someone with severe infirmity was abandoned by their doctors, they would go to him with a request for healing. 'Every day, the entire street where the canon of Father Pniewski stood was literally crammed with carts, cuffs with the sick who came to him for health'. He never refused to help. 'For a moment I do not suppose that such an enlightened and learned priest could believe in some embodiment of the power of hell, but he probably considered the disease to be something wrong and through deep faith and earnest prayer influenced and disposed the sick so beneficially that, believing in the prelate's divine mission, he was relieved. Indeed, faith healed the sick. Spells against Satan and showing him the organ of the body through which he was to leave the sick, I think these were necessary formalities to make the sick person more convinced that the disease in him had left him. Miracle work: was it not today's hypnotism?' [12].

DISCUSSION

Prepared in the twenty-first century, the biography [6] shows JTP, the priest, as a well-educated clergyman who was highly promoted in the Catholic church hierarchy and enjoyed authority among both the faithful of the local church and theologians, as evidenced most clearly by his supervision over the education of future clergymen. Szrednicki's memoirs, which have sat in the archives for almost a hundred years and published in 2018 [12], are the only source that identifies JTP as a healer. This explains the pilgrimage to his burial site in the past and the preparation of the epitaph in Pułtusk's collegiate church, despite the fact that the prelate did not have distinguished aristocratic origins. It is worth noting that in his painting, he was depicted in very modest clothing. The epitaph was omitted from scientific works devoted to the interior of the collegiate church in Pułtusk [4,5].

Szrednicki's testimony is of particular importance due to his ability to observe, reason and strive for truth. After the death of his parents at the age of six, Szrednicki was raised by his uncle Bonifacy Ostrzykowski, who, being a Catholic priest, organised folk education, wrote poems and translated poetry [13]. The humanistic openness of Ostrzykowski, which was probably shared by his charge, is especially proven by the fact that he was one of 150 subscribers thanks to whom the first translation of the Holy Quran into Polish was published in 1858 under the substantive editorship of the Polish Muslim of Tatar origin J.M. Buczański, from the area of Białą Podlaska. Due to his moral authority and professional achievements, Szrednicki was a Pole who held the highest position in the judiciary of Tsarist Russia in Polish lands included in the Russian Empire after the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) [14–16]. He was decorated, inter alia, with the Imperial Order of Saint Prince Vladimir, established by Empress Catherine II. Professor Bohdan Winiarski, who was elected to the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Netherlands) in 1946 and served as its president in the 1960s, described Szrednicki's prominence as a judge in Russia [15]. Both in St Petersburg and in Warsaw, completing a judge's apprenticeship at the court headed by Szrednicki was considered as an "Oxford School" [14]. In general, after the reforms of Tsar Alexander II, the judiciary was a branch of public service in nineteenth-century Russia that was regarded with high esteem [15]. After Poland regained

its independence at the beginning of the twentieth century, Srzednicki was appointed the First President of the Supreme Court. He held this position for five years until his retirement at the age of 82 [16].

Srzednicki's three-volume memoirs are a source of very detailed information. Attempts by the author of the article to compare information of geographical, economic and ethnographic nature from Srzednicki's childhood with other sources concerning the White Forest and Pułtusk show impressive agreement and sensitivity to anthropological issues, such as the self-determination of the population regarding their origins (e.g. in Budy Stare) or the sharp boundaries in contacts between communities separated by the Bug River (e.g. in Brańszczyk) [1,13].

Undoubtedly, JTP's authenticity must have made a great impression on Srzednicki, which led to the former being described by the latter as a healer. It is also worth noting that Srzednicki's mother fell ill after his birth and died after less than two years. The author of the diary mentioned that the essence of her debilitating disease had not been known. Srzednicki's father did not consent to the autopsy which the doctors wanted to carry out. From the manner of narration, one can read the regret of having lost the chance to learn about etiopathogenesis. At the age of 70, while writing the third volume of his memoirs [14], Srzednicki noted that he himself has always been in very poor health and doctors constantly moved his presumed life expectancy, first to seven years, and then to 24, 32 and 44 years. The pragmatic judge felt no need to describe any of the visits to doctors. Only one doctor, Dr Szczygielski from Lublin, is mentioned by name by Srzednicki [14], which is in contrast to the detailed description of the healer [12]. Whether he personally used the help of JTP or considered to do so, he did not disclose in his memoirs.

The influence of religion, and the religious views and spiritual life of a patient, as well as their experience of suffering is very often ignored by the medical community [17-19]. It can be assumed that, in connection with bringing hopelessly ill patients whose doctors refused to help them, to JTP, his intercession was not based on reversing the disease but on charismatic persuasion so that the patient would have the ability to live with it [20]. Healing may be operationally defined as the personal experience of the transcendence of suffering [21]. Evidence grows that states of mind can affect physiology. Mind-body approaches can be used to reduce the severity and frequency of biological symptoms and can potentially help strengthen the body's resistance to disease [22]. Very recently, Kruijthoff et al. [23] described a series of healing experiences through prayer in which the documented improvement in the patients' functioning did not go hand in hand with an improvement of imaging test results.

Finding reliable archival descriptions of self-born healing experiences can do a lot about healing and the deep interconnectedness between the mind and the physical world [24,25]. Despite the limited description of JTM, his healing practice can, at least in part, be considered a form of spiritual influence. Although some reports indicate extraordinary successes in healing both mental and physical diseases at centres that use spiritual techniques [26], the fundamental question still remains: what is the essence of such therapy and what is just smoke and mirrors?

The time prelate Pniewski was active as a healer fell partly on the period when Franciszek a Paulo Pawłowski was the bishop of Płock. A year younger than JTP, Pawłowski liked to reside in Pułtusk. Pawłowski disciplined the clergy harshly; however, he was known for his own lively contacts with the laity and his gourmand [9,12]. Tolerating the canonry having been transformed into a hermitage with daily queues of sick people near the bishop's palace testifies to a shift in the appreciation of prelate Pniewski's actions as more of a service than a quirk. Interestingly, after JTP's death, the posts of the parish priest and dean of Pułtusk remained vacant for seven years [3,9]. This long-term vacancy can be treated as a safety valve protecting any successors from being judged against the extraordinary skills of JTP.

Unfortunately, Srzednicki did not explain in detail JTP's contact with the sick. We do not know whether the described ordering of the disease to leave the body was accompanied by touching the patient. There are many observations in the field of paediatrics, which prove the importance of touching a child for its normal development [27]. In parallel, numerous randomised clinical trials have documented the healing effect of touch in treating patients [28].

The case of Pniewski and the available sources on his life show that

facts that are difficult to interpret are usually eliminated. It can be postulated that this practice limits the possibilities of getting to know healing from a historical and statistical perspective [29,30]. In the case of JTP, the path of professional development and promotion as a priest was preserved, while the extraordinary choice of living in material poverty, creating a place of help for those looking for a roof over their heads and discovering a healer in themselves was rejected. Powerful healers who come to the aid of their powerful contemporaries, go down in history. JTP, who healed mainly peasants, is remembered in local history but in a truncated form, which ignores his most distinguishing traits. Healing in the face of mainstream medicine expectations posed a challenge for the community, all the more so since JTP, at the end of his life, was not a typical clergyman but a person clearly following his own path.

The selective memory of healers makes it difficult to learn more about healing. The recently identified, credible archival descriptions of healers, however, may inspire further research and critical discussion.

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