

APPENDIX

A DAUGHTER'S MEMORIES OF ADOLF BECK

by

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My father, Adolf Beck, was born in 1863 in Kraków into the family of a poor craftsman. He told me that his mother had sold her string of corals so that he might go to the secondary school. At school, being very gifted he supported himself by coaching other students. He struggled hard throughout his youth and when at last he became an assistant and then a close friend of Napoleon Cybulski, his professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, his life began to follow a hard-working but much smoother course. He prepared himself for his scientific and research career very carefully and thoroughly and, as the future has proved, very fruitfully.

In 1895 he was offered the chair of physiology in Lwow. The medical faculty at the Lwow University was then in the stage of organization. Much later, being already a member of numerous scientific societies and twice rector of the Lwow University, he told me how important for him had been his first lecture as a professor (the title of which was: "The phenomena of life and the ways of investigating them") and how carefully he had prepared it. What he aimed at was, not only to deal with the subject in the best possible way, but also to get a close contact with the students. The reminiscences of his students witness to his success.

All this I learned from him, and now I will try to put down some of my own memories.

It is very difficult to write about a person whom you loved as dearly as I loved my father. The more so because the cruel fate of war deprived me of the possibility of being with him in his hardest moments and at the time of his tragic death; being in a different city, I was not able to perform any services for him.

When I was a little child, I looked up to my father as a supreme

person, who could tell wonderful fairy tales and who had a cure for any disease or any mental disturbance that a child might have. As I grew up, I understood that he had created for us children (there were three of us: my sister, my brother and I) a highly cultured atmosphere and a happy childhood, and that he had been molding us, developing all our inborn abilities. My brother used to say about himself: "Father molded me as if in plasticine"; I think the same applies to us all. If he had not formed my character, I would certainly have broken down after the tragic death of my husband (a professor of the Warszawa University, shot by the Germans at Palmiry in 1941) after the complete ruin of both my homes: in Lwow and in the burning of Warszawa. (The bust of my Father, sculpted by A. Karny was lost there, too.) I would not have been able, either, to bring up my son; I would not have known how to live on my own up to the present day without the support of my family, for my sister died in 1939, and my brother just after the war, in 1946.

It was Father who taught us to try to understand other people and to be friendly with them, and how to be modest while maintaining, at the same time, a sense of one's own dignity.

Our mother was a true companion to him. She ran a big house, looked after us, created an atmosphere of peace and safety, and supported him in his endeavours to give us a good education and teach us to understand beauty and art. She kept a tight hold on us so that we would not disturb him at work in his study, for although he made the necessary experiments in the Institute, he wrote mostly at home.

Father spoke to me about the sufferings of Poland, about the uprisings, about Polish and foreign painters and music; he also selected books for us to read. There were often family musical evenings in our home. Father played the violin and Mother accompanied him on the piano. I remember well those cosy, early winter evenings and myself a little girl in the circle of light thrown by a paraffin lamp, and later on in the dusky drawing-room lit with the electric candles placed by the music stand and the piano. I remember, too, our frequent evenings at the opera or at concerts, as well as the visits to picture exhibitions. Thus our father, an art-lover himself, developed in us a love for music and beauty. Most wonderful were the holidays, which we spent together, mostly in the mountains. Father taught me how to recognize edible mushrooms and to pick them. This has remained a passion with me and I have passed it on to my son. During these walks Father talked to me and treated me as if I were his equal, certainly aiming at the development of my mind and character. Even today in the moments of grave decisions I feel his eyes following me from an old portrait and I wonder whether he would approve of them.

In 1914, upon the outbreak of the First World War, Father, then rector of the Lwow University for the second time, defending bravely his colleagues and the property of the University, was deported as a hostage to Kiev. We felt lost and helpless without our leader and guardian. He used to write charming letters to us, very serene, which reminded us of his characteristic smile; it is a great pity that these letters were lost, together with all his manuscripts and library during the Second World War. In 1916 he returned home, thanks to an exchange of prisoners, and our home became a meeting place for his colleagues who came to talk and discuss.

He took an active part in social work. Apart from his scientific work and active membership in numerous scientific societies at home and abroad, he worked in Towarzystwo Szkoły Ludowej (this was a society, of great merit, devoted to the advancement of education among the masses) and was chairman of "Zjednoczenie" (The Union) whose aim was to unite students, regardless of their origin or religion.

When I followed my husband to Warszawa, and my father and I were parted by fate, we nevertheless often met after my mother's death. We also spent a month's holiday together in 1939. Although an old man of 76 he was in high spirits and was a brilliant causeur, full of jokes and anecdotes. How little I knew then that we were together for the last time.

And then came the war. We were cut off from each other: I was in Warszawa, occupied by the Germans, he in Lwow. From time to time letters would get through, letters full of mutual concern. He was in Lwow with my brother, Henryk (an assistant-professor of gynecology in Warszawa), who was carried there with his wife by the fortunes of war.

What else can I say about my Father, I the youngest daughter so much petted by him, and then struck by sorrows, the only one to survive, deprived by the war of all the written records, manuscripts, letters and books, as well as the memories from both my homes except for two things: his portrait and his ring engraved with the motto: "bene merenti-facultas medica" presented to him by the faculty of the University. After the war I dug this out from the ashes of the house where I had hidden it.

I can only say that he was a charming man with a generous heart, sensitive to every human grief, a man of great mind, who had respect for everyone around him.

His death was painfully tragic: in 1942, in Lwow, when this magnificent, strong man had reached the age of 80, after a beautiful and dedicated life, he took poison at the moment when the Germans came for him.