



Research paper

The history of Olsztyn hospitals and medicine until 1945

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Olsztyn has been one of the main centers of social and spiritual life in Warmia since the times of the Teutonic Knights. The necessity to conceive organized and supervised healthcare by the city authorities was caused by population growth, wars and a devastating plague. Previous hospitals included: The Holy Spirit Hospital and The Saint George Hospital. They had the character of shelters or leproseries and in the next centuries they were transformed into a professional, multi-profile and well-equipped main parish hospital.

Aim: The aim of the study is to present the history of organized hospital services in Olsztyn from the early 14th century to 1945.

Material and methods: The work is based on available literature and the authors' own research.

Results and discussion: Centers functioning as hospitals for about 500 years have been chronologically presented and the type and scope of functions (services rendered) were discussed, if the sources were available on the internet.

Conclusions: The development of hospital services in Olsztyn was similar to other cities in the region. From the second half of the 19th century, the quality of medical and hospital health care significantly increased in connection with the construction of a modern hospital as a substitute for previous facilities that did not conform to the requirements of population growth and medical progress.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the times of the Teutonic Knights, Olsztyn has been one of the most significant centers of social and spiritual life in Warmia. Many factors, such as population growth, several wars and epidemics of infectious diseases, necessitated the organization of health care supervised by the church and city authorities. The previous hospitals – The Holy Spirit Hospital and The Saint George Hospital had the character of shelters or leproseries. The often changing headquarters of the hospitals were caused by the bad condition of the buildings and numerous fires. In the next centuries, these hospitals were transformed into a modern, well-equipped main hospital. This was possible thanks to the initiative of the church and city authorities, as well as large funds provided by the authorities of East Prussia and church.

2. AIM

The aim of the study is to present the history of organized hospital services in Olsztyn from their beginnings in the fourteenth century to 1945.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This work is based on available literature, the authors' own research and the use of source material available on the Internet. The basic sources of this knowledge are articles available at the University of Warmia and Mazury Library, the State Archives in Olsztyn, the Library of the Municipal Polyclinical Hospital, the Provincial Public Library, and the Library of the Higher Theological Seminary of the Warmia Metropolis 'Hosianum.' The authors' own research consisted of reaching unrevealed sources by searching the Internet and blogs using the keywords: 'Olsztyn,' 'medicine,' 'hospital,' 'doctors' and 'history 1330–1945.' Unpublished sources from private archives were additionally used.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Olsztyn hospitals in the first half of 19th century

Modern health care reached the land of Prussia together with the Teutonic Knights. Guided by Christian principles, the Teutonic Knights took care of the sick, handicapped or homeless. A great hospitaler in the Teutonic held territories was responsible for looking after people who needed help.¹ The bishop and the chapter were responsible for health care in the Warmian dominion.

It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of the 16th century in Warmia, the first and only doctor was Nicolaus Copernicus, who after graduating in Padua practiced medicine in the years 1503–1543. He was a canon of the Warmian chapter, to which Olsztyn city belonged. Copernicus, after

3 years of medical studies when he was taught by the best doctors, obtained a bachelor's degree and *veniam practicandi*, which qualified him to practice medicine.

In the early history of Olsztyn, there were two public health centers. Unfortunately, the foundations of these establishments were not saved, therefore it is assumed that they probably came into being in the second half of the 14th century.² It was a Holy Spirit Hospital, in actual fact resembling a shelter and looked like a leprosarium, i.e. a hospital for lepers under the invocation of St. George.

The above-mentioned hospital of the Holy Spirit at first was placed in the Old Town of Olsztyn,³ at the intersection of today's Prosta and Asnyka streets, near the Łyna bend. It is known that the hospital burned down completely in 1622. Although it was rebuilt a year later, it did not remain in its current headquarters for long. Thanks to the donor's generosity, including special support from the canon and administrator of Olsztyn, Albert Nowiejski, in 1668 the Holy Spirit Hospital was reborn in a new location. The site of the former cemetery of St. George was chosen. It was near the former location, on the corner of today's Grunwaldzka street and Old Warszawska street, near the Low Gate, in the part of the Old Town then called the Lower Suburb.⁴

It was a building with an improved construction, one-storey, brick-built, reinforced with wooden beams. It could be considered as 'solid, spacious and functional' at that time.⁵ Two rooms and a small chapel as well as utility rooms were in the hospital. The facility was well equipped with medical equipment. In legal and administrative terms, it was a municipal hospital (its patronage was exercised by the magistrate), although it was managed in cooperation with and under the supervision of the parish priest of St. Jacob. The hospital was maintained by alms and partly by funds obtained from rents of three villages located near Olsztyn (only until the first partition in 1772). However, the main source of funds for the hospital was the Warmia Cathedral Chapter.

At the beginning of the 19th century, medical care in the Holy Spirit Hospital was exercised by a municipal doctor, most probably doctor Skotnicki. A low fee was charged for a hospital stay, although the poorest people were exempted from this obligation. It was already known from the mid-19th century that a general renovation of the hospital building of The Holy Spirit was inevitable. However, it was not remodeled in a hurry, because at the same time decisions regarding the construction of a modern, large hospital in the city were made.

The second medical institution, which existed from the Middle Ages to the 19th century in Olsztyn, was the above-mentioned small leprosarium, intended for only four people. People affected by contagious diseases were admitted, although even when there was no plague in the city, it was still referred to as a leprosarium.

In 1535, the mayor of Olsztyn, Valentin Schröter, founded a new shelter. It was intended not only for infectious patients. It was named as the hospital under the invocation of St. George. Initially, the building was outside of the

city, which was obvious at that time. Its first location was at Grunwaldzka street, near the place where today the Jerusalem Chapel is located. The hospital was administered by the city, but patients were required to stay there at their own cost.

In 1622, the building was destroyed by fire and the patients were moved to a new headquarters near the Lower Gate. However, soon afterwards the leprosarium also burned down. This time, the patients were moved to a house outside of the Upper Gate, which today is more often called the High Gate, meaning that it was in the Upper Suburbs.⁵

The decision from 1682 to merge in administrative terms both existing hospitals in Olsztyn (The Holy Spirit and St. George) was a turning point. In the following years, the headquarters of the leprosarium were moved several times, because the technical condition of the buildings required renovation.² Finally, in the late 17th century, and especially in the 18th, it was decided that a hospital for infectious diseases at a separate location was no longer required. The patients under hospital care were taken to the building of the Holy Spirit Hospital.⁶

Therefore, it should be noted that this was the only organized medical care facility in Olsztyn in the years 1682–1871. In 1872, the patients were transferred from there to the new hospital at today's Independence street. It can be assumed that, in some way, it was a continuation of the activity of The Holy Spirit Hospital and The Hospital of St. George, both of them early health care centers in Olsztyn.

4.2. Hospital Services in Olsztyn from the second half of the 19th century to the end of World War II

Andrzej Wakar, an Olsztyn historical researcher, pointed out years ago that 'until the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, Olsztyn was a small and poor city.' However, there was no doubt that the world was changing and due to improvements in living standards in the mid-19th century, a modern hospital in Olsztyn was very much needed. The two above-mentioned hospitals dating from the Middle Ages were intended not only for the sick but also the elderly, cripples and poor people. This did not suit the realities of a civilized and expanding city. An urgent need in Olsztyn was to create a large, modern, well-equipped hospital with professional staff. Luckily, this coincided with the extraordinary economic development of the city after 1870.

The first conversations about the need to build a modern hospital were undertaken around 1857 between Olsztyn's church and the secular authorities. This happened after another cholera epidemic struck the city. A Hospital Development Committee of 14 members was formed, consisting of lay and clergy people, which 'confirmed the old practice of connecting hospitals with the parish' as a researcher of this subject, prof. Andrzej Kopiczko, has noted.⁴ The committee was managed by the local pharmacist Baltazar Józef Oster, who was also a member of the parish council and the city council of Olsztyn.

In March 1858, the statute of the Committee was prepared. Then it was made available to Józef Geritz, the Bish-

op of Warmia. However, there were disagreements because the Committee members wanted the future hospital to be a 'church foundation belonging to the parish of St. Jacob,' while the bishop suggested that the hospital should be managed as a 'corporation.'⁴ A compromise was reached and on December 9, 1858 a statute was approved by the commons, and on March 8, 1859 by the presidents of the Prussian province. The next stage was the establishment of the future hospital Administrative Board.

Meanwhile, it was decided to organize an institution that would be a form of 'temporary hospital' – a development which deserves special attention. It was created in 1858 in a small house near today's Cathedral, in the area donated to the foundation by the well-known Olsztyn landowner Adolf Hipler. Four doctors were employed in this temporary institution: Dr Adolf Sonntag (general practitioner), Adolf Rarkowski (general practitioner and obstetrician), Walenty Gahbler (surgeon) and Józef Boehm (barber surgeon). The nuns – the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul who came from Poznań took care of the sick. Their place at the St. Mary's Hospital was taken by the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Catherine the Virgin and Martyr, present in the city since 1894.⁷

The next step on the way to building a new hospital was the purchase of a construction plot of 10 acres, i.e. about 5 ha from the widow of the landowner Blockhagen (approx. 350 thalers was allowed for this purpose). It was in 1860. A year later, the foundation was enriched by a significant money amount of the will left by priest Kazimierz Sommerfeld. Other donations also appeared and as a result, an amount of approx. 11 000 thaler was already available for the construction of the modern hospital in Olsztyn.

In 1863, negotiations with the Chapter on the finalization of the legal merger of the above-mentioned shelter and leprosarium with the emerging hospital began. Subsequently, after the organizational merger of the two facilities, the foundation took over their property, and – as planned – it was sold. The profit was allocated to the construction of a new hospital.⁸

The architectural design of the building was ready in 1862. It was prepared by an architect from Cologne, Vinzenz Statz. It was in a Neo-Gothic style, very popular at the time.

Finally, on October 4, 1864, the foundation stone was ceremonially laid, marking the symbolic beginning of the construction of Marienhospital.^{4,9} Although in 1865 the building had a roof, further construction was stopped because there was not enough money. Only in the Autumn of 1867 were some of the rooms completed and orphans in the care of The Daughters of Charity children were moved there in October that year. To complete the works, the hospital's Administrative Board obtained a loan from Bishop Filip Krementz.

The definitive end of construction took place in 1870. When a new hospital started to rise, the mayor of Olsztyn was Jakub Rarkowski, who stayed in office for 29 years (1836–1865). The construction was completed when the

mayor was Robert Zakrzewski (he governed the city from 1865–1875), considered to be the last Polish steward of the city before 1945.⁶ The opening ceremony took place on May 31, 1870 and this date is taken as the beginning of the St. Mary's Hospital (today known as the Municipal Hospital of Nicolaus Copernicus in Olsztyn).

The hospital's first director was Doctor Hugo Rakowski who at that time was the only qualified physician living in Olsztyn. From 1872–1877 he was also the chairman of the City Council.^{6,10} The news of the opening of a large and modern hospital encouraged many other medics to come to Warmia and work in Olsztyn. It is worth emphasizing that this was a period when, apart from St. Mary's Hospital, Lazaret Garrison, later a Military Hospital (1885), the Provincial Institute for Insane Patients in Kortowo¹¹ (1886) and the Anti-Tuberculosis Sanatorium, also called the Institute of Lung Disease for Women (1907), i.e. the Pulmonological Hospital located in the nearby forest, were founded on what today is called Jagiellonian street. In addition, another medical institution in the city before the outbreak of World War II was established. It was called the Hindenburg Hospital and was named after the Field Marshal who triumphant at the battle of Tannenberg in 1914. After 1945 it was renamed the 'railway hospital').

Regular admission of patients to St. Mary's Hospital began in October 1872. In the following years, the number of beds increased systematically. While in the 1880s there were only 50 beds in the hospital, by the 1920s there were already 250 beds. There were also modern departments, operating rooms and a laboratory. A surgeon, internist, ophthalmologist, laryngologist and dermatologist were employed.⁴

In 1892,¹² doctors were already employed in Olsztyn, but due to the fact that the city at that time had a large concentration of military personnel, half of the medics found employment in the above-mentioned garrison hospital.⁸

During the interwar period (1919–1937), doctor Albert Schneider, who was the head physician corresponding to the position of director, did a lot for St. Mary's Hospital,⁸ especially by acquiring and modernizing medical equipment and the extension of the facility. Meanwhile, a second floor was built, where laryngology, ophthalmology and maxillofacial surgery were organized, and in 1935 an isolation room for the infectious diseases ward was created.⁹

In the 1930s, there were 350 beds in the facility. Schneider's successor as director, appointed in 1938 was doctor Bernard Höhner, a general surgeon. Although he managed the hospital for a few years (he died in a car accident in March 1944), he introduced a number of modern solutions. At that time, the X-ray room and obstetrics unit were modernized.⁴ According to the contemporary sources, director Höhner was perceived as a good-natured person. The circumstances of the car accident in the area of Dywity near Olsztyn remain unclear to this day. One hypothesis indicates that this was not a normal car crash, but a murder ordered by the Nazi special forces.¹²

Before the outbreak of World War II, 27 doctors worked in the entire Olsztyn area, including 8 general doctors and 19 specialists; 12 dentists also had a practice.⁸

A year before the outbreak of war, there were 350 beds in St. Mary's Hospital. There were 12 doctors, 14 lay nurses and 34 schoolgirls practicing this profession; 33 sisters from the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Catherine the Virgin and Martyr continued to provide enormous help to the hospital.¹³ In legal terms, the Hospital Board was subordinate to the Committee, which from 1938 included a new St. Mary's Hospital director, dr Höner, as well as pr. canon Jan Hanowski, priest Moritz from Braşwałd and the local manufacturer Wichert.

In the first half of the 1940s, 11 doctors worked in the hospital. It is known for certain that one laryngologist, dermatologist and ophthalmologist were employed. There was also 1 neurologist, 2 internists and 3 surgeons. A maternity ward and an analytical laboratory were opened. During the war, 350 beds remained in the hospital.

Until January 1945, the board of St. Mary's Hospital consisted of 14 permanent committee members, headed by a parish priest from St. Jakub.⁴ The hospital was mainly maintained by the Church, although the Olsztyn council also contributed financially.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The development of hospital services in Olsztyn was similar to other cities in the region. Initially, the treatment facilities were similar to shelters and leprosaria, maintained mainly from donations and land leases. These facilities were supervised by church authorities. There were two such establishments in Olsztyn. They played an important role especially during the cholera epidemics that hit Olsztyn several times. In connection with the growing health requirements of the population, a decision to build a new modern hospital, the construction of which significantly improved the quality of medical and hospital care was made. The construction of the hospital became possible thanks to the city's development and to financing by the city, church and the central authorities of Prussia. A new, and for that that time, very modern medical facility caused a surge in numbers of medical specialists and the emergence of a modern healthcare system in the city. The St. Mary's Hospital functioned without any major disturbances until the entry of the Soviet army into Olsztyn.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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