

Book Reviews

Marta A Balińska, *For the good of humanity: Ludwik Rajchman, medical statesman*, trans. Rebecca Howell, Budapest, Central European University Press, 1998, pp. xvii, 293, illus., £22.00 (hardback 963-9116-17-3).

Marta Balińska's book brings to life a little known figure, her great-grandfather, Ludwik Rajchman, the medical director of the Sanitary Commission of the League of the Nations, and a little known period, the early development of international health organizations. Rajchman, a Polish-Jewish physician who specialized in public health, created in 1919 the first epidemiology laboratory in the newly independent Poland (this laboratory later became the Polish National Institute of Hygiene). His key role in the control of the typhus epidemic in post-war Poland led to his appointment as the director of the Health Office in the League of Nations. Rajchman's qualifications for his job included excellent organizational skills, first-hand experience with control of epidemic diseases, and the fact that as a citizen of a peripheral country he did not threaten the delicate political equilibrium of the League. The title "Director of Health Office of the League of Nations" was more impressive than the function related with it. The Office's main task was the collection of information, and it had a small staff and infrastructure, and a limited budget. On the other hand, the Office had high visibility, and close links with other international organizations. Rajchman's headquarters were in Geneva, but he spent much of his time travelling, and many of his concrete achievements were related to the development of personal contacts with politicians and health administrators all over the world.

In the late 1930s, the increasingly right-wing Polish government became suspicious of Rajchman. His loss of political favour coincided with increased paralysis in the League of Nations' activities in the late 1930s. The League's Health Office was

closed in January 1939. Officially jobless, Rajchman nevertheless maintained close contacts with high officials in several countries, including China. In the 1930s he had become a close friend of the Chiang Kai-shek family, especially with Chiang Kai-shek's son-in-law, T V Soong, then the president of the Bank of China. His relationship with Soong provided him with his new occupation as a lobbyist for the Chinese government. Between 1940 and 1944, Rajchman, hired by Soong as a consultant for the Bank of China, settled in Washington, where he negotiated together with his friend Soong the conditions for the economic reconstruction of post-war China. His career as a lobbyist came to an end, however, when Soong fell from grace. After the end of the war, Rajchman tried to recover his position as an expert in international health policy. The fact that he found himself citizen of now-communist Poland did not facilitate his task. Nevertheless, thanks to the contacts he had made with several major players of the post-war international scene during his Geneva years, he was initially seen as an asset by the Polish government. Rajchman was named the Polish representative to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). He was then instrumental in the founding of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and became UNICEF's first chairman (1947–50). His political situation as a Polish citizen who lived in France and whose political allegiances were never entirely clear, became, however, a liability with the intensification of the cold war. In 1950 the communist Polish government withdrew Rajchman's diplomatic passport, bringing to a close his international career. He ended his life peacefully on his rural property in France.

Balińska's carefully researched and well documented biography is written as a tribute to her great-grandfather. It accentuates Rajchman's role in establishing innovative international institutions, and

stresses, in particular, his contribution as the “true” (and insufficiently recognized) founder of UNICEF. Balińska quotes Jean Monnet’s remark that “Rajchman believed in the generosity of men, but he had taken the precaution of founding institutions”, and discusses in parallel the human qualities of Rajchman, presented as warm and unpretentious in his dealings with simple people. Her work is not, however, merely hagiographic. Balińska does look at several unclear episodes in Rajchman’s life, and tries to account for some inconsistencies in his career, especially in his relations with the nationalist government of China, and then with the Polish communist regime. Her main argument is, nevertheless, that Rajchman’s actions were motivated by a sincere wish to help suffering populations, and a no less sincere Polish patriotism. For Balińska, this was one of the leading threads in Rajchman’s life.

Rajchman’s biography may be classified as a straightforward contribution to the history of international health organizations, were it not for an additional, and rather unexpected dimension: the display of the ambivalence of its hero and the ambiguity of the milieu of international experts within which he evolved. Rajchman’s first ambivalence is related to his origins. He was born in an affluent family of Polish Jews, at a time when the entities “Jew” and “Pole” were seen as mutually exclusive (for some they are still so today). It is not clear if Rajchman’s family became assimilated through baptism or through abandonment of Jewish customs, and if Rajchman saw himself as a secular Jew or as a non-practising Catholic. One may assume, nevertheless, that in pre-Second World War Poland, Rajchman’s Jewish name and his oft-caricatured (in the West also) “Semitic look” did not entirely fit the image of an eminent Polish patriot, an issue which is not discussed in the book. Balińska’s efforts to make explicit Rajchman’s political convictions maintain a similar confusion: Rajchman enjoyed his

family’s fortune and was a socialist, had close relationships with aristocrats and with leftists, was a friend of Chiang Kai-shek and of radical politicians, and, after the Second World War, was seen as a potential ally by some Polish communists and as an adversary by others. Above all, the description of the way of life of the main players in the arena of international organizations in the inter-war era—and to some extent, in the post-1945 era—depicts a cryptic, tightly knit universe, with high salaries and high intrigue, hidden lobbies and multiple circles of influence, limited action on the public stage, and intensive activity behind the closed curtains.

Balińska describes with affection Ludwik Rajchman’s widow, Maria, who in her old age lived as a respectable landowner in the French countryside, was interested in the Catholic religion, and subscribed to the communist French newspaper. Her contradictions illustrate for Balińska a spirit of tolerance and a lack of dogmatism. The contradictory behaviour of a private person may indeed be seen as colourful, amusing, and occasionally moving. The contradictory behaviour of a public personality may have a different meaning. Rajchman’s success as an organizer of international institutions reflected his exceptional organizational skills and his sincere devotion to the causes he defended, but may also have been linked to his equivocal personality, which made him especially apt to intervene in ambiguous situations and twilight zones. Balińska’s honest narrative leaves many key questions unanswered, and is therefore an especially apt reflection of the somehow murky atmosphere in which international organizations were developed, and the opacity of Rajchman’s and his partners’ or opponents’ motivations. This—probably involuntary—effect enhances greatly the interest of her book.

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