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Tadeusz Kielanowski

(Gdańsk)

MY MEETINGS WITH LUDWIK FLECK IN LUBLIN
DURING THE YEARS 1945—1950

Although we lived and worked in the same city, Lwów (Lemberg), before the war I had not met Doctor Ludwik Fleck. His name was not foreign to me and I knew that he was a distinguished bacteriologist, author of scientific papers, published mostly in journals abroad, and of a book issued in German on conditions and circumstances favouring scientific discoveries done by researchers.

His name became well-known in the medical milieu of Lwów at the end of 1941 and early 1942. Like all Jewish physicians and Poles of Jewish descent, Fleck was moved by the Nazi occupation authorities to the so called Jewish residential quarter (subsequently the ghetto) and employed there in an analytical laboratory of the Jewish hospital. This was in many respects an unusual hospital; I visited it once when it was still allowed for an 'Aryan' to go there. I met him then briefly and talked to numerous colleagues and friends who worked in various wards. They were ambitious and tried not to anticipate their fate, they worked very efficiently in circumstances less than modest wishing to prove themselves and they even had scientific aspirations. It was then that Fleck discovered that spotted fever (the first signs of the epidemic were already in the quarter) could be diagnosed before severe clinical symptoms were visible. As early as the third day after infection there would appear in the urine an antigene which could be discovered by means of Fleck's method. This was a very valuable discovery, both theoretically and clinically, and it soon became known throughout the town; it gave even rise to a joke that henceforth the spotted fever would be called 'the Fleck fever', the name it already had in German ('Flecktyphus', *Fleck* meaning spot). News about the discovery got to the Germans and who knows if it did not save Dr. Fleck's life, because having been arrested

and deported to a concentration camp he escaped death during the liquidation of the ghetto when all the doctors and patients were killed on the same day.

In the late spring of 1945 it came to be known that Fleck had survived the war, that he had been saved with his wife and son. This was a joyous piece of news, especially for those founding new medical schools and seeking qualified academic teachers. I was deputizing then for the dean, Prof. Jan Lubieniecki, who was ill, and was worried about the departure from Lublin of many professors who were going to be engaged at more attractive medical departments, such as those in Gdańsk, Wrocław, Poznań and other academic centers. Lublin was so insufficiently equipped that there was talk about closing the medical faculty and even the academic school itself. In order to prevent this happening rector Prof. Henryk Raabe and I decided to accept a professor's departure only when he could give a replacement as highly as himself, or at least adequately qualified. And it was then that Ludwik Hirszfeld, who had been appointed to a chair in Wrocław, suggested Ludwik Fleck.

Ludwik Fleck did not have yet at that time the formal qualifications of professor, but this did not matter and was not an exception since he was a well-known researcher and held the title of *profesor nadzwyczajny*, given him by virtue of a prewar law on academic schools. He would receive these formal qualifications of professor (*habilitacja*), for the sake of 'a clear conscience', only many years later in Wrocław.

In Lublin I came to know Prof. Fleck quite well, I used to see him often and soon fell under the spell of his character and intellect. He took lodgings provisionally (yes, provisionally but it was to last long) in a single room, where he lived with his wife, and set to work, not only in the organizational but the scientific field as well. When I came to see him for the first time, late in the evening, I found him looking into a microscope and wearing a frayed jacket with a red stripe painted on its back. Asked what it was he explained it was still his camp jacket which he wore to spare the jacket he used to put on when going to town. I enquired at once about his material needs because some small sums of money could be got from various quarters for the former inmates of Nazi concentration camps. It turned out that Fleck had not reported his situation to any of them and I had a hard job in persuading him to do so. He said to me then literally: 'I used to be rich in the past and I know the taste of being so. Now I am passionately interested in other things'.

From then on I would often drop in on the Flecks — to have a chat but also to ask for advice. To be dean of a faculty which existed in incredibly primitive circumstances was a hard task and I was occasionally on the verge of a breakdown, of resignation, of a flight like other pro-

fessors. Fleck, always composed, wise, would calm me down, and the advice he would give me proved always right.

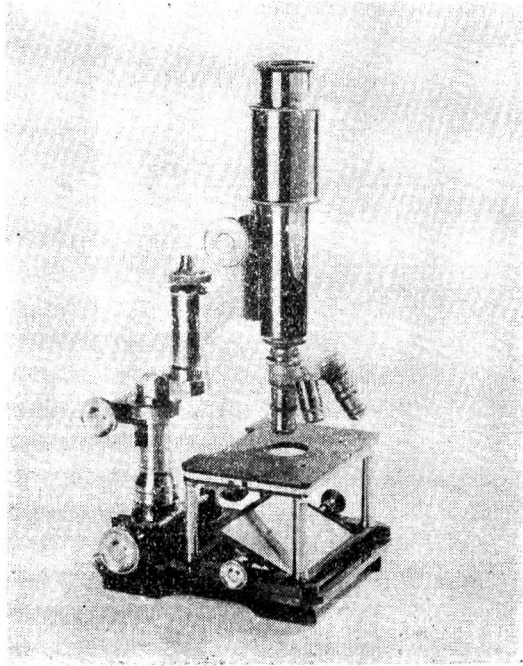
I learned much about his vicissitudes. After his arrest he spent several 'reformatory' weeks as a simple inmate in the camp of Auschwitz. He worked manually, was beaten, abused, driven, starved, then, having been so conditioned, was moved to Dachau to a laboratory which produced by Weigl's method a vaccine against spotted fever. It was sent in big quantities to the eastern front for the Wehrmacht soldiers as these were massively contracting and dying of the disease. Fleck told me that the doctors, working at the camp laboratory, had been ordered to conduct scientific research work as well. The prisoners, people of various nationalities, some of them distinguished researchers, only pretended doing it or even sabotaged it, for instance by asking for more and more modern and refined apparatuses. The camp authority would look for them in Germany and occupied countries only to hear, when they did arrive, that something else was still necessary. The inmate-researchers came to an agreement should they make a real discovery they would not communicate it to the authorities and they stuck to their resolution. The German doctor they were directly subordinated to was Dr. Ding-Schuler, a young, rather obtuse man who actually wanted to learn bacteriology and habilitate to become professor after the war. Alas, he had no memory and could not learn which bacteria were Gram-negative and which Gram-positive, so Fleck had to compose for him a funny mnemonic verse on this subject.

Fleck did survive because he did not break down believing he could survive and return to his home-country. He agreed with his wife and son, also inmates of Nazi concentration camps, that they would wait and meet each other in the hall of the pediatric clinic in Lwów. And indeed when he entered the hall, there was his wife waiting for him and the son also soon turned up. But all three had been sent to Lwów, now a Soviet city, as 'Soviet citizens', consequently the son, still a boy, was called up to the Soviet army and sent with his troop a long way into that huge country. The parents were worried about him, but in a few months they got him repatriated and I could meet the boy. He looked ill and had in his lungs fresh TB symptoms. Fortunately they quickly disappeared, the boy recovered and then emigrated to Palestine which at that time was not yet Israel.

Professor Fleck wished to remain in Poland. He considered himself Polish having been born in Poland, he lived in this country, his native language was Polish (he did not know Hebrew, nor Yiddish), his were Polish customs and culture. Yet, having worked a year, he wanted to go abroad to visit the scholars who had become his friends and who held various posts in research units and universities of several countries. But he was refused the passport in those hard postwar times. In my capacity

of dean, and then rector as well, I did intervene in Warsaw many times, but to no effect. However, in 1947, Professor Fleck appeared as a witness at a trial of Nazi doctors in Nuremberg and in the 1950s he did go abroad many times.

He was a superb lecturer, equal in this to Ludwik Hirszfled whom he replaced and whose lectures had been intellectual treats, concerts of thought and imagination. Fleck talked more in 'prose' than Hirszfled but so interestingly as does only an erudite who knows all the aspects of the problem under discussion.



Compound microscope by Nacet (Paris, 19th century). From the collection of Musée d'art et d'Histoire, Geneva.

At the time Fleck was establishing his laboratories in Lublin there was a severe shortage of everything in the country ravaged by war, and the scanty university budget was divided into paragraphs stating what could be bought for the money assigned to each of them. Fleck usually managed to get round the pedantic bursar with wit and aplomb: when there was money under the paragraph of scientific instruments but one was not allowed to buy for it a typewriter or even small tin plates to keep the laboratory tables from rocking, Fleck called the typewriter an 'anthropodactylograph' and the tin plates 'tabular stabilizers'; in my capacity of dean I used to accept these bills keeping a straight face and everything was all right.

In the 1940s Fleck described a new phenomenon in the fields of hematology and immunology which he called leukergy. It consists in the leucocytes collecting in the sick while in those in good health they remain in another configuration and are scattered. I am not qualified to judge on the value of this research, done by Fleck, his assistants and many other doctors both at home and abroad. It was certainly interesting and it managed to stimulate in Lublin many young people to serious studies, teaching them the methodology of critical scientific observation and thinking. This was one more thing they owed to Ludwik Fleck.

In 1950 I left Lublin, Fleck moved soon to Warsaw and a few years later emigrated to Israel. There was no more opportunity for our seeing each other. I have been left with the memory of an exceedingly capable, original and creative man who achieved much in science and could achieve even more if the times he lived and worked in had been less stormy and the fate less unjust.

Translated from the Polish by Ludwik Wiewiórkowski

Reviewer: Tadeusz Dzierżykraj-Rogalski

