



Urszula Glensk

Hirszfeldowie. Zrozumieć krew

[The Hirszfelds. Understanding blood]

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Urszula Glensk, a professor at the University of Wrocław, literature expert and literary critic researching historical and modern reportage and documentary fiction among others, published an extraordinary book last year in which she described the life and work of two married, prominent Jewish doctors with the pertinent sensitivity that had previously been seen in her *Historia słabych. Reportaże i życie w Dwudziestoleciu 1918–1939* [History of the weak. Reportage and life in the interbellum 1918–1939]. The fate of these physicians and notable scientists previously entered the public consciousness thanks only to the extremely interesting but rather unidimensional and unilateral work by Ludwik Hirszfeld entitled *Historia jednego życia*¹ published in 1946. Urszula Glensk has completed this picture with the knowledge that the story of Ludwik Hirszfeld is also the story of his wife Hanna *née* Kasman: the academic history, choices and successes of the person closest to him both in an emotional and in a scientific sense long remained beyond the interest of researchers inasmuch as the life and work of Ludwik Hirszfeld are known and recorded in the story of the fate of Poland's Jews. Until now. The subtitle of the present publication highlights yet another important heroine in this tale, that is blood, to the study of which both Ludwik (more so) and Hanna (slightly less so) dedicated themselves. Blood played a critical role in the story of their lives and connected their own fate to the history of Poland, Europe and the world. Life and blood, that is *vita et sanguis*.

The book *Hirszfeldowie. Zrozumieć krew* undoubtedly enters into dialogue with *Historia jednego życia*, supplying it with several interesting facts and information concerning Hanna and Ludwik's social activities. Every-

1 English edition: L. Hirszfeld, *The Story of One Life*, transl. M. A. Balińska, eds. M. A. Balińska, W. H. Schneider, Rochester 2010.

thing is upheld by a rich inquiry resulting from the necessarily countless hours spent in archives and libraries. This time did not go to waste, as Glensk has uncovered hitherto unknown and unpublished material of exceptional interest which, it so appears, throws new light on already-described issues. The author also includes several photographs in her book, the oldest of which date from the end of the 19th century and show a world which no longer exists.

Hanna Hirszfelfd was a Varsovian. She was born Hanna Kasman to a relatively affluent family in 1884, yet her childhood was not an especially easy one. She was exceptionally talented linguistically (she knew seven languages), however, she quickly became enamored with biology. Glensk highlights in her book that she was the first woman to have an article (albeit co-authored with her husband) published in the prestigious “The Lancet” journal, one of the most longstanding medical journals in the world. Hirszfelfd went abroad at the age of 16 to study the subject to which she would later dedicate her life. She began her studies in Montpellier, moved then to Paris, and finally to Berlin. She had already met her future husband by the time she left her home and married him at the age of 21. Years later, Ludwik wrote that that moment had been a blessing, even though his family considered their marriage to be a poor match. This did not stop Hanna from graduating, and she was awarded her PhD in medicine for her work on blood one year after her husband had defended his. She then wanted to specialize in surgery, and accordingly, she prepared a second PhD, this time in Italian. At that point, her life was already intertwined with Ludwik’s and it was likely therefor that they moved together to Heidelberg where she received an assistantship in a pediatric ward. This work became the crux of her professional life.

Ludwik Hirszfelfd was the same age as Hanna and, like his future wife, was born into an assimilated Jewish family. He also took the decision to study abroad. He initially received an education in Würzburg, and later in Berlin, completing his studies with a PhD about blood. Researching a subject that at the time was particularly far-reaching and fairly universally studied led him to epochal discoveries: the laws governing the inheritance of blood groups and the introduction of the names describing the specific blood groups which are still in use to this day.

The later fate of this couple has been presented in a similarly fascinating way. Glensk has described their years spent in Germany, later in Switzerland, and on the frontlines of the First World War with real passion and expertise. The description of the wartime conditions and of the soldiers who were being shot to death and, above all, dying of malnutrition and disease – chief among them epidemic typhus (also called hospital fever) – allows us to imagine a time which is often obscured by the images of the more recent Second World War. Typhus epidemics took immense tolls during the First World War; Ludwik and Hanna fought a losing battle with biology, hygienic conditions and the overbearing feeling

of powerlessness. The author describes all this with vibrancy and malleability in what is certainly one of this book's greatest assets. The later professional life of this marriage of scientists, including Ludwik's work at the State Hygiene Institute on Chocimska Street and Hanna's work in the Pediatric Diseases Clinic on Litewska Street in Warsaw, is also presented in a similarly commendable way.

Another notable thread which the author masterfully explores in this exceptional biography is the Hirszfelds' private life. One of the elements of this tale is the history of their home in Warsaw's Saska Kępa district – themselves actively participating in its design – and also the case of their only child, their daughter Marysia. The house, as Hirszfeld himself recalled and as Glensk repeats, was characterized by a modest elegance, but also – which Ludwik did not mention, but which the author abstracts herein – by the concern and sadness surrounding their daughter's illness.

The years of the occupation, when the Hirszfelds were forced out of their beautiful home on the right bank of the Vistula after a short period of relative security and placed in the ghetto, are also examined in an extraordinarily compelling way. The detailed presentation in Ludwik's book of their life in the isolated Jewish district is supplemented in Glensk's work with extra information from the inside and, as it were, with the benefit of hindsight, which considerably completes Hirszfeld's personal and at the same time rather subjective narration. Moreover, the author points out the inaccuracies in some of the information he gives, citing witness testimonies including from Ludwik's close colleague Juliusz Zweibam, the initiator and originator of sanitary courses (that is *de facto* underground medical studies), for which Hirszfeld had wanted to take responsibility. Glensk also pays tribute to Hanna Hirszfeld, who was omitted from the 1946 book *Choroba głodowa. Badania kliniczne nad głodem wykonane w getcie warszawskim z roku 1942* [Hunger disease. Clinical research on the starvation inflicted on the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942], even though she too had contributed to the research. Her work resulted in an article which appeared independently of the monogram in a medical periodical in 1946. Separate issues include the Hirszfelds' relationship with the Jewish Catholics in the ghetto, their decision to leave the isolated Jewish district and hide on the so-called Aryan side, and their later post-war life in Wrocław.

To refer to the title of Ludwik Hirszfeld's autobiographical book, the publication *Hirszfeldowie. Zrozumieć krew* is the story of one joint life of two exceptional individuals. Glensk complements existing knowledge of the eminent serologist while at the same time drawing attention to his equally hardworking and socially active spouse. Ludwik's history is closely intertwined with Hanna's herstory, which is perfectly justified in this case. This "double image" presents the opportunity to see and to understand more.

This book, aside from its high cognitive value, captivates with its form. Beautifully written, it allows us to delve with pleasure into the past

and read the pages of history in the broad context of European and world history. The extensive bibliography also presents a roadmap of how and where to expand even further this strictly historical knowledge with issues pertaining to medicine and its fascinating and rapid development in the 20th century.

It is also worth mentioning that at the time of writing this review, Urszula Glensk's book has been nominated for the Nike Literary Award along with 19 other publications. Regardless of the winner, the work on Hanna and Ludwik is deserving of particular attention.

Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych

(transl. by Ian Stephenson)