

Eleonora Reicher: a pioneer of European rheumatology

Eugene J Kucharz 

Handling editor Josef S Smolen

Professor emeritus, Department of Internal Medicine, Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Medical University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

Correspondence to

Professor emeritus Eugene J Kucharz, Internal Medicine, Rheumatology and Clinical Immunology, Medical University of Silesia, 40-635 Katowice, Ziolowa Street 45/47, Poland; ejkucharz@poczta.onet.pl

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Eleonora Reicher life coincided with the emergence of rheumatology as a separate medical specialty. She was one of the most prominent founders of this specialty in Europe, and almost all current rheumatologists of Poland as well as other countries are subsequent generations of doctors coming from the school of Eleonora Reicher.

Eleonora Reicher was born on 29 September 1884 in Warsaw as a daughter of Bernard Reicher, a co-owner of the shoe and ribbon factory and his wife Eleonora née Wolfowicz. Warsaw at those days was a provincial town of so-called the Vistula Country, that is, the Polish lands under Russian partition. She was born to Jewish family but was sent to a private catholic school in Warsaw. She graduated of the school in 1900. Her father was going to raise her to be a wife and mother. She decided to receive baptism in 1903 in order to release from the father's plans for her future live. According to the Napoleon Code that was applicable law in the part of Poland under the partition of Russian Empire, the baptism established her new legal status. Thanks to that, Eleonora Reicher was able to decide about her further fate by herself.¹ She inherited some fortune from her grandparents and in the same year (1903), she went to Fribourg. There after completion of a preparatory course, she graduated in 1906 as baccalauré at es lettres. Later she was studied medicine at the University of Paris (1906–1907) and Bern (1907–1909 and 1912–1914) as well as biology in Bern (1909–1912). In 1912, Eleonora Reicher got a title of philosophy doctor in biology in Bern after presentation of the thesis 'Ueber das Haftorgan von Gobius fluviatilis' (On the adhesive organ of Monkey goby). She completed medical education in 1914 but she did not sit for the final examinations due to outbreak of the First World War. The war began when she was at home in Warsaw. During the war Eleonora Reicher worked as a medical doctor at a rear of the front in Mogielnica near Grojec (1914–1916), and was involved in organisation of the typhoid hospitals. At the beginning of 1917, she returned to Bern and was granted the medical diploma. Later, she was an assistant (1917–1920) at the university hospital in Bern under Hermann Sahli, a famous internist who discovered hemoglobinometer. On 1 May 1920, Eleonora Reicher was awarded PhD in medicine after presentation of the thesis 'Ueber das Blutbild bei Influenza' (On the blood picture in influenza).

After completing medical education, Eleonora Reicher returned to Poland. The country was independent but still involved in wars. It was time of the Polish-Soviet war, and Eleonora Reicher for a few months was a physician in a rank of officer

at the Women's Volunteer Legion in Warsaw. In independent Poland, she was an assistant (1921–1927) in the Department of Internal Medicine of the Warsaw University under Anthony Gluzinski² and later under Witold Orłowski,³ the very famous internists in history of Polish medicine. Later, she was associated with the University Out-Patient Clinic for Physical Education and Sport Medicine. She was a medical consultant to the construction of the Central Institute for Physical Education in Warsaw (opened in 1929) and was faculty member of the Institute. Interest in physical education and sport medicine directed Eleonora Reicher to a relatively new separate specialty, rheumatology. She founded the first rheumatologic outpatient clinical in Warsaw and headed it from 1932 to 1939. In 1933, she completed the habilitation thesis (thesis for the post of associate professor) on effects of physical exercises in healthy and morbid human beings. As a dozent (associate professor), she was lecturing rheumatology in graduation and postgraduation education at the School of Medicine of the Warsaw University. Earlier, she was a lecturer in rheumatology during the annual summer post-gradual course for doctors in Ciechocinek Spa (since 1928). Since 1921, she closely collaborated with the House for Blind Children of the Franciscan Sisters of the Cross in Laski near Warsaw. She also established a small publishing house and published some religious books. Some of the books were authored by Eleonora Reicher. She also translated the prayers of saint Thomas Aquinas into Polish.¹

Eleonora Reicher was a cofounder of the Polish Society for Rheumatology. The society was established on the base the Polish Committee Against Rheumatism (founded in December 1928 as the Polish representation to La Ligue Internationale Contre le Rhumatisme), and transformed to the Polish Society to Fight Against Rheumatism (Polskie Towarzystwo Zwalczenia Gośćca) on 15 February 1930. Later in 1952, the society was renamed the Polish Society for Rheumatology. She was elected the secretary general of the society (1932–1939), and took part in International Congress of Rheumatology in 1932 (Paris) and 1934 (Moscow).⁴

During the Nazi attack on Poland and outbreak of the Second World War, Eleonora Reicher was working as a doctor. As a Jew the Nazi occupant authorities dismissed her from a hospital employment, and she had to go into hiding. Eleonora Reicher was living in the Convent of Franciscan Sisters in Laski. Eleonora Reicher contributed to the Polish underground



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resistance movement, mostly in secret education of military nurses for guerrilla. Her pseudonym in underground activity was 'Barbara'. She was also active in the underground Council to Aid Jews (Żegota). During the Warsaw Uprising, she was a physician in an insurgents' hospital. After capitulation of the uprising, she was hiding at the presbytery of the Catholic church in Warsaw Ochota.

After the war, Eleonora Reicher almost solely devoted herself to rheumatology. In 1945, she was appointed to the post of chairman of the Rheumatology Section of the Medical Council in the Ministry of Health, and was an associated professor and professor (since 21 October 1947) at the Warsaw University. She opened the first outpatient clinic of rheumatology in her private apartment in ruined Warsaw. Due to her efforts, the Institute of Rheumatology was founded in Warsaw on 1 January 1948. Eleonora Reicher was appointed to the post of director of the Institute and was on this post until 30 April 1961. Initially, the institute was located in an old hospital (former the Child Jesus Hospital), and later a new building was constructed. As the director of the Institute, she founded and supervised a nationwide network of rheumatologic clinics and hospital wards. In 1957, Eleonora Reicher was elected the president of the Polish Society for Rheumatology, and chaired the society until 1962.

Eleonora Reicher represented Poland at numerous meetings and on behalf of the Polish Society for Rheumatology took part in the Congress in Copenhagen (4 September 1947) when the EULAR was founded by a group of national societies, and the Polish Society for Rheumatology was one of them. She published the first handbook of rheumatology in Polish (Warsaw 1960, second edition 1965) as well as a few other books, including 'Current advances in rheumatoid arthritis' (in Polish, Warsaw 1951). She authored more than 60 research papers, contributed to a few handbooks of internal medicine.⁵⁻⁷ In 1936, she was invited to be coauthor of the international handbook of rheumatology, the book was not completed due to the war outbreak. She was a member of the editorial board of the Polish Archives of Internal Medicine. After the war, she founded and was editor-in-chief of the journals *Postępy Reumatologii* (Advances in Rheumatology 1954–1957), *Reumatologia Polska* (Polish Rheumatology 1959–1962). Later, Eleonora Reicher contributed to foundation of *Reumatologia* (Rheumatology). The last journal appears in print since 1963.^{8,9}

Research achievements of Eleonora Reicher are substantial. Before the Second World War she was interested in pathophysiology of physical exercises and therapy of chronic arthritides. After the war, her interest was focusing on various fields of rheumatology, including rheumatoid arthritis, so-called collagen diseases, especially differential diagnosis of lupus erythematosus and similar disorders. In 1950, she described a new axial subset of ankylosing spondylitis. A few years later, she described a new disorders akin to mixed connective tissue disease, and there are suggestions that it was one of the first reports of this nosological entity.¹⁰

Eleonora Reicher was elected to the post of honorary member of the Polish Society for Rheumatology as well as national societies of Holland, Italy, Sweden, Turkey, USA, and Yugoslavia. She was awarded with the State Award of the Republic of Poland (1951) as well as she was granted a few state orders and distinctions.

Last years of her life, she spent in her beloved House for Blind Children of the Franciscan Sisters in Laski. Eleonora Reicher died on 12 March 1973 in Warsaw, and according to her will was buried at the cemetery in Laski. She is remembered



Figure 1 Eleonora Reicher, about 1935 (collection of the Central Medical Library in Warsaw, with permission).

as a very well educated, talented elegant and hard-working woman. She had a thorough medical and biological training, and was also familiar with literature and art. She painted pictures herself and wrote works on philosophical topics. She was a great organiser and knew how to work well with other people. As a doctor, she was extremely dedicated to her patients.

Institute of Rheumatology in Warsaw that was founded and designed due to efforts of Eleonora Reicher currently is named The Professor Eleonora Reicher National Institute of Geriatrics, Rheumatology and Rehabilitation in Warsaw.^{11,12}

This section of *Annals of Rheumatic Diseases* is titled 'Heroes and Pillars'. Heroes are those who have been fighting for recognition of new diseases, pathophysiological, diagnostic and therapeutic concepts or methods. The pillars are those who established and supported the hospitals, university departments, laboratories and associations. There is no doubt that Eleonora Reicher is one of the basic pillars of European rheumatology, and new generations of rheumatologists in Poland owe a lot to Eleonora Reicher (figure 1).

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ORCID iD

Eugene J Kucharz <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0924-2260>

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