

Heritage of Antoni Kępiński

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INTRODUCTION

For the last 35 years I have been trying to get an integrated concept of Antoni Kępiński, who was the teacher of my teacher in psychiatry. Now, I am trying again, in spite of being convinced that the effort brings effects far from satisfactory. But, his influence on the milieu I live in has been essential, even if a vast majority of us find following his example very difficult. I am afraid, that the reasons can be found not only in our lack of his specific charm and virtues he possessed. The most important problem is hidden in following and developing his thoughts, presented clearly in his writings but – as it happens in case of completeness – one finds them easy to understand, almost obvious, however in practice demanding, and in consequence one sticks to a fragment only.

Now, this introduction is congruent with Kępiński's epistemology and psychiatric methodology. He thought, that complexity of human being is beyond human ability to understand, so we have to use "perspectives" for description and teaching, however each of the "slices" of our knowledge gives a false picture of human reality. False in this case means true, but fragmental.

The same happened to him and his oeuvre in many interpretations, biographies, commentar-

ies, each presenting him as clinician, researcher, psychotherapist, war prisoner, soldier, mental patient etc etc.

For many years Kępiński was working on his *summa psychiatriae*, but the 1960's were rather unfriendly towards his way of thinking and publishers appeared to be reluctant to edit it. His book had been rejected several times in spite of positive reviews. It should be also mentioned, that a specialised medical publishing house rejected it as the first, upon rather a negative critical review. Divided into smaller parts, on the Author's deathbed, it was finally printed and keeps being reedited every other year.

SOME BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Training in medicine:

- 1936–1939 Jagiellonian University, Faculty of Medicine
- 1945–1946 University of Edinburgh, Polish Medical School; MD
- 1947–1972 Jagiellonian University (since 1951 Academy of Medicine) Department of Psychiatry, Kraków (1958/59 Maudsley Hospital, London)

Traumatic experiences

- 1919–Ukrainian War prisoner
- 1938 – beaten by anti-Semitic student group
- 1939/40 – internation in Hungary
- 1940/43 – internation in Spain (Miranda de Ebro)

Mental crises:

- 1938 – following physical attack by anti-Semitic student group
- 1941 – following physical attack in Miranda de Ebro camp

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Having on mind the main topic of this symposium I shall try to bring before you my understanding of Kępiński's thoughts, using a series of papers he published in *Przegląd Lekarski – Oświęcim* between 1962 and 1972. *Przegląd Lekarski* is a general medical monthly published by Krakowskie Towarzystwo Lekarskie. Since 1962 each January, on the anniversary of The Auschwitz Concentration Camp liberation Professor Józef Bogusz, (the Holocaust survivor himself) edited a special issue subtitled *Oświęcim*. Kępiński had been on the editorial board of the *Oświęcim* Issue and contributed to each, until his death.

I am aware I skip his early studies and writings based on their results. In the 1950's there was only one scientific approach to mental health problems, namely the Soviet interpretation of Pavlov. Kępiński, as all psychiatrists in Poland was studying the skin electric resistance, in his case in people with dementia. Nevertheless he took from Pavlov, at that time, what at present forms the backbone of neuroscience. He went to London Institute of Psychiatry (Maudsley Hospital) in 1958/59 where he extended his training under supervision of dr Salo Tischler, a psychoanalyst, but after coming back he introduced at his unit therapeutic community and group psychotherapy, rather than individual analytical therapy. Psychoanalytical therapy, according to him, is dangerous especially when used by therapists who had not gone through their own training analysis. Offers, he thought, convincing and charming way of explanation of human being and his/her problems, quite often congruent in terms of theory, but closer to inner problems of therapists than his/her patient.

Antoni Kępiński. The Auschwitz papers first published in *Przegląd Lekarski-Oświęcim*

- 1962 *Psychopathology of Übermenschen*, (with M.Orwid)
- 1964 *The Auschwitz reflections*.
- 1965 *Anus Mundi*.
- 1966 *Nightmare*.
- 1967 *Psychopathology of power*.
- 1968 *The Ramp. Psychopathology of decision*.
- 1970 *KZ Syndrom*.
- 1972 *Dulce et decorum*
- 1972 *Genocide crimes*.

They were basically based on the research programme Antoni Kępiński had initiated in 1959

and carried on with the team: Maria Orwid, Roman Leśniak, Jan Mitarski, Adam Szymusik and Aleksander Teutsch.

I would like to turn your attention to several problems Kępiński deals with in the paper, written in co-operation with Maria Orwid, based on a book Höss had written while in prison in Poland.

First he points out, that family milieu, ways of upbringing, values transmitted in parents-child relations have formative influence on personality development.

Second, a concept of mental break-down, presenting it as a message calling for change in lifestyle.

Third we can find a directly presented opinion, that the atrocities of Auschwitz were performed by "everymen". Unimaginable evil can be made by everybody.

And on hypothesis, that full submission to ideology makes everybody a robot devoted to achieve the goals ideology indicates. Inner freedom is precondition for individual moral self-assessment.

"Höss reaction for imprisonment ... can be explained in different ways. [...] as consequence of isolation and monotony of life in prison. It can be also seen ... a warning that our life does not go in a proper way, according to the laws of human development. Similarly to a pain being a warning of a danger for the organism. It is very rare for a human being to develop all his potentials, part of them stays suppressed unable to be developed. Sometimes, in exceptional conditions, requiring extraordinary effort, the real worth of the person reveals. In chaotic and turbulent way these all 'energies' not used till now, appear in the acute stage of psychosis." [1]

"Man perceives the surrounding world in context of his influence on it. Even neurone is constructed in the same way, its perception is inseparable from its activity.[...] The structure of the nervous system determines limits of cognitive abilities of a living creature within the limits of its activity." [2].

The idea is developed and discussed in the next paper [3], as well as idea of importance of responsibility feelings.

And that, that one can loose feelings of guilt, but this does not make him responsibility – free.

"In a «mechanical» society feeling of responsibility, crucial for human development is lost,

[...] one becomes a robot. Feelings of guilt due to committed crimes decrease or disappear completely. ... The lack of feelings of guilt however does not cancel responsibility. *Nolens-volens* one has to be responsible for becoming a robot." [2].

"Mechanical" society serves here as a metaphor for totalitarian society. He writes about responsibility of those Nazis who organised and run Auschwitz; his reflection stays valid in regard to the whole Nazi system, but also to every system which postpones human values.

"Anus mundi", an expression [...] as one could presume, was expressing terror and repulsion ... but from the other side rationalising existence of the camp as necessary to clean the world '*katharsis*'. In Nazi concept besides the direct political and economical task of effective and inexpensive extermination of enemy, death camps had also deeper goal; this was cleaning the Germanic race ... The far vision was the world of beautiful, strong, healthy people, the world with no place for ill, disabled, mentally abnormal, contaminated with Jewish or Gipsy blood." [3].

One should keep in mind, that two decades after the end of the II WW the question: "How the horror of extermination could happen?" still was nor only without any answer, but also important and personal. Survivors and witnesses were the majority in population. Kępiński rejects presumptions present in classical and analytical psychology namely these concerning basic aggressive drive, or in traditional psychopathology – such as psychopathy, sociopathy or moral insanity. He tries to show that origins of "goodness" and "evil" are the same. We are keen to accept explanations, which offers a less painful picture of the surrounding world.

"Ability to transform the surrounding world, one can regard as specifically a human feature, contains the largest span of human nature contradictions. This ability gives birth to heroism, dedication, arts, science, but also cruelty, abuse and killing. To change the shape of the world wars are carried on, people are victimized in camps and prisons. What does not fit to the structure to be enforced, becomes strange and hostile, and as such has to be destroyed." [3].

His conclusion points out, that destruction of the other, and "otherness" is defined by ideology, inevitably leads to killing, just in consequence of the ability to transform environment.

"Similarly, on an incomparably higher level one can encounter in human life, dominated by an idea, strange at the beginning, but with time ones own. One does not see anything besides, is ready to sacrifice the life – ones own and other people (usually other's is easier to sacrifice). [...] One loses own identity; thoughts, feelings, doings are no longer expression of his own personality, but a reflection of the structure accepted from outside. [...] People overcome by the same idea become identical as twins; social differentiation diminishes, but effectiveness (understood as aiming the same tasks, postponing everything else) increases. Human being who has not a stigma of the same idea, in consequence, becomes an obstruction in its realisation, enemy, obstructing thing, and has to be eliminated." [3].

Kępiński uses, as metaphor, a biological model of viral intervention into DNA structure of bacteria: ideology contaminates, and builds in not only criteria for "otherness" but also simple criteria of "sameness".

What is especially appealing (to me, at least) is a process of loosing individual characteristics, identity formation on a tendency to identify with something external rather, than based on individual experience and internal continuous sameness.

"People who were obstruction, a thing sentenced for extermination, eliminated from the way to a new world, had accepted their fate in a different way. Some had no time to get out from the shock of the sudden placement in the hell of the concentration camp before their life came to end. Others welcomed death with fatalistic conviction of the inevitable. Yet others wanted to survive at every price. And as in extermination camp, as a rule, convenient arrangement was accessible for those only who killed, and those who were the masters, then some tended to take the forms of their oppressors. [...] Nevertheless – [...] survival required, to some extend, overcoming overwhelming law to stay alive at all costs. Those who stayed within this law totally, were losing their humanity, and with this, often a chance for survival. Among human characteristics important for survival was the inner ability to oppose the external, reality; creation of alternative world, dreams about future, memories of the past, or more realistic in friendship, helping others, organizing 'alternative life', other then camp-life." [4]

Kępiński's explanation of survival in concentration camp turn to the concept of importance of higher values. He writes about "overwhelming" of the first rule in biology, struggle for life. Personally I still have some problems with it. I do remember my student exam in psychiatry, and his remarks on weakness of the concept of "higher values", specific for human being.

This explanation stays in conflict with the opinion of Emanuel Tanay arguing for the importance of "staying alive" as heroic in the time of extermination.

"But there were also such people, who in spite of hunger, thirst, cold, pain, humiliation of human dignity were able to distance from their suffering and avoid concentration on searching for anything to eat, to stop colds, heat and body pains. Biological imperative is extraordinary powerful and enormous power of will is necessary to avoid thinking about bread when one is hungry, about water being thirsty. This effort of will was necessary to preserve inner freedom – inner space to think, dream, plan, decision making, to free from the nightmare of the present time." [3].

I suppose that Kępiński suggested importance of an order among values, hierarchy of importance.

"Unusual situation always arouses fear, which can be described as "desintegrative", as generated by disturbance in a structure developed in a lifetime between an individual and her/his environment. This structure enables, to some extent, prediction what will happen, and planning own activities. There is a limit in tolerance for unusually, that means for what one is not used to. Beyond this limit one reacts with panic: fear and helplessness. One enhances the other, panic paralyzes purposeful activity, inability to act increases anxiety." [4].

"In dangerous situation the first biological rule: the quest for survival – appears exceptionally clear. In concentration camp conditions its forms happened to be sometimes drastic. [...] It seems obvious, that in concentration camp life norms evident in normal life could not be followed. This makes difficult any moral assessment, especially for those, who never experienced concentration camp." [4].

Let me turn your attention once more to the difficult problem of relation between quest for

life and ethics, between guilt and responsibility, in Antoni Kępiński's writings. Here, in 1966 he comes back once more to the problem of survival in extreme situations. After arguing for importance of overwhelming by what biology demands and support to be found in an "alternative world", he says, that under such conditions, as can be imagined in concentration camp, "norms of normal life could not be followed". This statement is followed by declaration on our inability to perform moral assessment on people behaviour in the camp.

This way of thinking, I believe, influenced Kępiński's attitude towards people suffering mental disorders. Using analogy, he also compared mental crisis condition to the condition of concentration camp prisoner. In consequence, I presume, formulated one of psychiatrist's errors: the error of a judge.

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