

A SHORT HISTORY OF PHILANTHROPY IN POLAND

based on a book by Ewa Leś, Zarys historii dobroczynności i filantropii w Polsce [Outline of the History of Charity and Philanthropy in Poland], Warsaw 2001

The mythical Prometheus, widely known as the world's first philanthropist, loved mankind so much that he gave it the gift of fire going against the will of gods for which he was condemned to eternal suffering caused by the vulture eating his eternally growing liver. This distant and rather discouraging example did not scare everyone off though: in all times and places around the world philanthropic attitudes can be observed.

The Greek term *philanthropos* meant the attitude full of compassion, understood - as in the Promethean myth - as providing aid, making sacrifices, educating. Already in the ancient Rome, as demonstrated by individuals like Caius Cilnius Maecenas, patron of artists, it was a well-known truth that wise philanthropy may shape social policies.

The Christian Middle Ages added its share of love of neighbor taking the form of "caritas", taking inspiration from the works and lives of St. Augustine, St. Francis and St. Thomas, who taught to help the poorest. From this moment on two types of charity have coexisted: charity as commanded by religion, and philanthropy related to secular humanitarian ideas.

In Poland at the time charitable work was supported or done primarily by rulers and church institutions: monastic orders, parishes, religious fraternities which supported the poor, gave alms and established hospitals - the fundamental charitable institutions of the Middle Ages. The structure is well symbolized by the fact that one of the first charitable institutions were founded thanks to a donation of Prince Władysław Herman, who in this way wanted to show his gratitude to God for a male child.

The Reformation, especially in Western Europe, led to partial secularization of charitable activities. They became centralized, as was the case in England which introduced a mandatory tax for the poor. At the same time supervision over the poor was increased, in some places a ban on beggary was instated.

In 1584, Piotr Skarga, the founder of the Archfraternity of Mercy, reminded his contemporaries that "a prayer without mercy is like a bird with its wings cut off, and cannot fly." In his opinion, the best form of help for the poor was to establish hospitals. The 16th century was an important stage in the development of church education, also in Poland, which saw the expansion of monastic colleges run by the Jesuits and Piarists.

It should be kept in mind that Poland was a country of great diversity, both in ethnical and religious terms, and charitable actions were inspired not only by the merciful ideas characteristic for Western Christianity, but also the traditions of the Orthodox Church, Judaism and Islam. Each of these religious communities had their own charitable institutions.

In the 17th and the first half of the 18th century the need for charitable aid rose due to a deep economic depression in Poland that took much of people's wealth. Wars with Sweden and Tatar invasions ruined townships and in some places reduce rural populations by as much as 50 percent. The still dominating charitable work of the Catholic Church was complemented with new monastic orders arriving to Poland such as the Brothers of St. John of God, Piarists, Trinitarians, Sisters of Charity.

Under the influence of the Enlightenment in the first half of the 18th century in the whole of Europe the understanding of philanthropy evolved: the idea of the charity resulting from the love of God changed into the notion of charity resulting from the love of man. The new philanthropic doctrine, related to Montesquieu's conclusion that "a man is not poor because has nothing, but because he does not work", gave emphasis not to charity, but to work. People spoke more often of the responsibility of the state for counteracting poverty, and of the need for state interventionism.

The mounting crisis of the feudal villain economy and the development of industry was accompanied with the large-scale pauperization and an increase of the number of children abandoned, neglected or demoralized. Just as in other countries of Europe at that time the development of philanthropic organizations was a reaction to the growing social needs related to industrialization, in Poland - partitioned by aggressors - philanthropy and charity were also seen as a patriotic duty and a form of keeping the stateless nation alive. It is worth mentioning that despite all restrictions many innovative social initiatives, that were also undertaken in Western Europe, were launched in the 19th and early 20th century on the Polish soil.

"The readiness of the Polish society to make sacrifices is endless. Our national disposition may be rightfully criticized in many respects and we are most aware of our failures and shortcomings, but faced with the need to spend money for a public cause, there can hardly be any other nation superior to us - and even foreigners do justice to us when speaking about it" - wrote Henryk Sienkiewicz, himself engaged in philanthropic activities.

Along side the traditional spontaneous forms of charity, new associations were being built that used professional ways to help individuals and families. Bolesław Prus was one of the proponents of such professional welfare associations and took active part in their work himself.

Toward the end of the 19th century new concepts as to the future of Poland appeared. Edward Abramowski, philosopher and a socialist activist, affirmed associations as a social structure more perfect than the most democratic state.

From the outbreak of World War I the Polish soil was the playground of military campaigns, which led to another attempt on the part of the Polish society to organize itself and show mutual solidarity. The war and the liquidation of many welfare institutions by partitioning states caused the necessity of founding citizens' institutions to do important social work, like the care over children and youths, the part of the society that the war threatened most.

In the first years of the newly found independence, charity was still the domain of associations, foundations and individuals. State and local self-governing authorities, being in the stages of self-organization, were taking over some of the tasks of private institutions. In the years 1918-1939, due to the taking over by the state and public institutions of welfare and patronage over culture and arts, the importance of private charitable activities in this fields decreased. The needs of the country so exhausted with World War I and the later economic crisis of the 1930s gave significant impulses for the existence and growth of associations. More than 10,000 associations and 3,000 foundations were registered in Poland during those years.

In early stages of World War II, on the land incorporated into the Third Reich, social organizations of the 2nd Polish Republic were declared illegal. The Church lost its legal status, and Polish secular and religious help was organized illegally and secretly. All forms of aid, self-defense or resistance against the German authorities being the result of the work of charitable institutions and monastic orders, individuals and parts of the community until

then not related to charitable work, proved the extraordinary readiness for sacrifice and the solidarity of the Polish society, as well as allowed to reduce the number of victims of war and occupation.

After World War II, the charitable and philanthropic tradition in Poland was interrupted. Under communism, philanthropy was despised and stripped of its positive meaning, seen as a bourgeois relic. In late 1940s, the process of systematic liquidation of independent institutions and organizations was begun. The state took full control of the economy and society, including education, health care and welfare, banning independent work in these fields.

After 1956, the communist state allowed for limited development of associations. The Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs, political discussion forums were created then, and some secular and Catholic associations were revived. The reconstruction of the charitable work in parishes was also initiated.

The disappointment with the system that failed to keep its promise of social justice and economic welfare gradually led in the 1970s to the creation of a “second society”, sometimes also called an “alternative society”. The creation of the independent trade union *Solidarity* in 1980 was a breakthrough experience. By the late 1980s, 54 percent of the workforce in the state-run sector of the economy were members of the Solidarity. In the years 1980-1981, large masses started to participate for real in the public life. New social and charitable organizations were created.

The imposing of the martial law in December 1981 again stripped the Polish society from the right to associate and freely articulate its needs and rights. Some social organizations started secretive activities. The 1980s brought on one hand the reduction of social obligations on the part of the state, and on the other - an unprecedented fall of the standard of life. The deepening economic crisis and poverty that a growing number of people had to face were reasons why state authorities had to tolerate independent social organizations, both secular and religious, being born at the time.

During the democratic transformation Poland saw a rise of old and new forms of charitable and philanthropic traditions. A new doctrine of philanthropy was formed that was going beyond the altruistic concept of helping others. More often the idea of mutual aid is being mentioned.

Contrary to the situation in Western countries, despite 10 years of fundamental transformation processes, the mutual relations between authorities and social organizations are not regulated very well in Poland. Citizens' initiatives are the most common stimulators of the philanthropic ethos in the 3rd Republic. Since 1989, Polish charitable and philanthropic organizations make efforts to satisfy social needs that the state, reducing its welfare role, is less and less capable of doing. They play an important role in the easing of social tensions, and in initiating and implementing innovative organizational solutions.

There were 50,000 non-profit organizations active in Poland in 1997. The category comprises religious and secular associations, foundations and philanthropic alliances, but also political parties, trade unions, organizations of economic and professional self-governance, and church-related social institutions. There are more than 3,000 foundations, over 36,000 associations and social organizations (including voluntary fire-fighting units), and 900 church organizations.

A new type of social organization introduced in Poland after 1989 is the so-called community foundation, which gathers resources within the local community for citizens' initiatives and

activities of local organizations. The resources make up the so-called capital endowment, interest on which allow for supporting the needs of local communities. The creation of community funds should be seen as an important step toward institutionalization of philanthropic activities in small townships and rural communities, where the presence of social organizations is weak and the role of the businesspeople in the financing social initiatives is also small. They may play an important role in the reconstruction of local bonds and communities.

There is a rise of individual and corporate generosity in the 3rd Republic. Results of an international research on the non-profit sector in Poland show that contributions from individuals and corporations made up for the total of 15 percent of all income of non-profit organizations in 1997. 22 percent of income came from the public sector, while 63 percent from own sources (membership fees, business operations, sales of services).

What is charity and philanthropy in Poland at the turn of centuries? As in the past, it continues to be a necessary element in the building of social solidarity and covers many aspects of life nowadays. The new philanthropy does not have to ask anything in return or it may take the form of exchange relations (mutual help, sponsoring, patronage, public advertisement campaigns).

Charity and philanthropy belong to the category of the social values without which balanced development of the society and economy are not possible. They oppose egoism in the public life, they are a reaction to and protection from exaggerated liberalism, and they are an expression of respect and social love of the poorest.