

# History of Ophthalmology

## Ludwik Zamenhof: a colleague of rare distinction

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### ABSTRACT

Ludwik Zamenhof trained as an ophthalmologist in Vienna at the end of the 19th century. He is best known as the originator of Esperanto and devoted his life to the ideals of secular humanism and ethnic tolerance. Few individuals left a nobler legacy, yet in a tragic irony when the Nazis invaded Poland in World War Two his family were singled out for persecution.

**Key words:** Esperanto, philology, Zamenhof.

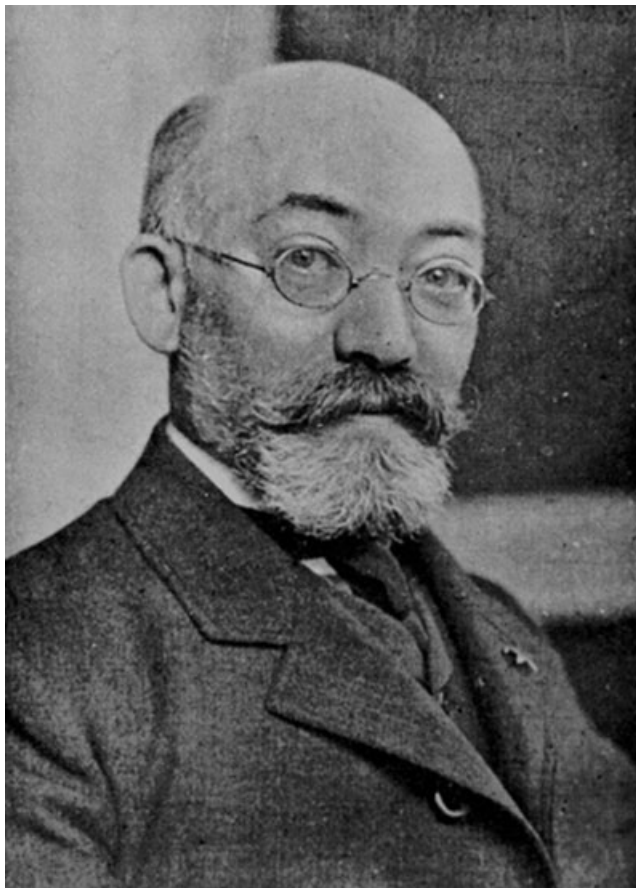


Figure 1. Ludwik Lazar Zamenhof. Image from *Life of Zamenhof*.

Among the extraordinary Europeans attracted to ophthalmology in the late 19th century was one whose genius is celebrated more outside his profession than within it – Ludwik Lazar Zamenhof (1859–1917). His contribution to Esperanto and his rare humanism are celebrated around the world on 15 December – the anniversary of his birth – as ‘Zamenhof day’. There is a planet named after him,<sup>1</sup> several European streets bear his name and a Japanese Shinto sect (Oomoto) venerates him as a God.<sup>2</sup>

Ludwik was the eldest child of a Jewish family living in Bialystock, a provincial town in Russian-occupied Poland. His father was a language teacher – emotionally restrained and intellectually rigorous – with secular beliefs. He depended on his mother for emotional support. She was devoted, forgiving, and unlike her husband, observed Jewish religious customs and beliefs. The family were poor and the prospects for any Polish Jewish family living under the repressive authority of Tsarist Russia were not good. Outside the home ethnic intolerance between Lithuanians, Poles, Russians and Jews frequently led to disputes. Tsarist society discouraged intellectual freedom and personal initiative; publications and private correspondence were censored. In 1873 Ludwik’s father became a government censor and the family moved to Warsaw. Ludwik came to realize that it was his mother’s love that bound his family together despite his father’s autocratic behaviour. As a child he mainly spoke Russian and Yiddish but learnt to express himself fluently in Polish and German and formed the opinion that language barriers were contributing to the ethnic intolerance that he witnessed in daily life. Given his circumstances the likelihood of him doing anything about it must have seemed remote at the time.

Ludwik furthered his language studies at school, learning French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and English, and was familiar with Italian, Spanish and Lithuanian. He survived serious childhood illness to grow into a lean red-haired young man with myopic blue-grey eyes and a sallow complexion (Fig. 1). Among his friends he was regarded as idealistic and excessively compassionate. He was also an enormously gifted philologist since on his 18th birthday he demonstrated the first practical version of a new language which he had

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invented in the hope of enabling people to communicate and live peaceably with one another – Esperanto.

He graduated from the 'Second Philological Gymnasium' (high school) with high grades in all subjects in 1879 and enrolled to study medicine in Moscow. Before leaving Warsaw his father persuaded him to postpone his language project and leave his copious notes at home. Tsar Alexander II had survived four assassination attempts and such was the paranoia of the political leadership that the Polish language was outlawed for fear its use might incite Polish nationalism. In this environment Ludwik's father was advised by his colleagues that social activism, no matter how well meaning, could be regarded as subversive; so he discouraged his son. While Ludwik was studying in Moscow his father burnt all the documents entrusted to him.

By 1881 Ludwik was almost starving in Moscow on the meagre stipend his family could provide and the little work available locally, so he returned to Warsaw. In the same year Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by a bomb and the Jews were falsely blamed for his death. An infamous 'pogrom' took place in Warsaw. Ludwik confronted both his father's deceit and the frightening consequences of the pogrom in the same year but was not deterred from resuming the language project which he saw as an essential instrument to overcome interracial enmity. He recreated the Esperanto documentation from memory while completing his medical degree.

In 1885 he graduated and entered general practice in Lithuania but soon realized he lacked the temperament for this vocation. Using his savings he travelled to Vienna in 1886 to study ophthalmology, where the famous teacher Ernst Fuchs had been appointed Professor the previous year. (Another famous colleague, Arthur Conan Doyle, followed him in 1890.) At the same time he began trying to publish his first Esperanto book but was frustrated by insufficient funds.

After returning to Warsaw he met and married Klara Zilbernick. In 1887 his father-in-law, who fondly regarded him as an eccentric genius, agreed to support the publication of the first book about Esperanto. Ludwik's 40-page volume was written in Russian and called – 'Dr Esperanto/International/language/Introduction and complete textbook for Russians'. The nom de plume 'Dr Esperanto' translates from Esperanto as 'one who hopes'. In 1888 Ludwik began publishing a second book in Esperanto but stopped when his father, who still worked as a censor, was blackmailed by an accusation of permitting a publication defaming the Tsar. Despite the strained relationship between father and son Ludwik spent most of his remaining savings to pay a bribe necessary to save his father from being denounced and arrested. This left him unable to continue publishing Esperanto works and barely able to support his family.

Ludwik's financial situation remained dire for several years because his ophthalmology practice could not support him. Warsaw society disapproved of his obsession with Esperanto and many in the Jewish community disapproved of his lack of religious observance. He formed a strong belief in secular humanism and declined to observe religious customs

that he saw as an impediment to social harmony. Although he was notoriously generous to his patients he only attracted the poorest ones and was forced to accept financial support from his father-in-law for several years. Despite relative penury and prevailing social attitudes characterized by distrust bordering on xenophobia he never wavered from the promotion of Esperanto. There was some personal risk in this since he was under the scrutiny of the onerous censorship regime of Tsarist Russia and activism in the name of secular humanism was a little too close to open sedition for many of his colleagues.

In 1901 Ludwik returned to Vienna for a refresher course in ophthalmology and thereafter his practice began to prosper. At this time he was corresponding widely with Esperantists around the world, including a wealthy French ophthalmologist, Louis Emile Javal. In 1901 Javal became blind from glaucoma, but he was an outspoken Esperantist and a strong personal supporter of Ludwik Zamenhof. The first world conference of Esperantists was held in Boulogne, France, in 1905. Ludwig and Klara stayed with Javal *en route* to the conference. The Zamenhofs travelled to several other conferences in Europe and one in the USA prior to 1914. Meanwhile Ludwik's health was failing, partly due to a lifetime of smoking.

In the early 1900s there were hundreds of people around the world contributing to the development of Esperanto. Within this community several controversies arose, such as whether to retain the use of diacritics. Ludwik became somewhat aloof from such considerations because he was obsessed with another project – a universal religion. In 1911 he wrote to the Congress of Races in London, including the remark – 'the separation and hatred between the races will completely disappear only when mankind has one language and one religion'.<sup>3</sup>

He proposed a universal religion based on the philosophy of secular humanism and called 'Homaranismo'. He aspired to a 'neutral system of ethics and observances' acceptable to all peoples, which would at the same time accommodate private theological and philosophical differences. He tried to arrange meetings with other Esperantists to discuss this subject at Esperanto conferences but the politics of the time did not allow it. Unfortunately his obsession with overthrowing racial and ethnic borders was discordant with the political trends in Europe at that time.

In June of 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo but Ludwik and Klara were determined to attend an Esperanto conference in Paris later that year. They travelled as far as Germany when the borders were closed and were forced to flee Germany via Finland in order to return home to Poland, arriving without baggage, demoralized and isolated. They witnessed the looting by the German invaders in 1915 and the subsequent attempt at appeasement by offering Polish national independence. Ludwik's health deteriorated while living in German-occupied Warsaw. He suffered from frequent angina and cardiac failure and although he survived to witness the abdication of Tsar Nicholas on 2 March 1917, he did not survive to see the

Bolshevik revolution in October. He died on 14 April 1917. Eulogies flowed from all over Europe. He was survived by his wife Klara, their son Adam (head of ophthalmology at Czyszte Hospital), and daughters Sofia and Lydia. Sofia was a physician and Lydia a language teacher.

Adam and his wife Wanda had a son named Ludwik, and neither of the daughters married. Lydia was the only child to take a keen interest in Esperanto and through her interest in Homaranismo became involved in the Baha'i faith. Klara died beforehand but the remaining family members were all in Warsaw in September 1939 at the time of the Nazi invasion.

The Nazi movement regarded Esperanto as a 'Jewish language' rather than a progressive and humanistic language project. They actively persecuted Esperantists throughout Europe and in all occupied countries destroyed translations and detained activists. The Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 was particularly brutal. During the attack Ludwik's family home was bombed and most of his archives were destroyed. The Nazi commander actively sought out the Zamenhof family and Adam was executed by gunshot. The remaining family faced near starvation in the Warsaw ghetto but were eventually loaded onto trains bound for Treblinka. Wanda escaped with her son Ludwik at a refuelling stop and both survived the war under an assumed name. Sofia and Lydia were killed.

The tragic irony of the children's wilful extermination by a sinister manifestation of the very intolerance Ludwik spent his life combating makes his legacy all the more poignant. There are numerous works now available in Esperanto and the Universal Esperanto Association, established in 1908, is now accessible online. The mantra of 'unity in diversity' used by some Christian sects and the Baha'i faith echoes the philosophy of Homaranismo. Ludwik's family history has the pathos of Don Quixote and the heroism of a Homeric epic, and is most clearly told in Marjorie Boulton's biography.<sup>4</sup> This summary was prepared in the hope that his profession would remember him as a colleague of rare distinction.

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