

Jadwiga Kuczyńska-Kwapisz prof. Ph.D.
Universitas Cardinalis Stephani Wyszyński
Warsaw

A Visually Impaired Person in the Socio-Pedagogical Space (Family, Educational, Professional, Social) from Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka's Perspective - Concepts and Reality

All well-known pedagogical concepts evolved within the reality of the social environment in which their authors happened to live. The Work of Róża Czacka was her response to the needs of blind people between the years 1898 and 1949. These dates were benchmarks for her life's mission. The first one refers to the time when she learnt that her eyesight had been irretrievably lost to her. It was then when she understood her state and chose, with full awareness, to devote her life to work for the blind. The latter refers to Mother Elżbieta's retirement from direct activity on account of grave health troubles.

The first ten years Róża Czacka spent on thorough preparation for the task she had undertaken. She studied the needs of the blind in Poland, she also learned about the ways their problems were solved overseas.

What was the situation of the blind in our country during the times when Róża Czacka set off on her life's journey towards her future Work?

Róża Czacka's own experience and research provided the answer. Dr. Bolesław Gepner, her ophthalmologist, knew that the problems of blind people were unresolved. It was him who encouraged Róża Czacka to commence that difficult, but so much needed work. She was well aware that to be able to help other people she had to go through the process of rehabilitation herself. At that point, however, she encountered some problems like mastering Braille or learning practical life skills. As there were no appropriately specialized institutions she was compelled to start autorehabilitation. The effort put into learning how to read and write in Braille and acquiring the much desired self-reliance in everyday life, enabled her to use the experience later in her rehabilitation work with the blind.

In order to become better acquainted with the situation of the visually impaired she undertook numerous travels. Her study trips to France turned out to be particularly valuable. After all, it was the place where tyflopädagogy was being developed, where the first school for the blind had come into existence, the Braille writing system had been invented and suitable teaching aids

were created. An organization called "Valentin Haüy Association for the Benefit of the Blind" was unusually active in Paris. Róża Czacka met Maurice de la Sizeranna - the originator and the founder of that modern organization which completely changed the concept of what was the right approach to the problems of the blind. His mission was "A blind person - a useful person". Instead of the accepted forms of philanthropic care - the approach which resulted in great passivity of blind people, he came up with the new solution that guided the blind into the professional and social activity and made them take responsibility for their own lives at the same time.

He considered it the duty of the State and the society to provide the blind with general and vocational / professional knowledge. Such an education would enable them to work and gradually become independent. The concept corresponded well to Róża Czacka's views and became a fundamental principle in her work for the visually impaired.

The situation of the majority of blind people in Poland at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was exceptionally difficult. The country had been partitioned, the annexation delayed its development, the limitations imposed by the occupants impoverished the existing social institutions. These factors explained why such a marginal percentage of visually impaired people had been included in any care whatsoever. A great majority of them suffered from poverty and lived on the margins of the completely uncomprehending society that was generally ignorant of the needs and the potentials of the blind and therefore incapable of providing them with the chance of a decent existence. Most blind people were forced to beg in order to survive. Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka, before she started her own institutions, wrote about that period: "Apart from the Institute for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind in Warsaw, where the children were educated in Russian, the only other one was The Institute for the Blind in Lvov, almost unavailable to the children from the territory that had been annexed by the Russians. The Blind Musicians' Association in Warsaw was the only institution for adult blind people, the scope of its activity in its very nature being very specialized and limited. Apart from that, the blind devoid of any care, were reduced to begging, which brings to mind similar treatment of the blind by primitive tribes" (E. Czacka 2007, p. 208).

Apart from political and economic factors, Mother Elżbieta Czacka also indicated negative social attitudes towards the blind, which even more affected their difficult position.

The situation as it was, Mother Elżbieta Czacka considered it her main aim to raise the level of both the economic and intellectual, moral and spiritual living standards of blind people. She recognised that it was a must to deal with all the categories of blind and visually impaired people in a way that would cover consecutive stages of their life, changing their image among Polish people.

A visually impaired or blind person in the family space

Mother Elżbieta thought that the functioning stereotype of a blind person as a helpless, worthless creature, had its roots in the attitude of the family to which a child deprived of its eyesight

was born. The parents, siblings, grandparents are often ashamed of having a disabled member in the family and they separate them from even the closest environment. It is obvious that the fate of the children born to pathological families, e.g. of alcoholics is particularly sad. In such families love is missing, the child is treated as an additional burden, frequently taken advantage of and used for begging.

Mother Elżbieta also indicated educational problems which emerge in accepting and loving families with a blind child. The parents, unaware of the rudiments of tyflopädagogie, may hinder their child's physical and intellectual development. Being guided by prevailing stereotypes they do not recognize the developmental potential in their child. In all the above-mentioned situations a child is condemned to a weaker development, passivity and apathy. Róża Czacka valued the family upbringing of blind children. However, she thought that raising a child was very difficult and even more of a challenge if the child was blind. Therefore the majority of families were not able to cope with that task on their own. This point of view made the employees of the "Patronages", created by Róża Czacka, support the families with a blind child in their own homes. At the same time she tried to create a family atmosphere in the boarding houses she ran. She cared for appropriate relations between class tutors and the children in their care as well as between the children. She wanted the boarding house to replace home, she held everyone responsible for its everyday functioning, thought everyone should work for the good of all the inhabitants as much as they were able to. She aimed at creating educational places that would closely imitate family ways based on full acceptance, appreciation and love for the children, but which would challenge them with some requirements to meet at the same time.

Róża Czacka's concepts concerning the family upbringing are still relevant and used today. The mission of the "Patronages" is still being realized by the "Patronage" institutions in the Ukraine, established by the Franciscan Sisters, Servants of the Cross. In Laski, however, the Team of Early Intervention as well as the Department of Graduates operate instead. Although the boarding houses which were founded by Róża Czacka are undergoing changes to meet the challenges of contemporary life, a family educational atmosphere is still there. Even the use of some names prove this point e.g. the expression „boarding house” is not in use, but „girls' house” or „boys' house” are used instead.

Mother Elżbieta Czacka's views on starting up a family by blind women have been controversial. They are still considered as such by many people. She shared the generally prevailing belief that blind women should not enter into marriage. There were some exceptions to her standpoint, though. She was not against the marriage of a blind man with a sighted woman. Alicja Gościńska, Mother Elżbieta Czacka's colleague, writes: "In individual conversations Mother explained to blind girls the significance of money in their situation. She also added that a blind

woman who was going to marry should be exceptionally efficient and resourceful in running a household, nursing a child, etc. She also stressed the necessity of a medical statement on possible contraindications from the point of view of etiology of blindness.

In the 30's Mother Elżbieta accepted e.g. the marriage of a girl who was blinded as a result of an accident, with a blind inhabitant of her Institution. The girl was financially secured with a permanent pension. Having lost her eyesight as an adult, she had already acquired the necessary skills in all household chores.

The problem of avoiding marriages between the blind girls and boys entailed limitations on any closer social contacts between the older boys and girls in Laski in the inter-war period. Those days the issue was similarly solved amongst the sighted, and co-educational schools had just began to appear" (A. Gościmska 1983, p. 97-98).

At present the schools in Laski are co-educational. Young people are being prepared for family life, they get the best possible training in life skills, moving around independently and spatial orientation. They also learn about carrying out genetic tests and are taught the rudiments of heredity.

A blind person in the educational space

Mother Elżbieta Czacka received a broad and very good education. That helped her create the unusual Work although she had lost her eyesight. She thought it a must for the schools for blind children to represent a very high standard of teaching. The graduates should get a better general education than their sighted peers on account of further continuation of educational process or a prospective job. She wrote: "For a blind person, gaining knowledge is like getting outside one's own self, it is a window on the world, it helps keep the balance and mental health, it compensates for that certain poverty which the disability imposes upon them" (Róża Czacka, Teresa Land 1938). She aptly thought that a school for blind children must offer the same curriculum as a school for sighted children. The main differences can be observed in applying special teaching techniques, the use of dedicated teaching aids, a different organization of the classroom and class equipment. She demanded that the approach in the teaching process be practical. Therefore, various models and objects normally inaccessible to blind children were used as teaching aids. Owing to their introduction into the teaching process, supported by the use of modelling, the tendency to verbalism can be minimized. Already on the primary school level, Mother Elżbieta implemented the instruction in foreign languages and the preparation for further vocational training. These pupils who would be doing physical work should receive a very good general education, even better than the education their sighted peers might receive. That should serve the main purpose i.e. facilitation of social contacts and enabling the visually impaired to enter the competitive labour market.

Mother Elżbieta Czacka paid great attention to special education at kindergarten and at

primary school levels. She realized the need for a special methodology of providing instruction, knew that a longer period was necessary for the blind to master the required knowledge, and that they needed additional instruction in life skills to become independent. She considered special vocational training very useful. She thought, however, that after a good training at primary level there was no reason to create special education systems on the secondary and tertiary education levels. The students have already been made familiar with the learning techniques and can cope on their own at school as well as at college. They should receive scholarships and the help of a reader, though. She directed the graduates of Laski to Warsaw schools. That clearly shows that as early as in the period between the First and the Second World War, Mother Elżbieta Czacka supported the concept of integration of the blind and the sighted during the educational process. At present there are secondary schools at the Centre for Blind Children in Laski. After primary school the young people can carry on their education in the familiar environment, they also receive support when moving to other schools.

A blind person in the professional space

Blind people are able to do numerous jobs. Mother Elżbieta divided them into two main groups: the first - intellectual, the other – technical or craft. The most gifted students can take up a profession e.g. start an academic career, become teachers, particularly at schools for the blind, clergymen, lawyers, politicians, office workers. They constitute a particularly privileged, small group. Even the most gifted ones sometimes need certain support, though. Competition and prejudice in general public can prevent them from getting employment in spite of their high qualifications. Blind people are often welcome to the jobs connected with music on advantageous conditions as organists or music teachers, to give an example. They frequently appear in music bands, they perform as soloists, they are tuners of musical instruments. Also, massage is considered a good and popular job.

The above-mentioned jobs and professions are accessible to the minority of blind people. The other group of employment, open to the majority of the blind is craft. The job is done in workshops or at home as outwork method. The most popular ones are: basket-making, brush-making, knitwear production, crocheting, bookbinding, carpentry. Mother believed that a sighted person should supervise the work as they could easily check the quality of the produce. Mother Elżbieta Czacka claimed that only exceptional blind people can be financially independent. Most of them work much more slowly than their sighted colleagues, and therefore their payment is lower. The organizers of the employment for the blind must not think solely of expected profits, they should bear in mind human dignity and a person's right to work. Therefore state institutions should co-fund employment in case of workshops and outwork jobs.

The experience gained abroad enabled Mother Elżbieta Czacka transfer patronages as

special forms of work with blind adults. She assumed that every blind person needed some help from the sighted. "The entire wisdom of the education for the blind, hence the patronage, consists on the maximum of initiative, effort, resourcefulness and work it can make a blind person summon up. The patronage should be limited to offering to blind people what each of them individually will not be able to cope with" (Róża Czacka, 1932). Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka's views are still standing. Despite the passing time a blind person still finds it difficult to get employed. Therefore the fact that several graduates of the Laski Centre are self-employed is considered their great achievement. The Graduates' Department has taken over the role of patronages.

A blind person in the social space

Róża Czacka in her childhood already experienced problems caused by short-sightedness and glaucoma. Her siblings did not really comprehend their sister's situation and sometimes laughed at her strange behaviour like bumping into furniture or problems with horse-riding. She took her brothers' vexing remarks badly. Her parents' reactions were equally painful as they refused to believe their daughter could not see. The Father talked about Róża's poor vision but never about her blindness. As a result she started avoiding social contacts so as not to embarrass her parents by her blunders which were caused by the lack of eyesight. Although the decision was hers, nonetheless she experienced social isolation. She knew first hand what impediments in social contacts the Laski graduates may encounter.

Mother Elżbieta was aware of existing stereotyped opinions about the blind. They may have been responsible for pushing the blind into the margins of social life, therefore Mother Elżbieta took action to change the stereotypes. She wanted the Laski inhabitants to participate in cultural events, both as audience and as authors. Stage performances, concerts and exhibitions were being organised for and by the blind, frequently with the participation of their sighted peers. She also emphasized the importance of general education and constant mental activity in social contacts. She cared for abiding by good manners in everyday life. She required correct table manners, proper eating habits and cultured conversation. The Laski graduates recall that on various occasions e.g. while doing some work together, Mother Elżbieta talked to them about appropriate behaviour. When discussing loud laughter she said that hardly anyone was able to laugh nicely and it was better to do it more quietly. She thought highly of the sense of humour and regarded it very important for class tutors and generally necessary in social life. She also pointed out the importance of aesthetic clothes and observing hygiene as the factors which could highly facilitate social contacts, but which were sometimes uncontrolled or neglected by the blind.

Mother Elżbieta cared for the cultivation of high cultural and intellectual levels by the blind. She insisted that they develop a variety of interests. That would serve the purpose of making good use of one's free time as well as the purpose of making the difficult relationships with sighted

people easier. She popularized reading habits amongst the blind not only because that way some opportunities for the general development and entertainment were developed, but also for social reasons, namely acquiring good conversational topics. Similar considerations made her popularize musical education for the blind. She recommended to the teachers that they cultivate proper manners and personal culture in their pupils as they facilitated social contacts.

Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka's concepts should be considered as right and innovative. Her work was experimental and proved very successful. She was the first one to combine typhology with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and practical solutions. She recognized upbringing, education, rehabilitation and employment of blind people as the essential factors in dealing with the overall situation of the blind.

The Work of Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka is alive and continuously developing according to the guidelines and ideas set by her i.e. religious upbringing, educating young people into independence and self-reliance in life, and preparing them to do vocational work according to their individual potential.

The Franciscan Sisters, Servants of the Cross have expanded their services for the benefit of the blind beyond the borders of Poland.

In Laski, the very high quality of educational and rehabilitation processes are observed. More and more graduates acquire higher education, become independent and have satisfying lives. The aim of preparing elites, i.e. such blind people whose work and life could set an example and contribute to the higher quality of living of other visually impaired people has been fully achieved. There are many extraordinary examples of creative, good lives for the good of the blind. Mother Elżbieta Róża Czacka and her Work - the environment which she created and formed, is still highly appreciated by the graduates and friends of Laski.

References:

1. Alicja Gościmska , Torowała nowe drogi niewidomym. Róża Czacka – Matka Elżbieta jako tyflog i wychowawca, Laski 1983
2. Czacka Róża, Landy Teresa: Dziecko niewidome, „Ku szczytom”, X-XI, Wilno 1938
3. Róża Czacka: Memoriał w sprawie zorganizowania pracy dorosłym niewidomym, (typescript), Laski 1932
4. Róża Czacka: Triuno, (typescript), Laski 1936

