

STUDIES IN PHYSICAL CULTURE AND TOURISM
Vol. 15, No. 1, 2008

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EUGENIUSZ PIASECKI: THE FOUNDER OF ACADEMIC PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN POLAND

Key words: Eugeniusz Piasecki, theory of physical education, sport.

ABSTRACT

The following paper is concerned with the life, education and professional career of Eugeniusz Piasecki (1872-1947) – the greatest Polish pioneer of modern physical education. The aim of this paper is to discuss Eugeniusz Piasecki's life and his views on plays, professional sport and Olympism at the turn of the 19th century. Piasecki claimed that sport should be firmly based on pedagogical values. In physical education he saw a chance for moral and cultural revitalization of the Polish nation, traditions and heritage. According to Piasecki physical education should serve all in the same way: as an educational tool supporting health with joy and satisfaction. Piasecki thought that sport had lost its original values and was becoming a mere spectacle feeding the media with morbid sensations as well as an object of financial speculations. Professionalism and commercialization of sport became the major reasons for degeneration and decline of the ancient idea of sport. Piasecki hoped that his work on cultivation of folk and ludic heritage of Polish history would rebuild the proper image of physical education and sport for all.

PIASECKI'S LIFE, EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER

At the turn of the 19th century the political situation in Poland was unsettled as the country was partitioned by its three powerful neighbors: Russia, Austria and Germany. The Poles felt weak and disappointed of their position in Europe as a nation unable to regain its independence. The economic situation in partitioned Poland was dramatic. The press – clearly becoming one of the most powerful and influential forces in developed countries – lagged behind in Poland. There were very few national newspapers (controlled by the partitioning authorities), and hardly any other means of communication between the three partitioned sectors of Poland. Polish society lacked information about events abroad. Soon, the role of sport

(hitherto a traditional pastime of the upper class) was changed in Polish society as well. Sport became regarded as a tool for creation of a strong nation ready for military action with the liberation as its primary goal.

It is still a matter of conjecture whether teaching physical education at a university level in Poland would have been possible without Eugeniusz Piasecki's activities. What we know however, is that due to his extraordinary intellectual ability and broad contacts Piasecki effectively combined theory with practice in founding of the Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego (University School of Physical Education) in Poznań in 1919 – the very first school of higher education in the area of physical culture.

Eugeniusz Piasecki was born in Lvov (a former Polish city, now in Ukraine) on the 13th

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November 1872 as a third child to a noble family. His years of emotional, moral and intellectual growth coincided with the three most unstable periods in Poland's history: the partitioning, the interwar period and the communist dictatorship of the Polish People's Republic. They all affected his works and ideas. When he was eight years old Piasecki's family moved to the well-known Polish mountain resort of Zakopane, where his father undertook physical therapy based on hydrotherapy combined with outdoor gymnastic exercises. This experience played a crucial role in the development of Piasecki's further interests. By helping his father he was acquiring knowledge and practical skills in medicine, becoming more aware of the healing and prophylactic power of a healthy life style and physical activity in particular.

In his schools (first in Zakopane and later in Cracow) Piasecki learnt about the system of school physical education, which in those days focused only on gymnastics. It was also at that time, when he first time came across the "Sokol" ("Falcon") movement and began to attend its meetings. The Sokół initiated physical activities and programs, but also national ideas. Poland at that time remained partitioned between three powerful states: Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary. In 1890 Eugeniusz Piasecki began his studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Lvov. Lvov was then the capital of Galicia and remained a strong cultural and scientific centre for cultivation of Polish tradition. It was also the cradle of the "Sokol" movement. Piasecki's Lvov experience had an effect on his decision to return to Cracow and began studies at the Medical Faculty of the Jagellonian University in 1891/1892. Piasecki graduated as *doctoris universae medicin* (doctor of medicine) on the 23rd of December 1896 and soon left for Vienna for a few months in order to gain some practice and extend his qualifications in medical gymnastics.

When he once again returned to Cracow he remained under a strong influence of Henryk Jordan (1842-1907) – one of his lecturers and mentors – the founder of the famous Ogródki Jordanowskie (Jordan's children's playgrounds). Piasecki's professional preparation as a doctor of medicine and interests in physical activity and traditional plays pushed him towards combining both areas into physical education teaching.

On the 5th of June 1898, at the age 25, Piasecki married Gizela Maria Silberfeld-Szelińska

[1]. Becoming a father span his interests even more and shortly he took an exam to become a teacher of gymnastics in gymnasiums and teacher training colleges (on 31st January 1899) [1], where he was both a PE teacher and a school doctor. His professional practice resulted in his first publication *Wpływ ćwiczeń cielesnych na rozwój psychiczny dzieci* (Influence of bodily exercises on psychical development of children) published in 1899.

In 1904 he founded Towarzystwo Zabaw Ludu i Młodzieży we Lwowie (the Society of Ludic Plays for Youth in Lvov), which aimed at popularization of plays and traditional games through specially organized courses for teachers of countryside schools and occasional lecturing.

Despite numerous obligations and undertakings in many fields related to health and physical well-being in 1909 Piasecki managed to finish his postdoctoral dissertation on school hygiene at the Faculty of Medicine of the Jagiellonian Medicine, which opened new perspectives for him. Between 1909 and 1914 he was lecturing on school hygiene and theory of physical education at the Faculty of Medicine and Philosophy of the University of Lvov. In the meantime, in 1912, he was appointed a professional inspector of gymnastics.

His fluent command of several European languages helped him propagate his views on physical education, health and upbringing of children through national and traditional plays and games at conferences in France, Belgium, Germany, England and Scandinavia. His journeys abroad had also a political and national dimension. Piasecki represented his ideas as a member of a stateless nation; however, his educational background, scientific achievements and novel opinions made him a key figure in many international events, where he represented Poland in European sport and exercise sciences. He believed a long-term reform of physical education based on regional and traditional folk plays and games, and supported by the medical authorities, pedagogues, psychologists and philosophers is the only way to create a healthy society. This creative and fruitful period of his scientific career was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. He was enlisted for the Austrian army as a doctor and worked in a hospital.

In 1915, at the age of 43, he was forced to move to Kiev, where he continued his main area of research on origins of folk and traditional plays and soon, in 1916, he published one of his the most

important didactic books emphasizing the national heritage of sporting traditions: *Zabawy i gry ruchowe dzieci i młodzieży – ze źródeł dziejowych i ludoznawczych, przeważnie rodzimych i tradycji ustnej* (Physical games and plays of children and youth in the historical, ludic and regional traditions, in the form of oral reconstructions).

After some years he returned to Lvov to teach at a middle school and was invited to become a board member of the Komisja Wychowania Fizycznego Zarządu Głównego we Lwowie (Committee of Physical Education in Lvov) aimed at establishing an appropriate system of education programs in Poland. Later Piasecki used this experience in writing *Program ćwiczeń cielesnych* (Program of bodily exercises) for Polish school children. The project was initiated by Krakowskie Koło Towarzystwa Nauczycieli Szkół Średnich i Wyższych (Cracow's Society of High School Teachers) and the teaching material was divided into three age categories. Piasecki also opted for introducing obligatory classes of physical education into the program of university education. He presented his ideas and the requirement of academic training of future professional physical education teachers at the meetings of the Scientific Committee. At almost the same time he was elected Editor-in-Chief of "Walka o zdrowie" (Fight for Health) journal devoted to hygiene, social care and health.

However, the most important event in Piasecki's life came in the spring of 1919. His arrival in Poznań coincided with Poland regaining independence. On the 5th of February at the meeting of the Sekcja Medyczna Międzyuniwersyteckiej Komisji Stabilizacyjnej w Krakowie (Medical Section of the Inter-college Committee in Cracow) Eugeniusz Piasecki was offered the position of an university professor at the University of Poznań, together with the mission to start a Master's course for physical educators [11]. He was granted a full professorship in school hygiene and theory of physical education on the 20th of September 1922, and on the 7th of March 1924 became head of an autonomous Faculty of Physical Education [1].

At the age of 46, the author of 150 publications in many languages, highly appreciated and regarded both in Poland and in Europe Piasecki was a very important key figure in the academic elite of the University of Poznań. In 1925 he started to work for the Komisja Historyczno-Pedagogiczna Badania Dziejów Wychowania Fizycznego i Szkol-

nictwa w Polsce (Committee of Historical and Pedagogical Research on the Origins of Polish System of Education) [1]. Noticing multiple shortages and deficiencies in health and physical culture of Polish society, Piasecki continued his trips abroad exploring different systems of physical education. In 1927 at the request of the Section of Hygiene of the League of Nations he set off for a long trip visiting England, Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, Italy and Austria. However, his main scientific interests remained within the area of the ludic origins of human plays and traditional folk games, whose significance he always strongly emphasized at all meetings and public hearings. He believed in plays having fundamental significance in human cultural and moral development. In 1932 the Komisja Wychowania Dziecka (Committee of Physical Education of Children) voted to carry out a nationwide research on origins of plays and movement games. Piasecki, busy with numerous duties and honorary memberships in such committees as Zarząd Polskiego Związku Gier Sportowych (Polish Committee of Team Sports) also worked on the unification of rules of team sports and reconstruction of Polish-originated game of *p a l a n t* (a sport similar to present-day softball).

His work and achievements earned him in 1923 the Krzyż Komandorski Orderu Odrodzenia Polski (Commander's Cross of the Order of Poland Reborn) – one of the highest Polish national awards – and the Order Papieski (Papal Order) as well as La Fédération Internatoinale de Gymnastique Ling Award in 1939.

The hard years of World War II Piasecki spent in Lvov working as a professor in Weigl's Institute. He lost his contacts with the scientific and academic community and with most of his relatives. In his struggle for survival Piasecki lost his health and fell in dire financial problems. After the war Piasecki returned to Poznań in June of 1945. Six years without his scientific work, terminally ill wife and deteriorating health – all these contributed to his problems at the University. The new authorities of the Polish People's Republic expressed very critical views about Piasecki's work and legacy. It became politically incorrect to support scientific research on national heritage. There were new communist ideas praising a new ideology – socialism. Piasecki could not even publish his life-long gathered collection of Polish

traditional plays and games. It was finally published in 1959, 12 years after his death.

Piasecki died on the 17th of July 1947, leaving his vast collected materials in numerous boxes, on paper slips and card indexes [1].

PIASECKI'S VIEWS ON PLAY

From the early 1900s Piasecki started to collect old folk plays and games, not only from the Polish lands but also from other parts of Europe and the world. With his life passion especially for Polish traditional plays and games Piasecki began his research on ludic pieces of Polish cultural heritage.

He prepared his first nationwide survey on plays and games in 1916. Having gathered hundreds of regional plays and games he published his first book *Zabawy i gry dla dzieci* (Plays and games for children) in 1916. It was directed to teachers to provide them with resources and practical examples for transmission of national and cultural heritage into the educational system. The book was unique in this sense, as it was published at the time when Poland was still struggling for independence.

The second national survey carried out in 1922 brought much more evidence on the survival of national plays and games, despite the foreign 123-year dominance.

In 1928 Piasecki started to publish a scientific journal "Wychowanie Fizyczne" (Physical Education), where he announced his third research project, which helped him collect more unique information on culture and traditions on different nations. He wrote:

We are a nation of rich traditions in all areas of culture. We have, however, little inclination to research such traditions and certainly little interest in nursing these elements which can be assimilated in contemporary life. One of the most striking examples of blameworthy indifference pertaining to the treasures of native civilisation is our attitude toward Old Polish play and folk games. Among many Western nations serious scientific works have been made part of national education. Not in our country [6].

Following his analysis Piasecki was able to revive several hundred original folk activities, describing them in articles and series of books. He sacrificed almost a quarter of a century to collecting

material to a monograph on Polish folk plays and games. Traditional folk plays and games cultivating local and regional customs and strengthening the sense of national belonging were to be a fundamental part of that program. It was bound to be published in 1939, but the outbreak of World War II canceled his plans. The monograph contained findings and conclusions of an analysis of 2,800 responses from individuals from Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. The majority of returned questionnaires provided information on the same kind of plays and games with very similar structures or plots, differing only in name.

As a great patriot and devout Christian Piasecki was strongly convinced that physical education should serve everybody in the same way: as an educational tool supporting health with joy and satisfaction. Piasecki claimed that the reform of sport education in schools should be carried out through introduction of plays and games common for different cultures and traditions thus combining and strengthening the international understanding and exchange of cultural tradition.

According to Piasecki, plays originated in four ways:

- self originated;
- based on traditional rites, legends and fairytales;
- as mimicry imitating human habitual activities;
- based on movement expression inspired by the human natural environment.

The most characteristic plays from Piasecki's archives were *sobótka*, *mak*, *ojciec Wirgiliusz*, *pięstkówka*, *palant*, *kiczka* and *kręgle polskie*.

Following his exceptional international survey he established that some folk plays were rooted in the tradition of several nations, and that they originated simultaneously in different parts of Europe. Although today they have different names, their plots are the same. For example, the Polish game of *chusteczka* has a number of analogies in other countries, e.g. "Paduszaczka" in Belarus and Russia, "Sáteček" in the Czech Republic, "Babbity Bowster" or "Cushion dance" in England and "Kranzsingel" or "Polstertanz" in Germany.

PIASECKI'S VIEWS ON PROFESSIONAL SPORT

In the same period of modern history of Europe a French pedagogue Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) was looking for a solution to reform education of French youth. According to him, this solution was to be Olympism as a new way to educate young people through sport. Sport started to be an important part of social life, especially for the aristocrats who, having more leisure time than any other social class, needed to have it organized in a pleasant and mannered way.

A number of new forms of physical activity appeared in sport stadiums – new public arenas, where sport events meant enjoyment and pleasure not just for the athletes but also for the spectators. When sport became widely popular and less of a pastime for the upper class, it became open to the masses. The simplicity of sport rules allowed the less privileged classes (mainly the poorest) to join in sporting competition. But this blend of social classes and extremely different cultural and educational backgrounds led to a mixture of values and acceptance of some characteristics, usually associated with poverty, such as aggression, cheating, and “double-dealing”. It is difficult to say whether this alteration of values and “desportification” of social life came from sport. Perhaps, it was the other way round, and the sportification of social life brought bad sporting “habits” into socio-cultural life. Nevertheless, the “winning at all cost” syndrome and financial gratification seriously threatened the primary idea of enjoyment in honorary sporting rivalry [2].

Sport information began to circulate worldwide by developing media business. However, in occupied Poland news from international sporting arenas was limited and not so “hot” as in other countries. But sport was also a way to cultivate national tradition and for a country like Poland, where the use of symbols and any means of national language or heritage was strictly forbidden, it provided hope for cultural survival. On the other hand, the rapid development of the modern “elite” sport was responsible for the gradual elimination and virtual extinction of traditional sports. The poverty of the Polish village kept folk sports alive longer than in the urban areas. Industrialization, which started to soak up peasant populations, in conjunction with other phenomena of modern civilization experienced in the Western civilization

several decades earlier, at the turn of the 19th century began to exert its destructive influence on folk culture, including folk plays and games. Unfortunately, the expansion of Western-originated sports into Slavonic countries was destructive to their own traditional games and plays. That situation raised much greater interest in the so-called “imported” sports, greater than the love of their own tradition. This was not typical of Poland only. A similar situation was also observed in other East European countries (Russia, Bohemia, Romania), where “foreign” sport teachers and foreign sports were in demand and trendy [4].

When European sport was influenced by Anglomania, especially the poor and underdeveloped Eastern European countries, including Poland, struggled for international recognition and political acceptance. In Poland it was more complicated due to the policies of the occupants, who had no interest in educating the Polish youth intellectually nor physically, as they feared it could mean a threat against them. None of the occupying countries really cared about the physical fitness of Poles and development of any other parts of Polish life.

This destructive work of occupants on the national culture, lack of national sport activities and organizations (with the exception of very few clubs and federations) as well as the low status of physical education in Polish schools (no regular physical education classes) brought some worries, especially among members of the Polish intelligentsia, who felt an urgent need to preserve the national cultural heritage and physical potential. It all led to the foundation of “Sokół” (Falcon) movement in 1869 [12], aimed at cultivation of physical activities (especially gymnastic and team games) in a patriotic context.

Eugeniusz Piasecki’s life, scientific achievements and international reputation fit into the historical reality of Poland of that time. Initially, Piasecki concentrated on his original idea of the reform of the Polish physical education system, first in schools and then in other sport organizations. Piasecki resembled Coubertin in his search of ways of reforming the French education system. Piasecki in Poland, like Coubertin in France, was a great reformer of physical education system. The difference was not so much in their approach and ideas but in the scale of their undertakings. Coubertin focused more on the international context (though his original idea of the reform

concerned only the French educational system) and his Modern Olympic Games became a global phenomenon. Piasecki was more of a local or regional reformer. However, both desired a revival on a broader scale: Coubertin with his motto: "All nations, all games" and Piasecki with his comparative approach to regional traditions and cultures, i.e. "Games without spectators". Piasecki wanted everybody to join in rather than only watch others playing. He said that sport lost its original value, because it turned to be only a spectacle, feeding the media with morbid sensations and reasons for speculations (betting, bribery, cheating). He was also convinced that professionalism and commercialization of sport became the major reasons for degeneration and decline of the ancient idea of sport [5]. Pseudo-amateurs were supported by the governments, whose idea was to have "agents of national policy" (later the problem returned and became clearly seen in the Cold War period). This concealed professionalism in sport was and still is immoral, because it is based on lies and hypocrisy. He could not agree with sport events being organized for money to "feed" the masses' primitive instincts and desire, where results were settled before the competition began, very much like in present-day American wrestling [8]. According to Piasecki, in order to serve its social role, sport would require returning to its original sense. Piasecki believed that sport was about courage and ambition, but not only of selected individuals (aristocracy or a political system) but also, or perhaps first of all, of the masses sharing similar passions and ludic understanding of national heritage and enjoying physical activity devoid of international rivalry.

As an official delegate of the Hygiene Section of the League of Nations in Geneva Piasecki was sent to a number of European countries to observe and compare physical education systems all over Europe. After that journey he published his well-known document *La science de l'éducation physique dans les différents pays de l'Europe (The state of physical education in different European countries)*.

His outstanding individuality, enhanced by his academic degrees, let him form a strong belief that harmony in human development is achieved by a combination of intellectual development, physical culture and morality as primary (and superior) values. Piasecki saw in physical education a chance

for moral and physical revitalization of the Polish nation.

Perhaps, his presence at the VIII International Olympic Congress in Prague in 1925 had the greatest impact on his views. It is very likely that during the Congress Piasecki met Coubertin in person [10], as the latter was the chairman of the Committee on university cooperation in the field of physical education. One of the most important proclamations of the Congress was settling the amateur status in sport competitions [7]. The Congress debates made Piasecki's view on professional sport more critical. Like Coubertin, he claimed that sport should be based more on pedagogical values. Coubertin believed in the Arnoldian system of education introduced in Rugby and based on the "new order". Thomas Arnold believed that sport served three general purposes: 1) physical, by achieving harmonious and muscular and strong body; 2) moral, where achieving aims based on individual interests could enhance his experience and moral development and 3) social, where pupils themselves learnt how to be a part of a team, how to lead a team and how to be led by the others [3]. The educational system in Rugby School was concerned with four places most frequently attended by pupils: the church, school, student campus and playing field. The pedagogical superintendence should equally concentrate on these four areas as well. While participating in different classes pupils had to make the rules and then abide by them on the playing field, where they shared responsibility within a team. Piasecki was close to that way of thinking. In his scientific research of sport in the socio-cultural dimension Piasecki came to a conclusion that professional sport was a source of demoralization to the youth and that it was the reason for the widely spread carelessness in the field of physical activity.

PIASECKI'S LEGACY

The difference between sport and physical education was explicit for Piasecki. He started to organize university education in physical education studies, though probably he did not realize it would also trigger a terminological debate on sport and physical education. When after World War II physical culture became an important element of the state policy, it was a few communist politicians who told academics what direction should physical

education take and how sport should be treated and organized. Sport, which had different aims (winning in regular competitions and maximizing results) in socialism, was also a tool of national and political propaganda.

Physical education is a form of obligatory physical activities undertaken in school, aimed at a holistic development of social attitudes of all young pupils. In socialism, it was meant to be a form of fitness preparation of the youth (for the military purposes) and, therefore, its primary goal was to increase fitness and subordination. It is now clear why Poland's communist authorities were not interested in the continuation of Piasecki's work on cultivation of folk and ludic heritage of Polish sport. The new political system did not intend to build on achievements of any former governments, in particular, the pre-war Marshal Józef Piłsudski's government, since it had always been clearly anti-Soviet and defeated the Soviets in the Polish-Soviet War of 1920. However, for Piasecki the 1920s and 1930s were not good times either as he could not find support and proper recognition for his scientific work on folk heritage. Ironically, after the war he was considered a representative of the former political system and was not able to gain the necessary support for his work either.

His monumental collection of national and international folk plays and other activities (containing plays and games from different countries) is now in the Archives of the University School of Physical Education in Poznań and will be brought to the public awareness through revitalization of the most outstanding examples of our national heritage and later introduced into physical education at school.

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