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The Controversy Surrounding Rev. Włodzimierz Kirchner's Brochure [*Challenging Poverty in Bałuty*]

There are few people today who remember about Rev. Włodzimierz Kirchner¹, but in the interwar period he was a well-known, if not controversial, figure, i.e. a photographer/portraitist appreciated by the political and cultural establishments. He caused a scandal with his act of apostasy. He was certainly an exceptional dynamic person with a strong sense of independence.

He knew (...) seven languages, he was always studying something (...), experimented with something, was learning something. He was certainly an artistic soul focussed on himself and his art. He preserved inside him something of the Young Polish bohème, which, of course, consisted of his peers, (...) I knew since I was very little that he was an outstanding person, (...) refined.²

¹ W. Kirchner, born in 1875 in Krasiniec (Krasne parish), son of Ludwik and Izabella née Kowalewski, vide *Krasne Birth Marriage and Death Register*, Roman-Catholic Parish, [in:] State Archive in Warsaw, Mława Branch, act no. 152 from 1875, col. 76. He died in 1970 in Żyrardów. For more detailed genealogical and biographical information, vide D. Samborska-Kukuć, *O księdzu Włodzimierzu Kirchnerze*, [in:] id., *Dziewiętnastowieczne pryncypia i marginalia literackie* (forthcoming).

² H. Kirchner, *O Ojcu*, "Fotografia" 1985, issue 2. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

This is how he was depicted by Hanna Kirchner, his daughter. An artist and a restless spirit, aesthete, lover of the fairer sex, hard to domesticate. Kirchner was also a major social activist and a theoretician of philanthropy, and this was also an area of his activities which caused controversy, since in his texts he expressed his bold and assertive views.

This article is mainly devoted to Kirchner's intervention brochure titled *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* [*Challenging Poverty in Bałuty*], though one should bear in mind that he authored several other works on philanthropy which he published prior to his leaving priesthood. He wrote "Prywatne miłosierdzie" ["Personal Mercy"] for the Łódź-based *Rozwój* periodical, which was also published in Warsaw in 1901, and texts on the theory of philanthropy published in *Kurier Warszawski* and *Słowa*, the major of which were: "Rozbitki"³ ["Castaways"], "Własność i jałmużna"⁴ ["Property and Alms"], "Dobroczynność"⁵ ["Charity"], "Miłosierdzie, dobroczynność i opieka"⁶ ["Mercy, Charity, and Care"], "Psychologia włóczęgi"⁷ ["The Psychology of Vagabound"]. Early in his writing career, he wrote the religious text titled *Maryja jako matka niebieska naszego życia pobożnego* ["Mary as the Heavenly Mother of Our Reverent Life"], published in Warsaw in 1902. He also wrote articles about art, e.g. "Muzyka i odczyty muzyczne"⁸ ["Music and Musical Readings"], and "Lepla", devoted to Anastazy Lepla⁹. Kirchner's views on philanthropy were of a special character. They constituted a consistently radical attitude towards economic poverty and the related moral poverty. This was because the author was an outright opponent of uncontrolled *ad hoc* material aid and spontaneous charitable reflexes, an attitude which was repudiated by various groups, both the proponents of the right and the so-called 'progressive' groups. It was not the very thought but, rather, the form of the priest's commentary – stark and bureaucratic on the one hand and ironic and irate on the other – that was controversial; there was actually nothing appalling in the opposition to merciful free distribution as the principle matched the declarations of all charitable associations whose aim was to eradicate beggary, and to prevent support with alms and support "those truly unfortunate who deserve it"¹⁰. One should add that despite the suggestions of some of the commentators of Kirchner's works, he was not the only adamant opponent of free distribution; suffice to mention the articles published in *Kurier Warszawski* by Rev. Zygmunt Chełmicki¹¹ on beggary and alms¹², which, perhaps unknowingly, the author of *Walka*

³ "Kurier Warszawski" 1903, issue 176, pp. 2-4.

⁴ "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1903, issue 16, pp. 302-303; issue 17, pp. 322-323.

⁵ "Błuszcz" 1902/1903, issue 1, p. 3.

⁶ "Błuszcz" 1903, issue 26, p. 306.

⁷ "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1904, issue 2, pp. 22-23; issue 3, pp. 42-43.

⁸ "Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne" 1902 issue 3, pp. 31-32; issue 4, pp. 41-42.

⁹ "Wędrowiec" 1905, vol. 1, issue 9, pp. 143-144.

¹⁰ E. Mazur, *Dobroczynność w Warszawie XIX wieku*, Warsaw 1999, p. 20.

¹¹ Z. Chełmicki (1851-1922) – Catholic priest, social activist, commentator. He was discussed in more detail in A. Skąła, *Ksiądz Zygmunt Chełmicki – przyjaciel pisarzy, społecznik, skandalista. Niekonwencjonalny wizerunek kapłana*, "Ruch Literacki" 2015, collection 6, pp. 571-586.

¹² For example, the three-part series *Żebracy i domy zarobkowe*, "Kurier Warszawski" 1897, issues 68-73.

z *nędzą na Bałutach* matched. What is striking in Kirchner's texts, though, is the aesthetic criterion which he used to measure and evaluate the reality. This aspect also seems controversial and dissonance-evoking in the context of the topic of philanthropy.

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For Kirchner as a member of the Christian Charity Association¹³, the fact of serving as priest in the oldest Łódź parish of the Ascension of Virgin Mary was a good opportunity to learn about the reality of the life in the borough of Bałuty, comparable to London's Whitechapel, i.e. a borough of crime, disease, and poverty¹⁴. Until 1915, Bałuty was an area located outside Łódź's city limits and – from the very beginning of its existence, i.e. the turn of the 1860s – it was inhabited by the poorest: labourers, servants, the unemployed, and those who came into conflict with the law¹⁵. Surely it was a well-known area as it appeared in the first novel about Łódź, i.e. *Wśród kąkolu* (published in *Biesiada Literacka* in 1890), written by Waleria Marrené Morzkowska, a Warsaw-based writer. "People are like wolves there (...) you must be very careful as you do not know what can happen next"¹⁶ – a Jewish woman familiar with the situation tried to persuade the novel's protagonist against an evening visit in Bałuty. Through the protagonist's eyes, readers saw repulsive scenes:

(...) We found ourselves surrounded by low wooden houses sunken in the dirt, similar to abandoned huts, stretched along a damp street frozen over with puddles. One could forget that a few dozen steps further the factory city was bustling with fervent motion. Here the motion was of a different kind: in front of the houses, benefiting from the pale autumn sun, there wriggled a mass of beings marked by poverty. Those were feeding mothers, wax-yellow new-borns, consumption-ridden children, and men of repelling exteriors. Among teams of Knight Hospitallers without aid, without a roof, without bread, clearly afflicted by disease, among those who carried on their faces marks of disability, debauchery, crime, or idiocy, there were also talented labour folk whose hands were idle as they either could not find jobs or did not want to. So, in their faces you could read all possible calamities, from grim despair all the way to artificial stimulation and complete indifference. There were also those who were still fighting with utter misery, when others submitted to it without a trace of opposition, they did not even try to stay on the surface and they sank to the bottom like dead bodies devoid of the ability to defend themselves.¹⁷

¹³ The institution was established in 1877; it was the first such an institution in the Łódź district.

¹⁴ S. Górski, *Łódź współczesna*, Łódź 2004, p. 14.

¹⁵ J. Fijałek, *Instytucje pomocy materialno-zdrowotnej w Łodzi i okręgu łódzkim. (Wiek XIX do roku 1870)*, Łódź 1962, p. 34.

¹⁶ W. Marrené Morzkowska, *Wśród kąkolu*, Łódź 2008, p. 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

Kirchner's observations from his visits to such locations became the empirical material that he discussed in the 1901 brochure titled *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, which he wrote with the intention to draw the attention of the public to the growing problem of extreme poverty of lumpenproletariat in the slums surrounding Łódź, which usually included newcomers from the countryside who sought Łódź's famed promise land. Interestingly enough, those paupers were natively Polish exclusively, not people of Jewish descent. The many Jews who lived in Bałuty appear in the brochure rarely and only as people coping with poverty owing to their resourcefulness, i.e. usurers¹⁸. Before in the final few pages of the fifty-page-long booklet the author proposed the so-called "earning houses" – modelled after those in Warsaw (which, in turn, were modelled after those in Western Europe), which today are understood as employment agencies, though more efficient as they were compulsory – he had offered an overview and an analysis of the spreading phenomenon of poverty. This was done by providing specific examples taken from personal observations from when he was working for the philanthropic mission of Rev. Karol Szmidel¹⁹, and from the accounts by "acquaintances and reliable people"²⁰; the purpose was to warn against alms and free distribution as a carrier of social demoralisation. Surely, then, Kirchner's brochure was aligned with Rev. Szmidel and doctor Bronisław Knichowiecki's initiative; in March 1901, they pitched to the chairman of the Łódź Charity Association a project of earning houses, which were established after the founding of the Anti-Beggary Committee²¹.

Walka z nędzą na Bałutach offers excellent material for a historian as it includes specific and quite extensively discussed examples. It is of equal merit for a sociologist, since Kirchner delved into the difficult and complex notions of social pathology in the poorest degenerated area near Łódź, indicating the causes and suggesting remedies²². Yet, the attractiveness of Kirchner's book also consists of its interesting though controversial overtly expressed worldview of the author, articulated in a language which is so

¹⁸ That element of Kirchner's brochure was noticed by F. Guesnet, *Spoleczność Żydów łódzkich w XIX wieku i jej kontakty z innymi środowiskami kulturowymi – oddziaływanie społecznego rozwarstwienia*, [in:] *Wspólnoty lokalne i środowiskowe w miastach i miasteczkach ziem polskich pod zaborami i po odzyskaniu niepodległości*, ed. M. Bogucka, Toruń 1998, p. 181.

¹⁹ Rev. K. Szmidel, born in 1846 in Łyszkowice (Pszczonów parish), son of landowners: Filip Szmidel and Katarzyna née Juga, died in Łódź on 24 December 1920, vide *Łódź Birth Marriage and Death Register*, Holy Cross Parish, [in:] State Archive in Łódź, act no. 1394 from 1920. He was the parish priest in the oldest Łódź parish of the Ascension of Virgin Mary, later at the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Parish. He was a specialist in religious art and church construction. He was an activist of the Łódź Christian Charity Association; being well-known and respected in Łódź, he often spoke during major Church events and he delivered eulogies at the funerals of the city's major figures. In the recollections by H. Bitner (*W fabryce Szajblera*, [in:] *1905 w literaturze polskiej*, ed. S. Klonowski, Warsaw 1955, pp. 86-87), he was presented as a priest who aided factory owners who were exploiting labourers (the famous case of the strikes in December 1904 at the Karol Scheibler's factory).

²⁰ W. Kirchner, *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach, przedmieściu Łodzi*, Łódź 1901, p. 2.

²¹ J. Sosnowska, *Działalność socjalna i opiekuńczo-wychowawcza Łódzkiego Chrześcijańskiego Towarzystwa Dobroczynności (1885-1940)*, Łódź 2011, p. 135.

²² An extensive bibliography of these issues was used in a monograph by A. Bołdyrew, *Spoleczeństwo Królestwa Polskiego wobec patologii społecznych w latach 1864-1914*, Łódź 2016.

suggestive that readers can feel like eye witnesses – a fact which, in turn, evokes in them not compassion or mercy, but pity. It is also often the case that the generally appreciated pungency of Kirchner's style evokes smiles in readers, which might indicate that the humorous (intentionally?) descriptions included in the brochure were a proof of Kirchner's distance towards the cases he described, which evoked in him not so much compassion as aversion. He actually devoted the most space to beggary as a phenomenon stemming from laziness and indolence, but also intention and treachery. That is why Rev. Kirchner's work is also a philosophical study on the almost animal-like nature of a human being, seen right through by the careful eye of a reserved observer.

For the author, the leading thought of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* – i.e. "If mercy is supposed to be rational, it must through detailed knowledge, a clear judgement, and a deep understanding grasp the material of its work"²³ – was an obvious methodical consequence leading to an ascertainment that mercy had to be rational, not resulting from a momentary bout of compassion, and thus the description of the study material is of a dispassionate character, somewhat devoid of empathy. The author expressed this thought more precisely in an interview by Wincenty Kosiakiewicz, in which he argued that:

(...) Charity should be, maybe not even those who practise it but by necessity by those who manage it, studied using clearly scientific methods (...) Through experiment, similarly to how chemists at our factories study sugar. With the difference of the specific methods applied (...) Therefore, history and statistics, the image of that which has been done and the limits of that which is, can offer important help. In short, my perfect situation would be enlightened charity which would substitute the existing chiefly reflexive charity we profess.²⁴

The assumption to develop an unemotional overview of the state of things, which could seem difficult to achieve when one deals with a living object of study, became the *sine qua non* of a reliable description and concrete conclusions. Kirchner carefully calculated the percentage of families that needed significant support; families who – due to actual disability or other reasons outside their influence – could not support themselves with honest work. That percentage was low. The brochure is clearly dominated by examples of "professional beggary", i.e. scroungers preying on people's mercy, refusing to accept jobs offered to them or pretending to be working, and cons faking or exaggerating their poverty. Their approach to gainful

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Varsoviensis [Wincenty Kosiakiewicz], *Z rozmów i wrażeń. Dobroczynność oświecona, "Kraj"* 1903, issue 15, p. 15. In that interview, Kirchner also mentioned the names of social activists with whom he would eagerly cooperate and promote the 'enlightened charity' through a purpose-established periodical. Those figures included: Adolf Suligowski, who wrote about the housing situation of paupers; Kazimierz Rychłowski – writing about the mentally ill; Antoni Wyslouch – writing about prostitution; and Judge Aleksander Moldenhawer – writing about neglected children.

employment was negative as they were extremely reluctant; they remained in poverty somewhat at their own request as they enjoyed the idle lifestyle, and since they wished to retain it at any cost, they became proficient in swindling. Kirchner mentioned various detestable examples of beggars' "decorative" inventiveness: smearing raw meat and liver over own body or tying up limbs to pretend serious illnesses, wearing extremely tattered clothing to pretend to be even more pitiable, renting crutches, fitting out rooms to resemble sleazy hovels (in case a philanthropist visited them, they could pretend extreme deficiency intended to convince the visitor to offer more aid). Shocking displays of diseases, disability, widespread filth, alleged hunger, and helplessness caused by objective factors were all the staple elements in the theatre of beggary. Those who demanded support the most emphatically were usually thieves, hustlers, and regular alcoholics who used all donations for purposes other than expected by the benefactors while mocking the naivety of their sponsors ("Apparently they organise an alcohol-ridden party every night. They cry and moan all day long so at least before bed they can have a laugh and some fun at the «merciful» people"²⁵), who, as Kirchner stressed, were often poorer than the recipients who did not know how to save money and – instead of spending the received money on food or other things necessary to live – they organised alcohol-filled feasts, demoralising the young ones and teaching them how to easily gain money, i.e. through disgusting preying. As the author stated overtly, "Beggary loves its profession"²⁶, only to add further on: "It is a good industry, this beggary, you are not threatened by bankruptcy, you do not need effort, you have a good piece of bread, (...) beggary is considered as a very good, reliable and peaceful lifestyle"²⁷. Beggars even organised the funerals of their kin so as to gain as much as possible on them.

Kirchner also presented Bałuty paupers within various situational configurations. There were beggars "violently wedging" between people and extorting or basically stealing alms and then arguing that they received too little; there were ragamuffins perfectly trained in beggar mantras, who spoke "like deputies to the parliament"; there were even comical situations as in the following passage:

One time some ragamuffin came up to me to ask me to lend him 10 roubles for clothes as he could not wear such tattered clothes to the church to confess. Naturally, he assured me he would repay me soon. I refused and explained that he could go confess wearing those rags just as well. I shut the door and left him. A moment later I was told that the beggar sat comfortably on the stairs, took out a bottle and chug, chug... he drank it all in one sitting.²⁸ Poverty was the cause of prostitution and pimping. Neither in this case was Kirchner economical with providing examples usually underlining the ugliness of not only the deeds, but mainly of the people. He was sickened

²⁵ W. Kirchner, *Walka z nędzą*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

by old “grey, incapable, deformed” men having small children²⁹; he was terrified by incest.

Kirchner’s booklet featured the clear animalisation of the group of people he discussed. Several examples are worth quoting:

A beggar’s request includes so much deceitful flattery, so much some kind of a dog’s fawning (...) As a result of the constantly turning whole soul, thought and will, to receive a bit of bread or money for food or drink, those beggars turn into animals. The needs of the stomach take away all of their human abilities. Such a beggar bent forward, with protruding eyes, greedy and crazed, with half-opened mouth, hurrying with her quick pace, with a pot in her hand for a hot meal, often appears like a hungry dog. You cannot come to terms with **this**.³⁰ (emphasis – DSK)

Many of the paupers he visited had a distinct “facial expression of an animal living in a den: a boar; mindless and greedy”³¹. Kirchner also applied that stylistics to a description of a visit at a mentally ill woman’s place:

I once visited a sick woman. She led me to basically a pigsty, without a window, with only a hole opened to the wind and ill weather (...) There was no floor, only wet sand. There was a bed by the wall; in it, under the duvet, a half-animal half-human, a woman, her mother, insane.³²

Associations with animals were clearly not a sign of compassion but, rather, contempt for the situation in which those people found themselves due to not so much poverty as helplessness and complete disregard for that which constitutes the core of being human. The reduction of needs to the most primitive level evoked in the writer anger and disdain for such a state of affairs, which was caused by the fact that the people had grown accustomed to asking for support and by their passivity, which is a constituent element of being a beggar.

Therefore, before a benefactor reaches for their wallet, they should, as Kirchner warned, realise that giving alms instead of providing help will only cement an alleged beggar “slyly qualified in the begging procedure”³³ in his art of camouflage. This infallibly leads to demoralisation. This is why the author was an opponent of spontaneous reflexive support, and he not only enlightened prospective Samaritans about their gullibility, but by providing distasteful examples he also inspired them to think about the phenomenon of poverty as a challenge for the mind, not emotions. The withholding of a merciful hand is an act of prevention of corruption and wastefulness, and desisting from giving alms or withholding the gesture

²⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ Ibid., p. 4.

³² Ibid., p. 21.

³³ Ibid., p. 4.

until one verifies the actual condition of the person who asks for it are the principles which are supposed to prevent the spread of corruption in the lowest classes deprived of dignity not so much by their living conditions as the debasement by their passivity when faced with various fortunes or, what is worse, by their foul characters. For Rev. Kirchner, beggars, thieves, harlots, and cutthroats were “the rubbish of the physical and moral excreta of our society”, “spreading around the living room of our city”³⁴. Therefore, actions to prevent that plague were the obligation of all rational people who cared about the good of the community.

One of the fundamental ways to prevent that ailment and the carefree *ad hoc* free distribution was not an incentive, but a categorical compulsion to work³⁵, which was a socially beneficial activity. Kirchner offered a diagnosis of the corruption with passivity in writing that: “Idler misery is inherently decomposive and demoralising. Thus, anything that lies in mud motionlessly rots and infects the air”³⁶. This is why he developed his project discussing various kinds of jobs and not excluding the elderly or the disabled.

Kirchner also had the ambitious, if not utopian, plan to liberate the primitive human being from primitivism – through Art. In an interview from 1906, he clarified:

Give a labourer two constitutions at once, triple his earnings, and he is always going to exit the dirty factory, stroll the same dirty streets, wear the same disgusting junk, sleep in the same dirty stinking hovel, sit around for hours in the same dirty inn if you do not lure him out using the light of culture from which it is already close to a sense of aesthetics and the love of beauty... Many roads lead to Rome. Let us give them art education at school, certainly a cultural background at home, let us construct cities which are hygienic and beautiful, let us strive for beauty in the construction of every house, church, lecture room, let us have museums, let us organise lectures, special lessons, and beautiful role models for work. In such conditions, even labourers can change. Their needs will change, they will view the world differently.³⁷

That idealistic project assumed aesthetic education to be instilled in children from very early on, i.e. in schools and philanthropic institutions, and a development of the “decorative industry” intended at a general scale, producing furniture and trinkets. Kirchner believed that Beauty could change people, discourage them from major crimes; he believed that aesthetics was influenced by ethics. This probably echoed his admiration for the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁵ W. Kirchner was a proponent of the theory that only work could prevent misery as it constituted an activity having a salutary effect on man. Vide P. Wilamowski, *Zamiast jałmużny – praca* (Wywiad z księdzem Kirchnerem), “Kurier Poranny” 1904, issue 41, p. 3. Kirchner organised in the Warsaw Charity Association an initiative to seek out jobs for the unemployed.

³⁶ W. Kirchner, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁷ M. Winiarski, *Sztuka dla wszystkich. Rozmowa z księdzem Kirchnerem*, “Świat” 1906, issue 26, p. 9.

Hellenic culture, in which major emphasis was placed on aesthetic education which influenced moral growth as beauty not only stimulated the senses, but it also opened people's perceptions to goodness, truth, and virtue. The art of photography – which combines art, utility, realism, and imagination – became for Kirchner a way of implementing those ideas, though clearly at a micro level. Regretfully, we do not know what he thought about the aesthetics after the war.

Even though critics did not argue against the social theses of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, they raised doubts as to the rigidity of Kirchner's recommendations for prospective benefactors, who were supposed to dispose of all affections and act being guided by limited trust. Ludwik Krzywicki, who in his recollections referred to Kirchner as a "rigid doctrinaire"³⁸, not being convinced by the text, asked:

But what am I supposed to do with my stupid heart which rebels against reason? What am I supposed to do with my mind which suggests to me that such a systemic training of reason drains the very sources of compassion and having neutralised by sensitivity to the sight of a crying child by its mother's breast it shall neutralise me even more towards the inhumane patterns of misery? (...) what am I supposed to do with my stupid heart which does not want to ask whether someone deserves a donation, and when seeing a fellow human in desolation it is ready to support even a harlot! And, finally, how to deaden the protests of my lively feeling being against the bureaucratic patterns of compassion, against cattle-like classification of those hurting, against the reasoned weighing of good and bad deeds when my brother, my sister in humanity hurt!?

And he concluded:

The mind opposes my heart, and the latter in its mindlessness is probably wiser than the former: the mind indicates the means of "just" division of alms, yet the heart, led by instinct, feels that even though justice will be served, with it the source of compassion may dry out (...) There are practical, wise pieces of advice in front of me. I know they are wise yet (...) personally I shall stay true to the voice of my stupid reflexive sensitivity. I shall give alms to whoever moves me.³⁹

Krzywicki did have a point, though it was a point made by his heart; one which is, clearly, contrary to that made by the mind. Kirchner considered this and protested against this exact reflexiveness of compassion, and saw in it the greatest weaknesses abused by those spreading sickness, which had to be eradicated, not just alleviated.

Kirchner was attacked even more severely, though through similar arguments, by Artur Glisczyński, who signed his texts with the pseudonym

³⁸ L. Krzywicki, *Wspomnienia*, vol. 3, Warsaw 1959, p. 203.

³⁹ R.K. Żywicki [Ludwik Krzywicki], *Na widnokręgu*, "Ogniwo" 1903, issue 7, pp. 163-164.

'Homo'. He was a commentator of *Głos* and in a series of four retorts he reproached the author of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* for not knowing the reality of the borough which he discussed, and he questioned the concept of compulsory work at "earning houses", instead proposing a twelve-step material and moral restoration programme. Glisczyński accused the author of the brochure ("an overly delicate inhabitant of Łódź") of a clumsy contradiction-riddled attempt to reconcile the strict principles of economics with the love for others, using carefully selected examples from the text. The commentator noted and emphasised that which in *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* was emphatic due to the very topic; the over-arching abomination and a clear tendency for separatism which would enable one to separate that which was aesthetic from that which was ugly, and the healthy from the sick so that it would not shock with ugliness and cachexia⁴⁰. One could argue even further: Kirchner's views were not only distant from the common vision of the compassion of Catholic priests, but they were also disturbing as they applied aestheticism as the measure of all things. Kirchner did later try to cover up those traces of extreme aestheticism in the evaluation of the world by publishing in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* the article titled "Własność i jałmużna"⁴¹, in which he tried to justify – from the point of view of a Catholic priest – the absolute moral value of help for the poor, yet once again he offered an extreme opinion – this time an ethical one – which turned his article into an incoherent elucubration.

An anonymous commentary in the *Czerwony Sztandar* completely disavowed and twisted the interpretation of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*. The leftist commentator, without going into detail, used Kirchner's text as a pretext for anti-Church propaganda, warning potential readers that, lo and behold, "earning houses" were intended to establish a close connection between the clergy and factory owners in order to recruit cheap forced labour. Having twisted the author's intentions, the commentator argued that the monitoring of, e.g., former prisoners or common cutthroats – an idea mentioned by Kirchner – was supposed to be a tool for detecting the so-called political criminals and, to make matters worse, in partnership with the Tzar's police⁴².

Modern researchers quote Kirchner's brochure in minor fragments and rarely – more as an example of drastic descriptions of poverty⁴³, or of statistics and data⁴⁴, disregarding its exceptional ethical or literary dimensions. The suggestive force of the descriptions and their richness and irony indicates Kirchner's extensive writing skills. The ability to examine, remember details, and use them in order to compose complete images also indicates his journalistic capabilities,

⁴⁰ Homo [Artur Glisczyński], *Nędza łódzka*, "Głos" 1901, issue 36, pp. 549-551; issue 37, pp. 566-569; issue 38, pp. 582-583; issue 39, pp. 599-600.

⁴¹ W. Kirchner, *Własność i jałmużna*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1903, issue 16, pp. 302-303; issue 17, pp. 322-323.

⁴² *Klerykalna filantropia*, "Czerwony Sztandar" 1904, issue 14, p. 4. To learn about the complex relations between socialists and the clergy, vide M. Śliwa, *Polscy socjaliści i katolicyzm – zbliżenia i oddalenia*, [in:] *Religia jako źródło jako źródło inspiracji w polskiej myśli politycznej XIX-XXI wieku*, eds. T. Sikorski, A. Wątor, Szczecin 2007, pp. 119-138.

⁴³ A. Barylska, *Początki rozwoju opieki pedagogicznej nad dzieckiem chorym w Łodzi*, "Rozprawy z dziejów oświaty" 1979, vol. 22, p. 115.

⁴⁴ M. Sikorska-Kowalska, *Wizerunek kobiety łódzkiej przetomu XIX i XX wieku*, Łódź 2001, pp. 59-60.

which were certainly the basis for his refined visual perception specific for a painter. Kirchner was surely an aesthete. It would be difficult to argue that the sight of people and things that were disgusting, and thus abjectionable, did not influence his evaluation of the reality or trigger beastly associations which led to contempt. Somewhat trapped in the proverbial "ivory tower", Kirchner wanted to create and record beauty while the reality, i.e. the fact of being a priest – additionally burdened with the mission of philanthropy – forced him to come into contact with ugliness, with "bodies smeared with dirt", with "defaced children afflicted by smallpox", with "yellowed phthisics", infants "dried up as wood" with "feet swollen from the cold". The fact that he viewed people through the prism of aesthetics was clearly visible in his confession in the text titled "Rozbitki", in which he commented upon the human oddities he encountered while inspecting a soup kitchen at Czerniakowska Street:

During my stay in Munich I stepped several times into the vestibule of the local Academy of Fine Arts, which featured many live models. I do not remember finding there such superb types as I did here. It would be worth, I thought, for painters to visit this place and use these individuals for their studies.⁴⁵

Who knows if Kirchner's separation from the Church had not begun because of aesthetics. After abandoning priesthood, he did devote his time to that which was his calling and devotion, namely photography.

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⁴⁵ W. Kirchner, *Rozbitki*, "Kurier Warszawski" 1903, issue 176, p. 2.

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SUMMARY

Włodzimierz Kirchner (1875-1970) – former priest, activist in the Łódź and Warsaw districts of the Christian Charity Association, he supported the efforts of the organisation by publishing articles on philanthropy. He was a proponent of the so-called

'enlightened philanthropy', i.e. he argued that social support cannot be of a spontaneous and chaotic character, but, rather, it should be controlled and monitored so that unemployment can be prevented.

To justify his theses, the main of which was a conviction that giving alms was a waste of money and a tool spreading demoralisation, he conducted an analysis of dysfunctional communities, e.g. Bałuty (near Łódź back then). He depicted the inhabitants of the area (serving as a synecdoche of the dysfunctional communities throughout Poland) as a group of pretenders and impostors hustling potential benefactors by using a theatricalisation of behaviours which evoked empathy. He collected and published his conclusions in the brochure titled *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, which – due to its controversial recommendations of emotional restraint and the application of the method of control and monitoring – stirred aversion among various groups of intellectuals. Kirchner was accused of blind support of doctrines and extreme aestheticism, while the leftist press accused him of hypocrisy typical of the clergy.

Keywords

Włodzimierz Kirchner, philanthropy, charity associations, journalism of the early 20th century, Łódź, proletariat

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