



***The Role of Passion Combined with the Mission to Protect
Humanity Reflected in the Memoirs of Ludwik Hirszfeld***
***Znaczenie pasji połączonej z misją ochrony człowieczeństwa
w świetle analiz wspomnień Ludwika Hirszfelda***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of the analysis is to illustrate the importance of Ludwig Hirszfeld's scientific and research passion combined with his mission to protect humanity. The topic is explored in a specific historical context, which has educational value.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The central problem of this study is the question of what is the significance of an individual who, despite the most difficult experiences, is able to overcome fear and act to protect the dignity of people subjected to dehumanization. The research methodology used was memory studies.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article discusses facts, mainly related to the time of World War II, including selected contexts from the biography of Ludwig Hirszfeld, who took on the mission of conquering hatred and contempt towards the victims of the German Nazis.

RESEARCH RESULTS: History education, along with learning about the memories of Holocaust victims, helps younger generations understand the importance of the mission to protect those at risk of losing their human rights.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Learning about those who opposed the German Nazis, and others who defended the dignity of every human being should be a subject of education for young people. This knowledge can make younger generations aware of the important role individuals can play in protecting life, which is the highest value.

→ **KEYWORDS:** LUDWIG HIRSZFELD, MISSION, HUMAN RIGHTS, NAZI CRIMES, EDUCATION FOR PEACE

STRESZCZENIE

CEL BADAŃ: Celem analizy jest przedstawienie znaczenia naukowo-badawczej pasji Ludwika Hirszfelda połączonej z misją ochrony człowieczeństwa. Temat ten został zrealizowany w odniesieniu do konkretnego kontekstu historycznego, co ma wartość edukacyjną i wychowawczą.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Główny problem niniejszego opracowania związany jest z pytaniem, jakie znaczenie ma jednostka, która pomimo najtrudniejszych dla siebie przeżyć potrafi przezwyciężyć lęk i działać na rzecz ochrony godności ludzi poddanych procesowi dehumanizacji. Zastosowano metodologię badawczą wypracowaną w ramach studiów memorialnych.

PROCES WYWODU: Przybliżono fakty związane głównie z czasem II wojny światowej, a w tym wybrane konteksty z biografii Ludwika Hirszfelda, który podjął się misji przezwyciężania nienawiści i pogardy wobec ofiar niemieckich nazistów.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Edukacja historyczna wraz z poznawaniem wspomnień ofiar Holokaustu pomagają młodym generacjom zrozumieć znaczenie misji ochrony ludzi zagrożonych utratą praw człowieka.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE I REKOMENDACJE: Wiedza o jednostkach przeciwstawiających się nazistowskiemu zbrodniarstwu niemieckim, stających w obronie godności każdego człowieka powinna być przedmiotem edukacji młodzieży.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** LUDWIK HIRSZFELD, MISJA, PRAWA CZŁOWIEKA, ZBRODNIENIE NAZISTOWSKIE, EDUKACJA DLA POKOJU

Introduction

Passion should be viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon that manifests itself in a variety of desires, unleashing an individual's will to act on certain challenges and tasks (Vallerand, 2012; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Passion usually leads to self-fulfilment, which fits in with the concept of well-being, as it commonly stems from the need for self-actualization, which can express itself in creative activities or activities that free a person from daily responsibilities.

The meaning of passion changes when coupled with a mission to fight evil when a person can unleash their inner potential which changes their previous life strategies. These are boundary experiences that force the individual to retrospect, develop deeper reflections, as well as to re-evaluate their goals, assess their possibilities, and seek ways to alleviate emotional tension (Esch & Stefano, 2004). Severe stress accompanying change occurs due to loss of control, growing anxiety, fear, failure to see future prospects, isolation, not to mention rebellion against injustice, marginalization (of excluded people or groups), and opposition to situations that violate key values that the individual has internalized.

This article pays special attention to such a role of passion which triggers the power to act that transforms into a mission to protect others even despite the awareness that

the consequences may include the loss of one's life. There were such examples during World War II, when many people who were not only witnesses, but also victims of the crimes committed by the German Nazis were able to overcome fear in the mission to protect the lives of others. One of them was Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld, who was not only an outstanding researcher and educator, but also a man who was able to defend the dignity of dehumanized people, which is highlighted in this article.

The methodology draws from the guidelines for memory research, including the importance of research on memory in the education of young generations (FRA, 2011, pp. 17–19). The biographical approach to this topic helps to understand how victims of hatred, even under the most difficult conditions of existence, unlocked their potential to resist evil.

From passion to mission – Ludwik Hirszfeld's memoirs

Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld was born in Warsaw in 1884 to a Polish patriotic family with Jewish roots. He studied abroad, where he began his scientific career (and developed his research passions in microbiology, immunology, virology and serology). During an assistantship under and in collaboration with Emil von Dungern (Kozuszek, 2005, pp. 60–61), he first discovered that:

[...] science should not be done sullenly or on command [...] the scientific idea contains both the joy of life, and the admiration of beauty, the protest against death, and the desire to persist, questions about nature, the desire to experience, and the curiosity of depth. There is neither only national greatness, nor racial hatred, nor a leader, nor an order. For orders are what soldiers of science need, not free and creative spirits (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 18–19).

At the same time, another master, Professor Wiliam Silberschmidt taught Ludwig Hirszfeld other qualities that are valuable in a good educator, such as duty, systematic work, and attention to detail. "If it were not for him, I would know neither the real duties of an educator nor the cultivation of human souls" (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 27). When educating students, he understood, like his mentor Silberschmidt, that he also had to be like a father to them to some extent. He compared his students to rare varieties of flowers that must be nurtured so that they bloom for the glory of science and the benefit of humanity (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 29).

Upon hearing that Poland had regained independence, Ludwik Hirszfeld returned to Warsaw feeling that he had to fulfil his duty to his homeland (Górski, 2012, p. 1). He made a major contribution to the activities of the National Institute of Hygiene, in response to the epidemiological crisis of the time. He is known mainly as a researcher of the heredity of blood groups, but was remembered by many as a great lecturer and educator who helped the souls of his students climb to the heights of humanitarianism.¹

¹ Bogusława Benendo-Kapuścińska attended the Professor's post-war lectures. She described them as follows: "the Professor's lectures were unforgettable, fascinating; they introduced us

Back in the interwar period, he opposed extreme nationalism, inequality, the politicization of universities, and iniquity and hatred spreading among people. He was concerned about the rising anti-Semitism, which had even encroached on university grounds. He wrote that:

The school should also be a temple. People who want to learn are like those who want to pray. Beating people who are listening to a lecture is just as atrocious as beating people who are praying. Several people attacking one student is a disgrace that undermines our universities, and I think that the blame also falls on professors who wanted to teach but had no ambition to educate (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 174).

In the professor's view, the education of young people in colleges was to be, first and foremost, a higher school for the training of the spirit, because it should sculpt not only the intellect, but also model the soul. Teaching should be a forge which makes the student a better person (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 312).

He recognized the dangers of the racist pseudo-scientific concepts being developed in German universities, especially after the National Socialist German Workers' Party took power and criticized the eugenic methods used in the Third Reich (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 119). He accused many scholars who contributed to the development of racist views by declaring them complicit in the crimes committed by the Germans during World War II (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 137, 382, 387).

The peak of the Professor's mission to spread education in defence of humanity took place during the German occupation. The invaders' decrees introduced, among other things, restrictions on the teaching of Polish children and young people, and assigned them the role of the lowest classes in the world of "Aryan masters." The invaders plundered universities, academic institutions, and libraries while also destroying the Polish elites and their output (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 195–198). The Germans' exceptional hatred of Jewish communities became manifest from the beginning of the war. Over the course of these events, Professor Hirszfeld became convinced that "if the war lasts, the same fate awaits the Poles, because in Hitler's scale of hatred, the Poles are right behind the Jews. And Hitler's hateful proclamations are being fulfilled" (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 272).

In proclamations addressed to the Poles, the occupiers claimed that "the Jews carry germs that do not cause them illnesses, but it is in the interest of the population to avoid Jews. For this supposed purpose, Jews and Christians of Jewish origin were ordered to wear armbands" (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 199). This made it easier for the Germans to identify members of the Jewish communities, against whom they used various forms of violence. According to the Professor, "this generation of Germans were committing acts of brutality on the Jews in order to rid themselves of pity and any human reflexes

to the world of ideas of scientist and discoverers; they were something unique. I remember to this day his voice, sounding in complete silence, with the hall filled to the brim. And the quote placed in the Institute's then newly built lecture hall was true: 'The secret of a good lecturer: He who wants to ignite others must himself burn,' this was true, He was on fire" (Benendo-Kapuścińska, 2017).

before they set out to conquer the world. I suppose this is the main source of German anti-Semitism. To learn to despise and to hate” (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 200).

At the same time, this was only a prelude to the crimes committed by the Nazis, which were unheard of in Europe, and which Professor Hirszfeld experienced personally while living with his family in the Warsaw Ghetto. The experience of the liminal time of his life, gradually triggered the need in Hirszfeld to oppose evil. He wrote the following about the repression he experienced:

[...] they took everything away from me: position, property [...] position, because they regarded Poland, where my family had lived for centuries, as their living space from which I should be removed. I was just a parasite [...]. They isolated me because I was a carrier of dangerous germs. And they decided to destroy me because I had conspired against European culture and I declared war on them (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 204–205).

After finding himself within the borders of the Warsaw Ghetto,² he witnessed the extreme barbarity of the Germans. Every day he saw ragged crowds, people dying in the streets from starvation, beatings, shootings or epidemics raging there. Until then, he had not had close contact with the Jewish community, like many other members of assimilated families with Jewish roots. In the Warsaw Ghetto, however, he met his many associates and acquaintances from his pre-war days. This is what he wrote about them:

They look as if they found themselves in a madhouse. This, after all, cannot be true? They are completely lost. I can see that if their thoughts don't grab hold of something real that reminds them of their former lives, some vital inner spring will snap in them. One of them tells me that he has one desire, he would like to die thinking about the medical issues to which he devoted his life, and not in disgrace (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 214).

And it was these encounters that prompted the professor to act in the name of protecting humanity.

It pulls some kind of string in me and begins to act as remorse. How can I help these people? [...] I have always had the key to the hearts of the young. Maybe lead them somewhere to the heights of thought so that they will forget that they are only Jews [...]. I will tell them that there are countries where Jews are not despised, that a noble mind is what makes one noble. I can't help them but I will give them a moment of oblivion. I will tell them that they are wrongly despised [...]. That they should take these souls of theirs, sore and reviled, and begin to shape them. That they should not follow the hunger for life, but set their minds on living in a community, which requires mutual kindness and compassion [...]. Having nothing, neither influence, nor resources, nor a clinic, a stranger to this nation, rejected as a Christian, I had only enormous reserves of compassion. This was my capital and my weapon (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 214–215).

² “1941 [...] Among the arriving baptized Jews is Prof. Hirszfeld, a bacteriologist with a European name” (Czeraniaków, 1983 p. 271).

Professor Hirszfeld went to the president of the Jewish Community, Adam Czerniaków,³ and offered his services, saying he was ready to act, for example, in fighting the epidemic. He did not stop there, however. He and others began a series of lectures (first addressed to doctors), organized a clinic–laboratory in the infectious disease hospital and a blood donation centre in the Warsaw ghetto (Czerwiński & Glensk, 2019, p. 152). Although Jewish nationalists initially wanted to boycott his lectures,⁴ he won everyone over when, during his first speech, he called for a dignified attitude. He said:

The enemy wants to take away from us, Poles and Jews, everything that is science or art. We may perish but if we are to perish let us do it with dignity. Our thoughts should not turn to petty troubles, but wander where we can think and create (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 217–218).

Together with other scientists and researchers, he organized more courses for sanitary personnel (Czerniaków, 1983, p. 140). In fact, these were camouflaged medical studies.

I saw the halo of future martyrdom over these young people. I felt that I had to keep these young people's spirits up before all else [...]. I look at their young faces and think how few of them will survive. The power of hatred is too great [...]. I will give them solace through [...] hunger for knowledge. And when I saw that their imaginations were ignited and their hearts opened, I would introduce them to better, brighter worlds [...]. "Look," I said, "I am here with you behind the walls, and like any of you, I can be killed by some soldier on a whim, too. But my thoughts are allowed to wander through distant lands because I love science above all things." And in this way, I gave them a vision of powerful experiences [...] led them to peaks where the air was clean [...], and where no one would despise them and where they could build, think and dream in the halo of humanity [...]. I felt that I had to substitute for these children the life to which they were entitled and youth and love [...]. There I found myself as a gardener of human souls [...] in addition, I gave them oblivion (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 220–221).

Higher education for young people was, of course, prohibited by the Nazis, especially so in the ghetto. The professor knew that he was risking his life, but felt that he could trust his students and even discuss the topic of racism with them.⁵

I wanted to remove the curse of contempt from these youth because it is easier to bear hatred than contempt. I did not want these young people to die with a sense of deserved

³ Adam Abram Czerniaków was an engineer, social activist and educator before World War II, who became chairman of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw. After the occupation of Polish lands began, the Nazis established an office known as the Judenrat, which he headed. He was highly regarded and respected by Prof. Ludwik Hirszfeld (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 216–217).

⁴ In the Warsaw Ghetto, Jewish nationalists had a negative attitude towards the so-called converted Jews (Wieczorek, 2021). Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum recorded such attitudes, for example, when Chairman Czerniak was accused of filling positions with converts (Ringelblum, 2018, p. 234).

⁵ Czerniaków also wrote about this lecture "25 II 42 – [...] At 12 o'clock in the hospital in Stawki, Prof. Hirszfeld gave a lecture on blood and races" (1983, p. 204).

death... [as for the risk of touching upon the subject of racism and secret lectures, he stated that – added by BJC] there are situations in human life when one must not be guided by caution (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 221–222).

In the ghetto, the Professor also took care of those who could not complete their medical studies, which had been interrupted by the outbreak of the war. As a result, with the help of the chairman of the Jewish Community, Czerniaków, he also launched studies for them (“I am developing a program, convening the hospital heads and organizing the fourth and fifth years of studies”). He also conducted research by, among other things, co-organizing the Hunger Research Institute. He created, however, something much more important for the victims of the impending Holocaust, something we could see in terms of an oasis, where victims began to regain a sense of balance, even though it seemed impossible in the realities of life there.

Both students and employees felt care and warmth. Their thoughts drifted away from the worries of everyday life and began to focus on topics requiring intellectual effort [...]. [The professor also saw in his colleagues – BJC] a trusting expression on their faces, those who are beaming with hope: an expression of silent request and further encouragement for cooperation and recognition. I was giving these people who were condemned to extermination the opportunity to live the noblest life: to work with the hope of a harvest (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 229).

He also became chairman of the Health Council, whose goal was to stop epidemics in the Warsaw ghetto. The solutions that were developed as part of the Health Council's activities could have remedied the crisis, however, they did not materialize in time (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 239–267). They were interrupted by the so-called “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” (according to the Nazi decisions made, among others, at the Wannensee Conference with the goal of exterminating the Jewish population as quickly as possible – Jasch, 2013, p. 295). Professor Hirszfeld experienced a profound crisis when the ghetto was liquidated, for until that time he still lived in hope that at least the young people of the ghetto would survive, yet this hope was extinguished (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 295). He noted that:

The feeling of vulnerability creates a mood of despair and panic that is more terrible than death. The executioners are sometimes interested in the human reflexes of their victims. For example, they load a child onto a carriage while tearing it away from its mother and watch laughing whether she will follow the child or stay [...]. I was not afraid of death. My mental breakdown was rather connected with the loss of faith in humanity (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 294).

The Professor and his family were saved thanks to the efforts of a pre-war student whom Hirszfeld did not even remember, Potocki, an M.A (Hirszfeld, 1967, pp. 300, 342–343). When he was already on the so-called Aryan side (in 1943), he wrote his autobiography, which allowed him to gradually recover. After the end of World War II, the

Professor, almost immediately, began to work on creating and organizing university-level education for students.

Summary

Engagement in passion can play a therapeutic role in helping an individual overcome a crisis. The role of passion changes when it becomes a mission in the service of protecting others, which gives meaning to human existence. At the same time, in an effort to restore a state of homeostasis, the importance of such a mission, as Ludwig Hirszfeld's memoirs prove, counteracted anxiety, which people that he worked with also experienced. It should be noted, though, that the Professor had the great support of his wife, Hanna Hirszfeld, a professor of medical sciences, who served as head of the infant ward at a branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital on Leszno Street in the Warsaw Ghetto (Chmielewska-Jakubowicz, 1998). Both knew that it was not enough just to take care of their loved ones, but that it was necessary to awaken the "instinct of solidarity" in the ghetto residents, which would transcend the need to protect one's own existence. In time, they became witnesses to the genocide planned by the Germans (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 295). As the professor wrote:

I never had great ambitions, I only had a sense of mission. In the autumn of my life, I had the ambition to fulfil my mission to the end. I thought I had tasks only with regard to science and youth. It turned out that I had a mission to comfort the perishing (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 177).

In his autobiography, he included testimonies to the crimes of genocide committed by the German Nazis, while erecting a monument to those who died prematurely at the hands of the perpetrators. The mission of his book was also a warning to future generations. "I decided to be the voice of those who suffered in order to appeal to those who are still able to feel. I decided to forge a weapon out of my pain to stir consciences" (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 323) in order to prevent the consequences of the eruption of cruelty in the future. In the Professor's view, evil is all-pervasive and can only be opposed by teaching ethics, the rules of respectable social conduct, in the absence of which no community can exist. One must not stop being vigilant, either, because even the most well-mannered person can only have a thin shell of culture, while hiding inside a lava of hatred, which wreaks havoc when it finds an outlet (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 33). All the more so because "individuals, institutions and societies are perpetually contributing to evil. Ironically, they do so in the pursuit of good" (Wargacki, 2015, p. 761).

The professor also stressed that during World War II in Europe, which had seemed to many to be the cradle of the intellectual world, many respected scholars, religious figures and people of culture went down in the pages of history as criminals. In those days, "the human mind passed the test as an instrument of crime. As a realizer of the ethics of social life, the human being proved inferior to troglodytes" (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 33).

Therefore, in education for peace, it is not enough to teach about the crimes of World War II and to commemorate them. Especially since the scale of the crimes seem to be unimaginable for many contemporaries. The article by Konstanty Gebert entitled “Why are we forgetting the Holocaust” cites public opinion polls conducted on the subject in the Netherlands. They show that:

Twenty-three percent of Dutch people under the age of 40 believe that the Holocaust was either vastly exaggerated or simply made up. Such a degree of public ignorance in a country where the Germans, with the help of local collaborators, murdered three-fourths of the Jewish population is shocking... Behind Holocaust denial there may be a dangerous belief that people are not so evil after all, which, incidentally, refers to a phrase from Anne Frank’s diary: “I believe that people are good after all” (Gebert, 2023). This problem does not apply only to young or middle-aged people living in the Netherlands. In fact, already during the war, when the scale of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Germans in the lands they occupied was reported, this information was not believed (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 328). Perhaps the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot was right in saying that “human-kind cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot, 1969, p. 172; Wargacki, 2015, p. 761).

In opposing evil in the mission to protect humanity, it is also not enough to teach values, for as Stanisław A. Wargacki put it, “evil does not result from a lack of values, since some values can themselves be evil” (Wargacki, 2015, p. 760). What is evil in the eyes of some may be seen as good by others. This also occurs when conscientiousness in performing duties takes precedence over morality, which Zygmunt Bauman described as an element of the so-called adiaphorization of action (Bauman, 1996).

Teaching young people how to recognize evil and when it comes about – even when others don’t yet see it or don’t want to see it – should become an overarching goal of education. In a pre-war lecture to young people, Professor Ludwik Hirszfeld said that there are two instincts: of taking and of giving. However, human life has a true purpose when it is lived in service to others:

[...] only great social goals give us a powerful feeling of being alive and an intoxicating feeling of happiness; [...] let love [for your neighbour – BJC] be the engine of your deeds [...]. We experience the most powerful feeling of happiness when we give something back from ourselves (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 170).

We should teach about the consequences of disrespect, disregard, seemingly harmless hatred and contempt towards others. These are the foundations of evil, which start gradually from resentment, to the marginalization of those considered outsiders to the dehumanization of victims, experiencing violence from executioners whose were seemingly “ordinary” people.

I see wherein lies this secret of the transformation of man into a criminal. It is necessary to make a small shift in the human soul, to strip the future victim of their human attributes and endow them with the characteristics of some especially disgusting species of a bug, rat, or louse (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 211).

Therefore, it is also important to strengthen such attitudes that trigger in people strategies other than passivity in the face of harm and disparagement of the victimized. To achieve this we should remind, not only young people, that “one should be good in every situation” (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 46), because “the human soul is a mixture of good and bad, but everyone prefers to be good – we only need to make it possible for them” (Hirszfeld, 1967, p. 224).

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