



To Heal the Mind's Eye of Hate – Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof

Andrzej Wincewicz^{1,2}, Mariola Sulkowska MD PhD DSc² and Stanislaw Sulkowski MD PhD DSc²

Departments of ¹History of Medicine and Applied Pharmacy and ²Pathology, Medical University of Bialystok, Bialystok, Poland

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Abstract

Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917), born in Poland, invented and propagated Esperanto – an artificial, easy-to-learn language. Literally meaning “language of hope,” Esperanto was constructed to avoid misunderstandings, establish communication and facilitate harmony among different nationalities. Simply, he wanted people to accept one another despite observed differences. He was a skilled ophthalmologist, but figuratively, he wished to heal the eyes of humankind to look without hate, just as the biblical Tobias removed the cataract from the corners of his father's eyes to restore his sight.

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“I was raised to be an idealist and I was taught about the brotherhood of all people. However, every time in the street and courtyard I was persuaded that there are no people ... only Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews. All of that tormented my spirit during childhood.”

Several biographies of Ludwik Zamenhof have been published. However, while some of them contain false information, others are merely short references to him [2]. This article commemorates the 90th anniversary of Ludwik Zamenhof's death and 120 years since he compiled the Esperanto language. In this paper we have attempted to consolidate and verify the biographical information.

The early years, his studies and medical practice

Ludwik Lazarz Zamenhof (Louis Levi Zamenhof, Eliezer Levi Samenhof) was born in 1859 in Bialystok [3]. His parents, Rosalia Sofer and Mark Zamenhof, lived in Bialystok in the Podlasie Region, which from 1569 belonged to the Polish Crown but during Zamenhof's life was part of the Russian Empire. In his early childhood Ludwik Zamenhof spoke several languages. His mother tongue was Yiddish, but he soon picked up Polish, Russian and German, which were spoken by the town inhabitants. It was a tremendous achievement for a young boy to learn so many languages, and this may well have been the source of his later dream of a universal common language [4,5]. Ludwik's father was a teacher of foreign languages. He was also an atheist who supported the assimilation of Jews in Russian society. He initially worked as a tutor for the wealthy Zabłudowski family; he then opened his own school called “Torah in Derech Eretz” and also taught in the “Real” School in Bialystok, holding teaching

positions in Russian state as well as exclusively Jewish private schools. His mother Rosalia was a devotee of Judaism and succeeded in passing her spiritual sensitivity on to her son Ludwik [5]. As a child Ludwik experienced hatred and discrimination because of cultural differences between him and his peers. On the assumption that linguistic diversity is the main cause of regional tension, he wrote a tragedy in five acts entitled *The Tower of Babel*; he was 10 years old. This play was a projection of reality based on his own experience of the Babel tower in Bialystok with its diverse cultures and resulting misunderstandings. In 1872 he passed the entrance exam to Real School but the following year the Zamenhofs moved to Warsaw. From 1875 to 1879 he studied at the Secondary School of Languages in Warsaw. At that time he created the first version of an easy-to-learn language, which he called “Lingwe Uniwersala,” whose purpose was more than simply a communications tool, but a means of spreading his ideas on the peaceful coexistence of different peoples and cultures [6,7]. While studying English (along with German, French, Latin and Greek), he decided that this international language must have a relatively simple grammar with a wide use of suffixes to make new forms of the words. In 1879 Zamenhof went to Moscow to study medicine, but after the attempt on Czar Alexander's life by anarchists in 1881, the May Laws of 1882 and subsequent fears about antisemitism, he returned to Warsaw where he completed his medical studies in 1885 [4,5]. Shortly after graduation, he took up a position as a doctor in Wejseje in Lithuania [7]. The next year he went to Vienna to further his studies in ophthalmology [8].

Publications and social action

1885 was also the year of his last modification of Esperanto, which he had worked on steadily since 1878. His articles were published in the Russian magazine *Razsviet* (“dawn” in English) in 1886 and in the following year in the Hebrew magazine *Hatsfira* (“siren”). In 1887 Zamenhof published *Lingvo Internacia (Una Libro)*, a handbook of his new language, thanks to the generous financial backing of his fiancé Clara Zilbernik [8] whose father owned a soap factory [9]. This publication is assumed to be the debut of the Esperanto language. It appeared on 26 July 1887 in Russian, later in Polish, German and English, and finally in Hebrew in 1888. The work was authored by “Doktoro Esperanto,” a pen name meaning “Doctor Hopeful” from which the name of the language derives [7,10].

His *Unua Libro* championed one universal language – Esperanto. In *Libro Dua*, published in 1888, Zamenhof credited himself only as the initiator and not the final creator of the language [8]. In August 1887 Zamenhof married Clara and a year later their son Adam was born [4]. Meanwhile, Pushkin’s story “Winter Evening” was translated into Esperanto by Antoni Grabowski. In 1889 Zamenhof’s daughter Sophie was born and *La Esperantisto*, the first Esperanto magazine, appeared. That year Zamenhof took up the offer of a good medical position in Cherson in southern Russia but he was homesick for his family and returned to Warsaw. Three years later the family emigrated to Grodno (presently Hrodna) but in 1897 returned for good to Warsaw. In the meantime, in 1894 Zamenhof published an Esperanto dictionary entitled *Universala Vortaro*. Just one year later *La Esperantisto* was forbidden to be sold in Russia, where most of the subscribers lived, and the magazine closed. But in the same year, *Lingvo Internacia* was published in Uppsala, Sweden.

People were astonished at the ease of use of Esperanto [1,11]. Famous classics in literature were translated: for example, the Polish epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (Mr. Tadeusz), works by Hans Christian Andersen, Dickens, Goethe, Gogol, Heine, Molliere, and Sholem Aleichem [2]. Shakespeare’s plays were also published in Esperanto, beginning in 1894 with *Hamlet* [8]. This anthology of literature, published in 1904, was called *Fundamenta krestomatio* [2]. Zamenhof continued to translate notable works into Esperanto until 1917, the year of his death, when he completed the monumental task of translating the Old Testament. He also translated Yiddish grammar into Esperanto. The characteristic feature of Zamenhof’s publications was the use of pen names, e.g., *D-ro Esperanto*, *Unuel* (*Unu el la popolo* – one of the people), *Gofzamen*, *Homo sum* (I am human), *Homarano*, *D-ro X* (doctor X) and *Amiko* (friend). As a result of Zamenhof’s linguistic activity, numerous Esperanto clubs flourished in Europe: the first was organized in Nuremberg in southeastern Germany [12], the next in Uppsala, Petersburg, Odessa, and many others [13]. The Esperanto movement gained in popularity. In 1896 Spain launched a ship called *Esperanto*. In 1897 the new language spread to France and Denmark. Louis de Beaufront established the *Societo por La Propagando de Esperanto* in 1898 in Brussels, and Stockholm and Montreal also established Esperanto clubs. In 1901 the French publishing house Hachette contracted with Ludwik Zamenhof for a series of books written in Esperanto. Numerous intellectuals became interested in this new language, such as the pioneering American psychologist and philosopher William James, the German philologist and Orientalist Max Müller, and Leo Tolstoy who announced that he had learned to read in Esperanto “in not more than two hours study” [9]. The dynamics of the spread of Esperanto was overwhelming.

Homaranismo – the integrity of humankind

Ludwik Zamenhof conceived the notion of homaranismo in about 1897 [14]. This idea referred to communication, integrity and friendship among people by means of one common language without the loss of identity. Earlier, Zamenhof considered hillelism, the philosophy of the biblical interpreter and rabbi, Hillel. In his book *Hillelism and the Solution of the Jewish Case*, written under

the pen name “Homo sum” and published in 1901, Zamenhof encouraged the close cooperation of Jews with non-Jews and the practice of Judaism in private only. Zamenhof was plagued by an inner religious conflict and opposed strict Jewish separation. This intellectual trend believed that Jews should participate in the life of society and the state, but should preserve their religious identity and speak the national language. Moreover, he expected Jews to constitute the perfect nation with a universal faith and one world language. Integration would be achieved by a common language, first among Jews and later between nations. This idea was addressed mainly to Jews but was almost completely rejected. This philosophy was a precursor of homaranismo [14,15]. Homaranismo was more universal, suggesting that every person first recognize him or herself as a member of humankind, and only then identify with their own nation and family. His vision aimed ultimately for the existence of one religion and one language and was addressed to all Esperantists. Thus, the main tenets of homaranismo are that all humankind is one big family; people should be judged in the light of their actions not their ancestry; patriotism is a matter of caring for local communities and should never be interpreted as a license to persecute national minorities [14]; and the common language should have international neutral meaning. The trinity of universal identity, ethics and language are the main pillars of homaranismo. This movement strongly opposed the idea of nationalities. Zamenhof may be said to be the forerunner of Mahatma Ghandi when he announced: “If nationalism of the mighty is ignoble, the nationalism of the weak is imprudent.” It is not known if Ghandi was familiar with Zamenhof’s movement, but Ghandi uttered the same words just a few years later, except that he used the word violence instead of nationalism [8]. The immense power of Ghandi’s words succeeded in preventing a military confrontation that might have inflamed the whole subcontinent of India.

Zamenhof’s recognition and Esperanto congresses

In January 1905 Zamenhof received the czar’s command to serve as a military medical officer in the war in Manchuria but he was exempted for reasons of health [9]. Instead of traveling to East Asia Zamenhof attended the First International Esperanto Congress, held in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1905, with the participation of 688 Esperantists from 20 countries [7,16]. Zamenhof presented the manifesto of the Esperanto movement at this meeting and ended his speech with the “Prayer under a Green Flag”:

A green flag held high
Means goodness and beauty.
The secret power of the light will bless us,
And we will achieve our aim,
We will break down the walls among the nations,
and the walls will creak and groan,
and will fall down forever and love and truth will reign on
earth.

On his way back to Poland, he was decorated with the Légion d’honneur by the French prime minister.

Zamenhof failed to set up a World Esperanto League (*Tutmonda*

Ligo Esperantista) but he edited and published *Fundamento de Esperanto*, a compendium of the language. In 1904 the Zamenhofs had another daughter, Lidia. In 1906 the magazine *Pola Esperantisto* was published in Lvov. In response to Louis de Beaufront and the French branch of the Esperanto movement that separated and proclaimed a new language called "Ido" in 1907, the Swiss Hector Hodler founded the World Association of Esperanto (*Universala Esperanto Asocio*) in 1908. Since the meeting in Dresden in 1908, the Esperanto Congresses were organized under the patronage of European heads of state. The inventor of Esperanto also visited America when he attended the 1910 congress in Washington. In 1912 Zamenhof resigned from the leadership of the Esperanto movement [8,13]. In 1910, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize by four British members of Parliament; the price was awarded to the International Peace Bureau. In 1915 Zamenhof's open letter, an emotional appeal against the war that was raging in Europe and a call to diplomats to put an end to the terrible hostilities, was published in the Swiss magazine *Esperanto* and *The British Esperantist*.

Zamenhof is commemorated in various ways around the world. The name Esperanto graces the Clinical Children's Hospital of Bialystok Medical University, the former Green Street in Bialystok, and two minor planets between Jupiter and Mars. December 15, the day of his birth, is Zamenhof Day. In 1912 Terrasa Square in Spain was renamed Zamenhof Square, and in 1914 a monument of Zamenhof was unveiled in Franzbad (today Frantiskovy Lazne in Bohemia).

On 14 April 1917 in Warsaw, in the German Regency Kingdom of Poland, Zamenhof died due to heart insufficiency. He was immensely distressed by concern for the future of the world, a world torn by the bloodshed of the Great War. Esperanto did not prevent global wars and their resultant misery, which he feared the most. Little was he to know that his three children – Adam, Sophia and Lidia – would perish in the Holocaust. Esperanto did not save his offspring.

He was buried in the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw. At Zamenhof's grave, Leo Belmont, a well-known Jewish writer and poet, said of him: He was a good son of the country in which he was born. A moment will come when the whole Polish land will understand the shining glory with which this great son covered his Motherland." Just a few years later, in 1921, the Esperanto Society was established by Jacob Shapiro in Bialystok, the city of Zamenhof's birth [7].

Summary

Ludwik Zamenhof gave us a tool that he believed would prevent misunderstandings and discord – Esperanto. This language is still spoken by some communities, but it was not universally accepted as Zamenhof hoped. Every language defines us and affects the way we perceive the world [8]. Language constitutes identity and

Esperanto was expected to elevate global identity and responsibility for the whole human family. A language that is free from national limitations, that connects people and humanizes them, is not in competition but in solidarity. The story of every human conflict is a type of commentary on the Tower of Babel, the history that the child Zamenhof recalled in his play that set the action in the town square of Bialystok. Ludwik Zamenhof attempted to heal our hostile attitude to speakers of a foreign language, an inevitable result of the diversity of language. By using Esperanto to break down the borders dividing nations, our outlook would continuously change the prevailing negative perspective in international relations to build a global village of peace.

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Correspondence: A. Wincewicz, Department of Pathology, Medical University of Bialystok, Waszyngtona St 13, 15-269 Bialystok, Poland.

Cell: 506660426; Fax: (48-85) 748 59 44
email: ruahpolin@yahoo.com

The best marriage is the union of two good forgivers

Robert Quillen (1997-1948), U.S. humorist, journalist and cartoonist