

# Giants of Science

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## Hanna Hirszfeld

Born in 1884 as Hanna Kasman in the estate of Wilczkowice, in the county of Warsaw, her parents were Saul and Sara nee Gesundheit. Her father abandoned Hanna and her mother when Hanna was at an early age, and Sara remarried, becoming the wife of a rich trader from Odessa, Chaim Bellin. Hanna had a half-sister, Bella, and a brother, Szymon. Szymon Bellin later became a professional musician.

The family moved to Łódź and took up residence in Piotrkowska, where Hanna attended a gymnasium. In the year 1900, being only sixteen, she passed her 'matura' exams. From her early youth, Hanna exhibited pronounced linguistic skills. She spoke Polish, Russian, French, German and English fluently. She also knew Italian and Serbian. Expressing interest in the natural sciences, she reached the decision to undertake medical studies.

She studied medicine in France, first at the university of Montpellier and then in Paris. She continued studying at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. In the year 1905, she married Ludwik Hirszfeld in a civil ceremony. In the year 1908, she received the diploma of Doctor of Medicine and Surgery on the basis of her treatise on the comparative morphology of white blood cells (*Beitrag zur vergleichenden Morphologie der Versenderungen der weissen Blutkörperchen*).

At that time, she received a private (unpaid) position as assistant at the university neurological clinic in Heidelberg, subsequently finding employment at the paediatric clinic headed by Emil Feer, author of the almost classic textbook on children's diseases, the *Lehrbuch für Kinderheilkunde*. In the year 1911, Hanna left Germany with her husband, moving to

Zurich. Here, between 1912 and 1915, she worked as an assistant at a paediatric clinic, also headed by Feer. In the summer of 1914, Hanna Hirszfeld took on the task of organising courses for nurses.

In the spring of 1915, Ludwik travelled to war-torn Serbia. Hanna initially remained in Switzerland but soon joined her husband in Valjevo, working at a field hospital. Here, together with her husband, she had to face a typhus epidemic. After Serbia was taken by the Austro-Hungarian army, the Hirszfelds were evacuated, first to Albania, then to Corfu and Italy. In Naples, Mrs Hirszfeld, on the basis of her 1916 treatise *Congenital hypertrophic spastic stenosis of the pylorus and the first Ramstedt's Operation* (*La stenosi spastica ipetrofica congenita del piloro e l'operazione di Rammstedt*) she received her second doctoral title, in surgery this time. They soon found themselves in Switzerland, leaving it yet again after receiving an official invitation from the government-in-exile of Serbia. They travelled to the region of Thessaloniki in Greece and, working under difficult conditions, established a bacteriological and serological laboratory at an infectious disease hospital in the vicinity of Sedes. Given the opportunity to examine soldiers with diverse ethnic backgrounds and a wide variety of nationalities, they conducted worldwide pioneering research on the percentage share of blood types in human populations. The results, presented in the article *Serological differences between the blood of different races* published in 1919 in the *Lancet*, are considered by many as signifying the beginnings of seroanthropology.

In autumn of 1919 the Hirszfelds returned to independent Poland. In October, Hanna was baptised, and the Hirszfelds married in a church and took up residence in the Aleje Jerozolimskie. Later, in the 1930s, they moved to a villa in Obrońców street, in the area of Saska Kępa. Their house was later destroyed during the war.

When their residence in Warsaw began, Hanna worked as a school medic, subsequently finding employment in the walk-

in centre of the Warsaw medical insurance company. In August of 1920, her daughter was born, and was given the name Maria.

Beginning in 1921, Hanna worked as a volunteer, later holding an unpaid part-time position of assistant at the University Children's Clinic at Litewska 16. Starting in 1932, she was head ward doctor at this clinic. She steadfastly refused remuneration for her work. She made money only from her private paediatric practice, where she took patients according to a contract concluded with a social insurance agency.

Besides her active medical practice, Hanna also actively participated in the life of the paediatric community. From 1935 onwards, she headed the Warsaw branch of the Polish Paediatric Society.

The Hirszfelds experienced the outbreak of World War II in Warsaw. During the September Campaign, Hanna organised a makeshift hospital in Saska Kępa. Initially, the Hirszfelds lived on the Aryan side, continuing their research and helping the ill. In February of 1941 they were forced to move to the ghetto. They took residence in Grzybowska street, later moving to the parish house of the All Saints Church in Grzybowski square. Hanna tried to run her private practice at the same time she was made head ward doctor of the neonatal ward, a branch of the Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital in the area of Leszno. She became a member of a team of Jewish doctors studying and documenting the effects of malnourishment.

In July of 1942, thanks to the aid of the Żegota Council to Aid Jews, the family managed to leave the ghetto and move to the Aryan side. They were initially transferred to a hideout in the district of Żoliborz. Later, the Hirszfeld family left Warsaw, seeking refuge in, among other localities, Wesola, Szczytniki, Nowy Korczyn and Kamienna. In January of 1943, their daughter Maria died, having suffered from depression and progressive anorexia. Ludwik and Hanna survived the German occupation and found themselves in Lublin in 1944.

Hanna Hirszfild took the position of ward doctor at the Children's Hospital in Lublin, at the same time managing the clinic created at that time. She simultaneously started working towards her habilitation. On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1944, on the basis of the pre-war monograph on constitutive issues in children's infectious diseases (*Zagadnienia konstytucyjne w chorobach zakaźnych wieku dziecięcego*, 1937), Hanna Hirszfild was awarded the scientific title of doctor habilitatus with *venia legendi*. The habilitation was approved on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and Mrs Hirszfild was made associate professor on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945. She was made full professor in 1950.

The Hirszfild family was invited to Wrocław in 1945, as a Polish university was being established there. In October of 1945, Hanna Hirszfild took the position of leader of the chair of paediatrics and was named general manager of the paediatric clinic organised within the scope of the municipal hospital. In 1947 a nursery was opened in the clinic, thanks to Swiss support, and in May of that year, Mrs Hirszfild organised a nurses' school in the abandoned Maltese Hospital, under the auspices of the Polish Red Cross. The school was named after its founder in 1977. She retired in 1962. She died on February 20, 1964, and was buried together with her husband in St. Lawrence Cemetery in Odo Bujwid street.

Her research work includes papers on children's haematology, the mechanism and consequences of serological conflicts, the symptoms of rheumatic diseases, disturbances in the activity of the autonomic nervous system as well as diagnosis and classification of congenital defects. Of significant value is her research on the characteristics of the course of malnutrition. A staple interest of hers was children's allergology. One of the fundamental papers on the origin of blood types was the one published jointly by Hanna and Ludwik Hirszfild.

During the interbellum, she published a range of papers on children's infectious diseases, including in particular

diphtheria and scarlet fever. She developed and studied an original method of treating pertussis with ether (*Leczenie krztuśca eterem*, 1922). Together with her husband, she authored the chapter on the laws of the spread of children's infectious diseases (*Prawa szerzenia się chorób zakaźnych wieku dziecięcego*) published in the paediatrics textbook on children's diseases (*Choroby dzieci*, 1936) edited by Waław Jasiński. She supported preventive vaccination actions for children, writing, e. g., a short, popular science guidebook for mothers on serums and vaccines (*Co matka o surowicach i szczepionkach wiedzieć powinna?*, 1936). She also handled issues of proper nutrition of infants and children.

In the postwar period, the works of Mrs Hirszfeld concerned themselves mainly with antibiotic therapy of purulent meningitis, the diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis-related meningitis, the course of rheumatism in children as well as pathologies of the foetal phase and serological conflicts (*Konflikty serologiczne w życiu płodowym i pozapłodowym* [with Ludwik Hirszfeld], 1954). Together with her husband, she researched the hemolytic disease of newborns (*Choroba hemolityczna noworodków. Patologia ciąży w świetle immunologii*, 1956).

She was the founder and first head of the Wrocław branch of the Polish Paediatric Society, member of the International Paediatric Association, the Paediatric Society of Paris, and the International Haematology Society. She was made honorary member of the Czechoslovak Medical Association. She was an active member of the International Committee for the Aid of Children and was responsible for initiating cooperation with the Expert Committee of the World Health Organisation.

In the year 1956, she received the Polish state award, 2<sup>nd</sup> class. In 1957 she received the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta.

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