

## Short Article

# “Villages . . . Reek of Ether Vapours”: Ether Drinking in Silesia before 1939

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By the late nineteenth century ether drinking (i.e. non-medical ether consumption) had gained some popularity in places as far apart as Northern Ireland, Russia, France, Norway, the United States and the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea.<sup>1</sup> Ether’s intoxicating properties had been known centuries before William Morton secured fame for its anaesthetic effects<sup>2</sup>—but its widespread use in nineteenth-century Europe seems to have been a by-product of medical practice and subsequent industrial production. Although precise figures for consumption are lacking, the sources available provide evidence of a remarkable scale. However, as far as I am aware, ether consumption raised some interest among historians mostly as a local phenomenon in Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this article is to outline the history of ether drinking in interwar Upper Silesia—a region of

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<sup>1</sup>For Russia, see ‘Ether drinking in Russia’, *Br. Med. J.*, 1903, i: 98; ‘Ether as a substitute for alcohol’, *Br. Med. J.*, 1897, i: 831–2; for France, see E Beluze, *De l’éthéromanie*, Paris, Ollier-Henry, 1885; P Regnard, ‘Les poisons à la mode: la morphine et l’éther’, *Revue Scientifique*, 1885, 35: 546–56; B Baron, *Etude psychologique de l’anesthésie par l’éther: avec quelques considérations médico-légales*, Lyon, A H Storck, 1896; G Pichon, *Les maladies de l’esprit . . . délires alcoolique et toxique: morphinomanie, éthéromanie, absinthisme, chloralisme, etc.*, Paris, Octave Doin, 1888; for Norway, see ‘Ether-drinking in Norway’, *Br. Med. J.*, 1891, i: 1396; for USA, see H Wayne Morgan, *Drugs in America: a social history 1800–1980*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 1981, pp. 12–13, 38; A W Nichelson, ‘Ether drinking in Michigan’, *The Medical Age*, 1891, 9: 239; J H Kellogg, ‘New intoxicants’, *The American Medical Temperance Quarterly*, 1893, 1: 22; J C Warren, ‘The influence of anesthesia on the surgery of the nineteenth century’, *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, 1897, 136: 426; for the Baltic Sea, see A Lütis, *Liikwa ehk eeter: Kõne Võru karskuse kihutuskoosolekul 1909*, Tartu, Eesti

Karskuseseltside Keskoimekond, 1910; ‘Ether drinking in East Prussia’, *Br. Med. J.*, 1898, i: 1033.

<sup>2</sup>See R Davenport-Hines, *The pursuit of oblivion: a global history of narcotics*, London, W W Norton, 2004, p. 146; J M Fenster, *Ether day*, New York, HarperCollins, 2002; S J Snow, *Blessed days of anaesthesia: how anaesthetics changed the world*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 22–3; A Drygas, ‘Czy Walery Cordus był odkrywca eteru? Argumenty za i wątpliwości na nie’, *Archiwum Historii i Filozofii Medycyny*, 1997, 60: 427–42.

<sup>3</sup>The most important study remains K H Connell, ‘Ether drinking in Ulster’, *Q. J. Stud. Alcohol*, 1965, 26: 629–53, later reprinted in K H Connell, *Irish peasant society*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968, pp. 87–111; See also R A Strickland, ‘Ether drinking in Ireland’, *Mayo Clin. Proc.*, 1996, 71: 1015; E Cyran, ‘Eteromanja. Referat wygłoszony w Katowicach na Konferencji w sprawie eterizmu dn. 4 maja 1936 roku’, *Trzeźwość*, 1936, 11: 184–9, pp. 184–5. The subject of ether consumption as such is also marginally present in a number of global drug histories, e.g., Davenport-Hines, op. cit., note 2 above, pp. 146–150; G Edwards, *Matters of substance: drugs – and why everyone’s a user*, New York, St Martin’s Press, 2005, pp. 61–5; L Lewin, *Phantastica: narcotic and stimulating drugs, their use and abuse*, trans. P H A Wirth, London, Paul, Trench, and Trubner, 1931, p. 201–2.

Poland—where, supported by a fully-fledged black market, it evolved into a lively consumer culture. In the 1930s ether became the most popular illicit drug in Poland—on some parts of the border customs officers seized more smuggled ether than alcohol.<sup>4</sup> It is surprising that Polish historians have not covered this subject. Antoni Bielewicz's history of drug consumption in Poland offers an example of the dominating attitude by dismissing ether drinking in a single sentence: "In some regions of Poland ether drinking was quite common, but this is a separate matter that we are not going to discuss."<sup>5</sup>

It is quite difficult to reconstruct the pattern of ether consumption in Silesia as no official statistics were kept. Ether drinkers came from the lower social strata and rarely left any written evidence. Because it was illegal after 1923, consumers obviously tended to conceal their habit.<sup>6</sup> To make the situation worse, relevant documents from the archive of the Ministry of Social Welfare did not survive the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> In these circumstances most historical evidence comes from published surveys by medical professionals and school authorities. Any gaps are filled by correspondence of the Silesian clergy (held at the Archive of the Arch-diocese in Katowice), reports of the border police and court records (held at the State Archives in Katowice, Warsaw and Cracow), as well as newspaper coverage—all from the interwar period. The most valuable information comes from three local studies carried out in the 1930s. Although the original records on which these studies are based no longer exist, the results were published in the Polish medical press, and they shed some light on the scale of ether drinking.

In 1933 Kazimierz Hrabyn surveyed 3,535 pupils living in the district of Pszczyna in Green (western) Silesia. Of that number, he identified 903 (25 per cent) with some ether experience, most of whom came from small villages. While they constituted no more than 2 per cent of the student population in Pszczyna, in the surrounding localities of Frydek and Międzyrzecze the proportion was over 50 per cent. In the community of Bojszowy

<sup>4</sup> For example, *Czaty*, 5 Jun. 1938, pp. 18–19; *Czaty*, 25 Apr. 1939, pp. 14–17; see also note 11 below.

<sup>5</sup> "Na niektórych terenach Polski rozpowszechniona była eteromania. Jest to jednak osobne zagadnienie, którym nie będziemy się tutaj zajmować". A Bielewicz, 'Narkomania jako zjawisko społeczne – historia problemu w Polsce', *Archiwum Kryminologii*, 1988, **15**: 251–86, p. 256 (unless otherwise stated, the translations are mine); M Abucewicz, 'Narkomania w Polsce jako problem społeczny w perspektywie konstrukcjonistycznej. Część pierwsza: okres międzywojenny', *Alkoholizm i Narkomania*, 2005, **18**: 79–107, p. 88, is a rare (and short) exception. See also I Arabas, 'Problem narkomanii w Polsce na przełomie XIX i XX wieku', *Farmacja Polska*, 1996, **52**: 174–7; B Płonka-Syroka, 'Społeczno-kulturowe uwarunkowania narkomanii na ziemiach polskich w ciągu ostatnich stu lat', *Archiwum Historii Medycyny*, 1985, **48**: 187–96; B Płonka-Syroka, 'Narkotyki w twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza (1885–1939) na tle polskiego

modernizmu przełomu XIX i XX wieku', *Archiwum Historii i Filozofii Medycyny*, 1997, **60**: 361–74.

<sup>6</sup> Before 1923 use and possession of drugs (such as opium, heroin and cocaine) were not penalized in the Polish territories. In 1923 the Polish parliament passed an act prohibiting unauthorized production, trade and possession of some psychoactive substances. The same act prohibited the sale of ether for the purpose of consumption. In 1928 it was officially declared a poison. In effect, all provisions applied to other drugs, including the penalization of possession, were extended to ether. See J Morawska, 'Regulacje prawne dotyczące narkomanii w Polsce i na tle porównawczym', *Przegląd Lekarski*, 2001, **58**: 208–14, p. 210–11; D Andrejew-Frączek, *Narkomania w Polsce*, Warsaw, Biuro Studiów i Ekspertyz Kancelarii Sejmu, 1992, p. 21; Abucewicz, op. cit., note 5 above, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> M Motas (ed.), *Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie: przewodnik po zasobie archiwalnym*, Warsaw, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1973, p. 43.

Nowe it reached a record 80.7 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Four years later Michał Wiendlocha, head of the psychiatric hospital in Rybnik, published a study on ether consumption in the districts of Rybnik and Pszczyna. According to his research, no less than 30 per cent of the population were ether drinkers, and in some villages up to 90 per cent.<sup>9</sup> These results were confirmed in 1938 by a team of researchers from the Silesian Institution for Deaf Children in Lubliniec. They undertook the study after deaf pupils had by chance been noticed communicating (in sign language) about the benefits of ether drinking. In order to conceal the real aim of the investigation, researchers asked the children to identify the smell and taste of different liquids. According to their findings more than 52.8 per cent of deaf pupils recognized the taste of ether. Geographic data confirmed Green Silesia's reputation as the epicentre of ether-drinking: the proportion of pupils acquainted with ether was highest among those from Rybnik district in the western part of the voivodeship (76 per cent).<sup>10</sup>

The scale of consumption is revealed also by police data on smuggling. In 1934, Polish border guards confiscated 757 kg of ether. The following year the seized contraband came to 1,656 kg, reaching 1,670 kg in 1936. Before the outbreak of the Second World War these amounts decreased, but they remained at more than 500 kg per year, while the amount of seized contraband of all other drugs did not exceed 6 kg.<sup>11</sup> The scale of ether smuggling matched more closely the illegal imports of alcohol.<sup>12</sup> Although the jails were filled with petty ether smugglers,<sup>13</sup> the drug obviously remained available to Silesian consumers on a regular basis. It came from Germany, where wholesalers supplied Polish smugglers, who later trafficked the drug to Silesia either directly or through Czechoslovakia. According to reports of the Polish border police, German wholesalers could sell as much as 1,500 kg per month.<sup>14</sup> In 1935 the prefect (*starosta*) of Rybnik estimated the amount of contraband ether entering his district at between 4,000 and 5,000 litres a year, and acknowledged that even harsh repression of the smugglers failed to reduce the quantities.<sup>15</sup> The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs attempted to curb smuggling by anti-narcotic cooperation with Nazi Germany, but subsequent diplomatic interventions in Berlin did not produce any real

<sup>8</sup> K Hrabín, 'Narkomanie w szkole. 1. Alkoholizm 2. Eteryzm. Referat wygłoszony na Zjeździe Delegatów Kół Tow. Trzeźwość', *Trzeźwość*, 1933, 8: 203–28; Answering an inquiry from the bishop in Katowice, the parish priest confirmed that "there are hardly any pupils who have never tried ether". Archiwum Archidiecezjalne, Katowice (hereafter AAK), ARZ00519, p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> M Wiendlocha, 'Eteryzm w powiecie rybnickim i pszczyńskim', *Gazeta Lekarska Śląska Polskiego*, 1937, 2: 21–30, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Data based on M Głogowska, 'Używanie eteru wśród dzieci głuchoniemych', *Rocznik I Śląskiego Zakładu dla Głuchoniemych w Lublińcu*, 1938, 2: 48–57, pp. 52–4.

<sup>11</sup> C Łuczak, *Od Bismarcka do Hitlera: polsko-niemieckie stosunki gospodarcze*, Poznań, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1988, p. 197; J Firstenberg, 'Eteromania na Górnym Śląsku. Streszczenie referatu wygłoszone na posiedzeniu Twa Medycyny Sądowej i Kryminologii, dn. 15. XII.1938', *Czasopismo Sądowo-Lekarskie* 1939, 12:

1–4, p. 2; Some official sources give even larger quantities found by customs officers. For example, Colonel Jur-Gorzechowski, general commander of the border police, reported that in 1935 the guards seized 2,259 kg of ether—about 500 kg more than in the data quoted by Łuczak. See Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warsaw (hereafter AAN), 2/322/0/1953, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1934 alone the border police of the Rybnik district jailed 171 persons for running contraband ether; AAN, 2/322/0/1953, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> AAN, 2/322/0/1953, p. 52; P Kozłowski, 'Charakterystyka południowego odcinka granicy państwowej pod względem zagrożenia przestępczością graniczną w świetle materiałów Służby Informacyjnej Straży Granicznej', *Biuletyn Centralnego Ośrodka Szkolenia Straży Granicznej*, 2006, 9: 166–83, pp. 169–70.

<sup>15</sup> AAN, 2/322/0/1953, p. 14; see also L Bielaczek, *Milowe kamienie: ze świata baśni i przeżyć byłego fornała tworkowskiego*, Opole, Instytut Śląski, 1975, p. 127.

results.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Polish Intelligence suspected that the German border police actually permitted the activities of the ether smugglers.<sup>17</sup>

Ether was an important competitor to alcoholic drinks even before the First World War. Silesian miners and peasants began to use the drug, known there as *kropka* or *anodyna*, in the late nineteenth century. According to later accounts, it was brought back by migrant workers from western parts of the German Empire.<sup>18</sup> Consumption of the drug increased after the First World War, especially in western parts of the voivodeship.<sup>19</sup> Ether's outstanding features were the small dose needed for intoxication and its low price. Representatives of the medical profession attributed *kropka*'s popularity to a number of factors ranging from its early status as a "universal cure" (discussed below) to the unexpected consequence of church-organized anti-alcohol campaigns.<sup>20</sup> These do not, however, explain the growth of ether's popularity after 1918, which must be ascribed in part to economic changes.

After 1914 the provision of spirits in the future Polish territories rapidly deteriorated. During the war the Russian government introduced a prohibition. At the same time Germany and Austria-Hungary raised their taxes—the German tax on spirits rose spectacularly from 1.25 to 8 marks per litre in 1918.<sup>21</sup> Facing severe food shortages, the Central Powers used administrative means to safeguard supplies of potatoes and barley by reducing alcohol production.<sup>22</sup> In addition, military operations on the Eastern Front had damaged many distilleries. Under these circumstances, the consumption of ether as a substitute for spirits flourished.<sup>23</sup>

With independence, interwar Poland initially inherited the alcohol policies of the former authorities; an excise-based system survived in former German and Austrian regions, while the government established a state trade monopoly in central and eastern parts of the country.<sup>24</sup> Spirits were taxed at the pre-war level, notwithstanding the dramatic plunge in real wages.<sup>25</sup> Disregard for the purchasing power of the population quickly translated into a reduction in the legal production of vodka. Recent estimates for the period after 1918 suggest that Polish distilleries produced only a fraction of the spirits they sold before the war.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, despite falling legal consumption, income from alcohol excise and monopoly constituted an important part of government revenue.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>16</sup> AAN, 2/322/0/1953, pp. 8–9, 46, 229; AAN, 2/322/0/13206, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> AAN, 2/322/0/1953, pp. 28–29; This was also the practice of Polish border police—Polish guards permitted the smuggling of cigarettes and alcohol from Gdańsk to Scandinavia. See H Kula, *Polska straż graniczna w latach 1928–1939*, Warsaw, Bellona, 1994, p. 168. According to court files held in the state archives in Cracow, in 1926 the border police in Lwów authorized ether smuggling to Czechoslovakia. See Archiwum Państwowe, Kraków (hereafter APKr), 29/467/531, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> See Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 22; Piotrowski, 'Przypadek samobójstwa przez otrucie się eterem etylowym', *Czasopismo Sądowo-Lekarskie*, 1930, 3: 189–94, p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> S Sterling, 'W sprawie alkoholizmu', *Zdrowie* 1898, 14: 550–1, p. 550.

<sup>21</sup> R R Kuczynski, 'German taxation policy in the world war', *J. Pol. Econ.*, 1923, 31: 763–89, pp. 777–8; cf. *Polityka społeczna państwa polskiego 1918–1935*, Warsaw, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, 1935, pp. 380–1.

<sup>22</sup> P Grota, *Przemysł gorzelniczy w II RP*, Rzeszów, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2002, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> AAK, ARZ00519, p. 175; *Czaty*, 25 Mar. 1939, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Dziennik Ustaw*, 1919, n. 11, poz. 130.

<sup>25</sup> Z Ciechomska, 'Podatki pośrednie', in H Tennenbaum (ed.), *Skarb Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw, Gebethner i Wolff, 1923, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> P Grota, *Przemysł gorzelniczy w II RP*, Rzeszów, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2002, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> B Kasprowicz, *Przemysł spirytusowy byłej dzielnicy pruskiej w okresie etatyizmu*, Poznań, 1921,

After a short-lived experiment with free trade, in 1924 the government extended the state monopoly in spirits to all parts of the country. This decision should be seen as part of a wider fiscal reform introduced by Władysław Grabski. Grabski sought to balance the Polish budget and stabilize the currency by increasing state revenues through an extension of monopolies. During the following years alcohol-related income constituted a growing part of the Polish budget, exceeding 10 per cent of total domestic revenue.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, between 1924 and 1927 the tax on spirits rose from 2.20 zł to 7.50 zł per litre, much faster than the inflation rate, and rendered Polish vodka dearer than that in neighbouring countries. By 1928 Polish vodka drinkers had to pay approximately 30 per cent more than their German or Czech counterparts.<sup>29</sup> Given the price differences, it is not surprising that this policy encouraged a rapid development of smuggling along the densely populated German and Czechoslovak borders, where, with the best will in the world, customs officers could not hope to prevent the entry of contraband.<sup>30</sup>

The economic depression of the 1930s contributed to this trend. Although the Polish economy experienced deflation and a fall in real wages, the state alcohol monopoly did not adapt its prices to the changing market. Between 1928 and 1932 the price of spirits rose from 13.24 zł to 15.52 zł per litre. This hit particularly hard the rural population, whose cash incomes dropped by 60 per cent as a result of the fall in food prices.<sup>31</sup> If the price of spirits had reflected the deflation in other prices, by 1932 it should have fallen to 9.88 zł, instead of rising to 15.52 zł. As the burden of taxation grew, per capita alcohol consumption declined. Between 1928 and 1932 government sales of alcoholic drinks decreased by 53.4 per cent<sup>32</sup> as the legal consumption of spirits had fallen from 1.6 to 0.7 litre per person.<sup>33</sup> These figures suggest that the Polish state had failed to observe the changes in alcohol consumption. Many consumers turned to illegal options. Demand was seemingly met by the bootleg industry, the production of denaturated alcohol,<sup>34</sup> smugglers, and—to a lesser degree—ether producers.

On the black market the price of ether fluctuated between 5 and 15 zł per litre.<sup>35</sup> As the consumer required no more than one small glass to induce intoxication, it was much cheaper than vodka.<sup>36</sup> For many impoverished peasants the choice was quite obvious. Silesian prohibitionists considered ether drinking a plague second only to the illegal production of spirits.<sup>37</sup> In 1938, at a meeting at the Towarzystwo Medycyny

pp. 70, 76; Ciechomska, op. cit., note 25 above, p. 173. This remained valid for the whole interwar period—see K Ostrowski, *Polityka finansowa Polski przedwrześniowej*, Warsaw, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1958, p. 304.

<sup>28</sup> *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny*, Warsaw, 1931, p. 149; J Husarski, *Znaczenie monopolów państwowych w życiu gospodarczym kraju*, Warsaw, 1928, s. 5

<sup>29</sup> Grota, op. cit., note 26 above, p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> A Krzyżanowski, *Pauperyzacja polski współczesnej*, Cracow, Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1925, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny*, Warsaw, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1936, p. 162; J Kaliński, Z

Landau, *Gospodarka Polski w XX wieku*, Warsaw, Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 2003, p. 106.

<sup>32</sup> Data based on W Mateńko, *Zagadnienie monopolów skarbowych w Polsce*, Warsaw, Szkoła Główna Handlowa, 1939, p. 77–81.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176; AAK, ARZ00519, p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> J Firstenberg, *Walka z narkomanią i handlem narkotykami na terenie sądowym*, Warsaw, Księgarnia F Hoesicka, 1935, p. 31; See also APKr, 29/442/12659, p. 5; APKr, 29/467/531, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> APKr, 29/467/531, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> AAK, ARZ00519, p. 148, letter from Rev. Tadeusz Gałczyński (secretary of Catholic Union of Abstinent) to Bishop Stanisław Adamski, 12 Dec. 1933.

Sądowej I Kryminologii (Association of Forensic Medicine and Criminology), Julian Firstenberg, a renowned expert on drug-related crimes, presented a paper on the ether black market in Silesia, in which he commented, “in the places where ether is taken habitually, sales of vodka usually fade away”.<sup>38</sup>

As already noted, until 1923 the legal status of ether was not clear. According to a statement by Wiendlocha, before this date “one could buy any amount of ether in village bars, both pure and mixed with fruit juices or wine. Ether was also sold, without any restriction, in pharmacies”.<sup>39</sup> Memories of past liberal legislation survived, providing legitimacy for what was already becoming a popular social habit among the lower classes. Even during the 1930s people accused of illegally trading in the drug defended themselves by claiming that they were unaware that it was illegal.<sup>40</sup> One defendant argued that he bought “4 doses for himself and 6 for his friends, with a 2 zł margin to reimburse travel costs. He did not realize that he had committed a crime, because in his neighbourhood ether was being sold openly.”<sup>41</sup> According to several court records, in the 1930s profiteering pharmacists were still illegally selling ether without prescription.

The levels of ether consumption varied greatly across the social classes. Peasants and miners constituted a clear majority of consumers, with very few among the upper social levels. According to church records, poor ether drinkers attributed this to their economic situation, claiming that they could not afford legal spirits.<sup>42</sup> But ether’s easily recognizable and stigmatizing odour may also have been the reason why the better off avoided it. The famous Polish writer, painter and dedicated drug-experimenter, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, in his book on drugs (published in 1932) quoted an opinion describing ether’s smell—unlike cocaine or opiates—as “disgusting, identifying the drinker from the distance of a few feet and lasting for up to two days”.<sup>43</sup> A similar observation had been made by Wiendlocha, who noticed that drinkers tried to conceal their habit by holding their breath during meetings with priests or local intelligentsia.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> “W okolicach, gdzie pije się nałogowo eter, wyszynk wódki zanika z reguły zupełnie”. Firstenberg, op. cit., note 11 above, p. 2; Firstenberg, op. cit, note 35 above, p. 34. It is no wonder that the “war on ether” found ardent supporters among publicans and restaurant owners. While villagers rarely cooperated with the police, restaurant owners “served their own interests by always helping with the identification of smugglers and ether peddlers”, according to a report written in 1935 by the district prefect of Rybnik, AAN 2/322/0/1953, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> “Można było w niektórych wiejskich i miejskich gospodach otrzymać eter w każdej ilości, bądź to czysty, bądź mieszany z sokami owocowymi lub winem owocowym. Nieograniczona była również sprzedaż eteru w drogeriach”. Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 28; See also AAK, ARZ00519, p. 175. In Austria-Hungary ether could be obtained without a prescription. See M Bilek, ‘Historia aptekarstwa w Żegiestowie Zdroju’, *Farmacja Krakowska*, 2005, 8: 32–6, p. 34; See also A z

Działuńskich Potocka, *Mój pamiętnik*, Warsaw, Wydawnictwo PAX, 1973, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> APKr, 29/442/14143, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> “z tego 4 litry zamierzał użyć dla siebie a zaś 6 odstąpił znajomym z dobićmiem sobie 2 zł od litra a to na pokrycie kosztów podróży, przyczem nie zdawał sobie sprawy z tego, że popelnia jakiś czyn karygodny, bo w jego okolicy eterem handluje się jawnie”. APKr, 29/442/12659, p. 30; See also APKr, 29/442/13511, p. 58.

<sup>42</sup> “Ich nie stać na lepsze napoje, na które sobie pozwalają lepsze stany”. AAK, ARZ00519, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup> “Zapach eteru jest ohydny i denuncjuje on eteromana na kilka kroków, i to nawet na drugi dzień po eteryzacji”. S I Witkiewicz, *Narkotyki. Niemyte dusze*, Warsaw, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1993, p. 130. Connell offers a similar explanation in his chapter on ether drinking in Northern Ireland, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 27; see also ARZ00519, p. 178.

Attempts to conceal ether use seemed to be restricted only to contacts with the upper and middle classes. Peasants consumed ether drinks at christening parties, weddings and funerals.<sup>45</sup> *Kropka* was a prominent feature of their festivals and dances. In 1934 the daily newspaper *Kurier Poranny* exclaimed disapprovingly: “Young boys drink ether, just like others drink vodka. If a stranger comes to Czyżowice or another ‘ether village’, he must bring a ‘quarter’ of ether with him if he wants to dance with local girls . . . Young unmarried girls drink because they want to please the boys. A girl who does not drink ether is not popular.”<sup>46</sup> Silesian ether-drinking was not restricted to festive occasions. Since ether intoxication disappears as rapidly as it sets in, consumers could easily mix periods of drunkenness with participation in the normal life of local communities. As a result, the mawkish fumes of the drug could be smelled in the streets and at places of work. In 1936 Emil Cyran, head of the psychiatric hospital in Lubliniec, claimed that “some villages near Wodzisław . . . reek of ether vapours as strongly as an operating theatre”.<sup>47</sup> Miners drank *kropka* in their pits,<sup>48</sup> vendors were offered a glass after making a deal,<sup>49</sup> intoxicated ether drinkers attended religious services, making churches smell—according to one police officer—“like hospitals”.<sup>50</sup> Last but not least, many peasants firmly believed that *kropka* was a universal cure. To a Silesian peasant the pleasure experienced under the influence of ether proved far more powerful than the disapproval of (rarely met) representatives of the medical profession. According to the local authorities in Rybnik, the belief was still common in the 1930s that “ether is an efficient curative. In popular opinion, ether stimulates the appetite, relieves stomach-ache and all other kinds of pain, and even eases childbirth”.<sup>51</sup> The level of the drug’s social acceptability is evident from an anecdote jotted down by Wiendlocha. During the Silesian plebiscite, a Polish MP came from Warsaw to campaign for the incorporation of Silesia with Poland. After a public meeting he was offered a small glass of what he believed was local vodka—in fact it was ether. To the delight of the gathered Silesians, after a single sip he could no longer walk.<sup>52</sup>

The fact that the drug was a good substitute for the traditional Silesian psychoactive substance, vodka, explains its appeal. It is no wonder that the social context of the

<sup>45</sup> ‘Kronika’, *Trzeźwość* 1939, 14: 172; *Dobry Wieczór—Kurier Czerwony*, 27 May 1935, p. 8; AAK, ARZ00519, p. 180; APKr, 29/467/531, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> “Młodzi chłopcy piją u nas eter, tak jak gdzie indziej wódkę. Jeśli na przykład jakiś obcy przyjdzie na zabawę do Czyżowice czy innej ‘eterowej wsi’ to musi się wkupić do towarzystwa i za prawo tańczenia z miejscowymi dziewczętami postawić ‘ćwiartkę’ eteru . . . Młode dziewczęta przed zamążpójściem piją eter dlatego, aby się podobać chłopcom. Taka dziewczyna co nie pije eteru—nie ma powodzenia”. *Kurier Poranny*, 18 Dec. 1934, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> “W niektórych wioskach koło Wodzisławia czułem tak silne opary eterowe, iż miałem wrażenie, że znajduję się na sali operacyjnej”. Cyran, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 185.

<sup>48</sup> M Wiendlocha, ‘Zagadnienie eteromanji’, *Trzeźwość*, 1936, 11: 318–320, p. 319; *Czaty*, 25 July 1939, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> APKr, 29/442/16869, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> “Podczas nabożeństwa niedzielnego wypełnia Dom Boży zapach eteru jak w szpitalach”. Archiwum Państwowe, Katowice (hereafter APKat), 12/38/192, p. 374; see also T Sobczak, *Konsumpcja żywnościowa chłopska w Królestwie Polskim w 2 połowie XIX i w początkach XX wieku*, Wrocław, Ossolineum, 1986, p. 57.

<sup>51</sup> “Jest też powszechnie przyjęte u ludności gmin, które pod tym względem są zagrożone, że eter stanowi skuteczny środek leczniczy, według jej pojmowania picie eteru doskonale działa na pobudzenie apetytu, uśmierzenie bólów żołądkowych i wszelkich innych, a nawet ułatwia porody”. AAN, 2/322/0/1953, p. 10. See also *Czaty*, 20 Mar. 1938, p. 12; *Czaty*, 25 Mar. 1939, p. 15; Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 48 above, p. 318.

<sup>52</sup> Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 28.

consumption of ether resembled that of alcohol. Illegal “*kapliczki*” (chapels) where ether was served were located in private houses, usually guarded by a sober person. Ether was mixed with other drinks, including coffee, milk, wine or juices. The most popular formula, known as “*himber*”, included water and concentrated raspberry juice, but every ether *kapliczka* offered its own speciality.<sup>53</sup> In 1935 the daily newspaper *Dobry Wieczór—Kurier Czerwony* published a series of reports about *kropka* and its consumers. One of its journalists summarized the situation in an obviously exaggerated yet highly illustrative sentence: “A glass of ether is for a Silesian the same as a glass of wine for a Frenchman or an Italian or a tankard of beer for a German”.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that even children drank it is yet another example of the drug’s high level of social acceptability. Pupils identified as consumers usually came from ether-drinking families.<sup>55</sup> Numerous sources, ranging from medical reports to church correspondence, comment on parents giving *kropka* to their children. As with adults, the drug served a double role—as pain-killer and intoxicant.<sup>56</sup> This obvious discrepancy between the social norms followed by parents and the legal order imposed by the state can be seen in the results of research undertaken at Lubliniec Institution for Deaf Children. Although most of the children questioned were socially isolated from their peers, more than half had some ether-drinking experience. Their answers indicated that they had first become acquainted with the drug in the family circle.<sup>57</sup> Noting the response of one boy, a researcher commented, “After smelling the substance, [he] immediately said that he knows the liquid and he likes it . . . when asked who gave it to him and why, he answered that mum gave it to him when . . . he could not sleep”.<sup>58</sup> Young children “took a spoon with sugar to show that one should mix ether with sugar. They mentioned the warm feeling in the stomach and that their parents like it too”.<sup>59</sup> One girl “knew that the police prohibit the drink and that smugglers get arrested at the border. Asked whether she was referring to vodka, the girl firmly denied this, stating that she meant *kropki*”.<sup>60</sup> Researchers noted as “characteristic” the answer given by another girl: “Her father had been a drunkard, and she considered it a disaster for her family. Currently her father had ceased to drink vodka and the whole family had turned to ether. She is glad about

<sup>53</sup> Firstenberg, op. cit., note 11 above, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> “Czem szklaneczka wina dla Francuza i Włocha, a kufel piwa dla Niemca—tem szklaneczka eteru dla Ślązaka”. *Dobry Wieczór—Kurier Czerwony*, 27 May 1935, p. 8; K H Connell in ‘Ether drinking in Ulster’ quotes a strikingly similar description of the situation in Northern Ireland in 1870. In an account by an English surgeon, inhabitants of the area around Draperstown are called “a race to whom ether is what koumiss is to the Kalmuck, ava to the South Sea islander, absinthe to a certain class of Frenchmen, and gin and whisky to their more immediate neighbours”, Connell, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 99.

<sup>55</sup> AAN, 2/322/0/1953, p. 11; See also Hrabín, op. cit., note 8 above; *Polska Zachodnia*, 13 July 1934.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Eteryzm’, *Trzeźwość*, 1934, 9: 368; AAN, 2/322/0/1953, p. 53; cf. M Wawrzyniecki, *Współczesne zewnętrzne strony życia ludu w*

*guberniach: kieleckiej, radomskiej, piotrkowskiej, warszawskiej, części siedleckiej i lubelskiej, na podstawie 30-letnich własnych badań*, Kraków, 1911, pp. 16–17.

<sup>57</sup> Głogowska, op. cit., note 10 above, p. 52.

<sup>58</sup> “Po powąchaniu eteru chłopak momentalnie migał, że zna ten plyn, że to bardzo dobre, że to bardzo lubi—relacjonowała Głogowska—Na pytania nasze, kto dał i dlaczego, dziecko migało, że mama dała, gdy . . . nie mógł spać”. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> “. . . brały łyżeczkę z cukrem i pokazywały, że eter leje się na cukier i że po zażyciu robi się ciepło w żołądku, że mama i tata też to lubią”. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>60</sup> “. . . wiedziała, że policja zabrania pić i aresztuje przemytników na granicy. Na naszą uwagę, że myśli pewnie o wódce, dziewczynka stanowczo oświadczyła, że to jest eter, który nazywają ‘kropki’”. *Ibid.*



that, because she considers ether drinking perfectly normal.”<sup>61</sup> However the most striking testimony of children’s consumption comes from the Rev. Alfons Januszewicz, parish priest of Jedłownik in Green Silesia. In a letter to the bishop in Katowice, he expressed his shock at a woman “praising the courage of her twelve-year-old son who was already able to drink a glass of pure ether.”<sup>62</sup>

While doctors, church authorities and other guardians of the prevailing discourse viewed *kropka* drinking as a social evil, they faced resistance from rural consumers for whom ether prohibition was a question of vested interests. In 1936 a priest lamented to the diocese: “The local population does not want to believe that there is something wrong [with ether drinking]. They prefer to claim that they cannot afford better spirits, suitable for those of the upper classes, that the state doesn’t care about the common good, that it serves the interests of the alcohol monopoly.”<sup>63</sup> As moralizing sermons obviously fell on deaf ears, parish priests often turned to more drastic actions: they refused to give absolution, expelled ether drinkers from the church building or even denounced them to the police.<sup>64</sup> Prosecutor Firstenberg reported cases of open confrontation between the clergy and the local population: “One priest used to enter illegal ether *kapliczki* and simply chase the drinkers out with a whip.” Drinkers reacted in a similarly violent manner by, for example, “breaking windows in parsonage buildings.”<sup>65</sup> Less violent reprisals included “punishing” prohibitionist clergy by refusing to attend mass. The church’s engagement in prohibitionist campaigns obviously weakened links between ether consumers and local clergy. In the words of another priest: “Ether drinkers rarely visit church—because the ether can be smelled. In three cases I have been called to dead ether drinkers. The bodies were already cold. They had to ventilate the rooms.”<sup>66</sup>

Until the 1930s ether consumption remained of marginal concern to the general public. The upper classes of Polish society seemed to be unaware of the widespread popularity of the drug among Silesian peasants. In the most complete bibliography of Polish medical literature in the interwar period<sup>67</sup> not a single article on ether consumption was listed

<sup>61</sup> “... jej ojciec dawniej był nałogowym pijakiem, co uważała za nieszczęście dla rodziny. Obecnie ojciec jej wódki nie pije, za to cała rodzina pije nałogowo eter i dziewczynka jest zadowolona, uważając fakt picia eteru za zjawisko zupełnie normalne”. Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>62</sup> “... chciała się z bohaterstwa 12 letniego synka, że on już potrafi wychylić czysty kielich eteru”. AAK, ARZ00519, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> “Ludność nie chce uwierzyć, że się rozchodzi o jakieś czyny karygodne, lubi się tłumaczyć, że ich nie stać na lepsze napoje, na które sobie pozwalają lepsze stany, a że państwu nie rozchodzi się o dobro społeczeństwa, tylko o powodzenie monopolu spirytusowego”. Ibid., p. 181; See also *Czaty*, 25 July 1939, p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> *Kurier Poranny*, 18 Dec. 1934, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> “... ksiądz szedł do lokalu, gdzie ludność zbiorowo piła eter i po prostu białem rozganiał pijących... wybijanie szyb w budynku

plebanii.” Firstenberg, op. cit., note 11 above, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> “Eterowcy bardzo mało chodzą do kościoła, bo eter czuć. W trzech przypadkach zawezwano mnie do umarłych już eterowców, zimnych już, bo przecież najprzód muszą wywietrzeć”, AAK, ARZ00519, p. 176. This may be part of the reason why some priests persistently denied that ether was consumed in their parishes, contrary to data obtained by researchers and the border police. For example, in the parish of Bijasowice where—according to Hrabina’s research—more than 34 per cent of pupils were familiar with ether, the local priest claimed that the problem did not exist. In the village of Wola, with 40 per cent of ether consumers among the pupils, the priest knew of only one family who drank ether occasionally. See AAK, ARZ00519, pp. 229, 261.

<sup>67</sup> *Polska Bibliografia Lekarska, 1901–1939*, accessible at: <http://pbl-ikk.gbl.waw.pl/>.

between 1918 and 1930.<sup>68</sup> Hrabín's research, published in 1933, changed the situation substantially. Eugenacists, journalists and doctors produced a number of articles uncovering the alleged devastating effects of ether consumption in Silesia. Many expressed their "moral panic" at the situation, but they were much more concerned with moral hazard and the threat to social values from ether consumption, than with its medical impact. Ether became a new addition to the causes of depravity, endangering the ethical and biological prosperity of the nation. Unsurprisingly, the drug became associated with promiscuity and homosexuality. Journalists reported on ether drinking prostitutes, sexual acts between fathers and daughters, lesbianism among married women, *kropka* drinkers experiencing "sexual excitement, resulting in wild collective excesses", not to mention "children . . . falling prey to sexual deviance".<sup>69</sup> One doctor's fertile imagination even produced "boys copulating with goats and other animals".<sup>70</sup> Scientists commenting on the ether-drinking culture were by no means free of this moralistic discourse. Sometimes their opinions simply unmasked class prejudices—for example, the declaration that rural "ether drinkers" were "eager for social, political and religious novelties and very vindictive".<sup>71</sup> Though some authors, pointing to official statistics, challenged the myth of an "ether-caused mass extinction of children in Silesia", and sometimes even distinguished between ether consumption and ether addiction,<sup>72</sup> in the public discourse of the 1930s their voices remained a minority.

Silesian ether drinking lasted for a few decades, reaching its climax during the Great Depression of 1930s. It declined after the Second World War,<sup>73</sup> but it was neither the moralistic discourse nor state- or church-led anti-drug campaigns that could take the credit for eradicating this social scourge. This should be attributed rather to the socio-economic and geopolitical changes that restructured the life of the Silesian population after 1945. Post-war Green Silesia shared no border with Germany—so the smugglers could no longer operate. The change was even further strengthened by the tightening of border controls within the Stalinist Eastern Bloc, which rendered drug smuggling from Czechoslovakia practically impossible.<sup>74</sup> Finally, in the centrally planned economies that dominated Eastern Europe after 1948, there was hardly any room for the illegal production of ether. Privately owned chemical factories, typical providers of the illicit drug in the 1930s, ceased to exist and with their disappearance the Silesian ether drinking culture could not survive.

<sup>68</sup> A Piotrowski, 'Przypadek samobójstwa przez otrucie się eterem etylowym', *Czasopismo Sądowo-Lekarskie*, 1930, 3: 189–94.

<sup>69</sup> " . . . podniecenie seksualne prowadzące do dzikich zbiorowych ekscesów. . . dzieciaki . . . padają ofiarą zbrodni seksualnych". *Dobry Wieczór – Kurier Czerwony*, 27 May 1935, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> "Ponoć już chłopcy spółkują z kozami i innymi zwierzętami". Wiendlocha, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> "Eteromani są . . . żądni nowinek społecznych, politycznych i religijnych, a przy tym bardzo mściwi". Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>72</sup> " . . . masowym wymieraniu dzieci na Śląsku z powodu eteryzmu". *Gazeta Polska*, 18 Oct. 1935.

<sup>73</sup> During the war ether drinking was linked to the scarcity of alcohol. Oral history sources mention ether consumption during the Warsaw Rising (referred to as

a Silesian custom) and among the prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau. See: Collection of Oral History at the Warsaw Rising Museum, interviews with Zbigniew Woynowski ([http://www.old.1944.pl/index.php?a=site\\_archiwum&STEP=03&id=1342&page=4](http://www.old.1944.pl/index.php?a=site_archiwum&STEP=03&id=1342&page=4)) and Mieczysław Rybicki ([http://www.old.1944.pl/index.php?a=site\\_archiwum&STEP=03&id=1401&page=2](http://www.old.1944.pl/index.php?a=site_archiwum&STEP=03&id=1401&page=2)); Z Jagoda, S Kłodziński, J Masłowski (eds), *Oświęcim nieznamy*, Cracow, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1981, p. 195; J Masłowski, *Oświęcim. Cmentarz świata*, Warsaw, Książka i Wiedza, 1995, p. 112.

<sup>74</sup> In the immediate post-war years smugglers continued trafficking ether from Czechoslovakia to Green Silesia. See K Kaczmarek, *Na ojczyzny zawołanie*, Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1988, p. 62.