

Summer 2018

# Soap from Human Fat: The Case of Professor Spanner

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### Recommended Citation

Drobnicki, John A., "Soap from Human Fat: The Case of Professor Spanner" (2018). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
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Tomkiewicz, Monika, and Piotr Semków. *Soap from Human Fat: The Case of Professor Spanner*. Translated by Garth James Burge and Monika Sarnowska-Burge. Gdynia: Wydawnictwo Róża Wiatrów, 2013. Original Polish edition: *Profesor Rudolf Spanner 1895-1960: naukowiec w III Rzeszy*. Gdynia: Wydawnictwo Róża Wiatrów, 2010.

Translated from the original Polish edition (2010), Tomkiewicz (historian and archivist at the Institute of National Remembrance's Branch Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Gdańsk) and Semków (faculty member at the Polish Naval Academy in Gdynia) provide an overview of the life of Professor Rudolf Spanner – before, during, and after his tenure at the Institute of Anatomy at the Danzig Medical Academy. Prior to Danzig, Spanner had worked in anatomy departments in Cologne, Hamburg, Kiel, and Jena – but in the minds of many Poles, his name has forever been linked to the manufacture of human soap in Danzig, especially due to Zofia Nałkowska's book *Medaliony* (1946). But is this infamy warranted? Did he do what the newspaper reporters and the Soviet prosecutors at Nuremberg said he did?

At the end of March 1945, the day after the Red Army liberated Danzig (Gdańsk) from German control, the Polish National Council established the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (*Główna Komisja do Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce*). The Soviets set up a military hospital on the site of the former Danzig Medical Academy, and officials from Poland's National Institute of Hygiene arrived in mid-April to inspect the premises. One of the visitors, pharmacist and toxicologist Stanisław Byczkowski, was suspicious of what he saw in the Anatomical Institute – dozens of bodies, some without heads, were soaking in vats, while piles of heads were found elsewhere – and he alerted authorities that something terrible might have happened there. The Main Commission established a committee to inspect the Danzig Medical Academy, which included the writer and political activist Zofia Nałkowska and the journalist Stanisław Strąbski, and among those whom the Commission interviewed were Aleks Opiński, who worked in the Institute of Physiology at the Medical Academy, and Zygmunt Mazur, who worked in the Institute of Anatomy. They both gave statements saying that soap was made from human bodies in the Anatomical Institute, and pieces of soap were found in both of the men's apartments. Mazur confessed to making soap and claimed it was done under the direction of the Anatomical Institute's director, Professor Rudolf Spanner. Thinking that some bodies could be Russian POWs, the Red Army requested that Soviet experts inspect the Institute. Photographs of the Institute were taken, and Strąbski wrote the first report on the Anatomical Institute, "Mydło z ludzkiego tłuszczu," for the Polish news agency Zachodnia Agencja Prasowa (expanded into a book a year later), and the story began to be widely publicized, both by Strąbski's own articles in *Dziennik Bałtycki*, and by other news outlets as well, including in the west. Soap and skin samples were sent to the Institute of Forensic Research in Kraków in Oct. 1945, and it was determined that the skin was human, but they did not test for human proteins in soap, because boiling in alkali destroys protein, and fatty acids of humans do not differ from those of farm animals. Nałkowska, the Vice-Chairperson of the Main Commission, began writing the short story "Professor Spanner," based on her Danzig experience, which would be published a year later as part of her book *Medaliony*.

Meanwhile, by September 1945, Rudolf Spanner was already working as a medical doctor in Schleswig-Holstein under his own name, likely having no idea that his name was among a list of ten people being sought by the British in connection with possible crimes committed at the

Institute of Anatomy in Danzig. When the Soviet Chief Prosecutor mentioned the manufacture of soap from human remains in his inaugural address to the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg on Feb. 19, 1946, and introduced the so-called “soap recipe” as exhibit USSR-196, it was covered widely in many newspapers. After moving to Hamburg, Spanner was arrested in May 1947 on orders of the British Military Government – he had been recognized by residents of his apartment building after German newspapers began belatedly publishing reports from the Nuremberg trials. Spanner told investigators that the boiling of corpses to remove tissue (i.e., maceration) produced a soapy by-product which he would then inject into flexible anatomical models for the training of medical students – he denied that the production of soap was his primary objective, and he was released three days later. Another investigation into Spanner commenced in Nov. 1947, by the Flensburg Public Prosecutor, after Spanner was accused of war crimes by Max Knott, who read the description of the “soap factory” in Georg Rehberg’s book *Hitler und die NSDAP in Wort und Tat* (1946). Once again, Spanner explained that in order to produce a flexible anatomical specimen of a human joint, he needed to impregnate that joint with human fatty soap. The investigation was dropped because the prosecution was unable to prove that Spanner committed any crime, and the information contained in Rehberg’s book was disputed. In late 1948, Spanner was officially exonerated through the denazification process, and he resumed his academic career in May 1949 as a professor at the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Cologne, where he later became the Director of the Institute in 1957.

While all the anatomical drawings and models that Spanner had undertaken in Danzig were left behind when the Germans evacuated, Spanner was still able to publish revised and updated editions of Werner Spalteholz’s atlas of anatomy – his 15th (1953-54) and 16th (1959-61) editions were used as standard textbooks in medical schools. Spanner died on Aug. 31, 1960, at age 65 from a heart attack. Even after his death, the “human soap” story continued to be raised every few years. A 1967 investigation by the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen* in Ludwigsburg, West Germany, concluded that the soap-like greasy mass from human corpse fat discovered at the Institute near the end of the war originated as a by-product of the maceration process.

In 1973, Poland opened its first formal criminal proceeding regarding the matter of the manufacture of soap from human fat at the Danzig Anatomical Institute. However, the investigation was suspended because none of the alleged victims had ever been identified, and because the former German employees of the Anatomical Institute lived beyond Poland’s borders and could not be interrogated. In Dec. 2001, triggered by a series of articles written by Tadeusz Skutnik in *Dziennik Bałtycki* (May 2000) and the ensuing discussion in the local press, the Union of the German Minority in Gdańsk asked the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) to investigate the matter of the Danzig human soap. On Sept. 26, 2002, the Gdańsk branch of the Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation of the Institute of National Remembrance re-opened the suspended 1973 investigation into the Anatomical Institute.

Professor Andrzej Stołyhwo, Head of the Section of Food Analysis and Quality Assessment at the Department of Chemistry of the Gdańsk University of Technology, was chosen to analyze the various examples of soap that the Commission had obtained from various sources, including a bar of “brown soap” taken from the Gdańsk Medical Academy immediately after the war by a laborer

who had given a piece to a co-worker as a souvenir. In his Nov. 2002 report, Prof. Stołyhwo noted the presence of kaolin, which is an additive designed to improve the abrasive qualities of soap. Thus, Stołyhwo believed that Spanner was untruthful when he said that any soap produced at the Danzig Anatomical Institute was used exclusively for the purposes of maintenance of the ligaments of the movable joint preparations – why would soap used for flexible joints need to be abrasive? The tests also found fats occurring in butter and beef fat. Because of the presence of kaolin, and since it was unlikely that German pigs were being fed on butter and beef during the war, Stołyhwo concluded that human fat *was* used in the manufacturing of household soap. In Feb. 2003, various pieces of soap were subjected to surface analysis at the Department of Forensic Medicine at the Medical University of Gdańsk, and the samples tested negative for the presence of human blood or DNA.

The investigators also approached the archives at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which holds the original evidence from the International Military Tribunal, for permission to test the soap introduced at Nuremberg (Exhibit USSR-393). During the discussions, it was discovered that there were *two* separate IMT exhibits – one labeled USSR-393, and another labeled CCCP-393. A Polish delegation went to The Hague in Jan. 2006, including Prof. Andrzej Stołyhwo, and was able to take samples from both the material in the tray labeled USSR-393, and from the glass jar labeled CCCP-393.

Prof. Stołyhwo’s analysis of the soap samples obtained from The Hague found the presence of fatty acids, which *could* have come from humans – but it also could have come from the fat of pigs, since they are almost identical. The IPN’s Gdańsk branch decided to close the investigation into the Anatomical Institute, citing a lack of evidence to substantiate that any crimes had been committed. However, using Stołyhwo’s findings, they concluded that soap from human fat *was* manufactured at the Danzig Anatomical Institute, based on the various testimonies from 1945, as well as the discovery of kaolin in the samples. The prosecutor also doubted Spanner’s testimony of 1947 and 1948 that human fat was only used for the purposes of maintenance of ligaments of the movable joint preparations, saying that there was no confirmation that Spanner had completed his research on the procedure, and that the method is unknown in the science of anatomy. He also questioned why Spanner was placing requests for significant numbers of cadavers when the training of medical students ceased from the autumn of 1944 because the war was coming to an end.

What then is the reader to make of the sometimes conflicting information about Rudolf Spanner and human soap? As the authors point out, Spanner was a prominent and well-respected physician who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1939 for his research on renal physiology – why would he be experimenting with human soap instead of training medical students? The authors also point out that Spanner left Danzig at the end of January; the Russians arrived at the end of March; and the Poles didn’t enter the Medical Academy until mid-April – so there’s no way to know if the “soap” discovered there was made *before* or *after* Spanner left, regardless of what it was made from. If the by-product of the maceration process was utilized to make soap while Spanner was there – whether by Mazur or someone else – then Spanner could only be charged with failure to protect the bodies. The presence of kaolin in the “brown soap” does not prove that the soap was meant to be used in a home for cleaning,

because Spanner had written an article in 1938 describing the injection of kaolin into a cadaver – so the presence of kaolin in the soap could have come from the cadaver itself, rather than as an additive. The fact that Spanner frequently made requests for more cadavers was not out of the ordinary, because he had hundreds of medical students, and cadavers were a necessary part of their anatomical education. After the public had learned of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis in the death camps, perhaps it was only natural that when people, even educated scientists, saw the dismembered bodies in the Danzig Anatomical Institute, they automatically assumed that atrocities must have occurred there, too.

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