

Water Rescue in Poland

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Abstract — The Voluntary Water Rescue Service (commonly referred to as WOPR) operates pursuant to the Polish act of 18 August 2011 concerning the safety of persons present in water areas. The main tasks of the service include: undertaking rescue operations, organizing and providing aid to persons involved in accidents (that means sudden events that occur during swimming, bathing or practicing sports or recreational activities in water areas, which could result in an injury of an organ of the body or in health impairment) or to persons exposed to a threat of losing their life or health while in or near water.

Index Terms— the Voluntary Water Rescue Service (WOPR), safety, drowning, lifeguard

I. INTRODUCTION

The need of safety is one of the fundamental human needs. Water areas are especially life-threatening to humans as water is not our natural living environment. This is why staying in water may limit or preclude a person's ability to perform the essential life functions. It is a primary objective of each state to respond swiftly to threats to life and health of its citizens in order to protect them from the consequences of random occurrences, this includes accidents in water areas. The Polish Voluntary Water Rescue Service (WOPR), a specially dedicated water emergency agency, was established in 1962. Currently it has over 80 thousand lifeguards providing help and assistance to people pursuing *recreational activities* in lakes, rivers and open *water*.

II. SWIMMING OVER CENTURIES

People have been able to swim probably since the dawn of human history. Being able to keep afloat was initially a functional skill – it was necessary for hunting and fishing. The increased contact of humans with water required swimming skills. Also war operations required soldiers to be able to swim. The first organized swimming lessons were conducted in ancient Rome where swimming was treated as one of the means to achieve a desired level of physical development. According to the Romans, a cultured man, apart from being able to read

and write, should also be able to swim. Many centuries later the Russian and Prussian armies contributed greatly to the popularization of swimming. A special role in development of swimming education can be assigned to a Prussian general Ernst Von Pfuel, the creator of first lidos in Berlin and the author of a book entitled *About swimming*. In 1810 Von Pfuel invented the breaststroke movement and recommended to learn it on land, using specially constructed devices (Karpiński, 2005).

III. THE DAWN OF WATER RESCUE

First records concerning life rescue were found in ancient annals. The term 'breath of life' appears in the Bible. It seems that mouth-to-mouth respiration was known in biblical times. The idea of saving lives by resuscitating people who drowned or were close to death due to other water related reasons, has a very long history. For example, the ancient Chinese and Egyptians considered the procedure of removing water from the airways of the drowned person really significant. The Egyptians did this by hanging the victim by the heels and alternately squeezing and stretching the chest. In China and Japan, the drowned person was hung over the back of an ox. While moving, the ox would jounce the rescued person. Another method was pain stimulation in which embers would be placed on the victim's stomach to stimulate the person to resume breathing. Until 1812, the Royal Navy used a method adopted from the Native Americans which relied on blowing tobacco smoke into the victim's anus by means of a special apparatus (Gwiaździnski, 1980). Another surgical procedure called tracheotomy i.e. cutting the trachea in cases of suffocation was applied by ancient Greeks in the second century A.D. Different kinds of bellows and bags with air have been in use to assist artificial respiration for a very long time. As the first attempts at resuscitation were linked to the observed results i.e. being able to breathe was considered as an equivalent to staying alive, the history of artificial respiration predates the beginnings of indirect cardiac massage by over a thousand years.

Later, especially in the 18th century, numerous water rescue societies were founded. The first 'Society for the Rescue of



Drowned Persons' was founded in 1767 in Amsterdam (Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen). It was the first society of that type in the world, followed by societies of Lille, Vienna, Venice, Copenhagen, Paris and London, all of which were established between 1772 and 1774.

The first textbooks and manuals concerning water rescue were written by Jonson in 1773, Kite in 1788 and Curry in 1792. These textbooks recommended mouth-to-mouth and mouth-to-nose method and the application of masks, tubes and bellows (Sych and Aroński, 1968). In 1775, Huntery recommended the application of blowers and bellows in the rescue of drowning persons. In 1779, Guts-Muths published a book *Gymnastics for Youth*, in which he devoted a lot of attention to water rescue. He observed for example that 'running along the shore with rescue equipment won't be of any help if we don't find the means of rescue within ourselves' (Skalski, 1998).

By 1850, the idea of water rescue was already widely spread. Among the members of the British Rescue Society were such known promoters of lifesaving activities and creators of artificial respiration methods as Dr. Marshall-Hall, Dr. Sylvester and Dr. Howard. Considerable contributions to water rescue were made by members of the French Rescue Society who first propagated the idea international cooperation of rescue organizations. The founder of the Society, Raymond Pitet, contributed to the establishment of a federation uniting lifesaving associations, similar to the International Red Cross Movement. As a result of his efforts, in 1878 in Marseilles, the first international meeting of representatives of national water rescue societies was organized. During this meeting, it was decided to establish an international organization gathering all rescue societies (Witkowski, 1973).

In the 20th century the idea of uniting water rescue organisations from different countries finally came to life. On 23 February 1993 in Leven, Belgium, the International Life Saving Federation (ILS) was founded. It was constituted on 3 September 1994 in Cardiff, England. The ILS merged with Madrid's Federation Internationale de Sauvetage Aquatique (FIS) founded in 1910, and the World Life Saving (WLS) established in 1958.

IV. THE BEGINNINGS OF WATER RESCUE IN POLAND

The oldest sources available mention a monastery and a hospital in a town of Sandomierz on the Vistula River. The monks of the monastery, which was established in 1604 by Hieronim Gastomski, provided aid to the victims of the river. The first book on water rescue in Poland was published in 1775 in Warsaw. The book whose title was *On saving drowning persons* was written under the patronage of A. Czartoryski. At the same time, on 13 November 1775, an edict was issued in Wrocław entitled 'Edict for the swift rescue of persons lost in the water due to sudden events and persons who are threatened by loss of life in any way'. In 1805, J. Śniadecki, the editor of *Dziennik Wieleński*, described various ways of rescuing drowning persons especially in 'water' countries. At the end of the 18th century, a certain kind of 'emergency service for

drowning persons' was established in Kraków. The book *Learning swimming and the art of swimming* was published in 1820 in Lviv. The author, K. Heinitz, also described the methods of hauling rescued persons to the shore and the necessary set of utensils to be found in a 'rescue box'. In 1839, the Kingdom of Poland adopted regulations giving resuscitation a legal status. In the same year in Warsaw, the Kingdom's Medical Board published *Information concerning the rescue of persons in the state of apparent death or threatened by sudden loss of life* edited by A. Janikowski. The authors stressed very strongly that in cases of persons pulled out of the water, it is essential to unblock the airways and clear the mouth of foreign bodies. J. Gawlik's book entitled *How to save drowning persons*, which was published in 1869 in Wadowice, was the first book in the Polish language which included not only descriptions of methods and ways of rescuing drowning persons but also instructions and guidelines on how to behave in or near water in order not to cause an accident.

In 1898, following the initiative of a journalist J. Radwan, the Imperial Society for the Rescue of Drowning Persons was established in Kalisz. In 1902, also in Kalisz, L. Wernic published a book entitled *How to rescue drowning persons*. In this volume, the author presented eight recommendations for bathing (Witkowski, 1973). In 1908, a periodical *Ruch* placed a note concerning the activities of the Petersburg Society for the Rescue of Drowning Persons which had 63 members in Warsaw. The members of the Petersburg Society were responsible for ensuring continuous presence of lifeguards at two Warsaw water stations: at Leszczyńskiego Street and at the Railway Bridge. According to the same periodical, in 1908 there were 26 lives lost in water in Warsaw. This was the first statistics of this kind.

In the period in question, the main efforts were focused on publishing guidelines concerning rescuing drowning persons – especially after pulling them ashore. There was almost no training of lifeguards at that time. On 20 April 1926, the authorities of the Board of the Polish Swimming Federation took a decision to create the Water Rescue Committee. The headquarters of the Committee was in Siemianowice, its first chairman was F. Berlik and the first members were: W. Trata, F. Bondar and W. Sussman. According to a biweekly magazine *Sport Wodny*, which published all announcements of the Polish Swimming Federation, the Committee was the first organized form of water rescue in Poland after regaining independence. The Water Rescue Committee oversaw all the associations involved in water rescue.

V. EARLY WATER RESCUE TRAINING IN POLAND

In 1927, the Polish Swimming Federation's Rescue Committee decided to declare the day of 29 June the 'Lifeguard Day'. On this day the Committee organised training courses and lifesaving shows. The main events of that day took place in the Silesia region. The 'Lifeguard Day' was an occasion to conduct a widespread educational campaign during which a specially selected team of instructors had an opportunity to train new

lifeguards. In 1929 two water rescue shows were organised in Bydgoszcz and Grudziądz. There was also a ten-day free training course in Kraków which was promoted by YMCA. After a four-year break in the activities, the Rescue Committee and the Polish Swimming Federation organized a 12-day water rescue course for instructors in the Central Physical Education Institute in Warsaw. The manager and the main speaker at the course was Capt. K. Laskowski who had trained in the Netherlands. The next two courses took place on 20 August 1938 in Warsaw and Gdynia.

After WW2, water rescue activities were resumed after the reactivation of the Polish Swimming Federation. In 1947, a new body called the Rescue Department was created. However, the department was not very active and training courses were organised very rarely. The situation did not change until 1952, when upon the initiative of D. Bogajewski –the head of the Swimming Department of the Warsaw Academy of Physical Education and Polish Swimming Federation, lifesaving was included in the Academy’s curricula. Slowly, in the years that followed, all major physical education schools started to train their students in water rescue. After water rescue was included in the student training programs of Warsaw Academy of Physical Education, necessary teaching materials were developed and collected by M. Witkowski PhD. In the spring of 1958, the Swimming Federation organized a course for lifeguards based on the extended curriculum of the Academy of Physical Education. The course was conducted by M. Witkowski and M. Skład. Due to the scarcity of publications concerning rescue theory and practice, the Board of the Great Poland Regional Swimming Association, wishing to help the trainees in their preparations for the exam, decided to publish the first after-war script which came to be known as the ‘Lifesaving’. The handbook was written by M. Witkowski.

In 1959, 1133 persons were declared drowned in Poland, one in four deaths in water concerned children and young people below the age of 18. The need to create a professional water rescue emergency service was really big. This was the beginning of the idea behind what was later called the Volunteer Water Rescue Service (WOPR). The ‘godfather’ of the service was T. Olszański, a well-known activist in the field of swimming. In 1959 he unified certificates for 1st and 2nd class lifeguards and contributed to the standardisation of training programs for respective ranks which started to be uniform for the whole country. In the same year, the Board of Polish Swimming Federation recommended all regional swimming federations to establish water rescue committees that would organize training courses for lifeguards. Within two years, three courses for instructors were organised which trained 74 new lifeguards. In the 1960s, voluntary lifeguard teams were formed in Augustów and the Poznańskie voivodeship, soon afterwards other voivodships followed suit.

VI. POLISH VOLUNTARY WATER RESCUE SERVICE (WOPR)

The grounds for the creation of a country-wide water rescue service were laid on 11 April 1962 thanks to the ordinance No.

74 of the President of the Main Committee of Physical Education and Tourism. Initially, in the early stages the service functioned on the basis of temporary regulations while voluntary lifeguard teams were recruited and the organisational structures were prepared for taking over all water lifesaving organisations existing at that time in the country (Burski and Tabaczek-Bejster, 2012).

In 1965, the Polish Swimming Federation’s Rescue Committee introduced significant changes in the lifeguards training programs. These changes referred to the increase in the volume of the course material, introduction of more course hours and higher requirements for respective lifeguard ranks. The Committee also recommended putting more emphasis on the training of lifeguards in open waters. In the same year, the verification of the 1st class lifeguards and water rescue instructors was conducted.

The first assembly of members of what was going to become the Volunteer Water Rescue Service (WOPR) took place on 6-7 November 1965 in Poznań. During the assembly, the profile and scope of activities of the organization were discussed comprehensively. 12 people were selected as the management of the organization. This group of activists was entrusted with the task of developing a legal status, obtaining legal personality and creating a new, specialized organization called the Volunteer Water Rescue Service (WOPR). After much discussion, the articles of the association were drawn up and WOPR obtained its legal status following the decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of 9 October 1967. The period 1965–1969 saw intensive organizational, informative and training transformations. On 30 April 1969, based on an agreement between the General Board of WOPR and the Polish Swimming Federation, the Volunteer Water Rescue Service took over all the water rescue issues.

On a more international note, WOPR participated in the FIS Congress and Lifesaving World Championship in Warsaw on 24-28 August 1970. During the Congress, upon the motion of Bulgaria, WOPR was admitted to the International Life Saving and Applied Sports Federation (FIS) and in the same year, during the Congress in Varna, WOPR became its member. During the next Congress in Cardiff, in 1994, FIS joined the International Life Saving Federation, forming the European Federation (ILS Federation of Europe).

VII. PROVISION OF SECURITY IN OR NEAR WATER – ORGANISATIONAL AND LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

At present, water rescue operations can be carried out by entities that have obtained the consent of the minister competent for internal affairs to perform water rescue. All entities engaged in water rescue must be in the register of units constituting a part of the Polish National Rescue System. The rescue services may be provided on designated water areas used for bathing and swimming e.g. swimming pools or other facilities with pool basins with a total area covering at least 100 m² and depth of over 0.4 m in the deepest point or depth over 1.2 m, upon permission of the head of a given designated water area. The

officials responsible for ensuring safety of persons staying in water areas are:

- within the national or landscape park - the director of the park,
- in the area where sport or recreation activity is carried out - the legal person, legal entity or organizational unit without legal personality, who is responsible for these activities in the supervised area,
- other water areas or facilities - the competent head of a local government unit e.g. the mayor.

Ensuring security in or near a water area relies on the analysis of threats which includes:

- identification of places constituting danger;
- marking and securing areas, facilities and equipment intended for swimming or other recreational activities in water areas;
- conducting preventive and educational activities also among school children related to safety in water areas such as raising awareness of threats related to the use of water areas;
- warning and informing about the weather conditions and other factors that may cause hazard to the health or life of people;
- organizing assistance and rescue of persons who have been injured or are at risk of losing their life or health.

The stages of a rescue operation include:

- receiving information on an accident or a hazardous situation;
- reaching the scene of the accident with appropriate rescue equipment;
- delivering qualified first aid;
- securing the place of the accident or danger;
- evacuating people from the area which may pose a danger for their health or life;
- transport of victims or persons who are exposed to the risk of loss of life or health in the water area to the place where it is possible to undertake medical rescue operations by the units of the National Emergency Medical Services System (pursuant to article 32 paragraph 1 of the Act of 8th September 2006 on State Emergency Medical Services) after prior arrangement concerning the place of transfer with the dispatcher of the unit of the State Medical Rescue System;
- searching for missing persons in the water area.

When it comes to the tasks related to the supervision of water rescue, they are carried out by the minister competent for internal affairs, on the basis of the provisions of the Act of 18 August 2011 on the safety of persons residing in water areas (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1482). Other relevant legislation includes:

- the ordinance of 23 January 2012 on minimum requirements regarding the number of lifeguards

ensuring permanent control of the designated water area,

- the ordinance of 6 March 2012 on the method of marking and protecting water areas, and patterns of prohibition signs, warranties and information signs and flags,
- the ordinance of 27 February 2012 on the requirements for providing the designated water areas with rescue and necessary equipment, signalling and warning devices and medical equipment, medicines and sanitary ware,
- the ordinance of 21 June 2012 on training in water rescue.

As part of the supervision, the Minister may request entities authorized to perform water rescue services to disclose documents and provide written explanations regarding their activities related to performing water rescue. The Minister may as well conduct checks of entities authorized to perform water rescue services regarding the correct implementation of tasks related to performing water rescue. The assessment of activity of water rescue entities is carried out in terms of legality, economy, expediency and reliability. Tasks in the field of water rescue are co-financed by voivods and may be co-financed by local government units under targeted subsidies which may be granted for: maintaining emergency readiness, carrying out rescue operations, organizing and conducting training programmes of water rescuers and rescue dogs and their guides, maintenance of operational readiness of rescue equipment and keeping records of accidents. Entities authorized to perform water rescue operations are also obliged to carry out preventive and educational activities propagating the area of safety in water areas. As part of preventive and educational activities, entities authorized to carry out water rescue services are obliged to cooperate with water authorities and the Police in order to carry out risk analysis and to supervise places in which risks may occur, including places commonly used for swimming.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

It should be remembered that each person staying in or around water is responsible for his or her safety and must take all necessary precautions to protect their own and other people's lives and health by getting acquainted with the rules and regulations in force in a given area and complying with all information and prohibition signs. It is necessary to adapt one's activity to the possessed skills and current weather conditions. The swimming equipment and accessories should always be in good working condition, the equipment and accessories must be used for the purposes for which they are designated and in accordance with the rules. In case of emergencies that may affect the safety of persons, one must immediately notify relevant emergency services or entities authorized to perform water rescue in order to minimise the impact of the incident.

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