

A doctor without boundaries: a memory of Alina Margolis-Edelman on the hundredth anniversary of her birth (1922–2008)

Józefa Dąbek¹, Halina Kulik², Oskar Sierka³, Eugeniusz J. Kucharz⁴, Zbigniew Gąsior¹

¹ Department of Cardiology, Faculty of Health Sciences in Katowice, Medical University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

² Department of Propaedeutics of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences in Katowice, Medical University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

³ Student Research Group at the Department of Cardiology, Faculty of Health Sciences in Katowice, Medical University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

⁴ Faculty of Medical Sciences in Katowice, Medical University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland

April 18 marked the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Alina Margolis-Edelman (1922–2008), a Polish doctor of Jewish origin, a participant of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, a social activist, and a founder of the Nobody's Children Foundation (since 2016 the Empowering Children Foundation), and one of the most active woman activists of Médecins du Monde.¹ The centenary of her birthday is a great occasion to remember this exceptional person, whose whole life was a priceless lesson on one of the most important human needs, the most desirable and creative emotion, that is, love for people and seeing to those in need.

Alina Margolis-Edelman (FIGURE 1) was born on April 18, 1922 in Łódź, in the family of Aleksander Margolis (1887–1939) and Anna née Markson (1892–1987). During the Second World War, she studied at the Nursing School established in 1923 at the Jewish Hospital of the Orthodox Jews ("Czyste" Jewish Hospital) in Warsaw, and after the war ended, she started her medical studies at the Medical Academy of Łódź (nowadays the Medical University of Lodz).^{2,3} Apart from medicine, after which Alina Margolis-Edelman specialized in pediatrics, she also studied pedagogy. She specialized in nephrology and adolescent diabetes. In 1953, she founded an outpatient clinic for children with kidney diseases and a center for the treatment of childhood diabetes in Rabka. Professor Teresa Pajszczyk-Kieszkiewicz wrote: "Ala was passionate about everything she did. She loved people and devoted her entire life to them, regardless of whether she was healthy or suffered from physical ailments. She was an outstanding doctor—a pediatrician, but her care was not limited to treating children—she looked after the child, not

only their disease. She knew the children under her care like no other doctor."⁴

Alina Margolis-Edelman worked at the Department of Pediatrics of the Medical Academy of Łódź. Her scientific and social interests focused on childhood diabetes, which was then underestimated, misunderstood, and nonexistent in science. In this regard, she used the knowledge and experience of Henri Lestrade (1921–1997), one of the pioneers of pediatric diabetology, whom she visited in France. Upon her return, she immediately transferred the knowledge and experience gained in France to Poland. Alina Margolis-Edelman was an extremely hardworking person, and in addition to her medical practice she was developing her scientific passions. Her research on childhood diabetes resulted in the preparation of her habilitation thesis and a book entitled *Cukrzyca u dzieci* (Diabetes in children), which has had 3 editions since its first release in 1964 (1969, 1973, 1995). In March 1968, as a result of an antisemitic campaign implemented by the communist authorities of Poland, Alina lost her job and her habilitation procedure was blocked. In 1972, Alina made a difficult decision to move to Paris, where she left with her children, Anna (born 1956) and Alexander (born 1951).

The first years of emigration were very difficult. As the French authorities refused to recognize her diploma, she resumed medical studies there. During this period, she worked several jobs to support her family, including one as a vaccine tester.⁵ She obtained the qualifications required by the French government and became a medical graduate at the age of 60!

In the mid-70s, she continued her intense social activity, engaging in several actions to help those in need. Together with Bernard Kouchner

Correspondence to:

Józefa Dąbek,
Department of Cardiology,
Faculty of Health Sciences in
Katowice, Medical University of Silesia,
ul. Ziolowa 45/47, 40-635 Katowice,
Poland, phone: +48 32 359 80 00,
email: jdabek@sum.edu.pl
Received: October 8, 2022.
Accepted: October 10, 2022.
Published online: October 21, 2022.
Pol Arch Intern Med. 2022;
132 (10): 16354
doi:10.20452/pamw.16354
Copyright by the Author(s), 2022



FIGURE 1 Alina Margolis-Edelman with her husband, Marek Edelman (March 24, 1988)
Anna Beata Bohdziewicz/REPORTER.

(born 1939), a French gastroenterologist and politician, they founded international charity organizations Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, MSF) and Doctors of the World (*Médecins du Monde*) that provide organized medical assistance in various parts of the world, in countries affected by internal conflicts, poverty, and hunger. It is worth mentioning that the MSF has received many awards for its activities, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. As a Doctor of the World, she worked in hospitals in Chad, Salvador, Afghanistan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where she was a co-organizer of a support center for rape victims during the civil war. On hospital ships, she looked after refugees from the communist Vietnam, saved from the South China Sea. In Russia, she organized houses for homeless children.^{5,6}

Alina Margolis-Edelman did not forget about Poland and Poles. During the martial law period in Poland (1981–1983), she organized, together with a group of friends, a transport of medications, food, clothes, and toys for children of Polish people fighting for their freedom and dignity. She also cofounded the French Association of Help for the Sick in Poland (*SOS Aide aux Malades Polonais*), which offered the possibility of treating terminally ill patients from Poland in France, organized internships for Polish doctors, and financial aid for hospitals in Poland. She took effective steps toward organizing the care of hearing-impaired children, providing research on both children's hearing and their diagnosis and treatment.⁴

In 1989, she founded the Social Initiative Aid Office, and 2 years later, in 1991, the Nobody's Children Foundation (nowadays the Empowering Children Foundation). In the 1990s, it was the first organization to deal with the issues of violence and sexual abuse toward children. As a part of the Foundation's works, she started organizing professional medical, psychological, and legal assistance for victims of violence as well as social campaigns to promote prevention and combat of violence.

Alina Margolis-Edelman died on March 23, 2008 in Paris and was buried at the ecumenical

cemetery in Bagneux. Her symbolic grave in Poland is located at the Jewish cemetery in Okopowa Street in Warsaw, next to her husband Marek Edelman (famous Polish cardiologist and politician). She was an extremely modest woman with great accomplishments despite many adversities. John Steinbeck (1902–1968), an American writer and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962 wrote that "Men seem to be born with a debt they can never pay no matter how hard they try. It piles up ahead of them. Man owes something to man. If he ignores the debt it poisons him, and if he tries to make payments the debt only increases, and the quality of his gift is the measure of the man." Michał Szymańczak, a co-organizer of the Nobody's Children Foundation, recalled in a radio broadcast that Alina Margolis-Edelman "often said that she had a debt that she had to pay back."⁷

Alina Margolis-Edelman, until the end of her life, selflessly, with great dedication, repaid her debt by doing good, and showing care and love to everyone in need. After the Warsaw Uprising, she was awarded the Cross of Valor for her courage and dedication to helping the wounded. On April 6, 1998, Polish children awarded her the Order of the Smile, that is, the highest international award for activities that bring joy to children. Since 2011, the Empowering Children Foundation together with the Zeszyty Literackie Foundation have been awarding the Alina Margolis-Edelman prize to people especially involved in activities aimed at helping children.⁸ On the hundredth anniversary of her birth, the Municipal Council of Łódź celebrated by deciding to announce Alina Margolis-Edelman the Matron of the Year 2022. The honorary patronage over the jubilee year was assumed by the Ambassador of France in Poland. Moreover, Marek Edelman's Dialogue Center in Łódź, in cooperation with the Museum of the City of Łódź, the Łódź Women's Trail, the POLIN Museum in Warsaw, and the Empowering Children Foundation organized a series of events devoted to the Jubilarian, including a fundraising for victims in Ukraine under the slogan "Be like Alina."⁹

Alina Margolis-Edelman was an extremely brave, noble, and kind woman, sensitive to harm and the needs of others. She had this extraordinary and unique feature of infecting people with the need to help and do good. If she had lived, she would have been a hundred years old and she would have certainly been organizing help for the victims of the war in Ukraine, especially children. After all, she was helping all her life and tried to be wherever her help was needed.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS None.

OPEN ACCESS This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution -NonCommercial- ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material, provided the original work is properly cited,

HOW TO CITE Dąbek J, Kulik H, Sierka O, et al. A doctor without boundaries: a memory of Alina Margolis-Edelman on the hundredth anniversary of her birth (1922–2008). *Pol Arch Intern Med.* 2022; 132: 16354. doi:10.20452/pamw.16354

REFERENCES

- 1 Alina Margolis-Edelman. Biography. Polish Center on Holocaust Research. <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Osoby/M/Margolis-Edelman-Alina-Margolis>. Accessed July 8, 2022.
- 2 Ciesielska M. Amelia Greenwald and the Nursing School at the Old Jewish Hospital at Czyste in Warsaw [in Polish]. *Medycyna Nowożytna.* 2020; 26: 93-139. [↗](#)
- 3 Schindlerówna S. The Nursing School at the Old Jewish Hospital in Warsaw 1923-1928 [in Polish]. Warszawa: Bernard Więgart Publishing; 1929.
- 4 Pajszczyk-Kieszkiewicz T. Dr med. Alina Margolis-Edelman. *Kronikarz. Rocznik Uniwersytetu Medycznego w Łodzi.* 2007/2008, 6: 1/2: 456-457.
- 5 Mielnikiewicz O. Margolis-Edelman Alina. Virtual Shtetl [in Polish]. <https://sztetl.org.pl/biogramy/193197-margolis-edelman-alina>. Accessed July 11, 2022.
- 6 Rzeczycka A. Obituary of Alina Margolis-Edelman [in Polish]. RFI Radio-france Internationale. http://www.rfi.fr/actupl/articles/100/article_4221.asp. Accessed July 10, 2022.
- 7 Alina Margolis-Edelman. Devoted to life-long improvement of the world [in Polish]. <https://www.polskieradio.pl/8/2222/artykul/2794474,alina-margolisedelman-przez-cale-zycie-poprawiala-ten-swiat>. Accessed June 29, 2022.
- 8 The Empowering Children Foundation. Award of Alina Margolis-Edelman. <https://fdds.pl/o-fundacji/nagroda-im-aliny-margolis-edelman.html>. Accessed June 29, 2022.
- 9 A hundredth birthday of Alina Margolis-Edelman [in Polish]. <https://www.centrumdialogu.com/100urodziny-aliny-margolis-edelman>. Accessed July 10, 2022.