

**PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT
IN THE GRAND DUCHY OF POSEN THROUGH
THE OLYMPIC CIRCUS**

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Abstract. This article examines the historical context of public health in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Posen in Prussian-partitioned Poland of the mid-nineteenth century, focusing on the circus as a local entertainment attraction that could indirectly contribute to well-being and the physical and mental health of the Polish population. Non-reactive research methods used in historical sciences were applied to analyse archival materials related to the widely acclaimed Olympic circus of that era. The findings of the conducted research are press releases, particularly the note published in the local press on June 11, 1856. Circus performances, showcasing sports, culture, and human prowess, exemplified high physical culture levels, offering relaxing, imaginative, and sensory experiences. It is argued that through the performances of professional athletes, the circus promoted attitudes of self-development and the need to strive for set goals, especially important for the Poles in the context of their independence aspirations.

Keywords: Olympic, circus, physical culture, public health, mental health, physical health, Grand Duchy of Posen, Poland

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1. Introduction

As a result of evolution over millions of years, humans adopted an upright posture and developed the need to be on the move (Sahaj 2001). Due to various biological constraints of human existence different threats to life or health triggered reflections and actions in people's collective consciousness that regulated human behaviours oriented towards disease prevention and health maintenance based on the state of knowledge and concepts of organization of social life. The state of health was reinforced by natural, social or economic factors, resulting from the conditions of individual population groups (Rosen 1993).

As well as referring to the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health and fitness, the historical definition of public health also indicated the need to develop social mechanisms to ensure a standard of living for all and enable them to maintain and consolidate their health (Winslow 1920). These assumptions made the definition of public health different from the classic definition of medicine, as it emphasized the health of the collective and efforts of societies to protect themselves from disease, focusing, among other things, on preventive healthcare (Nosko 1997). Since ancient times one of the commonly recommended forms of disease prevention has been physical activity as physical health has always been synonymous with the health of the individual. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of mental health had not been systematically addressed. Mental well-being was often conflated with notions of intellectual deficiency or outright insanity. During this period, a limited number of psychiatric facilities existed primarily for the purpose of isolating and removing individuals deemed mentally ill from public scrutiny (Bilikiewicz and Gallus 1962).

The development of physical activity associated with a healthy lifestyle and contact with nature was accompanied in the 19th century by the revival of sport. This represented a breakthrough because the dwellers of the Eastern European cities, for example those in the Polish lands under Prussian rule, had been characterized by a low level of physical fitness, which may have been due to the once widespread opinion of sport being useless, ridiculous, and practiced only by primitive amateurs (Uściński 2016). In addition, the subject of women's physical activity was treated rather perfunctorily, comprising mainly of recommendations of walking and not too strenuous outdoor physical games due to the unquestionable morality and aesthetics of these activities (Kałamacka 2015). In the meantime, newly constructed exercise yards, playing fields, swimming pools, ice rinks, horse racing tracks, and later sports halls and other facilities, where both amateurs and athletes could shape their bodies, keep fit, and acquire new skills, were becoming increasingly popular (Jurek 2000). This was important in the context of the earlier infrastructural deficiencies of cities, such as the lack of water supply or sewage systems.

One form of human engagement, experienced and understood as something pleasurable and directed at satisfying psychological needs of individuals, was entertainment. It could involve human activity or relative passivity in the physical as well as in the psychological sphere. Indeed, entertainment has various functions in people's lives, and it allows them to develop, adapt, and maintain their mental

and physical health (Obidziński 2015). An example of entertainment that combines elements of culture and sport in its artistic output comprising animal acts, stage performers, gymnasts or acrobats performing complicated balancing acts, are traditional circus shows (van Rens and Filho 2020). Circuses require the same mental skills from the performers as those required from athletes, i.e. commitment, resilience, confidence, or concentration (Ross and Shapiro 2017). Furthermore, sport defined as a conscious and ludic human activity that has a part to play in shaping the destiny of individuals and communities through all-round bodily and spiritual improvement, blends perfectly with circus endeavours (Lipoński 2002). Thus, many physical and psychological experiences from sport and performing arts can be gained in the circus environment. However, it should be emphasized that participation and interest in the circus can be diverse, e.g. active, including physical involvement; receptive, consisting primarily of watching the art; and active-receptive (Davies et al. 2012). Regardless of the form of participation, contact with art has been found to have a positive impact on psychological well-being (Davies et al. 2016).

The subject of circuses in research remains under-exploited. In recent years, however, the mental health of circus professionals (van Rens and Heritage 2021) or arts students (Stubbe et al. 2018) has been studied. On the other hand, due to the nature of their work requiring constantly being in the best possible physical condition, circus performers' training is most often focused on developing muscular strength, movement and expression, putting aside any mental health aspects (Donohue et al. 2020). Instead, there is empirical evidence that passive watching performers act in circus arenas can have a positive impact on people's health and well-being (Heller and Tagliatalata 2018). This has been proven, for example, in studies on individuals with fewer opportunities or specific needs as well as coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Spiegel and Parent 2018, Loisel et al. 2019). The sense of investigating the connection between circuses and sport or health is important in the context of the relationship of man's various physical activities to culture or the arts. At the end of the 1830s, *The Illustrated London News* recognised the important culture-forming role of sport, treating it on a par with art. Circus is an art rooted in the European cultural tradition, and its strength was the public's willingness to experience sensations, emotions and watch remarkable phenomena containing demonstrations of physical prowess of an extraordinary nature. For this reason, it took on an athletic character, taking on a proto-sports form – without the rules of sporting combat regulated by rules or institutions guarding the correctness of the competition's principles, as its aim, rather than a specific result, was to be a spectacular show effect (Godlewski 2000). Compared to sport, the circus artist is not focused on the result, but on interacting with the audience and giving them a positive impression, which should culminate in applause. Through the performances, the artist is an educator who pays attention to aspects such as movement therapy and psychomotor preparation, the development of reaction speed or visuospatial coordination (Godlewski and Sajek 2018).

The above findings warrant historical research into the impact of the circus on the health and life of societies. Particularly relevant seems to be the context of nations

which, due to their geopolitical conditions, did not have full freedom in shaping their policies on healthcare, culture propagation, or physical culture. One such example can be the Poles under Prussian rule in the nineteenth century, when parts of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth constituting the region of present-day Greater Poland (also known by its Polish name Wielkopolska) were occupied by the Kingdom of Prussia as a result of the partitions of Poland, and were subjected to a gradual process of Germanisation (Paprocki 1970). The subsequent division of the Duchy of Warsaw at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 made the city of Posen (present-day Poznań) the main urban centre of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Posen, despite its peripheral location within the Prussian state (Trzeciakowski 1964). The Grand Duchy of Posen developed much less dynamically in comparison with other parts of Prussia, also in the field of broadly defined physical culture (Łuczak 2010). Although the Duchy remained one of the leading centres of organic work, its autonomy was consistently curtailed over the years and was finally abolished in 1848. Significantly, in the same year the Prussian administration decided to dissolve the Grand Duchy of Posen and establish in its place a new entity called the Province of Posen, but the previous name remained in common use for the mentioned area for several decades to come. This did not affect the interest of the region's residents in sport as a form of keeping fit as well as active recreation and entertainment. Information on opportunities to practise recreational sport or enjoy professional sport was sought in the local press, especially in Polish-language Greater Poland regional magazines, which were in fact the only source of information on current urban affairs. Although the subject of physical culture was presented rather sketchily in those magazines (Rozmiarek and Włodarczyk 2021b), its impact on the daily lives and health of individuals was unquestionable.

Although there are numerous monographs on the history of circuses in the world (Stoddart 2000, Linda 2014) and their most important representatives (Saxon 1978, Ward 2018), little research has been carried out on the role of the Olympic circus. Its history is recounted by Bogdan Danowicz in his book *Był cyrk olimpijski...* published in 1984 in Polish and based on foreign circus literature meticulously studied by the author, who worked as a literary consultant for the United Entertainment Companies – a government institution in charge of all the entertainment shows (Danowicz 1984). Recent research into the Olympic circus reveals that the variety and frequency of performances of equestrian shows point to circus troupes and their leaders as promoters of physical culture in Greater Poland (Rozmiarek and Włodarczyk 2021a). Moreover, circus performances that more or less consciously popularised the Olympic tradition at the time can be classified as *pseudo-Olympics* (Rozmiarek 2020, Rozmiarek and Włodarczyk 2023) – a term introduced by Gerald Redmond (Redmond 1988) referring to games inspired by the Olympic Games (usually by their name or programme) and the Olympic idea itself that had an impact on many sports, both at the local and national level (Margaritis et al. 2017, Włodarczyk and Rozmiarek 2020).

The aim of this article is to raise awareness among the international public of the role of the Olympic circus and its possible contribution to the physical and mental

health of the residents of Prussian-partitioned Poland by promoting an attitude of self-development and the need to pursue goals, especially important for the Poles in the context of their independence aspirations. The study also provides a historical outline of public health in the area, which at the time did not concern issues of mental health.

2. Methodology

Historical research methodology was chosen as the most appropriate for the study of the past related to human and social activities. Non-reactive research methods such as content analysis and comparative and historical research proved particularly valuable (Babbie 2017). Due to the time frame of the subject, spanning the nineteenth century, the applied methodology made it possible to examine not only the scholarly literature on the subject, but also various source materials dating back several hundred years. Because of the passage of time since the events described, many relevant sources had been destroyed due to wars and other historical perturbations. This fact was confirmed by the author in the State Archives in Poznan, an institution established in 1919 on the foundations of the post-German State Archives which had existed since 1869. The State Archives now possess the largest number of preserved materials relating to the entire region, which in the past was part of the Grand Duchy of Posen (Krüger 2015).

Following an official enquiry, the State Archives in Poznan informed the author that it possessed no archival material regarding the performances of circus troupes in the Duchy from the mid-nineteenth century. The staff of the State Archives searched its entire holdings with particular reference to acts, placards, posters and leaflets, with the exception of newspaper contents (*Response...* 2022). For this reason, the search had to be limited to the press published in the Duchy. At the time, the market was dominated by newspapers that tackled regional themes from a multi-thematic and sectoral perspective, quoting both informational and journalistic materials and frequently referring to historical, literary, sightseeing or socio-cultural issues, with a particular emphasis on national education, cultivation of the Polish language as well as on upholding the national spirit and solidarity among Poles. The most popular Greater Poland newspapers and magazines included *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* (Gazette of the Grand Duchy of Posen) (1815–1865), *Przyjaciół Ludu* (Friend of the People) (1834–1849), *Orełdownik Naukowy* (Scholarly Advocate) (1840–1845), *Przegląd Poznański* (Posen Review) (1845–1865), *Gazeta Polska* (Polish Gazette) (1848–1850), *Gazeta Wielkopolska Niedzielną* (Greater Poland Sunday Gazette) (1849–1850), *Przyroda i Przemysł* (Nature and Industry) (1856–1858) and *Tygodnik Poznański* (Posen Weekly) (1862–1863) (Kowalczyk 2017). Circus topics could only appear in magazines that published daily news and usually contained sections with advertisements and various opinions of correspondents or local residents. Therefore, of all the newspapers, the daily *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* (published as the *Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* from July 1, 1845) was selected as the best research source.

The present study has a socio-historical theoretical orientation (Wohl 1979, Kruczek 2009). It is a historical overview based on primary and secondary sources. The historical perspective of public health has already been addressed by researchers before, however, in the author's opinion, the accessed sources allow the past events to be reliably presented and the research problem to be reliably portrayed. The present exposition by no means lays claim to an unequivocal treatment of the subject, but rather assumes the character of a primary source reconnaissance, which may perennially be enriched by an array of pertinent and supplementary facts.

3. Public health and its relation to the physical culture of Polish society

In the era of capitalism, industrialization and urbanization, the life of societies generated an increasing number of problems and needs to adapt to the new conditions (Godlewski 1990, Hądzerek 1996). This was particularly noticeable in nineteenth-century partitioned Poland, where the public health situation was unsatisfactory. The partitioning powers abolished Polish health service organizations, introducing a bureaucratic model and eliminating Poles with any influence on public health from public life (Magowska 2012).

In partitioned Poland physical exercise considerations took precedence over health matters. For the Poles physical fitness was important both in peacetime and during and after the partitions of their homeland. At that time, a lack of physical fitness was tantamount to a lack of patriotism and to unwillingness to fight for independence (Kałamacka 2004). Progress related to technology and science, gradually led to the development of new physical culture structures. In addition to a utilitarian approach, physical culture was also developed through the prism of values related to health, hedonism, perfectionism, and competition, inspired by western ideas (Żmuda-Pałka and Siwek 2017). However, for these changes to take place, modern educators were needed, above all physicians, who using their knowledge and commitment were able to demonstrate the benefits of their innovative approach to physical activity (Kałamacka 2014).

Doctors wishing to shape attitudes encouraging physical education focused on health didactics, unofficially recognized the significance of physical activity in the context of intended democratization of the country. The fostering of appropriate knowledge was made possible by content related to rational human behaviour, with health understood as the opposite of disease, supplemented by modern views on sanitation and hygiene. As there was no single definition of health in the nineteenth century, depending on the interpretation of various terms, different methods and measures of disease prevention and treatment were adapted. The development of a definition of health that would appeal to the widest possible audience, and not only to specialists, was the nucleus of health sciences emphasizing the benefits of exercise (without much consideration of its intensity) and recommending moderate levels of exercise as there were no studies confirming the effects of professional

sport on health. Nevertheless, it was through professional sport and the emergence of the first organized sports, including gymnastics, that the role of health and physical education increased (Kałamacka 2004).

In the nineteenth century the inhabitants of partitioned Polish territories, including the Grand Duchy of Posen, enjoyed the first opportunities to experience not only amateur sport, accessible to all, but also championship-level sports, which was not initially associated with hygiene and health motives (Kałamacka 2005). The various forms of sport that emerged over the years were intended to encourage the public to reject a sedentary lifestyle and physical inactivity that had a negative impact not only on physical but also on mental health (Kazimierzczak 2004). For this reason, the promotion of sport – understood as an individual or collective form of human activity restoring health but improving psychophysical strength – was one of physicians' main objectives in the field of preventive healthcare (Kałamacka 2005). Various sports drew public attention to their one common feature: the high level of physical fitness and movement skills of competitors, which made it possible to promote a life attitude based on good health practices. Although the spectators watching competitions of professional athletes most often simply wanted to satisfy their needs of entertainment, they also communed with physical culture at the highest level (Lipiec 1988).

4. Olympic circus as a form of entertainment influencing citizens' imaginations

The first circus known as Olympic circus (originally in French as *Cirque Olympique*) was an amphitheatre built in 1782 in France on the suburbs of Paris by entrepreneur Phillip Astley, an English Sergeant-Major of the 15th King's Royal Regiment of Light Dragoons (Frost 1881). Even then, almost all of the most characteristic circus activities, such as high-wire acrobatics, trapeze jumping, circus ballet, tightrope walking, horse gymnastics, equestrian vaulting, military performances and mime shows, had appeared (Danowicz 1984). The Olympic circus was taken over in 1793 by the Italian equestrian artist Antonio Franconi, as Astley had to leave the French capital because of the revolution (Wild 1989). Franconi moved it to the former seat of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, where he built a new amphitheatre and stables. After various vicissitudes and numerous problems, the Olympic circus was re-opened in December 1807 (McCormick 2011). This moment can be considered an important stage in the development of the modern circus and, at the same time, the birth of the Olympic circus, not only in the context of a building, but also to define a particular type of artistic spectacle based on the display of physical prowess and strength, as well as the demonstration of the human body's capabilities. The shows were intended to evoke numerous impressions, emotions and reflections from the audience. Franconi's circus, after a wave of popularity in the first decades of the nineteenth century, had to give its place to the German circus, which attached greater importance to aesthetic and pedagogical qualities. The first and hugely

popular German circus troupe, which offered an alternative to the French shows and was advertised with an Olympic theme, was the circus of Rudolph Brilloff, initially associated with the traditional marketplace jugglery (Günther 1986).

The entertainment needs of the Grand Duchy of Posen were met from 1839 onwards by a Brilloff's troupe that organised events under the name 'Olympic Games' ("Igrzyska Olimpiskie" 1839). The venue for the show was a newly erected circus "by the diamond lights in what was once a lodge garden abutting the camellaria square" ("Igrzyska" 1839). Initially, circus troupes staged equestrian shows and re-enactments of historical events, especially the Napoleonic wars, in which military battles on horseback or counter marches were presented ("Igrzyska Olimpijskie" 1839). However, one press note mentioned a strength display during individual performances by the artificer Ernst Renz ("Igrzyska Olimpiskie" 1839) – the later director of a circus troupe – who, by showing his immense versatility made the audience aware of the role of stamina in maintaining physical fitness. In 1841, C. Gärtner and his troupe staged similar shows in the Royal Riding School of the Grand Duchy of Posen (Rozmiarek and Włodarczyk 2021).

The Olympic circus also visited Posen in the late spring of 1853. The first extensive account of its performances by a spectator or a newspaper correspondent included a description of the circus building as well as the presented sports and artistic tricks. They included the so-called 'academic exercises' involving boys jumping through hoops sealed with paper or throwing brass plates. The author of the note compared the performed activities to the best paintings or woodcarvings, while the dance shows resembled to him "acrobatic dances of southern women with castanets" ("Kronika miejscowa" 1853). Over time the range of performances expanded to include attractions such as women performing ring grabs with a sword or shooting pistols ("Cyrk olimpijski" 1853a). One of the main attractions staged by the Olympic circus in the Grand Duchy of Posen was a running race of two large African black ostriches ("Olimpijski Cyrkus E. Renza" 1853). During the show, the birds would chase the horsemen, slapping them with their wings, hissing, and opening their beaks. The riders were then ultimately rescued from the birds by the Bedouins ("Cyrk olimpijski" 1853b). The artistic level of the Olympic circus was appreciated by poets, for example, J. Brancovich ("A Monsieur E. Renz" 1853).

The most relevant press note is an extensive entry by a correspondent or a spectator of Ernst Renz's performance, from June 11, 1856, published in *Gazeta W. Xięstwa Poznańskiego* in the "Artistic News" section. In the first part of his note, the anonymous author emphasises the great value of circus art in the context of other branches of culture, including museums. He states that young people consider themselves to be in step with the times for whom "an exhibition or a concert in salons open to the public (...) smacks of some aristocratic pride that needs to be eclipsed" ("Wiadomości artystyczne" 1856). The author admitted he heard such opinions more than once although he does not cite the place or circumstances in which they were uttered. He observed, however, that "for such people of progress Renz's circus is open, where they let their imagination run free, or rather, by grazing their eyes and teasing their senses, lull their thoughts and imaginations" ("Wiadomości artystyczne" 1856).

He noted that Renz's troupe presented plays and games, and that the performers earned "justice to the incomprehensible courage, dexterity, and strength of men and women" ("Wiadomości artystyczne" 1856). Among the most startling attractions, which were "admired in all illustrious cities of Germany" the author points out the incredible power of the dwarf Tom-Pouce and the plays of horsemen "so bold, so terrifying, that no person of weak nerves could look at them calmly" ("Wiadomości artystyczne" 1856). He finally notes that "for a community busy with work, it is frequent and even necessary at times to have such entertainment, which, while edifying the senses and entertaining the eye, leaves the senses in complete idleness" ("Wiadomości artystyczne" 1856). He thus emphasises the extremely important role of sports and artistic performances in the daily life of residents of the Grand Duchy of Posen, who did not care about any other forms of relaxation, motivation for further activity, or individual development, which is significant in terms of the physical and mental health of the population. This assertion can also be applied to the situation of Poles in other partitioned areas of their homeland. Work, especially in the absence of statehood, became one of the elements of maintaining the minimum existence necessary for the survival of individuals. The author of the press note also assumes that participation in such events could permanently improve not only one's well-being, but also one's cultural sensitivity, which could be developed on a daily basis in the Variety theatre staging plays by Fredro, Skarbek and Korzeniowski. The author concludes his argument by indicating the utter futility of undertaking physical development without caring for mental health. He also relates to self-development and the need to pursue one's goals in life, indicating that great ideas should only be approached with great perseverance. He also wonders where "mankind would have gone" if everyone had relied on tenacity, consistency, and determination, picking themselves up after every fall in life. In his final sentence, he apologises for his straightforward opinions expressed under the influence of the shows of the most eminent circus artists ("Wiadomości artystyczne" 1856).

Ernst Renz's circus company also visited the Grand Duchy of Posen in June 1858. The famous circus entrepreneur announced gymnastic performances and a higher school of riding and dressage, indicating that he was aware of the familiarity of his circus repertoire by the Posen residents. For this reason, Renz arrived with his company to present a special programme, which was 'new to Posen' ("Cyrk Renza na placu Działowym. Doniesienie tymczasowe" 1858). Apart from tumbling and equestrian shows the repertoire also included dances, jumps, and flips ("Cyrk Renza, obecnie w Poznaniu" 1858). The shows were hugely popular as the circus was 'all too busy' ("Cyrk Renza" 1858) and "there was no traffic to be seen in the town" as it drew "both rural and urban audiences to their shows" ("Kronika miejscowa" 1858).

The Olympic circus dominated the circus entertainment market in the Duchy for nearly twenty years, although at that time there were also other initiatives that may have drawn inspiration from its repertoire or provided an alternative to the circus group already well-known in the community. For example, in 1843 Edward Wollschlaeger's 'Gymnaste Equestre' organised the 'Games under the Rifle' ("Igrzyska przed strzelnicą" 1843) – 'a great representation of the art of horse riding

and dressage' ("Gymnaste Equestre" 1843). A year later, the Athlete's Society, led by Fr. Schneider, came to Posen and staged 'Three Gladiators' in four divisions ("Trzech gladiatorów" 1844). In 1846 the Eastern Circus arrived in the Duchy under the aegis of de Bach and Soullier, but details of the troupe's repertoire remain unknown ("Cyrkus wschodni" 1846). The most comprehensive press coverage can be found for the New York Circus, performing in Posen from early March to mid-April 1858. Its attractions included acrobatics, jumping through hoops ("Cyrk Nowo Jorski" 1858a), jumping from horses, or tightrope walking. There were also instances of failures and accidents ("Cyrk Nowo Jorski" 1858b), which in the case of the Olympic circus were not reported in the press.

5. Circus and health in the context of contemporary research

The specific nature of historical research on a subject little covered so far makes it difficult to discuss in a comprehensive manner, and generally it only permits the research results to be related to some contemporary findings. However, the observed positive impact of circus shown on the attitudes of society from the press analysis, confirms the timelessness of the function of circus and the essential immutability of its role in the social context. Contemporary empirical research, for example, McGrath and Stevens (McGrath and Stevens 2019) involving a community circus programme for young people has shown that a circus programme brings about a range of positive changes related to socialization, and physical and psychological well-being. The positive relationship between audience impressions and performance evaluation was also proven in a study of contemporary circus by Szubielska and Ho (Szubielska and Ho 2021). These findings confirm the possibility of the above-mentioned correlation in the case of traditional circuses, which included the Olympic circus. However, there are some important differences between traditional and modern circuses. The latter have adopted interactive practices similar to contemporary visual arts (Kołtun 2019), do not stage animal acts, present traditional sporting skills in a more theatrical rather than sport-artistic manner, and attempt to address current social issues, subjecting the audience to certain reflections (Loiselle et al. 2019). However, this does not mean that the audience's experience of the performances has changed dramatically over the years.

McCarthy and Jinnett (McCarthy and Jinnett 2001) list various factors and processes that may make people attend live artistic events. Passive admiring professionals performing sports-artistic shows in the traditional circus era may have contributed to the perception of a strong and gymnastic man as a role model, for example, in the context of possible struggle for national independence. This could also have influenced the mental health of the audience by strengthening their belief in possible triumph and motivation to work on their own fitness, positive thinking, or well-being, which is in line with the proposed model of participation in the arts (McGrath and Stevens 2019). Indeed, an adequate level of physical culture among the public, as in the case of circus professionals noted by Ménard and Hallé (Ménard

and Hallé 2014), can guarantee an adequate level of mental conditioning for possible success. It should be noted, however, that nineteenth-century thinking referred mostly to male role models. Forms of movement such as gymnastics, dance and horseback riding were subject to various caveats (Kalamacka 2015), although circus entrepreneurs also had a small number of women in their line-ups. In gymnastic exercises, for example, aesthetics and morality were extremely important, so that circus shows were performed according to the laws of decency (Stella-Sawicki 1907).

No press sources were found that indicated critical or negative perceptions of the Olympic circus. Nonetheless, artistic performances could, of course, carry unfavourable implications, not necessarily among spectators but rather among professional performers. Circus acrobatics is a physically demanding profession, and contemporary research by Cayrol and colleagues (Cayrol et al. 2019) found that the incidence of injuries had widespread psychosocial consequences, in particular, adverse effects on performers' moods and identity. Since physical fitness is crucial in circus arts, there are currently many options of injury prevention programmes to be implemented, subject to gender differences (Wanke et al. 2012). Such programmes, however, take place outside the circus arena and in the absence of an audience, and therefore have no direct impact on the public.

6. Strengths and limitations of the study

This article has several strengths. It complements and improves the knowledge and links between circus and sport and health and provides more detailed information to clarify them. The research design involves a synthesis of data from a wide range of sources. It draws on rich sources of information and is concerned with the analysis of material from the past that has not hitherto been within the purview of researchers addressing health issues. Only such a perspective, combined with an appropriate methodology, could allow the study of a topic that cannot be studied in any other way.

The present study has also some limitations. Firstly, the analysis concerns only one of many different circuses, i.e. the Olympic circus, which enjoyed great popularity (considering the number of countries it visited and circus directors) in the nineteenth century. In fact, spectacles and various forms of circus shows have been present in many cultures and civilizations for millennia, and the traditional circus in its modern version became popular in the second half of the eighteenth century thanks to Philip Astley and his amphitheatre (May 1953). Similar analyses can, therefore, be conducted on even earlier circus ventures. Secondly, at the time, health was mainly associated with the model of a strong and fit male, and the female perspective was rather overlooked. More in-depth historical research on physical culture from a feminist perspective is therefore necessary. Thirdly, the content analysis covered only the daily *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego*. This significantly narrows the scope of the research since other Polish newspapers or magazines published

in the Grand Duchy of Posen or in the Polish territories annexed by Austria and Russia may also have contained accounts by correspondents or spectators reflecting different aspects of physical and mental health of circus participants. Fourthly, as already mentioned in the description of research methodology, the specificity of the topic regarding spectators' reactions to the Olympic circus is based on sources more than 150 years old, which may be incomplete due to the passage of a considerable amount of time since the described events as well as due to wars or other historical perturbations.

7. Conclusion

Sports and artistic performances, including the Olympic circus, certainly influenced the dissemination of the model of a strong and fit man. Circus artists' performances were a kind of sublimation of human motor expression. Moreover, the variety of professional shows may have had a significant impact on shaping the social conditions for adopting a universalistic approach to health. Through the displayed physical activities an attitude based on culturally desirable and healthy habits was fostered. The audiences communing with the master artists through passive observation of circus performances were able to develop a greater awareness of the role and positive effects of physical activity. This, in turn, may also have contributed to their interest in recreational sport, practised for health or well-being, which was, in the opinion of physicians, the best way to maintain a healthy lifestyle and both physical and mental health.

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