

"Time for Serious Women". Campaign for the right to education and professional work, including art, of women from gentry and intelligentsia in the Kingdom of Poland. 1864-1914

This dissertation addresses the professional work of women from Polish gentry and intelligentsia in the Kingdom of Poland between 1864 and 1914. It aims at identifying and analyzing changes which took place in the social reception of this phenomenon. I put particular emphasis on the professional art practice, trying to reconstruct social expectations towards female artists based on their gender.

Originally I intended to present only women's artistic careers that time but in the broadest possible context, necessary for a proper assessment of the analyzed phenomenon. It turns out that the problematic I was interested in could not be cut out of the larger one (women's struggle for right to work), without misrepresent the situation. Consequently, this study had to cover also issues related to women's professional activity in fields other than art.

I argue, that professional pursuit of applied arts, painting, sculpture, etc. by Polish women in the second half of the 19th century was largely the result of an activating campaign carried out primarily in the Polish press. This professional activation was to be a solution to social and economic problems that particularly affected Polish landowners that time. As a result, women's educational and professional aspirations, including artistic ones, increased spectacularly. Social and economic factors determined not only the fact that upper-class women practiced art professionally in the Kingdom of Poland, but also determined what they created and how.

Emphasizing the external determinants of women's art is in line with trends in contemporary art history, where the artist-genius narrative has given way to the sociological discourse. The case of nineteenth-century women artists from the Kingdom of Poland fits perfectly into this perspective. This study covers the years from the defeat of the January Uprising to the outbreak of the World War I. But women's right to work and, more broadly, questioning the social role of female sex, was not an entirely new topic in the 1860s in the Kingdom of Poland. It excited public opinion and had been discussed in the press before. Therefore I included also information on the first half of the century. It serves as a source of reference and comparison, highlighting the transformations taking place. Moreover, this dissertation, covering the period 1864-1914, focuses especially on the years from 1864 to about 1905, as this was a time of exceptionally dynamic economic, social, and mental changes in the Kingdom of Poland. The ambition to transcend the role of a wife and mother was revived after the defeat of January Uprising with redoubled force in changed (compared to previous decades) conditions, acting in favor of women's aspirations. Emancipation, which had been cautiously announced earlier, gained a new dimension, namely, it acquired the convincing features of necessity. In that breakthrough period 1864-1905 Polish women won the right to work also in prestigious intellectual professions and to pursue the arts professionally. In the first decades of the twentieth

century the changes mentioned above became established and women's professional and educational aspirations ceased to amaze (which does not mean that they no longer aroused resistance). The impoverishment of landowners and the development of capitalism were the most important factors that contributed to the emancipatory upturn of Polish upper-class women. But Poles were also influenced by information about the progress of gender equality in other countries and the ideology called "Warsaw positivism". The propagators of positivism believed that every adult human being should work, no matter his or her sex. They perceived idleness as a vice and an exploitation of others.

The Polish press had a significant impact on the spread of new ideas. It contributed greatly to the formation of new attitudes, and the evolution of upper classes' mentality. An esteemed writer of the time, Eliza Orzeszkowa, considered press as the only legal, though censorship-bound, tribune where Poles in the Kingdom of Poland could express their opinions under the tsarist regime. As soon as the issue of paid job for women from impoverished gentry families became a problem affecting society (or at least its upper classes), the press sprang into action. It conducted a campaign for women's right to education and professional including artistic work. Magazines addressed to a female audience made a special contribution to this mission, so it seemed justified to devote a separate chapter of the dissertation to the women's press: its origins, evolution, and approach to emancipation. The typical content pattern of periodicals for women underwent a radical transformation in the second half of the 19th century: previously literary-entertaining became an advisory-educational-literary. The controversies over the position, role, assigned tasks, privileges, responsibilities, potential, etc. of the female gender and the related existing or (more often) postulated education had been reflected in an avalanche of articles, studies, references, and polemics. The leading women's magazines undertook a mission to change the mindset of the readers. They wanted to shape the worldview and characters; in general, to promote a new model of a Polish woman adequate for the times in which she lived. A key example of such a program policy was "Bluszcz". This periodical is the most widely presented in this study in comparison with other titles because of its reach and influence. "Bluszcz" was published throughout the entire discussed period, in contrast to the programmatically progressive, but rather ephemeral "Świt". It competed primarily with the comparably long-lived, but more conservative "Tygodnik Mód i Powieści".

Apart from addressing the phenomenon of emancipation, and the problematic of professional work, "Bluszcz" (to some extent the other women's magazines too) undertook the mission of filling gaps in the female education. This aspect I emphasized both in the chapter on women's press and the next one, devoted to education. The latter seemed indispensable in a study on women's professional work, since the educational system prevented representatives of the female gender from obtaining the education required in particular professions. Thus it constituted an effective formal barrier modeling professional aspirations. There was a concept spread among the women from gentry and intelligentsia to treat education as "enlightenment" or a value in itself. Nevertheless high educational aspirations

successively translated into a desire to work in intellectual professions corresponding to the acquired qualifications and at the same time entailing social prestige.

Apart from educational activity, another great merit of the women's press in the second half of the 19th century was the creation of an environment friendly to female authors. The magazines, encouraging women to read, also mobilized them to write, to try their hand at poetry, novels or journalism. The periodicals offered a convenient place for publication - and an extra income per text.

The model of the "new woman" promoted by press was supposed to meet the challenges of the current political, social, and economic situation. It contributed decisively to the establishment of a specific generation formation: educated (within the limits available to women at the time) and constantly self-educating, engaged in social activities, patriotically oriented, setting high moral standards for themselves and others, professing lofty ideals and using equally lofty rhetoric. This generation of "ambitious ladies" with awakened aspirations has been brought up largely on articles proclaiming women's right to education and profession, and at the same time emphasizing the duties that the female gender has to fulfill for the sake of the world. One can observe the phenomenon of raising the status of women's professional work by combining it with unpaid, social work and giving the whole thing the rank of a mission performed for the benefit of the country, nation, and humanity. In the Kingdom of Poland those who showed the greatest social commitment were female teachers from private schools and the first female doctors.

This study attempts to find and identify the experiences and testimonies shared by two generations. And so, for the generation of Maria Ilnicka, Kasylda Kulikowska or Eliza Orzeszkowa, model "working women" of the Polish Kingdom in the 1870s and 1880s, teachers, editors, writers, columnists, poets, and devotees of self-education, the January Uprising proved to be a formative experience. Many of them took an active part in it. They found their place in post-uprising Poland, but defended the legend of uprising. They were mentors and models for girls entering adulthood in the second half of the 19th century for whom the uprising was associated rather with the defeat's consequence for their own family and country in general. This next generation raised on the articles of "Bluszcz" and Orzeszkowa's writings was the generation of the first Polish female students, doctors, lawyers, and researchers. They had to overcome many formal and informal barriers. They had to fight against the stereotypes widespread in Polish society about woman's nature, which would automatically assign the female gender to specific activities (housework, childrearing), while definitively excluding it from others (the profession of a lawyer, doctor, etc.). For those who believed in the existence of a clearly defined, unchanging and homogeneous feminine nature, it was a part of the order established by God. Humanity was organized - by the Creator Himself, therefore irrevocably - on the principle of polarity. The woman and the man were assigned, practically in the act of creation, distinct qualities and the tasks resulting from them. Science, inventiveness, and art were not to be

compatible with the passive, non-intellectual nature of women. The female mind, weak in synthesis, could not grasp abstraction, and because of its innate lack of creativity, would only exceptionally acquire independence and originality. On the other hand, women were supposed to be superior to men in terms of tenderness, faith, piety, mercy, generosity, patience - therefore it fell to them above all to patiently endure adversity and to make sacrifices. Men were credited with the ability to form abstract concepts, creativity, rationality - intellect in general, and even exclusivity of intellect. Women's professional work itself was supposed to be a violation of the world order in which men were predisposed to be active in the public sphere, while women should fulfill themselves only in the private, domestic sphere.

However, it turned out that the defenders of the traditional gender status quo, in a situation of economic hardship, did not mind women doing physical work, even "in public sphere". The real problem were female aspirations for intellectual professions entailing social prestige.

The situation of upper-class women who faced the necessity of earning a living as a result of impoverishment, was hampered not only by the opposition to women's professional work considered a violation of the female gender domestic destiny. The more acute obstacle was the narrow range of professions available to "ladies." This issue was even recognized in the press in 1860s and 1870s as one of the key social problems of the country and attempts were made to solve it by searching for new "lady-like" income options.

Commonly considered appropriate for ladies was the teaching profession regarded as the variant of bringing up children and thus a part of a mission assigned to women by God. In the first half of the century Polish women also won the right to occupy themselves with literature, what in many cases they combined with editorial job. In the case of teaching, supply (the number of female applicants) quickly exceeded demand (jobs). Literature was an exclusive occupation with no regular income. These professions could not solve the problem of work for women, the press alarmed. It should be emphasized that press reports about impoverished upper-class ladies' searching desperately for income were a powerful driving force behind emancipation's progress in the Kingdom of Poland. The supporters of the traditional gender role could not contradict the "sad necessity of life" if they did not want to deny reality. Thus, a compromise was found between "non-intellectual, passive and reproductive women's nature" and the harsh economic situation. Attempts were made to channel women's professional activity into fields related to child-rearing and low-prestige manual occupations. In the 1860s, the press began to promote handicrafts as the ideal solution to the problem of paid employment for ladies.

For many women art appeared to be one of the income options. However, can a woman create? Views clashed on this issue. In 1860s, 1870s and 1880s opinions prevailed that women's nature (in the biological and psychological sense) precluded true creativity. Thus women's artistic aspirations were directed primarily toward the so-called applied arts for industry, treated as nobler handicraft because

aesthetically enriched. For this purpose, numerous female schools and training courses in applied arts were established. Applied arts were to become a women's artistic specialty requiring not so much creativity and genius, but rather good taste. The popularization of applied arts was to stop, at least to some extent, women's entry into the so-called pure arts. It was supposed to be a happy compromise with regard to women's professional-artistic aspirations, the need to earn money and an attempt to preserve the dichotomous vision of the world, where men and women were assigned separate characteristics and separate fields of activity.

While women's access to prestigious intellectual professions aroused strong resistance from conservatives, consent to manual labor was easy to obtain even from staunch supporters of the traditional gender status quo concerned about the welfare of the family. As a rule, opponents of women's professional work did not oppose the idea of women taking up physical labor, even though it could do as much damage for the family (limiting the time spent on caring for the home, children, etc.) as intellectual work. The problem here lay in persuading upper-class women that taking up physical labor would not be degrading for them. Conservatives, positivists, and supporters of emancipation all joined in the effort to convince ladies that no humiliation would befall them in such case.

Nevertheless while attempts were made to limit the professional expansion of women only to the manual sphere, the main battle of emancipation was about the access to intellectual jobs, as well as for the right to practice professionally the so-called pure arts (painting, sculpture), understood at the time as intellectual activity.

Professional work is often seen as the very core of emancipation, sometimes even its determinant. Thanks to having a job, women emerged in the social life of the second half of the 19th century as individuals, independently of their families. However, it must be emphasized that in the discussed period the support of women's work in the Kingdom of Poland did not automatically mean the approval of emancipation itself. According to many people, these phenomena were by no means identical, and some conservative publicists, such as Krystyna Narbuttówna, even claimed that they were contradictory. From their point of view, if an unmarried woman worked for a living and in an appropriate profession, she did not immediately become an emancipationist, but rather a victim of unfavorable life circumstances. In this aspect, the activation of women in labor market received significant social support in the Kingdom of Poland. It was manifested not only, as already mentioned, in a flood of press publications, but also in the establishment of private schools and courses, workshops employing only female workers, the organization of exhibitions of "women's work," and sales network for products.

Women who treated their job as passion and vocation exposed themselves to criticism from people with not only conservative but also moderate views. At the end of the 19th century, the majority of Polish gentry accepted women's work as a necessary evil. But still many people were opposed to a career chosen by free will and treated as an alternative to the traditional model (mother, wife,

housewife). Numerous periodicals continued to sound the alarm about the doom threatening humanity (or just the Polish nation) that would inevitably follow if the emancipated women succeeded in their subversive demands.

Thus, the pro-emancipatory touchstone of the periodicals and individual columnists was the attitude towards women's accession to intellectual professions unrelated to pedagogy, as well as supporting the right of female representatives to work not only because of the wage constraint.

On the one hand, the economic situation served as an irresistible argument in favor of letting a woman have a job. Many publicists advised doubters just to take a unbiased look around. On the other hand, opposition to women's intellectual work was also largely economically motivated. It was all about competition. But in the battle for arguments that followed the rise of women's professional and artistic aspirations, opponents of emancipation were much more likely to refer to nature rather than rivalry.

They argued that it was the very nature of women that predisposed them to specific occupations, while definitively excluding from others. However, this argument was doomed to fail when confronted with the "sad economic necessity" emphasized by the other side of the dispute. Moreover simple

observation of the facts provided more and more evidence confirming the thesis that in the sectors of intellectual work considered so far entirely masculine women can do no worse than men. Arguing that a woman is inherently incapable of something, while examples of her ability to do it were flourishing around, could only cause cognitive dissonance. In this way, with the successive decades of the 19th century and the progress of emancipation, faded away the convincing force of the argument about the restrictive female nature. Claims related to economic issues had much greater impact, and they could be invoked not only by supporters, but also opponents of emancipation. One of the most important reasons for opposing the women's entry into the intellectual labor market in the Kingdom of Poland in the second half of the 19th century was the phenomenon of intelligentsia's overproduction. The situation of Polish intelligentsia remained peculiar, mainly for political reasons. After the defeat of the January Uprising, one of the priorities of the tsarist policy towards Polish society was the systematic removal of Polish intellectuals from state posts. This manifested itself, among other things, in importing teachers from Russia to high schools and colleges in the Kingdom of Poland. As an incentive, the tsarists authorities offered Russian applicants much better salaries than they could get in Russia and many additional privileges. The path to a career in public service was also largely closed to Poles. Therefore, Polish intelligentsia could not count on state patronage. All the more important became the private one, which unfortunately could provide far fewer jobs than there were candidates for them. The emergence of educated and ambitious women provoked great resistance on the grounds that working female intelligentsia contributed to the already fierce spirit of competition that prevailed in this milieu. But it was not women's aspirations that created the highly competitive intellectual labor market in the Kingdom of Poland in the second half of 19th century. Apart from political reasons, the ongoing pauperization of the gentry and the progressive assimilation of the Jews contributed to this difficult situation. However, when women's work became a real competition, it began to be fiercely

contested. The medical community was particularly aggressive against women doctors, although it did not speak of competition but rather of the proper "destiny of women" that would be violated by practicing medicine.

At the turn of the 20th century, those arguing against the employment of women in trade did raise the issue of competition, but at the same time they emphasized the lower quality and efficiency of female work. In their opinion low cost was the only asset of women as employees and it was an asset that often didn't pay off.

Another economic and social argument against employing women was that such move created a self-perpetuating mechanism: female aspirations take jobs away from men who otherwise could guarantee the livelihood for a wife. As a result of an "emancipatory whim of few", more and more women had to search for the gainful employment even if they would have preferred to stay at home. But they no longer had a choice.

The process of professional activation of women accelerated in the first decades of 20th century, especially during the World War I, when they had to replace in many fields men fighting at the front. Time has shown that the prophecies (and hopes) of both conservatives and positivists that women's professional aspirations were only a painful requirement of the moment and a problematical but transitional phenomenon have not come true.

Finally, I must mention two aspects. First, the discussed phenomena of women's emancipation and professional activation are obviously not specific to the Kingdom of Poland in the second half of the 19th century. Similar transformations took place in many countries during this period. Secondly, Polish emancipation, though peculiar, was not isolated. News coming from Western Europe and US about the gender equality achievements formed the strong inducement for Poles to demand the changes in their own society. However, taking into account the commonalities, this study emphasized the political-economic-cultural determinants of the women's movement in Poland, where emancipation, including the approach to women's work, was strongly modeled not only by economics, but also by politics.

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