

The influence of women on cultural life in Poland in 18th century

INTRODUCTION

Women's part in history and her influence on the culture is still a subject to be examined. Although the interest in women and their role in certain eras is growing, there are not many works on the subject in historiography and sociology. The first attempts to develop the subjects are seen already in 19th century. These are the works of K.W. Wójcicki „Polish women”, Z. Kaczkowski „Woman in Poland”, J.Sowiński „About educated polish women” and others. Even though these works were written to create an ideal image of woman, they are an important part of the subject. Especially Wojcicki and Sowinski's works are major as they recall many totally unknown surnames. The first serious, scientific work based on many sources is “The woman of old Poland” by Lucja Charewiczowa (first published in Lwow in 1938). The subject of woman's role in the society was also described by Maria Bogucka, Cezary Kuklo, Władysław Konopczyński, Zbigniew Kuchowicz, Jerzy Michalski.

The aim of this work is to answer the question what was women's influence on cultural life in 18th century in Poland. It is going to be very general and can serve only as a monograph because of the restrictions on the work. The same reason did not let me compare Polish situation with, for example, European. The notion of culture is also very broad so I am going to consider only women from wealthy families. To answer the stated question we have to look at a woman's role in society throughout centuries. On the basis of chosen women I am going to prove how important role they played in creating Polish Enlightenment.

The word ‘woman’[Polish “kobieta”] describes the gender for not a very long time. It appeared for the first time in 16th century in satirical pieces underlying that it is an offending word. The etymology states the word as coming from ‘kobu’ – pigsty, ‘koby’ – mare or ‘kobi’ – to tell fortunes. Before words like wife, ‘niewiasta’- young women, ‘bialogłowa’ the word is impossible to render into English but basically means a woman with a white scarf, podwika – a woman wearing a scarf called ‘podwika’, were used. Women's role in society was always determined by two factors: the gender and social status. Also legislative, religious and social norms played important part. Spiritual inferiority of woman in old Poland was obvious. Doubts appeared with admitting her humanity. In 1690 in Frankfurt a Latin book was published “A woman is not a human” and in 1753 in Lipsk “A proof that women does not

belong to human genus”¹! Woman’s duty was to abide by men; first father, then husband. This kind of behaviour was still valid in 18th century. However, legislative discrimination of women not always equalled social discrimination. There are many examples of women with strong character who could not only be self-reliant but also imposed their will on the surrounding. The good example would be the Queen Bona or the beautiful and educated mistresses in 17th – 18th century in France. But they were exceptions because feudal customs discriminated women by not giving them the right to education and limiting only to the duties in a household. The image of old polish woman was created by satirical literature created by men. Women’s attitude towards the literature is unknown due to lack of sources on this subject. The main charges levelled against women were inborn mental inferiority, lack of high-level skills, being too emotional about life, carelessness. Women from aristocratic circles were allowed the greatest deal of freedom; we know of the wealthy and educated women’s houses like the queen Bona or Ludwika Maria Gonzaga already in 16th century.

¹ Ł. Charewiczowiczowa, *Woman in Old Poland*, Poznań, 2002

Women and Culture

Throughout 17th and 18th century women's independence from aristocratic circles grows much higher. 18th century is a very specific one because of that. There were many political changes in Poland and Lithuania leading to the collapse of the gentry culture and annexations. 18th century is the century of enlightenment and creation of new social movements and ideologies. With no doubt the French Revolution had huge impact on the change of women's role in society. Women of noble birth participated actively in many aspects of social life. They got thorough education, which helped gain more independence from men. They voice their opinion absolutely and participate in political life of the country. Also travels of women played vital part. At first they travelled for health and sanctimonious reasons, later only tourist and even political. "Rare trips of Polish women to Italy in 16th century were often in 17th to become common in the 18th."² Next to Italy, the most important trip place was France. Women were introduced there to new trends not only in fashion but also in literature, architecture and politics. After coming back to Poland they used their knowledge in patronage. France was visited by, among others, Julia Potocka and Teofilia Morawska who "[...] in secret missions commissioned by her brother Karol Radziwiłł, also visited Germany, Austria and Italy."³ A magnate took her servants or even gentlewomen with her. They travelled not only across Europe.

The Dutchess Izabela Czartoryska from Flemings is an excellent example of cultural activity of women. Born on the 3rd March 1746 in Warsaw, she was a writer participating actively in cultural and political life, and knowing many outstanding people of the era like Tadeusz Kosciuszko. She married prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski in 1764. She was very intelligent woman. She organized a centre in Pulawy and rebuilt after it was destroyed by Russian army after the insurrection in 1794. Pulawy became one of the main cultural centres and she created there first Museum in Poland. Among national mementoes were: saber of Stefan Batory, old and valuable guns, and swords from the time of Grunwald.⁴ It gathered artists and writers, among others: F.D. Kniaźnin, F. Karpiński, J. Szymanowski, F. Zabłocki, J.U. Niemcewicz, L. Karpiński, J.P. Woronicz. Czartoryska created there a museum of national mementoes, which played vital part during annexations. She also created there

² A. Sajkowski, in: M. Bogucka, *Białogłowa w dawnej Polsce- Kobieta w społeczeństwie polskim na tle porównawczym*[Women in Early modern Polish society, against European background], Warszawa, 1998

³ M. Bogucka, *Białogłowa w dawnej Polsce*, p.176

⁴ Z. Kuchowicz, *Wizerunki niepospolitych niewiast staropolskich XVI – XVIII w*[Images of outstanding women in Old Poland XVI-XVII], Łódź 1794

Sybilla's Temple and Gothic House where a valuable collection of weapon and pictures was placed. In Powazki, near Warsaw she established a wonderful park where manifold buildings were constructed with artificial romantic ruins as one of them. She was involved into theatre and teaching actors taking part in patriotic performances herself. She became a devoted patriot during annexations. She established schools in villages, wrote moralizing pieces for village people ("Pilgrim in Dobromil, village lessons"). The duchess helped raise women's role in society.

Women were also writing literary pieces but it is difficult to determine the first attempts. Zofia Olesnicka and Regina Filipowska are said to be the first old polish female writers. In 17th century appeared Anna Memorata, pastor's daughter; "Anna was a well-educated person (except for Polish, she knew German, Latin and Greek) and moved in intellectual circles with high average in Leszno."⁵ In 18th century there is a lot more female writers led by Elzbieta Druzbacka. She was called "traditional polish muse" or "Polish Safone". She was a famous writer influencing many readers and the development of 18th century writing. She is an author of sentimental romances, rhyming hagiographies of great penitents like "A penance of Saint Maria Magdalena" as also occasional pieces. Evaluation of her works vary a lot. Except for very positive, one may also encounter negative opinions like the one of famous researcher and literary expert Julian Krzyzanowski.⁶ "She is accused of being naïve, vulgar and having cheap wit, which is characteristic for the works from the end of 17th and 18th century."⁷ Other famous writers are: Franciszka Urszula Radziwiłłowa née Wisniowiecka, Antonina Niemiryczowa née Jełowiecka, Anna Radziwiłłowa née Mycielska, Anna Działyńska née Radomicka, Konstancja Bonisławska who deserves special attention. She published only one volume of poems but, like Druzbacka, aroused controversy. A big impact on writing these poems had reading Spanish mystics like Teresa from Avila. The ladies mentioned above wrote poems, diaries, rhyming advice, prayers, love dramas, racy and metaphysical pieces. There is one piece, by researches called great, that should be mentioned here: "My own and outsiders piece" by Wirydianna Fiszerowa. It an important source to learn about Polish history in the second half of 18th century as it describes years from 1766 – 1815. "It is not only significant source about the era's history but also evidence of changes made in mentality, horizons and polish women's conduct – it is a proof that an intellectual, female elite was established which

⁵ M. Bogucka, Białogłowa w dawnej Polsce, p. 181

⁶ Z. Kuchoicz, Wizerunki niepospolitych niewiast staropolskich XVI – XVIII w[Images of outstanding women in Old Poland XVI-XVII], Łódź 1794

⁷ M. Bogucka, Białogłowa w dawnej Polsce [Woman in Old Poland], Warszawa 1998, p. 183

was not worse in any way from male; not in educational level, knowledge about the world, patriotism, skills in making assessments and forming opinions.”⁸

Another form of women’s influence on Polish culture in 18th century was patronage of the arts. It is easily visible in architecture. Elżbieta Sieniawska née Lubomirska contributed to rebuilding Pulawy destroyed by Swedish. She rebuilt and furnished houses in Łubnice, Laszki and Oleszyce. She contributed to restoring Czerniakowski Church and Bernardin Monastery, she funded a new Church dedicated to Saint Alojzy Gonzaga. She created major libraries in Pulawy and Lubnice. Anna Radziwiłłowa née Sanguszkó contributed to rebuilding palaces in Biala, Warsaw and Gdansk. She collected books, documents and ordered archives. Ursula Lubomirska née Branicka contributed to building Collegium Nobilium in Warsaw. Thanks to Zofia Lubomirska née Krasińska one of the first Polish cabinets of natural history was created. It is worth mentioning here about Anna Jabłonowska who collected many natural exhibits. In 1726 she translated from French “Psychologia albo krótkie zebranie lekcji elementarne o naturze i właściwościach duszy” She wrote several works. In 1783 – 85 she published “Ustawy powszechne dla dóbr moich rządców” a book about the organization of land property. For the bride she wrote “Dobra gospodyni, czyli fundamenta ekonomii gospodarskiej osobom młodym do tego stanu zbierającym się”, printed in Kraków In 1784. In 1776 she printed “Porządek robót miesięcznych ogrodnika” which was republished as *Calendarium Universale*

Elżbieta Lubomirska née Czartoryska, one of the greatest patron of arts at the end of 18th century, cannot be omitted either. She contributed a lot to rebuilding and adaptation of the castle in Wilanów which at the beginning was a fortified fortress and after the conversion became a stately building. The Lubomirska surname however, is mainly connected with construction of a great residency in Łańcut. This unusual woman was also a keen art pieces collector which she brought from the whole Europe. The collection was located in the castle in Łańcut.

I would also like to mention Helena Radziwiłłowa née Przezdziecka. The environment she was raised in had a huge impact on her. Although some of her characteristics may raise doubts however she was outstanding individual. She was an intelligent and talented woman. She was famous for her uncommon beauty. Plants were one of her life’s passion. In her garden she

⁸ Ibid., s. 185

raised very rare plants. She created one of the first landscape park in Poland. It was an romantic, English-style garden. Inspiration for creating this type of garden were Enlightenment ideas which promoted to live in harmony. She called this place Arcadia. In her residence in Nieborów she collected a lot of valuable items. Many objects in this beautiful garden were a real work of art. Arcadia was famous not only in Poland but also outside its border.

Conclusion

Presented examples of woman cultural activity are only brief description of the most important figure and their activity. This work only indicates some area of women activity.

In XVIII century appeared a new pattern of women behaviour :”Kobiety religijnej, uznającej tradycje, lecz równocześnie czytanej, potrafiącej nawet władać piórem, zajmująca postawę patriotyczną.”[“Religious woman, who appreciate tradition, but the same time widely read and able to write, and is patriot”]⁹ Recognition of women’s rights to education opened a new possibilities for them. Women could freely travel not only because of religion. By travelling to cultural centres they gained a new experience, knowledge and trends during Enlightenment. Together with magnate travelled less wealthy gentlewoman or even townswomen. By returning to the family fold they brought the latest trends in literature, in the theatre and science. In discussed period young girls education has become the norm (among magnate, more wealthy gentlewomen or townswomen). For the first time in history, public opinion accepted fact that women were representing culture. The influence of women on cultural life could be examined as consumption and as from the point of view of production or creation. On the one hand they took an active part in creation of culture on other they become the patrons of the arts. XVIII century initiate women’s emancipation. Without women activity as a patron of the art (Izabela Czartoryska, Helena Radziłłowa, Elżbieta Sieniawska) Polish cultural life would be much poorer. Some women conducted charitable activities for example by establishing country schools, which was quit important because peasants were excluded from a literacy programme. Women learned how to express their feeling, emotions and ideas. They begun to participate in various forms in cultural life and undertake large scale patronage. Women activity were extremely important for national identity during the period of partition. With out doubts women play a significant role in Polish culture.

⁹ Z. Kuchowicz, Wizerunki niepospolitych niewiast staropolskich XVI – XVIII w[Images of outstanding women in Old Poland XVI-XVII], Łódź 1794, s 423, (fragment translated by A. Szwarc)

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