

# REVIEW ARTICLES

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## IN SEARCH OF FEMALE AGENCY: LATEST TRENDS IN POLISH RESEARCH INTO WOMEN'S HISTORY IN POLISH LANDS IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Review of: Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis, and Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność – Równouprawienie – Komunizm* [Women in Poland, 1945–1989: Modernity – Equality – Communism], Kraków, 2020, Wydawnictwo Universitas, 519 pp.; Karolina Dzimira-Zarzycka, *Samotnica. Dwa życia Marii Dulębianki* [The Recluse: Two Lives of Maria Dulębianka], Warszawa, 2022, Wydawnictwo Marginesy, 539 pp.; Kamila Cybulska, *O niepodległość i prawa kobiet. Zofia Moraczewska 1873–1958. Życie i działalność* [For Independence and Women's Rights: Zofia Moraczewska, 1873–1958. Life and Activism], Warszawa, 2021, Wydawnictwo IPN, 368 pp.; Marta Sikorska, *Aleksandra Piłsudska (1882–1963)*, Łódź, 2021, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 303 pp.; Jolanta Kolbuszewska, *W drodze na naukowy Olimp. Akademicki awans polskich historyczek (od schyłku XIX wieku po 1989 rok)* [Women on the Way to Academic Olympus: Academic Advancement of Women Historians in Poland from the Late Nineteenth Century until 1989], Łódź, 2020, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 382 pp.; Iwona Dadej, *Habilitacja – bariera czy kariera? Porządek płci w polskiej kulturze akademickiej pierwszej połowy XX wieku* [Habilitation – Barrier or Career? Gender Order in Polish Academic Culture in the First Half of the Twentieth Century], Warszawa, 2022, Wydawnictwo IH PAN and Wydawnictwo Neriton, 222 pp.; Wojciech Piasek, *Jadwiga Lechicka – kobieta nowa i nowoczesna. Kulturowy porządek i relacja płci w historiografii polskiej* [Jadwiga Lechicka – A New and Modern Woman: Cultural Order and Gender Relations in Polish Historiography], Toruń, 2022, Wydawnictwo

Naukowe UMK, 274 pp.; Maria Jadwiga Strumff, *Spostrzeżenia nad ludźmi. Szczere wyznania Massażystki* [Observations on People: Frank Confessions of a Masseuse], ed. Piotr Kubkowski, Magorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdźiel, Wydawnictwo Neriton–Wydział Polonistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa, 2021, 160 pp.; Rachel Fajgenberg, *Dziewczęce lata. Młodość w poleskim sztetlu* [Girlhood Years: Youth in a Shtetl in Polesie], transl. Inka Stempin, ed. by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov, Warszawa, 2021, Wydawnictwo PWN, 172 pp.; Irena Protassewicz, *Róże pogryzę z kolcami cierni... Wspomnienia wojny i pokoju* [I Shall Sink My Teeth into Thorny Roses... Memoirs of War and Peace], editing, commentary, epilogue, and postscript by Waclaw Hubert Zawadzki, Warszawa, 2022, Wydawnictwo Neriton, 311 pp.; Anna Müller, *Przetrwać. Życ dalej. Rozmowy z więźniarkami z Europy Środkowej 1945–1956* [Survive – Live On: Conversations with Women Prisoners from Central Europe, 1945–1956], Warszawa, 2021, Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 280 pp.

### Abstract

The article discusses the latest trends in research on women's history in Poland. Attention is drawn to the increasing number of biographies, and an attempt is made to answer the question of whether and in what direction this type of writing is changing our perception of women's roles in Polish history. The article discusses the autobiographical literature written by women, whose publications reflect a growing interest in individual history and are a response to the demand to give a voice to previously unheard groups. It raises questions about the role of memoirs in describing past societies and gender order. The role of oral history methods in gaining insight into the past of women and society is also discussed.

**Keywords:** History of women, oral history, biographies in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century, memoirs in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries

### SYNTHESISE, BUT HOW?

Research into women's history has been conducted systematically in Poland since the late 1980s. Since then, it has resulted in numerous monographs, edited collections, and articles. Thus far, historical writing on women's history has focussed predominantly on filling so-called blank spots. Such was also the goal of the series *Kobieta i...* [Woman and...], perceived today as canonical.<sup>1</sup> However, even at its inception,

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<sup>1</sup> The series *Kobieta i...* saw print in Warsaw between 1990 and 2006 and discussed the history of women in Polish lands during the nineteenth and twentieth

the editors – Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc – proposed, on the one hand, a broadening of the reflection on gender relations and, on the other, the inclusion of the category of gender in studies on society. In the twenty-first century, their call is increasingly heeded. Likewise, new perspectives are offered in reflections on women’s history. During the twentieth century, authors focussed on the history of women from various social and labour backgrounds who played different roles in society – a perspective that continues to attract interest. One would also find within these current studies on women involved in science. Today, scholars increasingly delve into the life stories of individual women, exploring their peculiar, personal experiences. This biographical approach is gaining currency in research into women’s history, resulting in individual and group biographies (examples are discussed in more detail below). This interest in biographies and personal histories, individual attempts to adjust to social expectations or acts of defiance against norms of behaviour, results in the publication of increasing numbers of memoirs, recollections, and autobiographies by women. Several of them are treated in more detail below.

For over a decade now, scholarly gatherings of people engaged in research on gendered history have also postulated a synthetic work on the subject. In 2014, *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy* [Women’s History in Poland: Debate on a Future Synthesis], edited by Krzysztof A. Makowski, offered a response to this call while providing an overview of extant studies.<sup>2</sup> Regrettably, no such synthesis has seen print so far. Nevertheless, the authors of the Polish People’s Republic [Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL] chapter in Makowski’s book decided to keep the ball rolling. Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz and Piotr Perkowski were joined by Małgorzata Fidelis and Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, forming a team whose research bore fruit in 2020, in the shape of a volume entitled *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność – Równouprawienie – Komunizm* [Women

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century from a comparative perspective. Nine volumes were published as part of the series: *Kobieta i społeczeństwo* (Warszawa, 1990), *Kobieta i edukacja* (1992; part 2: 1995), *Kobieta i świat polityki* (1994; part 2: 1996), *Kobieta i kultura* (1996), *Kobieta i kultura życia codziennego* (1997), *Kobieta i praca* (2000), *Kobieta i kultura czasu wolnego* (2001), *Kobieta i małżeństwo* (2004), and *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy*, ed. Krzysztof A. Makowski (Poznań, 2014).

in Poland, 1945–1989: Modernity – Equality – Communism], comprised of eight chapters, an introduction and a conclusion, with an extensive bibliography and an index of names.<sup>3</sup> In the introduction, the authors state that the extant image of women in People’s Poland historiography causes “their agency to evade attention, along with a vast array of other aspects [...]” (p. 9). The book describes women’s agency by studying their involvement in politics or by comparing the work-related aspirations of women from various social groups, the actual economic situation, the official declarations of the government, and its actions, which often contradict verbal expressions of gender equality. Significant amounts of space are devoted to the socialisation of girls and family matters. This focus on spheres traditionally ascribed to women might suggest a reasonably commonplace approach to the role of women and their place in social life, which is far from the truth. The authors treat their subject in a modern manner, addressing such questions as family planning, women’s health, or violence against women. While addressing these issues, they deftly deconstructed prevalent myths and beliefs, such as the myth of female passivity or women’s submissiveness to social demands. Employing sources of diverse provenance, including the press, personal documents, or court papers, they traced how women found spaces for individual activity and the strategies they used for fulfilling their plans and dreams, as well as how the actions of a state that paid lip service to the emancipation of women helped reinforce traditional gender roles. In the final chapter, the analysis

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<sup>3</sup> Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis, and Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność – Równouprawienie – Komunizm* (Kraków, 2020). The book contains the following chapters: Małgorzata Fidelis, ‘Gender, historia i komunizm’ [Gender, History, and Communism]; Piotr Perkowski, ‘Droga do władzy? Kobiety w polityce’ [Pathway to Power? Women in Politics]; Małgorzata Fidelis, ‘Równouprawienie czy konserwatywna nowoczesność? Kobiety pracujące’ [Equality or Conservative Modernity? Working Women]; Piotr Perkowski and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, “Nowoczesna gospodyni. Kobiety w gospodarstwie domowym” (Modern housekeeper: women in the home); Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, “...Być dziewczyną”. Wychowanie, dorastanie i edukacja dziewcząt’ [... To Be a Girl’: Upbringing, Development, and Education of Girls]; Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, ‘Kobieta wobec rodziny’ [Women in Families]; Barbara Klich-Kluczevska and Piotr Perkowski, ‘Obiekty biopolityki? Zdrowie, reprodukcja i przemoc’ [An Object of Biopolitics? Health, Reproduction, and Violence]; Małgorzata Fidelis and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, ‘Piękne i zaradne: Rytuály ciała, moda i uroda’ [Pretty and Resourceful: Rituals of the Body, Fashion, and Appearance].

turns to beauty culture – both in terms of patterns and inspirations and the role it played in the everyday lives of individuals, defining their identities and places in social structures and hierarchies. Thus, from the very outset, this synthetic approach shifts the balance toward matters of significance to women, defined by the women themselves or by the impositions of state actors. What it serves to highlight is women’s agency – how they negotiated paths to their own identities within the boundaries that were set for them. The synthesis also shows how the time frames for social change can diverge from the political watersheds that historians commonly rely on and how gender relations can affect disparate responses to the same phenomena. One good example of this time frame divergence is marital relations transformations. Though spousal equality was legally guaranteed by the 1945 decree on marriage law, suggesting a direct connection with the political change that took place in the aftermath of the Second World War, fundamental changes in the relations between husbands and wives were observed somewhat later during the 1960s and 1970s. Examples abound, though none merit inclusion here; to sum up the reflections on a synthetic study of women’s history in Poland after the Second World War, one hopes that the book by the aforementioned foursome will inspire scholars of other historical periods.

BIOGRAPHICALLY SPEAKING:  
HOW (AND IF) BIOGRAPHIES CHALLENGE IDEAS  
ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN HISTORY

The biographical trend gaining in popularity in recent years has yielded numerous publications – notably, not all by historians. Of note here is the 2022 biography of Maria Dulebianka by Karolina Dzimira-Zarzycka, a historian of art from Wrocław.<sup>4</sup> Despite the absence of academic formality (such as annotations, which are replaced by detailed bibliographies appended to each of the chapters), the book offers an interesting attempt at an account of the life of the painter and suffragist, doubtless one of the most famous fighters for the emancipation of women in Polish lands at the turn of the twentieth century. Dzimira-Zarzycka weaves the tale of Dulebianka’s life around

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<sup>4</sup> Karolina Dzimira-Zarzycka, *Samotnica. Dwa życia Marii Dulebianki* (Warszawa, 2022).

her path to becoming a painter – subsequently, Dulębianka’s primary source of income. The author devotes significant attention to the painter’s relationship with poet Maria Konopnicka and the life they shared – often on the road in various European cities, chosen either for Konopnicka’s health or Dulębianka’s artistic interests. However, the author does not pursue the scandalous or sensational in the romance of the two exceptional women. Instead, she describes them as two mutually devoted persons who learned to respect one another’s individual proclivities and struggled together to maintain a shared household in the face of constant financial shortfalls. Finally, she devotes space to Dulębianka’s activities as a suffragist. These fragments, based primarily on press mentions and Konopnicka’s letters, seem the least compelling. Absent from them is the voice of Dulębianka herself, an insight into her motivations for crusading for women’s rights, and a detailed look at the path that led her to the milieu of women involved in the struggle for emancipation. These absences most likely result from a shortage of sources, but not everything can be explained in this way. Dulębianka’s writings for the press – such as her articles for the *Ster* magazine – as well as remembrances of her by other activists in the women’s movement should suffice, in my view, to plug the gap to a degree. Nonetheless, the book is a pleasant read and a vital attempt to fill a blank spot in our knowledge about the pioneers of women’s suffrage in Polish lands.

Another notable biography that adheres to academic requirements is Kamila Cybulska’s work on Zofia Moraczewska, a left-wing activist and parliamentarian.<sup>5</sup> In her presentation of Moraczewska’s life, the author focuses on her protagonist’s social and political activism, viewing it against the backdrop of Moraczewska’s private life. Indeed, it must be said that Cybulska attaches equal significance to both spheres of Moraczewska’s activity. This is crucial to the extent that Moraczewska was, in fact, a housewife who split her time labouring outside of the home, seeking to combine her duties as a wife and mother with social and political activism. Cybulska traces the models and inspirations that Moraczewska drew on in her choices to family traditions, social expectations, and Moraczewska’s own life experiences. The confrontation between Moraczewska-activist and Moraczewska-

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<sup>5</sup> Kamila Cybulska, *O niepodległość i prawa kobiet. Zofia Moraczewska 1873–1958. Życie i działalność* (Warszawa, 2021).

-private person serves to highlight – if only on an individual level – the peculiar experience of women involved in social action. The book relies on an extensive set of sources. At the foundations thereof are personal documents left behind by Moraczewska herself as well as her nearest and dearest – primarily her memoirs for the years from 1891 to 1895, published several years ago by Joanna Dufurat and Piotr Cichoracki; letters to her sister Helena; and diaries of Moraczewska’s husband, Jędrzej Moraczewski (socialist activist, prime minister, minister, and columnist); as well as the couple’s correspondence from the period of the First World War and a rich collection of photographs.<sup>6</sup> The author also uses press sources, papers of the organisations Moraczewska was involved in, and numerous secondary sources dating back to the inter-war period and recent. Together with the monograph on the Union of Women’s Civic Work [Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet] that Moraczewska had established, written by Joanna Dufurat,<sup>7</sup> this biography offers an interesting perspective on the role of women who took an active part in public life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It also attempts to show the life of a contemporary equal relationship in which both husband and wife remain active in the public sphere.

To a degree, these books resonate with the biography of Aleksandra Piłsudska by Łódź historian Marta Sikorska.<sup>8</sup> The author defines her work as “an attempt at a complete biography of Piłsudska”, although she also expresses the desire to offer a broadened and multi-layered portrayal of the historical figure and to depict how the wife of Marshal Józef Piłsudski found fulfilment in various social roles. To that end, Sikorska presents her protagonist as a fighter for Poland’s independence, a wife, a mother, and a social activist. She also tries to add nuance to the self-portrait that Piłsudska offered in her memoirs, published several times, with the first edition in 1940 in London. Outside of that, Sikorska uses archival sources, contemporaneous press materials, and

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<sup>6</sup> Zofia Moraczewska, *Listy do siostry 1896–1933. Dziennik 1891–1895 (1950)*, ed. by Joanna Dufurat and Piotr Cichoracki (Łomianki, 2018); Jędrzej Moraczewski, *Dziennik wydarzeń 1939–1944*, ed. by Joanna Dufurat and Piotr Cichoracki (Łomianki, 2016); Zofia Moraczewska and Jędrzej Moraczewski, *Korespondencja czasu przelomu 1916–1918*, ed. by Joanna Dufurat and Piotr Cichoracki (Łomianki, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Dufurat, *W służbie obozu marszałka Józefa Piłsudskiego. Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet (1928–1939)* (Wrocław, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Marta Sikorska, *Aleksandra Piłsudska (1882–1963)* (Łódź, 2021).

memoirs and diaries of people who knew Mrs Piłsudska at various stages of her life. The book opens in a fairly commonplace fashion, with a description of the family house of Aleksandra Szczerbińska (future Mrs Piłsudska) and her childhood within it, which prompts the author to search for the causes of the protagonist's future choices in the earliest part of her life. Aleksandra Piłsudska certainly deserved a biography that would draw her out from the shadow of Józef Piłsudski, but she may not have been satisfied with the result. After all, Sikorska concludes fairly explicitly that Piłsudska had made it her life goal to erect a statue of Marshal Piłsudski and his family and remained steadfast in this purpose to the end. However, I do believe that the book does not offer an answer to questions of Piłsudska's own agency, the degree to which she could and did exercise freedom of action as the wife of the first citizen of the state. Why would such a seemingly emancipated woman choose such a traditional path of self-fulfilment – as a wife, mother, and widow? Perhaps, as Sikorska occasionally suggests, her agency and influence were far more extensive than they appeared on the surface but had been put to use in a behind-the-scenes manner, far from the inquisitive gaze of journalists. The final sentences of the book proclaim that “Aleksandra Piłsudska felt most at home as the wife of a ‘grand man of state’, reserving the major part of her efforts for social activism” and that these two spheres of life “carried the greatest significance for her and defined her in her own eyes” (p. 267), are true, but they also appear to take a rather simplistic view of the life of Piłsudska.

#### WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND GENDER ORDER

One interesting trend gaining traction in the Polish publishing market is the history of science, written from the viewpoint of gender order – particularly titles that refer to an extent to biographical research. The year 2020 saw the publication of Jolanta Kolbuszewska's *Kobiety w drodze na naukowy Olimp. Akademicki awans polskich historyczek (od schyłku XIX wieku po rok 1989)* [Women on the Way to Academic Olympus: Academic Advancement of Women Historians in Poland from the Late Nineteenth Century until 1989].<sup>9</sup> In it, the author presents the

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<sup>9</sup> Jolanta Kolbuszewska, *W drodze na naukowy Olimp. Akademicki awans polskich historyczek (od schyłku XIX wieku po 1989 rok)* (Łódź, 2020).



paths to the academic work of women scholars across several historical periods – from the time of their doctoral dissertations, through the emergence of the first women scholars with a habilitation degree during the interwar period, up to the PRL era that saw them crown their achievements with full professorships. As Kolbuszewska herself describes it, her perspective is situated “between women’s history (due to the object of study) and history of science (history of a historical discipline)” (pp. 12–13). Her questions concern the divergence between men’s and women’s careers and their characteristics. She also uses selected case studies to depict the pathways by which women came into academia in interwar Poland and – much more extensively – in People’s Poland. Most of all, however, Kolbuszewska’s work is a broad overview of academic biographies of women historians from selected universities, notably written in an encyclopaedic style. In-depth analysis is absent, similarly to – despite initial declarations – an answer to the question of contributing and (particularly) contravening factors in women’s pursuit of the highest academic honours. The conclusion offers statistical data that present the proportions of women and men employed at university historical departments, a tentative systematisation of the scholarly interests of women history professors, and finally, contemporary data that lead the author to opine that “despite the long-standing presence of women in the academia, the academic profession still appears to be a man’s job” (p. 334). For Kolbuszewska, this is due to the organisation of academic life and its relationship to private life.

Kolbuszewska’s contribution fits well with the study by Iwona Dadej entitled *Habilitacja – bariera czy kariera? Porządek płci w polskiej kulturze akademickiej pierwszej połowy XX wieku* [Habilitation – Barrier or Career? Gender Order in Polish Academic Culture in the First Half of the Twentieth Century].<sup>10</sup> Its author reflects on how women attained a habilitation degree at five universities in interwar Poland (in Kraków, Warszawa, Poznań, Vilnius, and Lviv). In other words, she expands upon topics that Kolbuszewska merely hints at. Dadej’s main question is, how did the academia receive women? Did they face barriers when embarking on and continuing their academic careers – and if so, what were they? A substantial part of the volume is also devoted to

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<sup>10</sup> Iwona Dadej, *Habilitacja – bariera czy kariera? Porządek płci w polskiej kulturze akademickiej pierwszej połowy XX wieku* (Warszawa, 2022).

a bibliography concerning both women in science and the biographies of women scholars. Though the study constitutes – as the author herself asserts – the fruit of preliminary research and is troubled by minor inaccuracies, it poses a number of novel questions and presents Polish women scholars and their contribution in a broader European context. Aside from the bibliography, one interesting addition to the publication are fragments of primary sources which offer a glimpse of the reality in which the protagonists of the book had laboured.

On the other hand, Wojciech Piasek's biography of Professor Jadwiga Lechicka combines the biographical approach with one rooted in the history of science.<sup>11</sup> It also serves as a useful addition to the two aforementioned studies, being as it is concerned with the life of a single individual. Jadwiga Lechicka worked as a historian at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń from 1946 until her death in 1965, but her academic career began even before the Second World War, in Lviv. Piasek sees his protagonist primarily as a historian and a woman involved in the academic milieu (or milieus). He writes, "I describe Lechicka as a solitary individual – an individual who made her own life choices, had her own desires and expectations of herself" (p. 7). In his study, he chooses to make use of traces – biographemes. As Piasek himself declares, the category is borrowed from Roland Barthes; the author understands it to mean ethnographic information that helps to identify the experiences of an individual without explicating it: diplomas, applications, identification cards, unsigned photographs, etc. Piasek's hand was essentially forced: Lechicka left no autobiography or other sort of memoir. To retrace the choices and motives of his protagonist, he decided to confront the biographemes with the contemporaneous idea of a "new and modern woman". However, the confrontation is not particularly convincing. First, we do not really know much about that particular idea; second, we do not know to what degree, if at all, it affected the actions taken by the protagonist of the book. The chapter on Lechicka's engagement in work for women's causes broadly understood proves quite conclusively that the author's grasp of women's history and gender studies is inadequate. At least some of the facts from Lechicka's life could have been subjected to a more rigorous analysis – for

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<sup>11</sup> Wojciech Piasek, *Jadwiga Lechicka – kobieta nowa i nowoczesna. Kulturowy porządek i relacja płci w historiografii polskiej* (Toruń, 2022).

instance, her path to habilitation, especially after the Second World War, when the scholar began working at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. A sense of inadequacy is also evoked by Piasek's use of biographemes. In his study, the author generally does not show how they are useful to his purpose nor how he interprets them. The mere inclusion of photographs in the appendix does not suffice. Nevertheless, in spite of these inadequacies of interpretation, the book showcases an interesting approach to a biography.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING AND GENDER

A growing interest in the individual is also suggested by the appearance of increasing numbers of diaries and memoirs. The inclusion of this type of literature here might seem surprising – after all, how does one go about reviewing a memoir – but of interest in this context is the view of life and of the surrounding world contained in these works. One interesting feature of the women's memoirs cited here are the introductions, which often reflect on methodological challenges or expand the context of the times and events described in the books. I shall cite three different examples.

The first are *Spostrzeżenia nad ludźmi. Szczere wyznania Massażystki* [Observations on People: Frank Confessions of a Masseuse] by Jadwiga Maria Strumff, the original of which is found in the collections of the Museum of Warsaw.<sup>12</sup> It is not known precisely what period the writings are from or whether they were produced continuously – and at what intervals. They certainly come from a time after 1892 and before 1910; also included is a registry of expenses dated to 1915. Jadwiga Strumff's notes do not speak merely of the realities of her work as a masseuse around the turn of the twentieth century. Substantial amounts of information are also provided concerning the living conditions of women and men in contemporary Warsaw, belonging to various social groups – Poles as well as Jews or Russians. Of interest is also the very figure of the author. A member of the Jewish Szancer family from Piotrków Trybunalski, who describes herself as assimilated, found herself in Warsaw with her husband. Here she gave birth to four children. When her husband is bankrupt

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Jadwiga Strumff, *Spostrzeżenia nad ludźmi. Szczere wyznania Massażystki*, ed. Piotr Kubkowski, Magorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdziel (Warszawa, 2021).

and escapes, leaving her behind with the children, Jadwiga searches frantically for employment, eventually taking up ‘kneading’. Thus, the work she performs places her – by her own account – in an awkward position, having to face both gratitude and indecent proposals. She also becomes involved with her female patients – these fragments of her confessions are especially interesting for providing a rare case for the time of such an open account of homosexual relations. The writings are prefaced by contributions from cultural historians, who explicate the historical context of the period that the ‘Masseuse’ lived in, which enhances the reading experience immensely by rooting her reflections on other people in a particular time and place.

Among such memoirs and diaries is also the autobiography of Rachela (Rachel) Fajgenberg (Faygenberg, Feigenberg), one of the first among very few examples of a Jewish woman’s autobiography from the turn of the twentieth century, as the editor of the book Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow attests.<sup>13</sup> The author was born in Lyuban (today’s Belarus), a township in the Minsk governorate, and wrote her memoirs aged only twenty, mere years after the events they recount. What they amount to is an account of the adolescence of a Jewish girl in a religious community. Rachela’s autobiography (originally written in Yiddish) depicts the world of the shtetl through the eyes of a Jewish girl. It discusses the realities of everyday life of both girls like her and the Jewish community as such. Rachela Fajgenberg also writes about the doubts that lead her to question the rules of behaviour that the local community sets for girls like her. She likewise offers a window into the values shared by the inhabitants of a shtetl in the former Polish Eastern Borderlands [Kresy Wschodnie]. Additionally, the reader gains an insight into her own dreams and the inflexion points in her biography that lead her to entertain thoughts about living a better life. Rachela’s autobiographical perspective furthermore sheds light on the mutual relations between Jews and Christians, which I would describe as very distant. If contacts did occur, they mostly happened out of necessity. Rachela’s autobiography also invites questions about the peculiarity of emancipation within Jewish communities, its extent, and the role religion and custom played in defining its limits. Finally,

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<sup>13</sup> Rachela Fajgenberg, *Dziewczęce lata. Młodość w poleskim shtetlu*, transl. Inka Stempin, ed. by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow (Warszawa, 2021); the Yiddish original appeared as *ead.*, *Di kinder-yorn* (Warsaw: Farlag “Ha-Shachar”, 1909).

it also offers an opportunity to pose questions concerning gender relations in a traditional Jewish community, something Nalewajko-Kulikow does in her introduction.

Another example of women's autobiographical writing are the late (composed in 1968) memoirs of Irena Protassewicz, the daughter of a landowning family born in 1910 in the Borki estate near Nowogródek (today's Navahrudak in Belarus).<sup>14</sup> The memoirs first saw print in English in 2019; I had written on them elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> However, I found that their structure justifies their inclusion here. The first part of the book reflects on the interwar period and is preceded by an introduction by the author's son, historian Hubert Zawadzki, who not only talked his mother into writing the work but also prepared it for publication. Part two, describing the author's forced removal to Siberia and her wartime wanderings, is also introduced by her son. The order of the memoirs, not entirely chronological in the original edition according to Zawadzki, was altered by him. In essence, then, Protassewicz's memoirs are a collaborative work between herself and her son. The Polish edition is based on the English one.

## ORAL HISTORY

One interesting publication also within the autobiographical trend are interviews with female political prisoners from Central Europe, a selection of which has been presented by Anna Müller.<sup>16</sup> Her book contains nine interviews with former prisoners from Poland (Krystyna Włodarz-Jakimek, Wiesława Pajdak-Śmiechowska, Tonia Lechtman), Czechoslovakia (Gabriela Kleinová and Julie Hrušková), Hungary (Júlia Rajk), Romania (Aristina Săileanu), the German Democratic Republic (Helga Gabel), and Bulgaria (Tsvetana Germanova). The interviews were conducted by historians, employees of institutes

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<sup>14</sup> Irena Protassewicz, *Róże pogryzę z kolcami cierni... Wspomnienia wojny i pokoju*, ed. by Waclaw Hubert Zawadzki (Warszawa, 2022). The English edition appeared as: Irena Protassewicz, *A Polish Woman's Experience in World War II: Conflict, Deportation and Exile*, transl. Hubert Zawadzki, ed. by Hubert Zawadzki and Meg Knott (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> See my review in *Aspasia*, 14 (2020), available online: <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2020.140113> [Accessed: 17 July 2023].

<sup>16</sup> Anna Müller, *Przetrwać. Życie dalej. Rozmowy z więźniarkami z Europy Środkowej 1945–1956* (Warszawa, 2021).

of national remembrance, or journalists; only one involved a male interviewer, and another a male and female duo. Though Müller uses interviews in her academic work, she restricts herself to collecting and selecting conversations conducted by others. In an extensive introduction, she acquaints the reader with the conditions under which the presented interviews took place, as well as the methodology of this kind of research. Her self-defined goal is “to make the experience of female former political prisoners visible, to recover them from the unfathomable depths of the past that incessantly selects whose experiences are worth a story and what that story is to focus on” (p. 11). Because her other purpose is to review the methods of oral history applied by the questioners, she does not include a single conversation conducted by herself, though she does reference one (with Jadwiga Janiszowska) in one of her introductory notes. Such references help the reader recognise Müller’s sensitivity as a researcher, highlighting what she sees as the culmination of the interviews. As she describes it, “prison dominated my horizon: every story was different, and all the stories were similar” (p. 9). Müller’s introduction uncovers unobvious contexts, showcasing to the reader how Müller herself ‘reads’ and interprets the prison experience. However, it does not provide historical details that would increase the understanding of the reality of the prison, as well as of the reality of the time, expanding the interpretation and inscribing the experience into a broader context. Müller also seems not to recognise the impact of the war on the psyche of her protagonists. Several years of living in fear, uncertainty of survival, the loss of one’s kinsfolk, etc., must leave an indelible mark on the survivors. Each interview is preceded by information about the protagonist, the reasons for her arrest, and the circumstances in which the conversation occurred. The respondents include both Communists and members of the anti-communist underground, proponents and detractors of the new political system installed after the war. All were imprisoned between 1945 and 1956. Their polylogue is highly interesting, helping to uncover what the author highlights in her introduction – the specificity of penitentiary systems in various countries and how the leaders of those countries defined politically suspect persons. The nine protagonists of the book are women from different social milieus, different in education and worldviews, who received sentences ranging from a few up to even a few dozen years. Müller highlights the triplicate structure of the conversations, covering

the time before the arrest, the imprisonment, and the period after release. Aside from the realities of prison life, the interviews also touch on the emotions experienced by the imprisoned. They also lead the women to return years after the fact to the reality of prison and re-experience past events. Müller concludes: "It is within the dialogue between the women on the one hand and male/female historians and culture workers on the other – at the meeting point between the emotions of the interviewer and those of the respondent – that their history is re-created" (p. 19).

What is notable about those re-created histories is how they describe the violence, the survival of which now increasingly serves as proof of the strength and resiliency of the prisoners. The fact that they survived also lends meaning to their experience. However, many did not survive this trial or pass it only at the cost of deep psychological scars. The interviews occasionally mention such women in passing; one is tempted to ask why some were not as fortunate. Indeed, aside from poor health, certain psychological predispositions must have played a part – a fact that some former prisoners mention explicitly. They also notice the 'stroke of luck' that accompanied them on their paths. Regretfully, this topic is not explored more consistently in the interviews, but the responsibility for that does not lie with Anna Müller. One important finding that Müller does make is the shared conviction that the time spent in prison stays with the prisoner for all time. Prison becomes the reference point for all her protagonists, both for later and earlier events of their lives, even if it is not readily apparent in all interviews. The book also provides highly useful material for comparative analyses of the experiences of women and men in prison during the Stalinist era. It helps recognise the gender aspect of the prison experience while also contributing to considerations of humanity under duress in extreme conditions. It also demands a reflection on the relationship between the subject and object of research and its impact on the story produced between them.

## CONCLUSIONS

There has been a growing interest in biographical writing among scholars of women's history in Poland in recent years. Biographies offer the possibility of viewing individual agents in a determinate time and place. Individual cases affirm, expand, and add nuance to our

understanding of the past of women. They also open a multidimensional perspective on gender relations, their evolution in various social spaces, and their dynamics. Women's biographies, like personal documents created by women, lend value to the private space as a space for activity as well as to the emotional weight of life choices. It is also of note that the authors of studies in this vein use various types of sources and methodologies – after all, biographies are naturally the province of interdisciplinary research. One would hope that the observations on the attempts at a synthetic view of women's history in PRL that preface this text might lead to the creation of the long-awaited syntheses of the history of women in Polish lands across different historical periods.

*transl. Antoni Górny*

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