

Równe prawa i nierówne szanse. Kobiety w Polsce międzywojennej (Equal Rights and Unequal Chances. Women in Inter-war Poland). Collection of essays edited by Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc, Warszawa 2000, Wydawnictwo DiG, Instytut Historyczny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, p. 352.

In her *Introduction* Anna Żarnowska rightly observed that for different reasons "...to the present day ... the studies on the social differentiation conditioned by gender, on the inequality of social standing of men and women in inter-war Poland — and principally on the transformations of women's position within the society and state of that time — are not much advanced...". This opinion applies as well to the other historical periods. In spite of the fact that the editors of the present tome have endeavoured for many years to contribute towards the development of the study in this field, including the social conditions of women in 19th- and 20th-century Poland, and that such a research has been pursued in other academic centres, and, finally, that we cannot ignore the scientific output of those historians, who have been interested in the problems of the role of women for some longer time, there is still much to do. The articles presented in this book provide an excellent example of a comprehensive review of a contemporary knowledge about the inter-war period, both in the respect of achievements and the subjects still neglected by historians.

The collection of the essays is composed of four parts, with the above-mentioned *Introduction* and the review of literature on the history of women in inter-war Poland (Katarzyna Sierańska): 1. In politics (the authors: Roman Wapirski, *Women and Public Life — Generational Changes*; Andrzej Chojnowski, *Women's Activity in Politics*; Michał Śliwa, *Women's Participation in*

Elections and their Parliamentary Activity, Jerzy Myśliński, *Women on the Polish Left Wing*; Michał Pietrzak, *Women's Legal Position in the Second Polish Republic*. 2. in society (Janusz Żarnowski, *Women in Social and Professional Structure of Inter-war Poland*; Władysław Mierzecki, *Wage-labour of Women in the Workers' Society in Inter-war Poland*; Dobrochna Kałwa, *A Model of an Active Woman in the Context of Debates on Different Viewpoints*; Anna Glińska-Nadgórska, *Silesian Traditionalism and Women's Rights. Labour and Everyday Life of the Female Teachers in the Silesian Region*). 3. in family (Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, *A Woman in the Family and in Peasant Community in Inter-war Poland*; Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, *A Modernisation of the Household and House Furnishing*; Katarzyna Sierakowska, *Maternity — Visions and Reality*; Magda Gawin, *Family Planning — Slogans and Reality*). 4. amongst the creators of culture (Hanna Kirchner, *The Women Writers of the Inter-war Period*; Agnieszka Morawińska, *The Women Painters in the Inter-war Period*; Mariola Kondracka, *Women at Universities*). The collection is closed by a concise "Attempt to summarise" by Anna Żarnowska and suggestion for further reading throughout, by Dorota Zamojcka. It was a very good idea to complete the book with the indexes (of names and the press' titles), and with the additional information on the authors. There are amongst them historians of different generations, both the eminent scholars known for years for their studies of modern history, and young researchers who recently graduated. It is certainly a credit to the editors that they were able to induce to co-operate such a team of diverse interest and experience, and unite their articles into one consistent book. I was sorry to notice, however, that amongst 18 authors there are two of whom the notice says "currently does not conduct the research".

The most detailed part of the collection sheds light on the problems of position, life and activity of women belonging to the intelligentsia, particularly those involved in public life. But this is not surprising in the light of the fact that to them indeed we owe the most prolific sources. On the other hand, it is a consequence of the long-term studies of political history of inter-war Poland. We still know little, however, about the women from the workers and peasant communities, and even less about the women from the lower middle-class. It seems to be a weak point of all the studies of inter-war Polish history and that of 19th century; here the progress is considerably impeded by scarcity of sources.

We know by far much about the woman's position in the social and professional structure, and about her legal status. There could be, however, some doubts about to what extent the legal regulations were observed in real life, but even here our knowledge has been substantially broadened. Important conclusions have been reached with regard, for example, to the studies of family life and material conditions of its existence, although we notice certain disparity in knowledge, particularly about the less affluent circles. Very interesting are the rudimentary studies of regional differentiation which throw light on significant provincial variations resulting both from different situations in three partitions and specific local traditions (especially the Upper Silesia). In this context very striking is a poor condition of the research into the relations of the Eastern region.

This last problem leads to the subjects still neglected by historians. Only few historians, and only marginally, turned their attention to question of the specific situation of the women belonging to the national minorities. Some of the articles give the impression that there were no such minorities in Poland, or at least, that the women from those minorities, in terms of conditions of life, position and chances of professional career, were in no way different from Polish women. We seem to be able to get some more detailed information about the Jewish women, but even these are not essential. The reader does not learn from the book that the law concerning *kehillot* (Jewish communities) discriminated women (in accordance with the religious tradition), as they were not entitled to vote, neither were chosen as the members of their organs. Also the statistics about working Jewish women are very specific, in consequence of the tradition of the Orthodox Judaism,

where quite often the husband — the legal owner of the enterprise (in particular the shop) and the statistic head of the family — was engaged in the studies of *Talmud*, while the wife was responsible for the business.

Although fragmentary information (for example memoirs) testifies that this phenomenon was on the decline, for the purpose of an analysis of professional structure it certainly should be taken into account. Another example of certain "blindness" to the specific features of the national minorities is an observation that in independent Poland the women could freely engage in the politics and only the active communist party members were potentially persecuted. In reality, from the persecutions also suffered the women from the minorities, most likely the Ukrainians.

Some of the authors emphasise — quite rightly — the important positive changes in women's situation and life taking place in the inter-war period. It applies both to the legal status, opportunity to play an active part in formal political life, access to education (especially admittance to universities), and to furnishing of the household, hygiene etc. It still remains an open question, however, and I am not sure whether at this state of our knowledge we are able to answer it fully, to which degree these changes affected diverse social groups and different territories? In many cases it is quite obvious at first glance that the development was restricted in many ways. For example, in her article about the modernisation of household, Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska rightly notices that, although in general the technical innovation of the household was quite extensive, the practical exploitation was limited not only by the family affluence but also by the access to the electric, gas, and water supplies. In the face of the regional differences even the moneyed manors or burgher's families could not benefit from the electric light. One of important achievements was the development of magazines for women, but illiteracy and lack of financial means kept many women from reading them, not to mention political circumstances, such as in famous "Sokal cordon".

Very interesting issue presents the results of influence exercised by the Church over the life of women. The authors more than once pointed out the weight of the Catholic Church. Mainly its impact on family life (which was connected with publicity campaigns for family planning), and in some respect on the role of women in public life. But many a woman in Poland were of different religion, and the influence of their institutions, together with the consequences of their traditional customs was dissimilar, and different were the changes (for example, it is worth to notice an exceptional phenomenon of the development of the religious schools for Jewish girls).

The essays gathered in this volume lead to the conclusion that 1918 was a real turning-point in life of the Polish women. The open question is whether (or to what extent) it was relevant to the Polish female citizens of different origins. The next two decades witnessed some positive changes, but those were restricted not only by certain occurrences in political life or by social inequality, but also by the specific economic situation of the State, mainly unemployment, rural overpopulation, congestion of the shop retailers and craftsmen. Probably the group who benefited most was women from the intelligentsia (the open question is whether it holds true for the minorities?). The changes in other social groups were impeded by material conditions, low level of education (in spite of some progress in this field), and considerable traditional conservatism. Giving the challenging realities of women's life in inter-war Poland the book will help further investigations.

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