

“Poorest creatures in the world”. Identities and aspirations of governesses in the Kingdom of Poland, 1864–1914 – areas of research¹

The article aims to present areas of research in the project about the aspirations and identities of governesses in the Kingdom of Poland, 1864–1914. The article discusses both secondary and primary sources, the latter in the form of about 200 personal memoirs from the time in which homeschooling for girls is mentioned. The article makes a preliminary overview of their content, pointing to the intended routes of interpretation and forming a research hypothesis. It discusses the liminal position of the governesses in the context of class and gender relations.

Keywords: governess, homeschooling, emancipation, female education, 19th century

Słowa kluczowe: guwernantki, edukacja domowa, emancypacja, edukacja kobiet, XIX wiek

Introduction

The aim of the article is to present areas of research in the project about the aspirations and identities of governesses in the Kingdom of Poland, 1864–1914. To present the scope of the research, I will first showcase some individual, personal stories of well-known Polish women, who had a first-hand experience with homeschooling, either as a governess or a student. The stories presented below discuss two women born in the first part of the century (Zamoyska – born in 1831, Orzeszkowa – 1841) and two a generation younger (Sempołowska – born in 1869 and Skłodowska – 1867). When it comes to those born early, the time of their most extensive activity in the field of teaching – or, in the case of Orzeszkowa, writing against teaching – comes in the same time, mostly

¹ Artykuł jest wynikiem badań w ramach grantu NCN Sonata: *Tożsamości i aspiracje guwernantek w Królestwie Polskim (1864–1904) w kontekście zmian społecznych i kulturowych*, UMO-2020/39/D/HS3/00228.

in the 1880s and 1890s. When I include their personal experiences as young girls, having to do with governesses at home, it is to show the impact their own upbringings had on their attitudes towards education of girls – even though it was before the proposed timeline of the research. It is in keeping with the idea that the research subject of homeschooling, especially of girls, was equally influenced by the external factors, such as social, cultural and geopolitical determinants, and the internal factors, having to do with family upbringing and personal transfer of knowledge through the generations of women.

The criteria of choice for these introductory personal stories were simple – I wanted to showcase women that presented as varied experience of homeschooling of girls as possible. I strove to choose women from different social and economic backgrounds (aristocracy, wealthy and poor landed gentry, urban intelligentsia) and different attitudes towards the occupation of a governess – from enthusiastic participation to vehement rejection. However, it is vital to remember that these are just a few personal stories that do not represent the full scope of experience of the time. They are used to show the possible routes of behavior that were important because they happened to women of certain social standing and discursive power that later influenced the discussion and helped shape the home education of girls. In the later part of the article, as well as in the research project itself, I use as my primary source the diaries of ordinary people that had experiences with governesses in their daily life, and I treat them as a source of information on the daily realities of the profession from the perspective of the teacher and of the student.

Personal stories – wardrobes, road paving and threats of bodily harm

Jadwiga Zamoyska was born in 1831 into the aristocratic family of Działyński. Her mother, Celina Działyńska née Zamoyska, was a well known Polish philanthropist and educational activist. Her father, Tytus Działyński, was an art patron and an important political figure in the Polish national independence movement. She acquired the best education that money and position could allow. As most of the girls of her station, she was homeschooled by a selection of foreign and Polish tutors, schooled in art, poetry, languages, history, and geography. She and her siblings were left in the care of staff, from nannies to various governesses, while their parents engaged in social activism and political work that was expected of the family of their position and connections. Jadwiga was left to deal with the teachers on her own. In her diary, she wrote that she was physically abused by her nursemaid. Her older sister Karolina tried to alert their mother, but to no success: My mother said: “But look, she loves

the teacher! Whenever I come to the room she runs to her and hugs her!” She didn’t know that the nursemaid told me to do it or she would kill me in my sleep otherwise².

Things did not get better when she got older. When Jadwiga turned five, the Działyński family employed a live-in governess for her and her older sister. The governess, Wanda Żmichowska (sister of the well-known, gifted and devoted governess and writer Narcyza Żmichowska), was impatient, quick to anger and insults. She called Jadwiga a “horned angel”³ and made her kneel in the middle of the room as a punishment while she entertained guests. She used to lock Jadwiga in the wardrobe and tell her that she was not allowed to come out until she mastered a particular ability, for example counting to a hundred. Jadwiga, scared of the darkness and of disappointing her parents, couldn’t perform, and so she stayed in the wardrobe for hours at a time, until Miss Żmichowska decided to let her out⁴.

When she was twenty-one, Jadwiga married her uncle, a November Uprising veteran Władysław Zamoyski, and left to live with him in Paris. When she was widowed, she came back to the Polish lands and in 1883 decided to open Zakład Kórnicki, School of Homemaking for Girls in Kórnik – a well known school for girls of all classes that was supposed to teach them home economics and all the skills necessary to maintain a household. Haunted by the memories of her own helplessness as a child and feelings of inadequacy as a young wife of a much older man, Zamoyska wrote about her school: “We would like to teach our students that work, supported by education and spiritual development, is not only beneficial, but can also help with strengthening character, fostering self-reliance and most precious of all: independence”⁵.

Eliza Orzeszkowa, one of the most important writers of the Positivism movement, shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1905, was born in 1841 in a wealthy landed gentry family. She had a private live-in tutor as a child (a hated German governess Fraulein Fechner), and she was sent to a convent school for girls in Warsaw when she turned eleven. She did not see her family for the next five years, but she retained moderately fond memories of the school. In her memoir she wrote that “the curriculum was not overly ambitious, as it was”⁶, but the atmosphere was good and far from the hellish picture paint-

² J. Zamoyska, *Wspomnienia*, Londyn 1961, p. 23. Excerpts from memoirs were translated from Polish by Alicja Urbanik-Kopec.

³ Ibidem, p. 22.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁵ J. Zamoyska, *O pracy*, Poznań 1902, p. 152.

⁶ E. Orzeszkowa, *Pamiętnik*, “Literatura i Sztuka” 1911, no 9, p. 133.

ed by Gabriela Zapolska (who wrote a scandalous, supposedly autobiographical novel *Przedpiekle* in 1903, depicting finishing schools for girls as places of physical and mental abuse).

Eliza Orzeszkowa got married in 1858 at the age of sixteen to a much older man, Piotr Orzeszko, who used her name and wealth as means to pay his outstanding debts. After the January Uprising, Piotr was sent to Siberia, and Eliza faced the staggering fines put on her estate by the Russian authorities, who penalized the families of those who aided the uprising. Orzeszkowa was forced to sell her lands and familial manor house. She decided to get a marriage annulment, move to the city (first Warsaw, then Grodno) and find employment. She tried her hand in opening a haberdashery, glove manufacture, a printing shop, she applied to be a typist and a telegrapher. Through it all, before she managed to find success as a writer, she never considered to work as a governess – usually the first choice for women of her background and education, especially those impoverished and left with no family for support. She had some experience with teaching, as she set up a school for the peasant children in her lands, as was expected of the gentry women of the time. In her memoir, Orzeszkowa noted: I would rather pave roads than teach children⁷.

In her feminist manifesto, *A few words about women*, she wrote about the fate of home teachers: “[In the manor houses, apartments and finishing schools] there is a crowd of those meek and quiet creatures in dresses of dark wool, with faces pale from exertion and eyes cast downward from humiliation, creatures without a calling and abilities, who work endlessly with insufficient education and teach without skills”⁸. As if to further support her claim, in 1888 she published a novella *Panna Antonina*, a cautionary tale about a governess who dies alone and destitute after a lifetime of sacrifice for the children of her wealthy employers. The governess is forty, old before her time, and dies of an unspecified lung disease she acquired because of her damp, cheap rented room, and daily exertion of her voice during classes. On her deathbed, alone and in a hospital, she asks the narrator: “Do you think, my lady, that there will be anything left of me on this Earth?”⁹ She tries to comfort herself by saying that she taught so many little children to read, but we, and the narrator, are doubtful her sacrifice was worth it.

Maria Skłodowska-Curie, double Nobel Prize Winner (1903 in Physics and 1911 in Chemistry) and the first woman to achieve a teaching professor position at the French Sorbonne, was born in an intelligentsia family in Warsaw in

⁷ Eadem, *O sobie*, Warszawa 1974, p. 23.

⁸ Eadem, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, Warszawa 1893, p. 129.

⁹ Eadem, *Panna Antonina*, Warszawa 1888, p. 54.

1867. Her mother was a headmistress of a finishing school for girls in Warsaw, and her father was a mathematics and physics teacher in a boys' gymnasium (high school). Her mother died early from tuberculosis, leaving her father to support his three daughters, Helena, Bronisława and Maria. They all wanted to achieve higher education, which was not an easy feat in the 1880s and required a move abroad. Maria made an agreement with her older sister Bronisława. Bronisława would leave to study medicine in Paris, and Maria would support her financially from home, while working as a governess. When the time came, Maria would move to Paris and live with her sister and be supported by her in turn. The plan worked. Maria Skłodowska graduated from the governmental gymnasium for girls with an official teaching diploma in 1884, at the age of seventeen, and got a teaching position in the countryside. She lived with a gentry family for three and a half years, teaching two small children and their older sister, who was the same age as Maria. Of the experience she wrote little: It was pleasant enough, especially that the girl I was supposed to teach was of the same age as me, and she was more of a friendly companion than a student¹⁰.

She did not appear to enjoy the governess position and treated it clearly as a means to an end that was the academic career in France. It can be argued that from her perspective, her academic prowess and teaching abilities were better spent on research and teaching chemistry students in her laboratory at Sorbonne.

Stefania Sempołowska was born in 1869 in Polonisz, in the family of landed gentry. Because of the bankruptcy of her father, she moved with her mother and sisters to Warsaw. Her mother opened a millinery shop, and Stefania enrolled in Jadwiga Papi's private school for girls. The school was known to have an extensive and practical curriculum, which was not common for girls, and it boasted many of the future social activists and teachers as their students. Stefania wanted to be a teacher. She passed her state exams in 1887 and soon started supporting her family (mother and two sisters) with her work as a private tutor. She was set on upgrading her teaching qualifications, and, without the means to study abroad, she decided to join the Flying University – informal school for young woman seeking education in Warsaw. She first enrolled as a student, and soon became an administrative and teaching help. In 1895, when two of her sisters married and left home, she opened her own secret private school for girls in her apartment. She engaged in many teaching projects, as well as social activism connected to national education, Polish independence, and female suffrage, through her whole life. Among other initiatives, she was an active supporter and organizer of the School Strike of 1905.

¹⁰ M. Skłodowska Curie, *Autobiografia*, Warszawa 1959, p. 19.

According to all accounts of her young students and people that knew her, Sempołowska was a teacher with a calling, set not only on transferring knowledge to the students, but also creating an environment of trust, growth and independence. One of her co-teachers wrote that the main objective of Stefania's pedagogical work was "respect for the character of her students and development of their personalities in all directions, in the atmosphere of sincerity, ease and mutual trust"¹¹. Her influence (both intellectual and personal) on her young female students was so great that many of them became teachers and social activists as well¹².

The type of knowledge and civic responsibility taught by Sempołowska was as much the effect of her personal convictions as a sign of the times. The educational standards for girls were changing. As Piotr Chmielowski wrote, "it was not only about higher education or about beautiful gowns and teaching the talents, but about something more important, about life itself – about teaching ways to earn a living, and to live by herself, without the need to look for a 'stronger' arm of a man to lean on, as was done by women of the former generation, often to their bitter disappointment"¹³.

The need for "practical" education was indeed becoming very clear. At the end of her life, Narcyza Żmichowska, another life-long governess, suffragette and social activist, wrote to young girls in 1876: "learn if you can, be able if you can and plan to be self-sufficient, because there is no one waiting for you with care and support if you fall"¹⁴. The quote is a part of a foreword to one of the best-selling pedagogical books of 19th century: *Pamiętka po dobrej matce* by Klementyna z Tańskich Hoffmanowa. It was first published in 1819 as a guide for homeschooling and upbringing of girls, but its enormous popularity caused it to be reprinted seventeen times, despite its increasingly dated advice. Żmichowska wrote about it in the foreword from 1876: "The female occupations listed in *Pamiętka*: painting, music, embroidery, household management, would be even more enjoyable in this day and age than they were in the days of Miss Tańska: however, there are only the lucky few among women who can afford to amuse themselves so"¹⁵.

¹¹ A. Samotyhowa, *Panna Stefania – subiektywny portret wspomnieniowy*, [in:] *Życie i działalność Stefanii Sempołowskiej*, ed. N. Gąsiorowska, Warszawa 1960, p. 185.

¹² H. Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, *Panna Stefania. Dzieje życia i pracy Stefanii Sempołowskiej*, Warszawa 1961, p. 83.

¹³ P. Chmielowski, *Zarys najnowszej literatury polskiej*, Kraków 1895, p. 59.

¹⁴ N. Żmichowska, *Słowo przedwstępne do dzieł dydaktycznych pani Hoffmanowej, 1876*, [in:] *Chcemy całego życia*, Warszawa 1999, p. 38.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 41.

After the January Uprising, and even more, during the positivist and emancipatory cultural shift of the 1880s and 1890s, girls were increasingly taught in a manner similar to boys – with more emphasis on exact and social sciences, more consideration on their possible future careers, and less focus on the “talents”, taught, in the words of another governess, Anastazja Dzieduszycka, to girls “as if they were poodles, taught to sit, give paw and jump not because it makes their lives better or happier, but because it makes their masters amused”¹⁶. This cultural shift was undoubtedly reflected not only in the slowly changing curriculums of private finishing schools for girls, but also in the demands of parent when it came to governesses, as well as in the aspirations of the female students and teachers alike.

All these stories seem to be disconnected examples of women who had a willing or unwilling contact with homeschooling of girls – both as students and teachers. However, together they depict the various experiences of women in the latter part of the 19th century and showcase how different the teaching (and learning) experiences could be. What is most important, they also showcase the areas of conflict in the lives of governesses that are my main research interest – the questions how class, gender and nationality influenced their life trajectories as paid homeschooling tutors. These stories are an inspiration for my ongoing project that aims to analyse the identities and professional and educational aspirations of governesses in the Kingdom of Poland from the January Uprising to the end of the 19th and beginning of 20th century in the context of the existing social conventions and expectations placed on this group.

State of research and personal memoirs

Home schooling by governesses is well-researched in the British and American academic writing, both from the historical and sociological perspective¹⁷ and in literary studies¹⁸. The subject of governesses is also present in the research on the Victorian domestic female communities¹⁹. Governesses were perceived as sexual objects by the male family members of their wards. However, unlike

¹⁶ A. Dzieduszycka, *Kilka myśli o wychowaniu i wykształceniu niewiast naszych*, Lwów 1871, p. 151.

¹⁷ See: K. Hughes, *The Victorian Governess*, London 1993; B. Finkelstein, *Schooling and Schoolteachers: Selected Bibliography of Autobiographies in the Nineteenth Century*, “History of Education Quarterly” 1974, vol. 14, no. 2.

¹⁸ C. Wadsö Lecaros, *The Victorian Governess Novel*, Lund 2001; E. Godfrey, ‘Jane Eyre’, *from Governess to Girl Bride*, “Studies in English Literature” 2005, vol. 45, no. 4.

¹⁹ S. Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Princeton 2007; B. Newman, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity*, Ohio 2004.

house servants, they were often romanticized and idealized as possible, though unlikely matrimonial candidates. They were marginalized poor relations often working within their own familial circles, thus inspiring (and feeling) unresolved disdain and humiliation²⁰. These publications introduce notions and insights to be confronted with the situation on the Polish lands, different from the conditions of the Western Victorian society.

In my research, I put emphasis on individual relations between governesses and their students, their expectations, frustrations and chosen strategies of education and life. The state of the 19th-century education system pertaining to girls and young women, its limitations, problems and reforms are crucial, but still a background of my research. The research on the 19th-century school system on the Polish lands has been conducted for many years and there is an ample number of publications on this subject. They are mostly concerned with governmental schooling and private schools for girls. In this category, there are both classic books²¹ and newer publications²². Izabela Jarosińska's book is especially interesting, as her publication is a catalogue of sources on the didactic approaches to the education of women in the 19th century. Similarly, the subject of the education of women in the 19th century is present in two collective volumes in the series *Kobieta i edukacja na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX w.*²³

In recent years, a few academic publications and papers about home schooling have appeared²⁴. In 2004, *Nauczanie domowe dzieci polskich od XVIII do XX wieku*²⁵ was published, and in 2005, *Źródła do dziejów nauczania domowego dzieci polskich w XIX i początku XX wieku z bibliografią adnotowaną pa-*

²⁰ L. Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain*, Oxford 2011.

²¹ J. Miąso, *Szkołnictwo zawodowe w Królestwie Polskim 1815–1915*, Warszawa 1966; R. Kucha, *Oświata elementarna w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1864–1914*, Lublin 1982; E. Staszyński, *Polityka oświatowa caratu w Królestwie Polskim (od powstania styczniowego do I wojny światowej)*, Warszawa 1968; J. Niklewska, *Prywatne szkoły średnie w Warszawie 1905–1915*, Warszawa 1987.

²² K. Dormus, *Problematyka wychowawczo-oświatowa w prasie kobiecej zaboru austriackiego w latach 1826–1918*, Warszawa 2006; M. Czapska, *Prywatne szkoły średnie w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1831–1862*, Kielce 2003; I. Jarosińska, *Edukacja nie-sentymentalna*, Warszawa 2016.

²³ *Kobieta i edukacja na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX w.*, cz. 1, 2, ed. A. Żarnowska, A. Szwarz, Warszawa 1992.

²⁴ G. Karłowska, *Literacka kreacja postaci guwernantki w wybranych utworach pozytywistów polskich*, "Biuletyn Historii Wychowania" 2002, vol. 1/2, p. 35–39; M. Hajkowska, "Był on dla mnie nie tylko nauczycielem, ale jakby starszym bratem i towarzyszem" – o relacjach nauczycieli domowych z pracodawcami i ich dziećmi w Królestwie Polskim w XIX i na początku XX wieku, "Edukacja-Teknika-Informatyka" 2019, vol. 1, p. 29–34.

²⁵ *Nauczanie domowe dzieci polskich od XVIII do XX wieku: zbiór studiów*, ed. K. Jakubiak, A. Winiarz, Bydgoszcz 2004.

*miętników i wyborem literatury pedagogicznej*²⁶. Home education was researched by Monika Nawrot-Borowska²⁷. First two publications are cross-sectional and exceed the timeframe I take into consideration. Also, because of their character (a collection of case studies and a catalogue of sources), they are a valuable jumping-off point for further research rather than monographs that exhaust the topic.

The publication by Nawrot-Borowska is a general analysis and description of the subject of home schooling in the 19th century. It focuses mostly on the discourse surrounding the programme of home schooling for girls and boys and didactic and pedagogic approaches. It has one chapter devoted to home schooling for girls. However, it does not include an exhaustive analysis of the emancipatory perspective that I want to employ. It underuses the publications on the need of reform of female education and upbringing and the discussions about the financial, social and educational position of governesses. I will include the discourse of the progressive feminist newspapers, mostly “Ster”, “Nowe Słowo” and “Ogniwo”, as well the publications by Eliza Orzeszkowa (in her case, also the literary texts), Teodora Męczkowska, Izabela Moszczeńska, Narcyza Żmichowska, and, as a context, the pedagogical writings of Klementyna Hoffmanowa née Tańska and Eleonora Ziemięcka.

The second context of my research will be the social change in the time of national uprisings and industrialization on the Polish lands, as well as the changing situation of Polish intelligentsia and gentry. All of those factors influenced greatly the social and cultural life of the employees and employers.

My main primary sources are the published diaries pertaining to home schooling in the 19th century. Governesses are present in the memoirs of such well-known figures as Anna Potocka, Jadwiga Zamoyska or Eliza Orzeszkowa. More important, however, is the access to the diaries of less known or wholly unknown figures mentioned in the 2005 publication mentioned above: *Źródła do dziejów nauczania domowego dzieci polskich w XIX i początku XX wieku z bibliografią adnotowaną pamiętników i wyborem literatury pedagogicznej*. One of the bibliographies in this catalogue of sources is a bibliography of 391 diaries mentioning the subject of home schooling in the period of partitions of Poland. It is a vast catalogue of personal accounts of both men and women, students and teachers, allowing for the analysis of the experience of working as a governess, as well as their relations with the students and their families. To prepare the sources for my project, I must exclude the accounts written by men, the

²⁶ *Źródła do dziejów nauczania domowego dzieci polskich w XIX i początku XX wieku z bibliografią adnotowaną pamiętników i wyborem literatury pedagogicznej*, ed. K. Jakubiak, G. Karłowska, M. Nawrot, A. Winiarz, Bydgoszcz 2005.

²⁷ M. Nawrot-Borowska, *Nauczanie domowe na ziemiach polskich w II połowie XIX i początkach XX wieku – zapatrywania teoretyczne i praktyka*, Bydgoszcz 2011.

diaries exceeding my intended timeframe and those that are only describing the home education on a superficial level, and do not provide information about particular governesses and their relationships with the students and families. This leaves me with 196 written accounts from this source.

The focus of my research are personal documents created by women. After preliminary research, there appears to be a vast amount of diaries with the desired content, among others, those by Janina Opieńska-Blauth, Helena Kunachowiczowa née Kadłubowska, Hanna Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, Anna Skarbak-Sokołowska, Zofia Szeptycka née Fredro, Jadwiga Toeplitz-Mrozowska, Kazimiera Treterowa, Maryla Wolska, Beata Obertyńska, Paulina Cegielska, Krystyna Libiszowska-Dobrska, Maria Grodzicka, Janina Korolewicz-Waydowa and many more. They include information about the social background, age and appearance of the teachers, as well as their personal relations with the students and other family members, tensions and problems. The diaries of the governesses are written by, among others: Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniowa, Jadwiga Klemensiewiczowa née Sikorska, Grasylda Malinowska, Romana Pachucka and Hanna Malewska. Additionally, I will use the diaries and letters of well-known women who at some point in life were working as governesses – Narcyza Żmichowska, Stefania Sempołowska and Maria Skłodowska-Curie. The diaries of the women are especially interesting because of the variety of their later biographies – some of them became engaged with the social, political or emancipatory movements, some went on to study at the universities abroad, and some left their profession to lead a domestic life as soon as possible, as they perceived this work as a humiliating, unpleasant and forced activity. The choice of the diaries by governesses and students is included in the bibliography. I am focusing on those from the Kingdom of Poland, adding sources from other partitions as a context and to highlight differences.

To further define my research field, I exclude male home tutors and teachers with no in-place accommodation, as these are vastly different research fields with their own conditions and limitations. My research concerns female governesses who were steadily employed by one family. It concerns women teaching girls, with analysis of how this situation differs from the one of male private tutors and home education of boys.

Liminal position – class, gender and best-selling novels

Researching the history of the Polish emancipation movement, it can be seen that the emancipated women saw the hope for independence of women in the access to education. A proper education would then allow them to take up a profession, and that would be a base for financial and social independence²⁸.

²⁸ P. Chmielowski, *Zarys najnowszej literatury*, p. 59.

Governesses were a professional group that appeared to fulfil all these dreams of education and independence. However, the conditions of their lives and work oftentimes did not allow them to achieve praised self-determination. Governesses were able to get education (of varying quality), but it often did not lead to their independence, instead exposing them to different pitfalls. That is why Orzeszkowa called them “morally and materially the poorest creatures in the world”²⁹.

The description of their situation is full of contradictions, more jarring in the context of the 19th-century social conventions. They were the women performing a wage labour while coming from the social class that expected its female members to be domestic and refrain from any connection and participation in the labour market. They acted as caretakers of children while not allowed to have their own. They were young, genteel women of marriageable age not allowed to get married. Finally – they came from the upper class and worked in service. The profession of a governess serves as a lens that showcases dilemmas common to the age and often going far beyond the specifics of this profession. The discrepancy between those categories and the practicality of life proves how the common distinctions that we use to categorize and study individual biographies of the time (according to their occupation, ancestry, cultural capital, etc.) are in fact often too superficial and unsuitable to provide satisfactory analysis.

The liminal position of governesses in the context of class was seen in many different aspects. According to memoirs of governesses and girls taught by governesses at the time, most of the classes lasted from 9 to 12 in the morning, and then the students were left to their own devices. Sometimes they accompanied their governess for a nature walk or a ride in later years when public transport became more available. Waclaw Lednicki mentions his family governess that stayed with them from 1904 to 1918. She was Swiss and had a host of hobbies that she indulged in while not conducting classes. She used to practice ballet and dance in the house, looking “as if she fell from a Degas painting”³⁰. Later she took to photography and painting and spend hours in her room practicing her skills. This type of workload was nothing in comparison to the workload of other staff employed in the house. Most of the house servants worked from 5 or 6 am to 10 pm, waking before anyone else to light the fire and buy food at the market, and going to sleep after everyone else went to sleep. The governesses were distinctly separated from the house staff – they ate with their employers, they slept with the children or in their own, separate rooms, and

²⁹ E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, p. 103.

³⁰ W. Lednicki, *Pamiętniki*, vol. 1, Londyn 1964, p. 173.

not in the servants' quarters. This distinction had to breed resentment in some servants and inspire respect in some others, as governesses were a special type of household staff. Andrzej Rostworowski mentions that mademoiselle Louise Chigniac, a governess that took care of him and his sister between 1900 and 1907, was not liked by the house servants, as they resented the addition of "another sponger"³¹ to the family.

The respect or lack thereof was apparent also in the attitude of the children and the parents. Sometimes governesses had to endure a host of practical jokes played on them by the children. Janina Porazińska talked about many indignities that the governesses had to endure from the hands of the children. She talked how her cousin scared the governess on her evening walk by dressing as a ghost with a painted pumpkin on his head, or when he surprised her while she was bathing. Mademoiselle Louise (as she was called) discovered his plot and dunked him in the basin of icy water fully clothed as a punishment³². Sometime, as evident by the case of Wanda Żmichowska, the governesses reciprocated in kind. The memoirs provide many examples of former students who were given corporal punishment by the governesses, mostly resulting in mutual resentment.

The attitude of the parents requires analysis as well, as it showcases the liminal class status of the governess. All parties were mostly conscious of the professional agreement joining the family and the governess. Despite the talk of treating governesses as "beloved members of the family"³³ (as Porazińska and many others wrote), it was an agreement that could be terminated at any point in time, as indicated by the ruthless behaviour of Helena Turnowa towards Narcyza Żmichowska. On the other hand, as evident by the attitude of Celina Działyńska, many mothers took the side of the governess in any conflict. As Antoni Kieniewicz wrote about his sister in the 1870s: The only governess that taught Isia, the youngest, was Fraulein Mariechen, a German governess, very strict and irritable. Lessons usually concluded with Isia crying and Fraulein exclaiming "Isia, wieder du pipst!" (Isia, you are squeaking again!). And so mother decided that Isia should be sent to a convent³⁴.

Kieniewicz's mother of course meant a convent school for girls, not an actual convent, but the case remains that in the face of the obvious lack of any pedagogical knowledge of the governess, the mother was more inclined to blame the

³¹ A. Rostworowski, *Ziemia, której już nie zobaczysz. Wspomnienia kresowe*, Warszawa 2001, p. 11.

³² J. Porazińska, *I w sto koni nie dogoni*, Warszawa 1988, p. 50–157.

³³ Ibidem, p. 152.

³⁴ A. Kieniewicz, *Nad Prypecią, dawno temu... Wspomnienia zamierzchłej przeszłości*, Wrocław 1989, p. 43.

young daughter and not the teacher. In the convent school, the nuns soon broke Isia's spirit even further. On the first day, when the girl said that she does not like beetroots for dinner, they announced that she will eat exclusively beetroots for two weeks, as it will teach her to be grateful for the food.

This story is also important to showcase another facet of my research – the question how the children who were homeschooled by governesses remember their teachers and what influenced their attitudes and memories. It is important to note that personal documents are an ambiguous source of knowledge, heavily influenced by a biased perspective, especially if they are written by an adult recalling their childhood, as it is often the case in those diaries.

The liminal position of the governess was also visible in the gender perspective. Governesses were mostly young women of marriageable age that did not have their own families. Because of the similar class standing to the employer's family, they were often perceived as those searching for the husband in the sons of the family. However, the situation was mostly complicated by their lower financial status and, often, higher cultural capital. During her three years in the countryside in the 1880s, Maria Skłodowska managed to fall in love and get engaged to the son of the family, Kazimierz Żorawski. However, she was humiliated, as the Żorawski family forbade their son to marry Maria because of her inferior social status. The engagement was broken, and Maria left for Paris.

The unclear position of the governess made her a common object of crass sexual jokes and sexual harassment. Maria Ilnicka wrote in 1904 in “Bluszcz”: [A governess] is forced to pretend that she doesn't understand the allusions, the jokes, the whispers, the double entendres that are in fact single entendres, for they are so obviously insulting – and all because of her upbringing and the unfortunate circumstance that she needs to eat!³⁵

Popular magazines for men also made governesses a target of their sexual cartoons. A Galician newspaper “Bocian” published many pictures of this sort in the early 1900s. One of them depicts a teacher talking with the father of the family. The dialogue written below states:

Mr: You seem to never hear when I call, dear.

Governess: A pair of diamond earrings would surely help to heal my ears!³⁶

In the second cartoon, a young aunt is depicted talking to her little niece. The dialogue reads:

Girl: Aunt, I will never go to the park with you again!

Aunt: Why?

³⁵ K. Ilnicka, *Maria czy Marysia? W kwestii slug*, “Bluszcz” 1904, no 20, p. 229.

³⁶ “Bocian” 1904, no 11, p. 1.

Girl: Because you're ugly! Whenever I go with my governess, there are always nice men there to escort us, and when I go with you, no one dares to speak to us!³⁷

The peculiar gender position of governesses was immortalized in the novel from 1909, *Trędowata* by Helena Mniszkówna. It tells the story of a moderately wealthy daughter of gentry family, governess Stefcia Rudecka, and her doomed romance with a millionaire uncle of her ward, duke Waldemar Michorowski. They fall in love and, even though Stefcia is apprehensive of breaking social roles, get engaged. However, his aristocratic family and friends shun the girl, calling their match a misalliance. In the end, Stefcia dies of a brain fever because of the endless persecution his family inflicts on her, trying to force the girl to break up the engagement. It is worth mentioning that the Cinderella trope is present not because Stefcia is of a lower class standing than Michorowski – she is a gentlewoman, and she has a dowry of 20 thousand rubles. Her inferiority is mostly represented by her profession, as she enters the Michorowski social circle as a governess. It is her profession (temporary and undertaken not because of financial strain, but personal reasons) that dooms the relationship.

The novel was universally panned by critics, called “a typical spawn of talentless feminine graphomania”³⁸ and “literature for cooks and scullery maids”³⁹. However, it was also extremely popular and sold very well, amassing sixteen reprints until 1938. The extreme differences between the reception of the novel by its critics and readers show that the melodrama of a doomed relationship between a governess and a gentleman was something that resonated in the hearts of the female readers (perhaps especially with the “cooks and scullery maids” that the critics made fun of), as they felt the situation both close to life and made endlessly thrilling by the melodramatic costume and over the top plot twists – the same plot devices so hated by the reviewers.

As we can see, the position of the governess usually presented a curious mix of independence granted to educated women of upper class and helplessness of unmarried, impoverished genteel women. However, the description of the peculiar fate of the governesses, the material ramifications of their existence and their everyday life is not the only purpose of this research. It has also to do with the history of transfer of knowledge and worldviews.

The analysis of the conditions of life and work of governesses will allow to give voice to women standing directly behind those women that, thanks to their social standing and education, were able to influence the discourse – connected to emancipation, education, social reforms, but also preserving the traditional

³⁷ “Bocian” 1903, no 5, p. 8.

³⁸ See: T. Walas, *Zagadka Trędowatej*, [in:] *Lektury polonistyczne: od realizmu do preekspresjonizmu*, ed. G. Matuszek, vol. 2, Kraków 2001, p. 234.

³⁹ T. Walas, *Posłowie*, [in:] H. Mniszkówna, *Trędowata*, Kraków 1972, p. 465.

social relations. From the position higher than house servants, but lower than their aristocratic, genteel or bourgeois employers (here: parents and guardians), governesses were able to shape a new generation of women. Through a long-term care and educational relationship, they could give their students tools for emancipation (be it further education, social or patriotic work) or reproduce patriarchal system by schooling them solely in female accomplishments and perpetuating traditional notions of the place of women in the society.

Identity – personal and national

In my research, I assume a research hypothesis according to which the attitudes resulting from the individual biographies of the governesses influenced not only their own life choices but were also an important element of the intellectual formation and future actions of their students (through acceptance, rejection or modification of the proposed ideas, values and expectations). This way, the factors of social change, filtered through the personal experiences of the governesses, influenced in a particular way goals and aspirations of next generations of women. The examples of governesses prove that their motivations, relationships with students and eventual biographical choices reflected the full variety of approaches – from enthusiastic leadership (Stefania Sempołowska, Jadwiga Zamojska) through mild indifference (Maria Skłodowska-Curie) to abusive malice (Wanda Żmichowska).

Women employed as governesses were faced with very difficult dilemmas connected with their identity and their chosen pedagogical approach. Because of their specific, liminal status, the personal choices of governesses mirror a catalogue of approaches adopted by Polish intelligentsia and gentry in the existing socio-economic circumstances in a unique way.

The research questions that I would like to explore have to do with reasons why women took the governess job. Did they treat it as a calling, degradation, or maybe a steppingstone to greater things? Was it a necessity or a choice? They all can be summed up in one general question: to what extent being a governess and emancipation went together? What is more, the strange liminality of the governess position was a common experience in various geographic and political contexts – transgressing national borders. In many memoirs, it is underlined that children hated their German governesses and nursemaids – popular because women from the Prussian Empire were often thought to be the best caretakers of young children, because of their supposed level-headedness and no-nonsense approach. Eliza Orzeszkowa had a hated Freulein Fechner, Izabela Stachowicz, born in 1897 – Freulein Marta, who hated her cats and spoke to her in a cold manner.⁴⁰ Kieniewicz

⁴⁰ I. Czajka, *Córka czarownicy na huśtawce*, Warszawa 1971, p. 68.

mentions Freulein Mariechen who inadvertently sent his sister Isia to a convent. French governesses were very popular and thought suitable for adolescent girls, and so, most memoirs mention “some mademoiselle or other”⁴¹ (as said by Jadwiga Umiastowska, born 1892, who was perhaps fluent in French, but did not possess any academic skills. Employment of foreign governesses was a point of contention for many women, especially educated emancipated women of the time, who felt that foreign, untrained caretakers steal their job opportunities and teach without any preparation, spoiling the next generation of young girls – both in the sense of lack of transfer of any meaningful knowledge and of lack of patriotic upbringing. Eliza Orzeszkowa wrote: “It often happens that parents discovered, to their great astonishment, that instead of employing the graduate from famous Sacré Coeur or St. Claire, a woman with a calling and education, they employed a Parisian ex-washerwoman or ex-ballet dancer *de bas étage*, who decided that her hands are sore from doing laundry and her legs hurt from dancing, and so endeavored to relocate here and teach our children, receiving, in exchange for a French accent particular even to gamins of Paris, a hefty dose of money and an even heftier dose of respect”⁴².

As we can see, the national component was also important and divisive.

My project focuses on the governesses of Polish origin, from Polish lands. The conditions of their life were vastly different than that of foreigners, both in terms of education, expectations and pay. Polish nationals were often employed to teach general skills to young girls over the age of five or six, teaching reading, writing, a little of literature, history, and geography. They were also expected to mind the children, so they worked both as teachers and caretakers. Foreign governesses were often employed to teach specific language skills – Italian, German, French, English, and sometime only part time (for *demi-place*, as explained by Jadwiga Waydel-Dmochowska⁴³ – so that they could use the time to give individual tutoring classes in the morning). The position and pay of a foreign governess were significantly better (or perceived as such) than those for the Polish teachers, and the expectation for upper-class girls to speak two or three foreign languages meant that French, English and Italian governesses were constantly sought after by the parents. It is interesting to note how the traditions, cultural patterns, and female education in their country of origin influenced their stay and employment on the Polish lands. For example, Waclaw Lednicki mentions his and his sister’s Swiss governess Mathilde Jaubert⁴⁴ who met her first employers, a wealthy Russian family, while still living in Switzerland. She

⁴¹ J. Umiastowska, *Z Raczyńskimi w tle. Wspomnienia minionego świata*, Poznań 1997, p. 16.

⁴² E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, p. 178.

⁴³ J. Waydel-Dmochowska, *Jeszcze o dawnej Warszawie*, Warszawa 1960, p. 40.

⁴⁴ W. Lednicki, *Pamiętniki*, p. 170.

followed them to the Kingdom of Poland, where for some time she taught children of Russian aristocratic families, and so she was very fond of Russian people in general, seeing them as cultured, wealthy, gracious employees, which was often a point of contention for the Polish families she worked for after. However, being a foreign national not well versed in the Polish-Russian history or in current politics, she was unaware of the *faux-pas*. It is also interesting to see if the conditions and pay offered by the Polish employers was significantly better than the one they could achieve in their country of origin – also in the context of their social position, as a few diaries mention that their foreign governesses were born out of wedlock or arrived on the Polish lands in order to hide from their spouses, as a form of a forced separation attempt.

My focus will be put on the perspective of Polish governesses that were educated and employed in the Kingdom of Poland. I will explore their education possibilities and patterns, their employment rates and conditions, and their aspirations and identities. That being said, the comparison between those two types of governesses, noting the national tensions and differences in education, expectations and conditions of their employment is an important and interesting avenue of research that I will pursue as well.

The precarious position of the governess (often both a stranger in the house and a stranger in the land) can be perfectly summed up by a cartoon from “Punch”, published in September of 1914, at the beginning of the Great War. It depicts a little English girl, her mother, and a governess, sitting at a table in their London home. The subtitle reads: Ethel (in apprehensive whisper which easily reaches her German governess to whom she is deeply attached): Mother, shall we have to kill Freulein?⁴⁵.

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