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**Polish Women in Exile to Siberia in the 19th Century –
Autobiographical Reflection in Women’s Narratives**

The paper discusses the issues related to the biographical research perspective and the role of ego-documents in modern humanities. These considerations focus on autobiographical narratives of women exiled to Siberia in the 19th century, both those who were sentenced or went there voluntarily. Different forms of women’s narratives were analysed, namely a memoir of Helena Skirmuntowa (1827–1874), written in the years 1863–1867, and a diary of Maria Obuchowska-Morzycka (1841–1911?), who wrote it 40 years after her life in exile. The autobiographical research model adopted in the paper focuses not only on the questions regarding the autobiographical context of ego-documents but also on biographical and autobiographical identity of the authors, connected with the description of their life, experiences, emotions as well as their attitude to the outside world and relations with other people.

KEYWORDS: Polish Women in Siberia in the 19th Century, Women’s 19th Century Memoirs, Maria Obuchowska-Morzycka, Helena Skirmuntowa.

The present paper concerns a wide range of issues related to the biographical research perspective, defined by historical, sociological, psychological and anthropological inspirations (Metoda biograficzna 2012: 6–10). The issue of women’s narratives presented from such

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a perspective, exemplified by personal documents of Polish women deported to Siberia in the 19th century, allows for their multi-layer analysis and a formulation of a number of research questions about the significance of autobiographical reflections included in women's memoirs, diaries and letters. Within the autobiographical research design questions regarding autobiographical context of personal documents and their biographical/autobiographical identity, for which the concept of Philippe Lejeune (Lejeune 2001; Ogonowska 2011; Czermińska 2000), a French literary scholar constitutes a reference point, are important.

As a result, the attention of researchers concentrates on questions about the status of narrative as a story about oneself, one's own life, personal experiences and experiences of others, feelings, attitudes towards inner and outer world and finally questions about relationships and relations with others as well as interpersonal networks. I believe that the key to resolving many of the mentioned research problems is looking at women's auto-narratives in terms of communication, controlled by characteristic rules and practices of the text, and language as a state of consciousness of the authors.

Women's memoirs, diaries and letters are a kind of emanation of collective and individual consciousness. In the cognitive sense, what is important is their historical context and a specific transfer of the researcher into the historical reality, marked by subjective perception of the past reality held by female authors of ego-documents and, to some extent, inevitable self-censorship, resulting from political conditions of the times when the documents were written. Within the cultural research perspective, inspired in part by anthropological reflection, the issues which relate to 'the here and now' of the female authors' ego-documents seem equally important (Egodokumenty 2015; Bankauskaitė-Sereikienė, Statkevičiūtė 2017). This allows for understanding the modern world of the female authors of memoirs, diaries and letter and essentially their own, socially conditioned world. This extremely important "testimony of privacy", present in various genres of women's ego-documents, makes it possible to testify "the history in making" with one's individual experiences and private life (Lubas-Bartoszyńska 2006: 58). The cognitive attitude of a historian, defined in this way, leads to a wider range of research questions and a broader area of historical research, in which ego-documents occupy a central position (Szulakiewicz 2013: 65–84).

For many reasons, ego-documents occupy a special place in the reflection on the biographies of women living in Siberian exile in the 19th century. They not only personal narratives but are also characterised by the already mentioned historical context contributing to their role in historical research as well as in the source interest in the 19th century letters and memoirs (Pamiętniki 2017).

19th century memoirs of women in exile – description of sources

Selected memoirs, diaries and letters of the 19th century women who were either exiled to Siberia or went there voluntarily with their loved ones, husbands or fiancés, are the source base for the present considerations. The group of such women was not small. However, due to limited sources and incomplete state of research it is very difficult to present any

estimates. The literature assumes that only after the January Uprising out of the total 40,000 of the exiled approximately 10 % were women from the Polish Kingdom and the Western Krai, which amounts to about 4,000 women (Bruchnalska 1933, Śliwowska 1999: 306–312). Referring to their social status, it should be stressed that the majority of them came from the families of landowners and intelligentsia of gentry and noble origins, which is not irrelevant in this case. The women's social background, their position in a family and the tradition in which they were brought up influenced their worldview and the perception of the surrounding reality (Rzeczniwska 1990: 29–50; Sikorska-Kulesza 1990: 67–78).

Women's ego-documents from the Siberian exile, including memoirs, diaries and letters, are unfortunately rare sources (Śliwowska 1999: 307). This problem was frequently discussed by researchers analysing the problem, starting from Maria Bruchnalska, who as early as before the First World War started collecting women's accounts from the times of the 1863 Uprising and exiles to Siberia (Bruchnalska 1933). Therefore, the situation and the fate of women in exile was often described by the co-exiles as the authors of memoirs and diaries, including Waław Lasocki, Kornel Zielonka, Henryk Wiercieński and others. However, the role of women's narrative in this case cannot be underestimated as it allows for looking at the fate of Poles in exile in the 19th century from a different perspective (Śliwowska 1996: 175–194; Śliwowska 1990: 147–158; Jędrychowska 2000; Caban, Michalska-Bracha, 2015: 71–87). In the women's works, in addition to the description of landscape, one can find detailed accounts about everyday life in exile, Polish customs cultivated in exile, celebrations of festivals, social activity, help for co-exiles and the so-called 'Polish homes' – significant places in the life of Poles in exile (Caban 2011: 369–378).

The point of reference for further discussion is selected autobiographical texts written by women about their experiences in exile after the January Uprising. Although they were often written at different times, both on a daily basis as well as from a certain time perspective and under different political conditions, they have many features in common. Consequently, the issues to be studied include two women's narratives, which differ in form. The first one is a diary and letters of Helena Skirmuntowa from the years 1863–1867, written on a regular basis under the pressure of given moments and personal experiences (*Z życia Litwinki* 1876). In a sense, they are a kind of specific conversation of the author with herself as they were written for herself not for other people. The second example of women's narrative is the diary of Maria Obuchowska-Morzycka from the early 20th century, written forty years after the events had taken place and maintaining a certain distance towards the author's experiences. Contrary to the Skirmuntowa's memoir, the diary of Morzycka was created at the instigation of her daughters and friends, and thus, to some extent, it was written for other people, making the 'context of the addressee' important in her narrative.

Autobiographical narrative of Helena Skirmuntowa

The question whether this contrasted form of narrative and different times of writing both accounts created a different picture of woman's experiences of exile remains open.

The first author, who deserves some focus, is Helena Skirmuntowa (1627–1874), a painter and sculptor, born in Kołodno near Pinsk (Polanowska 1997–1998: 187–189). She received her artistic training in the 1840s in Berlin and Dresden, where she was taught painting by W. Krause and C. Vogel von Vogelstein. Then, at the beginning of the 1850s she Skirmuntowa mastered her sculptural skills in Rome and Vienna. She was married to a landowner, Kazimierz Skirmunt, with whom she settled in her hometown of Kołodno. For maintaining contacts with insurgents during the uprising of 1863 she was deported to Tambov and then to Kirsanov, where she stayed until 1864 (Polanowska 1997–1998: 187–189; Polanowska 2004: 105–124). She was in exile in Siberia with her husband and daughter. After serving a sentence of exile, in 1867 Skirmuntowa returned to Lithuania and then went to Crimea, to the estate of her father-in-law. Helena Skirmuntowa is the author of a diary, a unique historical source, a female auto-narrative, in which she recorded her experiences and fate in exile, sometimes emotionally charged and sometimes laconic and withdrawn.

As with other exiled women, she devoted a lot of space in her diary to detailed descriptions of the journey to exile, which was her first contact with an unknown space. These descriptions were written from the moment she left Pinsk in October 1863. She became known as an insightful observer of people she met while travelling, her travelling companions, surrounding places, the countryside, architecture of towns and cities as well as landscapes. She was sensitive to the landscapes of Siberia and on her way to Tambov she would record the finest details of that “tamed” space.

The landscape became an empty steppe; trees disappeared; villages, although always huge, became scarce; as of Lipeck houses are not made of stones but are black and made of straw. In Wolczek, a large and muddy village, we stopped for longer and had breakfast. <...> Again, there are more villages, even uglier, with huts made of clay rather than wood, fallen to the ground, leaning, ragged, torn <...>. (*Z życia Litwinki* 1876: 197, 199).

Her narrative is full of curiosity about the world, cognitive passion, and at the same time an ordinary fear of the unknown, new “forced” experience. This passion and love for details in describing everyday experiences and feelings weakened with time and as a result Skirmuntowa’s accounts were, unsurprisingly, subject to self-censorship. Bronisław Zamorski, publishing fragments of her notes and letters, emphasized that she adopted this approach in her narrative for fear of the safety of other people she wrote about in the diary (*Z życia Litwinki* 1876: 213). There was also another reason, namely a progressive eye condition and deteriorating eyesight.

This particular “discovering of the new and unknown world” and facing the unknown culture is clearly reflected in Skirmuntowa’s self-narrative. When she reached the tollhouses of Tambov in November 1863, after a month-long journey, she recorded in her diary a picture of ugly, muddy suburbs, which aroused mixed feelings in her (*Z życia Litwinki* 1876: 198, 201).

Skirmuntowa describes at length the community of co-exiles, seeing in it something “non-uniform and minutely critical” (*Z życia Litwinki* 1876: 215). Helena was characterized

by unique ability to feel compassion for other people and at the same time to downplay her suffering in exile. Modest and withdrawn, she tried not to notice the tragedy of her experiences. This was the case when she reached Tambov and received letters from her relatives and friends. She wrote then that she was grateful to God for the fact that her mother calmly learned about her exile. She also thought that her situation was no worse than other people's (Z życia Litwinki 1876: 203). She spoke similarly about her situation in exile when she was living in Tambov. Comparing her life with other exiles, who passed Tambov every day to move to further eastern parts of Siberia, she wrote with undisguised regret that she had much more luck – "it is a shame to suffer so little" – she stressed (Z życia Litwinki 1876: 223–224).

Her narrative is a rich, factual story, full of detailed descriptions of experiences, situations, events and people whom she met throughout her life. This was the case of meeting the exiles in Tambov, including Maria and Waclaw Lasocki and Fortunat Nowicki, a physician who took care of her eyes. But above all, he inspired her to design and make "historical chess" referring to the Sobieski's Relief of Vienna in 1863, which were to be handed out to exiles passing through Tambov to "make their journey more enjoyable" (Z życia Litwinki 1876: 226; Kraszewski 1875: 11–13; Pług 1876: 202–203, 218–219). Historical chess, the artist's most famous work which she did not complete, were cast in bronze in Vienna in 1873 and at present they are part of the collection of the National Museum in Krakow. Skirmuntowa wrote about the chess and her work devoted to it on several occasions both in her diary and letters. As she noted in Tambov, she stopped working on the chess figures until December 1, 1863. She continued it when she was exiled to other places, e.g. Kirsanov in the Tambov district and Balaklava.

The descriptions of these two places in exile, Tambov and Kirsanov, are slightly different. Perhaps Skirmuntowa was more accustomed to Siberia and misery of exile or somehow influenced by its conditions and the longing for her family home. The reason could also be a progressive eye condition which made it difficult for her to engage in artistic work and simply to carry on everyday life in exile. However, in each case, in her diary we can find deep thoughts regarding her life, family or a general situation, which, as she pointed out, could be recorded only from the perspective of the exile, being separated from home and the loved ones. In one of her letters to her mother, written from Kirsanov, Skirmuntowa wrote about the principle of bringing up young people in the spirit of responsibility and devotion for others (Z życia Litwinki 1876: 231).

In the letters to her mother she also referred to her private life and attitude to motherhood.

I am becoming more and more convinced that what several years ago seemed to me a very accurate instinct today is a practical experience, unfortunately, reinforced with age. If it is necessary I will curse young mothers who, for unworthy reasons, will give their children to hideous wet nurses. (Z życia Litwinki 1876: 235).

Helena Skirmuntowa's diary gives the readers an irresistible impression that there is no space for fragmented messages, on the contrary, the way she describes her own experiences,

artistic work, thoughts, feelings of longing and everyday dilemmas allows for capturing a significant context of her narrative.

Autobiographical narrative of Maria Obuchowska-Morzycka

The same places of exile as Helena Skirmuntowa's, Tambov and Kirsanov, as well as similar period of exile in Siberia, covering the years 1863–1866, are presented in an autobiographical reflection of Maria Obuchowska-Morzycka (1841–1911?). She was born in Warsaw but her parents came from Volhyn where she spent her childhood. Her father owned an estate in Ivankov near Zhitomir. When she was 16, Obuchowska-Morzycka married much older Julian Morzycki (approximately 1825–1898), an owner of the Lachowice estate near Zhitomir in Volhyn. The reasons why Morzycka lived in exile were different than in the case of Skirmuntowa. Maria went to Siberia voluntarily together with her husband, a participant in the January Uprising, who was sentenced to 20 years of hard labour (*Pamiętniki Marii* 2012: 86–422). She was 22 and she had four children. She was much younger than Helena Skirmuntowa, who was sentenced to exile at the age of 36. Maria Morzycka was not indifferent to insurgent activities and she had taken part in patriotic manifestations before the Uprising and also had helped the insurgents. Her journey to the exile in Usola started at the beginning of September 1863. Skirmuntowa started her journey in October the same year. Morzycka travelled together with her husband and later was joined by one of her daughters. Skirmuntowa, on the other hand, shared her husband's fate in exile when she reached Tambov and Kirsanov.

Maria remained in exile with her three children. On her way to Tambov in 1864 she gave birth to Faustina and in Usol, the final destination, Paulina was born. In her memoirs, written years later, there are numerous references to her private life, emotional states or the relationship with her husband whom she did not love. This “discovering herself” that characterizes Morzycka's narrative was a rare feature of women's exile accounts of that time. In her diary, Maria included a number of personal confessions. She wrote about her doubts and dilemmas, for instance those related to the decision to voluntarily follow her husband in exile. She wrote that she had done it under pressure, leaving at home four small children who needed to be taken care of. At that time, the wives of Waclaw Lasocki and Józef Łagowski, who were sentenced together with Morzycki, travelled with their husbands to Siberia. The decision about the exile was very difficult for Morzycka:

At the end of the trial, just after the verdict of the court was made, deliberations began whether I should go with my husband. It is true that I myself did not know what to do. Łagowska and Lasocka decided to go as all three of them were to be sent together. But Lasocka did not have any children and she loved Wacio immeasurably and believed in the indissolubility of the sacrament of marriage. Łagowska was going with her children, her entire family <...>. As for me, my feelings and emotions were strange at that time. I did not love my husband and because of this I was afraid to stay at home. I did not believe in myself. (*Pamiętniki Marii* 2012: 157, 159).

This personal confession of Maria Morzycka, made several decades later, had a certain therapeutic dimension for her and the very decision to write her diary was an attempt to reposition herself in the situations described:

For a long time, I was hesitating, asking myself a question whether, 60 years later, I would be capable of writing a memoir. I was encouraged by my children and friends and then I started seriously thinking about it. I was just held back by my incompetence and the time gap during which images changed as if without my influence. I looked at myself as a stranger, asking a question: Is it me? <...>. Looking back that far and seeing myself as a stranger, judging severely or indulgently according to the circumstances, I could characterize my personality better, being quite sincere. But this is difficult, almost impossible, even when there is great openness. Apart from a carefully hidden “corner” that every person carries in themselves there is always a greater degree of leniency towards yourself than towards the closest people. The more so when you write for other people because although we judge ourselves harshly we would try to explain ourselves before others. Writing memoirs, describing situations in a given moment, you are under the impression that you write with conviction, feelings, nerves, with the entire soul and after many years the same fact looks so different that it seems strange that you could feel, think or act in that way. The past seems to be a dream in which we recognize ourselves with difficulty (Pamiętniki Marii 2012: 86).

For Morzycka, as it can be seen, it was not an easy decision. Being aware of the test of time and inevitable distance towards the events and her own life as well as the need to situate herself in the context of the memoir and the time in which she was writing it, she looked at her own experiences as if standing next to them, outside the world she was describing. Was this approach to autobiographical narrative to help her understand herself and define her own identity? (Demetrio 2000: 14; Czermińska 2009: 11–12).

Her account, similarly to the Skirmuntowa's one, is a unique testimony of personal experiences, in which we can trace some fixed points of reference, also present in other women's narratives from exile. A detailed description of the journey to exile is one such point, together with the account of everyday ordinary reality. The first place on her way to exile was Tambov, where she stayed with her husband from the end of December 1863 until August 1864. Her second daughter, Faustina, was born there. The pregnancy, birth and then taking care of the baby made both travelling and life in exile extremely difficult. Interestingly, in Tambov, the two women, Mokrzycka and Skirmuntowa, met each other. Maria wrote about it in a detailed way:

Apart from Nowiczy, there were Skiermuntowie [Skirmuntowie – L M-B]. She was the only one in exile, a citizen from the region of Pinsk, a sculptor, very ugly and older than her husband, who had a gentle face with blue eyes and looked at people with kindness. His wife henpecked him although he was not stupid. But he was rather resigned and indulged her in everything. He liked children very much, however, because she could not bear them since their birth, even in winter, she would send away the child to a wet nurse living nearby so that she would not feel the presence of the baby she had given birth to. (Pamiętniki Marii 2012: 171).

Morzycka, sensitive to the issues concerning motherhood, further stressed that in Kirsanov, after giving birth to another child, Skirmuntowa radically changed her attitude to taking care of the daughter.

The next stages of Maria Morzycka's path to exile included Kirsanov, Simbirsk, Kazan, Perm, Tiumen, Tobolsk, Tomsk and finally Usole, which together made up a three-year period in her biography. She endured staying in Siberia with difficulty. Unhappy marriage, fear for children, material problems, taking care, working, together with her husband, in agriculture and horticulture, and performing other jobs in order to support her family left a lasting negative effect on her psyche. Then, there were tragic news from home, the death of her brother and mother, which made it difficult for Morzycka to cope with emotions and her mental state:

“These painful messages echoed terribly in my heart. Grief and violent despair ultimately weakened my health and I went down with some terrible nervous disease. Painful attacks several times a day would knock me off and I was overcome with a state of terrifying longing” (Pamiętniki Marii 2012: 208). Consequently, being pregnant for the seventh time, Morzycka made a decision to leave her husband in Usol and return with her children to Volhyn – to the family estate of Ivankov near Zhytomyr.

It is difficult to state clearly whether writing a diary was Morzycka's attempt to understand herself and her life choices, which at times were very difficult. Perhaps, to some extent, it was to explain the decisions she made to her loved ones, for whom she wrote the diary years after the events had taken place. What is important in this kind of autobiographical reflection is the reference to the already mentioned “context of addressee” of the narrative.

Concluding remarks

Summarizing the observations, it can be concluded that the presented forms of women's narrative share some common characteristics and points of reference. The created picture of the past, personal experiences and feelings, is subject to a multi-layered analysis, in which questions about historical context of the autobiographical reflection of Maria Obuchowska-Morzycka and Helena Skirmuntowa and the discussions concerning autobiographical identity of the authors and their attitude towards the outside world are equally important. Although it might seem that because of the individual dimension of the discussed narratives they present heavily individualized description of women's experiences in exile, they do provide a basis for the formulation of views concerning a collective biography of Polish women in Siberia in the 19th century. The interpretative importance of this kind of sources is great and gives numerous research opportunities in further discussions on the function of autobiographical women's narratives.

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