

WE DIDN'T HAVE  
A LUCKY STAR,  
WE LIT  
OUR OWN.

WARSAW  
HERSTORIES



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JÓZEFA BOJANOWSKA

EUFEMIA

GERTRUDA GAWENDA

MARIA GECOW-KUPISZEWSKA

JADWIGA IRENA GOLCZ

DANUTA KWAPISZEWSKA

WANDA KWAŚNIEWSKA

HANNA LOTH-NOWAK

JANINA BORKOWSKA (NÉE LOTH)

FLORENTYNA ŁUCZAK

JANINA RAKOWSKA

ANNA TOMASZEWICZ-DOBRSKA

STEFANIA WILCZYŃSKA

ANTONINA ŻABIŃSKA

These are herstories of women associated with Warsaw. We imagined them as a starry sky, of which we have mapped but a few constellations, using words and objects, images and places, spectres. Based on the Museum of Warsaw's collection, the participants of the Women's Museum Laboratory at the Faculty of Management of Visual Culture of the Academy of Fine Arts responded to the challenge of creating a story of women's emancipation. Their curatorial choices concerned both figures who are regarded as emblematic and, in several cases, women who are largely unknown, but whose attitudes and choices struck an affective, intellectual or biographical chord. Some of the protagonists of the exhibition were related by blood to some of the curators. All of them, however, could be considered beacons of emancipation in the genealogy of feminist attitudes in Poland.

Although the presented herstories date back maximum to the third quarter of the 19th century (the date of birth of the oldest of our heroines), they are relevant to us now and in the future. They do not tell a complete story; rather, they form a constellation of biographical experiences, official as well as private or family narratives, individual, collective and cultural memory, counter-memory and oblivion – of women, in Warsaw. Among the featured heroines are doctors, writers, educators, entrepreneurs, servants, saleswomen, artists, sportswomen, editors, models; women of wealth and poverty, independent and subordinate, from different classes, social and ethnic groups. We treat their herstories like pieces of fabric that we have managed to weave together. One weave is meant to reinforce another. The purpose of each of our herstories is to bring out or illuminate another biography, as yet unexplored, forgotten, excluded or repressed.

The leitmotif of all the stories is the struggle for emancipation, liberation and women's rights; striving after self-determination over one's own body, life, work, family; the drive towards self-realisation, social and political engagement; working and collaborating with other women and for other women. Carers, social workers, suffragettes, feminists *avant la lettre*, rescuing and supporting the weakest and most vulnerable, forging relationships and intergenerational bonds between women that transcended and abolished class antagonisms and challenged harmful stereotypes. They set their own rules, demanded what may have seemed impossible to many at the time. They rebelled against patriarchal hierarchies and social structures preventing women from living lives that were physically and psychologically healthy and safe, accompanied by a sense of personal and professional fulfilment and economic independence. They fought in a thousand ways for autonomy and subjective power, for professional position, for financial independence for themselves and for other women and girls. The subsequent threads and contexts raised by the exhibition lead to other tales – herstories – that will hopefully be told; that need to be discovered, reconstructed, invoked, continued, woven together. Let us therefore look with attention and tenderness at the known constellations, let us search for new ones, lost or untold. Let us light new stars.

The exhibition has been prepared by the participants of the Women's Museum Laboratory at the Faculty of Management of Visual Culture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in collaboration with the Museum of Warsaw. It is based on the collections of the Museum of Warsaw.

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## JÓZEFA BOJANOWSKA

*Mrs Bojanowska, who owns a bookbinding shop on Ś-to Krzyska Street, demonstrated the whole process of this craft, which for a woman is not as easy as it seems, the sewing of book spines is interesting, and the screws and presses and large blades prove that it is not such an easy piece of bread for a woman.*

Lucyna Ćwierczakiewiczowa<sup>1</sup>

I like paper products. I also feel a sense of closeness with heroines of everyday life, which is why I take my time looking at the photo of Józefa Bojanowska. Her hair is pinned low, with an unruly curl falling across the forehead, her chin is raised. Her creased blouse is fastened at the neck with an animal-shaped brooch, the species is hard to recognise. Is it a bird ready to fly away? If so, it will soon land near Świętokrzyska Street, at odd number 29, where Bojanowska opened the first bookbinding workshop employing women.<sup>2</sup>

She was born in Gostyń, probably in 1860. She graduated from the Flying University in Warsaw,<sup>3</sup> where she became known as a person of a thousand initiatives, “a force of concrete action, rushing headlong towards intended goals,” as Cecylia Walewska wrote about her in 1930.<sup>4</sup> Bojanowska organised Sunday drawing courses and holidays for seamstresses.<sup>5</sup> Together with her inseparable friend Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit, she fought for the admission of women to universities. As a result of their joint efforts, the Polish Women’s Equal Rights Union was founded in 1907, followed by the Women’s Scientific Reading Room at Nowy Świat, which often filled with the sweet smell of baked goods from Blikle’s famous confectionery.<sup>6</sup> Bojanowska

<sup>1</sup> L. Ćwierczakiewiczowa, *Kalendarz na rok 1890: kolęda dla gospodyń przez autorkę 365 obiadów. Rok 15* [Calendar for 1890: A carol to housewives by the author of 365 dinners. Year 15], Warsaw: K. Kowalewski’s printing house, 1890, pp. 125–126.

<sup>2</sup> E. Pokorzynska, *Emancypacja kobiet w zawodzie introligatorskim w Warszawie w końcu XIX i na początku XX wieku* [The emancipation of female bookbinders in Warsaw at the turn of the 20th century], doctoral dissertation, supervisor: E. Różycki, University of Silesia in Katowice, 2009, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> C. Walewska, “W walce o równe prawa. Nasze bojownice” [In the fight for equal rights. Our female fighters], *Kobieta Współczesna*, Warsaw: Drukarnia Rotacyjna, 1930, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



published everywhere she could, from *Kurjer Warszawski* and *Nowa Gazeta* to *Ogniwo*. She was the editor of *Ster. Organ równouprawnienia kobiet polskich*,<sup>7</sup> a magazine devoted to women's rights whose language was rife with feminine forms.<sup>8</sup> It frequently published demands for women's suffrage and greater independence, but also advertisements for contemporary novels (such as *Historia niemoralna i inne powiastki dla dużych dzieci* [An immoral story and other tales for big children]<sup>9</sup>). "I'm leaving. But there's a lot of beauty ahead of you and a long, unbroken thread of work," Paulina told Józefa just before the former's death in 1921.<sup>10</sup> Bojanowska continued her and her friend's work until she passed away in 1945.<sup>11</sup>

The thread of work has remained strong and unbroken since the courageous feminists of her ilk taught us how to weave ourselves into the fabric of society. They showed us that as women we have voices and names, we can be bookbinders, work creatively, support each other and boldly shape the reality around us. We could, we can, we will – exist with impetus in the capital city.

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Advertisements in *Ster. Organ równouprawnienia kobiet polskich*, 1912 (6), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Every Polish noun has its gender: masculine, feminine, or neuter. Although there are exceptions, the gender of any noun is typically distinguished by its suffix. Given that many public roles have historically only been open to men, their names have often only had masculine forms. Using feminine forms is therefore a sign of sensitivity to gender issues [translator's note].

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement for Teresa Lubińska's new novel, in *Ster: organ równouprawnienia kobiet polskich*, 1912 (6), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> C. Walewska, *W walce ...*, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> E. Pokorzyńska, *Emancypacja...*, op. cit., p. 35.

## EUFEMIA

*A white stone in Podolia  
A Podolian woman sits on it  
A Podolian man came to her  
Oh Podolian woman, give me your wreath.*

lyrics of a folk song<sup>12</sup>

Eufemia is the pseudonym, or real name, of a legendary model who posed nude at the Faculty of Painting of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw for at least two decades – from the 1960s to perhaps even the mid-1980s. When she began, she was already a mature woman. Because she had dark, curly hair and was short in stature, she facilitated comparisons to the Venus of Willendorf. It has been established that she came from the Grochów district of Warsaw, but details about her life are not known. She revealed about herself only as much as she wanted to. Reportedly, she started posing after the tragic death of her husband, who was caught in the door of a crowded bus. She received a small survivor's pension and took up modelling as an additional source of income.<sup>13</sup> She may have had a son. Even if we believe the stories and slowly fill in the gaps in the oral histories, her biography remains a mystery for the time being. Nevertheless, we have chosen to tell the story of Eufemia: the famous, controversial, clamorous, direct, people-loving and well-liked, unforgettable and colourful model of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. A phantom figure.

Despite the scarcity of information collected from interviews about our heroine, two things are certain. Firstly, she treated posing as a performance. To make her tedious, physical work more enjoyable, she used to sing pre-war songs or tell bizarre stories; sometimes she would even tell the students their fortunes. Once she had entered the studio, the future painters and professors turned into her audience who had the honour to watch the Grochów revue and experience the colourful atmosphere of pre-war Warsaw known from Grzesiuk's street ballads. Secondly, her visits to Krakowskie

<sup>12</sup> Lyrics of the folk song *Podolanka* (also known as *Na Podolu biały kamień*), which Eufemia used to sing while posing. Text quoted by Prof. Jacek Dyrzyński. Interview with Professor Jacek Dyrzyński, conducted by Barbara Orłowska and Franciszek Smoręda, audio recording in the authors' archive, 23 March 2022, Warsaw.

<sup>13</sup> According to Professor Rafał Strent, models in the 1970s were often pensioners, which was due to restrictions on the employment of models posing at the academy. Interview with Professor Rafał Strent, conducted by Aleksandra Makuch and Stanisław Kozielski, recorded in the form of a video, from Aleksandra Makuch's archive, February 2018, Warsaw.

Przedmieście did not go unnoticed: already in the 1960s, a club located in the basement of the rectorate building, in the Czapski Palace at Krakowskie Przedmieście 5, was named after her. During its ceremonial opening, Eufemia was asked to perform. She sang her regular repertoire of four songs and did a striptease. Since then, the basement of the Czapski Palace can be regarded as a monument to the legendary model.<sup>14</sup>

Anecdotes about Eufemia are repeated like a refrain of a song, with the same familiar motifs resonating in former students' stories. She was direct and did not mince her words. She was moody, had her humours and habits. She did not like it when somebody new entered the studio; strangers were not let in. Although she posed naked, she did it on her terms. She once asked Professor Tadeusz Dominik out of the room.<sup>15</sup>

Can models be said to also educate painters? Like the professors, they spend hours of classes with the students, but their presence is only noticed when the exercises begin. Eufemia's herstory breaks down this normative division. The observed turned into an observer and commentator, setting the pace for those gathered in the academic space. Implicit in these reminiscences is not only a kind of humoresque, but also a herstory of opposition to the objectification of the female body, the overcoming of the male gaze and the reversal of the roles imposed on models throughout centuries.

We would like to thank Aleksandra Makuch for sharing her video materials and knowledge about Eufemia.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Professor Jacek Dyrzyński, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Janina Tarkowska, conducted by Aleksandra Makuch and Stanisław Kozielski, recorded in the form of a video, from Aleksandra Makuch's archive, March 2018, Warsaw.

Paulina Brol

## GERTRUDA GAWENDA

*The woman question does not pertain to the interests of women of one sphere only, but of all walks of life. It is therefore not about shifting the burden from one woman to another, but about seeking to establish such a division of labour [that would eliminate] the servile restraints on personal freedom.*

Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit<sup>16</sup>

Gertruda Gawenda (née Wycislo) was born in the village of Bokowe near Jemielnica in Silesia on 17 February 1905. She came from a peasant family whose life was not easy. Gertruda's father, Józef Wycislo, had no respect for his wife, daughters or the family estate. Having gambled away his wife's farm and inn, he began to treat his teenage daughters as hired hands. The sisters had to work on a farm owned by distant relatives of their father, who took the monthly wages for their labour. One day Gertruda rebelled against the exploitation and fled on a bicycle to the nearby town of Zawadzkie. There she found employment as a maid in the house of a hardware shop owner. His wife, Mrs Szpilut/Shpilut,<sup>17</sup> took care of Gertruda and decided to put an end to the girl's exploitation. She paid her wages not in cash, but in items to be used as dowry. In this way, she not only prevented Józef Wycislo from robbing her daughter, but above all ensured Gertruda's economic independence. Thanks to Mrs Szpilut's fortitude, courage and kindness, Gertruda earned all her dowry by herself. It consisted of pots and pans, a dinner set, a coffee set, cutlery, tablecloths, bedding sets, quilts and kitchen equipment. To this day, my family keeps a set of kitchenware from my great-grandmother's dowry. Gertruda Gawenda died in 1994; she spent all her life living in Zawadzkie working on the farm; she had four children.

In the inter-war period, the dowry was still a key element determining the future lives of maidens – without this financial backing, their prospects of marriage were scarce. Parents who cared about their children's future invested in their independence: sons received land, a trade or education, while girls were given the best pos-

<sup>16</sup> P. Kuczalska-Reinschmit, "E pur si muove...", part III, *Przegląd Tygodniowy*, 1893 (31).

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to ascertain Mrs Szpilut's (or Shpilut's) name so far.

sible dowry. However, if they were not provided with it by their family, they had to work hard or get lucky. The dowry usually accounted for half of a young couple's estate and therefore often determined the family's future well-being. A woman with an adequate dowry had a greater choice of candidates for marriage, a stronger position in the marriage and, most importantly, protection in the event of a failed marriage. From today's perspective, the dowry can be seen as a stigma of patriarchy incapacitating the young woman. For a long time, however, it was the most certain guarantee of her future. This makes the token of female solidarity and support in Gertruda's story all the more important: Knowing how cruel the world could be, Mrs Szpilut decided to take care of her maid's economic security.

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Interview with Róża Brol conducted by Paulina Brol, 29 January 2022, Warsaw.

## MARIA GECOW-KUPISZEWSKA

*If all the bullets in the world  
hit me,  
then they couldn't hit anybody else.*

Anna Świrszczyńska<sup>18</sup>

Until recently, wartime stories functioned in the consciousness of my generation as a chapter in history that had been forever closed. Today, when “never again” has turned out to be just an empty slogan, I am looking for the right role models among women who are close to me, who overcame their fear, did not give up and found hope and strength to continue their lives, often despite immense harm they had experienced. When I think of women’s emancipation and struggle for freedom in the 20th century, I think of Maria Gecow, my grandfather’s sister-in-law, an internist whose choice to study medicine was dictated by the events of 1944.

Maria was born in Warsaw on 20 December 1927 as the youngest of three daughters. The Gecows lived at ul. Wilanowska 18/20, which during the Nazi occupation ended up in the “nur für Deutsche” zone. As a result, in 1942 the family was forcefully displaced to a flat on Pańska Street. Maria’s older sisters, Krystyna and Irena, were members of the Grey Ranks and later of the “Baszta” Group of the Home Army. They initiated Maria into the underground movement, but not fully – due to her young age, her duties were limited to carrying *Biuletyn Informacyjny*,<sup>19</sup> acting as a liaison and learning basic nursery training. The sisters did not live to see 1 August 1944 – back in June, the Gestapo made mass arrests of members of the underground and, after interrogation at the Pawiak prison, executed them in the ruins of the Jewish Ghetto. The Gecows were not informed of their daughters’ death, and for many years after the war they still clung to the hope that they would see them again.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Świrszczyńska, “Thoughts of a fourteen-year-old nurse,” in *Building the Barricades and Other Poems of Anna Świr*, trans. by Piotr Florczyk, Los Angeles: Calypso Editions, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> *Biuletyn Informacyjny* was a weekly conspiratorial information bulletin published under the German occupation from 1939 to 1944. During the Warsaw Uprising, it came out as a daily newspaper.

Maria was only seventeen when the Warsaw Uprising broke out, but the training initiated by her sisters provided her with basic wound care skills. She was one of the first women to reach the field hospital at Mariańska 1 and volunteer to help. Although each day the hospital walls were more destroyed by the falling bombs, Maria stayed with the patients until the capitulation and evacuation of the civilian population to Krakow. She did not return to Warsaw until 1946, after passing her matriculation exam to study at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Warsaw – contrary to her ambition of becoming a lawyer, which she had before the Uprising. “I wanted to be a juvenile judge who would help difficult youth become open-minded youth. But after the Uprising I came to the conclusion that medicine is a profession that will always be needed.” She qualified as a doctor in 1952.

Nurses are still remembered as background figures of past wars, even though they gave unconditional care to soldiers and civilians. They single-handedly helped the wounded amidst the ruins of collapsing cities; the fate of other people was their priority. Maria Gecow died in 2014. Until the end, she was driven by the kindness and empathy that her family and patients appreciated so much. Her herstory is a tribute to all women who survived a limit situation and found the strength to reconcile a traumatic past with a future life.

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<sup>20</sup> *Maria Gecow-Kupiszewska “Lipa”*, interview with Maria Gecow-Kupiszewska conducted by Dominik Cieszowski, 18 January 2007, Oral History Archive, Warsaw Uprising Museum, <https://www.1944.pl/archiwum-historii-mowionej/maria-gecow-kupiszewska,1010.html> [accessed on 17 May 2022].

## JADWIGA IRENA GOLCZ

*A suffragist who perceived photography as an excellent profession  
for an intelligent woman.*

Ignacy Płażewski on Jadwiga Golcz<sup>21</sup>

Marcelina Borkowska, Józef Brandt, Julian Fałat, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Bolesław Prus, Wanda Siemaszkowa, Henryk Siemiradzki, Stefan Szyller<sup>22</sup> – these are just some of the turn-of-the-century figures who had their photographs taken at the studio at ul. Erywańska 3<sup>23</sup> (today's ul. Kredytowa). First there, then at the Bristol Hotel. At some point, Jadwiga Golcz's photographic studio was the place to be. So they went there – representatives of the Warsaw aristocracy, the world of art, politics and culture. And on the other side of the lens stood her – Jadwiga Golcz.

Jadwiga Irena Golcz (born in Gradowo on 13 August 1865, died in Warsaw in 1936) came from a wealthy family of landowners, which had a considerable impact on her development opportunities. She studied photographic techniques in Vienna, Paris and Berlin, having previously learnt printmaking and painting under Wojciech Gerson. After her return to Warsaw in 1897, she bought the atelier of Edward Troczewski, a well-known photographer, and quickly turned it into one of the most recognisable and fashionable places on the map of Warsaw. She not only actively participated in Warsaw's social life, but also documented it, publishing her photographs in popular weeklies, such as *Biesiada Literacka*, *Wędrowiec* and *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, among others. In 1900, in the last-mentioned weekly, she announced the first professional and amateur photography competition. A year later, she organised a pioneering exhibition of artistic photographs, which attracted an audience of thirty thousand people.

<sup>21</sup> Ignacy Płażewski Archive from the Special Collections of the Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, inv. no. 1402/B, after: K. Gębarowska, "Jadwiga Golcz (1866–1936) – zapomniana popularyzatorka i krytyczka fotografii przelomu XIX i XX wieku" [Jadwiga Golcz (1866–1936) – a forgotten populariser and critic of photography at the turn of the 20th century], in *Krytyka artystyczna kobiet. Sztuka w perspektywie kobiecego doświadczenia XIX–XX wieku* [Women's art critique. Art in the perspective of women's experience in the 19th–20th centuries], Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2019, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Information on the basis of Jadwiga Golcz's photographs in the archives of the Polona National Library, <https://polona.pl> [accessed on 6 May 2022].

<sup>23</sup> Jadwiga Golcz's biography, Lexicon of Photographers, <http://www.fotorewers.eu/miejscowosc/Warszawa/1281/> [accessed on 6 May 2022].



All this, however, was only a means to an end, which was to teach photography. A well-educated woman herself, she offered free apprenticeships to girls who had limited access to vocational education at the time. She ran a makeshift photographic shop on Koszykowa Street, which also functioned as an advice centre for amateur photographers. In 1898, she started publishing *Światło* [Light], her own monthly photographic magazine and the first periodical of its kind in today's Polish territory. In 1901, she was the only woman to co-found the Warsaw Photographic Society.

Golcz was the first to do many things. The most important among them was the establishment of a photography school in 1907 at ul. Foksal 15 in Warsaw, in collaboration with priest Włodzimierz Kirchner, whose full-year courses were attended mainly by women. She put all her efforts and savings into this venture. However, the cooperation ended in Golcz's bankruptcy and closure of the school as a result of the priest's ineptness. This had a number of dire consequences, including the sale of the photographic atelier. After this, Jadwiga Golcz removed herself from public life. Each biography of hers ends with the same sentence: "She died completely forgotten."

She was a photographer, teacher, pioneer and visionary – an enterprising woman who knew how to get things done. Despite all adversities and setbacks, she never stopped in her efforts to document history by immortalising it in her photographs, but above all to realise her vision of educating and developing future generations of Polish women.

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<sup>24</sup> Besides Jadwiga Golcz, the founders of the Warsaw Photographic Society (Towarzystwo Fotograficzne Warszawskie) were Maksymilian Gerlach, Leon Janikowski, Jan Karlowicz, Stanisław Kossakowski, Piotr Lebidziński, Władysław Marconi, Feliks Plater, Stanisław Szalay, Stanisław Tyszkiewicz, Emil Waydel. Cf. W. Zdżarski, *Historia fotografii warszawskiej* [History of Warsaw's photography], Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1974, pp. 85–89.

<sup>25</sup> Jadwiga Golcz's biography on the basis of: Ignacy Płażewski, *Dzieje polskiej fotografii 1839–1939* [History of Polish photography 1839–1939], Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

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**DANUTA KWAPISZEWSKA**

*Dance as the Unity of Place is what I have been striving for all my life.  
And sculpture? Sculpture is but a reflection of my dance.*

Danuta Kwapiszewska<sup>27</sup>

Danuta Kwapiszewska, daughter of painter Julia Kwapiszewska, was born in Warsaw on 6 June 1922.<sup>28</sup> A versatile artist in every sense of the word, she was a sensitive choreographer, soloist and initiator of the Dance as the Unity of Place recitals<sup>29</sup> who also worked with sculpture, costume design, painting and graphic design.<sup>30</sup> She spent her childhood in Warsaw's Mokotów district, in the luxurious Concordia tenement house.<sup>31</sup> Danuta's artistic development was supervised by her mother, who from an early age insisted on fostering in her a love of the arts.<sup>32</sup> Aged 13, Danuta began her training as a solo dancer at Ruth Sorel's Private School of Artistic Dance and Rhythmic Gymnastics under the watchful eye of the founder.<sup>33</sup> In 1939 she won the first prize for artistic dance at the International Concours de Danse in Brussels.<sup>34</sup> During the occupation she studied under Zygmunt Dąbrowski, an eminent classical ballet professor.<sup>35</sup> After the war she worked as a soloist-choreographer in different drama theatres, including the Groteska Theatre and the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Kraków.<sup>36</sup> From 1948 to 1953 she studied at the Faculty of Graphic Arts of the Academy

<sup>27</sup> D. Kwapiszewska, "To jest taniec" [This is dance], *Polska* 1980 (11), p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> "Danuta Kwapiszewska," in *Dziennik Teatralny*, <http://www.dziennikteatralny.pl/artykuly/danuta-kwapiszewska-1922-1999.html> [accessed on 29 Apr 2022].

<sup>29</sup> A. Retmianiak, "Z zamkniętej szuflady" [From a locked drawer], *Przegląd Tygodniowy* 1984 (3), p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> W. Obniska, "Życie spełnione" [A life fulfilled], *Głos Wybrzeża* 1991 (167), p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> A. Legierska, *Prima Ballerinas, Soldiers & Hollywood Stars: Polish Dancers of the 20th Century*, <https://culture.pl/en/article/prima-ballerinas-soldiers-hollywood-stars-polish-dancers-of-the-20th-century> [accessed on 29 Apr 2022].

<sup>32</sup> D. Kwapiszewska, autobiographic entry in *Taniec w rzeźbie* [Dance in sculpture], Łódź: Teatr Wielki: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuk Pięknych w Łodzi, 1976, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> M. Leyko, "Sorel Ruth," in *Słownik tańca XX i XXI wieku* [Dictionary of dance in the 20th and 21st centuries], <http://sloowniktanca.uni.lodz.pl/sorel-ruth/> [accessed on 29 Apr 2022].

<sup>34</sup> B.S., *Stolica* 1953 (13), p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> D. Kwapiszewska, autobiographic entry, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Danuta Kwapiszewska," in *Dziennik Teatralny*, op. cit.

of Fine Arts in Krakow and in Warsaw.<sup>37</sup> She continued her artistic development after graduation, expanding her repertoire of characters and dancing in different theatres.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, in 1972 her brilliant career was interrupted by a serious hip injury, which prevented her from performing as a prima ballerina.<sup>39</sup>

She did not, however, abandon the art world. Initially, following in her mother's footsteps, she turned to watercolour painting, but she quickly realised that landscapes could not compensate for the lack of movement in her life.<sup>40</sup> Returning to her childhood memories of making clay figurines of ballerinas and princes, she combined sculpting with teaching dance.<sup>41</sup> Presentations of her works, often preceded by recitals, were held at numerous prestigious institutions in Poland and abroad (including in Belgium, the Netherlands and England, among others).<sup>42</sup> She died in Warsaw on 3 April 1999.<sup>43</sup>

Danuta Kwapiszewska's herstory is not only about creativity and passion, but also about the ability to overcome difficulties by finding new paths to self-realisation. Her artistic versatility, perseverance and determination testify to how stubbornly and consistently she pursued success in the art world, in which disability was treated as a limitation. Equally important was her out-of-the-box thinking. One of the results of her experiments with new artistic forms were the Chopin recitals called Dance as the Unity of Place, which combined mime art with ballet.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Danuta Kwapiszewska, in *Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego*, <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/osoby/3313/danuta-kwapiszewska> [accessed on 29 Apr 2022].

<sup>44</sup> Polish Newsreel 79/43A, 1979, <https://35mm.online/vod/kroniki/polska-kronika-filmowa-79-43a?search-Phrase.3=Kwapiszewska> [accessed on 29 Apr 2022].

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## **WANDA KWAŚNIEWSKA-LOTH**

## **JANINA BORKOWSKA (NÉE LOTH)**

## **HANNA LOTH-NOWAK**

*This club will always win, because of its women's team.*

excerpt from the song *Polonia*<sup>45</sup>

I would like to outline the history of women's sport in the Polonia Warsaw club through the biographies of my great-grandmother and her sister, Hanna and Janina Loth, and their mother – Wanda Kwaśniewska, married name Loth.

In 1923, together with the Szmid sisters and Giena Kielichówna, Wanda Kwaśniewska established the women's athletics section at Polonia. Born in Warsaw on 24 May 1901, she was a Polish athlete and a pioneer of women's sport. After finishing her sporting career, she married Lieutenant Colonel Stefan Loth, whom she met through the club, and they had three children – a son and two daughters. After her husband's death in an aircraft accident,<sup>46</sup> she received a survivor's pension and a license to run a wholesale cigarette shop, which was the family's only source of income. She died on 28 October 1968. As noted by Stefan Sieniarski, a researcher of the history of Polonia Warsaw, "Wanda Kwaśniewska, like her female colleagues, competed in all athletic disciplines, she was among the first handball players. [...] She never missed a club event, whenever she had a break at work (at the Mountaineering Club, located in the same building as the Polonia premises), she would run upstairs to the Blackshirts,<sup>47</sup> to reminisce about Polonia's most beautiful years."<sup>48</sup> She was a five-time champion of Poland in running.

<sup>45</sup> Polish: *A ten klub nie zginie, gdyż tam są członkinie.* [Teddi], Echo 1917, quotation after: S. Sieniarski, 70 lat "Czarnych koszul" [Seventy years of the Blackshirts], Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Kolejowego Klubu Sportowego "Polonia", 1984, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Air crash of an RWD-9 aircraft in the Gulf of Gdańsk near Gdynia-Orłowo on 16 July 1936.

<sup>47</sup> The nickname of the Polonia Warsaw sports club, due to the distinctive black jerseys worn by the players.

<sup>48</sup> S. Sieniarski, 70 lat..., op. cit., pp. 252–253.

Her daughters, older Janina and younger Hanna, followed in the footsteps of their mother and father, Stefan August Loth (who was also a long-time captain of the Polonia football team and later coach) by joining the women's teams at Polonia. From a young age, the girls were brought up in a culture of physical fitness and healthy competition.

Born on 30 November 1927, Janina was only eleven when the war broke out and only sixteen when the "W" Hour struck. She was a liaison and fought in the city centre. The Warsaw Uprising had a huge impact on her life. She later recalled how her mother, unable to dissuade her from the decision to join the Home Army, in an act of resignation accompanied her to the corner of Moniuszki and Jasna streets and bought her a basket of cherries. After the war, Janina represented the Blackshirts in rowing regattas. Before getting married, she worked as a secretary in the Polish Football Association, and later in the office of the Varimex Foreign Trade Central Office. She did not have such an impressive sporting career as her sister and brother, but because of her upbringing in an evangelical home in the 1930s, where great importance was attached to physical fitness, she kept herself in shape until the end of her life by walking the streets of Warsaw for hours. She died in 2019 at the age of ninety-one.<sup>49</sup>

Hanna Loth-Nowak, six years Janina's junior, reminisces: "I was practically born at Polonia."<sup>50</sup> She played on the women's basketball team for fourteen seasons, from 1951 to 1965, with the number 14 on her jersey. With her teammates, she won two Polish championship medals, played seventy-four games for the national team and twice took part in the European basketball championships. She claimed that she had become a basketball player owing to her mother, who persuaded her to join the team. At Polonia, her closest teammates were Barbara Wikarska-Szomańska, Zofia Piechotka and Lucy Werewska. After her sporting career ended, she worked as a physical education teacher at the Stefan Banach Secondary School no. 44 in Warsaw, and later, having completed an appropriate course, she also taught defence training.

Wanda and her daughters initiated the generational continuity of the women's section at Polonia Warsaw, laying the foundations for the contemporary sporting achievements of women in the black shirts. Their lives prove that sport fortifies not only character, but also female friendships, sisterly bonds and the mother-daughter relationship. Their herstory is also a story of Warsaw – a city that has brought up

<sup>49</sup> I wrote the biographies on the basis of the *Interview with Janina Borkowska "Janka"*, Oral History Archive of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, 2007, <https://www.1944.pl/archiwum-historii-mowionej/janina-borkowska,1126.html> [accessed on 9 May 2022].

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Hanna Loth-Nowak, Archive of the Club of Polonia Warsaw History Enthusiasts, 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/skppolonia/videos/1678031439073413/> [accessed on 9 May 2022].

so many brave, charismatic women, sportswomen, freedom fighters, friends – real Blackshirts.

Thanks to their ambition, determination and endurance, so much needed in sporting competition, a group of pioneering women managed to create a place for female athletes who were tired of corsets and restrictions. They carved out their own turf in a male-dominated field. Their courage and fidelity to their own values guided them not only on the field, but also in family, war and political life.

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Marianna Zakrzewska

## FLORENTYNA ŁUCZAK NÉE KUDELSKA

*Work perfects virtue.*

Polish proverb

Florentyna Łuczak was born into the Kudelski family in Macierzyż near Warsaw in 1875. From the time of her marriage until her death in 1959, she lived in Warsaw's Praga district, in a tenement house on Strzelecka Street. It was a two-floor wooden building, typical of the housing development in 19th-century Praga. In the 1920s and 1930s, Florentyna ran her fruit and vegetable shop in Hala Mirowska.

Because of the bankruptcy of her husband, who had owned an elegant restaurant in Warsaw, after the First World War she took it upon herself to support the family. Instead of doing the household chores, cooking or performing other jobs commonly held by women at the time, she opened a stall in Hala Mirowska food market, where she worked from morning to night. Each day, she carried the day's revenue, counted in millions of Polish marks (because of inflation; this was before Władysław Grabski's currency reform of 1925), in huge sacks across the Kierbedzia Bridge. She worked hard, often to exhaustion, singlehandedly dealing with any logistical problems to secure the supply of fresh produce. Due to her experience of inflation, she adhered to the old principle that it is best to invest money in land. This is how she secured the dowries for her three children, Anastazja, Leonora and Ładysław, who received plots of land in Legionowo and Wawer. In addition, she paid for all their trips and honeymoons.

Florentyna spent the last years of her life in a single room that could be accessed through her former flat. In the 1950s she was forced by the communist authorities to accept tenants. Today, there is no trace of the tenement – shortly after Florentyna's death, it was torn down.<sup>51</sup>

Florentyna Łuczak escaped the social norms of the first half of the 20th century. She was a strong, enterprising and economically independent woman. Her unusual occupation made it possible for the rest of her family to live a prosperous life. Despite the passage of years, she lives on in the memory of her descendants four generations later.

<sup>51</sup> I have prepared Florentyna Łuczak's biography on the basis of: A. Łuczak, *Kobieta interesów* [An enterprising woman], in *Wiatr i Duch* [Wind and spirit], Legionowo: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Legionowa, 2008, p. 14.

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Jagoda Gorczycka

## JANINA RAKOWSKA

*I am a working woman – I fear no work.*

From the TV series *Czterdziestolatek*<sup>52</sup>

My great-grandmother Janina Rakowska was born on 4 February 1922 in the village of Tomaszów. She came to Warsaw at the age of twelve to save her family from financial problems. Her mother died, her father remarried and also died a few years later. Janina had nowhere to live. A distant relative helped her find employment as a maid. At first she walked to work from Piastów, but her employers soon agreed to let her live with them. And so it was that she got up every day at five o'clock to wash and iron clothes, feed and care for five children, cook meals and clean the house. This was the life she led for many years. When her father was still alive, she sent him practically all her earnings. Just before the Second World War she found employment with childless people, which, as she insisted, made her job much easier. She got married in 1939. Janina Rakowska was very reluctant to talk about wartime. I know that towards the end of the occupation she worked as a maid for an unknown German man. When the war was coming to an end, the German fled, abandoning most of his belongings. My great-grandmother took from his flat a porcelain coffee, tea and cake set from the famous Rosenthal porcelain factory. The signature indicates a production date of 1905. Later, the set was given to my parents as a wedding present. To this day it remains a family heirloom.<sup>53</sup>

Wartime was certainly a very difficult time for the young couple, not only because of the events they had to face, but also because they lost two sons. Janina was twice pregnant during the occupation. The first child was stillborn, the second died after three months of life. Both were taken from my great-grandmother very quickly and buried in nameless graves in the Bródno cemetery. In 1945, my grandmother Karolina Rakowska was born, followed a few years later by her sister, Teresa. Janina never forgot her dead sons. At her request, her daughter Karolina would go to the cemetery to light a candle in their memory at the monument to the Virgin Mary; later my parents did it, and now me.

<sup>52</sup> Quotation from the TV series *Czterdziestolatek* [Being forty], produced between 1974 and 1977, directed by Jerzy Gruza, in the role of "working woman" – Irena Kwiatkowska.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Katarzyna Gorczycka conducted by Jagoda Gorczycka, February 2022, Warsaw.

After the war, Janina and her husband lived in Piastów near the Ursus Tractor Plant in Warsaw. After her children were born, she could finally take care of her own home. Her husband died in 2001, and she passed away on 4 November 2008.<sup>54</sup>

The image of a twelve-year-old girl walking to work at dawn has accompanied me since childhood. In my family, Janina Rakowska – my great-grandmother – is remembered as a woman who could do everything. She taught her grandson, and my dad, to cook and use a sewing machine. She proves that a maid's job is not always stereotypically associated with shame. In my family, Janina is a role model of feminine strength, persistence and perseverance.

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Karolina Rakowska conducted by Jagoda Gorczycka, February 2022, Piastów.

Zuzanna Andruszko

## ANNA TOMASZEWICZ-DOBRSKA

*Away from Poland with the freak of a woman-doctor!  
May we continue to celebrate the glory of our women,  
so nicely proclaimed by the poet.*

Ludwik Rydygier<sup>55</sup>

In the photograph published in *W walce o równą prawą: Nasze bojownice* [Fighting for equal rights: Our militant women] in 1930, I see a young, approximately twenty-year-old Anna Tomaszewicz. What catches my attention are her dark, prominent, slightly furrowed eyebrows. They make her seem preoccupied, angry perhaps. It was this stubborn perseverance that would become her driving force.

She was born in Mława in 1854 into a family of impoverished landowners. She went to school in Łomża, then to a boarding school in Warsaw. In 1871–1878 she studied at the Medical University of Zurich. She returned to Warsaw after graduation, but she was refused nostrification (taking exams to confirm the knowledge she had acquired at a foreign university), so she decided to go to St Petersburg. She spent two years there working as a doctor in the harem of a sultan staying in the city at the time. It was thanks to these women that she obtained permission to practise the doctor's profession – as she was the only suitable person to treat the female residents of the harem, the authorities had no choice but to allow her to do so. After returning to Warsaw in 1882, she took up the post of director of Maternity Refuge no. 2 on Prosta Street. She was also a co-founder and deputy-president of the Society of Polish Culture, in which she advocated for women's issues. In 1907 she organised the first Congress of Polish Women in Warsaw. She died in 1918, three months before women in Poland gained the right to vote.<sup>56</sup>

I understand Tomaszewicz-Dobrska's emancipation as perseverance, a constant push against an oppressive system, in many fields. In order to convince her parents to

<sup>55</sup> L. Rydygier, *Przegląd Lekarski*, 1895. Quotation after: J. Kulikowski, *Medycynierka. Pierwsza polska lekarka* [The medicine woman. First Polish female doctor], *Polityka*, 2007 (34), <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/historia/226843,1,medycynierka.read> [accessed on 26 Apr 2022].

<sup>56</sup> "Pamiętniki studentki" [Student's diaries], *Nowiny: pismo codzienne*, 1879 (56), p. 2.

finance her medical studies, she decided to go on hunger strike.<sup>57</sup> By turning against them – guardians of the social norm – Tomaszewicz also turned against herself in an act that could ultimately lead to self-destruction. As a student, she had to contend with mockery from her male colleagues, chronic shortages of money, food and time<sup>58</sup> – and yet she managed to achieve academic success. After returning to Warsaw, she devoted thirty years of her life to caring for women at a transitional, limit moment in their lives – the birth of an (often unplanned) child. According to Hélène Cixous, regaining her own body by a woman and taking care of it is a step towards reclaiming her voice and making herself visible in the patriarchal system.<sup>59</sup> I see Tomaszewicz-Dobrska's work in exactly this way – by taking care of women's physical health, she aimed to empower them and see them as citizens.

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<sup>58</sup> "Pamiętniki studentki", op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> H. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1976, vol. 1, no. 4.

Karolina Huta

## STEFANIA WILCZYŃSKA

*Tall, dressed in a black apron, hair cut in a manly fashion, always attentive and vigilant, even while resting she remembered every child and boarder.*

Ida Merżan<sup>60</sup>

Born in Warsaw in 1886, Stefania Wilczyńska was an educated woman from an affluent Jewish family. Having graduated from Jadwiga Sikorska's boarding school, she went on to study in Switzerland and, as an auditor student, at the University of Liège in Belgium, where she obtained a semi-degree in natural sciences.

The herstory of her heroism and emancipation, however, does not begin in intellectual circles, but when she was a volunteer for the "Help for Orphans" Jewish Society in 1908. Thanks to the Society and private donors, the Orphans' Home could be established in 1912 in a new building at ul. Krochmalna 92, where Wilczyńska took up the position of "chief pedagogue." Together with doctor Janusz Korczak she created a home for children who had lost one. From the mid-1920s she was in charge of the living quarters at the Orphans' Home, where she prepared older youth to enter adulthood.

From 1926/27 to 1933 she cooperated with the editorial board of *Mały Przegląd*,<sup>61</sup> where she was responsible for financial matters and where she had two regular columns. In the second half of the 1930s she quit her job at the Orphans' Home and began working at the Centos Pedagogical Counselling Centre,<sup>62</sup> where she took care of Jewish orphans and abandoned children. Throughout the 1930s she often visited Palestine, where she worked at the Ein Harod kibbutz, also looking after children.

<sup>60</sup> Ida Merżan, "Pani Stefa – najbliższy współpracownik Janusza Korczaka" [Pani Stefa – Janusz Korczak's closest collaborator], *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, 1977 (4), pp. 72–75.

<sup>61</sup> Established in 1926, *Mały Przegląd* was a weekly supplement to the daily newspaper *Nasz Przegląd. Pismo przeznaczone dla dzieci i młodzieży* [Our Review. A magazine for children and young people]. It came out from 1926 to 1939.

<sup>62</sup> Pedagogical Counselling Centre of Centos – Central Office of Societies for the Care of Orphans and Abandoned Children. A. Jarzębowska, *Inwentarz Zespołu Archiwalnego, Centrala Towarzystw Opieki nad Sierotami i Dziećmi Opuszczonymi (Centos), Warszawa-getto 24.07.1941-26.05.1942, AZIH* [Archive Collection Inventory, Central Office of Societies for the Care of Orphans and Abandoned Children (Centos), Warsaw-ghetto 24.07.1941-26.05.1942, Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland], Warsaw, 2006, [https://www.jhi.pl/storage/file/core\\_files/2020/10/28/44c7dd2923de4d45b5bb32e4fecf3c00/Centos\\_200.pdf](https://www.jhi.pl/storage/file/core_files/2020/10/28/44c7dd2923de4d45b5bb32e4fecf3c00/Centos_200.pdf) [accessed on 9 May 2022].

Her last sojourn in Palestine, which lasted over a year, ended in May 1939, when Stefania Wilczyńska decided to return to the Orphans' Home in Warsaw. In 1940, the institution was relocated to ul. Chłodna 33 in the Warsaw Ghetto, and a year later – to ul. Sienna 16/Śliska 9. Wilczyńska actively supported the defence of the capital, she set up an outpatient clinic at the Orphans' Home and an ORT<sup>63</sup> tailor's workshop. On 5 or 6 August 1942, together with Janusz Korczak and other pedagogues from the Orphans' Home and their charges, she was taken to Umschlagplatz and deported to the Treblinka II extermination camp. She died together with the children she was looking after.

Stefania Wilczyńska – author of texts, social activist, friend and collaborator of Janusz Korczak – was a second mother, later a grandmother, to all her charges. Her work was well known in other centres for Jewish children, so in the second half of the 1930s she was often invited as a consultant on organising and running care facilities. She was remembered by the children as a caregiver who managed to combine routine with tenderness. She accompanied them during famine, war, sorrow and death, providing them with care whenever there was cry, grief, dejection. With her female charges, she talked about intimate matters – menstruation, feelings, relationships, motherhood. She was a family to them, even though she did not have a family herself. Dedicated to her work, she always put the children first, making sure to pass on values and principles that they fully appreciated as they grew older. In the centre of suffering, during the Holocaust, she tried to create a space of understanding and peace.

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<sup>63</sup> The ORT was a Jewish organisation for the promotion of vocational training. Cf. N. Aleksion, *ORT, Virtual Shtetl*, <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/slownik/ort-0> [accessed on 9 May 2022].



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## ANTONINA ŻABIŃSKA

[...] about a woman who turned her home into an ark during the war, where people and animals found shelter.

Antonina Żabińska<sup>64</sup>

Antonina Żabińska (née Erdman) was born in St. Petersburg in 1908. She spent her childhood in Russia, where her father Antoni Erdman worked as a railway engineer. When she was still a child, she lost her parents – her mother died of tuberculosis and her father was murdered for belonging to the intellectual elite. Antonina's aunt took her in and they both moved to Poland. In Warsaw, she began learning languages and painting. Later she studied archival science and worked at the Main School of Rural Homestead, where she met her future husband, Jan Żabiński, director of the Warsaw Zoo. The couple had two children – son Ryszard (b. 1932) and daughter Teresa (b. 1944).

During World War II, the Żabiński family hid Jews in their villa known as the “House under the Wacky Star” on the premises of the Warsaw Zoo. It became a hideaway for, among others, Magdalena Gross and Rachela Auerbach.<sup>65</sup> When German officers were approaching the house, Antonina Żabińska would play a fragment of Jacques Offenbach's operetta *The Beautiful Helen* on the piano – this was a signal for the household members to immediately hide in the basement. Once the Germans had left the villa, Żabińska would play pieces by Frédéric Chopin. Sometimes empty cages of animals killed by the Nazis in the first days of the occupation were used as shelter. There were also entrances to canals on the zoo grounds, which served as an escape route. Antonina Żabińska was a member of Żegota.<sup>66</sup> In 1965 she and her

<sup>64</sup> A. Żabińska, *Ludzie i zwierzęta* [People and Animals], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> K. Dzieciółowska, *The House under a Wacky Star. The Story of the Żabiński Family*, trans. by Z. Sochańska, ed. by A. Lishak, 2015, <https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/en/stories-of-rescue/story-rescue-zabinski-family> [accessed on 17 May 2022].

<sup>66</sup> Żegota: a cryptonym of Temporary Committee to Aid Jews, later of Council to Aid Jews (RPŻ) – a conspiratorial organisation aiming at the provision of various forms of help for Jews. RPŻ was formed on 4 December 1942 in Warsaw as a section of Government Delegation for Poland – Polish civil underground. It helped by providing allowance aid, finding flats and hideouts, giving bogus documents, sending kids to Polish custodial institutions and Polish families. After: “Żegota” entry, Virtual Shtetl, <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/glossary/zegota> [accessed on 16 May 2022].

husband were awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations.<sup>67</sup> In 1980 the Żabiński couple were posthumously awarded the Commander's Crosses of the Order of Polonia Restituta<sup>68</sup> - the second most senior civilian decoration, after the Order of the White Eagle.

Antonina Żabińska took care of newborn animals rejected by their mothers, and used it as inspiration for her books. In 1968, a collection of her memoirs *Ludzie i zwierzęta* [People and animals] was published – a testimony to her wartime experiences and everyday life in the villa with its many inhabitants. Żabińska painted a poignant picture of the devastation of the Warsaw Zoo during the occupation, its reconstruction and the restoration of life over the course of many years. Their home remained a refuge for both people and animals. For me, Antonina Żabińska is a symbol of extraordinary courage and sacrifice combined with sensitivity, caring and social engagement. She had exceptional intuition and empathy towards animals and people alike.

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<sup>67</sup> The title of Righteous Among the Nations has been awarded since 1963 by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem to individuals who acted to save Jews during the Holocaust. Cf. <https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/en/o-sprawiedliwych/institut-yad-vashem/kryteria-yad-vashem> [accessed on 16 May 2022].

<sup>68</sup> Żabiński Foundation, *Remembrance, Acknowledgement & Accreditation*, <https://zabinskifoundation.com/en/remembrance-acknowledgment-accreditation> [accessed on 12 Apr 2022].

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