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## The Thin End of the Wedge Foreign Women Professors as Double Strangers in Academia

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## Abstract

The impetus for this study was an observation that many of the women who obtained the first chairs at European universities were foreigners. Our initial attempt to provide a statistical picture proved impossible, because there were numerous problems deciding the contents of such concepts as "first", "university professor", and "foreigner". We have therefore focused on four life stories. It turns out that being a "double stranger" – a woman in a masculine profession and a foreigner – is not, as one might think, a cumulative disadvantage. Rather, it seems that these two types of strangeness might cancel one another, permitting these women a greater degree of success than was allowed their "native" sisters. This situation was far from providing psychological comfort, however. Thus the metaphor of the wedge: opening the doors but suffering from double pressure.

Key words: wedge, stranger, Simmel, Schütz, women in academia, intersectionality

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## PART 1: Introduction

### Women Professors as Double Strangers

**the thin end of the wedge:** a relatively insignificant change, action, measure, etc., which promises or threatens to open the way to further more serious changes or consequences (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993: 3647).

The impetus for this study was an observation that many of the women who obtained the first chairs at European universities were foreigners. Our initial attempt to provide a statistical picture proved impossible, because there were numerous problems deciding the contents of such concepts as "first", "university professor", and "foreigner". We have therefore focused on four life stories. It turns out that being a "double stranger" – a woman in a masculine profession and a foreigner – is not, as one might think, a cumulative disadvantage. Rather, it seems that these two types of strangeness might cancel one another, permitting these women a greater degree of success than was allowed their "native" sisters. This situation was far from providing psychological comfort, however. Thus the metaphor of the wedge: opening the doors but suffering from double pressure.

The first women in the highest post in the academia, that of a full professor, earned individually a great deal of attention in biographies and feminist writings. They were hailed as pioneers, female heroes and martyrs. Our text, driven by both respect and admiration, focuses on another aspect of their careers. We have become attracted to the "thin end of the wedge" metaphor because it seems to us, that this is how they must have felt (some of them became heroines, but only later, in stories about them), and because the ambiguity of the metaphor is appealing. To wedge, in English, might mean to split and open or to tighten and secure. Whichever the result, it is the thin end of the wedge that feels the greatest pressure. Women professors ourselves, we feel as if we are on the thick end of the wedge: there are many of us, and although it is still uncertain whether our presence will split or solidify the world of academia, our number is also our protection. These women who were the first were alone.

The conceptual inspiration for this work derives primarily from work of Georg Simmel and Alfred Schütz, who both focused on the phenomenon of a *stranger* and conceptualized it in an interesting way (their views are complementary). As we have mentioned at the outset, many of the first women who received the title of professor (often called "full professor" in North American universities)

at European universities were foreigners. Women and foreigners: two sides of the thin end of the wedge, and therefore double pressure. It is this element of foreignness, of being an alien, that made us associate these women with the stranger, rather than the well explored metaphor of "woman as the Other", because the Other, different as it might be (a woman, a dog), can be nevertheless familiar; might provoke distaste, but only occasionally fear. The Others can also be exotic, as in the case of "the otherness of the orient" (see e.g. Adler, 1995: 86), but are still different from the stranger in that they remain far away.

## Strangers within and without

### SIMMEL'S CONCEPT OF THE STRANGER

The stranger is ... not...the person who comes today and goes tomorrow, but ... the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He<sup>1</sup> is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. ... He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself. (Simmel, 1909/1950, 402)

By way of a contrasting example, Simmel adds that the inhabitants of another planet are not strangers to us, as they do not exist for us at all; they are beyond far and near. This notion can be extended to the natives of other countries – as long as they stay there.

The stranger is by nature no “owner of soil” – soil not only in the physical, but also in the figurative sense of a life-substance which is fixed, if not in a point in space, at least in an ideal point of the social environment. Although in more intimate relations, he may develop all kinds of charm and significance, as long as he is considered a stranger in the eyes of the other, he is not “owner of soil”. (ibid, 403).

And, finally, “strangers are not really conceived as individuals, but as strangers of a particular type”, most often defined by ethnicity, p.407.

Simmel's picture of “the stranger” is usually interpreted as having been developed from the symbol of “the wandering Jew”, and interpreted as being positive. It has been used by Lewis Coser in his study of Jewish intellectuals who took refuge in America (Coser, 1984) and by Rose Laub Coser in her study of immigrant Italian and Jewish women (R.L. Coser et al., 1999). Rose Coser claimed that the stranger formed “weak ties”, as she called it, using Granovetter's vocabulary. It

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<sup>1</sup> As much as the constant use of male form in texts from that period might be jarring to a contemporary reader, adding “sic” after each useage would hardly improve the situation. Actually, the effect is even more bizarre when women writers used this form (see e.g. Margaret M. Wood, 1934 and Rose Laub Coser, 1999).

seems that she misread Simmel's text, saying that the stranger *is* "here today and gone tomorrow" (p. 47). What Simmel says, however, is that the stranger has come today but will *not* be gone tomorrow. The stranger is not a tourist, but is stuck for a good while, perhaps forever. Rose Coser continues:

He may derive as much advantage from his partial belongingness as he may be disadvantaged by being an outsider at the same time that he is disadvantaged by having demands he cannot honor made on him by the new group. He may understand the group's shortcomings better than true insiders do, and he may be praised or hated for his objectivity. In any case he will have multiplied his opportunities – at the cost of secure belongingness – to form weak ties even with those with whom hostilities are customary. *Although much pain ensued from this, advantages came from it as well.* (p. 47, italics ours)

A further insight into the advantages and disadvantages of being a stranger is offered by Alfred Schütz's essay "The Stranger" (1944/1971), which is a mirror piece of Simmel's that analyzes the situation from the stranger's point of view.

#### SEEN BY A STRANGER: SCHÜTZ'S VIEW

Schütz (who knew from personal experience what does it mean to be a stranger) constructed his argument around the contrast between "natives" or, as ethnomethodologists would say, "competent group members", and strangers.<sup>2</sup> The former inherit from their elders a knowledge system that is incoherent, partial, and inconsistent, yet satisfactory for their everyday actions. Moreover, their knowledge is differentiated insofar as it treats the world as an object of action (predominantly) or of reflection (marginally), and consists of "knowledge about" (predominantly) or "knowledge of" (marginally). As long as there is no crisis in a social world, competent group members live happily in their taken-for-granted world, which provides them with both expressive and interpretative schemes.

Not so the stranger: "He becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group" (Schütz, 1944/1071: 96). Strangers can learn the group's history, but cannot ever make it part of their biography: the standard device of a life story, i.e. setting it in a context of the history of a community (McIntyre, 1981), is not accessible to them.

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<sup>2</sup> His definition of "competent group members" coincides with that of Simmel's: "an adult individual of our times and civilization who tries to be permanently accepted or at least tolerated by a group he approaches", p.91.

Strangers approaching an alien group are forced to translate their previous knowledge about the group – as an object of reflection – into knowledge of the group as an action object – not an easy translation, as anybody who tried to learn a practical skill from an abstract manual would know. It is the very "objectivity" of the stranger, the one pointed out by Simmel, which will make difficult the stranger's "subjectivization" into an actor. As Schütz remarked, the knowledge provided by stranger's home group "serves merely as a handy scheme for interpreting the foreign group and not as a guide for interaction between the two groups" (1944/1971:98). In the vocabulary of sociology of science and technology, this interpretative scheme works well as long as "the objects" do not talk back; but in an interaction they will talk back, and forcefully so, being in the majority. In order to make themselves understood, strangers must use the group's interpretative scheme as a basis for their expressive scheme. Otherwise, they will continue to speak "an alien tongue".

Finally, whereas group members can live in a relative ignorance permitted by "knowledge about", strangers must dramatically increase their "knowledge of"; they need to inquire not only into the natives' "that" but also in their "why" (Schütz, 1944/1071: 103).

Hence the strangers' lack of feeling for proper distance and proximity, their oscillation between remoteness and intimacy, their hesitation and uncertainty, and their distrust in every matter that seems to be simple and uncomplicated to those who rely on the efficiency of unquestioned recipes:

... the cultural patterns of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master (Schütz, 1944/1971: 104).

The psychological price of such a situation is obvious, and we furnish many examples. At this point, however, we want to highlight how this description of a stranger, including the "objectivity" and an oscillating commitment ("weak ties"), fits an ideal description of a scientist or an artist – in other words, a person acting outside "habituality, automatism, and half-consciousness" (Schütz, 1944/1971: 101). This is the point similar to that made by Lewis A. Coser (1984). But, we claim, if the intellectuals described by Coser became "bridges" between the learning of the old world and the new" (1984:14), the women became "wedges".

## The material used

We were constrained to secondhand material in this analysis for two reasons: we are not historians, and we wished to concentrate on cases with some celebrity to make them more interesting to the readers. Thus we rely on biographies, written always within a certain framework and with a specific – not our – thesis in mind. Although we might not be able to prove our own thesis in any forensic sense, we try to convince our readers that it is worth considering.

Similarly, we were forced to abandon an ambition of proving our point quantitatively.<sup>3</sup> Attempting first to trace women professors, we soon discovered that the futility of the enterprise on at least three grounds: the impossibility of defining what is "first", who is a "professor", and even who is a "foreigner". The differences between the US and European university traditions are well known: in contemporary Europe, only chairs are called professors. Recently, however, full professors need not have chairs, further complicating a picture that was already complex.

Take the example of the physicist Laura Bassi: Was she the first female professor ever, or was she an example of twisted ways in which the male university adapted itself in order to avoid admitting women to high scholastic posts? If one is to count her as the first, did she become a professor when she was admitted to the Academy of Sciences in Bologna in 1732 (after her doctorate, see e.g. Wertheim, 1995) or only in 1745, when she convinced the Pope to create a twenty-fifth post of an academic in a group called "Benedictines" – a post, that ceased to exist after her death? (Cavazza, 1995; 1997a, b). Or, does Vassar College count as a university or as a teachers' school? For there were women in Europe who were appointed professors at teachers' schools earlier than 1837, when it happened at Vassar.

We do not consider the quantitative argument to be important; there are enough cases to consider the phenomenon interesting and to permit insights that may be more general than those merely concerning women immigrants. The cases of "the thin end of the wedge" might be illustrative in making the pressures visible and accountable. Applying a simple chronological criterion forces us, in addition, to cross the imperceptibly emerging barrier between studies of "women in science" and "women in humanities/arts". Accessibility of biographical material

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<sup>3</sup> We are not alone with this problem: see the European Commission's Report "National Policies on Women and Science in Europa", Reese, 2002.

also played a role. For instance, we have not included Margareta Wrangel, born in Moscow in a Balt-German-Russian family, who became the first woman professor (in plant physiology) in Germany in 1923, although her case would be of strong interest to us.

Our four cases are those of Sofia Kovalevskaya, mathematician, the first woman professor in Europe (at Stockholm University, 1898); Maria Skłodowska-Curie, physicist and chemist, the first woman professor in France (at Sorbonne, 1908); Alma Söderhjelm, historian, the first woman professor in Finland (at the University of Helsinki, 1927) and Cezaria Baudouin de Courtney, ethnologist, the first woman professor in Poland (at Warsaw University, 1934).

## Part Two: Four Lives

### Sweden: Sofia Kovalevskaya

In relating the life of Sofia Kovalevskaya, we are using material that is accessible in English, but relying particularly on Ann Hibner Koblitz's (1983/1993) doctoral dissertation in the history of science and on the work of Karen D. Rappaport (1981), a mathematician with a knowledge of Russian and German that allowed her to appreciate Kovalevskaya's scientific production.

In her scientific writings, Kovalevskaya used the male version of her last name ("Kovalevsky"), as the law in western European countries does not allow for the variation in surnames that are adjectives.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, however, we preserve the version closest to her actual Russian surname, although we keep the original in quotes. As to her first name, the readers may know of Sofia Kovalevskaya by the English spelling of "Sophia" or by her common nickname, "Sonia" (in Slavic languages nicknames are used in private contexts and for younger people, whereas full names are the official ones and those used for adults). We call her "Sofia" but the sources we quote might use other versions or her names and different spelling.

#### AN EXTRAORDINARILY GIFTED MIDDLE CHILD

Sofia Kovalevskaya was born in Moscow in 1850, the second child of Elizaveta Shubert, a daughter of a military topographer and a granddaughter of a famous astronomer; and of Vasily Korvin-Krukovsky, a son of a Russianized Polish landowner. Her older sister was called Aniuta (Anna), and their younger brother, the family heir, Fedya (Fedor). In 1858 Krukovsky retired from the army and brought the family to Palibino, an estate near the Russian-Lithuanian border. This move gave rise to a famous anecdote about Kovalevskaya's life, to survive into Tom Stoppard's play, *Arcadia*. The event was reported by e.g. Rappaport (1981: 564):

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<sup>4</sup> Which is a norm in Slavic languages. Barbara's surname is "Czarniawska", but her brother is called "Czarniawski", and the family name is "Czarniawscy".

After settling at Palibino, the household discovered that they had not brought a sufficient amount of wallpaper with them. Rather than travel a great distance to obtain new wallpaper, they decided to use the old newspapers on the wall. Since only the nursery required the paper, this was deemed an adequate solution. However, when searching the attic for the newspaper, they discovered paper of a better quality. On it were the lecture notes from a calculus course taken by General Krukovsky.<sup>5</sup> This is how the nursery walls came to be covered with the calculus notes that, in her later years, Sofya claimed to have studied.

Kovalevskaya has written several versions of her memoirs, various points of which were contested during her life. She apologized for memory lapses, and we mention it here to warn the reader that there are several versions of various incidents in her life in circulation: in each case, we have chosen the version that is best corroborated and most coherent.

Her interest in mathematics first underwent formal schooling, with the help of the family tutor, Josef Malevich. Her uncle Peter supported this interest and discussed various mathematical notions with her. Her father believed that an exaggerated interest in mathematics made her neglect other topics, and he stopped the lessons. Allegedly, Sofia managed to borrow a copy of Bourdeu's *Algebra*, which she read in bed at night.

A neighbor, Nikolai Nikkanorovich Tyrto, a professor of physics at Petersburg Naval Academy and a co-founder of free pedagogical courses for women, presented the family with his textbook on physics. Sofia had problems understanding the part on optics because she did not know trigonometry. However, she taught it to herself, a task that led Tyrto to assert that she had repeated the very process of discovery itself. He pleaded with her father to permit her to study further, calling her "a new Pascal". Krukovsky relented, and in 1865 Sofia went to school in Petersburg, returning home in 1867 after having completed the school's program. Women could not enter Russian universities, and Krukovsky would not permit his daughters to travel abroad.

#### BIRDS FLY THE CAGE

Sofia's older sister, Aniuta, felt equally imprisoned in Palibino and sought contacts with various political groupings of the young radicals: nihilists and feminists. These dangerous ideas were brought to Palibino by two young men (Koblitz, 1983/1993). One was Malevich's ex-pupil, an officer by the name of

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<sup>5</sup> Given by Professor M.V. Ostrogradski (Koblitz, 1983/1993: 46).

Semevsky, who proposed to Aniuta but was rejected as penniless by her father. The other was Aleksei Filippovich, the local priest's son, who had just returned from his first term at the Department of Natural Sciences in Petersburg.

Aleksei Filippovich told her [Aniuta] about the new admiration for the natural sciences, the philosophy of materialism, the urgent need for reform of the Russian system of government. (...) He told her about the place of women among the "new people" – educated, serious, uninterested in exterior adornment. (Koblitz, 1983/1993: 38)

Aniuta developed a desire to study at the university, a wish that her father firmly rejected as being both unrealistic and undesirable. He was especially afraid of her joining the "nihilists", which was, indeed, her main goal.

The expression "nihilist" comes from the Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Children* (translated into English as *Fathers and Sons*) in which it was used pejoratively to describe a young man who does not believe in anything: "anything" being the traditional value system. Actually, the nihilists were firm believers, but in a different set of values:

As distinguished from progressivists [another youth movement in the 1860s in Russia], nihilist women had more concern for personal emancipation, as from parental control and from the pressure to marry. They wanted equality of the sexes, freedom in marriage, a room of one's own, and divorce if considered desirable. (Kennedy, 1983: 84)

One idea struck Aniuta as especially pertinent: a "fictitious marriage", a white marriage by the means of which the woman could liberate herself from the authority of her father. A "fictitious husband" was prevented by the binds of honor from consummating the marriage. An unmarried woman needed her father's signature to obtain a passport. Yet although in this and other ways Tsarist Russia unequivocally subordinated women to men, Russian law allowed married women complete control over their property and gave substantial rights over the parents' property to the daughters (Marrese, 2003).

Waiting for an opportunity for a fictitious marriage to arise, Aniuta was not idle. She had written two stories and sent them to Dostojevsky brothers to be published in their journal, which indeed they were. Upon discovering her submission to the journal, General Krukovsky became very upset but then calmed down and eventually changed his mind about the whole matter (Sofia commented later that "such things often happened in Russian families; children educated their fathers";

after Koblitz, 1983/1993:43). Thus Elizaveta Krukovskaya arrived to Petersburg with her two daughters in February 1865. Later, Fiodor Dostoyevsky proposed to Aniuta, who rejected him, and the three women returned to Palibino. In 1866 the girls went with their mother to Switzerland, where Sofia bought herself a microscope. But it seemed that they were destined to stay at home until they married.

In winter of 1867-68, three young women (Aniuta, Sofia, and their cousin Zhanna) apparently asked a young professor in Petersburg if he would enter into a fictitious marriage with one of them, so they could go to Germany or Switzerland to study, with one married woman acting as a chaperon for the other two. He refused.

But the young women (including another friend, Julia Lermontov from Moscow, who was also counting on profiting from the arrangement) did not give up. Sofia was being tutored in calculus at the time by A.N. Strannoliubsky, who was so impressed by her talents that he told all his acquaintances about her predicament. One nihilist circle decided to rescue Sofia, but the candidate they selected was firmly rejected by General Krukovsky. Another young radical, Vladimir Kovalevsky, also from a Russianized Polish family, fared better.<sup>6</sup>

It has been suggested that Sofia could actually have received her father's permission to study abroad, but in her fascination with the nihilist ideas, she forgot to ask for it. Instead, she was set on securing the marriage approval from Krukovsky, who thought she was too young to marry, and had to be tricked into giving his permission. At a dinner he gave at his house, Krukovsky was told that Sofia was absent because she was at another place with Kovalevsky and was going to elope if not given an immediate permission. In September 1868, Sofia married Vladimir Kovalevsky and they moved to Petersburg to study.

Aniuta and Sofia thought of the fictitious marriage as a mere formality, but Vladimir saw himself as the protector and guarantor of Sofia's intellectual development. He began to take his studies seriously, if only to spare himself the embarrassment of appearing ignorant before his wife. Sofia attended the university classes unofficially, entering and leaving by the back doors. She considered medicine for a while, but settled on mathematics, which required that she went to Germany for more advanced studies. In 1869 the pair left for Europe, together with Aniuta and Julia. Zhanna joined them later, illegally.

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<sup>6</sup> The complications of various fictitious marriages augmented those resulting from the adherence to a belief in true love and equality in marriage. Young Russians' ideas on marriage at that time surely deserve a book of its own, but there is no room for such a description here.

## THE FIRST PERIOD OF SERIOUS MATHEMATICS

The group came to Vienna, where Vladimir could study geology and paleontology, but Sofia could not find a mathematician who would allow her to attend his lectures. Aniuta left for Paris to further her radical politics, although the fiction of her living with the married couple was maintained. Vladimir and Sofia moved to Heidelberg, but Sofia was not allowed to matriculate at the university there. A special committee considered her case, and rejected her pleading, allowing only that she could attend lectures with the unofficial permission of a professor. They all, in fact, agreed, and her talent became the talk of Heidelberg. It is said that she even tricked the famous woman-hater, Wilhelm Bunsen to permit her friend, Julia Lermontov, to enter the previously male-only chemistry laboratory.

On a joint trip to England in October 1869, Vladimir Kovalevsky renewed his acquaintance with Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley. Huxley introduced Sofia to English mathematicians, but also to George Elliot, at whose *salon* she defended the woman's cause from the attacks of Herbert Spencer.

In late 1869, Aniuta came for a visit and was surprised to find the "fictitious husband" still around. Misunderstandings and financial problems disturbed the peace in the little "Heidelberg commune". Krukovsky discovered that Aniuta was not in Heidelberg, and stopped sending her money. Sofia began to divide her money with the sister and with Victor Jaclard, whom she learned during a visit to Paris in the spring of 1870, to be Aniuta's partner. Shortly thereafter, Vladimir left for Jena, where he was awarded a degree in paleontology in March 1872.

In the fall of 1870, Sofia and Julia moved to Berlin, where Kovalevskaya began to study mathematics with Karl Weierstrass, the most noted mathematician of the time, according Rappaport (1981). Although the senate of the University of Berlin denied her permission to attend classes, Weierstrass took her on anyway, although not even his intervention changed the university official stance. He tutored Sofia privately for four years, and, as she later said:

These studies had the deepest possible influence on my entire career in mathematics. They determined finally and irrevocably the direction I was to follow in my later scientific work: all my work has been done precisely in the spirit of Weierstrass. (Rappaport, 1981:568)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rappaport notes that this youthfully exuberant acknowledgment was later taken by chauvinistic critics to be proof of Kovalevskaya's lack of autonomy.

In October 1872, Weierstrass suggested several possible topics for Kovalevskaya's dissertation, and by 1874 she completed three works, any one of which her tutor would have considered to be sufficient.<sup>8</sup> What was needed was a university that would grant her a doctor's degree, and Göttingen had a reputation for occasionally granting such a favor to foreigners. "In July 1874, the University of Göttingen awarded Sofya Kovalevsky a Ph.D. in absentia, summa cum laude, without either orals or defense" (Rappaport, 1981: 568). Göttingen extended a similar favor to Sofia's friend, Julia Lermontov, granting her a degree in chemistry. But this was as far as the favors went: there was no question of either of them being given a job.

At this point, one might ask why Kovalevskaya could not get a job in Germany? According to our own theory, being a woman and a foreigner, she could have benefited from one strangeness canceling another.

The reasons, as we see it, are twofold. First, there was no such precedent. Before Sofia Kovalevskaya there were no women chaired professors in Europe, and one might suspect that such an innovation had been easier to promote in a relatively unimportant land such as Sweden. The German tradition would not move against itself. Second, and perhaps more important, was what could be called an investment involvement: at least three German universities had repeatedly refused her permission to matriculate as a student. How could they then offer her a faculty employment without losing the face?

Thus in 1873 Vladimir joined her in Berlin, and in 1875, Sofia, Vladimir, Aniuta and her husband, the Communist Victor Jaclard,<sup>9</sup> who had been living in Zurich, all returned to Russia.

#### LIFE INTERVENES

Immediately after their arrival, Sofia, Vladimir and Julia were invited to a party given by the famous chemist Dmitry Mendeleev, where Sofia met the mathematician P.L. Chebyshev, and spent most of the evening talking to him.

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<sup>8</sup> These were: "On the theory of partial differential equations" (in 1875 published in the famous *Crelle's Journal*, the most serious mathematical publication in Germany); "On the reduction of a certain class of Abelian integrals of the third rank to elliptic integrals"; and "Supplementary remarks and observations on Laplace's research on the form of Saturn's rings". For a summary and comments on the papers, see Rappaport (1981).

<sup>9</sup> For the history of Aniuta and Victor's participation in the Commune, Kovalevskis' visits to Paris and General Krukovsky's role in saving both Aniuta and Victor, see Kennedy, 1983, and Koblitz, 1983/1993. Their versions differ somewhat.

Chebyshev had a more practical approach to mathematics than that propagated by the German mathematicians and especially by Weierstrass, but there was no doubt that there was as much curiosity as suspicion in his approach to Kovalevskaya. Nothing followed from this meeting, however.

Kovalevskaya tried to get a job in Russia, but the only one accessible to her was teaching primary school arithmetic in a girls' school, because women were legally forbidden to sit for the Master's exam.<sup>10</sup> She commented, somewhat sarcastically, that it was not a feasible proposition because she was "unfortunately weak in the multiplication table" (Rappaport, 1981: 569). Paradoxically, she was now also a stranger in Russia – Russian science had entered a path of independence and the independence was sought, in the first place, from German influence.

Vladimir was not faring much better than his wife. He failed the Master's exam in Odessa and could not get a job, either. Eventually, he received a prize from Petersburg Mineralogical Society in December 1874 and passed the exam in March 1875, but no job offers followed. In September 1875 Sofia's father died and left her some money, and the couple decided to use it to engage in financial speculations and invest in real estate.

Sofia wrote fiction, theater reviews, and popular scientific articles in newspapers. She also contributed to the organization of the Bestuzhev School for Women, but her radical views prevented her from being allowed to teach there. She was engrossed in the life of the capital, but she was also often ill, as the last two years in Berlin, spent in relative misery and overwork, had tired her and made her susceptible to illnesses. It was then that she met a Swedish student of Weierstrass', Gösta Mittag-Leffler, who was sent by Weierstrass on a mission to retrieve Sofia back to mathematics. He did not succeed, but he was very impressed with Sofia as a person, as a woman, and as a scientist.

In Russia, the fictitious marriage turned into a real one, and in October 1878 a daughter, Sofia, was born to Sofia and Vladimir. She was called "Fufa" as the nickname "Sonia" was already taken by her mother. Apparently, the decision to consummate their marriage was also a result of radical politics, which at that time professed an end to bourgeois hypocrisy. Unfortunately, their finances crashed only few months after their daughter has been born.

At the end of 1879 or the beginning of 1880, the Sixth Congress of Natural Scientists was held in Petersburg, and Chebyshev invited Kovalevskaya to present

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<sup>10</sup> In order to teach at an institution of higher education in Russia, it was necessary to pass a Russian Master's exam. Exceptions were sometimes made for foreigners, but not for the Russians who studied abroad.

a paper. She took her dissertation paper on Abelian integrals, translated it from German to Russian in one night, and although it was six years old, it was well received. One of the people who appreciated it was Gösta Mittag-Leffler, who promised to find her a job in Sweden. She wrote to him in 1881: "[If I can teach] I may in this way open the universities to women, which have hitherto only been open by special favor, a favor which can be denied at any moment" (after Rappaport, 1981: 570).

In the meantime, Sofia and Vladimir had moved to Moscow, salvaging the rest of their property and seeking a cheaper lifestyle. While Vladimir started yet another business enterprise, Sofia applied to the Ministry of Education to be allowed to take the Master's exam, with the support of the entire Department of Mathematics in Moscow, but to no avail. She renewed contact with Weierstrass, visiting him in October 1880 while Vladimir was away on a business trip. On her return, she found Vladimir absent, creditors at the door, and officials at Moscow University angry with him: he had finally been granted a position there and was supposed to start teaching in January 1881, but nobody was able to locate him.

It is not our intention to analyze Vladimir's state of mind, but according to most biographers, by that time he was mentally unstable. He returned to Moscow, but Sofia's intention to return to Berlin angered him and they separated. Sofia and Fufa, together with a governess, moved to Berlin. Gösta Mittag-Leffler, by then a professor at the University of Helsinki (at that time called the Imperial Alexander University) was researching the possibility of getting her a job there. Apparently, neither her gender nor her foreignness presented a problem; but she had the reputation of being a nihilist, and Finns did not want to irritate the tsar unnecessarily.

In the late autumn of 1881 Sofia, Fufa and the governess moved to Paris to be closer to Aniuta who lived there with her husband. Fufa has become seriously ill and in March 1882 Sofia sent her to Odessa, to the care of her brother-in-law, Alexander Kovalevsky. In May, the recently married Gösta Mittag-Leffler arrived in Paris with his Swedish bride, and used this social opportunity to introduce not only his wife but also Kovalevskaya to the French mathematicians.

In 1883, there was a scandal at the stock market in Petersburg. Vladimir Kovalevsky, faced with ruin, found it difficult to concentrate on scientific work. When his dissertation in Russian was rejected, he committed suicide. Sofia stopped eating for several days, and then, force-fed by Julia Lermontov who nursed her, she turned to mathematics.

## PROFESSOR IN MATHEMATICS

Also in 1883, Mittag-Leffler was appointed the Head of the Department of Mathematics at the newly founded Stockholm University. He offered Sofia a position, on the condition that she would teach for a year without pay (her pupils paid her by private arrangement) and with no official affiliation that would demonstrate her competence. She accepted the offer and began lecturing in Stockholm in January 1884, having arrived in November 1883 and spending the first weeks learning Swedish.

On January 30, 1884, Kovalevskaia gave her first lecture, in German, on partial differential equations. The auditorium was full; people were aware of the historical nature of the occasion, Not only the twelve enrolled students, but also other students, professors, university officials, and interested citizens came to see the "princess of science!" begin her teaching career. Sofia was nervous, and stumbled at first, but finished her talk to applause. (Koblitz, 1983/1993)

Some hailed her arrival (it was a Stockholm newspaper that had called her the princess of science), but others did not. August Strindberg belonged to the latter group:

"A female professor is a pernicious and unpleasant phenomenon – even, one might say, a monstrosity" (after Rappaport, 1981: 572).

In the spring of 1884, Kovalevskaia lectured in German on her specialty, partial differential equations. The lectures were well received and Mittag-Leffler obtained the necessary funds to appoint her an (extraordinary) Professor of Higher Analysis at Stockholm University in July 1884. It is said that he had to pay for this act by allowing two incompetent candidates to obtain professor's positions in Uppsala (Koblitz, 1983/1993: 187).

Sofia started her professorial job in the fall of 1884, and her daughter joined her only a year later. She was publicly criticized for her faulty motherhood, but she apparently paid little heed:

"I have to admit that in the resolution of such an important question [Fufa's welfare] I could not care less about 'what people will say'. I'm fully agreeable to bowing to the opinion of Stockholm society in all the trivialities of life. In my dress and style of life and choice of acquaintances

and such I meticulously avoid all that could offend the most severe judge – usually female.<sup>11</sup> But when the subject under discussion is such an important one as the welfare of my daughter, then I must behave fully in accord with my own judgment”. (after Koblitz, 1983/1993: 188-9)

Her growing fame earned her an unheard of privilege: she was given permission to attend any lecture at any university in Prussia. She became an editor for *Acta Mathematica*, and in 1885 obtained a second appointment as an Acting Chair in Mechanics to replace a professor who had died suddenly. There was strong opposition against giving her the place permanently. As Koblitz says:

It is interesting that most of the opposition to Kovalevskaya within the Stockholm University faculty was apparently not because she was a woman. The university clearly supported the education of women, and even its most conservative faculty members were silent, at least in public, on the question of Sofia's sex. Instead, controversy focused more on her nationality, her place as a prominent member of Weierstrass' mathematical school, and especially her politics (1983/1993: 192).

A double foreigner – Russian by birth, German by training. However, her sex was of importance in another context – the Swedish Academy of Sciences, where Mittag-Leffler wanted to place her in order to stabilize her position:

Academy members were largely drawn from the established universities of Uppsala and Lund, and for them, Sofia's sex was a consideration. Professor Wittrock, a botanist, argued that a woman by her nature could never attain the standards necessary for an Academy post. (ibid: 193).

Kovalevskaya had no intention of abandoning her sex or changing her ways of mothering, so she tried to change one thing she could: her citizenship. However, it was not easy to discard her Russian citizenship, and her Swedish critics were not appeased by the attempt. She could reject her Russian citizenship, but not the German citizenship of her mathematics. She was stuck in her double strangeness.

Another place was prepared to absolve one with the other. During her stay in Paris, the wives of her French colleagues decided that, being an earnest academician, she was not interested in stealing their husbands, and welcomed her into their circles.

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<sup>11</sup> The acquaintances begged to differ – see the shocked reactions to the way Sofia furnished and decorated her household when she brought Fufa (Koblitz 1983/1993).

Early in 1888, the French Academy of Sciences announced a new competition for the Bordin Prize,<sup>12</sup> awarded for work on the rotation of the solid body. Submissions were anonymous, so that the sex of the authors was not an issue. The Academy had already honored a woman, Sophie Germain<sup>13</sup> who had been awarded the Grand Prix for her work on the elasticity of metals in 1816 (Koblitz, 1983/1993: 211). Fifteen papers were submitted this time, and the winning paper was judged to be so outstanding that the award was increased from 3,000 to 5,000 francs. The author of this paper was Professor Sofia Kovalevskaya. During the awards ceremony in December 1888, the President of the Academy of Sciences said:

”Our co-members have found that her work bears witness not only to profound and broad knowledge, but to a mind of great inventiveness.”  
(after Rappaport, 1981: 574)

She continued work on the rotation of the solid body in two more papers, which received awards from the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences in 1889. But her final appointment to a chair in June 1889 was not a mere formality. Stockholm University announced it in open competition (rather than simple promotion), but no candidate dared to enter it. A French, an Italian, and a Norwegian professor of mathematics wrote eulogical letters of recommendation, but in the last moment Mittag-Leffler had to fight against the objection directed against her socialist sympathies, primarily because she was a friend of Branting, the leader of the Swedish socialist movement.

Kovalevskaya tried to find a position in France and in Russia, but to no avail. The Secretary of the Russian Academy of Sciences explained:

We are especially flattered [as fellow Russians] by the fact that Mme Kovalevskaia has received a position as professor of mathematics at Stockholm University. The award of a university chair to a woman could occur only if everyone had an especially high and favorable opinion of her capabilities and knowledge (...)  
[However], since access to teaching in our universities is completely closed to women, whatever their capabilities and knowledge, in our homeland there is no position for Mme. Kovalevskaia as honorable and well-paid as that which she occupies in Stockholm (after Koblitz, 1983/1993: 222).

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<sup>12</sup> In 1835 a French notary, Charles Bordin, had left 15,000 francs to be divided among five scholars who added to the state of knowledge on problems selected by the French Academy of Sciences.

<sup>13</sup> A French mathematician, 1776-1831, who conducted her research at home.

But her colleagues in mathematics were keen on showing their appreciation, (or perhaps, as Koblitz suggests, were ashamed) and were able to negotiate a change in the charter that would enable the admission of a female member to the Russian Academy.<sup>14</sup> In November 1889, Chebyshev wrote to her:

Our Academy of Sciences has just now elected you as a corresponding member, having just permitted this innovation for which there has been no precedent until now. I am very happy to see this fulfillment of one of my most impassioned and justified desires (after Rappaport, 1981: 574).

A corresponding member with a doctorate *in absentia*: it was clearly the presence of the female body that seemed to be a serious problem. And what was the body like? According to some accounts, it was sturdy and compactly built; according to others, a "little sparrow" with the head too big for a small body (in Anna Leffler's version), or just as it should be (Kennedy, 1983). Apparently, it did not matter, as long as it was female.

Only in Stockholm had this obstacle been surmounted. Because the female body in question was foreign? Yet there was a campaign in the offing to elect Kovalevskaya as a full member of the Academy, which was interrupted by her death. In the light of what happened to Sklodowska-Curie twenty years later, however, the result would have been uncertain. Indeed, Mittag-Leffler himself had no illusions: "... it would be unseemly to pretend boastfully that the invitation to Sophia was evidence of a more advanced view of the women's question in Sweden than in other countries. Her invitation succeeded mainly because the opposition had no chance to get organized" (after Kennedy, 1983: 225). And it would be more difficult to surprise the opposition were the woman in question Swedish: surely the plan would have been discovered much earlier. But, "For Sweden, for the young Stockholm University, and for the educated men and women having concern for the university, it was a great happiness that Stockholm University attracted such a great light as Sophia Kovalevsky" (*ibid*).

The complete collection of Kovalevskaya's mathematical work existed until 1985 only in Russian (edited by one of her biographers, Polubarinova-Kochina).

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<sup>14</sup> It might be of interest that in 1782, Catherine the Great appointed Princess Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova as the Director of the Academy of Sciences in Russia. In 1783, Dashkova presented to the tsaritsa a project of a Russian Academy (of humanities) and served as the head of both until 1796, the year of Catherine's death (Heldt, 1987: 75). Nevertheless, no women members were allowed until 1889.

In the late 1980s, interest in Kovalevskaya's use of asymptotic method caused a resurgence of interest in her life and work (Koblitz, 1993). One of the lunar craters was even named after her.

#### LIFE INTERVENES FOR THE LAST TIME

In Stockholm, Sofia lived for a long while at Mittag-Leffler's house, and became friends with his sister, Anna Leffler. Together, they wrote a play *The Struggle for Happiness*. The play was based on the life of Sofia's sister, Aniuta, who died in 1887. Sitting at her bedside, Kovalevskaya wrote to Leffler: "At such moments mathematics are a relief. It is such a comfort to feel that there is another world outside one's self." (after Koblitz, 1983/1993: 202).

In 1888, however, Sofia's life took yet another turn. A distant relative of her late husband, Maxim Kovalevsky, a Russian lawyer who has been expelled from Moscow University for criticizing Russian constitutional law and lived in France, came to lecture at Stockholm. They had met briefly before, so it was only natural that he sought his compatriot. They became friends, then lovers; there are indications that they planned to marry in spring 1891.<sup>15</sup> Sofia and Maxim traveled together; she commuted regularly to France – to Paris, where she had an apartment, and to Nice, where Maxim had a villa. There, she wrote *Memories of Childhood* in Russian, published in 1889 in a Swedish translation as a novel under the title *The Raevsky Sisters*, and in 1890 in Russian. She wrote a novel in Swedish called *A Nihilist Girl*, which was posthumously published in Russian by Maxim. This has earned her a doubtful obituary from the Russian Minister of the Interior Affairs, who said that too much attention was being paid to "a woman who was, in the last analysis, a nihilist" (after Rappaport, 1981: 574). Soviet authorities were more lenient toward Kovalevskaya: her face has adorned two stamps, in 1951 and 1996.

Coming back from one of her visits to France, Kovalevskaya fell ill. She had caught a cold in Cannes which she refused to acknowledge. She went via Paris and Berlin, engaging in many professional meetings, then to Stockholm on a prolonged route, avoiding Copenhagen that was rumored to be infested with small pox. She came to Stockholm exhausted, but worked all day and lectured the day after. When she finally send for a doctor, she was very ill. Nevertheless, she seemed to be on a rebound, and the doctor and nurses left her alone. She went into a coma, and died on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1891, at the age of 41.

Mittag-Leffler gave the official eulogy for the University of Stockholm. Speaking of her as a teacher he said: "We know with what inspiring zeal she explained [her] ideas ... and how willingly she gave the riches of her knowledge." In his eulogy, Kronecker, of the University of Berlin, spoke

of Kovalevsky as "one of the rarest investigators". Karl Weierstrass, who felt her loss most deeply, having burned all of her letters, said "'People die, ideas endure': it would be enough for the eminent figure of Sofya to pass into posterity on the lone virtue of her mathematical and literary work." (Rappaport, 1981: 574).

A short and dramatic life, dramatized even more in various biographies and eulogies. Koblitz, in her Preface to the second edition of Kovalevskaya's biography (1993), shows how her life has been used, in the 19<sup>th</sup> as well as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to lead the well-trodden path of a story where the women's heart combats against the mathematician's brain. Koblitz herself writes fittingly that Kovalevskaya was "an extremely gifted but in some ways perfectly ordinary woman who fought against the prejudices of her time and sometimes won" (1983/1993: 7). In her own estimation of her role, Kovalevskaya was both right and wrong: she helped to wedge the door of the university open for women, but only a crack.

## France: Maria Sklodowska-Curie

The life of Maria Sklodowska-Curie has become the stuff of many legends, and there is no need to recall it in its entirety. We focus primarily on her university career and on the aspects that, although known, attract less attention than other, more spectacular ones.

### EAST EUROPEAN IN PARIS

Maria Sklodowska was born in 1867 into a typical family of the Polish intelligentsia – a poor noble family convinced that education was the only capital worth amassing. Maria's father and mother were teachers. Maria paid for her older sister, Bronia, to study medicine at Sorbonne, by working as a governess, and was duly supported in her studies by Bronia when Bronia's education was completed. The sisters could not study in Poland because there were no Polish universities, and because women were not admitted to Russian universities: Maria lived in the part of Poland that was under Russian occupation. The sisters were familiar with the Flying University – a clandestine school preparing women to be teachers, which was staffed with Polish professors who were officially teaching at Russian universities. But it was Sorbonne that was the dream of young women taking courses in Warsaw.

Why Sorbonne? It has been noted (Giroud, 1986: 38) that, considering Maria's interests, Great Britain or Germany would have been more appropriate places for her to go. But the allure of French civilization was for centuries irresistible to Poles, and indeed most East Europeans, as we have also seen in Kovalevskaya's case. Eastern European women had a strong presence at Sorbonne in November 1891, when Maria arrived in Paris (Walczyńska, 1999), the first woman having attended classes there in 1867, the year Maria was born. As Françoise Giroud points out, "[t]ravelling alone, living alone in Paris, London, or Berlin – this was unthinkable for French women of their age and their station at the end of the century, but it wasn't at all unusual for Eastern Europeans like the Sklodowska girls" (1986:21). On November 3, she registered at Sorbonne for a bachelor's degree in science. On November, 7, she turned twenty-four.

Why that which was good for Eastern Europeans was not good enough for French women? As Quinn says, the independent women had fewer opportunities in the Third Republic than in the days of Louis Napoléon, as the aristocratic salon was replaced by an all-male bourgeois club. She quotes Octave Mirbeau's reaction to the news that two women applied to join the Society of Men of Letters: "Some women, rare exceptions, have been able to give, either in art or in literature, the

illusion that they are creative. But they are either abnormal or simply reflections of men” (Quinn, 1995: 93). Women could not bear witness in a civil suit and could not spend their own earnings without a husband’s permission. No wonder that in every field of study at the Sorbonne, Frenchwomen were outnumbered by foreigners, and this was the case until 1912.<sup>16</sup> The ”protective coloring of foreignness”, as Quinn (p.95) called it, was in place, and its relationship to gender obvious. Quinn quotes a contemporary chronicler as saying:

”What distinguishes the serious female student, almost always a foreigner, is that almost no one takes her seriously (...) These female students work with great patience, as though they were doing embroidery. Their study makes them ugly. They usually look as schoolteachers and wear glasses. In the examinations, they recite with admirable exactitude what they’ve learned. They don’t always understand it.” (1995: 95).

But, strangely enough, the same system that categorized women as ladies (or housewives) or prostitutes worked in favor of women students in classes, observed Quinn. ”Young men who were crude and boisterous ‘in the very different atmosphere of the cafés’ were the soul of courtesy inside the walls of the Sorbonne.” (Quinn, 1995: 97). Cafés were ”street”, classes were ”salons”.

#### BEGINNINGS OF A CAREER

Maria Skłodowska received the *licence ès sciences* in 1893 – one of two women to achieve that distinction that year. In 1894 she received the *licence ès mathématiques*, as one of five women. Maintained by her sister for the first two years, she received a scholarship from a Russian foundation in Warsaw that allowed her to continue studying mathematics, thanks to the intervention of her former tutor and friend. In the spring of 1894 she met Pierre Curie, and, as Susan Quinn puts it, one of his first *billets-doux* was a copy of his paper on symmetry in physical phenomena. Maria went back to Poland, and planned to stay there to teach. But Pierre spent the summer convincing her to marry him, to return to France, and to join him in his study of magnetism. After much vacillation, she agreed, and was present when he defended his doctoral thesis in March 1895, at the age of thirty-six. They were married at the Town Hall of Pierre’s hometown of Sceaux on July 26, 1895.

Maria spent the first year of her marriage studying for the teacher’s certificate that would allow her to teach in a secondary school for girls. Had she decided

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<sup>16</sup> Russian women were particularly numerous; Russia was a big country, and their women were still not allowed into university.

to depend on Pierre's income, she could have started working on her doctoral thesis immediately. But, according to Susan Quinn, such an idea hasn't occurred to her: she took for granted the need for an independent income. She obtained her certificate in 1896, gave birth to her first daughter in September 1897, and began gathering material for her first article on the magnetism of tempered steel – a paper that would pave her way towards a doctorate.

The work of the Curies has been well documented elsewhere, so our focus will be on Maria's career (now called "Marie", but we will continue to use the Polish version of her name). In July 1898, the French Academy of Sciences awarded her the 3,800 franc Prix Gegner for her work on magnetism and radioactivity – in an appropriate manner:

While the academicians were willing to depart from usual practice and award the prize to a woman, they were not willing to go so far as to inform her of it *directly*. Instead, both Henri Becquerel and Marcellin Barthelot wrote letters to Pierre Curie, informing him that his wife had won the prize. "I congratulate you very sincerely," wrote Becquerel, "and beg of you to present my respectful compliments to your wife". (Quinn, 1995: 153)

In 1899, the division of labor between the spouses became more pronounced: Maria concentrated on isolating radium, while Pierre attempted to explain radioactivity as a phenomenon. The stereotypical gender explanation – that Pierre was an abstract thinker and Maria just a tinkerer – does not hold, claims Quinn. "In fact, Marie was better at abstract mathematics than Pierre, and nothing interested Pierre more than such very concrete tasks as designing and building instruments. The division had more to do with predilections than abilities" (p.154).

Although Pierre was a Frenchman, Maria and Pierre always considered themselves to be outsiders, and were seen by others, Quinn tells us, as an "odd, and seemingly ungrateful, couple" (1995: 175). Maria was Polish and besotted with the Polish romantic tradition; Pierre was a son of a Communard and a product of an anti-establishment education. Obsessed with their work, they were hardly the attraction of the salons; proud and obstinate, they refused to network in self-serving ways, although they lacked funds for living and for working. Pierre was twice refused a chair at Sorbonne, and was teaching at the École polytechnique; Maria became the first woman on the faculty of the École normale supérieure at Sèvres, a preparatory school for women teachers. And, as always, she worked in the laboratory – whatever laboratory was accessible to them at the moment.

In 1902, Maria isolated a decigram of radium, and on June, 25, 1903 she defended her dissertation "Research on Radioactive Substances" in the students' hall of the Sorbonne, earning the title of doctor of physical sciences, with the mention *très honorable* (Curie, 1937/1983: 230-231; Giroud, 1986: 112; Quinn, 1995: 183). On December 10, 1903, the Curies were given a Nobel Prize<sup>17</sup> together with Becquerel. For Maria, it was *in absentia*, as she was too unwell and depressed after the loss of her second child. Pierre went alone again to receive the Humphrey Davy medal from the Royal Society of London for the most important discovery in chemistry in 1903. As Giroud astutely comments, "with the exception of stage stars (...) the Curies were the first in contemporary history to endure the torture of the limelight" (1986: 118).

Maria Skłodowska-Curie was the first woman to receive a Nobel Prize. Although the second, in literature, went to Selma Lagerlöf in 1909, the next woman to receive a Nobel Prize in sciences was the Curies' daughter, Irène, together with her husband Frederick Joliot, in 1935. The reactions of the French press provide support for our thesis:

... Curies, unlike Becquerel, were virtually unknown. Some had thought at first that they were English or American. Thanks to the Swedish Academy, the press chorused, France discovered its own geniuses. (...) the same writers who deplored France's reluctance to recognize its own prophets were quick to claim that the Curies' discoveries were entirely French. (...) Marie Curie's Polish origins were mentioned only in passing, often to insist that she was now as good as French. (...)

Marie Skłodowska Curie was a far cry from the conventional wife of a *savant*. And it was this, more than anything else, which intrigued the press and the public. The idea that a man and a woman could have a loving *and* working relationship was exciting to some, threatening to others. (...)

Some writers ignored Marie Curie entirely, ascribing all the research findings to either Becquerel or Pierre Curie. Those who did mention her most often cast her in a supporting role. (...) Even sympathetic portraits had Pierre doing, Marie inspiring. (...)

Feminists tended to overstate the case in the other direction. (...) Only a few observers (...) seemed capable of understanding the mutuality of the Curies' relationship. (...) Journalists sought out Marie Curie at home to reassure themselves that she retained feminine virtues (Quinn, 1995: 192-195).

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<sup>17</sup> Originally, the prize was to have been given to Pierre Curie and Henri Becquerel, but the intervention of Gustav Mittag-Leffler, the very man who was a decisive influence on the career of Sofia Kovalevskaya, set it right (Quinn, 1995: 118-189).

The efforts seemed to be directed at the domestication of the Maria Skłodowska phenomenon: making her "not really a foreigner", and "a proper woman"; not a stranger, but distinguished by Others, and therefore "one of us". The Curies clenched their teeth, hoping their work would prove scientifically rewarding. On December 15, 1903, a chair in general physics at the Sorbonne was offered to Pierre Curie. A laboratory went with it, and Maria became its head. On July 5, 1905, Pierre Curie finally became elected to the Academy of Sciences, and a journalist of *La Patrie* visited Madame Curie at home, only to find that

"... the eminent scientist had gone off on visits of thanks to his new colleagues." (...) And what of Madame Curie, asked the reporter? Madame Curie dismissed the question. "Oh! me, I am only a woman," she told us smiling, 'and no woman, ever, has sat under the Cupola' [of the Institute]. Madame Curie told us in closing that her only ambition is to aid her husband in his work." (Quinn, 1995: 202)

Madame Curie did not appreciate this particular attempt to domesticate her, and sent a letter to *La Patrie* pointing out that she had given no interview to their reporter and certainly did not say to anybody anything resembling the utterances attributed to her. Her concerns were addressed with mild repentance, and the text attributed to an occasional collaborator. It was accepted unquestioningly, she was told, because "there was nothing in the text but compliments" (Quinn, 1995: 203).

In December 1905, Eve (Ewa) Curie was born, and although Pierre "was a loving father, he deferred to Marie on child-rearing matters (...) Marie, on the other hand, juggled. Sometimes, as Pierre acknowledged, 'she finds her double task beyond her powers.... children and the laboratory require a constant presence of those concerned with them.'" (Quinn, 1995: 211).

On April 19, 1906, Pierre Curie died in a street accident.

#### BECOMING A WOMAN

A question arose concerning Pierre's chair at the Sorbonne. Offering it to his wife and collaborator seemed out of the question – no woman had been allowed to teach at Sorbonne before, let alone to hold a chair. It was decided that the chair would be left vacant and that Maria Skłodowska-Curie would be named "course responsible" and director of the laboratory. Urged by her friends, she accepted. "On November 5, 1906, Marie Curie became the first woman in history to teach at Sorbonne" (Curie, 1937/1983:290-291; Giroud, 1986: 145; Quinn, 1995: 244). All the fashionable world came to listen to her, as well as her pupils

from Sèvres: she began her lecture exactly in the place her husband finished the previous one. All the three of her biographers have quoted the first sentence of her lecture that moved the audience to tears by its matter-of-factness: "When one considers the progress of physics in the last decade, one is surprised by the changes it has produced in our ideas about electricity and about matter."

Quinn notices that "after Pierre's death, Marie Curie began to play a leadership role which would not have been available to her had he survived" (1995: 273). Indeed, this is an impression one gathers from all three biographies;<sup>18</sup> one also wonders if Pierre Curie would have continued his research or if he would have pursued his increasing interest in spiritualism. But that meant also that the attempts to domesticate her were no longer an easy task.

On November 16, 1908, Sklodowska-Curie was nominated to a post of ordinary professor of general physics at the Académie de Paris (Hurwic, 1993). Most likely, her nomination was due to Andrew Carnegie's creation of the *Fondation Curies* that was to finance her research and her chair (Giroud, 1986: 148). This event, central to our study, was barely noticed by the contemporary commentators and by the biographers. It was considered to be an internal promotion, as it were, not surrounded by the earlier drama of her taking the teaching post and receiving a Nobel Prize, and practically mundane compared to what happened later.

By 1910, Maria Sklodowska-Curie was the only of the three living Nobelists in France who was not a member of the French Academy of Sciences, and in that year her colleagues suggested that she should accept a candidacy to a vacant chair. Although there had never been a woman member in the 215 years of the existence of the Academy, they were certain that there was no legal reason to prevent her from becoming the first. Thus, although the debate in the press took up various issues, the fact that the candidate was a woman was the one most hotly debated, and divided even the feminists.

The actual debate took place in two stages. Her candidature was to be discussed at a plenary meeting of the five academies that constituted the *Institut de France*, and then the physics section of the Academy of Sciences would make a decision. The attendance at the general assembly on January 4 was double the usual. Émile Lavasseur, head of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences argued that it has never been the intention of the founders of the Institute to admit women;

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<sup>18</sup> Yet all three biographies are based on Maria Sklodowska-Curie's diaries and letters, and built on one another. Quinn's biography is the latest, the most ambitious, and the most complete (the diaries were first known only through quotations used by her daughter, and were made public later, so Quinn was the first to have access to them in their entirety).

whereas Mr. Viollet of the Academy of Inscriptions and Literature used historical examples to prove the opposite. The supporters of Maria Sklodowska-Curie pointed out that the Academy did not have the obligation to follow Institute recommendations. Whereas the autonomy of the Academies was cherished by the majority, it was pointed out that, once elected to an academy, Sklodowska-Curie could become eligible to be president of the entire Institute. The vote – 85 to 60 – was to sustain the tradition of the Institute.

In spite of that, Sklodowska-Curie submitted her candidature to the Academy of Sciences. There was one other candidate. Crowds willingly came to suffer through the boredom of an ordinary meeting on January, 23, 1911 (Curie, 1937/1983: 311; Giroud, 1986: 160<sup>19</sup>). "Let everyone enter except for the women", shouted the president (Giroud, 1986: 160). The only woman who gained entry was a newspaper editor who was given a special dispensation as a result of a plea by her male colleagues. At four o'clock, the elections began. Maria's competitor won in the second voting by two votes (it has been suggested that a myopic member was given the wrong slip). Although there were some xenophobic comments from the right, it was the gender issue that dominated the debate – in the Institute and in the media. Here is an example among many quoted by Susan Quinn:

"in posing her candidacy herself, in protesting to the newspapers that she was indeed a candidate, she has displayed a lack of reserve that was not of her own sex. She has thus offended some scientists who otherwise admired her work." (1995: 293)

Another journalist suggested that she ought to have withdrawn her name after the first vote – "a beautiful gesture, an elegant gesture very much in the character of this race of Frenchwomen to which the scientist belongs" (ibid). Woman, and therefore inappropriate for the Academy, but French nevertheless. Not for long.

#### BECOMING A FOREIGNER

On November 4, 1911, the day when the first Solvay conference in physics ended in Geneva, with such participants like Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Maria Sklodowska-Curie, and Ernest Rutherford, one of the most popular dailies in Paris carried a front page story entitled "A STORY OF LOVE: MADAME CURIE AND PROFESSOR LANGEVIN", with the photograph of Maria. The article was provoked by Madame Langevin or her mother, who both supplied

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<sup>19</sup> Quinn claims it was January, 24.

heart-breaking stories about Madame Curie as husband snatcher, alluding to letters written by Maria to her colleague Paul Langevin, explaining to him how to end his unhappy, humiliating, and turbulent marriage. Those letters, in their involvement and detachment, revealed her to be the stranger she was – in the exact meaning suggested by Simmel and Schütz. And this aspect of the letters was unerringly pointed out by her most virulent adversary, Gustave Téry, the owner and editor-in-chief of *L'Oeuvre*:

”If only Mme Curie had said: ‘I laugh at your traditions and your prejudices; I am a stranger, an intellectual, a free spirit . . . . Leave me alone. . . . ‘ If Mme Curie had said something like this, we would have said: ‘It’s not French, but it’s pretty daring!’

Deliberately, methodically, scientifically, Mme Curie set about alienating Paul Langevin from his wife and separating his wife from her children. All this is either cynically recounted or unconsciously admitted in the letters which remain Mme Langevin’s only defense now.” (after Giroud, 1986: 179)

What Téry seems to be saying is that, had Madame Curie acknowledged being a stranger, she might have been forgiven (unlikely, but this seems to be gist of his rhetoric). Had she behaved like a (French) woman, ditto. But she had behaved like a scientist in an emotional situation, and for that there was no reprieve. Madame Langevin, in contrast, ”was everything a French woman should be: passionate, indulgent of her husband’s dalliances, fiercely protective of her children, but never selfish or aggressive”<sup>20</sup> (after Quinn, 1995: 306).

On November 7, 1911, the decision was made to award Skłodowska-Curie a Nobel Prize in chemistry. But the French press was not impressed, and in the middle of November, says Quinn, *L’Action française* launched its campaign of hatred. They were not against women, it was asserted, ”... even though this woman is not of our race...” (Quinn, 1995: 314).

*L’Action française* was followed by *L’Intransigeant*: ”On the other side there is a mother, a French mother, who . . . wants only to keep her children. . . It is with this mother, not with the foreign woman, that the public sympathizes.”<sup>21</sup> (ibid: 315). The Curie-Langevin affair was a new Dreyfus affair, which shows ”France in the grip of the bunch of dirty foreigners, who pillage it, soil it and dishonor it” (ibid: 317).

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<sup>20</sup> Apart from the fact that she used to beat her husband, but this was never mentioned in the press.

<sup>21</sup> Although the author of this article apologized publicly and withdrew from the campaign against Maria later on (Quinn, 1995: 307-308).

On November 22, Sklodowska-Curie wrote to Svante Arrhenius that it would perhaps be better if she did not attend the ceremony in Stockholm. He advised her to ignore the scandal and assured her of his – and Swedish – support. On November 23, *L'Oeuvre* published the letters from Maria to Paul Langevin, which he kept in a drawer of the flat where they were meeting and where they were found by either his wife or his mother-in-law (who broke into the apartment). The language of the letters was more damning than the contents: she spoke, indeed, "an alien tongue" – analytic and rational in face of her obvious deep involvement.

A crowd gathered around the house in Sceaux shouting "Down with the foreigner, the husband-stealer". Even Maria's colleagues and supporters suggested that it would be best for her to return to Poland. On November 26,<sup>22</sup> Paul Langevin had a duel with Gustave Téry, although no shots were fired. On November 28, Svante Arrhenius advised Sklodowska-Curie not to come to Stockholm. But Maria decided that she and her daughters were French, and would remain so, and that she would receive the Nobel Prize in person. Paul Langevin and his wife reached a separation agreement, a fact seen by the right-wing press as a victory of French motherhood over the Foreign woman (a Jewish woman, it was suggested when *L'Oeuvre* discovered that Maria's middle name was Salomea).

On December 10, 1911, Maria Sklodowska-Curie received her Nobel Prize. On December 29, she was taken to the hospital on a stretcher. When she recovered from the fever and illness, she underwent a kidney operation that required a long convalescence. The personnel files in the Faculty of Sciences indicate that she was absent for reasons of illness from January 1, 1912, to August 1, 1912 – for the first and last time in her career (Giroud, 1986: 193).

#### THIN BUT STUBBORN: THE WEDGE

We were trying to show how, in each of Maria Sklodowska-Curie's trials, only one of the elements of her strangeness was taken up. She was a woman and therefore not worthy of becoming a member of the Academy: she was a foreigner and therefore hostile to French institution of motherhood. Apart from single attacks of *L'Action française*, her foreignness was not an issue for the Academy, and it is striking how she ceased to be a mother herself in the eyes of the press during her affair with Langevin.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Giraud claims that it was November 25.

The first time Maria's double strangeness was brought to light was in the teachers' school at Sèvres. During her first year, the pupils, with the cruelty and directness of teenagers, mocked her foreignness and her gender. But she ignored both insults, and dedicated herself to making physics understandable to the girls. And "as spontaneously as the twentieth promotion had detested her the twenty-first loved her" (Quinn, 1995: 214).

As we said before, none of the three biographers that we quote paid much attention to the events of 1908, when she became a full professor at Sorbonne. But the three women biographers describe in detail how she was presented and perceived at the times of her great successes, that is, after 1921 and her first trip to America that made her what Giroud calls "a national monument" (1986: 261). She had rehabilitated herself as a woman by becoming "the Healing Mother" (ibid) – a woman who saved lives threatened by cancer, and thus became the first member of the Académie de Médecine in 1922 (the Academy of Sciences did not budge<sup>24</sup>). She further rehabilitated herself as a Frenchwoman by her activity during the war, when she organized and ran a radiological service for the army. Her first departure for the USA was a national event in France – apart from being hailed and celebrated, she was given there a gift of a gram of radium. Sara Bernhardt even recited an "Ode to Madame Curie" in her honor (Giroud, 1986: 236) "The 'foreign woman' of the Langevin scandal was forgotten; Marie Curie was now France's modern Joan of Arc" (Quinn, 1995: 391). Thus in 1923, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of radium, French government gave her a pension that would revert to her daughters after her death. She died on July 4, 1934, at the age of 67, as a result of changes in the marrow due to a prolonged exposure to radioactivity.

#### HARDLY A ROLE MODEL

The inevitable question is now, as it has been for hundred years: What lay behind the scientific success of Maria Skłodowska-Curie? The long debate about whether she was merely a helper of her husband or he a helper of hers seems to have come to an end, as it is more and more obvious that science always

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Quinn's reading differs from ours. She claims that during Maria's candidacy to the Academy, *L'Action française* focused on her foreignness; whereas during her affair with Langevin, her gender was the more threatening characteristic. It is difficult to understand how she reached this conclusion. Her own quotes indicate that *L'Action française* was xenophobic in both cases (quite in accordance with their political orientation), that their xenophobic attack was not central in the debate about the Academy, and that they postured as quasi-feminists.

<sup>24</sup> The first woman elected to the Academy in 1962 was Marguerite Perey from Curie's laboratory.

requires teamwork, and that this couple was an extraordinarily smooth-working team. Also the "father-figure" analyses seem to have been put to rest by the facts: both Skłodowska's parents were teachers, Pierre Curie was not much older than Maria, and she was not a child when they met.

One of her biographers, Françoise Giroud, has a clear thesis concerning the success of both Curies: left alone with xenophobic and envious French people, they would have never accomplished anything. It was the intervention from abroad – Lord Kelvin's involvement in the case of Pierre Curie, Andrew Carnegie's and the jet-set member "Missy" Meloney Mattingley's in the case of Marie Curie – that forced the French to admit that they had an exceptional pair of scientists in their midst. Although Giroud's thesis is not the same as ours, we do not see it as competing, but complementary; actually, a similar theme emerges in the case of Sofia Kowalevskaya.

Nevertheless, Giroud asked herself, what was so special about Maria Skłodowska-Curie, and answered this question as follows:

The only trait that distinguished her sharply from other women of her generation and the generation that came after was the fact that she never doubted herself (1986: 277).

Ah, but why had she never doubted herself? Our three biographies (Curie, 1937; Giroud, 1986; Quinn, 1995) all point us in the same direction, as formulated by Giroud in another context: Skłodowska-Curie was "[r]elieved of the morose pleasures of introspection" (p. 214). It seems that, with the exception of her teen years, Maria Skłodowska spent no time or attention on herself. One may call her obsessed or outer-directed, but she had no opportunity for doubt. She herself saw her career as a result of a calling, a vocation.<sup>25</sup>

As to being a model for other women, she did not see herself in that role:

"It is hardly necessary to lead such an abnormal life as I did. I dedicated so much time to science because it suited me, because I love research. I wish other women and girls a normal domestic happiness and an engaging job" (as quoted by Ewa Curie, 1937: 402, transl. BC).

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<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, Barbara Heldt describes Russian women who authored their own biographies: "Confidence in oneself seems to be the hallmark of all women in Russia who wrote their autobiographies – but it was not a confidence rewarded by a long government career, a string of medals, or a body of writings (...) as was the case with male autobiographers (...) For women, the public self, the calling, can be motivated by anything from family affairs to the writing of the lives of others, and their own only secondarily" (1987: 67).

A thin end of the wedge. Has she opened the door or helped to lock it tighter? The issue was debated before, during, and after her visits to the USA, where her gender and her foreignness were also discussed. At Bryn Mawr's commencement in 1921, Dr. Simon Flexner, Director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, addressed the young women on the topic of "The Scientific Career for Women". The case of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, he concluded, meant that "now that the doors of opportunity have been thrown open to women, one may expect that many more will pass their portals and enter upon a career of science" (Quinn, 1995: 396). The media did not agree with him, and the motif of what "a proper American woman" ought and oughtn't do, emerged as well.

Susan Quinn quotes the science historian, Margaret Rossiter, who claimed that the visit of Skłodowska-Curie actually inhibited American women from trying to enter the sciences, as it propagated the "Madam Curie strategy": a conservative and non-confrontational strategy of "deliberate overqualification and personal stoicism" (1995: 396). Quinn is of another opinion:

The facts, however, suggest otherwise. In 1920, the year before Marie Curie's first visit to America, forty-one women in America were granted Ph.D.s in science. In 1932, three years after her second and last visit, there were 138. And while, as Rossiter points out, the women's doctorates didn't earn them the jobs they deserved, the fact remains that many more women were choosing to go into science. It is possible that Marie Curie's visits inspired them (ibid: 396-397).

There is no way to judge who is right: all social events are overdetermined, and co-occurrence is not causality. But this debate only confirms our observations on the ambiguity of the "thin end of the wedge" phenomenon and corroborates our commonsensical assumption that it is the thick end that opens the door, although it is preceded by the thin. As Quinn points out, "[h]er laboratory accommodated not only more women than most, but also more foreigners" (1995: 403).

## Finland: Alma Söderhjelm

Alma Söderhjelm is our Nordic case. She was born in Finland, and was appointed to a chair in Finland, but still qualifies, we think, as a stranger in most of her identities, some of them self-chosen, other forced upon her.

### THE UNCANNY?

Alma Söderhjelm was born in 1870 in Viborg, which was, at the time, a Finnish city with a mixture of Finnish, Russian, and German cultures, situated close to the Russian border. The Söderhjelm family was a noble one that belonged to both the Finnish aristocracy and the Swedish-speaking minority of the country. Alma's father worked as a judge and ended up as procurator in the Finnish Senate. When Alma Söderhjelm described her parents in her autobiographies (1929-1931) in a plain but positive manner, her nephew criticized her later for not mentioning all her parents' versatile abilities. She characterized her father as an impatient and critical man, and leading personality in the world of culture. She saw in her mother especially the motherly qualities, as revealed in playing a role of a mediator in the family.

Alma Söderhjelm was one of eleven children – the seventh of eight girls. In her autobiography (1929) Alma wrote that the Söderhjelm sisters were categorized according to age but also to other criteria: four of them were considered intelligent but not good-looking, and the other four unintelligent but beautiful. She put herself in the category of intelligent but unattractive: those who should not expect to get married, and must invest in studies in order to earn a living.

Even if Alma Söderhjelm considered the categorization to be unfair to both groups, it seemed to be confirmed by the fact three of the beautiful sisters married, while only one of the four deemed unattractive did. The remaining three – Hedvig, Sanny, and Alma – chose to study. Hedvig received the highest possible credits in the German language in 1885, and the following year Sanny received the highest credits in mathematics. Her achievements were recognized by the Finnish press, and in 1887-88, because of her qualifications in mathematics, she was allowed attend the lectures of Sofia Kovalevskaya and Gösta Mittag-Leffler at Stockholm University. The readers might recall that Gösta Mittag-Leffler was first a chair in mathematics at the University of Helsinki (he was appointed in 1876), but in 1881 took up a chair in his hometown of Stockholm.

Kovalevskaya's and Mittag-Leffler's scholastic successes stimulated both Alma and her sister to aim even higher, and to attempt to get a diploma from a gymnasium. They studied with a private teacher and managed to get the maturity diploma from a boys' gymnasium as externs.

In 1889 both Sanny and Alma were among the first 20 women to be accepted as students at the University of Helsinki. In 1894, when the two sisters were awarded Master's degrees, their big brother Werner, newly appointed Professor in Romance Philology, was the master of ceremonies. The two sisters were among six female recipients; only one woman before them had been awarded this degree in Helsinki.

Even though Sanny was a principal reference for Alma in her academic ambitions, it was her brother Werner who was her favorite among the siblings. He was the significant other in her life, and a model for her, she wrote in her autobiography. Both Alma and Werner lived later in Stockholm, where they met occasionally at public events. Werner had by then left academia and served as an attaché, and Alma worked as a writer and self-styled cultural attaché of Finland. Werner was close to Alma, but was also concerned about her conduct. She annoyed and shamed him, and he criticized her for not behaving properly. Alma cited a letter from him in her autobiography (1929-1931):

... I am surprised that you, who are able to produce such good reflections with broad and smart viewpoints and with a witty style, do not reflect enough when you start talking about yourself. A lot of gracefulness is required from a lady – well, of anyone – in order to become central in however small circles. And nothing is easier than to exceed the fine line that separates irony directed against oneself from absurdness, wit from bad taste, topics that may universally interest strangers from those unnecessarily intimate and unattractively self-centered.<sup>26</sup>

Alma was self-assertive and stubborn and had no inclination to adapt to what she considered unreasonable demands. She characterized herself as a stranger in several different cultures and acted accordingly. Marja Engman (1996), a literary theorist who wrote a dissertation on Alma Söderhjelm claims that she had a personality to which no one was indifferent: either they liked her or hated her. In any case, her personality was seemingly useful when she fought for her position in academia.

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<sup>26</sup> The original reads: ” ... Jag förvånar mig över om du, som kan producera så goda reflektioner med breda och fiffiga sympunkter och ett spirituellt utförande, att du ej har tillräcklig besinning när du börjar tala om dig själv. Det fordras mycket grace av en dam – ja av vem som helst – för att med framgång göra sig till centrum var det i än så små cirklar. Och intet är lättare än att överskrida den fina linjen som skiljer självironi från barockhet, esprit från smaklöshet, det som kan allmänmänskligt intressera främmande från det som blott blir onödiga intimiteter och osympatiskt självupptagenhet”.

## ENTERING ACADEMIA

Alma Söderhjelm's interest was in the humanities, which went against her parents' wish that she should study medicine or law. She chose history as her major subject. Professor J.R. Danielsson, an expert on European history of the late eighteenth century was her teacher, and later, for several years, was her advisor and mentor. It was he who recommended that she should focus on the history of the French revolution. When she finished her Master's thesis on Rousseau's *Contrat social* in 1892, she was uncertain if she should continue her academic studies or choose a career in teaching. She did not consider herself smart enough to be a researcher, but was convinced by her friends and her mentor that she should continue on this path. She was also no doubt influenced by the example of her brother Werner, her role model, who was highly regarded as a university researcher and teacher.

An important stimulus to continue her studies was the positive attitude toward women in academia that existed in Finland. At the time Finland was the most advanced part of the Russian Empire; its level of education was high, there was a well-developed civic society, and the Finnish struggle against Russification had increased national self-esteem. Women were encouraged to work for the future of the nation, and it was particularly significant that Finnish women received the right to vote and to stand for election at the same time as men did; the universal suffrage for men and women was obtained together in Finland. Thus in 1906 Finland was the second country in the world to allow women to vote.

Alma Söderhjelm began to study the history of the French revolution. She had traveled to Paris in 1885 in order to work in the French archives with Professor Alphonse Aulard, who was considered to be the authority on history of the French revolution. Alma wrote her thesis on the situation of the press during the revolution and defended it in 1900 at the University of Helsinki. She published her thesis at her own expense.

Her opponent during her thesis defense was a Finn, docent Hjalmar Chrons, an expert on the relationship between Germany and Sweden in the 1650s. Alma was extremely nervous, and was virtually incoherent during the defense, causing her opponent to damn her with faint praise in his statement, saying that the size of the thesis was satisfying. He did not explicitly comment on the quality, but he did say that the material was versatile and in many cases new, that it had been handled with good judgment, and that the topic of research was well framed. One shortcoming, he noted, however, was that the author did not critically scrutinize her sources.

The thesis and the study that followed the thesis, published a year later, were reviewed in at least ten foreign journals and two newspapers, most of them French. But the thesis received only one review in Finland, which, says Engman (1996: 56), was due to the relatively unknown topic. In France, where her thesis had attracted attention, commentaries emphasized that Anna Söderhjelm was a stranger of a particular type – one who was not French – and as such, was appreciated. She was considered “external” to the topic of her dissertation. The non-Finnish reviewers appreciated her “objectivity”, and said that she was impartial to the events of the revolution and the persons involved – both of which usually evoked passion. It was probably easier for a foreigner to approach the subject without prejudice, they concluded.

The non-Finnish reviewers also wondered how it was possible that research on French history was conducted with such success in Finland, and some noted that apparently “even a woman might succeed in French history, although sharpness and the seriousness that such research requires in general did not characterize women” (after Engman, 1996: 56).

But the Finns took another perspective. They did not think it strange that she, a foreigner in France, was able to do research on a subject of a culture different from her own. Was it, then, common in Finland that students did research in and about other cultures? Possibly so. The Finns, like the Russians, were used to studying in continental Europe. Alma Söderhjelm’s older brother, Werner, had been one of them, writing his thesis in Munich, Germany, and studying for several years in Paris.

One year after her dissertation Alma Söderhjelm applied for a docent (lecturer) position in general history at University of Helsinki. Her merits were evaluated by her Finnish mentor, Danielsson, who considered both Aulard’s positive appraisal of her research and Alma’s personality. She was deemed to possess “the qualities suitable for a teacher position” (after Engman, 1996: 61). The university council recommended her for the position, as did the vice chancellor. But when the acting chancellor, V.K. von Plehwe, presented the suggestion to the Russian tsar, it was rejected. When Danielsson asked the acting chancellor for reasons the answer was that the tsar “had had enough of the [Söderhjelm] family” (after Engman, 1996: 62). Furthermore, if he accepted one woman as a university lecturer, every woman in Russia would demand equal treatment (Count Tolstoy before him used a similar argument in refusing Kovalevskaya). Alma Söderhjelm interpreted this decision as being political rather than personal. The next acting chancellor argued in her favor, arguing that her reputation abroad justified her appointment. Thus, in 1906, Alma Söderhjelm was appointed “docent”.

Over the next two decades, Alma was to remain the only woman in Finland to hold such a position. She left it in 1926, when the university could not or would not continue to finance her position. Thus, at 56, she moved to Stockholm, concerned about her prospects for earning an income. She applied to the university chancellor for a pension, arguing that the decision to continue or discontinue the lectureship had been delayed, and that, as a woman, she could not apply for a chair.

#### NOT THE END OF THE STORY

A year later, however, Alma Söderhjelm became the first woman in Finland to become a chaired (full) professor. She was then 57 years old. It was certainly not the first time she had applied. The average age of males attaining a full professorship in Finland at that time was 44. Why did it take so long for Alma Söderhjelm? One factor concerns the interpretation of the rules. The laws surrounding rights to academic positions, established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Finland was part of Sweden, said nothing about women's rights – only the rights of “Swedish men”. The expression became a question of interpretation in 1911, when Alma Söderhjelm wrote to the Chancellor of University of Helsinki asking for permission to apply for a vacant chair in history. Her request engaged many constituents within the university. The Department of Law provided the interpretation that women and men were equally able to conduct research and teaching. But a woman could not be entitled to a chair for another reason: the university council, of which all professors were members, had the responsibility, of conducting the university court, although it was rarely executed and then only for minor cases. However, to be a professor was to be a judge, and women, the law stated, could not hold a judge's position. Other professors were willing to recommend Alma Söderhjelm, and suggested that the tsar be asked to grant an exemption that would permit women to become professors despite their incapability to serve as judges. However, the chancellor adopted the interpretation of the Department of Law and the Finnish senate decided to not forward the request of Alma Söderhjelm to the Russian tsar at that time.

These university statutes were based on the language and ideas from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in which neither prohibition nor authorization was prescribed about women. And the statutes built on a law established almost 60 years earlier, in 1852, continued to hinder a woman from competing on equal grounds for a chair in 1911. Women then had the right to vote and were in general appreciated in academia. But they had no right to serve as judges. Here again we come across the suspicion that women's opinions are not trustworthy.

But Alma Söderhjelm did not stop there. Her ability and interest in writing about her fights with the statutes stimulated an intense debate in academic circles and

mass media, and influenced a decree in 1916 regarding women's right to hold lectureship. Alma then resumed her position as lecturer, although she did not convince the authorities that she should be exempted from the statues concerning women's right to hold a university chair. This change came later and without her help. When Finnish universities lost the right to function as court in 1924, the last formal block to equal opportunity of women and men was removed.

Three years later, the opportunity for Alma Söderhjelm to become a full professor was made possible by a donation to Åbo Akademi in Finland, from a Finnish family, the Dahlströms.<sup>27</sup> One of its members, Caj Dahlström, the treasurer of Åbo Akademi, met Alma Söderhjelm in Stockholm. He became fond of her, seeing her as "a loving older sister", and the Dahlströms donated money for a chair in history, which was meant for her.

The faculty of the university wanted a chair in general history, but Alma Söderhjelm was not willing to accept anything but a chair in modern history. As had so often happened before, she was unwilling to negotiate with diplomacy. However, this time she gave way to the faculty, and in 1927, at the age of 57, Alma Söderhjelm was appointed a *pro tempore* personal Chair in General History at Åbo Academy, thereby becoming the first woman university professor in Finland. The donating family wanted to be anonymous, and we do not know why (the usual reasons are either because they do not want the publicity or because they are concerned about being swamped with requests for other donations). Typically, however, the donator was made publicly known whereas what person to hold the chair was not announced until a process of selecting the candidate was concluded.

Alma Söderhjelm was a prolific writer over her entire adult life. Her production totaled 1345 publications, which, like those of Sofia Kovalevskya, covered many literary genres and domains (Engman, 1996: 22). Her academic writing was supplemented with essays, popular historical texts, theater plays, autobiographies and fiction. She became a leading personality in the field of culture, especially in Sweden. Alma also worked as a journalist, writing columns in newspapers and ladies' magazines. During her most productive decade, in the 1920s, when she was between 50 and 60 years of age, she produced 478 publications: an average of one publication a week! Also, like Sofia, Alma was politically active. During the Finnish Civil War (1917-1918) and before and during the Winter War and Continuation War (1939-1945), Alma worked as an unofficial Finnish cultural attaché in Sweden.

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<sup>27</sup> Åbo Akademi, situated in Turku, Finland, was founded in 1918 as a private, Swedish-speaking university.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF A STRANGER

Objectivity may also be defined as freedom: the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given. The freedom, however, which allows the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird's eye-view, contains many dangerous possibilities. ((Simmel, 1909/1950, 405)

Alma Söderhjelm's situation indeed recalls Simmel's (1950) characterization of a stranger: "The stranger, like the poor and like sundry 'inner enemies' is an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it." (p.402). Like a stranger, she was, on the one hand, a member of the academic life and its institutions; and, on the other hand, an outsider in constant confrontation and conflict with it. The conflict around her right to apply for a professorship in 1911-1913 estranged her from the university and contributed to her concentrating on genres other than the academic. She left the place in which she was seen as a stranger and resigned from the lectureship. She was also depressed, and needed a cure for some time. Maria Janion (1996) suggested that a native woman who transgresses the limits defined for her by her community must be mad: a foreign woman "does not know better". Alma Söderhjelm experienced both fates. She tested the limits of a woman in academic life in Finland. The tests were harsh, she was extremely critical and seldom willing to compromise; and even if she had a loyal group of supportive friends inside and outside academia, she was weakened at times by her opposition.

Simmel's characterization of the objective attitude of a stranger concluded with a statement that the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given.

The freedom (...) which allows the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird's-eye view, the party attacked has claimed, from the beginning of things that provocation has come from the outside, through emissaries and instigators. (...) it is an exaggeration of the specific role of the stranger: he is freer, practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice, his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habits, piety, and precedent. (Simmel, 1950: 405).

Even as a child, Alma Söderhjelm was already characterizing herself as different. She believed herself to be unattractive and therefore ineligible for marriage and family life, which was supposed to be a complete life for a girl of those times in Finland. Assuming that she had to earn her own income, she chose an academic career, for which she was also outside the norm. Academic institutions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century primarily wanted Finnish-speaking male Finns, not Swedish-speaking female ones. Alma Söderhjelm's choice of a position that relegated her to the position of an outsider is also noticeable in her non-academic adult life. In the numerous chatty articles that she wrote in Swedish ladies' magazines, the unmarried docent in history, born in a noble family, gave advice about forms of social intercourse and emotional life to housewives of middle-class families. Engman states that Alma's Finnish background gave her a position from which she could criticize Swedish conditions – one of her favorite subjects was the weakness of the Swedish man and the delightful characters of the Finns (Engman, 1966: 13). Her pseudonym in Sweden was chosen in accordance with her self-perception: "The alien eye" (*Det främmande ögat*), and her messages often criticized. Anders Österling, a writer and a member of the Swedish Academy commented on Söderhjelm that she was a stranger, but not enough strange to stand outside:

What we want to know about ourselves we often learn from the mouth of strangers, and the inevitable mistakes are at least meant to flatter our secret knowledge about what concerns our own nation. However, a stranger should not be too strange: there must be some points in common, otherwise there is no base for a comparison.<sup>28</sup>

She wrote from a bird's view, from a distant but intimate perspective. She was straightforward and told stories not only about the lives of other people, but about her own. She can perhaps be seen as an exhibitionist: she reported intimately about herself, about how it felt to be homely and lonely, or becoming old. At the same time she dissociated herself from the academic community. She neither involved herself in scientific societies nor was she ever elected as member. Scientific journals seldom reviewed her scientific publications, and she had few contacts with her Swedish academic colleagues. It seems as if she was a stranger in all cultures.

The adjustment to the picture of herself as unattractive woman made Alma Söderhjelm choose a seemingly unbounded position. She was praised for her

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<sup>28</sup> A.Ö. (Anders Österling). Review, Svenska Dagbladet 21.3.1922. Cited in Engman, 1996: 257.

objectivity in academic work when she studied the French revolution, yet when she tested the freedom of being objective in relation to her brother, Werner, he refused to consider her any kind of a stranger. He was simply ashamed of her and afraid that what she did might hinder his diplomatic career. He had no wish to be associated with somebody who did not follow the rules of conduct in diplomatic circles. In fact he eventually broke relations with his sister. She was no stranger to him. She was simply too close for comfort.

## Poland: Cezaria Baudouin de Courtney

### LIFE

Cezaria Baudouin de Courtney (*primo voto* Vasmer, *secundo voto* Ehrenkreutz, *tertio voto* Jedrzejewicz) was born in 1885. She became the first woman professor in Poland, obtaining the Chair of Polish Ethnography at Warsaw University in 1934. She was also the first woman Associate Professor at Warsaw University, passing her *habilitation* test in 1922. At that time, however, she lived and worked in Vilnius, and came to Warsaw only in 1934.

The case of Cezaria Baudouin de Courtney demonstrates the ambiguity of the word "foreigner". To begin with, Poland in the 1930s was a young republic, and the passports of its citizens bore traces of 200 years of divisions by its neighbors: whether one was "Russian", "Lithuanian", "German", "Polish" or "Austrian" depended on who was in power in a given place when one was born, or when the passport was issued. People changed nationalities when they moved to another place, but also when they changed political opinions.

Cezaria Baudouin's case is even more complicated, although by no means unusual for the people from intelligentsia. Although she considered herself to be Polish, she first came to Poland at the age of eight. She was born in Dorpat, Estonia, which belonged to Russia at the time, and her father was the Chair of Comparative Grammar at Dorpat University – a German university.

Cezaria's mother, Romualda Bagnicka, was of Polish origin, although born and educated in St. Petersburg. Jan Ignacy Niecislaw Baudouin de Courtney, as his surname indicates, was, like his daughter Polish by choice rather than origin. By ancestry a Frenchman, he lived and taught most of his life in Russia, Austria, Estonia and Poland. He studied in Jena, Berlin, Prague, St. Petersburg (where he received his Master's Degree), and Leipzig (doctorate).

Jan Baudouin de Courtney was, according to Roman Jakobson (1978), one of the founders of structural linguistics. He has been in close contact with Ferdinand de Saussure, and there are authors who claim that his ideas withstood the test of time better than those of Saussure (Stankiewicz, 1976). He introduced the idea of the "phoneme" in 1870, when he was 25 years old, in his inaugural lecture at the University of St. Petersburg. His lecture was given in Russian, but he could also speak and write Polish, Slovenian, Czech, German, French, Italian, Lithuanian and Yiddish; "comparative grammar" seems to be an obvious choice for a linguist living in those places and in those times. His work remained relatively unknown in the West, as he published mostly in Polish and Russian,

and scattered his work among many journals hardly accessible even in Eastern Europe.

De Courtney was as bold in his life as in his profession: his daughter was called "Cezaria" to honor the professor's first wife, Cezaria Pryfke. Dorota Zamojska, the author of Cezaria's biography (1996), comments that such an uncompromising move against conventions was typical of Baudouin de Courtney.

Romualda Bagnicka had a so-called "male high school certificate"<sup>29</sup> and had graduated from Bestuzev Courses for Women with the equivalent of a university degree. She continued her intellectual work after her marriage, publishing historical studies, literary critique and newspaper articles. As Zamojska comments, "Cezaria needed not, as many of her contemporaries, fight against her family in her strive for education. Her parents not only were convinced that their daughters must be educated (all four received university degrees), but took it for granted" (1996: 157).<sup>30</sup>

German and Polish were the two main languages spoken in her home, interspersed with Russian, the official language, and Estonian, which was spoken by the servants and most of the inhabitants of Dorpat. This pattern changed when the family moved to Krakow in 1891, where Baudouin de Courtney became the Chair of Comparative Slavic Grammar. Although the family became involved in many community activities, the cosmopolitan opinions of Jan Baudouin de Courtney, which he did not bother to hide, were an obstacle to a complete assimilation of the family in a relatively conservative Krakow. They remained "foreigners".

Cezaria's parents had been her teachers, in a rather unsystematic way, until 1898, when she was sent to a high school that awarded a "male" certificate. Because she revealed a significant musical talent, her mother considered sending her to a conservatoire, but Cezaria was against it. She decided to become a university professor. As Zamojska points out, this choice was hardly surprising, considering her father's career, the significant role of Jagiellonian University in Krakow, and the generally high social position of university professors. In a letter to a friend in 1909, she claimed to have chosen "the road of scholasticism quite unaware, almost instinctively" (Zamojska, 1996:160).

In 1900 the uncompromising Jan Baudouin de Courtney publicly expressed his opinion about the tax fraud perpetrated by some leading Krakow aristocratic

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<sup>29</sup> Which, needless to say, was more appreciated than a "female" one, which was awarded in women's schools and did not permit an entrance to the university.

<sup>30</sup> All quotes from Zamojska's biography were translated by BC.

families under the umbrella of a patriotic activity. He was expelled from the university and the family moved to St. Petersburg, where he was given a Chair of Comparative Grammar and Sanskrit.<sup>31</sup> Cezaria finished the high school in St. Petersburg in 1903, and in 1906 was among those women who entered a Russian university for the first time. The Petersburg university had allowed women in 1905, but the actual entrance was delayed by a wide-spread strike at the university. Cezaria spent the years 1903 to 1905 studying at home under her father's guidance. She shared her father's interests and his specific version of linguistics that connected it to psychic and social phenomena. His Krakow lectures were called "anthropophonic" and, as Zamojska observes, the road from there to ethnology was a short one.

Cezaria studied extremely intensely, afraid that the laws permitting women to study at university could be changed at any time. In 1909, she wrote in a letter: "During last three months I took 7 exams from various subjects, mostly having nothing to do with linguistics. (...) My women colleagues and most of my men colleagues will remain two more years at the university, ... but I preferred to shake off this yoke at one go" (Zamojska, 1996:161). She received a "diploma of the 1<sup>st</sup> degree" in 1910, for a dissertation on the "Language of a Maria prayerbook from 16<sup>th</sup> century".

The women who studied at the university and similar institutions of higher education felt a need for solidarity, and so did the "Polish" women in that predominantly Russian intellectual environment. In 1909 Cezaria co-founded an association called "The Union". One of the central events organized by The Union was an excursion to Poland – eagerly awaited by Cezaria, but ending in a feeling of estrangement. Her only positive encounters were those with young people of leftist sympathies, among others, her future third husband.

Cezaria was married in the same year to a colleague of her father's, Maximilian Vasmer, a Professor of Slavic Philology in Berlin. They went to Greece, where they both collected their research material. In 1911 Cezaria attended lectures of Professor Meringer in Gratz and Professor Kretschner in Vienna. She soon discovered that the role of a housewife with a hobby of research did not suit her, but her husband's family was against the idea of her working – even as a teacher. She divorced Vasmer, as Zamojska assumes, with no harsh feelings on any side; it is known that he remained a close friend of Baudouin de Courtney family.

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<sup>31</sup> It was not the end of his political activities: in 1913 he published a brochure criticizing the Czarist political suppression of national minorities and spent two months in jail (Stankiewicz, 1976).

Cezaria was free to follow her other dream: to move to Poland. In 1913, she started teaching in Polish private schools for women. She did not abandon her research, however, and published two works in linguistics, in 1913 and 1914. Her interests moved toward ethnology, especially towards folk tales and hagiographies. As a famous Polish professor said in 1929: "She had neither a teacher nor a model; she goes her own way. She is an ideal type of a scholar: she is fascinated with the difficulty and the risk of a road that needs to be found" (Zamojska, 1996:164).

Cezaria's father asked her to return to St.Petersburg, but she was involved in a political conspiracy against the Germans who were occupying Poland, and did not want to leave. It was in those circles that she met Stefan Ehrenkretz, a university teacher, whom she married in 1917, giving birth to her first child in the same year. When the Polish Republic was formed after the World War I, they moved in 1920 to Vilnius,<sup>32</sup> where Ehrenkretz was an active contributor to the establishment of Stefan Batory University. Cezaria worked as a high school teacher, but was not satisfied: "I am dreaming of a *habilitation*, because I am feverish from ideas, and have quite a lot of my own material, too. I would have much better working condition if I get the title" (Zamojska, 1996: 165).

Hers was not an easy goal, for three reasons. One, it was difficult to form a committee in a discipline that hardly existed (at the time Cezaria de Courtney decided that her subject was ethnography). Two, the gender of the candidate was seen as an obstacle, at least by the University of Lvov, which was one of the institutions from which she could receive a title. Three, the senior university positions held by her father and her husband raised suspicions of nepotism. Nevertheless, she obtained her *docent* title at Warsaw University in 1922.

This accomplishment permitted Cezaria de Courtney to begin the establishment of an ethnographic center in Vilnius. She also began teaching at Stefan Batory University on an irregular basis, and was involved in integrating and systematizing an ethnographic library and folk art and crafts. An exhibition of folk tapestries in 1915 was the beginning of the Ethnographic Museum, an organizing work that required a more systematic methodology than that which existed, and in 1926 her work resulted in a book that proposed such a methodology. The year 1927 saw two of her monographs on folk ceremonies and etiquette, which were summarized in English in 1936 (*Folk Dances and Wedding Customs*). She demonstrated a distinct profile: her ethnography was phenomenological in character. She was also one of the first to introduce the dramatist analysis into ethnography. After five years of

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<sup>32</sup> At present the capital of Lithuania, at that time part of Republic of Poland.

actually chairing the Institute of Ethnography and Ethnology at Stefan Batory University and two years as an Acting Professor in that institute, enthusiastic reviews of her work led to her nomination as an extraordinary professor at Stefan Batory University (on the same day, the 19<sup>th</sup> of November 1929, the same title was given to Helena Wilman at the Jagiellonian University; however it was not until 1937 that Wilman became ordinary professor).

Cezaria de Courtney's professional activity was frantic, says Zamojska. In 1927, she co-organized the Second Conference of Slavic Geographers and Ethnographers; in 1928 she organized an ethnographic exhibition at Northern-Eastern Fair in Vilnius; and in 1930 she participated in the Second International Congress of Folk Art, taught at the Institute of Eastern European Research, affiliated to Stefan Batory University, and was the chairperson of the Vilnius Association of Women University Graduates. This period of intense professional activity was attended by great tragedy in her personal life. In 1927 her oldest daughter died, eroding Cezaria's marriage. Once again she divorced a husband. In 1934 she moved to Warsaw, received the newly created Chair of Polish Ethnology, and married Janusz Jedrzejewicz, who had also divorced his first wife. Although even the most hostile of her colleagues admitted her merits, public opinion was against her:

She was one of the leading Polish ethnographers, but her rapid promotion to the post of a professor (two months from the proposal from Faculty Council) was most likely the result of the influence exerted by her future husband (prime minister, minister for religious affairs and public education), who personally signed her nomination. Most Polish professors of ethnography supported the proposal, but in their opinions emphasized mostly her energy, and her educational and organizational talents, formulating certain reservations concerning her scientific production (Halbersztadt, 1996:122, transl. BC).

This politically correct opinion was formulated in 1996<sup>33</sup>; the same message sounded somewhat different in 1934, especially in Catholic press:

Jedrzejewicz transferred his fiancée from Vilnius to Warsaw university, nominated her a full professor and the director of the ethnographic institute created for her at Warsaw University (...) As Poles and Catholics we are truly sorry that J. Jedrzejewicz rejected the faith of his fathers and divorced his legitimate wife (Zamojska, 1996:168).

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<sup>33</sup> Halbersztadt supports his statement with the opinions of three male professors. Their words would undoubtedly remind many contemporary readers of the arguments used in various debates on quotas and "chairs for women".

Not for the last time there is a subtle allusion to Cezaria's "foreignness": she was a cosmopolitan, not "a real Pole", and forced Jedrzejewicz to change his religion in order to divorce and remarry. Yet observe that the comment is directed at Jedrzejewicz rather than de Courtney, who is merely "his fiancée". The weight of that negative opinion was profound, because the nomination occurred during the time of university reform, which, in view of many professors, was aimed at taking chairs away from politically awkward academics.

Thus in 1934 Cezaria Jedrzejewicz began her work as a regular full university professor, while continuing her collaboration with Vilnius, where her network was situated. She modeled her work on her previous successes, creating both a research group and a museum, and joined other colleagues in opposing the growing anti-Semitism at the University. In a letter written at the time, she said that she felt harmonious and happy, but that the war had changed everything. She left Warsaw with her husband after the capitulation in 1939; they went first to Bucharest, then to Middle East (Teheran, Jerusalem). Cezaria continued working on her latest project, the myth of St. George. She was also actively involved in scientific associations created abroad, where, says Zamojska, "she made use of her scientific passion and her organizing talents" by continuing to publish and to create and edit professional journals.

The new political situation after the war made a return to Poland inadvisable. So in 1947, the Jedrzejewiczs moved to London, where Cezaria was active in the Polish scientific immigrant community. In 1958 she was elected President of the Polish University Abroad, at which she held a Chair of Ethnography from the inception of that university. She was the elected member of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. She died in London, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1967. Zamojska ends her biography with following epitaph:

There were only laconic notes about her work in the postwar Poland. Her decision to remain an immigrant – practically unavoidable, as her second husband died in the Soviet prison in Vilnius<sup>34</sup> – made it impossible to publish her work in Poland, and also, what was probably more painful for a dedicated fieldworker, to continue her observation of the Polish culture. It has been admitted, however, that her work opened the Polish ethnography toward structuralism. She created two university chairs in ethnography and two ethnographic museums. (Zamojska, 1996: 172).

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<sup>34</sup> Which meant, in the postwar Poland, that every family member – including divorced ex-members – was defined as an "enemy of the regime".

## VOCATION: FOREIGNER

There are several points in Cezaria de Courtney's biography that are of particular interest to us here. To begin with, there can be a doubt about her being a stranger in the sense of being a foreigner. Wasn't she Polish? She was a Pole by choice, as it were, and it is quite certain that in such places like Warsaw and Krakow she and her family were perceived as "foreign". If she was Polish, she was from the Eastern part of Poland, where Poles, Russians, East Prussians, Lithuanians, White Russians, and Ukrainians lived under a constantly changing national allegiance. They were recognized as "Easterners" in the "real Poland", not the least because of their pronounced accent.

Cezaria de Courtney lived in the "real Poland" between 1893 and 1900 and again in 1934-1939: twelve years all in all. She was perceived as being foreign, but it is doubtful that she felt that way. If she did, she appears not to have cared; she was used to being foreign, and the example of her father (we do not know enough about her mother's attitude) was clear: one mustn't care. Like him, she disregarded "native" conventions and did what she wanted to do. Although indifferent to conventions, she was passionately involved in the matters of her chosen country. She probably did not think that her gender made her peculiar, either. In spite of a lack of predecessors, a scholastic career seemed to be characteristic of her generation, more than any generation before or after. In an essay on Polish women analytical philosophers (who constituted 13 per cent of the philosophers in the famous Lvov-Warsaw School in 1939<sup>35</sup>), Pakszys observes that "It seemed that they took the possibility of studying such masculine university disciplines as philosophy, logic or mathematic as something completely natural. Or did they so imbibe the positivist ideals of gender equality that they did not bother to reflect on it?" (1996: 97, trans. BC). It is also worth mentioning that, unlike Cezaria de Courtney, they did not come from intellectual families and did not have fathers who were prominent academics.

There is no doubt that Cezaria served as the thin end of the wedge as the first associate professor and the first full (ordinary) professor at Warsaw University. In this case, the wedge also helped to open the door of academia because it materialized at the right time. In Polish humanities, for example, women were the authors of 4.9 per cent of doctoral dissertations before 1918, of 21.9 per cent in the decade 1920-1929, and of 31.6 per cent in the decade 1930-1939. This increase was all the more meaningful because it coincided with a university reform that significantly raised the quality criteria for doctoral dissertations (Wierzbicka & Jakubowska, 1996: 76). As Coser (1984) repeatedly stressed in

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<sup>35</sup> Pakszys compares it with only 19 per cent of women-philosophers in Poland in 1995.

his book, being at the right place at the right time was, after networking, the most important success factor for refugee intellectuals in the USA.

After Cezaria de Courtney, more and more women became associate and full professors at Polish universities (eight were given the right to teach at Warsaw University in the years 1932-1934, although almost none followed immediately after Cezaria de Courtney's habilitation in 1922). Although 1934 may seem to represent a late entry in the history of women in academia, it is worth reminding the reader of the specific situation of Polish universities. It was only in 1919 that Poland became an independent country and prior to that time, universities were provincial schools of a given empire: Russian, German or Austrian, and the entrance of women into the university system was especially late in all the empires. Yet this belated independence was not without its advantages. When Warsaw University reopened as a Polish university in 1915, the attendance of women – in all faculties, including medical and technical faculties – was no longer a controversial issue (Halbersztadt, 1996).<sup>36</sup>

But the most provocative aspect of Cezaria de Courtney's career is the accusation of nepotism that was levied against her. Was she the first professor because she was a woman and a foreigner or because her father was a famous professor and her husband the minister of education?

We do not claim that these four women whose careers we describe became professors because they were women and foreigners. They clearly merited their professorships and the time was ripe to begin nominating women to university positions. But their double strangeness, we claim, often helped them to reach this position before native women, who had to pay the costs of transgression. An interesting counter-example to Cezaria de Courtney is Jozefa Joteyko, an internationally renowned psychologist, who became the first woman professor at College de France in 1916, but failed to obtain the position of full professor when she returned to Warsaw in 1919. She applied once more in 1926, at the age of 62 and with a list of 250 publications, but was given only *veniam legandi*: the right to teach. The chair went to a younger and less qualified man (Halbersztadt, 1996).

But did Cezaria de Courtney merit her position, or was she merely pushed upward through nepotism? We can briefly repeat the same argument that we mentioned in our discussion of the Curies. Neither men nor women are able to progress in their careers without associating with other people – often persons

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<sup>36</sup> Women were 9 per cent of Warsaw University students in 1915/1916, 20 per cent in 1917/1918, 35 per cent in 1923/1924, 41 per cent in 1932/1933, 36 per cent in 1935/1936, and 40 per cent in 1937/1938.

of a senior status. At the turn of the previous century, such persons were men, and men and women who networked, networked with men. That the men in question were also family relations is not especially strange. Then, and even now, associations between men and women were often interpreted as having sexual undertones, and the opportunities for free and wide networking were, then, and even now, more limited for women than for men. Cezaria Baudouin de Courtney was already a Chair in Vilnius, although not an ordinary professor. The creation of a chair in Warsaw was a nepotistic move but such a chair would have had to be created sooner or later.

But what about her merits outside the realm of education and organization? In plain words, did she write too little? Her admirer and reviewer from 1929, the famous Professor Bystron, wrote that "her works are concise and substantial; she solves the problems with the minimum of necessary means" (Zamojska, 1996: 171n). But such conciseness, which tends to be admired today, was considered to be bad style in those times. Her second husband thus wrote of one of her publications: "In my opinion, she narrowed the frame of her work too much; anybody else would make an *opus magnum* of it, but this is, after all, Cezia's<sup>37</sup> system" (ibid). One can thus claim that not only did she foreshadow the structuralist turn in Polish ethnology, but she was also a pioneer of writing in the new, Anglo-Saxon scientific style, at that point unknown in the humanities within Poland.

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<sup>37</sup>Cezaria's nickname.

## Part 3: How thick is the end of the wedge?

### STRANGE WOMEN

At the end of our analysis, we would like to stress once more that ours is not a preempting explanation of the professional success of four women. The reasons for their success were many and interactive: the politics and culture of Europe at the turn of previous century; the alliance between the natural sciences and progressive politics at the time; Russian property rights for women; the emergence of a Central European intelligentsia; the Scandinavian geopolitical situation and culture of that time, and so on and so forth. Rather than claiming that the lives of the four women presented here provide a complete explanation of the phenomenon of the entrance of women into the highest post in academia, our text focuses on one aspect – the double strangeness – that has been largely ignored until now.

### INTERSECTIONALITY: ON INTELLIGENTSIA

Their class belongingness requires a comment, though, lest it will be assumed that they simply benefited from an "upper class origins". Not all of them had upper class origins, but they all belonged – as this is the correct word – to that peculiar historical grouping known as "intelligentsia", which originated in Eastern Central Europe (mostly Russia and Poland) in the period between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, and which now is said to have vanished, incorporated by its previous ideological enemy, *petit bourgeoisie*.<sup>38</sup> The emergence of intelligentsia is usually explained by the decline of the feudal system in Russia, and by legal prejudice against the nobility in partitioned Poland, leading to impoverishment. "In both countries members of the 'déclassé' fraction of the landed nobility, seeking to maintain in an urban environment their traditional style of life, had to separate themselves from the 'bourgeois' middle class" (Gella, 1976: 13).

*Wikipedia* defines intelligentsia (from Latin: *intelligentia*) as "a social class of intellectuals and social groups close to them (e.g. artists, school teachers), which can be also seen as a class of mental workers in opposition to non-working

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<sup>38</sup> In an edited volume on *The intelligentsia and the intellectuals* (1976), Aleksander Gella pointed out that almost all his contributors used different definitions of intelligentsia (as an editor, he assumed a minimalist definition of "groups or strata of educated but unpropertied people" (p.9), but the actual difficulties arose only when somebody attempted to apply traditional class analysis on intelligentsia.

aristocracy or business owners on the one hand and to manual laborers on the other” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligentsia>, 25 September 2005). The important point is that one is not born into intelligentsia, although one can be born in the intelligentsia family. Belongingness to intelligentsia equals the acceptance of its ethos, still dimly understood outside Eastern Europe, as Rachel Polonsky (2005) rightly points out. One of the reasons, as Gella (1976: 10) indicated, is that while all other classes and strata of Eastern Europe have had their counterparts in the West, intelligentsia, strictly speaking, did not.

The central point of intelligentsia’s ethos was the value of education and knowledge as opposed to the right of birth (aristocracy) and money (*bourgeoisie*). Thus, an aristocratic family could choose to follow the intelligentsia ethos, like the daughters of Korvin-Krukovsky did; and even people in other countries, like Finland, much under Russian influence, could imitate it, like three of Söderhjelm girls, although evidently not their brother, who espoused the values of the Swedish aristocracy. In the period after the World War II, many people from workers’ and peasant families joined intelligentsia. Accordingly, intelligentsia comprised people in many white collar jobs, not only artists and teachers, although they indeed were typical examples. Intelligentsia valued class equality. Although the practice might have differed from the ideals, as it often does, Gella was right to point out that, within intelligentsia, ”a simple clerk in a patent office was culturally closer to the greatest scholar of his nation than was a wealthy *bourgeois* in the West to his country’s outstanding intellectual” (1976: 21).

Skłodowska’s family and herself were the most typical examples of intelligentsia: impoverished nobles, who espoused the ethos of education and dedicated their lives to propagate it. Cezaria Baudouin in turn belonged through her family, her marriages and her own career, to that narrower circle within intelligentsia, the intellectuals. This is a group to be found also in countries where there was no intelligentsia, usually attached to upper or middle class. They were often cosmopolites, whereas intelligentsia was strongly nationalist and patriotic.<sup>39</sup> Also, as it has been suggested by many authors (Kramer, 1996; Péteri, 2001), intellectuals were (and are) most often critical of the existing institutional order, while intelligentsia builds and supports it, thus corresponding distinction between ”critics” and ”experts”. In this sense, only Alma Söderhjelm was an intellectual; the other three were experts. Jan Baudouin was undoubtedly an intellectual, and a critic, as his attempts to reform Krakow’s bourgeoisie indicate; Cezaria helped her second and third husband to build a new order, not to destroy it.

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<sup>39</sup> Helena Lopata, Florian Znaniecki’s daughter and sociologist herself, claims that intelligentsia was cosmopolitan (Lopata, 1976). Literally, it is true, as these people were born either in occupied territories or in the country of the occupant that extended far beyond its national borders, but they preached patriotism and nationalism; Sofia Kovalevskaya and Cezaria Baudouin are best examples of such a paradoxical stance.

## THE RELATIONSHIPS OF A STRANGER

The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near... His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it. (Simmel, 1909/1950, 403)

A point that is especially relevant in the context of women transgressing by entering academia, as we emphasized before, is the “objectivity” of the stranger:

He is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and particular tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of “objectivity”. But objectivity does not simply involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement. (p.404)

The danger of which Simmel speaks has to do with instigation to transgressions: it is a historical cliché that revolutionary emissaries are often foreigners (Janion mentions a novel in which a Russian woman seduces a “proper” Polish boy, in an act that is as much sexual as ideological). The receptiveness to such seduction, says Simmel, has its grounds in the exaggerated perception of the stranger: “he is freer, practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety and precedent”. (p.405)

Relationships with the stranger, continues Simmel, are also more *abstract* than are relationship with compatriots: “with stranger one has only certain *more general* qualities in common, whereas the relation to more organically connected persons is based on the commonness of specific differences from merely general features” (p.405). It contains “an element of coolness, a feeling of the contingency of precisely *this* relation – the connecting forces have lost their specific and centripetal character... The stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people” (406).

This may mean that, if stranger is a woman, her “womanness” may be overlooked in that it does not correspond to the local standard of femininity. We have felt

this way in Arab countries – that we were not women, but something else, a creature from another culture not endowed with sex attributes<sup>40</sup>.

In her theoretical study of how strangers are perceived, Margaret Mary Wood made a summary of "the special sociological characteristics of the relationship of the stranger which Simmel presents" (1934: 247): mobility, objectivity, confidence, freedom from convention, and abstract relations. Viewed together, these characteristics form a clear contrast to the stereotype of a woman, at least in European societies. Thus, if a woman was a stranger to the academia, she was a different kind of a stranger, a stranger *au rebour* as it were. And as we noted at the outset, the description of a stranger seems close to the stereotype of a scientist. Not without reason Becker claimed that the etymology of "theorist" is "one who traveled to see men and things" (1950: 188).

What can be observed in the present study is that, when in trouble – when one kind of strangeness did not suffice as an explanation for the other – the women professors tended to sacrifice one or another aspect of their "strangeness". Sofia Kovalevskaya returned to Russia several times, hoping to put a stop to a life as a foreigner, and at least once she seemingly relinquished her "unwomanly pursuits" when she was desperate and saw no chance for success. On the other hand, she did not hesitate to behave in an "unwomanly" and "unmotherly" manner when given the opportunity. Neither Sofia Kovalevskaya nor Maria Sklodowska-Curie nor Cezaria Baudouin ever aspired to "abstract relations". Rather they had strong emotional ties in their private lives, which one might regard under the category of "femininity", and seen as differentiating them from their male colleagues. However, (not much is known about the emotional ties of their colleagues, and herein might lie the difference – in knowledge of and interest in, not in the existence of such ties or its lack. Koblitz has thus commented various romanticized stories about Kovalevskaya (it has been even suggested that she died of unreciprocated love!):

Hermann Hettner, Paul DuBois-Reymond, Carl Runge, Leo Königsberger, and Hermann Schwartz were contemporaries of Kovalevskaya, of roughly comparable mathematical accomplishments. No one claims, however, that they did not prove the theorems with which they were credited, or that they were mascots rather than participating members of the mathematical community, or that they were unhappy doing mathematics. Nor does anyone insinuate that they succeeded because they slept with their mentors. These stories have been reserved for Kovalevskaya (1993:xviii).

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<sup>40</sup> When Nina L. Colwill was visiting India with Indian friend, she told Nina afterwards that the women they met thought Nina was fun and friendly and kind, but that they couldn't imagine that she had had children (Personal communication, 2005-04-14)

Alma Söderhjelm has dealt energetically with this type of rumors by producing them herself: thus nobody was sure how true or not they were. She also made distinct use of mobility: she created and cultivated it, to be able to claim objectivity and disengagement. Not by chance was her column called "The alien eye".

Cezaria Baudouin held to her mobility all her life; perhaps this is one of the reasons that she is not very well known or remembered in her chosen country. But she replaced objectivity and distance with involvement. Her interest in folklore was a different way of demonstrating ties with Poland, so different from her father's interest in comparative linguistics, and so appropriate for a perpetual stranger.

Maria Skłodowska-Curie, when under attack, relinquished her mobility,<sup>41</sup> both symbolically and literally. Mobility, even potential mobility, is the most central element of strangeness, claims Wood, and all the remaining characteristics are derivative. Therein may lie the explanation of Skłodowska's obsession with acquiring real estate in her old age: perhaps she longed for what Simmel called the "ownership of soil", to tie her down.

As to freedom of conventions, a caveat must be made. They all broke conventions, but it cannot be said that they did it easily and freely. They suffered and were punished for it. This is especially visible in the lives of the three women with children: their way of enacting motherhood was a standard critique against them. And of course all four were criticized for their unconventional relationships with men, whether actual or assumed.

There are no doubts, however, as to the confidence that these women carried with them. In most cases, it was neither an arrogant confidence nor just a self-assurance. They insisted on what they were doing from a sense of vocation: something *made* them exercise their profession.

This occurrence was especially visible in case of the two women in the natural sciences. It can be claimed, in accordance with Koblitz (1983/1993), that it is not by chance that the two first women professors were natural scientists. Koblitz argues that, in contrast to their present image of being male dominated and hierarchically construed, the natural sciences were allied with progressive politics at the turn of the previous century, and were especially supportive to women (viz. the support of Russian mathematicians for Kovalevskaya, although the revolutionary fire must have burned quite low by the time Skłodowska-

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<sup>41</sup> She could have returned to Poland as the head of a laboratory created for the study of radioactivity (Hurwic, 1993).

Curie applied to French Academy). It was the humanities that were the bastion of tradition and animosity against women at universities. Also, it was more often administrators than their colleagues in science who opposed women's entrance into universities. Nevertheless, the present hierarchy of sciences, with mathematics as the queen and natural sciences in court, was being established at that time. Thus one could claim that Cezaria and Alma could become professors because Sofia and Maria were there first. Natural sciences legitimate changes in the order of things reigning at universities.

## How does it feel to be a wedge?

### TRANSGRESSIVE WOMEN IN LITERATURE

The fate of these four women can be contrasted with that described by a Polish literary theorist and sociologist, Maria Janion in her study of transgression, *Women and the Spirit of Otherness* (1996), which combines history, cultural sociology and literary theory. Janion proposes that although transgressive acts are accessible to all humans, social transgression committed by women is judged by a special set of criteria and severely punished.

One of her examples is the many variations of a popular Romantic ballad, of German or English origin – Lenora. A woman is visited by her dead lover and accompanies him to the grave. In its different cultural versions, the interpretations of the consequences vary. In a well known version by Bürger, Lenora is an example of a young woman who forgets her societal duties for love, and is duly punished for this madness by death. In another version, that of a Polish Romantic poet Mickiewicz, Lenora is a woman who dares to use her own judgment, and chooses love over religion and society. Mickiewicz's ballad does not jingle with Gothic fears – Lenora is a madwoman, but only in the sense that she chooses love that is absolute, and therefore mad relative to its conventional version: marriage. Choosing science or arts over love was seen as mad.

Janion quotes A. W. Schlegel, one of the enthusiasts of Bürger's version of the ballad, who said that the ballad conveys an impression of *das Unheimliche* – a feeling of strangeness, a reaction to the unknown and the uncanny. Janion reminds the reader that this expression was one of the Freud's central terms (translated into French as *L'inquiétante étrangeté*). In his 1911 essay called "The Uncanny" in English, Freud discussed several cases in which something strange and incomprehensible intrudes upon the near, familiar, and well known provoking fear mixed with disgust.

Janion also quotes a Polish literary critic who was a contemporary of Bürger, and who discussed the Slavic versions of the ballad in which the young woman manages to escape the lover-demon by hiding in his house. When the priest comes in the morning with the people to exorcise the demon, they find her hidden behind the stove, trembling. Alas, nobody understands her when she begins to speak because "she was from an alien land". She was indeed from the alien land, notes Janion, in the double sense of the word: she originated from a village 200 miles from the lover's and she had returned from the land of the dead. In the ballad, she dies several days later, in spite of all attempts to help her.

In this text, we saw the transgressor's role as resulting from strangeness, and we postulated a possibility that the two types of transgression – a woman entering a male field and a foreigner entering another culture – may cancel one another in some cases and double their effect in others. We suggested the possibility that their “strangeness” could have been explained by their foreignness, which allowed them to avoid the punishment that Janion suggested was typical for transgressing women: being defined as mad. To put it simply, a native woman who transgresses the limits defined for her by her community must be mad; a foreign woman does not know any better.

#### ACTUAL TRANSGRESSORS

This conjecture goes against a statement that is often taken for granted and rarely examined, even by particularly critical scholars: that two types of deviation necessarily reinforce one another (a “cumulative disadvantage”, in the words of Epstein, 1973). Thus when Sander L. Gillman, an authority on gender stereotypes, discusses the qualities ascribed to Jewish women, he concludes that “qualities from each reinforce those ascribed to the other” (1995, p.97). And yet he begins the paragraph by saying:

When Jewish women are represented, the qualities ascribed to the Jew and to the woman seem to exist simultaneously and yet seem mutually exclusive – much as in M.C. Escher's merging and emerging image of fish and birds. When we focus on the one, the other seems to vanish (1995, p.97).

We owe an apology to Gillman for using his text against his intentions, and yet this is a brilliant metaphor for what we wish to suggest. Escher's picture cannot be called “Fish” or “Birds” because it always contains both, and focusing on one makes the other vanish. But it can be also evoked in order to change the focus. Thus the observation, “She deviates from a proper woman's behavior”, can be countered by, “Yes, but she is a foreigner”. The observation, “She does not follow our customs”, can be countered by, “Yes, but she is a woman”. Gillman uses the example of Sarah Bernhardt being persecuted for being Jewish and for being a woman; yet he does not seem to notice what the next essay in the same book (Ockman, 1995, p.121) emphasizes: the unprecedented success of Bernhardt.

Lewis Coser reached a conclusion similar to ours several times in his book. In one case he quotes Paul Lazarsfeld as saying that “being categorized as a foreigner saved him from being categorized as a Jew” (1984: 119). Coser has actually included three women in his collection of biographies: a failure story (Charlotte Bühler, a famous Austrian psychologist who failed to recreate her career in USA); a mixed story (Hannah Arendt, who became famous, but had no faculty

position, although it is difficult to say if this was her choice or the choice of US universities); and a success story (Karen Horney, the psychoanalyst). As Coser says of Horney:

Curiously, Horney's success as a theoretician may well be accounted for by her making use of the opportunities available to insiders in one context and to outsiders in another. Her perceptive view of the psychology of women owed a great deal to her position as an insider who could discern the male bias of Freud and other sexual outsiders to the world of women. On the other hand, her powers of observation as a refugee in America allowed Horney to discern defects in the American character that might have well have remained hidden from most inside observers. Like those other outsiders, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville and the Norwegian-American Thorsten Veblen, she put her finger on the hidden underside of the American character and thus contributed to a many-sided analysis of the effects of American culture (Coser, 1984: 82).

Karen Horney's "insiderness" in the world of women might have been less of an issue than her "outsiderness" in the male world of psychoanalysis. Indeed, she was excluded from the profession by the orthodox analysts, and one could claim that it was her double outsiderness, her double strangeness, that both saved her and made her famous in USA.

#### IS STRANGENESS A SOLUTION?

It is not that we believe that women who want to make it to the top of their careers should go to another country (although it might help). There are many more determinants of a final career outcome than ethnicity or sex. We try to capture as many of them as possible in this discussion, but we do not claim to be able to list all the factors or even configurations of factors. Each life is a trajectory, combining, at its own pace, contingency with personal variations and institutional givens. As institutionalists, we examine those trajectories as being individually unique but, taken together, characteristic of their times and places.

Neither did we intend to say that women foreigners "have it easy", or even that they have it easier than native women, especially as it is difficult to imagine a scale on which such comparisons could be made. As we tried to show, these four women foreigners suffered from all kinds of repressions and attacks. Nevertheless, they succeeded in making their place in the men's world, and may have served as wedges, opening the closed doors of academy to other women. They suffered a double pressure, but it must be compared to the price that, according to Janion, a (native) woman had to pay for entering male domains: madness, a civil death.

Even this generalization can be seen as exaggerated. Maria Janion mentions her own student, Izabella Filipiak, now a successful novelist, who ironizes Janion's teachings: "It seemed that it was enough to go properly mad for a woman to hop on the wagon of history" (1996: 320). Janion cedes Filipiak a point: the romanticism of madness may be more seductive than a possibility of saving someone from that very madness. She also applauds her younger colleague for her explorations, which are an expression of the hope that madness and punishment are no longer necessary conditions of female creativity. The Romantic tradition certainly fades, but not as quickly as one might think. The same can be said of the rise of the multicultural society, which is supposed to treat strangers in the same way it treats the natives: it emerges, but not as quickly as one might wish.

## Are the doors open now?

How relevant is our essay for today's problems? If we are not trying to tell the accurate and unknown story of the past (we disavowed ourselves from any pretensions to compete with the historians at the outset), what is the use of the story of the past in the present? The answer is that the issue of wedging the doors of academia open is still highly relevant. We are able to corroborate this claim with numbers collected by the European Commission. The following table shows the proportion of women professors in European countries (where such statistics were available<sup>42</sup>). The reader might be interested in knowing that the proportion in USA is 14 per cent (source of the table: *Forskning & Framsteg* 2000/2:7, Rees, 2002; Rees quotes more up-to-date statistics, but the list of countries is not completely the same).

COUNTRY	WOMEN FULL PROFESSORS (per cent)
Turkey	22
Finland	20
Poland, Portugal	17
Estonia	15
France	14
Hungary, Sweden	13
Norway, Slovenia	12
Italy	11
Greece	10
Iceland, Israel, United Kingdom	9
Belgium (French-speaking community), Denmark, Ireland	7
Austria, Germany, the Netherlands	6

The contents of this table provide little ground for optimism, although it needs to be said that in the two years separating the two sources, Sweden and Finland each raised the proportion of women full professors by two per cent. Also, the optimistic picture of Turkish universities becomes somewhat less optimistic when it is contrasted with the fact that at least until 1992 there were no women university presidents or rectors in Turkey, and that women were generally under-

<sup>42</sup> The problems with gathering statistics mentioned before (Rees, 2002) contribute to the fact that statistics come from different years (from 1998 to 2001) and are not complete. No later statistics are available.

represented in higher administrative posts (Senesen, 1994).

Numbers need to be interpreted, and only speculations can be offered as to the differences between the countries and the general low proportion of women professors. An insight into the everyday practices is necessary to form an opinion on the mechanisms at play. *Gender, Work & Organization* has dedicated an entire issue (2003, 10/2) to "Gender and Academe". The picture presented there, apart from a report of a sensible, down-to-earth intervention at MIT (Bailyn, 2003), is rather gloomy. One gloomy insight into the everyday practice of Swedish academia is offered by Elg and Jonnergård's (2003) report on the strategies assumed by women PhD students in one university department. "Compliance" is the most popular and most successful strategy (where success is measured in terms of a tenured position). It seems not unlikely that, as women become domesticated by academia, the door is being wedged tight, and the "strangers" may have to go. One optimistic possibility is, however, that as the European Union creates more possibilities for women to seek academic employment in other countries, the "double stranger" phenomenon can be exploited once more – hopefully at a lower price.



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