

## *Foremothers. First women translators in Poland*

### *Pramatki. Pierwsze kobiety tłumaczki w Polsce*

Karolina Dębska  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

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#### **Słowa kluczowe**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper offers a look at some of the earliest women who translated in Poland in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries– Anna of Austria, Zofia Bohowitynowa, Zofia Anna Bernitz-Bernardi, Anna Teresa Piotrkowczykowa, Konstancja Kerschenstein. Who were they? What did they translate? And why? A shortage of precise data makes them appear semi-legendary, but they are nevertheless interesting to consider as the mythical founding mothers of Polish woman-made translation.

#### **Abstrakt**

Niniejszy artykuł jest spojrzeniem na pierwsze kobiety, które w XVI i XVII wieku zajmowały się w Polsce tłumaczeniami (Anna z Austrii, Zofia Bohowitynowa, Zofia Anna Bernitz-Bernardi, Anna Teresa Piotrkowczykowa, Konstancja Kerschenstein). Kim były? Co tłumaczyły i dlaczego? Brak dokładnych danych sprawia, że traktowane są prawie jak legendy, niemniej jednak interesująco jest uważać je za mityczne matki-założycielki kobiecego, polskiego tłumaczenia.

KAROLINA DĘBSKA

## Foremothers. First women translators in Poland

Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth (2012: 8) state that women translators are even more invisible than men, because their invisibility is not only due to their profession but also their gender. We know less about them, there are fewer sources concerning them, and translation historians take them less eagerly as their subjects. Meanwhile, Western authors often emphasise the need for a genealogy (e.g. Flotov 1997), for learning about our mothers and establishing a link between them and us (Godayol 2011). The aim of this paper is therefore to identify the earliest women translators in Poland, to find out who they were, what they translated, and why.

The history of women translators in Poland is not long; the first ones appear only in the late-16<sup>th</sup> and early-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is little biographical information on them; their translations usually no longer exist and are only known from later reference, or were never recorded at all. However, since every genealogy needs a founding myth, it is worth focusing on the legendary foremothers at least to learn their names.

### 1. Background

Unlike in Western literature, there are no published sources on women translators in Poland, and it is difficult to compare the situation in Poland and in the West, where the first translating women appeared in the Middle Ages (Barratt 2008), and spread their wings in 17<sup>th</sup>-century salons (Delisle 2002). They were royals and aristocrats, but gradually, as women became better educated, also representatives of the lower classes (Barratt 2008). Various authors emphasise that they rarely published their translations (Krontiris 1997), and if they did, it was done anonymously (Agorni 2005; Delisle, Woodsworth 2012). In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance they mostly translated religious texts (Barratt 2008; Krontiris 1997), later mostly second-rate works from modern languages (Agorni 2005), while Greek and Latin were accessible only to daughters of clergymen (Brown 2005). Unsurprisingly, aristocrats mostly translated for pleasure (Barratt 2008), others predominantly for profit (Agorni 2005).

A useful source of background information concerns the general situation of Polish women at the time, which may suggest why they were so few and so late to take up intellectual activities: in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Poland there was very little to encourage women to exercise their mind; their legal and economic situation, lack of access to education and the predominant opinion

on their role as a mother and wife only discouraged them from intellectual efforts.

In their discussions of women's situation at the beginning of the modern times in Poland, Stanisław Roman (1962) and Maria Bogucka (2004) agree that any rights were only available to noblewomen and townswomen, and even in the privileged classes the situation of women was far from ideal and the rights they enjoyed were very few indeed. They had no civil rights, all public affairs could be settled only by male guardians; they did not inherit land and property, but were recompensed in cash; if they were noble, they managed their husbands' estates; if they were burghers, they worked in their fathers' or husbands' workshops, although they could not be members of guilds and own the workshops (the only exception were widows, who could take over their husbands' workshops after their death). However, the law is said to have been particularly liberal in the publishing industry: there were periods in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when the four major publishing houses in Kraków were run by women (Bogucka 2004: 50-51).

Education was rarely seen as a virtue in a woman. The noblewomen who were praised for their remarkable education usually learned in convent schools how to run a household, or in their family homes, often with foreign governesses. If they were lucky, they could learn along their brothers. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Galicia, 90% of magnate women and 50% of rich noblewomen knew how to read (Bogucka 2004: 128-129).

Polish cities boomed at the time: before the depression in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were moments when the share of literate women inhabitants in Kraków reached 36%<sup>1</sup> (in London at the time it was no higher than 20%) (Bogucka 2004: 128-129).

## 2. 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century women translators in Poland: Biographical sketches

Our heroines are five women whose names we know: Anne of Austria, Zofia Bohowitynowa, Zofia Anna Bernitz-Bernardi, Konstancja Kerschenstein, and Anna Teresa Piotrkowczykowa, and an anonymous group of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Carmelite nuns.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Given how multicultural Polish cities were at the time, it is tempting to assume their women inhabitants also knew foreign languages and were therefore potential translators. However, no precise data on any teaching programme for women in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Polish cities have been found, so all we can do at this point is speculate.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is unlikely that they were the only women translators active in the period. But they are the only ones I have been able to find in my bibliographical research.

Let us examine their short biographies before we move on to discuss their translations, or rather what is known of them.

### 2.1. Anne of Austria (1573–1598)

She was the daughter of Maria of Bavaria and Charles of Austria. In 1592 she married King Sigismund III and became the queen of Poland. Their marriage was said to be happy; they had four children, two of whom survived. She died in childbirth.

She grew up with many siblings in Graz, brought up by a strict and active mother who passed her fervent Catholicism on to her children. Since early childhood she was educated by monks, mostly Jesuits. She learned Latin, Spanish, and Italian very early, and once in Kraków, she did not take long to learn quite good Polish as well. She was not liked in Poland due to her German origins; she was nevertheless known for her modesty, relative accessibility, piety and charity. She was a skilled politician and the king is said to have asked her opinion often, but she did not voice her political views publicly.

As a teenager, she translated the life of Saint Ignatius from Latin into German (Rudzki 1990; Targosz 1998: 16).

### 2.2. Zofia Bohowitynowa née Czartoryska (ca 1580-ca 1603)

She was the daughter of Zofia Chodkiewicz and Michał Czartoryski, the starost of Żytomierz. She had several brothers. Before he died, her husband, Waclaw Bohowityn Szumbariski, governor of Volhynia, ensured her wealth in a contract. The widow paid off debtors and took over his fortune. She managed it well, and established a printing house specializing in Slavonic texts, which continued operating after her death. She was famous for her charity work. Authors praise her mind and education, and her piety without fanaticism.

She translated religious texts and fragments of the New Testament from ancient Greek into Slavonic. The only trace we have of them is in a mention by Kirill Stavrovyetskiy, a religious writer who admits having quoted from her texts at length, and in a Russian library catalogue (Jaszowski 1828; Par-tyka 1995; Siarczyński 1828: 38–39; Stecki 1871).

### 2.3. Zofia Anna Bernitz-Bernardi (1620–1675)

She was the daughter of a Silesian scholar, and her husband Marcin was a doctor and botanist of the king. She was Queen Marie Louise Gonzaga's lady-in-waiting, a polyglot, and her native tongue was German. She wrote Latin panegyrics. After her wedding she settled in Gdańsk, where her husband es-

tablished a botanical museum that she took over and ran after his death. Some of her writings were printed, others are only known from manuscripts.

She was an interpreter for both French queens on the Polish throne (Targosz 1997: 174–175; Wiśniewska 2003).

#### 2.4. Anna Teresa Piotrkowczykowa née Pernus (ca 1600–1672)

She was the daughter of a Kraków council member, Mikołaj Pernus, and in 1624 she married Andrzej Piotrkowczyk the younger, a doctor of law from the Kraków Academy, a council member, and the heir of a family printing house. She had six children.

After her husband's death in 1645, she took over the printing house and ran it very effectively. She was good at business: she often sued her dishonest business rivals, got rid of her legal guardians very soon after her husband's death, and took over the business. She published approximately 90 volumes, mostly religious, but also official documents and lay literature. In 1665 she left the printing house to her son and retired.

We do not know much of her education, but a 19<sup>th</sup> century anonymous author writes about Anna's mother-in-law, Jadwiga née Prężyna, who had got little education at home, that she owed her later enthusiasm for learning to the intellectual climate of her husband's printing house. Indeed, Jadwiga learned Latin so well that she is said to have written very good poems in it. We can assume that Anna's road to writing was similar, that she was self-taught, but also that her mother-in-law's example might have made her way easier and encouraged her to take up literary and translating work.

Except publishing, Piotrkowczykowa also authored the religious *Fawor miłości boskiej* (1663) that she dedicated to her daughters. It was published anonymously, but was attributed to her by Jan Sowiński. The book begins with a foreword to the reader in verse and in prose, and is accompanied by poems on the insignificance of human life. The same overly enthusiastic anonym says: "She is better than many others, even Mikołaj Rej" (J. 1821: 39, translation mine).

She is also the author of the Polish translation of the Jesuit Philippe Hanotel's Latin work *Ćwiczenie którym się wzbudzać mamy do miłości Boga dla nas ukrzyżowanego*, published in 1649 (J. 1821; Kamińska et al. no date; Ptak-Korbel and Wawrykiewicz 1981; Sowiński 1821: 28–31).

#### 2.5. Konstacja Kerschenstein née Czirenberg (1605–1653)

She was the daughter of Anna Kerl and Jan Czirenberg, the mayor of Gdańsk and a council member, the grand-daughter of Daniel Zirenberg, also

a mayor. Her whole family were Calvinist. In 1628 she married a much older and sick Zygmunt Kerchenstein, a rich and influential burgrave of Gdańsk. She had three children.

She is mostly known from the journal of Charles Ogier, the French ambassador, who praised not only her beauty, but also intelligence, education and talents. She spoke several languages, was very good at various crafts, played the organ and sang.

She translated the Swedish queen's letters for Ogier (Rowicki 2012; Sławoszewska 1966–1967; Targosz 1997: 430).

## 2.6. 17<sup>th</sup>-century Carmelite nuns

There are 17<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts in Carmelite nuns' collections that contain anonymous translations, paraphrases and texts inspired by Saint Theresa d'Avila's famous poem *I live without living in myself*. Given the motifs they have in common (which are often absent from the Spanish original), it is likely they were all inspired by one another rather than a direct translation of a foreign-language source.

Little is known of the authors. A foreign language source text might have been brought to Poland by the four founders of the Kraków Carmelite nunnery from their native Belgium. Also, one of the versions carries a note from sister Eufrozyna, but we do not know whether she was a copyist or a translator. Mirosława Hanusiewicz suggests she might have been the same sister Eufrozyna who died in Vilnius in 1648 and was a known author of religious poems.

The poems were probably created as a religious act, and Hanusiewicz concludes: "in the private and somehow intimate reading circle, as we can see in the Carmelite manuscripts, no literary attempt was considered embarrassing, each one was allowed" (2005: 255, translation mine) (Hanusiewicz 2005).

## 3. An attempt of generalisation

As we can see, the early women translators form an atypical group: the target language in relatively many of the translations is not Polish, which is probably due to the multicultural character of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Poland; the source languages are rarely modern European ones, unlike in most later woman-made translations; while the religious subject of most of the translation is not unexpected, the political-themed texts are only going to reappear in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The translators have very varied social backgrounds: from a queen to a townswoman, while only one hundred years later women translators are going to be exclusively aristocratic or at least rich and noble

(again, the cause seems obvious: the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century boom of Polish cities ended in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with the Swedish invasion).

In light of the poor situation of women in Poland, it is evident that they are remarkable: Bohowitynowa and Piotrkowczykowa both ran their business affairs very well, and easily took over control of their estates after their husbands' deaths. In Piotrkowczykowa's case, it may well have been the nature of her business that made it possible.

In the sources concerning the translators, the authors write very enthusiastically about their great education, but it is unclear whether it really reflects their actual knowledge or whether they were just more educated than most women. The latter seems more realistic, and given that women were usually taught housework in their convent schools, the exaggerated praises of the translators' education are put into perspective.

However, given the shares of literate women presented above, the fact alone that they could read placed them among the elite. What is more, in a situation where nothing encouraged women to use their minds, the translators' drive to intellectual work is also meaningful (after all, the aristocrats and the nuns translated with no commission but their internal need, and Piotrkowczykowa published her translation in her own publishing house).

The only spiritual experience available to women and the only occasion to get away from household duties was religion (Bogucka 2004: 53). It is therefore not surprising that most of the translators chose religious texts to translate (it is also consistent with studies of Western women translators): Anne of Austria translated the life of Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit order which had great influence over her whole family; Bohowitynowa chose commentaries of the Bible; Piotrkowczykowa – a spiritual text on the Passion of Christ. We can assume that the main motive driving their choice was deeply personal, a sign of their piety, an intellectual exercise.<sup>3</sup> Bohowitynowa's translations may have also had a more missionary character: she translated and published fragments of the Bible in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when her religion was making first steps.

The works of the other two translators were transient: Bernitz-Bernardi was an interpreter who worked at court and – according to Karolina Targosz (1997) – in situations where it was improper to ask for a male secretary's assistance; and Kerschenstein translated letters from the Swedish queen. Both works were probably commissioned, although we know nothing of their

<sup>3</sup> In the context of another 17<sup>th</sup>-century translator of religious texts, Ewa Kaczyńska (2014: 137-138) points out that given the great supply of religious texts in Poland at the time and the common knowledge of Latin, there were no *practical* reasons to translate such texts.

fees. It is probable that for Bernitz-Bernardi, interpreting was part of her lady-in-waiting duties.

It is difficult to speak of their professional prestige given that they have been largely forgotten: the nuns remain completely anonymous; Piotrkowczykowa's translation is often described as anonymous (e.g. in Kaczyńska 2014); Bohowitynowa's has been lost and is only known from later sources; others were either made for private use (Queen Anne's) or transient. However, the over-the-top praises of the translators' education show that their contemporaries saw their merits, even if it was the result of their uniqueness rather than actual professional achievements.

In Poland, over a century would have to pass before women translators stopped being individual cases, so it is impossible to find any traces of our heroines' contacts with each other or with other educated women; little is known also of their contacts with male translators, but some hints in their biographies suggest that they may have found models and support from people around them: Piotrkowczykowa's mother-in-law, Jadwiga, also found her place in history as a writer; Queen Anne must have found encouragement among her Jesuit guardians; Hanusiewicz (2005) emphasises the mutual encouragement among the nuns who translated Saint Theresa's poem; Targosz (1997) describes the intellectual atmosphere of the female court of the French queens of Poland. Still, we have to remember that at the time, nobody expected intellectual achievements from a woman, which probably explains the tone of surprise in the older sources describing how educated the described women were.

Sadly, there are no indications that they became role models for later women translator. After all, they have all been largely forgotten.

Finally, there are very few 17<sup>th</sup>-century women translators in Poland who are known by name, but it seems reasonable to assume that they may have been representatives of larger groups whose other members remain unnamed and their works unpublished. What is more, like in Western studies, we can probably assume that some groups were more prone to translate: royals or nuns, and a preliminary analysis seems to suggest members of publishers' families.

However, even as separate cases, just knowing the names of our foremothers is very heartening.

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