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Bitter oranges. Scenes from married life by Konstacja Rzewuska née Iwanowska

The novel I wanted to remind only causes problems. Its very title is enigmatic: *Youthful memories by Mr. K. Nehemar. First memory. Sylvia* – it says nothing about whether the text is a published diary, fiction written to look like a diary, or romance. The authorship is as unclear. K. Nehemar is obviously a nom de plume. However, whether the real author was Dionizja Poniatowska (according to *Estreicher's Bibliography*), or her younger sister, Konstacja Rzewuska (according to the *New Korbut*), cannot be said for sure. Analysing further output of both sisters contributes little because of scarce preserved material, which is too far in style from *Youthful memories*. It is of course possible that both sisters collaborated on the novel. Some biographic hints, stylistic looseness and incohesive narration suggest that the idea and outline of first volume might have come from Dionizja. The second, which concentrates on the protagonist's unhappy marriage, might have been added by Konstacja. Anyway, the fact is that the novel was „published by the author” in Lviv in 1874, six years after Dionizja's death, and therefore, with regard to all other mentioned doubts, authorship is now attributed to Konstacja Rzewuska.

It should be said clearly that *Youthful recollections* are not an outstanding work. For a modern reader the novel is annoying, perplexing, but also intriguing in a way. It is not well written, pretentious, psychologically naive, however, by showing intimate family life of wealthy Volhynian landowners and a specific aspect of so-called „women's question”, it remains a unique testimony of its time.

The plot is set in an idyllic summer resort near Odesa, the protagonists are wealthy nobles from Volhynia, but the most important topic is devaluation of the idea of marriage as a lived experience and diagnosis of modern family's dysfunction. The plot is in fact rather banal: two young maidens, suitors, young love, great hopes and bitter disappointments. Sylvia manages to avoid a poorly promising marriage. The destiny of the second protagonist, Olesia, is decided by her father and she will experience the hell of marriage to a husband she doesn't love. Her fate will be humiliation, moral extortion, physical violence. Predictable, idealistic profiles of both protagonists stand in contrast to their desperate struggle and feeling of being stuck in a fate which cannot be avoided – their stories are exact replicas of the stories of their mothers. For each one of them marriage becomes first a disappointment, then an emotional defeat, and finally an existential disaster. And it's not simply about sad stories of marital

conflicts and illusions grown on sentimental novels being broken, it's about domestic violence, financial exploitation and women's helplessness before the law, which, by giving the father full power over his children, robs women of all agency.

A figurative portent of the true topic of the novel is a symbolic scene in which gifts are offered to the maidens. A wish to have „each of the gentlemen bring something from the sea” is made true in a very particular way. The gentlemen bring a basket of oranges, fished out from the sea – they were being transported by a ship which was wrecked on the rocks. In 19th-century culture an orange is a symbol of fertility and passion, orange blossoms, an inseparable part of wedding dresses, stood for virginal waiting for love and submission to the husband. Yet in this scene oranges, bitter from seawater, become an ominous symbol of destiny, a sign of disappointment and disillusionment. The spellbinding image of „hundreds and thousands” of oranges, floating on the surface, exposes the deception of maiden hopes, a promise of sweet marital happiness turns into an experience of bitter women's fate.

The plot begins in a summer resort near Odesa, a perfect place for a sentimental romance. However, happiness is absent from this world. Young ladies and gentlemen carefully orchestrate the appearance of an idyll – they read about love, dream of it and try to behave, think and speak as shown in trendy romance novels. However, it doesn't take much to shake this fragile order. It is enough to send the young men to Odesa, where sentimental pageboys turn into cynical lechers. The fictional character of meticulously created unity of young lovers' world is exposed by one of the women:

- Do you really believe, Sir, that we, young girls, don't see, don't feel, don't hear and don't know what's happening in our families, that we don't cry over the tears of our mothers? (...) It seems like a secret to you. You think that God and people see nothing, because you are trying to show yourselves as different from how you really are (...). Yes, it may be a secret to the lounge, but you forget that your real life is known outside the lounge. Oh! one woman knows it from another, even if you expect your victims to stay silent, but you forget how soon enough is enough, where there is no respect, and that they will reveal the wicked truth to both people and God.

Olesia's emotional tirade exposes the universal awareness of the hypocrisy or premarital rituals and disenchants the fairy tale of happiness awaiting young lovers in marriage, it also smashes the myth of young women's naivety. Young women in the novel carefully observe the surrounding world and learn about their own inevitable fate from the stories of other women, their mothers, cousins and neighbours:

Never expect a young girl to be happy. Her first years are a preparation for the second act, much worse, because they are robbed of motherly care, the only happiness in this world, which the husband tries to steal from them as soon as he can, but what will he give in return?

The climax of the novel – Sylvia's broken engagement and the beginning of Olesia's marital ordeal – is also the point at which the plot loses its pace. The plot turns into a tiring enumeration of male offences, a kind of catalogue of 19th-century misandry. It includes complaints of men's selfishness, immaturity and lack of empathy. It rebels against the cult of masculinity, which gives bachelors permission to „sow their wild oats” before marriage and thus foils any attempt to keep later family fathers from gambling and drinking sprees. Repeated complaints about husband's friends can be read as refusal to accept social isolation of women, locked in their homes, but also as a recognition of progressive disintegration of intimacy and trust, which were supposed to be the foundation of marriage.

Rzewuska, in her accusatory passion, has no scruples about breaking the taboo, and exposes stories of physical and mental violence against wives, instrumental treatment of children, which become hostages in conflicts between their parents, even sexual perversions:

This gentleman (...) wanted me to find and recruit girls for him, aged from eight, ten, to fifteen years, supposedly as house servants, in order to deceive my mistress and deprave these poor girls, seemingly keeping watch on their good conduct, until I offer them to him.

Rzewuska tells a story of a ruthless battle of the sexes, hidden in the privacy of households. The pages are filled with episodes of this war, as told by women – usually silent victims of a world designed for men:

A man is a woman's inherent enemy, he will deny her even the right to humanity as much as he can. (...) He is happy to only see her as a servant, a slave, a toy, often without regard for her life, never caring about her dignity, her feelings and sufferings.

Youthful memories are astonishing in their accumulation of anger, extreme emotions, but also helplessness and, in a way, lack of conclusion. Rzewuska doesn't offer any social diagnoses, doesn't openly reject patriarchal oppression or redefine women's roles. Her diagnoses of the crisis of institution of marriage, recognition of effective decay of the traditional family model and desperate ascertainment of the gaping chasm between romantic ideals and reality are reduced to pointing out men as the guilty party and descriptions of religious ardour as women's reaction to a reality which can't be accepted. Her findings could be travestied by saying that men are sinners, and then they „take revenge” on women for their higher spiritual maturity. Men portrayed by Rzewuska cannot rise to the role of fathers and guardians anymore, but they also fall short of the modern ideal of romantic lover and friend.

In this world, women are both missionaries and martyrs. Missionaries – because Rzewuska sees their activities as a kind of evangelic mission, and martyrs – because their fates effectively appear as a sacrifice for the common good.

Will all her radicalism, Rzewuska declares that she doesn't want to contest the God-given order. Yet the paradox is that, the more she speaks of her respect for tradition, the more she exposes its dysfunctionality. In this novel all attempts to update old rules and appeal to traditional „safety fuses” meant to guarantee the durability of marriage turn out to have no effect anymore. „When you marry, you will love each other” - this naive declaration of Olesia's father is meant to break her resistance. Tradition is supposed to protect women and, if the „sentimental model” fails, guarantee her the stable happiness of family life, as it always was. It is supposed to guarantee, but, as Rzewuska shows, it doesn't guarantee anything anymore. The modern woman has no model to look up to – the tradition of Polish noble household is now a void myth. Young girls in Rzewuska's novel see a reflection of themselves in their mothers' stories and, instead of consolation, they only find a confirmation that a marital disaster is inevitable. The author sees all this interdependence, states it as a fact, and deperately repeats her trust in the everlasting, sanctioned by religion and tradition, ideal of relationship between a woman and a man. This intellectual helplessness becomes most apparent in the finale, which is marked by Olesia's death, Sylvia's rejection of marriage, and religious reformation of men, who are „sentenced” by the author to penance for their sins in a theological seminary.

Konstancja Rzewuska's older sister, Dionizja Poniatowska, is remembered in the history of Polish literature as inspiration for works of Zygmunt Krasiński and Józef Bohdan Zaleski. As a victim of tuberculosis, marked by melancholy, she was a perfect embodiment of 19th-century angelic femininity. Neither the Poniatowski family, nor readers of Zaleski wanted to probe the character of relationship between the poet and his muse. Nobody asked about Dionizja's family life, although it was widely known that the only bond between them was the prenuptial contract. The silent drama of this woman, who in moments of despair would call herself „a deep grave”, went forgotten.

The story of Konstancja Rzewuska, as protagonist of a famous scandal, stands in marked contrast. According to Tadeusz Bobrowski, the story of her marriage was followed with immense interest for years in all Volhynia. And it was indeed a turbulent story with multiple twists. What started out as a perfect marriage of miss Konstancja's impressive dowry and count Rzewuski's great family connections, soon turned into a story of neverending

domestic rows. As Bobrowski wrote, „Rzewuski was violent to his wife, and since she was hotheaded herself, they kept fighting and reconciling, parting ways and returning, kidnapping their children from each other – and the lady repaid her husband for her suffering in any way she could”. The war between Mr. and Mrs. Rzewuski was, for a time, the favourite topic of Volhynian gossip.

The story of this forgotten novel makes a strange loop here. Literary stories of arranged marriages have their prototypes in real life, gossip of old memoirists shows similarities between fiction and the true stories of Iwanowska sisters. If we are to trust Bobrowski, both women were heartbroken as they married, each, in her own way, had to deal with everyday life with a man she didn't love.

Obviously such a twist of literature and real life is nothing new. But in this case, it seems that *Youthful memories* are not merely fictionalised memoir, but also an intrigue, with control over public image at stake. Sylvia, as literary (self-?) portrait of Dionizja, was meant to preserve her intellectual and spiritual image, while Olesia became a „tool”, with which Konstancja – protagonist of a scandal, humiliated by her husband and ridiculed by gossipy public opinion, was trying to push her version of the story. Rzewuska turned a personal story into a tale of female sacrifice, domestic drama and an effort to carve out a space of women's freedom. She used literature as a tool in this struggle, however, she distances herself from ironic Balzac and „immoral” Sand, visibly inspired by works of countess Ida von Hahn-Hahn, particularly her novel *Doralisa*,

A choice of „German Mrs. Sand”, as the countess was called, as her guide through the world of women's literature, was a meaningful gesture – it would free Rzewuska from associations with scandal and provocation which Sand stood for, and allow the plot to make ambitious „detours” towards philosophy and morality. A sarcastic contemporary reviewer wrote of *Doralisa*: „What is it? Romance or theology? A novel or matins?”. His irritation only confirms that Rzewuska's intention was to look for a new form for a story about women's experience, something different from the conventional model of romance. Among conservative Polish nobility the popularity of Ida von Hahn-Hahn, who was perceived as *la grande dame*, writer, moralist and thinker, created a chance for avoiding a simplistic association between women's emancipation and outright rejection of tradition. In fact if we look closely at Hahn's biography, it is not so different from that of Sand (divorce, a long unofficial relationship and writing career), but two aspects seem the crucial ones: her famous conversion to Catholicism and knowingly emphasised elitism, which made her so popular among European aristocracy. It isn't entirely accurate to say that Ida von Hahn-Hahn was

perceived as an alternative to George Sand, rather than a conservative retelling of her biography made her more acceptable in conservative circles.

An inspiration with *Doralisa. Family picture from our times* allowed Rzewuska to tell the story of her marital conflict from the perspective of the usually silent victim. Moreover, it also allowed her to change the standing of this voice – it is now no longer a weeping or lament, but a kind of philosophical, moral reflection, developed into a novel and reinforced by the authority of Ida von Hahn-Hahn's moral pronouncements, which gives the female experience a universal perspective. Konstancja Rzewuska's *Youthful memories* – a weak, poorly written novel, thus became not merely a text of private history, but also a forgotten trace of the unobvious paths in history of emancipation, and an intriguing addendum to the reception of George Sand, who found both an unexpected rival and an ally in Ida von Hahn-

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