

# OUTSTANDING *Polish Women*





# MARIA Sklodowska -Curie

**Physicist and chemist. The first and only woman in the world to receive the Nobel Prize twice, as well as the only scientist honored in two different fields of the natural sciences.**

She was recognized as one of the greatest scientists of all time by the British weekly New Scientist. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maria Skłodowska-Curie was the only woman invited to participate in the Solvay Conferences, which gathered the most eminent physicists and chemists of their time – including celebrities such as Albert Einstein or Max Planck. She was friends with Einstein and several times went hiking with him in the Swiss Alps. ‘Marie Curie is, of all celebrated beings, the only one whom fame has not corrupted’, he would later remark.

She was born in Warsaw in 1867. At that time, in Poland, which was then partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria, women were not allowed to study. The only chance to make her scientific dreams come true was a costly move to Paris. She therefore made a contract with her older sister: Bronisława went first to study in Paris, while Maria worked as a governess to support her financially. Later, they switched roles, which allowed Maria to start her education at the Sorbonne. There she studied mathematics and physics; in the latter subject, she was the first woman graduate in the Sorbonne’s history. She gained recognition in academic circles and opportunities to work with the best scientists. In Paris, she also met her future husband – Pierre Curie. They went cycling on their honeymoon, breaking the conventions of the era.

Together with Pierre and Henri Becquerel, in 1903 she won the Nobel Prize in Physics for her research on the phenomenon of radioactivity discovered by Becquerel. She received a second prize in 1911

in chemistry for discovering the new elements polonium (Po) and radium (Ra), isolating pure radium and studying the chemical properties of radioactive elements. Her discoveries have become a breakthrough in the fight against cancer.

Maria was the first female professor at the Sorbonne. She believed that the pedagogical methods used at the time did not serve child development, so together with her friends she established a school for faculty children with classes held in the Sorbonne building. During World War I, she became one of the first women to obtain a driving license so she could help soldiers at the front. She constructed special miniature X-ray machines for use in field hospitals, delivering them personally with her daughter and military doctors. By allowing the rapid and precise identification of shell and bullet fragments, these X-ray images saved thousands of soldiers from having their arms or legs amputated.

She died in 1934 of leukemia, caused by prolonged radiation exposure during her research. She rests in the Paris Pantheon as the first and only woman honoured in this way for scientific achievement. She is also the only non-French woman to be buried there.





# IRENA Sendler

**A social activist, recognized by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, who during World War II saved approximately 2,500 Jewish children.**

She was born in 1910 in Warsaw. As a little girl, she learned the Yiddish language while spending time in the company of Jewish patients at her father's tuberculosis sanatorium. It was her father who instilled in Irena the idea that 'if you see a person drowning, you must jump into the water to save them'. This precept guided her for the rest of her life. She studied Polish Literature at the University of Warsaw. Before the war, she started working at the city of Warsaw's Social Welfare Department, where she got to know the problems of single mothers, the unemployed, and the homeless.

She married Andrzej Sendler, who was captured by the Germans during the September 1939 campaign and remained in a POW camp until the end of the war. During World War II, in 1940, when the Jewish ghetto was established in German-occupied Warsaw, Irena became involved in helping Jewish families save their children. She managed to obtain for herself and her friend employee identity cards as sanitation workers fighting infectious diseases, which gained them access to the closed ghetto district. She supplied Jewish children with new Polish identities and smuggled them into Polish shelters and families. These family partings were emotionally painful with no guarantee that they would end well. The children were packed in boxes and bags and driven out of the ghetto in Municipal Sanitary Company ambulances; infants were drugged so they would sleep. The many ways children were smuggled out included hiding them in trams or fire trucks that passed through the ghetto or using underground tunnels knocked through the basement walls of houses next to buildings on the 'Aryan' side.

Irena Sendler and her colleagues also helped adults escape from the ghetto. In 1943, she became one of the main activists of the children's section of the Council for Aid to Jews (Żegota) – a Polish humanitarian underground organization that was an official organ of the Polish government in exile. In the same year, she was arrested by the Gestapo, but Żegota managed to free her.

She wrote down all the new and original names of the children she rescued on sheets of paper, which she rolled up and hid, among other places, in jars buried in a garden. It is estimated that she saved 2,500 Jewish children.

In 1965, Irena Sendler was awarded the medal of the Righteous Among the Nations. She was also nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize.

She died in 2008.





# OLGA Boznańska

**A prize-winning artist recognised by the Berlin magazine Bazaar as one of the 12 best painters in Europe.**

It was said of her that she didn't paint the eyes but expressions; not lips but a smile or a sob. She could detect the inner anxieties of her subjects and depict spirituality in a human palm. Her most famous painting, 'Girl with Chrysanthemums' (1894), fascinated contemporary critics and was described as so enigmatic that those who gazed at it for too long risked madness.

She was born in 1865 in Cracow. From an early age, she was passionate about the visual arts and her artistic talent was quickly discovered. Her parents were determined that she receives the best education. She took private lessons with the best artists in Cracow and attended many courses. In order to develop her technique, she went to Munich in 1886 to study art. As a woman, she was not allowed to enter the Academy of Fine Arts and was forced to study privately. Later on, she stated that it was Munich where she learned how to paint properly. The 'Portrait of Paul Nauen' (1893), a breakthrough in her career, was painted there. With this piece she demonstrated both technical mastery and extraordinary sensitivity. This painting heralded her great talent and opened the door to the international art community.

By 1898, when she moved to Paris, she was already working as a mature artist in her own style. Her career took off and she gained widespread recognition, including numerous awards and shows in Europe and the United States. At one exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1912, she represented France along with Claude Monet and August Renoir. Her art was subtle, mysterious and moody. Critics sometimes accused her works of being sad, but the artist replied that her paintings could not be different from herself. She was a born loner. Her studio was not just

a workplace but her refuge from the outside world. Painting meant everything to her and she devoted herself to it completely. She worked meticulously and very slowly, which forced her models to hold uncomfortable poses for hours at a time.

She looked for subjects in her immediate surroundings. Boznańska's thematic repertoire included still lifes, interiors and landscapes, but in her art the portrait reigned supreme. Her colour palette was restricted to dark tones, dominated by browns, greens, greys and black, with white and pink accents. She achieved unusual chromatic harmonies by applying small dots of colour. Like no one else, she was able to reveal individual personality through portraits. She always wanted to capture the truth about the model, which is why she shunned embellishment. She focused primarily on the eyes, believing that they embodied the essence of each person.

She was called a painter of silence. Of her own work she said: "My paintings look great because they are true and honest as God's creation; there is no pettiness, no affectedness, no blather. They are quiet and alive as if a slight veil separated them from the viewer. They are in their own atmosphere."

Her old age was marked by declining health and financial problems. She died in Paris in 1940.





# WISŁAWA Szymborska

**The ninth woman in the world and the first Polish woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The inventor of new literary genres based on humour, irony and grotesque.**

The Nobel Committee awarded Wisława Szymborska the Nobel Prize 'for poetry which, with ironic precision, allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality'. Her work exudes wisdom, brilliance and a unique sense of humour. She didn't like pathos. She used to say: 'Whenever I write, I feel as if someone was standing behind me and making clownish faces. That is why I am very careful and avoid big words as much as I can'.

She was born in 1923 in Prowent, Poland. Her poetic talent revealed itself in her early childhood. At that time, her father used to offer her a small coin for humorous short verses – on the condition that they were genuinely funny. During World War II, she attended clandestine classes and worked for the railroad to avoid transportation to the Nazi Germany. After the war, she began studying Polish literature at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, but after a few terms she switched to sociology. For financial reasons, she quit her studies without a degree, though she was an active member of Cracow literary society. Her first poem was published in 1945, and her debut volume of poetry, 'Why We Live', in 1952. Since that time, her life was an uninterrupted burst of creativity. In poetry, she most valued elevating the everyday to the extraordinary.

She worked with many newspapers and magazines. She was prolific, but not all of her writing was published. Besides belonging to the Polish Writers' Union and Pen Club, she was also an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Not just a poet, she was also a literary critic, essayist and translator of French Baroque poetry.

A sense of humor accompanied her in everyday life and manifested itself in her famous passion for creating collages, which she mailed as postcards to friends and acquaintances. She used newspaper clippings – both photos and texts – to create extraordinary minimalist compositions. These collages, each composed for a specific addressee, were characterized by a surreal sense of humor and apt punch lines.

She died in 2012. When the poet's funeral began at the Rakowicki Cemetery in Krakow, instead of the traditional bugle call that resounds every day at noon from St. Mary's Tower, the trumpeter played a melody composed for Szymborska's poem „Nothing happens twice”.

Nothing can ever happen twice.  
In consequence, the sorry fact is  
that we arrive here improvised  
and leave without the chance to practice.

Even if there is no one dumber,  
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,  
you can't repeat the class in summer:  
this course is only offered once.

No day copies yesterday,  
no two nights will teach what bliss is  
in precisely the same way,  
with precisely the same kisses.

One day, perhaps some idle tongue  
mentions your name by accident:  
I feel as if a rose were flung  
into the room, all hue and scent.

The next day, though you're here with me,  
I can't help looking at the clock:  
A rose? A rose? What could that be?  
Is that a flower of a rock?

Why do we treat the fleeting day  
with so much needless fear and sorrow?  
It's in its nature not to say  
Today is always gone tomorrow

With smiles and kisses, we prefer  
to seek accord beneath our star,  
although we're different (we concur)  
just as two drops of water are.





# KRYSTYNA *Chojnowska- Liškiewicz*

**The first woman to sail around the world solo. Sailor, traveller, and naval architect. Often referred to as 'the first lady of the oceans'.**

She remembered her circumnavigation not only as an interesting chapter in her life, but also for its punishing days of hard physical labour. Despite many difficult and stressful situations, which including losing radio contact, suffering an attack of kidney stones, or wrestling with a 90 kg raft during a storm, she cherished fond memories of the beautiful landscape of Tahiti, the people encountered during her voyage, the pods of dolphins that often accompanied her boat, and the breakfasts of flying fish that jumped on board.

She had no fear about her solitary voyage. As she explained later, she didn't have enough imagination to visualize what might happen to her during the cruise, so she remained calm. This peace of mind, however, owes more to careful preparation, though she later lamented failing to acquire the acrobatic and skating skills required to navigate the wet and slippery deck of a heaving yacht.

She departed the port of Las Palmas in the Canary Islands on March 28, 1976. She followed a course across the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal, across the Pacific Ocean, then around Australia and Africa. Two years and many adventures later, on March 20, 1978, Chojnowska-Liškiewicz completed her circumnavigation of Earth near Cape Verde, having sailed 28,696 nautical miles alone. Her achievement was listed in the Guinness Book of Records.

She was born in 1936 in Warsaw. The experiences of World War II eventually brought her family to Ostróda. In this small Masurian town, little Krystyna discovered Poland's great lakes and learned how to sail. She channeled her passion for sailing into studies at the Gdańsk University of Technology's Shipbuilding Faculty. When asked about the reasons for choosing such an unusual specialization for a woman, she replied: 'I was good at mathematics and physics and I liked ships'. At university, she met her future husband – the outstanding boatwright and designer, Waclaw Liškiewicz. It was he who designed the Mazurek, the 31-foot sloop which Krystyna sailed around the world.

After graduation, she got a job at the Gdańsk Shipyard, where she worked on ship design and construction. She obtained competency certificates as a day skipper, a coastal skipper and, in 1966, a Master Mariner. Before the journey of her life, she made many shorter, but still ambitious cruises. It was this educational background and experience that led the Polish Sailing Association to select her in 1975 for the single-handed voyage around the world.

Does she have any regrets? She never had an opportunity for space travel, which is the only thing that she envies future generations.





# WANDA Rutkiewicz

**The first woman to reach the summit of the most dangerous mountain in the world – K2. The first European woman to conquer Mount Everest. One of the greatest climbers in history.**

At the top of Mount Everest she left a small stone brought from Poland. The day she stood on the roof of the world – October 16, 1978 – was exactly the same date cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope John Paul II. 'The good Lord wanted us to ascend so high on the same day. Both of us as the first Poles', the new pope said when he heard about his compatriot's achievement.

After returning from the expedition, Rutkowska said: 'As I approached the summit, I had to cover the last 50 meters without oxygen, because my intake valve had frozen shut. So I took the mask off and walked the last few meters breathing the outside air. I was in such a state of euphoria over these final meters that I went to the top at the same pace as with oxygen'.

She loved challenges. She was confident and feisty. But also stubborn.

She was born in 1943 to a Polish family in Plungiany, a small town near Kłajpeda, Lithuania. After World War II, she moved with her parents to Wrocław. Her love for the mountains grew slowly. After graduating from high school, she went with her friends to Morskie Oko in the Tatra Mountains. While sitting on the shore of Poland's loveliest alpine lake, she was struck by the thought that the landscape was so beautiful she would like to stay forever. She was truly bitten by the mountain bug a little later, however, when she went rock climbing in the Sokole Mountains near Jelenia Góra.

She graduated from the Wrocław University of Technology and became an electronics engineer. Her first job was at the Automated Power Systems

Institute in Wrocław; then, after moving to Warsaw, she was employed at the Institute of Mathematical Machines. Every holiday she devoted entirely to climbing. Sunbathing on a beach, she claimed, would be too tiring.

At the beginning of her alpine career, Himalayan specialists claimed that women were not suited to high-altitude climbing. Rutkiewicz broke this stereotype. In 1986, she became the first woman in the world to climb K2, one of the most dangerous mountains in the world.

She wanted to conquer all 14 of the world's 8,000-meter peaks („eight-thousanders”), following in the footsteps of Reinhold Messner and Jerzy Kukuczka. She called the project her 'caravan to dreams'. In the end, she climbed eight of them. Apart from Mount Everest and K2, she summited Nanga Parbat, Shishapangma, Gasherbrum II, Gasherbrum I, Cho Oyu and Annapurna I. She often climbed alone, taking difficult routes and eschewing oxygen.

She organised or co-organised women's expeditions in the Alps and Himalayas. She recorded her achievements and thoughts in articles for climbing magazines. She was also the author of several books and films on climbing.

She perished on the way to the summit of Kangchenjunga (8586 m) on May 13, 1992, at the age of 49.

She became a legend of Polish and world Himalayism.





# ANNA Walentynowicz

**A legendary figure of 'Solidarity' – the socio-political movement that initiated the fall of communism in Europe. One of the 100 women who defined the last century, according to the American newsweekly Time.**

She worked hard her whole life, which made her particularly sensitive to the mistreatment of others. She always bravely stood up against various injustices, which earned her the respect and admiration of ordinary people, but also made her an object of persecution by the communist authorities. She was frequently arrested, interrogated, interned and imprisoned. She always remained true to her ideals, believing that 'Poles might sometimes be poor, but they should never be intimidated'.

She was born in 1929 in the village of Sienne. In 1945, she moved to Gdańsk, where she would spend the rest of her life. At 21 she went to work as a welder at the Gdańsk Shipyard. At the time, welding was physically the hardest and most hazardous of all shipbuilding jobs. Despite these conditions, Anna worked tirelessly for 12 or more hours a day until health problems forced her to slow down. Then she retrained as an overhead crane operator.

From 1978, she was an active member of the Free Trade Unions, an illegal organization formed in opposition to the communist authorities. She was one of the leaders of the new organization, even letting her apartment be used as a contact point. This activity caused the most severe harassment from the secret police – including temporary detentions, searches, threats of dismissal, and even attempted murder.

On August 8, 1980, five months before she was due to retire, Anna Walentynowicz was dismissed for indiscipline. Her union associates used this injustice as the pretext for an organized protest against the communist authorities. The demand to reinstate Walentynowicz became the first of the Gdańsk Shipyard workers' legendary 21 demands in what

became the most important strike in modern Polish history, a strike that hastened the fall of communism a decade later. The protest wave that Walentynowicz's dismissal started gave rise to 'Solidarity', which in turn led to the democratic changes in Poland and then throughout Europe in 1989.

After the birth of 'Solidarity', she played an active role in the movement, constantly incurring the authorities' hostility by protesting against their various abuses.

Her life has been the subject of news reports, books, plays and films. Among her numerous honours and decorations, she received Poland's highest state distinction, the Order of the White Eagle, for 'acting to bring about democratic change and win freedom for Poland.'

She died in a plane crash in Smolensk, Russia, on April 10, 2010, while participating in a state delegation, headed by President Lech Kaczyński and his wife, to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyń massacre – the mass execution of Polish officers by the Soviets in the Katyń forest in 1940.





# MARIA Siemionow

**A distinguished surgical pioneer who performed the first full face transplant in the United States.**

'If you have dreams, you have to be stubborn, and then you can achieve something. Nothing happens overnight,' says Professor Maria Siemionow. Through a lifetime of perseverance and hard work, she overcame challenges that sometimes seemed impossible to handle. Preparing for one of the world's first near-total face transplants took her 20 years.

She was born in 1950 in Krotoszyn, Poland. She graduated from the Poznan University of Medical Sciences with a specialization in orthopedics and trauma surgery, and a particular interest in microsurgery. Medicine was a natural choice for Siemionow, because she liked helping people. In 1985, she travelled to the United States, to Louisville, Kentucky, which at the time was home to the world's best-known for hand surgery and microsurgery. Kentucky was then undergoing a rapid transition from a predominantly farm-based economy to manufacturing, which posed risks for inexperienced machine operators. Fingers, hands, feet, and even legs were sometimes cut off, and Professor Siemionow sewed them back on.

During her travels for the Physicians for Peace medical training programme, Professor Siemionow treated children with hand and face burns in Turkey and Mexico. But conventional skin grafts were not enough to reconstruct a face. 'I think that was the moment I subconsciously started to look for a way of helping those children doomed to a life without a face,' she recalls.

As a professor of plastic surgery, she began to conduct scientific and clinical research on transplants. These studies laid the groundwork for future facial transplants by Professor Siemionow's research and surgical team and those at many other medical centers. Such operations required not only medical knowledge but also the ability to organize clinical logistics and to assemble and manage a group of talented surgeons, making them set aside individual ambitions to work together as a team.

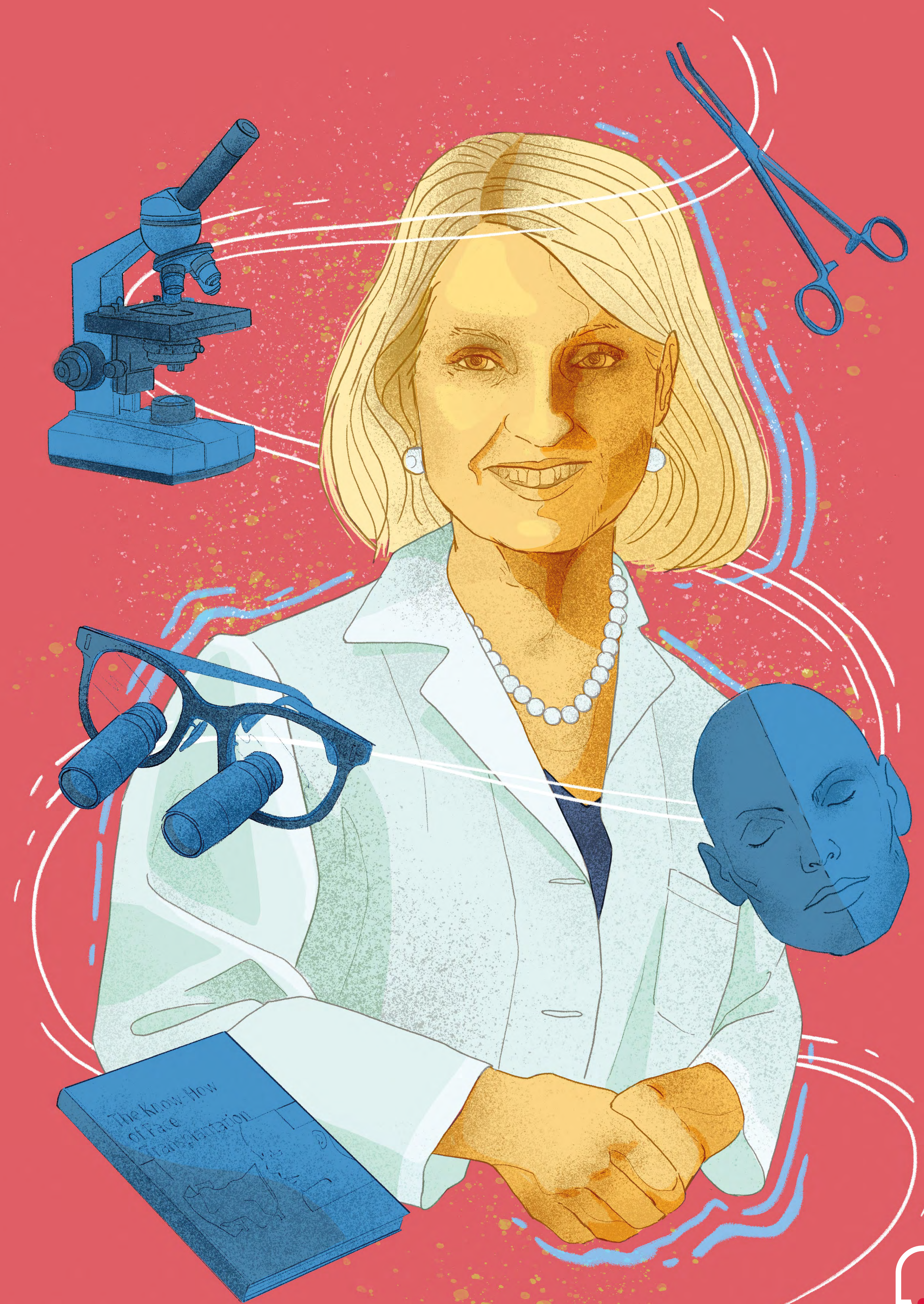
In 2008, in Cleveland, a team of doctors led by Maria Siemionow replaced 80% of the face of female gunshot victim during a 22-hour operation. It was the most extensive face transplant to date, requiring connecting numerous

bones, muscles, nerves and blood vessels. The patient's jaw and palate, upper lip, cheeks, nose and lower eyelids were completely rebuilt, allowing her to recover the senses of taste and smell along with the ability to breathe, speak and eat independently.

Only about 40 patients around the world have had a face transplant. Professor Siemionow has performed three of these surgeries. In 2014, she led a unique procedure in which she replaced all the skin and hair on a man's head, including the eyebrows, eyelashes and all facial muscles. Her most recent transplant of this type, enabling the restoration of all facial functions, was performed in May 2017. The patient, at less than 20 years old, was the youngest person in the world to undergo such a procedure.

Today Professor Siemionow is the head of microsurgical research at the University of Illinois in Chicago. For 20 years she has been doing pioneering research on chimeric cells (composed of material from both the organ donor and the recipient) with the potential to revolutionize transplantology and help fight many often incurable diseases. Chimeric cells do not require immunosuppressive drugs, which may degrade the body's ability to fight disease and lead to cancer. Professor Siemionow has developed several novel therapies in this field for previously untreatable diseases such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy and sarcopenia.

Professor Siemionow's research has been published in hundreds of books, textbooks and scientific articles. She has been awarded one of Poland's highest decorations: the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. She often visits Poland and helps medical students to apply for internships in the U.S. She says: 'Books and medals will outlast us, but most important is what remains in the minds of the young people we have inspired, because this will be passed down from generation to generation.'





# OLGA Tokarczuk

**An outstanding prose writer and essayist. Winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature and The 2018 Man Booker International Prize for the novel *Flights*. A lover of nature, animals and other people.**

In Olga Tokarczuk's books, objective and imaginary realities intertwine and are equally true. Yet the fictions she creates do not come out of the blue, because they must be felt and found within herself. The Swedish Academy of Sciences honored her for 'a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life.'

She began writing as an adolescent. Nevertheless, before fully devoting herself to a literary career, she held multiple jobs – even working as a maid in a London hotel. When accepting the Booker Award, she wore earrings that she had bought with wages earned in England 31 years earlier. 'When I heard the jury's verdict and did not really know what to say, these earrings came to mind. Their story somehow completed my story as a writer. And we all like such completed stories, because they give us a sense of meaning and fulfillment.'

The Booker Award did not complete Tokarczuk's story as a writer, however. The Nobel Prize was in the air. News that she had won the award caught her on a German highway, in the midst of a tour to promote the German-language edition of *The Books of Jacob*. Completely surprised, she said she knew her writing was good but did not realise it was of Nobel quality.

She was born in 1962 in Sulechów. Her parents worked as teachers – her mother taught Polish language and literature, while her father worked in a library. She seemed destined to be a writer. However, she did not choose to study Polish literature, graduating instead with a degree in psychology from Warsaw University. As she says: 'I was fascinated by everything that was peripheral, eccentric and abnormal, any disorders, diseases, anything that challenged the so-called norm.' Moved by a desire to rescue people from the chaos of delusions, she worked in a psychiatric hospital and a mental health clinic. This experience, combined with the knowledge she gained during her studies, taught her to listen to people and

better understand the human psyche in all its complexity. Thanks to this, her fictional characters are authentic and internally convincing.

She is against classifying authors by literary genre, a practice that she believes limits creativity and strips it of personal eccentricities. In her literary oeuvre, one can find parables, historical and crime novels, mythographic prose, essays, short stories, hybrid texts and even a psychological study of travel. Her work is full of contexts and references – to history, religion, mythology and nature. At heart, however, it is a deep spiritual reflection on the condition of modern man. She claims to write in order to disturb people a little – to make them question things that seemed obvious to them before. She considers the Polish language as a helpful instrument in her writing. According to Tokarczuk, it is one of the meatiest and most expressive languages for difficult subjects, friendly to those who have vision and know what they want to write.

Some of her books have been adapted for the stage and screen. The novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* was the basis for Agnieszka Holland's 2017 film 'Spoor', with a screenplay written by Tokarczuk herself. The novel was included in *The Guardian's* 100 best books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century list, and was described by the newspaper as 'an astonishing amalgam of murder mystery, dark feminist comedy...and a primer on the politics of vegetarianism.'

Tokarczuk is a vegetarian, ecologist, feminist and social activist. She lives in Wrocław, which allowed any passenger on public transport carrying one of her books to travel for free after she received the Nobel Prize.

She rarely speaks about her private life, preferring her books to speak for her. They have been translated into 37 languages by 94 translators.





# POLISH SUFFRAGISTS

## *The first female Members of the Polish Parliament*

Polish women were among Europe's first to gain electoral rights. They came from various backgrounds, differed in education, experience and political views, but shared one goal – to win equal rights for women and end their banishment to the margins of public life.

The women's emancipation movement in Poland reached back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but grew stronger at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Polish women, like their sisters around the world, demanded voting rights, access to education and skilled professions, as well as financial independence. However, their situation was even more complicated by Poland's subjugation and division between Prussian, Russian and Austrian partitions. Polish women had severely limited educational opportunities and faced manifold legal discrimination – they could not appear in court, sign contracts, or inherit assets. They could not work without their husbands' consent, and even if they did, they could not freely dispose their own earnings. They were forbidden to divorce and in most cases of separation, they lost custody of their children. Even after their husbands' deaths, they were deprived of parental rights.

The onset of World War I, which saw Polish women work as nurses and intelligence agents, and even don men's uniforms to fight at the front, brought deep cultural changes. The price these women paid was often prison, torture and death. The Great War put women in a position to take over many roles and responsibilities that had traditionally been assigned to men. They proved perfectly capable of fulfilling them. This experience showed that women were more than housekeepers. They were ready to actively participate in rebuilding a country that had been erased from the world maps for 123 years.

Women were given the right to vote and run for political office immediately after Poland regained independence in 1918. In this way, the demands of Polish suffragists were met and Poland became a precursor in Europe for granting active and passive electoral rights to women. Eight women were elected to the lower chamber of the Polish parliament in the first general elections held on January 26, 1919 – occupying positions that had previously been held exclusively by men. They constituted only 2% of the total number of deputies. Initially, the Polish language had no adequate designation for their profession. 'Member of parliament' was modified into various awkward and often grotesque feminine variants. Even with no proper name for their profession, these women faced an enormous task – yet, as MPs, they had also acquired new tools to effect change and act on a larger scale than ever before. The first female MPs were of various ages and representing almost all parties of the political spectrum – from

Socialists to National Democrats. They had distinguished backgrounds and considerable accomplishments in social work: **Gabriela Balicka-Iwanowska** (1867–1962) was a doctor of botanical science; Irena Kosmowska (1879–1945) was a newspaper columnist under a male pseudonym; **Jadwiga Dziubińska** (1874–1937) and **Anna Piasecka** (1882–1980) were taught education; **Maria Moczydłowska** (1886–1969) and **Zofia Moraczewska** (1873–1958) were schoolteachers; **Zofia Sokolnicka** (1878–1927) was active in a number of legal and clandestine organization to educate young Poles; **Franciszka Wilczkowiakowa** (1880–1963) was an activist among Polish emigrant communities. These women usually combined politics with social activities, which could be educational, charitable or caregiving in nature. They drew attention to what men tended to forget in the whirlwind of politics – the basic human issues that every Polish family and citizen had to deal with on a daily basis.

Many sacrificed their academic careers or family life to enter politics. Some remained active for many years, while others withdrew after a single term in office as their encounter with power politics proved too brutal. Nevertheless, they exercised their mandates to the best of their ability, engaging in politics not for career purposes but primarily to help those in need: not just women but other social groups that had been neglected, excluded or forgotten in Poland. They wanted to change lives for the better. What these women discovered was that it was hard to break through with their demands. They were not taken seriously, waiting years to push their bills through. Although they represented very different political milieus, they worked together and tried to speak with one voice, rising above party lines. They considered themselves, first and foremost, as representatives of their sex, and only second as members of their parties.

They succeeded in introducing many improvements to Poland's civil, procedural and administrative laws between the world wars, while helping modernise the country's schools, higher education and social welfare systems.

The outbreak of World War II interrupted these social changes and washed away the achievements of several generations of Polish feminists. Their work was only completed many years later.

