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AGNIESZKA OSIECKA'S DIARIES AND NOTES AS A SOURCE FOR RESEARCH INTO THE HISTORY OF GIRLHOOD

Review of: Agnieszka Osiecka, *Dzienniki*, i: 1945–1950, ed. by Karolina Felberg, pref. by Andrzej Zieniewicz, Warszawa, 2013, Prószyński i S-ka, 494 pp.; ii: 1951, ed. by Karolina Felberg-Sendecka, Warszawa, 2014, Prószyński i S-ka, 541 pp.; iii: 1952, ed. by Karolina Felberg-Sendecka, Warszawa, 2015, Prószyński i S-ka, 565 pp.; iv: 1953, ed. by Karolina Felberg-Sendecka, Warszawa, 2015, Prószyński i S-ka, 462 pp.; v: 1954–1955, ed. by Karolina Felberg-Sendecka, Warszawa, 2017, Prószyński i S-ka, 831 pp.; vi: 1956–1958 i 1970, ed. by Karolina Felberg-Sendecka, Warszawa, 2021, Prószyński i S-ka, 694 pp.

Abstract

This review article refers to the publication of six volumes of personal notes by Agnieszka Osiecka (1936–1997), one of the most popular Polish poets, a songwriter, director, and journalist of the second half of the twentieth century. The collection under review covers mainly the 1950s and provides a space for the search for one's own identity. While referring to the recent edition and highlighting selected themes, this review article puts forward a perspective on the entire body of documents published between 2013 and 2021. A particular emphasis is placed on the importance of analysis of such egodocuments in girlhood studies.

Keywords: Agnieszka Osiecka, girlhood, gender, egodocument, communism, People's Republic of Poland

Egodocuments represent an appealing, though challenging source for social historians.¹ Among important materials of this nature are the six volumes of personal notes by Agnieszka Osiecka (1936–97), published in recent years in Poland. A poet, songwriter, director and journalist, she is considered one of the leading figures of Polish mass culture in the second half of the twentieth century. In the collection under review, which mainly covers the 1950s,² i.e. primarily the teenage period of the writer-to-be, Osiecka appears as a unique but also, in a sense, quite a typical representative of the generation of the elite metropolitan post-war intelligentsia. In the diaries, we follow not only the socialisation processes specific to Warsaw’s intelligentsia (private language lessons, extra sports activities), but also the transformation of a girl into a young woman and the cultural contexts associated with the process. Finally, the diaries provide a space to search for one’s identity. While referring to the recent edition and highlighting selected themes, this review essay puts forward a perspective on the entire body of documents published between 2013 and 2021. A particular emphasis is placed on the importance of analysis of such egodocuments in girlhood studies.

Young Osiecka’s narrative acts as a distinctive periscope. It is used to view reality filtered through the sensitivity and intellect of a pubescent girl, and at the same time, it zooms in on the world that is the subject of self-creation.³ In this sense, these notes are an example of the literature of “women’s egodocuments”⁴ and, as such, are a source that should be read with caution. Already as a teenage girl, the author recognised a sphere in which she was able and willing to move. Namely, it was a literary field. This is probably why, from the

¹ Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self. Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (New York, 2019).

² The material mentioned on the front cover spans the years 1945–1970, with the notes written on the fly mainly covering the 1949–1958 period. From the turn of 1945 and 1946 comes a journal of a several years old girl (vol. 1). In 1970, in turn, Osiecka wrote the memoirs included in vol. 4. At the same time, the author repeatedly looks back to the past, recreating wartime experiences and reconstructing her family history.

³ Cf. Julia Swindells, ‘What’s the use of books?’ Knowledge, authenticity, and *A young girl’s diary*, *Women’s History Review*, v, 1 (1996), 155–66.

⁴ Anna Pekaniec, *Autobiografki. Szkice o literaturze dokumentu osobistego* (Kraków, 2020), 41–66.

very first notes, Osiecka honed her literary craft, using various artistic means with increasing awareness. It is also characteristic that the author signed her first notebooks with the pen name “Bożena Ostoja”, creating an alter ego of sorts but also paying literary tribute to her father, the musician Wiktor Osiecki, who used the pseudonym Ostoja.

One of the important thematic threads in the diaries includes numerous self-analyses concerning the formation of one’s identity and subjectivity and entering adulthood on one’s own terms (ii, 167).⁵ In this context, the most significant parts of the text deal with what can be described as self-reflection on gender relations. Of interest are the passages in which Osiecka explicitly states: “I’m terribly fond of being a fellow in a skirt for boys” (ii, 159). Or that “she’d terribly, terribly like to be a boy!” (iv, 58). There is, of course, a lot of identity play and self-creation in these statements, but one should try to read them in the context of negotiating social roles.

It is instructive to follow the issues of gender relations in Osiecka’s work by analysing, for instance, relevant passages on peer relations, her father’s love affair (e.g. iii, 176), domestic conflicts with her mother (e.g. iv, 84) or the formation of family contacts in general (e.g. iii, 174). By dialoguing, on the pages of the diary, with her mother’s attitude, Osiecka essentially defines the framework of her own functioning as a girl and a woman. The teenage girl – as if in opposition to her mother’s passive attitude – wants to be causal in erotic relations with men, and therefore not only declaratively, but often actually takes the initiative and engages in relationships on her own terms. This attitude clearly indicates a cultural and generational shift.

When reading the egodocuments of a teenage girl, it is worth paying attention to the narrative – not only because, as mentioned, the future artist is honing her literary skills. It is namely about the act of writing itself, which gives the author a distinct pleasure. For Osiecka, writing itself meant not only the social privilege of a girl from an intelligentsia family to develop her talent, but also a conscious choice. By taking intellectual work seriously and planning it as a paid occupation, teenage Osiecka here appears as a truly modern girl.

Another interesting theme in reading Osiecka’s personal notes through that scope is the analysis of vocabulary and language. Drawing

⁵ Numbers in brackets refer to the relevant sections of the *Diaries*. Roman numerals indicate the volume, Arabic numerals the page number.

on different styles (literary, youth, propaganda), the teenage author creates her own idiolect. In doing so, she tries to negotiate the semantic field of the terms she uses: “dance” [*potać*] (e.g. ii, 279; iii, 132, 196, 214) “depression” [*depresja*] (e.g. iii, 96) or “rosy humour” [*różowy humor*] (e.g. i, 167). The manifestations of this strategy can also be recognised in the specific style and overuse of irony, as well as in the use of quotation marks.⁶

From many excerpts one gets the impression that Osiecka had a penchant for treating the material and immaterial dimensions of her diaries rather liberally. Although the bulk of the material consists of personal notes in the form of entries about day-to-day life and experiences, made in notebooks, there is also room for those made in calendars and on loose sheets of paper, snippets of letters, drawings, friends’ entries, quotations and newspaper clippings. For the young Osiecka, the diary sometimes functioned as a space to which also those closest to her had access. This circle at various stages of writing included her mother and friends. It was with the latter in particular that the teenager exchanged notebooks, allowing herself and others to make corrections; sometimes she even arranged joint reading sessions (iii, 227).

These practices certainly had social value for her, although the analytically inclined 15-year-old girl was aware at the same time that such activity led to borrowing, inspiration and otherwise “pulling off a phrase, a way of expressing a thought or a problem” (i, 411). She was also aware that such “sharing inhibits sincerity. It causes the deliberate eliding of certain reciprocal expressions, criticisms, etc.” (i, 413). On the other hand, the author certainly never approached her diaries in an arbitrary manner. She was able to protect herself in case the notes fell into the wrong hands. To this end, she penned some passages in German, knowing that her colleagues would not understand them (iii, 343–45, 528–29).

Traces of protecting privacy and authenticity can also be found in the deletions and blank spaces, indicated by the editor as “torn out pages” (i, 331). Probably also out of concern for privacy, Osiecka kept two diaries in parallel for a time – one more and one less private.

Staying with the topic of German for a moment, the diaries reveal Osiecka’s bond with the language in an interesting way, especially in the

⁶ By the way, the editor has dispensed with some of these quotation marks, but nevertheless their presence (and excess) is still conspicuous.

context of her nostalgia for Sankt Pölten, a town in Lower Austria. Little Agnieszka came to this picturesque place with her parents after the Warsaw Uprising and, like mythologised Austria as a whole, held it in great affection. She wrote: "I'd simply like to see and experience Spring where I have already seen it once, in the moments of living from day to day, from hour to hour, in the country of my enemies, which yet I have come to love" (i, 176).

Published in a uniform layout, Osiecka's *Diaries* are in many respects a highly diverse and multi-genre collection. We should bear this in mind as we realise that although the work covers a relatively short period of the author's life, it concerns the decade in which she became a girl and then a young woman.

There is also nothing surprising, therefore, in the fact that one of the essential themes of such diaries are matters of emotional life and social adventures, especially relationships with boys and men. An analysis of these extracts also makes one aware of the transformations of girls' expressions. While issues of sexuality for Catholic young females entering adulthood just before the war were still generally taboo, Osiecka reflects on many issues of the emotional sphere straightforwardly. There are even passages in which the author allows herself confessions such as this: "The worst moments are those of caressing. Sometimes I indulge in them mechanically – I act, sometimes I do it out of habit, sometimes I succumb to past tenderness (never to passion), sometimes I feel revulsion, boredom and gnawing self-irony. Sometimes it is terrible" (v, 169).

The transformations of adolescence can also be traced by looking at how the field of contacts with the outside world expands. Although Osiecka's entourage is always large, these circles widen as the author begins her studies at the Faculty of Journalism at Warsaw University and becomes involved in art and journalism. Her point of reference is still the intellectual metropolitan milieu of a girl from a posh *Saska Kępa* district, but more and more often other places the young artist had links with, apart from Warsaw, such as Cracow, Tri-City or Masuria region, pop up on the pages of the diaries. Later on, Paris and London turn out to be important as well (e.g. vi, 306–401).

It is also natural to find mentions of the socio-political transformations – both domestic and worldwide. The death of Stalin, and then Polish "political thaw", the subsequent "bloody price rises" (iv, 35), the problems with provisions, and finally the serious crises leading

up to the 1956 Poznań protests – all this is reflected in Osiecka's life and echoes in her notes.

As time passes and Osiecka matures, her area of interest changes, and in many respects she appears as a typical girl of the first decade of post-war Poland.⁷ She listens to jazz, spends a lot of time with friends, and devotes many pages to analysing the situation in the country. In one entry from 1950, spinning her thoughts on communism, she states:

As for me, when I'm older, I'll feel the chains of this system strongly. For the time being, I have the same, or in fact a hundred times better living conditions than the young ladies of the mid-war period. On the one hand, they had God, schools and a saintly home, and on the other hand, their were the dreams of filth and unrealised ideals. ... One individual had everything, but around him 1,000 unemployed were desperately reaching out for a piece of bread. I don't believe that the lowest-earning worker (6–7,000 zlotys) today has it as bad as an unemployed person or a labourer who worked for a capitalist at the time [iii, 313].

The future author of the lyrics to one of the greatest hits of Polish pop music, "Małgośka", primarily consumes works of high culture, as befits a member of the intelligentsia. Osiecka absorbs countless volumes, significantly expanding her list to include items outside the literary canon. She has her favourites (e.g. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński), and is also able to engage in polemics with the classics (e.g. Adam Mickiewicz). She reads a lot of foreign-language literature, often quoting selected authors in the original. Osiecka's linguistic training pays off here – she knows German, English, French and Russian. Characteristically, Osiecka primarily devours fiction, although she does not shy away from philosophers. Her reading encompasses a wide range of contexts, and she is able to enter into an ironic polemic, for example writing about the journalist and reporter Ksawery Pruszyński: "I'd like to cleverly pick on him and I can't. Eh, that's not a book for girls" (v, 546).

Osiecka also created culture, so it would be a truism to say that her diaries were a chronicle of artistic life. This is an invaluable source,

⁷ Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, "...być dziewczyną". Wychowanie, dorastanie i edukacja dziewcząt', in Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis, Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność. Równoprawnienie. Komunizm* (Kraków, 2020), 217–90.

depicting the vast horizon of experiences and modes of thinking of an intellectual in a communist Eastern Bloc state. In this light, the references made in the summer of 1950 about the “threat (according to some people and some radio stations) of war” (i, 241) are interesting. This question, a clear manifestation of social emotions,⁸ provides the teenage narrator with a pretext to reflect on ultimate matters, anxiety or “Fear” – capitalised in the text.

Finally, a separate and important part of the young girl’s world, and therefore a major thread in the diaries: sports. This is a rich source for research into the history of youth athletics in post-war Poland. Osiecka trained from an early age, she played volleyball and swimming, and took part in competitions. The notebooks and notes contain information about some well-known figures from the sporting world of the time. There are also self-comments and reflections on the appearance of teenage girls’ bodies and their transformations. Numerous passages on these subjects are a valuable source for potential gender-focused readings.⁹

The editing of Osiecka’s diaries and notes was supervised by literary scholar Karolina Felberg-Sendecka, who also compiled the footnotes and indexes. During the period when subsequent volumes of the *Diaries* were being published, Felberg-Sendecka published a collection entitled *Koleżanka. Wspomnienia o Agnieszce Osieckiej* [Classmate. Memoirs on Agnieszka Osiecka],¹⁰ which contains, among other sections, interviews and comments from people featured in the diary and, as such, can be used to supplement the editorial work.

An important contribution to the publication was made by the heirs of the author, the Agnieszka Osiecka “Okularnicy” Foundation. Marta Dobromirska-Passent conducted the preliminary compilation of archival materials; the owner of the rights to the publication is the protagonist’s daughter, Agata Passent, author of the preface to volume six. Also featured in this edition is Andrzej Zieniewicz, author of the introduction entitled ‘Ukryta autobiografia. Agnieszki

⁸ Marcin Zaremba, ‘Powojenne paniki wojenne: Polska 1945–1980’, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, lxxiii, 2 (2019), 61–97.

⁹ Karin Hausen, *Geschlechtergeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Göttingen–Oakville, 2012).

¹⁰ Karolina Felberg-Sendecka (ed.), *Koleżanka. Wspomnienia o Agnieszce Osieckiej* (Warszawa, 2015).

Osieckiej dzienniki ze  rodka stulecia' [A Hidden Autobiography. Agnieszka Osiecka's Diaries from the Mid-Century] (i). It is appreciated that the manuscripts' scans have been made freely available in advance for paper and electronic editions.

Examining the complete six volumes of the *Diaries* totalling 3,590 pages, the author of this review is greatly impressed by the results of the editorial effort, which was not straightforward and took many years to complete. It is hard not to appreciate the work put into compiling the material, as well as deciphering the many contexts closely related to Osiecka's life, who, after all, repeatedly created new versions of her biography. In the published edition, the artist's later additions and comments are highlighted in bold. This is an important procedure not only from a philological point of view (vi, 450). The analysis of these amendments makes one aware of the changing points of view, and the author's discussions with herself, which may have been of crucial importance in the growing up and shaping of her identity.¹¹ All due respect must be paid to the effort put into editing such vast material, although at the same time I cannot help but share some doubts that emerged, and even increased in the course of reading the study.

It is not clear, for example, who is the addressee of the footnotes. However legitimate and academically sound it is to decipher the identities of Osiecka's encrypted social circle, it was a bit baffling to add footnotes about Stalin or Hitler there. This is significant insofar as the effort devoted to explaining who these figures were could have been put into, for example, establishing that the unrecognised song which begins "M w, co tylko chcesz" [Say Whatever You Want] is in fact Henryk Rostworowski's 1949 cover of Edith Piaf (i, 430); or that "Halszka Dzik wna", whose name appears in passages about swimming practice, is in fact Halina Dzik wna (i, 261), Polish record holder in freestyle swimming, and "Irka Dobramowska" is actually Irena Dobranowska, multiple Polish record holder and champion (i, 261). Comments on both these athletes appear in volume three (215), but why not immediately, at the first mention of their names?

The manner in which the footnotes have been compiled is questionable for yet another reason. The editor comments on some figures, phenomena and literary works not always in keeping with the principle

¹¹ Cf. Philippe Lejeune, *On autobiography*, transl. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis, 1988).

of conciseness and thus engages in unnecessary quibbles, for example, when, in describing Marie Curie-Skłodowska, she necessarily adds two sentences about her husband (i, 217). There are more examples of such inconsistencies, which obviously also constitute part of the editorial challenge. Placing a kind of errata with the errors spotted at the end of successive volumes was a good and praiseworthy idea (a rarity these days because who includes errata in popular publications?).

While in some places the principle of lengthy commentary rules, in others, one gets the impression that commentary is lacking. For example, it has been boldly assumed that customs associated with the Catholic Church need no further elaboration as if they were evident and transparent to every reader (e.g. i, 157). This decision does not seem entirely justified insofar as the theme of religious beliefs, the formation of attitudes in this respect and the resulting tensions in the young girl's mind is a very interesting thread. For instance, while summing up one of the discussions concerning individualism, devotion and criticism of religion as such, the 14-year-old Osiecka writes: "Too great a role has been played by beliefs and the relations created by them in the history of the world, for one to be able to simply shut the book of history and look only at present, solely through the prism of oneself" (i, 318).

At the request of some persons mentioned in the diaries, the editor has also blurred some of the notes, concealing the relevant places in the text with black rectangles. However, the abbreviations made in some parts of the text prove troublesome. This is most evident in the edition of the 1956 calendar. Every now and then, a symbol in the printed text suggests an illegible passage (vi, 104 ff.). However, reading Osiecka's manuscripts from this period, available online in the Polona online library, does not pose any significant difficulties – the text is easy to decipher. Worse still, it is also easy to decode the notes in the facsimile included in the book (e.g. vi, 114–15).

It is difficult to pinpoint the reason for these blunders and sometimes simple editorial sloppiness. The fact is that instead of helping, they often ruin contact with the source and cause the reader, rather than trust the printed edition, to look at the digitised version at polona.pl instead.

In interviews many years later, Osiecka stated that her diaries were insincere as if she was trying to invalidate their value. Still, perhaps, this was another piece of the author's peculiar interplay with her biography.

As mentioned, it was after Osiecka's death that *Diaries* and other egodocuments were first scanned and, for years, have been housed in the Digital Archive of Agnieszka Osiecka, allowing direct contact with the source for all concerned. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that we have access to the entirety of the artist's diaries. It is important to remember that the published edition does not cover at least the last three decades of Osiecka's life. Nevertheless, Osiecka's *Diaries*, published in six volumes, indeed constitute an important and extensive source. Their publication is a positive development. The first studies concerning the diaries in question have already been written,¹² but I believe that we can expect more upcoming research on the subject.

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¹² Sylwia Borowska, 'Czy byli ich "wielką szansą"? Obraz Związku Młodzieży Polskiej w *Dziennikach* Agnieszki Osieckiej z lat 1949–1955', *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały* 20 (2022), 81–112.