

Single Mothers and the Issue of Motherhood in Essays and Popular Cinema in Poland in the 1930s

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Abstract *Małgorzata Radkiewicz analyzes the situation of single mothers in 1930s Poland, drawing on journalistic writings and popular films from that period. In 1918, women in Poland were granted the right to vote, which marked the beginning of a broader public debate concerning the role of women in the public sphere and social institutions, as well as regulations related to medical care and access to abortion. Female authors in particular engaged with issues surrounding gender roles and maternal responsibilities. Since many of these women also wrote screenplays, such themes found their way into genre films—productions that, while conforming to conventional cinematic forms, nonetheless reflected contemporary social realities.*

In 1918 Poland regained its independence, and one of the most important regulations underpinning the new state was the granting of suffrage to all adult citizens regardless of sex. Women gained the right to vote, which they had fought for generations. Women's status as citizens was confirmed by a provision in the Constitution of March 1921, guaranteeing women equal rights in access to public office. In 1929 a new marriage law was drafted, introducing the principle of equality between husband and wife in personal relations. Public debates and the draft new law also included issues of family planning and reproduction, as well as a restrictive provision concerning the criminality of abortion. The restrictive legislation did not take into account the social or family situation of women, which drew sharp criticism from emancipation and liberal circles, and led to a relaxation of the provision in the 1930s: the penalty for a woman deciding to have an abortion was reduced from five to three years, and for the person performing the procedure from a maximum of fifteen to five years. At

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the same time, the code included a provision that abortions could be performed for medical or social reasons. Discussions of family planning and motherhood also addressed the issue of medical care for women and sex education, the need for which was advocated in feature articles at the time.

The changes in the legal status of women affected their social and political activities, which was reflected in their educational and popularization initiatives, artistic work and journalism. As Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, author of theatre plays and screenwriter wrote: "The interwar period was marked by an eruption of female talent in every creative discipline. [...] the already acclaimed Nałkowska, a cool intellectual, other women novelists shone: the talented Kossak-Szczucka, the deeply lyrical Pola Gojawiczyńska, sensitive as a seismograph. [...] there is Magdalena Samozwaniec, with her brilliant caricatural wit in *Na ustach grzechu* (On the Lips of Sin), the good columnist Wanda Melcer and a group of female writers with communist leanings: Krahelska, Szemplińska, Wasilewska. [...] And how many talented feature writers emerged then!"²

Morozowicz-Szczepkowska also recalled the community of women centred around the weekly *Kultura Współczesna*, founded in 1927, whose editor was first Wanda Pełczyńska, and from 1934 Emilia Grocholska. As for the magazine itself: "It was a social and literary weekly, dominated by serious, progressive journalism, addressing many current cultural and social issues, persistently fighting for the equality of women in community, social and professional life and the protection of their work. ...Its contributors were Maria Dąbrowska, Zofia Nałkowska, Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, Pola Gojawiczyńska, Helena Boguszevska, Maria Kuncewiczowa, Hermina Naglerowa, Irena Krzywicka and others."³

Interestingly, journalism was followed by other activities: "In 1930, on the initiative of the editorial staff of *Kobieta Współczesna* and the Women's Association, a Club was established in a house at 22 Żurawia Street, on the premises offered for this purpose by Dr. Bronisława Dłuska, the wife of a physician-social activist and a sister of Maria Skłodowska-Curie. It held discussion evenings on scientific, social, cultural and artistic topics."⁴

All these examples show that women's discussions on current social issues and engaged journalism addressed contemporary realities, depicted by the

2 Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, *Z Lotu ptaka*, 1968, p. 269.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

literature of the interwar period. It was believed that films should also deal with everyday problems, providing entertainment and education. The role and functions of Polish cinema were determined by the fact that from 1919 it was controlled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which was responsible for the cultural policy of the independent state. It is no wonder, then, that Marian Stępowski, in an article in *Film Polski*⁵ in 1923, considered it unnecessary to justify the propaganda role of cinema, concluding that it is a “medium as powerful as the press”.⁶ As he remarked, after a period of showing the post-war realities and the first years of the reborn state, it was time for a different kind of propaganda: “We must let the whole world know that Poland as a ‘young’ sovereign state has immeasurable treasures and vital forces ...”.⁷ This observation can be related to the need to set films in the present with its mores and social circumstances. The text of Stępowski opened a discussion on Polish cinema that would be continued in 1920s and 1930s.

Aniela Waldenbergowa addressed the contemporary women's issue, demanding in *Kino* that such heroines be portrayed on screen: “Everyman – our brother. ... We talk about him, he has passed into literature. He has become a symbol of the crisis, he will go down in history. Somehow no one ever writes about her, about ‘everywoman’, our sister Everywoman takes the burden of maintaining the entire house on her frail shoulders. She works in an office or in a shop. In addition, she looks after the children, often without any help from her partner, who is ‘in a rush to get to the office.’”⁸ The lack of time for herself is coupled with a lack of funds, so “everywoman's every dress, item of clothing and footwear is nothing short of a heroic feat! The result of long hours of thinking about where to get money for the material, what to alter, where to find a cheap seamstress?... And she's not the only one who needs clothes, the husband needs to be decently dressed, the children are growing so fast!”⁹ Even though the film critic saw *everywomen* as the heroines of their times, cinema was not always interested in portraying women's everyday life.

Film critics publishing in *Wiadomości Literackie* in the 1930s wrote about the necessity of reforming Polish cinema so that it would be closer to reality and ad-

5 Stępowski, Pierwiastki propagandy [1923] 2012, p. 39–44.

6 Ibid. p. 39.

7 Ibid.

8 Waldenbergowa, Szara kobieta, 1935, p. 12.

9 Ibid.

dress current problems.¹⁰ The same magazine published at that time texts by Irena Krzywicka and Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński that were notably sensitive to issues of sex education and the need for medical care for women, as well as the consequences of radicalizing abortion law. The presence of contributions from the writer-activists Boy-Żeleński and Krzywicka in *Wiadomości Literackie* was primarily due to the left-leaning character of this literary and cultural magazine whose authors wrote passionately about current issues. For Boy-Żeleński, activism was a writer's duty because he believed that 'literature is a nation's parliament ... It highlights the needs and developments of the hour; it gives voice to the people's demands and wrongs'.¹¹ Commenting on the debate sparked by his writings, he argued in a modernist spirit that the opinions of activists should not be considered only in the context of current problems, but also seen as an indication of future changes in the constantly evolving social order. Researchers of Boy-Żeleński's work emphasize that the author should be considered a moralist, or someone who makes a conscious decision to write about legal and social matters.¹² He chose non-fiction as his weapon for combat in the public sphere, often using maxims, aphorisms, witty comments, and apt caricatures.

Analysis of texts published in *Wiadomości Literackie* at the beginning of the 1930s shows intersections of different kinds between social life and popular culture then in Poland. A similar situation is presented by Shelley Stamp¹³ in her essay on regulating American early birth-control films from 1916 and 1917. She argues that these films "did much more than simply capitalize on a topical, even sensational, issue; they asserted cinema's claim to participate in national debates on an equal footing with newspapers, magazines, and other forms of political commentary".¹⁴ In the conclusion of her analysis, Stamp notes that by the early 1920s, the idea that "cinema's interventionist mandate would be replaced overwhelmingly by visions of its function solely as entertainment".¹⁵ Nevertheless, one might argue that early cinema's role as "an informed public forum"¹⁶ might be followed by individual filmmakers in different historical

10 Zahorska, *Film polski*, 1934, p. 7.

11 Boy-Żeleński, *Dziewice konsystorskie*, 1958, p. 34. On the role of Boy-Żeleński See also the contributions of Marcin Wilk and Heidi Hein-Kircher in this volume.

12 See Zimand, *Boy-moralista*, 1958, p. 7–8.

13 See: Stamp, *Precaution*, 2002, p. 270–297.

14 Stamp, *Precaution*, 2002, p. 270.

15 Stamp, *Precaution*, 2002, p. 292.

16 Ibid.

circumstances. In Poland of the 1920s and 30s, as in the United States at the beginning of 20th century, debates over national cinema and the film production system echoed larger questions in the public sphere. Screenwriters and filmmakers tried to incorporate issues of motherhood in popular genre films, particularly melodramas that served entertainment first and education second. This article thus aims at examining how films (and their reception by reviewers) reflected current public debates on women's social and political situation that took place in literature, press and public sphere and will especially take into account how publicists of that time were involved in discussing the gender roles.

Women's Hell

In January 1930, Boy-Żeleński's press columns from the period of October to December 1929 were published as a book about conscious motherhood, provocatively titled *Piekło kobiet* (*Women's Hell*).¹⁷ In January 1932 *Wiadomości Literackie* carried a review of Boy-Żeleński's book by Paweł Hulka-Laskowski who emphasized that it is 'small in size but immense in content'¹⁸ because it exposes the problems faced by contemporary women and the whole of society. The next issue of *Wiadomości Literackie* featured a note entitled *Głos lekarzy* (*The Voice of Doctors*)¹⁹ which quoted a letter written to Boy-Żeleński by Zakopane physicians who supported his tireless activity. They declared that his journalistic campaign for the 'improvement of the most neglected areas of life, his uncompromising fight against hypocrisy and reactionism, bold depiction of 'woman's hell', and ... promotion of "conscious motherhood" inspire awe and admiration in sound and independent minds.'²⁰ The presence of forty signatures under the declaration attests to the deep need for reform felt by the medical community, then unanimous in hoping that the implementation of the ideas promoted by Boy-Żeleński would improve the life and health of all social classes.

17 The following bibliographic note appears in the review: Boy-Żeleński, *Jak skończyć z piekłem kobiet?*, 1932, p. 47. See Hulka-Laskowski, *W walce o reformę seksualną*, 1932, p. 3.

18 Hulka-Laskowski, *W walce o reformę seksualną*, 1932, p. 3

19 *Głos lekarzy*, *Wiadomości Literackie* no. 3, 1932, p. 5.

20 Ibid.

This debate was waged among journalists as well as physicians and people involved in health care. In the preface to the first edition (there were two more by 1933) of his reflections on 'women's hell,' Boy-Żeleński noted that some of the issues he had raised no longer applied, or that the debate was at a different stage at that moment. However, he emphasized the importance of continuing the debates and literary interventions regarding sexual education: 'Let these notes spread around the world.'²¹ He saw the book as an opportunity to maintain the discussion and to remove 'certain intellectual and moral junk'²² that affected everyday life. In 1933, he stated in the preface to the book's third edition that it had not been possible to change the legislation to mitigate women's hell, though activists and their publications had popularized the idea of conscious motherhood, which in turn had led to the opening of the first family-planning clinic, and, moreover, 'the widest opportunities are available in this respect.'²³ The author also adds that the facts, arguments, and testimonies he had used years earlier remain valid, which confirms the acuity of his judgment and the aptness of his language.

The punishment for abortion, both for women and those who helped them, is the most crucial issue for Boy-Żeleński. The author regards the law as proof of the incompatibility of the legal system with the difficult realities of life where mothers are not provided with appropriate care, assistance, and support. He reflects: 'If you add the cases of young female deaths, cases of severe and permanent disability resulting from the current heartlessly supported state of affairs, perhaps those who draft these laws would shiver in their comfortable seats. And if we included ... suicides, infanticides, and other disasters, we would understand how right it is to call this article "the greatest crime of criminal law."²⁴ The author writes explicitly about the social hypocrisy that causes women to be left on their own: 'To push a poor girl into motherhood, take her job away because of pregnancy, kick her in disdain, throw on her the entire burden of guilt and threaten her with years in prison [...] – this is the philosophy of laws obviously written by men!'²⁵

21 Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet. Przedmowa*, [1930], 1958, p. 83.

22 Ibid.

23 Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet. Przedmowa*, [1930] 1958, p. 85. On the debate regarding 'conscious motherhood' See the contribution of Heidi Hein-Kircher and Marcin Wilk in this volume.

24 Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet. Przedmowa*, [1930] 1958, p. 87.

25 Ibid. p. 87–88.

Interestingly, Boy-Żeleński points out the role of men in the situation of women – as legislators, but also as perpetrators of unwanted pregnancies. He does not doubt that, in the absence of care for the mother and child, there is often no way out for the former, especially as the civil code has not regulated the issue of alimony or establishing paternity. So he asks a rhetorical question: ‘How can one prosecute only the mother, who bears all the burdens?’²⁶ He also mentions children born under forced circumstances and deprived of life chances. With the *matter-of-factness* of a physician and social activist he concludes that infanticide rates, especially among unemployed women and low-paid female workers, are depressingly high. The situation of children who will escape that fate is also difficult: ‘Such a child will go to the “factory of angels” ... where they will likely die. And the ones who have not perished of been raised in the gutter, will join the ranks of the scum of society and increase crime rates. This goes for children born out of wedlock, without a father.’²⁷ For the sake of clarity, he adds that it is not any easier for legitimate children, as indicated by the horrible situation in workers’ flats, filled with numerous offspring living in hunger and squalor.

The July 1932 issue of *Wiadomości Literackie* included ‘Życie świadome’ (Conscious Living), a special supplement in which Boy-Żeleński²⁸ explained his metaphor of women’s hell. He noted that the hell was still open, especially with the entry into force of the Penal Code on September 1, 1932, which, despite protests, maintained the criminality of abortion. The lost fight of ‘reason and humanity’²⁹ only served to strengthen the attitude of the journalist and doctor, who recalled the history of the Codification Commission’s efforts to change the legislation.³⁰ The new code (adopted in 1932) provided for the punishment

26 Ibid. p. 95.

27 Ibid. p. 98.

28 Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet wciąż otwarte*, 1932, p. 7.

29 Ibid.

30 Boy-Żeleński gives more details: At the first reading in 1929, the code stipulated a prison sentence of five years for the woman and fifteen years for the person who performed the abortion. As a result of resistance to this provision, an amendment was proposed at the second reading in 1929 that no penalty would be imposed on the physician who performs the abortion if it is necessary due to the mother’s health, welfare of the family, or an important public interest’. A clause adopted during the third reading decriminalized the procedure if it was performed on grounds of the pregnant woman’s health, her family situation, or public interest as well as the woman’s material circumstances. See: Ibid.

of the woman (up to 3 years' imprisonment) and the person who performed the abortion or assisted in its performance (up to 5 years' imprisonment). Abortion was permitted only if the woman's life was threatened or if the pregnancy resulted from one of the crimes listed in the relevant sections. On the one hand, Boy-Żeleński appreciated the fact that at least some exceptions were allowed; on the other, he called attention to the complete omission of the financial aspects and class determinants of women's life. He reiterated that the demands of the Codification Commission included the need to take into account the issues that fell under the concept of family welfare or, more broadly, public interest. The problems of unemployed women who lived in poverty and in large families remained unresolved.

The same supplement to the *Wiadomości Literackie* magazine included an ironic and insightful article by Irena Krzywicka, who pointed out the discrepancy between the modern way of living and thinking and morals – and legislation made mostly by men and the resultant situation of women.³¹ According to Krzywicka, the situation is paradoxical because, on the one hand, women have been liberated: 'Woman has relieved man of many obligations. She makes her own living and relies more on her own earnings than on the most tender lover.'³² On the other hand, the social changes have not improved the relations between the sexes or the 'daily interaction of men and women.' She makes an ironic assessment of the situation: 'The current level of seduction is at no more than one metre above the floor, so it does not reach above the waist'.

Krzywicka also writes about the brutal and primitive forms of courtship used by men, who 'enjoy only the outcome of love', having no time for a walk or conversation. However, women are not comfortable with this kind of love because it disregards their physical and psychological needs. She describes self-aware women who do not conform to conservative standards and want love, but are condemned to 'austere virtue and sometimes total abstinence' in what she calls a 'society of barbarians'. She adds for the sake of completeness: 'I know women who are prevented from enjoying their erotic life to the full only by their proud aversion to joining the embarrassing race for a disgustingly sated man. There are others, eager and willing, who, in the darkness of the taxicab, are frozen with sadness by the inevitably creeping hand, the only expression of male feelings nowadays.'³³ She sums up her bold observations by conclud-

31 Irena Krzywicka, *Śmierć lowelasa*, 1932, p. 7.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

ing that these problems in love life arise from the fact that in this area, as in many others, we are in a period of transition which has destroyed the old seducers, lady-killers, and Don Juans, but has failed to produce their replacements, which has not given rise to a new culture or a new love ritual.³⁴ The future may bring changes, but only if women themselves are involved in them. So she appeals to women: 'But men are not going to do this for us; we women must rely only on ourselves ... We cannot look to the church or bourgeois "principles" for regulators of our conduct: we must find them in ourselves, in our conscious intention, not motivated by calculation or absurd snobbery.'³⁵

Theatre and Film (Melo)Dramas

Krzywicka was not the only one who argued against patriarchal social structure. A similar attitude could be found in the writings of Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, an author of screenplays and theatre dramas, who, as Boy-Żeleński and others, openly addressed the issue of motherhood and being a single mother. In 1933 her play entitled *Milcząca siła* [The Silent Power] staged at the Great Theatre (Teatr Wielki) in Warsaw was reviewed by Henryka Felkowska as "the latest female art".³⁶ According to Felkowska, the viewers were proposed "three hours of a discussion on stage" about the contemporary woman – her rights and emancipation tendencies, especially that "Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, the author of a famous and controversial drama *Sprawa Moniki* [Monika's Case, 1933] about a love triangle, has gone even further in her feminism. While the first play wanted to prove that man is not indispensable for life [...] *The Silent Power* tries to convince us that in the future, better world, men will simply be redundant".³⁷

Moreover, Felkowska argued that if the message of the play may be considered disputable, its concept might cause interest as the vision of the future in which a woman – an editor in an influential women's magazine, managing the team of "women of all races and nationalities" – does something possible to make this "silent power" gain power over the world just for the good of this world. In so doing, she follows her conviction that "Humanity infected by war

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Felkowska, *Mężczyzna*, 1933, p. 2.

37 Ibid.

and crime of every description is heading towards destruction and it is only a change of the regime that can save it".³⁸ In the play, the currently gathering "World Women's Congress" is expected to have a decisive meaning, and the editor was to make a speech there as an activist and single mother. To achieve this goal, she had to struggle against representatives of male power, as well as equally obstructive representatives of "women of the old school". As the writer of the review ironically observes: "What a keen observation: He will always have followers and defenders among the ranks of 'the silent power'".³⁹

The way Felkowska presented the ideas of Morozowicz-Szczepkowska leaves no doubt that as a writer she was familiar with the ideas of Boy-Żeleński and Krzywicka, and shared with them the same attitude towards the realities of Polish women. As Felkowska remarked in her interpretation of *The Silent Power*: "the playwright's main thesis is [...] very extreme, although not so new. Recently male voices, even among scientists, have appeared which attributed the reason of the fall of humanity to the fact that it is only men who govern it [...] (please see Professor Bergman's book *Erkenntnisgeist u. Müttergeist*).⁴⁰ So they sought remedy in the return to matriarchate."⁴¹ According to the reviewer, the best solution would be the harmonious government of both sexes which, however, is difficult to see while watching the play because "the female characters are alive and active. Men, unfortunately, are shaped following a demanded policy".⁴² Nevertheless, the reviewer finds the idea itself very interesting, namely the introduction of a feminist theme on theatrical stage. This is especially so because "the discussion of this type on the theatrical stage is a novelty in our country, and thanks to the fact that there are very sincere and very strong moments in it, the play is neither tiring nor tiresome, on the contrary – it intrigues and generates interest".⁴³

Judging by the review of her play, it is not surprising that Morozowicz-Szczepkowska was willing to participate in the discussion on "women's hell". Her involvement and critical attitude are reflected in a screenplay for the most interesting film about unintended pregnancy and lack of support for women – namely, *Wyrok życia* (*Life Sentence*), directed by Juliusz Gardan in 1933. The

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Bergmann, *Erkenntnisgeist*, 1932.

41 Felkowska, *Mężczyzna*, 1933, p. 2.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

screenwriter's feminist view and radical opinions about social and moral issues related to women's life were reflected in the film's working title *Kto winien?* (*Who's Guilty?*), which sounds like a quote from Krzywicka's committed essays or Boy-Żeleński's columns. Most of the film's action takes place in a courtroom where a young woman is on trial for killing her newborn child. The only person willing to help her is her lawyer – the sole female member of the bar – who recognizes the difficult situation and living conditions of women, especially when they not only lack the support of their families, but also have no work or income. The defence establishes that the child died accidentally when the mother wanted to commit suicide. The baby fell into the water instead of the mother and could not be saved. The scenes in which the woman is stigmatized, reminiscent of lynching, are juxtaposed with images of her loneliness and rejection when it transpires that the affair has left her pregnant. The man has disappeared from the woman's life and the illegitimate child only reinforces the mechanism of exclusion caused by her economic status.

When the advocate finally manages to secure freedom and an opportunity for rehabilitation through work for the woman, it turns out that the girl's pregnancy and troubles were caused by the lawyer's husband. Upon learning the whole story, he tries to commit suicide; after he is saved, he confesses his love to his wife who decides to stay with him and lets the woman go. This ending matched the film's melodramatic tone, but was far from the intention of the screenwriter who wanted the women to reject the man and remain friends to support each other in later life, as did the heroines of her play *Sprawa Moniki* [Monika's Case].

Life Sentence addresses the themes discussed by Boy-Żeleński and Krzywicka, but also issues related to women's rights and their position in public life. They were noted in reviews of the film, which emphasized its timeliness and social impact. Jim Poker (alias Julian Ginsbert, a writer and a journalist) wrote enthusiastically in the magazine *Kino*: 'So let me celebrate a little, because I was right. It turns out that it is possible to make a good Polish film [...] in which an ingenious script with a noble message, combine with competent performances and the chief asset. [...] the whole is artistic and original, it makes use not of antiquated clichés, but of a beautiful idea, allowing the audience for an hour and a half to live, suffer, be moved, and rejoice with the characters. *Life Sentence* is not only well paced, but, above all, meaningful. Its meaning is not

superficial, but deep and social. The meaning does not insinuate itself in the form of a moral, but every spectator senses it perfectly'.⁴⁴

In his analysis Poker emphasized both the artistic and social values of the film: "A wonderful opening ... The court, an excellent jury, screaming women, the interior of a printing works, spectacular and numerous outdoor locations, ... erotic scenes shot discreetly, with great tact and restraint and, at the same time, with realism and simplicity, without trying for theatrical demonism, brilliant supporting characters, a profound and truly dramatic scene of childbirth, intensified by the juxtaposition with nature (wind)".⁴⁵

It is interesting to compare the review with pre-production discussions and comments. In 1933, when Gardan's film was still in production, the magazine *Wiadomości Filmowe* [Film News] announced it as an interesting project: "The subject of the film *Who's Guilty?* [working title later changed to *Life Sentence*] is rooted in life, yet completely new and original. A young girl has killed her child, the fruit of an enchanting night of love that was followed by a rude awakening. The seducer has disappeared and faces no consequences while a series of misfortunes befalls his victim. This serves as the basis for a gripping tragedy of love. The film is a fervent protest against all social injustice."⁴⁶

After the film's premiere, *Wiadomości Filmowe* wrote once again about *Life Sentence* in the *Talk of the Day* column. It reads: 'If you listen to people talking in cafes, sweet shops, dance halls, trams and taxis, it turns out that the most common topic of conversation now is *Life Sentence*, the latest production of Blok-Muzafilm."⁴⁷ The title of a note on the same page of the magazine read: "Four Aces in One Hand. 'It's easy to win a game with cards like these ... Who are the aces? One is Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska, the author of the record-breaking *Monika's Case*. ... First Polish screenwriter returned to film after a few years and wrote a sensational script called *Life Sentence (Who's Guilty?)*. ... The film's main actors are the other three aces. ... Namely: Jadzia Andrzejewska, Irena Eichlerówna and Dobiesław Damiński. [...] The film's subject – social injustice in matters of love and morality is strikingly original."⁴⁸

The problems addressed by the film are given even more resonance on the same page in a piece entitled 'In Defence of Unwed Mothers', pointing out, as

44 Poker, Wyrok życia [review], 1934 p. 8–9.

45 Ibid.

46 *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1933, no. 10, p. 2.

47 *Wiadomości Filmowe* 1934, no. 1, p. 3

48 Ibid.

Boy, the role of men in the situation of women: 'When a young girl succumbs to the seducer's sweet words and is then abandoned with a living memento of her passion – the full weight of moral outrage falls on her. When the child is lost, she becomes a suspect and faces terrible legal consequences. But the real culprit is someone else! Who? The answer to this intriguing question can be found in the latest picture by Blok-Muzafilm, *Life Sentence* [...]. A group of experts who have already seen *Life Sentence* unanimously regard these two roles as the greatest in the history of Polish cinema. The dramatic conflict between the two heroines is caused by the husband of one and the lover of the other. He is played by Dobiesław Damięcki, the first Polish screen lover of a new kind. The film promises to be the season's biggest sensation and has already attracted a lot of attention.'⁴⁹

Moreover, *Wiadomości Filmowe* printed a very original advertisement for *Life Sentence* in a box in which the names of cinemas that showed the film were accompanied by a list of reasons for seeing it:

'Life Sentence is a sentence against male seducers and a defence of seduced girls.

Life Sentence is an eternal problem of man and woman in the context of the present day.

Life Sentence is a film about an erotic tragedy of unprecedented depth ...

Life Sentence is a great protest against injustice to women...

Life Sentence is a great force paving the way for a better tomorrow.'⁵⁰

The list could be easily elaborated in a form of an essay, using arguments of Boy-Żeleński, Krzywicka and others. Unfortunately, Polish popular cinema did not follow the path of social activism (the same as the American film industry described by Stamp), submitting its function to entertainment. The best example of commercialization of the issues of motherhood and being a single mother could be *Serce matki* (A Mother's Heart), a popular novel by Antoni Marczyński, which was also adapted for the screen. The director Michał Waszyński initially intended to call the picture *Macierzyństwo* (Motherhood), but the title must have been considered insufficiently catchy and distant from the literary original because the film was released as *A Mother's Heart*.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

The magazine *Film* wrote that it is a story of 'two women fighting for the right to the child of the man they both love.'⁵¹ The melodramatic plot tells of a young teacher who becomes pregnant after a short affair. The female doctor who looks after her turns out to be the wife of her lover so the future mother agrees to give the child away to her to provide it with a father and a new guardian as well as social stability. She takes up a job as a cleaner in the kindergarten to be closer to her daughter. The man doesn't know anything and looks after the child as if it were his own and his wife's; when he learns the truth, he wants to be reunited with his beloved but dies in a car crash. The two women decide to join forces and raise the girl together. At least the theme of educated, working women who can meet the challenge of raising a child, stands out against the melodramatic formula. The motif of female friendship is illustrated by the situation of the woman whose flatmates – also employed, independent and single – are willing to help her in her maternal duties. They even buy a pram, but the protagonist lies to them that the child died in hospital.

Yet, the atmosphere of the discussion on motherhood and women's lives from the beginning of 1930s was reflected in another film adaptation based on a novel by Pola Gojawiczyńska, *Dziewczęta z Nowolipiek* (The Girls from Nowolipki, 1935), who carefully described the social situation of women in the interwar period. Her complex novel portraying a group of young girls living in the same tenement in a poor district of Warsaw was filmed by Józef Lejtes in 1937. By setting the story in a single building with a closed-in courtyard, both the writer and the director were able to emphasize the issue of social inequalities affecting the girls' lives. Growing up, young women would experience social rejection for economic and class reasons and on moral grounds due to the public perception of single women's affairs. They would also suffer disappointment in love and unwanted pregnancies. The structure of the novel, rich in plot and characterization, was kept in the film by Lejtes, providing diverse portraits of women, sensitively played by female film stars, including Jadwiga Andrzejewska, known from *Sentence of Life*. Both the cast and the excellent portrayal of realities must have contributed to the film's success.

The examples provided of works by Boy-Żeleński and female authors such as Krzywicka, Gojawiczyńska, and Morozowicz-Szczepkowska prove that the beginning of 1930s in Poland was a time of women's liberation, when women who had gained the right to vote more than a decade earlier, tried to obtain

51 See [Review] *Film* 1938, no. 32, p. 21.

better access to systems of health care and sexual education. It was the question of taking women's rights seriously in social life at large, but also in literature and popular cinema. As Krzywicka argued in her writings, modern women should work for her independence, breaking social and cultural taboos (pregnancy, maternity, abortion) and liberating her body from social conventions (of women's sexuality and gender roles in particular). She discussed the idea of a liberal society that equally treats both sexes, encouraging women to free themselves from patriarchal tradition and social patterns. Echoes of these ideas might be found in popular cinema, although transformed and subordinated to film genres.

It is interesting to examine interwar writings from the perspective of contemporary Poland. In *Women's Hell* Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński stressed that the issues of sex education, especially conscious motherhood and birth control, 'are a thing of the future, although not a distant future. We are living at a time when a new penal code is being drafted in Poland. Tormented by law and current ethics, woman cannot console herself that the next generation will cast off these chains. It is therefore necessary to raise a cry for justice for today's women.'⁵² History has proven very perverse and shown that the fight still goes on, and the 'future' described in Boy-Żeleński's columns turned out to be the present in the autumn of 2021 when a wave of protests connected with the women's strike swept through Poland. The most common slogan on posters and banners was 'women's hell', which continued to be the reality for Polish women in the early 21st century.

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52 Boy-Żeleński, *Piekło kobiet*. 1932, p. 173.

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