

# “From Girls into Women, from Boys into Men”

## An Expert’s Discourse and the Press in a Medium-Sized City in Interwar Poland. The example of Tarnów

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**Abstract** *This article answers the question of how expert discourses on sexuality, family planning, and marriage functioned in the local press of interwar Tarnów. By analyzing selected press titles from 1918–1939, the author explores the intersection of expert knowledge, gender norms, and religious influence in shaping public opinion. The study sheds light on the role of medium-sized cities in the circulation of modern ideas in interwar Poland.*

### Introduction

The study of diverse historical contexts pertaining to sexuality, family planning, and reproduction yields insights into the socio-cultural and political shifts within the regions and communities under consideration. In Europe, the advent of the twentieth century heralds a distinct epoch in these transformations, particularly concerning the youth, who served as pivotal actors in the transition. In Poland, as in many other Central and Eastern European countries, the processes of modernization and emancipation accelerated after 1918. New knowledge about human beings, their gender and sexuality, was not only a result of scientific discoveries, however. Attitudes towards sexual behaviour and expectations towards e.g. “female youth” and “male youth” were regulated by the voice of public opinion too. So far, research on this topic has focused on identifying certain general trends in sex education, ethnic discourses, or

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knowledge transfers and the formation of expertise.<sup>2</sup> Studies have brought a picture of general trends. The discourses of micro-regions or smaller – than Warsaw, Krakow or Lviv – provincial centers were much less often analyzed. Meanwhile, relatively well available sources on the subject, primarily the press, offered one of the basic tools for expressing opinions in society in a medium-sized city. Apart from local reports, one found opinions on old and new social ideas and how they were practiced. In this way, the voice of so-called experts – people recognized as such in a specific field – spread to the local community. The study of both expert functioning and expert discourses, therefore, expands not only the knowledge of social mechanisms, but opens new perspectives for regional and smaller city studies, which were often important centers of knowledge flow, cultural practices and new social norms in interwar Poland.

In this paper, I will focus on interwar Tarnów, a medium-sized Polish city located in the former western Galicia, about 100 kilometers east of Kraków, and inhabited then by a Polish-Jewish community. Between 1918 and 1939 the town metamorphosed significantly.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on the study of expert discourses in the press of interwar Tarnów. I define expert discourse here quite broadly – such parts of speech that refer to or contain statements of expert type, that is, refer, directly or indirectly, to – as Foucault argues – ‘purified and neutral’ scientific language.<sup>4</sup> As such they also have a normalizing character. The source basis is eleven press titles published in Tarnów between 1918 and 1939 concerning the city’s issues.<sup>5</sup> In the research sample there were no magazines representing Jewish and Zionist communities<sup>6</sup> – access to them turned out to be limited in the Covid era. At the same time the very present role of the Catholic Church is noticeable. The influence of the Catholic Church on the pro-

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2 Gawin, *Sex reform*, 2008, p. 181–186. Mickute, *Modern*, 2011. Karczewski, *Homosexuality*, 2022, p. 1–18. Kościańska, *Gender*, 2021.

3 Inhabitants: 35 347 (1921), 55 642 (1938). Gołębiowski, *Stosunki*, 1938, p. 414.

4 Foucault, *Histoire*, 1976.

5 Weekly magazines: *Goniec* (1934), *Hasło* (1926–1939), *Lud Polski* (1919–1926), *Nasz Głos* (1925–1929), *Nasza Sprawa* (1933–1939), *Praca* (1924–1935), *Słowo Tarnowskie* (1927–1929), *Wiadomości Tarnowskie* (1933–1934), *Ziemia Tarnowska* (1938–1939), and the monthlies magazines: *Świt* (1934–1938) and *Własnymi Siłami* (1936–1939). The research covered selected years.

6 On Jewish and Zionist positions of the debate see Hein-Kircher, “Debating Birth Control in Interwar Polish-Jewish Contexts” and Izabela Spielvogel, “The Jewish Women’s League of Breslau” in this volume.

duction of the press in the city was strongest in the second half of the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> I use the press as one possible tool of distribution, and in my analysis, I have used a variety of genres – from broadsheet journalism, to reprints of official or advice texts, to advertising. I consider the press as an important tool in the processes of the democratization of urban life and the formation of public opinion. The leading recipient of the press was the intelligentsia, however the ambitions of many editors, who tried to address the peasant or worker class of the “Polish folk”, should be emphasized as well.

Although the press has been used quite often in studies of smaller urban centers, it has rarely used as material for the study of expert discourses or the circulation of knowledge about sexuality. This article, predominantly employing gender history methodologies,<sup>8</sup> endeavors to address this gap, at least partially.

The main purpose of this presentation is to identify traces of expert discourses in press narratives in Tarnów. I am interested in answering the questions: Who was the expert for public opinion in interwar Poland? What parts of expert discourse permeated the press? What conditioned their audibility? Among many issues, I focused on the issues related to the discussion on marriage, as well as on the issues of motherhood and sexuality. An important aspect of the research presented here is the gender history. The issue of socialization was also a key context in my research.

## Social Factors of Expert Knowledge in the Interwar City

Before I discuss the examples, it is worth starting with the question of what an expert was and explore his/her social role in the examined period. In the dictionary of Polish language by Michał Arcta (1916) an expert is someone “proficient in something, has chosen to study it; a knower, appraiser; someone knowledgeable, professional, a specialist”.<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Florian Znaniecki in his essay “Uczeni polscy a życie polskie” [“Polish Scholars and Polish Life”] (1936), in turn, specified that an expert is a person educated and prepared by a learned professor to “cope with the life situation” in the academic system, related to scientific

7 Lachendro, Prasa, 2006, p. 305–326.

8 Scott, Gender, 1986, p. 1053–1075.

9 Arcta, Słownik, 1916, p. 286.

research.<sup>10</sup> In interwar Tarnów, the number of experts who specialized in medical matters was limited to 40 medical doctors working in the city, including three railway doctors, six dentists, and six dental technicians and midwives. There was also a general hospital, a Garrison infirmary, a children's clinic, a home for incurables, a district death fund and six pharmacies.<sup>11</sup> The newly opened prison also had a hospital. After Poland regained independence in 1918, the tasks of implementing sanitary regulations, controlling doctors, surgeons, and pharmacists, as well as dealing with healers and charlatans, and fighting infectious diseases in humans and animals were taken over by the district doctor and the city doctor. All of them were social workers, although it should be noted that access to health care largely depended on the individual means of citizens, so in many cases citizens, especially the poorer ones, remained without genuine health care. It is worth mentioning that many of the doctors, almost all of them Jews, who worked in the county health centre (opened in 1930) were very poorly paid.<sup>12</sup> In mentioning the numbers, two disclaimers must be made: firstly, the figure does not include the many professionals that applied medical knowledge in their work, such as educators or hygienists. Secondly, expert discourses may have been used in public debates by non-specialists, such as representatives of religious organizations.

Although among the sanitary councillors there were no women on the management staff, it is worth indicating here that the monthly magazine "Własnymi siłami" ["By Our Own Efforts"] was edited by female Catholics, and Marianna Dmochowska, the editor and the author of many texts in the magazine. She was also the general secretary of the Catholic Women's Association. Although the section "Dbaj o zdrowie" ["Take care of your health"] published in "Własnymi siłami" is unique,<sup>13</sup> and the focus is on dental hygiene, there is no mention of venereal diseases or other manifestations or consequences of the sexual life among the citizens. Expert knowledge was also rather rarely invoked in discussions about young people.<sup>14</sup>

A characteristic feature of the social innerworkings of knowledge in interwar Tarnów – as shown by reading the newspapers – was its competitiveness with non-expert knowledge, especially that based on the dogmas of faith. For

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10 Znaniecki, *Spoleczne role*, 1984, p. 229.

11 Maniak, *Ochrona zdrowia*, 1938, p. 705.

12 *Ibid.* p. 707.

13 *Dbaj o zdrowie*, 1937, 1938.

14 Wilk, *Prasy lokalnej*, 2021.

example, in 1926, the Catholic "Nasz Głos" ["Our Voice"] reprinted a speech by Tarnów bishop Wałęga from 1911, who explicitly stated that "knowledge and science are treated as God when God's revelations are ignored".<sup>15</sup> For this reason, experts probably had to deal with distrust in the city. In one article, a doctor encourages people to behave during a visit as if they were going to confession and thus to be honest about what may have affected the patient's condition.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, despite the fact that the present research focuses on the press published in Tarnów, it is worth remembering that regional, national, and even foreign newspapers reached and were read in the city. It was distributed through private channels, but was also available in schools or local reading rooms, and even in the local *Warszawianka* café.<sup>17</sup>

## Marriage and its Crises

One interesting theme indirectly related to expert discourses concerns the transformation of the institution of marriage. The roles in marriage – different for girls/women and boys/men – were determined by the gender binary. Echoes of representations of traditional roles permeated the law. As Claudia Kraft has noted, this emphasized the bipolarity of the structure of the organic world, consisting of a male element and a female element, "endowed in the human world with specific physical and psychological attributes".<sup>18</sup>

Remarkably, more emphasis on the future role of wife or mother was imposed upon girls. They were the ones from whom more was demanded, thus they were presented with a more extensive catalogue of duties. They had to prepare not only themselves, but also to be, as it were, for difficulties on the part of the man and marriage as such. In the article "For female candidates for marriage" published in "Praca" ["Labour"], for example, we read: "A woman's happi-

15 Wyjątki z mowy JE. bs. biskupa Wałęgi na Kongresie Marjańskim w 1911 r. w Przemysłu, "Nasz Głos" 20 (1926), 4.

16 Markowski, *Byłam u lekarza*, 1936, p. 4.

17 [advertisement], *Ziemia Tarnowska*, 1938, p. 6. Sprawozdanie roczne z działalności szkoły za rok szkolny 1923/1924, "Zespół Szkół Ekonomiczno-Gastronomicznych w Tarnowie", State Archive in Tarnów (hereinafter: SAT) 33/752/244, 11; Sprawozdanie roczne z działalności szkoły za rok szkolny 1923/1924, "Zespół Szkół Ekonomiczno-Gastronomicznych w Tarnowie", SAT 33/752/244, 48.

18 Kraft, *Równość i nierówność*, 2004, p. 317. More about marriage, See: Pietrzak, *Sytuacja prawna 2000*, p. 82. See also Ciechanowski, *Is marriage so sacred?* in this volume.

ness in marriage consists of understanding her husband and being indulgent towards his weaknesses or habits. A lot of disappointments would be avoided if girls wanted to understand that their husbands are made of the same material as their fathers or employers [...].<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the vision of the man's role in this perspective seems to depend on the fulfillment of the wife's conditions. As the journalist says, she shouldn't persecute her husband with constant excuses and suspicions, but should rather be "*a good sport*".<sup>20</sup>

Marriage as a burden, duty, anguish – such images often appeared in various narratives, but in Catholic journalism they gained the dimension of a distant promise. Fulfilling the role of a wife – that is, sometimes an anguished one – meant happiness and empowerment, even if it was paid for with "long hours of waiting for your husband, for all those bad moments of loneliness that bleed your heart so much, when your husband's house will no longer be occupied, when he will be impatient and rough, when he will not appreciate your work, the immensity of your love, when he will look for a quarrel in your words" – as Janina Pietrusińska enumerated in the pages of "*Własni siłami*".<sup>21</sup> The final advice, in accordance with the requirement of durability of marriage, was, of course, to persevere, despite the torments, although there is an interesting thread of interest in the psychological states of women, as well as in the indifference of the husband to the affairs of the home. Single women were also recognized.<sup>22</sup> The psychological price that a woman has to pay to fulfill the role of mother, wife, or grandmother expected of her often appears in Catholic narratives. The duty of parenting in the home rested on the woman. The press avoided commenting on the details, as if the issues of caring for a young child related only to the private sphere and concerned matters not dealt with by the public. Catholic narratives rarely defined concepts explicitly, rendering issues taboo that related to corporality or the physical side of the conjugal act. At the same time, sexual abstinence was required of spouses. In a pastoral letter reprinted by "*Nasza Sprawa*" ["Our Business"], Bishop Franciszek Lisowski reminds that marriage is "a sacrament of the living, that is the newlyweds should have pure souls".<sup>23</sup>

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19 Dla kandydatek do małżeństwa, 1933, p. 4.

20 Ibid.

21 Pietrusińska, *Źródło*, 1937, p. 4.

22 *Własni siłami*, 1939, p. 8; 1939, p. 8.

23 Lisowski, *List pasterski*, 1934, p. 5.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s the process of law unification in Poland, and more specifically the proceedings on the Marriage Act, brought a certain impetus to the debate on the status of marriage and its functioning in society and the state. The fundamental desire of the Codification Commission was that the existing Code should reflect "the spirit of the requirements of modern civilization".<sup>24</sup> At issue were, among other things, divorces. The Catholic Church treated marriage as a sacrament, an indissoluble bond, outside the law. Hence it did not agree to divorce. Moreover, it criticized the moral awkwardness of the state, referring to the Constitution, but also to the privileged – regulated by the Concordat – position of the Catholic Church.<sup>25</sup> However, the transformation of marriage was a fact. The conventionality of marriage was increasingly recognized. An interesting text on the subject is provided by the "Goniec" ["Messenger"], which calls marriage an "institution" and emphasizes the deterioration of labour markets, which prevents men in particular from establishing their own households. The text introduces the concept of the "mate marriage". "Perhaps what we call today heresy, utopia, backwardness and even 'immorality' will in a few years' time be a normal phenomenon, sanctioned by law".<sup>26</sup> It is also accepted that the process of change within the institution came from the woman. This text is in fact unique, because divorce was rarely been written about in the press. Generally, when writing about difficult matters, where experts already agreed, but where customs held back – they used examples from distant countries or cultures. This is a recurring narrative motif, and it seems that such a strategy made it possible to become accustomed to change. In the studied press we find several extensive texts on this subject. For example, divorce is written about in relation to ancient Rome.<sup>27</sup> In this context new media, such as cinema and radio, seems to be a good tool for spreading expert knowledge. Celebrity life normalized the transformation of the institution of marriage. This is a helpful lens for interpreting reports about Pola Negri's subsequent marriage, for example.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Kraft, *Równość i nierówność*, 2004, p. 312.

25 *Prawa małżeńskiego*, 1934, p. 13.

26 *Małżeństwo na próbę*, 1934, p. 6.

27 *Rozwody*, 1929, p. 3. *Przymus żenienia*, 1923, p. 10.

28 *Czwarte małżeństwo Poli Negri*, 1934, p. 4.

## Motherhood

As already mentioned, the Catholic narrative argued that a woman's natural vocation was motherhood. It claimed a woman was meant to take care of her child from its very conception, she should conduct herself "soberly and morally" (Bishop Lisowski). Long texts on this topic were published by Catholic magazines, especially after the discussion on marriage. Pastoral epistles were reprinted there. In one of them, addressed to believers from all over Poland, we read about "conscious motherhood" in the "Catholic spirit", which is defined here as "a deep sense of the dignity of the mother and her duties both in terms of health and hygiene, and above all in terms of raising the offspring. [...] On the other hand, we must condemn intentional motherhood understood and practised as the prevention of births by unlawful means. Under the name of 'conscious motherhood', certain groups are propagating the prevention of motherhood and childbirth. This movement should properly be called the 'conscious maternity' movement under the slogan 'fewer births'. Conscious motherhood understood in this way is a consequence of the materialistic understanding of the family, which is also evidenced by the reference made by the Polish conscious motherhood movement to such a movement in the Soviet countries. This movement is wrongly justified through slogans of hygiene, social justice, correction of nature, and even the good of the State. In fact, it is the desire for the law of sin".<sup>29</sup> The multi-layered rhetorical construction of this statement is interesting for many reasons, although a few aspects are worth highlighting. Firstly, the association of "modern culture" was often associated – in the perspective of the Catholic narrative – with "conscious motherhood". Secondly, an attempt to regain, in a way, the expression "conscious motherhood", which – according to some of the women's discourses of the twentieth century in Poland – was most often associated with the separation – at least partial – of procreation from sexual pleasure. The bishops' letter, addressed to the whole of Poland, was reprinted in "Nasza Rzecz" ["Our Thing"], a Catholic weekly with a high circulation for the city. It is not known what audience it reached or how wide an impact it had.

Catholic journalism was critical of "lectures, counselling centres and brochures", and did not approve of such initiatives. In the perception of

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29 Wspólny List pasterski, 1934, p. 2. On the criticized position towards 'conscious motherhood' See Hein-Kircher, *Debating Birth Control in Interwar Polish-Jewish Contexts and Radkiewicz, Single mothers and the issue of motherhood* in this volume.

Catholic publicists, they were associated with "pornography", which was particularly dangerous for the youth. In reality, in secondary schools in Tarnów, for example, there were lectures on venereal diseases held among 3rd grade students, but these were intended only for boys.<sup>30</sup> In fact, courses and papers – for example, on the care of mother and child read at meetings of the Women's Civic Labour Union<sup>31</sup> – were often addressed to the adults.

## Sexuality Issues

The Tarnów press devoted relatively little space to sexuality. The lack of appropriate vocabulary<sup>32</sup> made it almost impossible to talk about issues related to corporeality, physiognomy, or sexuality directly. They had to resort to satire and allusions. However, many topics were above all tabooed. In addition to indirect allusions, there was also information in the press about, for example, the women's trade or "streetwalkers". For example, I have not been able to find extensive texts on the epidemic of venereal diseases, which, as we know, posed a social problem especially in the 1930s.<sup>33</sup> In the capital, an anti-venereal law was being drafted, which was supposed to regulate matters of health care by imposing a standard number of beds reserved for venereal patients in hospitals. This obligation involved cities with populations over 25,000, and that included Tarnów.

While the topic of sexuality was not dealt with directly, I would like to draw attention to two interesting texts, which can provide contextual guidance to the issues discussed here. The first concerns dance, and its modern, fashionable form: "Today's dances, or so-called fashionable dances, almost without exception express the excitement of lovemaking. The man seeks, the girl or woman agrees, and then they both begin to rejoice in their mutual closeness and momentary possession of one another". Interestingly, the text quotes experts and specialists, including Havelock Ellis, a British physician and founder of modern sexology<sup>34</sup>. The second text is a reprint published in "Nasz Głos"

30 Sprawozdanie roczne z działalności szkoły za rok szkolny 1927/1928, "Zespół Szkół Ekonomiczno-Gastronomicznych w Tarnowie", SAT 33/752/248, 15.

31 Hasło, 1933, p. 2.

32 Sierakowska, *Elementy*, 2004, p. 369.

33 See: <https://dlibra.umcs.lublin.pl/dlibra/plain-content?id=10086> (05.06.2025); See also: Grata, Walka, 2013, p. 253–274.

34 Na karnawał, *Praca* 7–8 (1933), p. 2.

(“Our Voice”). The text – “Flapper” – refers to the Western model of a new girl, a representation of gender in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, it is also important to notice the absence of expert discourses in the secondary school magazines. Sexuality in the official circulation was strongly tabooed.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusions

The analysis of Tarnów’s press texts shows that expert discourses found it rather difficult to penetrate journalistic discourse. This transfer was limited by the lack of language and the tabooization of issues directly related to sexuality, the body or eroticism. Those who published used various rhetorical strategies – allusions or references to distant examples. At the same time, the identified traces of expert discourses from the press reflect only certain ideas about marriage or sexuality, and only to a small extent do they reflect their actual image. It is much more common for male experts to speak in the press, although the influence of women is becoming stronger. The analysis of press releases shows that Tarnów was getting into the swing of processes of a more universal character, such as the emergence of new personal patterns within gender roles, such as the “the modern girl”.<sup>37</sup> However, the local press used here as a source base does not give a full picture of the complexity of this phenomenon. In order to gain a deeper insight into this phenomenon, it would certainly be necessary to make use of other types of material, such as diaries or prosecution material – and above all, material that completes the bi-ethnic character of the city: the press or Jewish documentation.

It is worth noting in the context of the research results presented here that the specificity of medium-sized centers is often defined by the role these cities play in constituting a transfer tool on the path of upward social mobility from smaller to larger centers. It would be interesting to compare the results of the research conducted in Tarnów with other centers of this type both within Poland and in other Central and Eastern European countries. How did the expert discourses differ? What determined their audibility? What was conducive

35 Chłopczyca, *Nasz Głos* 32 (1927), p. 3.

36 One of the few exceptions is the story of the first date written by a girl in the monthly school youth magazine “Świt”: *Moja pierwsza randka*, *Świt* 4 (1935), p. 10.

37 Nicholas, *Modern Girl*, 2015.

to expanding the field of expert discourse? What impact did popular culture, especially cinema, which was a medium for new ideas and new definitions of marriage or reproduction? These questions above all in relation to the issue of sexuality or family planning seem relevant and interesting. Comparative research can provide new knowledge on the social and cultural contexts of the historical changes of the interwar period.

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