

Looking back at the history of science

Down Off the Pedestal, Marie!

There is something disconcerting about monuments. We usually erect such statues to commemorate people who fulfill our imagined ideals of heroism, sacrifice, or genius. We gaze up at their rock-hewn images in deference and give a wistful sigh. What wonderful heroes we have, how they help us all be a little better at heart! We dehumanize them so that they become part of the magnificent myths of our nation, homeland, field of science or art. Monuments are like spirits imprisoned in amber: we can gaze upon them through the fossilized medium but the distorted image does not tell us very much about what the person inside was really like. So let's stop laying wreaths and lighting votive candles – it is high time to bring out monumental figures to life, to feel their pulse, to sense their breath!

Marie Skłodowska-Curie of course more than meets all the criteria to be a hero. In Poland she is treated like a miraculous icon of hard work and success. Her face has already figured on banknotes (as the only female face to have been deemed so worthy in Poland), on black and white photos hung up in dirty classrooms, and in folders promoting a country off in Central Europe.

It seems that Poland has not yet grasped that what it really needs is no longer such advertising pamphlets, such glitter and pomp, but male and female heroes who can give people strength and inspire them to act. All it takes to discover such real heroes is to attempt a new interpretation of small facts, the kind of life-story details that make someone different from millions of others. The biographies of famous "statutes" are full of such little moments, watersheds after which nothing is ever quite the same again. I do not have to be an expert in chemistry or physics to be able to admire my countrywoman's sense of drive, the stories about her going on honeymoon on a bicycle, about her worn-out dresses and ignorance of fashion. So Marie, please give us a smile, come down from your pedestal for a moment, and lend us your bicycle pump. Young women need a friend like you.

In the research world she had the status of an immigrant, of a woman, of "her husband's wife." She was also described as a Jewess, as someone using the Parisian university to attain success at the expense of other female students. Who ever heard of a woman having her own laboratory? And her own male assistants! But it quickly became apparent that this extremely determined girl could not be disposed of so easily. Look at how she made it from ul. Freta in Warsaw all the way to the Sorbonne. Although she stressed her

Polish roots her whole life, she also realized that her homeland was not yet able to provide the working environment she needed.

Her father, a teacher, had instilled a passion for science in his daughters. Both of them decided to educate themselves beyond the private-gymnasium level. But where to find the money to get out of parochial Warsaw? First the elder Bronisława would go – to blaze the trail and try her chances abroad. Here lies a true illustration of the strength of sisterhood: a common future elaborately planned and built together!

Some time later, the 20-year-old Marie is already huddled up by a small stove, scrawling down notes with frozen fingers. Her shapely hands trace out bold concepts that would lay the groundwork for modern science. But if she were someone trying to discover new radiums and poloniums nowadays, presumably no one would give her any funding because she would have no proof of the expected results.

How could she have convinced a grant-giver that it was worth investing in an idea that was still floating in conjecture? So she's still sitting there in some chilly, godforsaken room, our little orphan Marie, rather than becoming a future Nobel laureate.

But what must it be like to have that sense, that moment of certainty, that the existing theories have got it all wrong and the fundamental assumptions need to be readdressed? You wake up and you just know that two does not equal two even though the

whole world maintains it does, and you are the one who is going to reinvent the world from scratch.

Wealthy women in America led by the journalist Marie Meloney banded together to buy her a gram of radium. And she in turn funded the Radium Institute in Warsaw's Ochota district, a milestone in the fight against cancer. Marie always stressed the importance of cooperation among women. "I admire them greatly and wish them success," she wrote to the activist Hertha Ayrton, describing the suffragettes.

And so at this point we can close our eyes, retaining the image of a serious-faced woman counting droplets. Can you visualize that scene, women of the world? Do you already know what you want to achieve in life? Will you dare to do it?



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