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Socio-educational activity of Stefania Sempołowska (1869–1944)

ABSTRACT: The article presents and analyses selected aspects of the socio-educational activity of Stefania Sempołowska, a revolutionist with temperament, a traditionalist by choice. The first part of the article presents the biographical path of her life, while the second one deals with the scope of her educational activity among adults.

Stefania Sempołowska's social and educational activity is marked by a particular concern for human beings, placed in the current of organic and positivist work. Her activity was shaped in two different historical eras – in the period of national captivity and in the first years of the Second Polish Republic. In the atmosphere of historical and political events of that time, as well as the clash of visions of the independent country, Sempołowska organized a secret educational movement and an aid for political prisoners, and after Poland regained independence, she created and propagated the concept of Polish education.

KEYWORDS: Stefania Sempołowska, socio-educational work, secret educational movement, aid for prisoners.

Introduction

The current transformations in the social functioning of adult education generate new research challenges. In this context, the interests in the past of the widely understood adult education, including the reference to the theoretical achievements and practical experiences of pedagogues and educational activists of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Poland, are justified. Researchers emphasize that

[...] human biographies are a source of knowledge about the role of individual life events and their role in the process of education and socializa-

tion. The educational aspect of the experiences contained in the course of life is therefore the value considered to be of particular pedagogical significance. It is supposed to be a way of finding out to what extent man, on their individual way of life, has been influenced by various external factors: from the socio-economic situation, through family, the closest environment, to objective events that had an impact (also) on their inner world (Wawrzyniak, Wypiorczyk-Przygoda, 2011], p. 217).

The attempt to present the biography of Stefania Sempołowska made in this article is related to the exploration of forms of educational and social work having a significant contribution to adult education.

The period of Stefania Sempołowska's life and activity falls from the late 1800s to the 1940s. This is the period of the partitions and the regaining of independence in 1918. The lack of a country caused a dichotomy between the feeling of national identity of Poles and the official policy of the occupying countries. Therefore, depending on the political situation in particular partitions of Poland, Poles undertook various forms of educational activity. They were part of an organic work programme aimed at developing national identity and consciousness.

The organic work programme was closely linked to the grassroots work programme, which was directly related to new education, the aim of which was not only to shape morality, social and cultural life, but also to teach rational management. Hence, the main emphasis was placed on the education of the rural population as a tool for combating illiteracy and at the same time encouraging self-education. An important place in the 'positivists' programme was given to the education of adults (Draus, Terlecki, 2006, p.109). It was supposed to serve a compensatory function due to the insufficient number of schools and anti-Polish educational policy of the occupants, as well as to awaken social and economic activity in the Polish society. Stefania Sempołowska was also part of this current of activities.

Childhood – youth – adulthood

Stefania Sempołowska was born on October 2, 1869 in the Wielkopolska village of Polonisz. She was the daughter of Stanisław and Maria, née Potrzobowska. The premature death of her father resulted in the taking in of the orphaned family, deprived of any basis for existence, by her grandmother Emilia Lalewiczowa (Sempołowska), who had a significant influence on shaping the personality of young Stefania (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, 1981,

p. 7). The deteriorating economic situation of her mother Maria forced her to acquire a useful practical profession that would financially secure herself and her four young children. In 1878 S. Sempołowska, together with her mother and siblings, moved to Warsaw, where she began her education at the boarding school of Teresa Jadwiga Papi. The patriotic atmosphere in the school and the social radicalism of the majority of teachers played a significant role in the shaping of her political views. Stefania had very fond memories of her time at school: “the school years introduced me to the atmosphere of new slogans and aspirations, taught me to worship deeds, to look ahead, not to look for the meaning of life and guidance in the past, when you are building a new life” (Gąsiorowska, 1960, p. 6–7). The boarding school provided education, daily meals and supervision over students’ homework. Illegal classes were conducted in Polish, and the students were taught history, Polish literature and geography. In addition, the program included sewing, embroidery and household works. Sempołowska graduated from the school in 1886.

In 1887 Sempołowska passed the final exam and began working professionally as a teacher. In her apartment at ul. Świętokrzyska in Warsaw she organized a secret school for girls, which had a very innovative system of teaching and upbringing. Within the core curriculum, efforts were made to teach the pupils independence and, above all, social activity (Pacholczykowa, 1996, p. 250–259). The school did not offer any qualifications, but thanks to its uniqueness it found recognition among progressive intelligentsia. Janina Rogowska-Doroszewska, remembering Stefania Sempołowska, writes about her commitment to teaching: “she was a teacher and educator by calling, by extraordinary talent, by passion, by character” (1959, p. 31). The main educational goal of Sempołowska was to teach her students to respect human dignity, she repeatedly told us that the most important cure for evil is “brotherhood”. And Miss Stefania understood it as compassionate humanity and taught us the same (Rogowska-Doroszewska, 1959, p. 13). A similar opinion about S. Sempołowska was expressed by Marian Falski, who wrote: “She was a teacher and educator by calling – from the desires of the youngest years, from natural intuition, from social temperament. She did not write any significant scientific works revealing new fields of knowledge, because she was more of a social activist than a scientist and theoretician” (1962, p. 3).

Teaching work obliged Sempołowska to supplement her education, which she did by attending lectures at the secret Flying University, where she had the opportunity to meet such known persons as Władysław Smoleński, Ludwik Krzywicki, Jan Władysław Dawid or Waclaw Nałkowski (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, 1981, p. 17). In this first period of her teaching and socio-ed-

educational work, according to Natalia Gąsiorowska, “Sempołowska had a youthful verve, diversity and variety of interests and influences, spontaneity, and a desire for new activities, aiming at progress, a new ideology that had not yet been fully crystallized. It was a flame of rebellion, destroying the past that was standing in the way of a new life” (1960, p. 17).

In the year 1899 Sempołowska was arrested by tsarist authorities. As a result of a police search carried out on 21 December in the Warsaw Charitable Society, the documents evidencing Sempołowska’s involvement in activities considered illegal were discovered (Schroeder, Seidel, 1995, p. 252). Her imprisonment lasted until March of the following year. In 1903, a second search of her apartment resulted in another arrest. Sempołowska chose Cracow as her place of exile. There, she took up a job as a geography teacher at a private school – 1st Girl Middle School (I Gimnazjum Żeńskie). Parallel to teaching in school, she gave lectures, was active in the so-called “circle” of the Public School Society (Towarzystwo Szkoły Ludowej), published articles in progressive magazines, including “Krytyka”, a Cracow magazine edited by Wilhelm Feldman (Gąsiorowska, 1960, p. 19).

Sempołowska would not return to Warsaw until 1905, where she organized systematic aid for political prisoners (Michalski, 1973, p. 56–60). She was taking care of political prisoners as early as in 1895, being under the influence of Wanda Umińska. At the same time, after being arrested and imprisoned twice in her life, Sempołowska’s conviction of the need for such help was cemented for the rest of her life. This is how she explained her decision:

I think that there is no nation in the world in the life of which prison has played such an important role as in the life the Polish nation. For a century and a half, everything that lived in Poland and worked for her freedom, spent a shorter or longer time inside the prison walls. Those who did not manage to escape and emigrate in time, ended up in prisons. Prison cells were, especially under Russian occupation, for many years and for many generations the “cradle and grave” for the ideas of independence and democracy. Our life after the partitions made a prisoner an honourable title. The aid provided by the Polish society to the victims of political persecution in a more or less well-organized manner is as far in the past as the imprisoned victims of political ideas. [...] The aid to prisoners lies somewhere deep in the character of a human soul that loves freedom and sees slavery as one of the greatest human tragedies” (Rogowska-Doroszewska, 1959, p. 31).

The care for political prisoners initiated by Sempołowska was of a pioneering nature, as there were no organizations providing help to them at that time. Justifying the need for such action, she wrote: “The complaints coming

from prisons made me think about it, it evoked a feeling of duty to act and to rescue” (Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, 1961, p. 55). She claimed that helping them lies in the nature of the human soul, treating slavery as one of man’s greatest tragedies. Therefore, Sempołowska did not divide the political prisoners according to their party affiliation, stating that they all took part in the struggle for independence and they deserve equal help. She wrote about the prisoners:

I owe them the greatest human treasure – faith in man and faith in a better future. I owe them the fact that I learned to look for life’s most important values at the top of the human spirit, among the love for ideas and the struggle for their fulfilment. I owe them that in my life I got to know in reality the heroes in the service of people and humanity, who sacrifice themselves and their lives for great and ultimate goals, who can merge their lives and their goals with the fate of the oppressed (Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, 1961, p. 55).

In 1905 Sempołowska joined the Aid Fund for Political Prisoners (Kasa Pomocy Więźniom Politycznym). The organization had been operating illegally in Warsaw since 1903. Initially, it focused on raising funds to help prisoners. After the Aid Fund was legalized in 1905, a political advisory office was established within its structure. The attorneys gathered there, such as Stanisław Patek, Leon Berenson and Henryk Landy, were defending the Polish revolutionists imprisoned by the tsarist authorities. According to D. Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, Stefania Sempołowska became “the soul and heart of the Aid Fund” (1981, p. 16). In the booklet entitled “My – opieka nad więźniami politycznymi” (“We – taking care of political prisoners”) she wrote: “The best, most powerful period of my spiritual life was swallowed up by prisons, prisoners and their fate. I was bound to it with an inseparable knot” (1960, p. 75). The necessity of providing help for prisoners is most accurately explained in the memories of S. Sempołowska by J. Rogowska-Doroszevska who writes:

What inclined Miss Stefania to help political prisoners was the awareness that they needed help and that few would have courage to provide it. She also had this strong conviction, which she constantly expressed, that they need to be defended not only because they are usually treated badly in prison and are thus subjected to the lawlessness of prison or court officials, but also because those, whose only “guilt” is serving the idea they believe in, should not be in prison at all. And finally, Miss Stefania used to help these people because she felt spiritually related to them (1959, p. 42).

Simultaneously with her teaching work and helping political prisoners, Sempołowska was actively involved in social activity in the *Women’s Circle for Popular Education* (Kobiece Koło Oświaty Ludowej), Warsaw Charitable Soci-

ety (Warszawskie Towarzystwo Dobroczynności), Association of Courses for Adult Illiterates (Stowarzyszenie Kursów dla Analfabetów Dorosłych), Polish Teachers' Association (Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego), Folk Teachers' Association (Związek Nauczycieli Ludowych).

In 1911 the Aid Fund was liquidated, but as soon as in 1909 there was another organization, the Society for the Care of Prisoners (Towarzystwo Opieki nad Więźniami), called the Patronage (Patronat). The Society functioned under the management of its founders: professor Walenty Miklaszewski, and attorneys: Adolf Peplowski, Leon Supiński, Jerzy Skokowski. After the outbreak of World War I, the Society worked under the management of the prosecutor Kazimierz Rudnicki, in the last two years of occupation as part of the activities of the Central Welfare Council under the management of Irena Nowodworska. Until 1914 Sempołowska cooperated with the Patronage by taking care of political prisoners. The most important thing in her eyes was the inner freedom of man. She fought against the repression of people who believed in certain ideas and took care of them (Sempołowska, 1960, p. 7). During the First World War, this work was partially halted, and Sempołowska focused on the issues of refugees, victims of war, but at the same time she did not neglect her educational work, adapting it to new social and political circumstances.

The aid for prisoners was resumed after 1918. According to Sempołowska, there was still a need for it. The activity of caring for prisoners was adjusted to different political conditions and the needs of new types of prisoners, but as Natalia Gąsiorowska writes, "the prisoners were still people who are faithful to their ideology and sacrificing their freedom to society" (1960, p. 35). In Sempołowska's opinion, the problem of prisons was to be viewed not only from the perspective of individual harm, but also as a social issue. She claimed that the above issue should be subject to the most in-depth revision, because the system of prisons existing in the inter war period was not adequate to the penitentiary objectives. Sempołowska emphasized its negative role and considered it to be the main cause of the increasing crime rate. In her opinion, the focus of the prison system on the destruction of human dignity caused a social threat of emergence of a system which demoralizes the prisoner and the prison guard. She justified this fundamental thesis rationally and thoroughly, drawing arguments not from theory, but directly from real life. Accompanying, in a sense, a man thrown behind bars, she analyses prison regulations and conditions and demonstrates how well they were adapted, even in the smallest details, to the systematic destruction of the prisoner's organism and psyche. She reveals the emptiness of the platitudes about the educational influ-

ence of punishment, and demonstrates the class character of the justice system at that time (Gąsiorowska, 1960, p. 6).

Sempołowska's care for political prisoners during the period of independent Poland took on a new dimension. In April 1920 Sempołowska accepted the offer of Julian Marchlewski as a representative of the Russian Red Cross Society to take care of Soviet captives and prisoners in Poland. She also obtained additional authorizations to provide, in agreement with the Society for the Care of Prisoners and their Families, financial assistance to Soviet civilian captives. On this basis, in the summer of 1920, she intervened in the case of left-wing activists, mainly communists, who were massively arrested and interned in camps. She also made a statement condemning the military authorities that had interned volunteers – Jews – in Jabłonna near Warsaw and called for a widespread social protest in this matter. Under the agreement concluded on 6 September 1920 in Berlin between the Russian Red Cross and the Polish Red Cross, Sempołowska carried out an inspection of prisons and camps of interned Russian captives until mid-November 1920, and her reports highlighted the difficult situation of civilian captives (Gąsiorowska, 1960, p. 51f).

The years of Sempołowska's life coincided with a difficult period, requiring confrontation with both the tsarist and German authorities, and finally also with the Polish authorities. The aid for political victims that she organized lasted for around thirty-five years. The last years of Sempołowska's life were marred by illness. She died on 31 January 1944, her funeral took place on 2 February and was attended by her closest family and friends. The place that commemorates her is the tomb of the Potrzebowski family with the following inscription: *Stefania Sempołowska 1869–1944. Educational activist and teacher. A relentless fighter for the rights of prisoners.* The story of Stefania Sempołowska's life was full of countering injustice and human harm. Her social attitude was an image of service to another human being.

Educational work with adults

In the last years of the 19th century Stefania Sempołowska joined the activities carried out in the Warsaw Group for Popular Education, and then the Women's Group for Popular Education. She financially and organizationally contributed to the establishment in Warsaw in the 1890s of a rental of school equipment, which was used by private Polish schools until 1901. As a result of her educational work, she became a close collaborator and friend of Bolesław Hirsztfeld. In the Association, together with, among others, Kasylda

Kulikowska, Rozalia Brzezińska, Faustyna Morzycka and Wanda Umińska, she led the organizational and lecture work, engaging in a movement aimed at popularizing knowledge among women. The activity of the Association focused on conducting secret teaching of youth and adults, providing them with books, in order to “(...) help the people and facilitate our access to them” (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, 1960, p. 52). As a member of the pedagogical section of the Association, she conducted classes for teachers from rural areas. She also helped in completing library sets for the participants of the courses. The educational activity of S. Sempołowska was often intertwined with her social activity (Karcz, 2000, p. 29). After the year 1899 Sempołowska's efforts in the rural educational movement and among the students of government seminars and active folk teachers intensified.

In her socio-educational activity she was also engaged in the supplementary education of folk teachers and educational activists working in rural areas. She was a teacher at courses organized during holidays and helped to prepare small libraries for them. In fulfilling the will of her close friend Bolesław Hirszfeld, who donated a significant part of his estate for the educational purposes, she generously supported the folk high school in Pszczelin run by Jadwiga Dziubińska (Mazurkowa, Wyszomirska, 1968). She also contributed to the development of a didactic and educational concepts for this institution, which was to have an impact on the development of culture in rural areas.

The revolutionary movement in 1905 brought about a new impulse to the educational work carried out among the people by newly established educational organizations. The need for education was born in the society. To meet this need, Sempołowska suggested in November 1905 to organize a network of courses for adult illiterates. In order to mobilize forces and raise funds for this action, on Sempołowska's initiative the Association of Courses for Adult Illiterates (1905–1908) was established and began to operate using volunteers, organizing courses of primary education in the working-class districts of Warsaw and its surroundings. In June 1906 the Association was legalized by authorities. Bolesław Prus became the president of the association, and its board, besides Sempołowska, consisted of: W. Weychertówna, J. Cichińska, J. Unslicht, M. Rotwandowa, J. Kurtz. The statute of the association stipulates its non-partisan position. It was open to people of various political orientations who wanted to obtain a basis for further education. It was therefore, as Sempołowska and Weychertówna called it, an “institution of independent education” (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa, 1981, p. 77). At the same time, she participated in the establishment and management of other educational institutions, by giving lectures in branches of the Polish Culture Socie-

ty. Sempołowska's favorite form of educational and pedagogical activity were trips organized for youth and adults. "For more than 20 years – she writes in 1938 – I was a Warsaw guide for tourists from rural areas (...) Visiting the city played an important role in our work as an educational, cultural, social and political factor" (Gąsiorowska, 1960, p. 26).

There was also the University for All (1906–1908), founded by the Warsaw intelligentsia, such as L. Krzywicki, S. Posner and Sempołowska. The University was established under the slogan "Knowledge is power" and its initiators intended it to be an educational institution for the working class. The main form of activity was lectures "for everyone" and regular lectures organized at the factories. In 1908 the University was liquidated by the police authorities and the main activists, in agreement with the Polish Culture Society, established the so-called V Division, which continued the work of the University for All in its former forms, but with certain limitations resulting from political repression. N. Gąsiorowska writes: "Sempołowska, who participated in the founding and managing of this University, had a great influence on the ideological character of this semi-official institution which served workers" (1960, p. 27). When, as a result of the disclosure of the ideological nature of the V Division of the Polish Culture Society was also liquidated, she became involved in the creation of the Society for the Propagation of Industrial and Commercial Knowledge, becoming its active and influential member from the beginning of its existence until the end, which came after the outbreak of the First World War.

Until the beginning of the First World War, Stefania Sempołowska's time was completely filled with both paid work, mainly teaching youth in schools and in private classes, as well as various educational and social activities. She was involved in the women's movement, in the teacher's labour movement, in multiple cultural, educational and social care institutions.

In the times of national oppression, Sempołowska's educational work in the Polish society was mainly aimed at protecting the mother tongue, native culture, history and tradition against Russification. It is evident in Sempołowska's life that the factor that stimulated and encouraged her educational activity was the revolutionary movement of 1905, which intensified her educational work, especially among workers.

Sempołowska's educational work during the partitions provided models of action and examples of solutions in the independent Poland. In the interwar period, she fought for the universal education and democratization of schools, she was active in the works of the Polish Teachers' Association.

With the change of political and social circumstances and events, the direction of thoughts and aspirations in the matter of education changed as well, but this issue always had an important place and was always treated as a national and political problem. Education was justly regarded as an important factor in public life, inextricably linked to it by the mutual influence of: schools on social life, socio-political life on schools. The idea of school reform was always part of the reformatory programme in our country; on the other hand, the main idea of school reformers was always the civic idea (Sempołowska, 1962, p. 95).

Piotr Gołdyn stresses that Sempołowska did not belong to any party, but was considered to be a representative of the extreme left, which made it very difficult for her to find a job in education after Poland regained independence (Gołdyn, 2016, p. 166). She was involved in the works of the National Parliament of Teachers (Sejm Nauczycielski) in 1919, where she opted for education based on universality, uniformity and gratuitousness. She insisted on separating religion from education.

Conclusions

The socio-educational activity of Stefania Sempołowska was shaped in two different historical eras – in the period of national captivity and during the Second Polish Republic. She was educated during the last years of the 19th century, and her professional and social activity took place in the first 40 years of the 20th century, that is, in the period of such important historical events as the 1905–1907 revolution, the First World War, Poland's regaining of independence after 123 years of national captivity.

Throughout her entire career, Sempołowska was involved in socio-educational work. Her work was aimed at improving the education and culture of the society, its moral development, and was based on the conviction that in this way she can most effectively serve her nation, ensuring its development and independent existence.

Stefania Sempołowska's life was a constant struggle against injustice and social harm. This social attitude was reflected both in her pedagogical activity as well as in all forms of help she provided to the persecuted and harmed. For thirty-five years she was looking after political prisoners. Although Stefania Sempołowska was not a member of any party, she remained committed to the fighters' cause until the end of her life.

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