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Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina: A 20th-Century „Strongwoman”¹

Abstract

Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina (1887–1970) was a Polish writer, social and educational activist, and populariser of the history and culture of Warmia and Masuria. During the interwar period in Warsaw, she was active in many societies, helped victims of World War I, was the organizer of the Masurian Museum and the Teacher Training College in Działdowo, as well as the Agricultural School in Malinowo. After the war, she settled in Olsztyn, where until her death in 1970 she held the position of secretary-general and director of the Masurian Institute. She was also very active as a populariser and writer, publishing hundreds of articles and books, delivering hundreds of lectures for students and pupils. She studied the history and culture of the region, cared for the indigenous people, and sought to restore the memory of unknown Masurian activists. For many years she was also the editor of “Gazeta Mazurska” (1923–1933), “Kalendarz dla Mazurów” (1924–1938), and “Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie” (1957–1965). She fought for the Polish identity of the inhabitants of the region and the historical awareness of Poles about Warmia and Masuria. She dedicated her whole life to this.

Keywords: Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, Warmia and Mazury, popularization of history and culture, socio-educational activities

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EMILIA SUKERTOWA-BIEDRAWINA – „SIŁACZKA” XX WIEKU**Streszczenie**

Polska pisarka i działaczka społeczno-oświatowa oraz popularyzatorka Warmii i Mazur, urodzona w 1887 r. w Łodzi. W okresie międzywojennym w Warszawie udzielała się w wielu towarzystwach, pomagała ofiarom I wojny światowej, była organizatorką Muzeum Mazurskiego i Seminarium Nauczycielskiego w Działdowie, a także Szkoły Rolniczej w Malinowie. Po wojnie osiedliła się w Olsztynie, gdzie aż do śmierci w 1970 r. piastowała stanowisko sekretarza generalnego oraz kierownika Instytutu Mazurskiego. Była bardzo aktywna również jako popularyzatorka i pisarka, opublikowała kilkadziesiąt artykułów i książek, wygłosiła setki wykładów dla uczniów i studentów. Badła historię i kulturę regionu, dbała o autochtonów, starała się o przywrócenie pamięci nieznanym działaczom mazurskich. Przez wiele lat była też redaktorem „Gazety Mazurskiej” (1923–1933), „Kalendarza dla Mazurów” (1924–1938), „Komunikatów Mazursko-Warmińskich” (1957–1965). Walczyła o polskość mieszkańców regionu i świadomość historyczną Polaków na temat Warmii i Mazur. Poświęciła temu całe swoje życie.

Słowa kluczowe: Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, Warmia i Mazury, popularyzacja historii i kultury, działania społeczno-oświatowe

Introduction

This study discusses the achievements of Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, beginning with the pre-World War I period until the 1970s. The “strongwoman” in the title draws on Stefan Żeromski’s eponymous short story², so as to highlight the labours of our protagonist, who devoted her entire personal life to others.

The “strongwoman” figure, introduced into literature by Żeromski, is invoked mainly by literary scholars in the biographies of distinguished women who fought against Russification and contributed in various fields of social, cultural and educational activity. One of those is Faustyna Morzycka, who, as a writer, propagator of regional, historical and literary knowledge, educational activist, and Polish language teacher, became the prototype for Stanisława Bozowska, the main character in Żeromski’s novella. Just as Sukertowa-Biedrawina, she studied at a private boarding school in Warsaw. She had numerous interests, including literary

² Stefan Żeromski, *Siłaczka*, (Warszawa–Kraków: Wydawnictwo J. Morkowicza, 1935).

and socio-cultural ones. After passing her secondary school examination in 1882 (Sukertowa passed hers in 1904), she obtained a teaching certificate, which entitled her to work as a private tutor. As a woman of letters, she adapted the works of outstanding writers for the needs of the common people, publishing adaptations and abridged versions of selected books. In an accessible form, she described the history, customs and geographical conditions of other countries. Sukertowa, on the other hand, introduced her readers to the history and geography of the borderlands of the Republic of Poland, later focusing her attention for many years on Masuria. Both women also engaged with biographies, using the lives of famous figures to convey the qualities and ideals worthy of emulation. To honour the achievements of Faustyna Morzycka and Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, two libraries in post-war Poland were named after them: the Municipal Public Library in Nałęczów and the Voivodeship Public Library in Olsztyn.³

Another parallel of our protagonist is Maria Rychter, born the same year (1887) as Sukertowa. Both attended private boarding schools and then a Russian secondary school that prepared them for their final exams. In 1904, Maria became involved in an illegal self-education club, where young people read Polish books. Emilia joined a similar club a year later. In early 1905, Maria took part in a school strike in Łomża, and Emilia in Warsaw. Both called for the introduction of the Polish language in schools and administration, as well as the abolition of the police system. Maria Rychter was arrested by the gendarmerie and expelled from school for her participation in the strike. It remains unknown what reprisals Emilia faced, but we do know that from September 1905, both attended humanities courses in Warsaw. Emilia first attended the Flying University, which later transformed into the Society for Scientific Courses, where Maria also enrolled. It is not unlikely that they met there in person. Although later they followed different paths in terms of education, after the end of World War I, both worked to promote education and reading by establishing libraries, for instance. They also wrote for newspapers and acted as editors of various periodicals. Furthermore, both contributed in the women's

³ Beata Wałęciuk-Dejneka, „Oświecać lud, szerzyć kulturę, budzić zakrzepłe serca... Faustyna Morzycka – samotna siłaczka”, w: Joanna Posłuszna (red.), *Siła samotności: zjawisko kobiecej samotności w kulturze i edukacji*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Aureus, 2015), 65–74; eadem, *Morzycka Faustyna*, <https://zapomnianepisarkipolskie.uws.edu.pl/pisarki?view=article&id=22:morzycka-faustyna&catid=20:pisarki> [access: 1.08.2025].

movement: Emilia in the Association of Polish Women White Collar Workers, and Maria in the Women's Civic Work Union. During the Nazi occupation, they stayed temporarily in Warsaw. Maria Rycher died in 1975, five years after Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina.⁴

The biographies of numerous women at the turn of the 20th century share the same elements. The research question of this study is as follows: Can Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina be considered a 20th-century "strongwoman"? In what ways was this strength manifested? What did this woman manage to achieve in the fields of scholarship, culture, and education during the interwar period in the Działdowo region and in the post-war years in Warmia and Masuria? To date, no one has asked such a question, merely discussing her life and activities. The work is divided into four periods. The introduction discusses her childhood and youth, while the subsequent sections focus on the interwar and post-war periods. The times of German occupation are presented fairly briefly, as no sources have survived. At the time, our protagonist wandered around Poland under a changed name, without any apparent involvement in social undertakings. The sources and literature concerning Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina are extensive and will be cited selectively below. No AI tools were employed in this study.

Emilia was born on 29 January 1887 as the eldest of three children of Hugo Zachert and Wiktoria, née Gundelach.⁵ Her father, of German origin, was a manufacturer in Łódź, whereas her mother came from a Polish family of Warsaw industrialists. After her husband's passing, Wiktoria moved to Warsaw with her children. It was here that her passion for sightseeing was born, as she spent her holidays with her family in what is now the Ojców National Park. Numerous hiking trips prompted her to write down the local legends, fairy tales, as well as the history of the areas she visited. Later, this resulted in publications describing, among other things, the castle in Ojców and Pieskowa Skała.⁶

⁴ Małgorzata Dajnowicz, Maria Bauchrowicz-Tocka and Wiesław Wróbel, *Słownik biograficzny kobiet kultury. Białystok i województwo podlaskie*, cz. 2, (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Humanica, 2018), 81–86.

⁵ The Northern Institute in Olsztyn (hereafter as IP), file no. PTH-R 158, E. Sukertowa-Biedrawina, Response to Lifetime Achievement and Work Questionnaire, 1966, 1.

⁶ Emilia Sukertowa, *Zamek w Ojcowie*, (Warszawa: Skład Główny w Księgarni Gebethnera i Wolffa), 1922; Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina 1887–1970. Zarys biograficzny*, (Olsztyn: Pojezierze, 1978), 187.

At first, Emilia attended a private boarding school in Łódź, and then a Russian secondary school in Warsaw. There, she passed her secondary school exams and obtained the qualifications of a home teacher. In effect, she was able to contribute in clandestine teaching of workers' children. As early as 1905, she took part in a school strike, and after the revolution she worked in the secret education system until the outbreak of World War I. Over the following years, she attended various courses and lectures on Polish history and literature. The next stage was the Conti School of Fine Arts, which Zachertówna did not complete, however. In 1910, at the urging of her family, she went to Vienna to study at the Export Academy. Still, she was not passionate about this either and returned to Warsaw after two years with a certificate as a teacher of the German language and German commercial correspondence.⁷

In 1912, Emilia Zachert married Stanisław Sukert, a merchant from Warsaw, nineteen years her senior. In 1914, she gave birth to her first daughter, Wanda.⁸

Involvement in societies and associations in the interwar period

Given her interest in local history, culture and landscapes, Zachertówna attended meetings of the Polish Sightseeing Society as a teenager and then became involved in the feminist movement. She was a member of the Women's Equal Rights Society in Warsaw, which later operated legally as the Association of Polish Women White Collar Workers. During World War I, Emilia Sukertowa co-founded the Society for the Care of War Victims, whose aim was to support prisoners of war and their families.⁹

After the war, as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, it was decided that a plebiscite would be held in Warmia, Masuria and Powiśle. Sukertowa then entered into collaboration with the Association of Polish Evangelicals, joining its board and becoming its treasurer. She became deeply involved in pro-Polish activities prior to the plebiscite, organising courses for native Masurians, looking after Masurian excursions in Warsaw, and meeting with Masurian

⁷ IP, sygn. PTH-R 158, E. Sukertowa-Biedrawina, Odpowiedź na ankietę, 1.

⁸ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 23.

⁹ Ibidem, 19, 23.

activists. All of this required her to devote her own time and to demonstrate considerable courage. She also authored a proclamation from Polish Evangelicals to Masurian Evangelicals entitled *Bracia Mazurzy (Brother Masurians)*, in which she tried to convince the Masurians to side with Poland.¹⁰ With the plebiscite lost, the Association turned its attention to the part of East Prussia that had been incorporated into Poland, namely the Działdowo region, where Sukertowa was sent to do social work.

Since 1921, Emilia Sukertowa was also active in the Union for the Defence of the Western Borderlands. She travelled to the border regions of the Republic of Poland to give lectures on Masurian topics and supply Polish literature and newspapers. At that time she had a seven-year-old daughter, yet she still found the strength and determination to leave home for long journeys in order to pursue her primary goal of raising interest among the inhabitants of the borderlands in the Masurian lands. She was interested in the history of the cities and towns she visited and their historical landmarks, describing all that and publishing her texts in multi-part articles and reports in Polish newspapers. In this manner, she raised awareness among Poles that their compatriots lived just across the border.¹¹ In hindsight, we know now that the pro-Polish portrayal of the history and culture of Masuria was not very objective. Sukertowa exaggerated Polish influence and downplayed both the distinct Masurian identity and the considerable German influence, asserting that the latter amounted to Germanisation of the Polish people. Therefore, though her efforts must be approached somewhat critically today, one should simultaneously respect her utter dedication to the Polish cause in Masuria.

Political and awareness-raising activities for the Masurians after World War I

Often enough, our protagonist was simultaneously involved in multiple political and propaganda activities. For instance, she undertook an ultimately unsuccessful trip to East Prussia (22–30 July 1923). Sukertowa decided to leave the country to get to know

¹⁰ Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, *Dawno a niedawno. Wspomnienia*, (Olsztyn: Pojezierze, 1965), 41–42.

¹¹ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 60–61.

the Masurian people and the region better, as well as to access Prussian libraries and archives so as to collect historical material. The trip was very well organised, but regrettably, Sukertowa was detained immediately after crossing the border. She was accused of document forgery and attempted espionage.¹² However, our protagonist demonstrated courage and determination in defending herself against these accusations. The matter was referred to the court in Olsztyn, which decided to release her on bail. Upon returning to Poland, she filed a complaint with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, which investigated the case for two and a half years. The prosecution proceedings ended with the dismissal of the court case against Sukertowa, but the charge of agitation was not dropped.¹³ Thus, the activist could no longer apply for re-entry into Germany and was thus confined to conducting her awareness-raising activities in her own country.

The board of the Association of Polish Evangelicals, which saw the need for a constant outreach in Masuria through the printed word, entrusted Sukertowa with the editing of *Gazeta Mazurska* [*The Masuria Gazette*] (1922–1933) and *Kalendarz dla Mazurów* [*Calendar for Masurians*] (1924–1938). Still, she was not only the editor, but also the secretary and proofreader, while due to limited funds, all of those roles were honorary. Emilia managed nonetheless, because her husband, Stanisław Sukert, was an affluent man and was able to afford his wife's charitable activities. Both periodicals featured texts from various fields: religious, historical (mainly concerned with the history of the Masurian region), political (including news from Poland and abroad), ethnographic (discussing Masurian material culture and folklore), works by folk poets, household advice, as well as dates of fairs and markets held throughout the year in all Prussian regions. There were also short religious reflections and Old Prussian proverbs that enjoyed popularity among the Masurians. Sukertowa wrote most of the texts herself, but she also invited activists from East Prussia and the Działdowo region to contribute. The periodicals were disseminated both in Poland and in East Prussia.¹⁴

¹² State Archives in Olsztyn (hereinafter as APO), file. No. 261, case file, 801–805.

¹³ Janusz Jasiński, „Z działalności Emilii Sukertowej-Biedrawiny”, *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 2–3, 1971, 191–196.

¹⁴ Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, „Kulisy wydawnicze «Gazety Mazurskiej» i «Kalendarza dla Mazurów»”, *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 3, 1965, 381–430.

Another means to achieve political and propaganda goals was cooperation with regional and national authorities. First, one had to draw the attention of Stanisław Wachowiak, the voivode of Pomerania, to the problems of the Działdowo Masurians. Assisted by Emilia Sukertowa, he developed a programme to improve religious and national relations in Działdowo and the surrounding area.¹⁵ Since this failed to bring the expected results, Sukertowa raised the issue on a broader forum. At her urging and thanks to her persistent efforts, the Association of Polish Evangelicals in Warsaw organised an official celebration dedicated to the Prussian Masurians in March 1925. Such figures as Bolesław Limanowski, a senator of the Republic of Poland and activist of the Polish Socialist Party, and Professor Stanisław Srokowski, a geographer and expert on Masuria, attended the ceremony.¹⁶

One of the major areas of Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina's lifelong work was writing popular and awareness-raising literature. All of the oeuvre related to Masuria can be grouped into six thematic areas: the history of the Polish movement in Masuria; the history of Polish education in Masuria; the history of Polish literature in East Prussia; regional biographies; ethnographic and folkloric issues; and current Masurian affairs.¹⁷

Contributions to regional knowledge, organisational and community work in interwar Działdowo

Emilia Sukertowa became associated with Działdowo in 1921. She began with co-organising a teacher training college for the Masurian youth. Over 13 years of living in Warsaw, she would come to Działdowo two days a week to carry out her duties. Even so, she did not become a teacher at the college, as she valued her independence and involvement in multiple fields. In addition, she was unable to take up permanent employment, especially as she was pregnant and her second daughter, Bożena, was born in August 1921.¹⁸

¹⁵ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 66.

¹⁶ National Digital Archives, file No. 3/1/0/6/2852/1, Address of Senator Bolesław Limanowski. Also pictured is the editor of "Gazeta Mazurska", Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, 1925.

¹⁷ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 78–88.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 29.

The birth of her second child did not prevent her from trying to establish the Masurian People's House in Działdowo. This was not an easy task, as it was necessary to obtain funds for the purchase and renovation of a suitable building from the Ministry of Public Works in Warsaw. What others had failed to accomplish, she – a determined woman – was able to achieve. Opened in December 1922, the People's House became a cultural centre for the inhabitants of Działdowo, especially for the Masurians, who could meet here, participate in events, debate and read Polish literature. The latter was a priority for Emilia Sukertowa, who ensured that the college and various schools in the Działdowo district were equipped with Polish-language library sections.¹⁹

In 1925, Sukertowa also organised cooking and dressmaking courses for girls in Działdowo, for which she managed to raise funds from the Ministry of Agriculture. It should be noted that this was a difficult period for the young Polish state, which had regained independence after 123 years of subjugation to other countries. The economic crisis, monetary reform and the ensuing chaos meant that obtaining subsidies was quite difficult. The initial courses for girls were also extended to include boys, and as a result, the state authorities decided to build a modern facility and establish an agricultural school there. The school in nearby Malinowo was opened in 1930 and served to educate young people from Masuria, Warmia and Powiśle. The building still houses an educational institution: the Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina School Complex.²⁰

While in Działdowo, Emilia Sukertowa did not neglect her passion for regional knowledge. During her numerous hiking trips, she explored the district from end to end, learning about Masurian architecture, life and customs. The local population gifted her with numerous items, which she collected in her flat, leading to the idea of establishing a regional museum in Działdowo. To this end, she contacted one of the societies in Lviv, from which she obtained artefacts relating to the Battle of Grunwald. She also gained the support of the Department of Art at the Ministry of Religion and Public Enlightenment and the Chief Conservation Officer for Pre-historic Monuments, Professor Roman Jakimowicz, who donated part of his collection to the museum. July 1927 saw the opening of

¹⁹ IP, sygn. PTH R-158, Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, Odpowiedź na ankietę, 2.

²⁰ Zespół Szkół im. Emilii Sukertowej-Biedrawiny w Malinowie, <https://zsmalinowo.edu-page.org/> [access: 1.08.2025].

the Masurian Museum. As the editor of *Gazeta Mazurska*, Sukertowa systematically promoted the idea of a museum and encouraged readers to donate artefacts of Masurian folk art.²¹ Students of the teacher training college, whom Sukertowa encouraged to form a Regional Interest Club, were another group of donors. Members of the Club combined their explorations of local history and culture with collecting artefacts to hand over to the museum.²² The young people also wrote down Masurian fairy tales and legends that they had heard, which Sukertowa-Biedrawina then printed in *Kalendarz dla Mazurów*.²³

Such great commitment to the development of Działdowo had much to do with her personal life, as she fell in love with Józef Biedrawa, the director of the teacher training college. Having been widowed in February 1927, Sukertowa was able to marry him in April 1928.²⁴

World War II

In the early 1930s, Sukertowa-Biedrawina's involvement began to decline, as a group of young, nationally conscious Masurians became active in Działdowo. In 1935, they founded a thoroughly native organisation—the Masurian Union—to which they did not invite Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, her husband, or other Poles who had been working for many years for the benefit of the Działdowo Masurians.²⁵ On the last day before the outbreak of World War II, the Biedrawas left Działdowo for Warsaw and wandered around various towns until the end of the war, including Chełm, Lublin, Chmielnik in the Kielce region, Konstantynów nad Bugiem, Biała Podlaska, Krosno, Jasło, and Nowy Sącz. In April 1944, Józef Biedrawa died following a serious illness. Earlier, Emilia had lost her younger brothers, who were killed as officers in the Polish army. In March 1945, she reached the ruined city of Warsaw, but she was drawn to Działdowo. She was not well received there,

²¹ Janusz Jasiński, „Z działalności”, 95.

²² Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, „Muzeum Mazurskie w Działdowie a młodzież”, *Ziemia*, nr 4, 1930, 76.

²³ Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, „Seminarium w Działdowie a Muzeum Mazurskie”, *Kurier Warszawski*, nr 312, 14.11.1931, 8–9.

²⁴ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 49.

²⁵ Andrzej Chojnowski, „Związek Mazurów w Działdowie (1935–1936)”, *Przegląd Historyczny*, z. 2, 1975, 217–237.

so she stayed for a few days near Działdowo with her daughter's in-laws, Bożena. She returned to Nowy Sącz, where her mother, daughter and grandson were still living. However, when her son-in-law took his wife and son to Olsztyn, Sukertowa decided to follow them, bringing her mother along.²⁶

Organisational work at the Masurian Institute after World War II

In September 1945, Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina was offered the position of secretary and director of the Masurian Institute, a research facility established by the Germans in occupied Poland in 1943. The functioning of the Institute may be divided into several periods, during which the role and importance of our protagonist remained unchanged. From 1945 to 1948, it was an independent scientific and research institution run by an association. Unfortunately, issues with funding, premises, and staff, along with the centralisation processes characteristic of socialist science at that time, ultimately led to its merger with the Institute for Western Affairs. Within this structure, the Masurian Institute functioned as a Scientific Station from 1948 to 1953.²⁷ In early 1953, the attempts to reorganise the Institute for Western Affairs once again threatened the existence of the Scientific Station in Olsztyn. Biedrawina fought for her own livelihood and continued operating the library, which had taken such a great effort to create. It was therefore decided that the Scientific Station would be incorporated into the Polish Historical Society. The Masurian Institute functioned as part of the latter until 1963, when it was merged with a new research institution, the Wojciech Kętrzyński Research Centre in Olsztyn. Two years later, Sukertowa-Biedrawina retired. The Masurian Institute was never formally dissolved; some find it to have been associated with her death (1970), while others maintain it was due to the retirement of her successor, Bohdan Koziello-Poklewski (1990).²⁸

²⁶ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 91–94.

²⁷ Izabela Lewandowska, „Instytut Mazurski w Olsztynie w świetle źródeł Archiwum Zakładowego Instytutu Zachodniego w Poznaniu. Sytuacja organizacyjno-finansowa (1948–1953)”, *Przegląd Zachodni*, nr 3, 2022, 217–231.

²⁸ Eadem, „Instytut Mazurski jako instytucja nauki. Postulaty badawcze. Kalendarium”, w: Witold Gieszczyński, Wiesław Bolesław Łach, Karol Sacewicz (red.), *Historia i pamięć. Studia z dziejów XX wieku*, (Olsztyn: Instytut Historii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie), 2011, 95–113.

One of our protagonist's crucial achievements in the early post-war years was creating a library and supplying it with resources. In accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and Art, all cultural assets – a including post-German archival and library collections – in the so-called regained territories, i.e. the western and northern regions of post-war Poland, were to be safeguarded. For many months, E. Sukertowa-Biedrawina ventured into the field and brought what she managed to find to her institution to save it from looters, unaware settlers, or other researchers from Poland (Toruń, Warsaw). She would often work in the cold, with her feet in the mud, to extract books from the rubble or rubbish dumps. Sometimes the books were wet, so she dried them in the attic, turning the pages every day. Occasionally, she returned to the same sites several times, literally “wrenching” valuable copies from the hands of school principals (e.g. in Bartoszyce) or local history enthusiasts (e.g. in Kętrzyn). One of the most telling episodes was her obtaining permission from a Soviet military commandant, residing in the former villa of Suckow in Olsztyn, to search his headquarters and take the books stored there. This was a major success of Sukertowa-Biedrawina, demonstrating her fearlessness even in the face of the Soviet military authorities of the time. During her expeditions, she had to take each volume in hand and decide whether it concerned history, art, or other subjects.²⁹ In this manner, she reviewed and selected several thousand volumes for the Masurian Institute library, thus laying the foundations for its scientific profile.

Another important achievement was the discovery and ensuring protection of the graves of Masurian activists. One of them was Gustaw Gizewiusz, an Evangelical pastor and defender of the Polish language in Masuria. After an extensive search in various cemeteries, she found his grave in Ostróda. The second was Bogumił Linka, a Masurian activist from Szczytno who the Germans killed before the plebiscite in 1920. His grave was destroyed during the war, but Biedrawina interviewed Linka's widow, analysed cemetery maps and found the burial site, which in the post-war years had become a location of rubbish disposal. Another figure was the pre-war Masurian folk poet Michał Kajka. After the war, Biedrawina explored the area

²⁹ Eadem, „Zabezpieczanie zbiorów bibliotecznych w pierwszych latach po zakończeniu II wojny światowej na terenie Warmii i Mazur”, w: Zoja Jaroszewicz-Pieresławcew, Danuta Konieczna (red.), *Zabytkowe zbiory biblioteczne w województwie warmińsko-mazurskim. Stan zachowania*, (Olsztyn: Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna, 2015), 12–36.

in Masuria where he lived and worked. She located his grave and the cottage he had built on his own in the village of Ogródek near Elk. She also travelled to Węgorzewo, where she found the grave and epitaph of Jerzy Andrzej Helwing, an 18th-century botanist who described the flora of Masuria, in the Evangelical cemetery. The numerous field trips were guided by the idea of restoring the memory of these figures and incorporating them into the collective memory of the new inhabitants of Warmia and Masuria.

Educational and awareness-raising activities for Masuria and the Masurians in post-war Poland

Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina attached great importance to educational and awareness-raising undertakings. One of her first tasks was to help establish the Masurian People's University in Rudziska Pasymskie and the Warmian People's University near Morąg. For two years, she would give lectures to the young people there. She also contributed as a lecturer at Masurian studies courses organised in 1946–1948 by, e.g., the School District Board in Olsztyn, the Masurian Institute and the History Teaching Centre. Several hundred participants attended the courses in question. Furthermore, she taught the history of Warmia and Masuria at the Academy of Law and Administration and the College of Law and Administration in Olsztyn, both branches of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

Sukertowa-Biedrawina also collaborated with the Polish Sightseeing Society, of which she was a member, giving almost a hundred two-hour lectures on Masuria and Warmia to Poles on holiday in the Olsztyn area. She introduced several dozen students from the Institute of History at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Łódź to the history and culture of the region. She delivered a lecture on the Polishness of Masuria and Warmia to 400 scouts from Łódź staying at a summer camp in the village of Dajtki near Olsztyn.³⁰ In 1948, the branch of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the Olsztyn branch of the Polish Sightseeing Society launched a series

³⁰ Archives of the Institute for Western Affairs in Poznań (hereinafter as AZIZ), file no. 062.1, Activity Report of the Scientific Station of the Institute for Western Affairs (Masurian Institute) for 1.07–1.10.1949, Olsztyn 28.09.1949, 44.

of “public lectures” on local history, in which Biedrawina contributed as well.³¹ In addition, tourist guides would also learn from Sukertowa-Biedrawina about Masuria during dedicated lectures.

The public showed great interest in the history of the region. School trips from both Olsztyn and other cities in the voivodeship continued to visit the Institute, while Biedrawina showed them old prints and manuscripts, acquainted them with the history of the region, and answered questions from students who did not understand the pre-war German history of these regions.³²

The activist also found it worthwhile to organise exhibitions about Polish influences in Masuria and Warmia. Those were intended for a broad audience, as well as organised groups of soldiers and students. The exhibitions served to raise awareness among both the local population and those who came to settle there. As early as December 1945, an exhibition of memorabilia and plebiscite prints was opened, while Biedrawina gave 55 related lectures and talks for schools, organisations and the general public. In May 1946, the Nicolaus Copernicus Exhibition opened, for which Biedrawina compiled a catalogue-guide.³³ Another exhibition, launched in January 1947, was the *Show of Masurian Prints from the 16th to the 20th Century*. An illustrated catalogue accompanied it, yet again compiled by Sukertowa-Biedrawina with funding from the Ministry of Regained Territories.³⁴ The subsequent exhibition prepared by Sukertowa-Biedrawina—*Fighters for Freedom and Polishness in Masuria and Warmia*—was held in 1952. Two years later, the head of the Masurian Institute Science Station put together an exhibition entitled *The Development of Cartographic Images of Masuria and Warmia* and, the following year, collaborated with Tadeusz Grygier to present *Activists of the Mickiewicz Period single in Masuria and Warmia*. Working with the latter, Biedrawina showed yet another exhibition, *The Struggle for Social and National Liberation of the Population of Masuria and*

³¹ Władysław Ogrodziński, Anna Andrusikiewicz and Piotr Grabowski, „Śladami Mieczysława Orłowicza (od krajoznawstwa do zorganizowanej turystyki)”, w: Stanisław Achremczyk, Władysław Ogrodziński, *Olsztyn 1945–2005. Kultura i nauka*, (Olsztyn: Ośrodek Badań Naukowych, 2006), 94.

³² Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, „Ze wspomnień redaktora «Komunikatów»”, *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 2, 1968, 323–334.

³³ Eadem, „Wystawa Kopernikowska w Olsztynie w 1946 roku”, *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 1, 1966, 172–177.

³⁴ Eadem (oprac.), *Katalog druków mazurskich XVI–XX wieku*, (Olsztyn: Instytut Mazurski), 1947.

Warmia, which opened in 1956.³⁵ Her activity in the fields of education and popularisation was immense, at times exceeding what might be expected of a single individual.

Popularising and scientific activity after World War II

The researcher did not stop at establishing the library and showing exhibitions, but also took up publishing. Her greatest achievement is the editing and publication of *Komunikaty Działu Informacji Naukowej* (*Communications of the Scientific Information Department*), with a total of 18 issues published between 1946 and 1950. After 1956, she managed to resume publication of the journal, which remains in circulation today as *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* and enjoys a considerable reputation. E. Sukertowa-Biedrawina was initially the secretary of the periodical and, between 1958 and 1970, its editor-in-chief.³⁶

The director of the Masurian Institute devoted much time to conducting research for various institutions and researchers from all over Poland. The Institute's reports contain detailed information showing that in 1949-1950 she searched for and supplied material such as literature and documents, to e.g. the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland in the case of Erich Koch, *Oberpräsident* of East Prussia; the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Kraków; the National Library in Warsaw; the Institute for Western Affairs in Poznań; the Ethnological Society in Lublin; the Voivodeship National Council in Olsztyn; the authorities of the Polish United Workers' Party in Olsztyn; the editorial offices of various magazines and newspapers, individual researchers from Kraków, Kętrzyn, Elk, and others.³⁷ For the aforementioned institutions and private individuals, within less than two years she conducted a survey of nearly a thousand items in the library of the Masurian Institute – an effort that may rightly be regarded as titanic.

Throughout the post-war period, E. Sukertowa-Biedrawina was also a tireless writer, publicist, populariser and scholar.³⁸ She

³⁵ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 132, 136–137.

³⁶ Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, „Ze wspomnień redaktora”, 323–334.

³⁷ AZIZ, file no. 062.1, Activity Reports of the Scientific Station of the Institute for Western Affairs (Masurian Institute) for 1949–1950.

³⁸ Izabela Lewandowska, „Ludzie nauki: Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina (1887–1970) – pionierka badań regionalnych na Warmii i Mazurach”, w: Małgorzata Dajnowicz, Diana

discussed the history and culture of Masuria and Warmia, including the Spring of Nations in East Prussia, the arrival of the Philippians and Arians, the struggle for the Polish language, and the activities of the Bund Deutscher Osten. In addition, her texts explored the history of cities and towns as well as ethnography: folk culture, fairy tales and legends, customs, and songs. She attached considerable importance to regional biographies, publishing articles on a number of historical figures, as well as a collective work entitled *Bojownicy o wolność i polskość Mazur i Warmii na przestrzeni siedmiu wieków* (*Fighters for the freedom and Polishness of Masuria and Warmia over Seven Centuries*).³⁹ A lot of time and energy went into compiling her *Bibliografia Mazur i Warmii* (*Bibliography of Masuria and Warmia*).⁴⁰

Although the fact is perhaps little known, she was also a prolific letter writer. Approximately 3,500 of her letters have been preserved – both official and private – though even the latter were mostly concerned with professional matters. Approximately 2,230 letters may be found in the collections of the State Archives in Olsztyn, around 1,100 letters are kept in the special collection of the Northern Institute in Olsztyn, while the archive of the Zygmunt Wojciechowski Institute for Western Affairs has preserved some 80 letters. Several dozen more are scattered in private collections, libraries and museums.⁴¹ An analysis of these letters shows that E. Sukertowa-Biedrawina organised scholarly work in the field of history, managed library activities, prepared exhibitions, invited guest lecturers, and undertook many other responsibilities. She bore the full burden of these tasks and proved indispensable in carrying them out.

Dajnowicz-Piesiecka, Justyna Zajko-Czochańska (red.), *Kobiety. Kultura – życie publiczne – prawo*, (Białystok: Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy, 2023), 89–114.

³⁹ Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, *Bojownicy o wolność i polskość Mazur i Warmii na przestrzeni siedmiu wieków*, (Olsztyn: Stacja Naukowa Instytutu Zachodniego. Instytut Mazurski, 1954).

⁴⁰ Eadem, *Bibliografia Mazur i Warmii w okresie dziesięciolecia 1945–1955*, (Olsztyn: Stacja Naukowa Polskiego Towarzystwa Historycznego, 1960); eadem, *Bibliografia Mazur i Warmii w okresie lat 1956–1960*, (Olsztyn: Stacja Naukowa Polskiego Towarzystwa Historycznego, 1964).

⁴¹ Izabela Lewandowska, *Źródła do biografii Emilii Sukertowej-Biedrawiny (dokumenty urzędowe, korespondencja, wspomnienia)*, lecture delivered at the Institute of Women's Studies in Białystok, 29.07.2025, forthcoming.

Activities as part of the Polish Historical Society and other associations in the People's Republic of Poland

In addition to her professional work at the Masurian Institute, Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina began to contribute in various associations. One in which she contributed the most was the Polish Historical Society (PTH), whose Olsztyn branch was established in May 1948. She immediately became a member of the board and, in the following years, vice-president.⁴² The first task she undertook was to compile biograms of prominent figures from the Warmia-Masuria region, which she then passed on to the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Krakow. In total, she authored 99 biographical summaries.⁴³

For several years (1949–1952), the PTH branch in Olsztyn faced a crisis due to the Stalinist period's difficulties, insufficient premises and funding, and the inability to publish historical works. However, Sukertowa-Biedrawina steadfastly continued her work, participated in meetings, and even gave talks. Details of those and later presentations, along with dates and topics, are available at the State Archives in Olsztyn. The situation changed in 1953 when she gave several lectures, which increased to several dozen in the following year, both in Olsztyn and in smaller towns of the voivodeship. She would speak to schoolchildren, tourist guides, library patrons, teachers and scholars at conferences; even radio audiences had an opportunity to hear her talk. Between 1953 and 1957, she delivered several hundred lectures and talks.⁴⁴

Sukertowa-Biedrawina was also involved in other associations, but since her activities in those bodies have not been well documented, listing her memberships will have to suffice. In addition to the aforementioned Polish Sightseeing Society—later the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society—as well as the Polish Historical Society, she was also active in the Scientific Council of the Society for the Development of the Western Territories, the Institute for

⁴² Jan Gancewski, Witold Gieszczyński and Andrzej Korytko, *Wierni Klio. 60 lat Oddziału Polskiego Towarzystwa Historycznego w Olsztynie*, (Olsztyn: Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, 2008), 36.

⁴³ Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, „Ze wspomnień redaktora”, 337; Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 132.

⁴⁴ APO, file no. 482, Minutes of the Meetings of Members of the Polish Historical Society and Activity Reports of the Polish Historical Society, Olsztyn Branch, for 1947–1957.

Western Affairs, the Białystok Scientific Society, the Polish Writers' Union, the Polish Literary Society and the Polish Archaeological Society.⁴⁵

Conclusions

Given so many fields in which she was active, it is extremely difficult to briefly recapitulate the life and work of Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina. Let us therefore draw on the assessments formulated previously by various researchers. As early as 1924, in an article entitled "W sprawie mazurskiej (On the Masurian Question)" Bolesław Limanowski observed: "... Almost all written propaganda coming from independent Poland is concentrated in the hands of Mrs Emilia Sukertowa. Her numerous brochures, popular yet written with a thorough knowledge of the subject, the calendars she edited, and the *Gazeta Mazurska* published under her editorship, cross the cordon, are sought after and eagerly read."⁴⁶ In 1927, *Słowo Pomorskie* published an extensive article entitled "Zasłużona kobieta polska – Emilia Sukertowa (Poland's Woman of Merit – Emilia Sukertowa)". The anonymous author, discussing her contributions for the Masurians, her editorial work and writings, concluded the text as follows: "Her homeland shall be grateful to her when those sons who once left its central province and, over the years, came under Prussian whip, do not dissolve into the sea of Germanness."⁴⁷ In 1938, the periodical *Bluszcz* featured a laudatory characterisation of Biedrawina. Evaluating her achievement, the anonymous author found Biedrawina to be a regional activist worthy of emulation, fully deserving of the Silver Academic Laurel and the title of "Masurian leader".⁴⁸

After World War II, in a speech celebrating the 40th anniversary of Sukertowa-Biedrawina's work for Warmia and Masuria, Tadeusz Grygier emphasised her personality traits, energy,

⁴⁵ Małgorzata Szostakowska, *Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina*, 143.

⁴⁶ Bolesław Limanowski, *Pamiętniki (1919–1928)*, t. 4, (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1973), 237.

⁴⁷ „Zasłużona kobieta polska – Emilia Sukertowa”, *Słowo Powszechne*, dodatek tygodniowy *Dom Rodzinny*, nr 29, 22.07.1927, 4.

⁴⁸ S.P.O., „Przodownica mazurska (Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina)”, *Bluszcz*, nr 7, 12.02.1938, 9.

perseverance, integrity, and pursuit of self-betterment, which enabled her to transition from popularisation to scholarly work.⁴⁹ In an issue of *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, dedicated to Biedrawina to honour her 75th birthday anniversary, Tadeusz Cieślak discussed her contributions to Masuria in the interwar period, as well as her community and scientific involvement in Olsztyn after the war.⁵⁰ In 1965, Stanisław Herbst wrote in the foreword to her memoirs: "A wealthy lady from the capital, embedded in its intellectual elite ... moved to a difficult, dangerous province, became rooted there through her work, selfless efforts and... family ties."⁵¹ After her passing, Janusz Jasiński presented a detailed analysis of the milestones of her life and work in the interwar period, appreciating her contribution to the establishment of the Masurian Museum in Działdowo and the distribution of *Kalendarz dla Mazurów* in East Prussia.⁵²

The activist's biographer, Małgorzata Szostakowska, wrote in her summary:

A woman of refinement, great intellect and uncommon diligence, always remained cheerful and never lost her good humour. Lively and energetic, she would actively engage in numerous social undertakings from an early age. ... Biedrawina devoted herself to the struggle for Polishness of that land [Masuria] although it was not an easy task. ... Based on the post-war material now available and potentially usable in this work, along with statements from her still-living associates, a portrait emerges of Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, a fighter for the Polish *raison d'état*, an inquisitive writer, and a scientific researcher. A portrait of an extraordinary person who, despite an ailment that troubled her for many years and exacerbated as time went by (hearing loss), preventing her from communicating normally with those around her, she kept in good spirits, maintained lively and cordial contacts with the younger generation of researchers, infected them with her optimism, enthusiasm and diligence, and taught them, by her own example,

⁴⁹ Tadeusz Grygier, „Jubileusz 40-lecia pracy Emilii Sukertowej-Biedrawiny dla kultury polskiej na Mazurach i Warmii”, *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 1, 1960, 136–137.

⁵⁰ Tadeusz Cieślak, „Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina”, *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, nr 3, 1962, 531–532.

⁵¹ Stanisław Herbst, „Słowo wstępne”, w: Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina, *Dawno a niedawno*, 6.

⁵² Janusz Jasiński, „Z działalności”, 187–215.

perseverance and faith in the righteousness of the work one has undertaken.⁵³

Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina received multiple decorations and honours in recognition of her work, not only at the regional, but also at the national level. There is no doubt that Emilia Sukertowa-Biedrawina was an exceptional individual who thoroughly deserves to be called a “Strongwoman” of the 20th century. Her professional life and work have been very well researched, but her personal life remains a mystery.

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