

The Museum of Maria Skłodowska-Curie in Warsaw

by Małgorzata Sobieszczak-Marciniak

The Museum of Maria Skłodowska-Curie in Warsaw is located at 16 Freta St., in between the “Old Town” and “New Town,” and not far from the famous Barbican, constructed in 1548 as part of the original defensive wall around the city, and the enchanting New Town Marketplace. Freta St., which dates to around the 17th century, was originally an area of bustling, unregulated trade that was at the heart of the expansion of Warsaw. Until World War II, the street was full of craftsmen and merchants, such as shoemakers, tailors, pharmacies, and photography shops. Nowadays, it is one of the most beautiful places in the Old or New Towns, with many restaurants, cafés, and galleries.

The Story of 16 Freta St.

In the 18th century, the architect Szymon Zug constructed a residence at 16 Freta Street for the Warsaw banker Łyszkiewicz. In 1839, it was converted to a boarding school for girls, one of the best in the city at the time, which was managed by Eleanora Kurhanowicz. In 1860, Bronisława Skłodowska, a former student and graduate of Kurhanowicz’s boarding school, became the matron and owner of the school and made it her home, along with her husband Władysław Skłodowski (see footnote, p. 8). Their five children were born there in eight years: Zofia, Józef, Bronisława, Helena, and Maria, the youngest. Born on 7 November 1867, Maria often went by the nickname



Maria Skłodowska, the youngest in the middle, with her brother and sisters.

“Anciupecio,” roughly “something nice and small.”

The building, which has been rebuilt several times, looks somewhat different now than it did originally, but these differences are only apparent upon a careful look at the 19th-century photograph of the place. At the end of the 1930s, a third floor was built, but due to a construction error the building collapsed, killing many dwellers. It was during the 1930s, still during Maria Skłodowska-Curie’s lifetime, that Warsaw citizens erected a commemorative plaque marking the birthplace of the two-time Noble Prize winner. Today, the Old Town’s old-fashioned horse-drawn carriages stop at the building to point out this famous landmark.

During World War II and the Warsaw Uprising, the building shared the fate of most of Old Town’s build-



From left: Freta St. in the 19th century, the birthplace of Maria Skłodowska; 16 Freta St. in the 1930s; the building at 16 Freta St. was demolished during the Warsaw Uprising; the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Museum today.

ings—it was destroyed and burned. A photograph taken just after the war shows Maria Skłodowska-Curie's sister, Helena Skłodowska-Szalay, and brother, Józef Skłodowski, standing before the entrance to the partially demolished building (bottom of page 38, third from left). Clearly visible is the original commemorative plaque from the 1930s. When the building was rebuilt in the 1950s, this same plaque was again placed on the building and is still there today.

In 1954, Maria and Pierre Curie's older daughter, Irène Joliot-Curie, opened a science museum in the building at 16 Freta St., with a small exhibition devoted to Maria.

As she was the youngest child, Maria lived at the home the shortest. A year after she was born, in 1868, the family moved to an apartment on Nowolipki St. to be near the Men's Governmental Gymnasium at which Maria's father Władysław Skłodowski taught (Jaworski 2006). A physics and mathematics teacher educated in Petersburg, Władysław was an open-minded man who kept up on the latest scientific discoveries. A Polish patriot, he had many problems with the tsarist officials supervising the schools in which he worked. Maria's mother, Bronisława Skłodowska, died of tuberculosis in 1878 when Maria was only 11.

Launching the Museum

In October 1967, on the 100th anniversary of Maria Skłodowska-Curie's birth, the first and only museum dedicated to her was created at 16 Freta St. Eve Curie Labouisse, with her husband, Henri Labouisse, the scientist's grandchildren, Hélène Langevin and Pierre Joliot, Kazimierz Fajans, Janusz Groszkowski, the president of the Polish Academy of Sciences, as well as nine Noble Prize winners, participated in the museum's opening ceremony.

The museum was the work of Professor Józef Hurwic, the President of the Polish Chemistry Association, an expert on Curie's life and achievements. It is not surprising that the Polish Chemistry Association manages the museum, since Maria Skłodowska-Curie has been an honorary member since 1919.

The idea of creating a Marie Skłodowska-Curie museum was born in the hearts of Poles shortly after her death. Originally, the Radium Institute's building at 15 Wawelska St. was to house the museum. It was here that items to be placed in the museum were collected: reminders of the scientist, photographs personal things, correspondence, and more. The plans were strongly supported by the National Museum's



The opening ceremony of the Maria Skłodowska-Curie Museum at 16 Freta St. in 1967: Prof. J. Huriwc, president of the Polish Chemical Society (left) and Eve Curie Labouisse.

director, Professor Stanisław Lorentz. Warsaw citizens and private benefactors contributed. Sadly, most of the collected items were destroyed in the war and occupation. Fortunately, the content of some of the letters and documents were preserved in a great book written by Maria's daughter Eve Curie Labouisse. Fortunately, there was, and still is, much regard and sentiment for Maria Skłodowska-Curie, so after WWII the museum managed to obtain many original items, letters, and documents. Even now, the museum sometimes obtains or purchases items to exhibit.

The Maria Skłodowska-Curie museum currently occupies the entire first floor of the building, as well as several offices on the second floor. Next to the offices of the Polish Chemistry Association there is a lecture



Irène Joliot-Curie tours an exhibition in memory of Maria Skłodowska-Curie at the Science Centre at 16 Freta St. in Warsaw, 1954.

The Museum of Maria Skłodowska-Curie in Warsaw



An exhibit celebrating the 100th anniversary of the discovery of radium and polonium in 1998. To the right is the granddaughter of Pierre and Marie Curie: Helene Langevin-Joliot.

and projection room, in which lectures and films are organized. In the exhibition part of the museum, there are three rooms with a total area of over 100 sq. metres. Since it is a biographical museum, the exhibition is permanent, changed only in fragments or in whole from time to time. In general, it does not organize temporary exhibits, although one of the rooms,

Maria Skłodowska left Warsaw in November 1891 and went to Paris to make the biggest dream of her 24 year-old life come true—to study at Sorbonne. It was only possible thanks to her stubbornness and the help of her family. It seemed that she might not leave for long, just a few years, that after graduation she would come back and share her power, wisdom, and heart with her motherland. Yet, fate can be tricky sometimes. Fortunately, she never lost contact with Poland and Warsaw. She came back many times and often emphasized how much she loved her country, her city, and the river that flows through Warsaw. In 1913, upon being awarded honorary citizenship of Warsaw, she said these famous words: “If Professor Napoleon Milicer and his assistant, Dr. Kossakowski, did not teach me analysis in Warsaw, I would have never separated radium.” It was also here that she fulfilled another dream—to build the Radium Institute in Warsaw, a twin institute to the one she created in Paris. “My greatest dream is to build the Radium Institute in Warsaw.”

the “Skłodowskis Lounge,” houses displays that may not be thematically related to the scientist herself.

The last room of the museum contains a reproduction of Maria and Pierre Curie’s first, and most primitive, laboratory. This was the laboratory in which they were the happiest Maria wrote in her autobiography. It was the lab in which they made their first discoveries, and first saw the “gleaming radium.” The small-scale model of the laboratory at Lhomond Street in Paris includes replicas of the devices that the scientists used, a computer station on which the visitors can see presentations about the Curies, devices that Maria used in her work, and the whole scientific process that led to the discoveries of polonium and radium.

Museum Activities

Maria Skłodowska-Curie was a person of great depth, with compelling insights not only about science, but about life, raising children, friendship, and human relations. She was friends with many interesting people, and held views that were well ahead of her time. For these reasons, the themes of the meetings and exhibitions in the “Lounge” part of the museum are extensive. The aim of the organizers of the current exhibit was clear: to interest visitors about who Curie was as a person and her achievements as a scientist, not to spoon-feed them information. The exhibit should encourage visitors to enquire further on their own, to read books on Curie and the consequences of her work, search the archives or libraries, and encourage them to think about her uniqueness as a person and the times and social conditions in which she lived and worked. After visiting the museum, visitors often write down in the guest book that they were surprised that



The author (right) and children at the museum during the 2009 Science Festival.

The Museum of Maria Skłodowska-Curie

this great scientist, sometimes so boringly described in textbooks, had such a rich personality.

Apart from strictly exhibit-oriented functions (i.e., collecting and cataloging collections, organizing exhibitions), the museum also fulfills educational and public relations functions explicitly emphasized in the statutes of the museum and the Polish Chemistry Association. In this regard, the museum participates in numerous activities and events organized by the City of Warsaw and scientific institutes, including the Night at Museums, the Science Festival, Scientific Picnic, Children's University, and more. During the events, the museum hosts lectures, meetings, and competitions, as well as chemical shows and experiments involving the scope of radioactivity. During this year's Night at Museums, the Maria Skłodowska-Curie museum hosted over 5000 visitors, ages two and up.

Staff of the museum have assisted many students with their M.S. and B.S. theses on Maria Skłodowska-Curie and her scientific studies, her personality, and the example she was, and still is, for women.

Over 16000 people visit the museum annually, of which students and foreign tourists, mainly from



The honorary diploma issued to Maria Skłodowska-Curie in 1924 by the Polish Chemical Society.

Asia, constitute a significant proportion. During the school year it offers biographical and chemistry museum lessons for students. As part of such lessons, students watch biographical or chemistry films and visit the museum with a guide. Due to the large number of foreign tourists, we offer films in English and French and the exhibition was also prepared in English and French. Biographical leaflets on Curie are available in 10 languages: Polish, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and German.

The museum is, as visitors proclaim, an exceptional place—a tribute to the unique connection between Poland and France and to the spirit of scientific discovery for the good of humanity.

As Maria Skłodowska-Curie said during her visit to the USA in 1929: “the radium that the U.S. offers to me must become the ownership of science for all time . . .” (E. Curie 1937) 🇺🇸

Malgorzata Sobieszczak-Marciniak <muzeum.msc@neostrada.pl> is director of the Museum of Maria Skłodowska-Curie in Warsaw, Poland. For a virtual visit, see <<http://muzeum.if.pw.edu.pl>>.



A Special Visit from Eve Curie

In 1998, the museum opened a new exhibition marking the 100th anniversary of Maria Curie's discoveries of polonium and radium. At the opening, it again hosted Professors H. Langevin and P. Joliot, several Nobel Prize winners, including Józef Rotblat, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. A year later, when Eve Curie Labouisse came to Warsaw for an unofficial visit, she wanted to see the museum. The author of this article was happy and honored to show such a great guest around the museum. I can still remember the joy, incredible youthful sense of humour, curiosity, and warmth of that remarkable woman. I can also remember her invitation to eat lunch together “When you come to New York, by any chance,” which has, unfortunately, never taken place.