Unique and Incomparable The Exceptional Life of the First Female Doctor in Poland, Regina Salomea Pilsztynowa
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The three waves of feminism and postfeminist analysis can be seen in the interpretation of Regina Salomea Pilsztynowa’s Life’s Travels and Adventures. Pilsztynowa’s eighteenth-century memoir was of great interest to first-wave feminists and antifeminists at the turn of the twentieth century because it included compelling narratives of female agency and emancipation. To antifeminists, it was evidence of a world turned upside down in which warped emancipated woman lost their way in the world, but feminists found evidence that the twentieth-century drive for women’s freedom had its roots in the struggle for freedom waged by eighteenth-century feminist foremothers. One of the clearest goals of second-wave feminism was to recover the lost voices of women of the past via the rediscovery of texts, and this memoir was rediscovered in the 1970s-1990s and reevaluated and translated. Third-wave feminists included this memoir in gender studies courses where students and scholars used digital media to publish their findings to cast a wider net and it captured a multiplicity of views including new discoveries regarding the author. Some third-wave feminists have labeled Pilsztynowa’s experience as exceptional and therefore unworthy of consideration or inclusion in any sort of canon of Polish female authors. But if we could go back in time to ask Pilsztynowa, in true Sarmatian fashion, she would insist that she was unique and incomparable, but nevertheless she was the first female doctor in Poland.

The historiography of Polish women’s history fits the same general developmental paradigm as the historiography of women’s history in the United States and Western Europe. One can see the traces of this path in the interpretation of the memoirs of the first female doctor in Polish history, Regina Salomea z Rusieckich Pilsztynowa, born in the year 1718 in Nowogródek, a town in current-day Poland.
Belarus. The familiar model holds that there were three waves of feminism: the first wave of feminist and antifeminist historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were preoccupied with the struggle for women’s emancipation and women’s suffrage, and first-wave works on women’s history were written by the first female PhD holders or their feminist allies or detractors. During the second wave of women’s history in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars and engaged writers devoted themselves to the rediscovery of women’s writing to restore women’s place in the history of the past and to include women in a more complete historical narrative. Second-wave feminists worked for equal rights for women while second-wave historians worked for equal inclusion and consideration of women’s experience. Texts and artifacts that were produced by women were rediscovered and included in the mainstream canon. Beginning in the 1990s, third-wave feminism coincided with the advent of gender studies, a space in which scholars came to the understanding that gender was a cultural construct and that it was necessary to approach research with a poststructuralist method in which multiple perspectives were considered. And now in the twenty-first century, we are living in a digital age in which more people than ever before in history can have access to these texts to interpret them directly via blogs, wikis, and other digital media where an unlimited number of perspectives can weigh in on the given subject and its meaning in the past and present. One can glimpse the three waves of feminism and even postfeminist analysis, in the interpretation of Regina Salomea Pilsztynowa’s *Life’s Travels and Adventures*.

The late nineteenth century saw the first Polish women earning doctoral degrees in history at the same time that feminist ideas were being put forth by some of the leading intellectuals in society, and these first-wave scholars published the first modern study of Polish women’s history. In 1895, Ludwik Glatman announced his discovery of an autobiographical manuscript of the first Polish female doctor, published in Istanbul in 1860. In 1900, Dr. Melina Lipińska wrote an award-winning book that attracted readers worldwide, *The History of Women Doctors*, and her

featured Polish woman doctor was Regina Salomea Pilsztynowa, who Glatman
demonized as an emancipated woman, and Lipińska canonized as an inspirational
emancipated professional who combined professional achievement with mother-
hood. The turn of the twentieth century was a heroic age of science when the public
was hungry for news of the triumphs in science and technology. In 1903, Marie Curie,
née Sklodowska, won the Nobel Prize in Physics, so perhaps this was one reason for
the interest in rediscovery of the achievements of Polish women of science of the
past. Therefore, in 1906, Ludwik Glatman published “Medical Doctor and Polish
Oculist in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul (Historical Sketches Based on an Unknown
Memoir)” echoing his previous findings touting what he believed were the most
significant features of the handwritten manuscript: “Echo of the given World: that
is to say the Proceeding of My Travels and My Life of Adventure, in honor of and
to the glory of the Lord God in the Holy Trinity, to the Mother of Christ, My Lord,
and to All the Saints written by Salomeja Regina de Pilsteinowa, Medical Doctor and
Oculist in the year 1760 in Istanbul.”

Why should the rediscovery of a previously unknown manuscript at the turn of the century by an eighteenth-century woman
who claimed to be a medical doctor excite so much controversy?

For Lipińska and Glatman, Pilsztynowa’s autobiography was a foil to fight out
their feminist and antifeminist battles. Each one of them read from the same text,
but Glatman interpreted it as a cautionary tale about the misfortunes that can befall
a woman who neglects the obligations of motherhood, while Lipińska portrayed
Pilsztynowa as a “model of feminine courage and professional honor.” Glatman’s
take on Pilsztynowa is framed even before he gives any details of her autobiography.
For him, Pilsztynowa’s tale is a cautionary one detailing the disaster that will befall
emancipated women who neglect their “true” duties as wives and mothers so as to
pursue fame and fortune outside the world of circumscribed domesticity:

In view of the emancipatory aspirations of today’s women, they would certainly find
the life of an 18th century Polish emancipated woman to be not without interest.
This woman, whose negligence of her duties as a wife and a mother as she chased
fortune and adventure, the fame of a doctor and fortune all around the world, and
in the end, after years of such racing came to the conclusion that neither wealth

6. Melina Lipińska, Les femmes et le progrès des sciences médicales [Women and the progress
7. Ludwik Glatman, “Doktorka medycyny i okulistka polska w XVIII Stambule (Szkie
historyczny na podstawie nieznanego pamiętnika)” [A female doctor of medicine and Polish
oculist in eighteenth-century Istanbul (Historical sketch based on an unknown memoir)],
8. Number 1482 in the Czartoryski Archive in Kraków, “Echo na świat podane czyli pro-
cedura podróży y życia mego awantur, na cześ y chwałę P. Bogu w Trójcy św. Jedynemu y
Najświętszy Matce Chrystusa Pana mego y wszystkim Świętym, napisała Salomeja Regina
de Pilsteinowa, Medycyny Doktorka i Okulistka w r. 1760 w Stambule.”
nor resounding fame can replace the love and warmth of family, which solely and exclusively can bring a woman happiness.¹⁰

It was not just that they were directly engaged in polemical conflict about female emancipation, it was even more personal than that. On the first page of his 1906 article, Glatman accused Lipińska of what we would now call plagiarism. Glatman accused her of winning the Victor Hugo prize with its 1,000 franc cash award and the worship of the public based on a work where the most interesting part of the whole book dealt with the fortunes and unusual adventures of a Polish female doctor. How would a critic know where such an engaging character came from? “I can reveal the secret here today . . . might Miss Lipińska have been crowned with laurels (and) forgotten about the rights belonging to this author?”¹¹ It is impossible for the dead to defend themselves against a charge of plagiarism, but other scholars corroborated the fact that Lipińska traveled to Kraków to read the original manuscript at the Czartoryski Library and published the fruits of that research trip as a four-part series of articles in a Paris magazine in 1900.¹² The picture that Lipińska paints of Pilsztynowa is of someone who combined professional achievement with the role of wife and mother and one who was admirable on account of her passion for science and study, her intelligence, and her indefatigable energy. Taking into account the challenges and desperate circumstances that she faced, she never despared, but in fact she struggled and fought, without forgetting what she was fighting for. “She suffered as a woman, as a spouse, as a mother, she suffered as an independent spirit” but she was in the right and “her life is a model of feminine courage and professional honor.”¹³

Yet despite the polemical conflict and accusations of plagiarism, the accounts by both Lipińska and Glatman highlight the most significant and poignant stories of the memoir because they revolve around Pilsztynowa’s accounts of her own professional autonomy as a female practitioner and her ability to act as an independent agent without the interference of her husband. Pilsztynowa narrates these descrip-

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¹⁰. “Wobec dzisiejszych emancypacyjnych dążeń kobiet, nie bez interesu zapewne będzie proceder życie tej emancypantki polskiej z XVIII wieku, niewiasty, która z zaniedbaniem obowiązków matki i żony uganiała się w awanturyczny sposób za fortuną, sławą lekarską i szczęściem po całym świecie i w końcu po kilkudziesięciu latach takiej goniwty do tej konkluzji przysłała że ani majątek, ani rozglośna sława nie zastąpią miłości i ciepła rodzinnego, które jedynie i wyłącznie po wszystkie czasy kobiety uszczęśliwić mogą.” Glatman, “Doktorka medycyny i okulistka polska (1895),” 856. (Translations in this article are the author’s.)


tions of her own independence and emancipation at great length, in great detail, and in an engaging manner and so it is not surprising that historians at the turn of the twentieth century should focus in so closely on Pilsztynowa’s descriptions of stories of her feelings of autonomy and emancipation, since these are the stories that would resonate with readers in 1895–1906.

Pilsztynowa’s memoir also deals with many extremely popular themes that would have attracted a wide readership throughout the entire modern era from the eighteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century. It is a woman’s account of travel in the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans that would have reinforced many of the commonly held beliefs about the Balkans in the eighteenth century, yet a close reading of the text would have challenged others. Pilsztynowa feels a greater degree of freedom when she is outside of her own society. Indeed, she feels more emancipated and reflects on “how much better it is to be a woman” doctor in eighteenth-century Istanbul, compared to the position of her own husband and other male doctors of that time and place. And finally, she takes note of how life’s most important business is conducted in private spaces like the garden and the harem, where women can experience freedom and pleasure apart from the gaze of men. These moments of personal autonomy, freedom, and emancipation that Pilsztynowa describes would resonate with the first-wave feminist readers who craved the memory of such women to inspire emancipated women in their contemporary struggles, but would anger antifeminists who wished to keep women within a restricted legal and cultural space.

The memoir begins as Pilsztynowa describes an incident that required her to act as an independent agent and to become a negotiator of sorts. Pilsztynowa’s first husband was imprisoned because he was accused of poisoning a patient and causing his death. Her first husband, Jakob Halpir, was given 700 Dutch thalers to cure the Sultan Mehmet V’s Groom of the Chamber, who was blind and crippled. Her husband began treatment, curing the man so that “he was able to read and write with his own eyes and hands and walk on his own legs on his own wherever he wanted, even without a walking-stick.” The Sultan found out about it and her husband received the Sultan’s gifts and great fame in Istanbul. But this newfound acclaim inspired jealousy in competing physicians. After three months, the Turkish patient was still taking the potion and following the treatment prescribed by Halpir when he suddenly fell ill and died. The deceased’s family was so furious they asked the Vezir, Ismail Pasha, to kill Halpir, and he was taken to prison to await capital punishment for malpractice. Pilsztynowa went to the prison to petition for her husband’s release, insisting that he was innocent of wrongdoing. Since her husband was taken prisoner, she was forced to negotiate, as a lone woman, the terms for his

15. Pilsztynowa, Proceder podróży i źycia mego awantur, 37.
16. Ibid., 38.
release. Instead of going through public channels, she chose to meet privately with the wife and children of the dead Groom of the Chamber to negotiate a settlement. “And so, little by little and with great difficulty and with God’s help I reconciled this matter for 5,000 Dutch thalers. . . (and) I got a receipt from the Turkish court according to Turkish custom and that is how my husband was released from prison, and so he was indebted to me for all my great effort and all the costs that I occurred.”17 Thus Pilsztynowa appears in the guise of a mediator, in order to free her husband from prison. The occupational hazard that early modern physicians faced as amateur self-promoters is clearly evident here. Itinerant doctors faced the hazard of coming into a community as outsiders, finding a prominent patient to cure for a nominal fee and thereby build one’s practice could have potentially fatal consequences for the doctor if the patient was not cured.

Pilsztynowa was not willing to be satisfied with the outcome of the settlement. She wanted to discover why the patient died in the first place, writing:

A few months later after diligent effort to find our why our patient died since we had to pay so much for it, I got the news that the last medicine that caused the Groom of the Chamber’s death was made in a pharmacy according to my husband’s prescription. [But] there was a Jewish doctor named Fonseka [Fonseca] and out of jealousy he added poison to the mortar where the medicine was being prepared, and that is why the Turkish man died.18

After she uncovered this plot, she urged her husband to press charges against the doctor and the pharmacist, but her husband disagreed with her, responding, “Thank God they spared my life, and fortunately the matter was resolved by money alone.”19 Halpir wished that she would let sleeping dogs lie and simply be satisfied with things as they stood, but Pilsztynowa thought otherwise:

And so I, in secrecy from my husband, and when he was absent, ordered a good supplication written asserting the [true] causes of the Groom of the Chamber’s death and also about the settlement money that I paid toward settling a false accusation. All of this was caused by poison given by the Jewish doctor Fonseka and the pharmacist Johan. And so having made ready the supplication, I had myself carried in a sedan chair to the court of the Vezir. The [previous] Vezir Ismail had already been fired, and the second one, Ali Pasha was more gracious. I gave him the supplication and I was given audience. I expressed that I am a Polish woman and a foreigner in their country and many more things that were related to this discourse.20

This incident reveals much about Pilsztynowa’s character. Even though she indulges in the discourse of weakness and disadvantage, her actions put the lie to her

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 39.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
words. Even though her husband and others counsel passivity and reticence, she is determined to use her skills as an amateur investigator and amateur negotiator to get what she wants. And she does succeed in getting what she wants. The doctor and the pharmacist were summoned before the Vezir’s chamberlain within an hour and a half to be held accountable for their actions. Pilsztynowa also got the opportunity to vent her rage at them, screaming that “you killed the honorable man, the Groom of the Chamber with your poison, and because of you I lost . . . (money) and my husband lost his good name since it spread around Istanbul that the Groom of the Chamber died on account of Dr. Halpir’s medicine.” The doctor agreed to settle the affair with her by paying her “a few thousand” thalers in order to forget the whole affair, with the entire settlement being concluded without her husband’s knowledge.

Despite her apparent initial victory, Pilsztynowa’s freedom and ability to practice in Istanbul would be impeded by the fact that she made an enemy in Dr. Fonseca. In Istanbul the practice of medicine was regulated by the government. In practice, this meant that all who sought to practice were to call on the Sultan’s senior doctor, “Hakim Basha,” who would confer permission to practice medicine. According to Pilsztynowa, Dr. Fonseca went to Hakim Basha:

> and that Dr. Fonseca said that I do not know anything about medicine and I am also a woman. He asked Hakim Basha to prohibit me from treating anyone except women and only then to treat their eye problems, since I know that area of medicine well from my husband. . . . And so Hakim Basha invited my husband to his place and told him rudely that he would not let me treat any man in Istanbul; only women with eye problems. And thus I had to agree to what I was commanded.

It turned out that the steps Dr. Fonseca took to harm Pilsztynowa’s practice ended up having the opposite effect. Pilsztynowa built up a solid practice treating the wives of the wealthy merchants who sold coffee and other luxury items in the Ottoman Empire and the world as well as women merchants and business owners. In eighteenth-century Istanbul, it was customary for a grateful patient to put on magnificent banquets in appreciation for his/her doctor’s good care. Pilsztynowa describes delicious hours spent in Turkish gardens sipping forbidden wines and eating from diamond-studded tableware with her wealthy female patients. The garden was a space in which women could eat, and talk freely with each other, and Pilsztynowa really enjoyed the celebration banquets. The wealthy women recommended Pilsztynowa to their friends, and thus Pilsztynowa expanded her practice through women’s patronage. Despite the fact that she agreed not to treat male patients further, she did wind up treating male patients. By chance and circumstance, Pilsztynowa

21. Ibid., 40.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
was compelled to treat the son-in-law of the Groom of the Cloakroom. The man had not urinated for days, and Pilsztynowa prescribed a tablespoon of violet-water syrup in coffee three times per day. Pilsztynowa told her husband about the case, and Halpir was horrified to hear the news.

As soon as my husband heard the news about my giving syrup to the sick man he was beside himself and complained to me, saying “Oh you indiscrete woman! Didn’t you know that you’ve been forbidden to treat men by Hakim Basha, especially the terminally ill? Hakim Basha himself . . . was seeking the advice of the most famous doctors in Istanbul. They gave him a lot of medicine to no effect. . . . When that man dies . . . it will be said once again that she caused an honorable man to die through bad medicine.”

In spite of it all, Pilsztynowa’s treatment worked, since the patient told her that “after the third dose a big stone fell out and plenty of bloody urine came afterward and now I am healthier.” As he recovered his health, Pilsztynowa continued to treat him and cautioned him to tell no one that she was his doctor since she was forbidden to practice by Hakim Basha. The Groom of the Cloakroom responded to her, asking, “Who will forbid whom to cure? Do not be afraid, Lady Doctor, even if my son-in-law, God forbid, should die.”

The son-in-law did survive and word spread about the cure, even to Hakim Basha. Even Hakim Basha was convinced of her skill when she successfully removed the cataracts from the eyes of an old woman, blind for seven years, who had been Hakim Basha’s son’s milk nurse. “With God’s help, she was cured in forty days.” Pilsztynowa described how, “[she] became the favorite one at Hakim Basha’s, moreover because Turkish men do not like male doctors attending their wives and their daughters. Hakim Basha had me treat the great Turkish ladies.”

The Turkish bath, like the garden, was another space for women’s free interaction where Pilsztynowa met women who would be her patients and promoters. Pilsztynowa had been troubled by a bad leg and believed that the baths had healing properties, so she frequented them with her two-year-old daughter. Pilsztynowa described the bath as a rare opportunity to meet other women. She would walk with her cane through the baths gazing upon beautiful, healthy, richly dressed women, some of whom were about to be married or were members of the wedding party. She contrasted the oppression of Turkish women’s domestic sphere with the space of relative freedom offered by the baths.

25. Pilsztynowa, Proceder podróży i życia mego awantur, 45.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 46.
28. Ibid., 47.
29. Ibid.
Women sit locked up in the house, they do not go out unless their husbands give them permission and daughters may go to a bathhouse only if their fathers let them. In a bathhouse they can visit each other, laugh, eat and drink, they can dance and sing. Thus these wonderful women began to praise me and to invite me to their homes asking me to be their friend, for which I was grateful to the Lord Jesus.  

All of these events were briefly described in Glatman and Lipińska’s studies of the Pilsztynowa memoir because they are narratives of female agency and emancipation. In Glatman’s view, they are evidence of a world turned upside down in which warped emancipated woman have lost their way in the world, but in Lipińska’s narrative they are evidence that the twentieth-century drive for women’s freedom had its roots in the struggle for freedom waged by eighteenth-century feminist foremothers.

The three-wave paradigm breaks down to some extent when one considers the disastrous effects of World War II on Poland, and the imposition of Stalinism in the postwar period. Millions of lives were lost at the hands of the dictators responsible for World War II. Ludwik Glatman died in 1915, and Melina Lipińska died in 1933, before the outbreak of World War II, but other first-wave historians like Łucja Charewiczowa were arrested, sent to Pawiak prison, and died in 1943 in the camp at Auschwitz.  

Between that first-wave discovery of Pilsztynowa at the turn of the century and the surge of second-wave feminist scholarship, Pilsztynowa’s memoir was published in 1957 thanks to Polish Socialism’s stated commitment to feminist goals. Because in all sectors of life, women stand next to men “As his full-fledged comrade, collaborating together on large, collective, long-range work.”

Poland’s second-wave feminist historians’ commitment to including women’s experience meant that in the 1970s and 1980s a great deal of important work was done, including study of Pilsztynowa. Specialists on the Polish Baroque such as Maria Bogucka, Zbigniew Kuchowicz, Bohdan Baranowski, Alojzy Saikowski, and Władysław Czapliński concluded that “women played a prominent role in the Polish Baroque, especially in its customary culture and religious life.” Kuchowicz completed sketches of Polish women like Pilsztynowa in 1972 and 1974, but they were not published until 1989. Kuchowicz rejected Glatman’s characterization of Pilsztynowa as “the prototype of our warped emancipated women” as overly harsh and conservative, but he also took issue with the overly rosy feminist portrayal of

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the Stalinist period. Pollak, editor of Pilsztynowa’s memoirs, and Jan Reychman, who wrote *Polish Life in Istanbul*, both treated her too gently and heroically. Kuchowicz wrote that she was certainly no exemplary mother since she entrusted the care of her children to others including a lover who actually contributed to the death of her eldest child. Indeed, she even wrote with great sadness that her son Stanisław left Istanbul without bidding her farewell, so little did he care for her. Rather than an emancipated women, she seems more a women who sacrificed a great deal on account of her relationships with husbands and lovers.

The next phase of second-wave scholarship set as its task to announce the presence of the memoir and to compare the experience of this Polish doctor with medical practitioners in other parts of early modern Europe at the time. One very valuable article looked at Pilsztynowa in her practice as an ophthalmologist. The biologists who wrote this article ponder the question of whether this woman was truly the first female doctor in Poland or a quack? Most medical practitioners of early modern Europe, whether they were male or female, Polish or some other nationality, would be considered quacks today. It once seemed very simple to impose a framework of two separate medical worlds: the world of the quacks, on the one hand, and the bona fide doctors, on the other, who were legitimate on account of their formal training, education, licensing, or admittance to a guild. As social historians began to enter the history of medicine, this dichotomy broke down. Scholars began to explore worlds of the variety of healers, emphasizing the importance of the apothecaries, the barber surgeons, the midwives, and delving into the whole area of “popular medicine.” Now we are aware that even those considered bona fide physicians might not have the formalized medical education, rigorous methods of training, and set of standards that would distinguish them as professionals today. In early modern Europe almost every town or village would be served by its settled midwives, physicians, and barber surgeons but would also be on the itinerary of “traveling oculists, oil salesmen, and peddlers.”

Pilsztynowa was a traveling oculist who treated cataracts and other conditions, and her practice resembled those discussed by Mary Lindemann in her examination of early modern medicine—the only difference was that Pilsztynowa was a

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female professional. Significantly, in the course of her life and her practice, she was promoted by other women, and her practice was centered on female patients, although she certainly did not treat women exclusively. In the course of her practice, Pilsztynowa had to act as a self-promoter in an effort to gain patients for her practice, and as an amateur diplomat and hostage negotiator because she had to literally negotiate her way out of various countries. Janina Konczacki and Kurt Aterman ultimately conclude that Pilsztynowa was not a quack, but acting in the same role as a barber-surgeon. 41

Pilsztynowa does not fit into the usual characterizations of female medical practitioners in early modern France or England, for example. You would not see female barber-surgeons in either of these places, and so I began my research under the incorrect assumption that Pilsztynowa’s role would probably be that of a promoter of new or unorthodox medical practices, similar to the role of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and her promotion of the practice of smallpox inoculation. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Turkish Embassy Letters describe the practice of the Turkish practitioners (many of them women), who scraped or scratched the skin and gave people mild smallpox as a form of vaccination. Thus the superior medical knowledge possessed by Turkish practitioners was spread to the West. The tale was popularized recently in a book called The Speckled Monster. 42

The chances for Wortley Montagu to gain access to the knowledge necessary to practice medicine seem far greater than that of Pilsztynowa. Wortley Montagu was wealthy, well-educated, and could hold her own in salon discussion and in letters with the greatest minds of the day. 43 Pilsztynowa, on the other hand, was born into the poor nobility in a rural corner of the sparsely populated Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. She was not well-educated, although she did learn the basics of reading and writing in the Polish language. 44 When she decided to publish her memoir, she wrote all 368 pages in her own hand, with the final twenty pages in a different handwriting. 45 Although she relates how she obtained access to medical textbooks, she wrote that she gained her medical training by apprenticing at her husband’s side. She also acquired medical knowledge by establishing a second training relationship with a Turkish ophthalmologist from Babylon, and attained a third apprenticeship when during a trip to Sofia, Bulgaria, she met an Italian who was in Turkish captivity and he taught her how to write her prescriptions in Latin. 46

43. Letters from Wortley Montagu to Alexander Pope and others are included in Isobel Grundy, ed., Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Selected Letters (New York: Penguin, 1997).
44. Kuchowicz, Żywoty, 114.
Pilsztynowa had advantages that women like Wortley Montagu did not. Wortley Montagu was also fascinated by the Turkish bath, the Turkish garden, and the Turkish harem, but she was not able to fully penetrate the culture because of the short time that she spent there. Pilsztynowa, on the other hand, learned to speak Turkish, and lived in the Balkans for many years. She found that many of the customs of that part of the world suited her well and allowed her to move about more freely than she would have had she been in Poland. If she wanted to travel about unobtrusively in the streets of Istanbul, she simply dressed in what we would now call a burka, but she simply called it "traditional Turkish dress." Sometimes she traveled on roads that were impassable by carriage and she had to ride on horseback. In that case, she would dress as a man in order to be able to travel unmolested. Pilsztynowa also became intimately acquainted with the Turkish harem when she served as doctor to the harem of Pasha Köprülü in Sofia, Bulgaria. She expressed no fascination with the harem, simply calling it a "women's apartment for the wives and children," and remarking on the boredom she felt at being secluded there with the women and children. She was able to put up with the boredom because she was compensated well, had a comfortable manor house with beautiful Turkish carpets, servants, and enough money to live independently from her husband, who stayed in Istanbul while she was pursuing her practice in Sofia. But when her husband became ill and thought that he was near death, he sought her out. When first she saw her husband after such a long absence, she began to cry. She described how:

[S]urrendering to God's will, I had to start thinking about treating my husband. My husband saw that without his help, God provided me with an orderly home, servants, horses, carriages, dresses, also patients and good reputation among respected people.

Pilsztynowa was able to support herself well and to live independently through her medical practice. First, as a settled practitioner in Istanbul and in Sofia and later as an itinerant physician to Prince Rakoczy in Hungary, to the Tsarina Anna Ivanovna in Russia, and to many other ordinary people as well, Pilsztynowa was regarded as a gifted physician. Although there were other women in the Ottoman Empire who learned about inoculation and passed knowledge of that practice to their countrymen, Pilsztynowa actually learned the medical techniques practiced in Istanbul—such as the techniques of surgical cataract removal—and carried them out herself on willing patients. In order to succeed as a practicing physician, she drew upon her skills as an amateur negotiator, amateur lawyer, amateur promoter, and linguist. Far from being an obstacle, the fact that she was a female doctor seems to

47. Pilsztynowa, Proceder podróży i źycia mego awantur, 47
48. Ibid., 58.
49. Ibid., 62.
50. Ibid.
have accounted in part for her success. She was able to speak with and make contact with women in their own private spaces—the garden, and the bathhouse—and to become a trusted confidante and physician. Pilsztynowa was promoted by the wealthy Turkish women who were her patients as well as other central European women who met her and were delighted by her personality, her knowledge, and her abilities and who were pleased to recommend her to their friends.

One of the clearest goals of second-wave feminism is to recover the lost voices of women of the past via the rediscovery of their texts and the translation of those texts into the major European languages, including English. Władysław Roczniak set out to translate Pilsztynowa’s memoir into English for the series, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, volume 105, and I agreed that I would join him in this endeavor. We presented a research panel on the project, and Roczniak published his findings in order to highlight the planned translation project. Unfortunately, it has proved to be much more difficult to translate the memoir than we had anticipated, and the project stalled. There are at least three reasons why the project proved more challenging than I thought it would be. First, the translation requires knowledge of medical terminology. Second, the geographical scope of the memoir is so broad that it would be good to have collaboration with a scholar of the Ottoman Empire. Finally, Pilsztynowa was born and lived in an area that was Poland at the time but is now current-day Belarus. It is difficult to arrange access to the archive in Minsk and so finally a colleague in Belarus would be a welcome addition to the translation team.

In the first years of the 1990s, gender studies programs were established in Warsaw, Łódź, and other universities in Poland, and this era coincided with the coming of third-wave feminism. Gender studies courses were established, and Pilsztynowa’s memoir appeared in the syllabus in these courses, and many of the professors directing these courses posted syllabi online, allowing for a much wider audience for these texts than they have ever had before. Perhaps one indication of the popularity of these works is the number of bachelor’s and master’s theses. Students and scholars are using digital media to publish their findings to expand the possibility that a wider range of people might read and interpret the text, and the text is being interpreted more creatively and available information is expanding as a result of this wider net to capture all views. In true third-wave fashion, instead of being offended by the idea that Pilsztynowa was labeled “Polish Shrew”


(Polska diablica), Lidia Kawecka’s blog piece summarizing the memoir embraces the term “shrew” as a badge of honor in a beautifully illustrated Web site. This broader availability of the text has led to new discoveries regarding its author. For many years, up to the “rediscovery” of the text, no one knew what had happened to Pilsztynowa after the publication of her memoir. She dropped off the map after the year 1760. But Dariusz Kołodziejczyk found that in 1763 Pilsztynowa worked as a doctor in a harem of the Crimean Khans and served as an informant for the Russian consul in Bakhchysarai, Alexander Nikoforov. Pilsztynowa is included in the catalog of New Women Writers of the World, which features new research done on Pilsztynowa by Joanna Partyka and Iwona Maciejewska. Some third-wave feminists have labeled Pilsztynowa’s experience as extremely exceptional and therefore unworthy of consideration or inclusion in any sort of canon of Polish female authors. But if we could go back in time to interview Pilsztynowa, I am sure that she, in true Sarmatian fashion, would be the first to declare herself Unique and Incomparable, and would deem other women unworthy of comparison with herself. The hyperbole characteristic of her writing would never allow the comparison of herself with mere mortals! Despite the fact that the work is so difficult to translate, its meaning sometimes difficult to comprehend, and its accuracy an extreme challenge to verify, the proceedings and adventures of Pilsztynowa’s life are even more appealing to twenty-first-century readers than they were to the first-wave feminists and antifeminists who rediscovered the text. But I have a feeling that the more people who read and the bigger the crowds who add to the information available, the more chance there is to ultimately understand it even as we appreciate the exceptional life of Regina Salomea Pilsztynowa.