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Marie Skłodowska-Curie

From Personal Tragedy to a Second Nobel Prize

Maria Skłodowska-Curie

Od życiowej tragedii do drugiego Nobla

Abstract: This article is dedicated to Marie Skłodowska-Curie, with a focus on the transformative period in her life after the sudden death of her husband, Pierre Curie, in 1906. The author examines how this tragic event reshaped Marie's personality, her relationship with the world, her self-perception and her approach to scientific work. The article further explores how this identity shift influenced her decision to accept the chair of physics at the Sorbonne and to continue her research into radioactivity. This choice marked a turning point in her life, propelling her towards a groundbreaking scientific career, which culminated in a second Nobel Prize and breaking barriers for women in science.

Keywords: Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Pierre Curie's death, turning point, identity transformation, the work of mourning.

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As Agnieszka Skowrońska-Pućka insightfully observes, 'a person's biography is shaped by a multitude of events. While some fade into insignificance, others act as boundaries between different stages of life or completely alter its course.'¹ Such events can profoundly transform one's perception of the surrounding world and their place within it.² In scholarly discourse, these transformative moments are often referred to as critical events,³ biographical ruptures,⁴ epiphanies,⁵ or turning points.⁶ Typical examples include major accidents, retirement, job loss, severe illness, the birth of a child, or the loss of a loved one.

For an event to be considered a turning point, it must disrupt the ordinary flow of life, connect with the individual's most deeply held values, carry significant emotional weight, and impact a fundamental aspect of their existence. Anselm Strauss conceptualised the 'turning point' as a key category in his studies of identity transformation. He described it as a moment that bestows a new identity upon an individual—a metamorphosis that becomes apparent not only to others but also to the person themselves, as they come to realize that they are no longer the person they once were.⁷

- 1 A. Skowrońska-Pućka, *Edukacyjny potencjał krytycznych wydarzeń życiowych w perspektywie biograficznego uczenia się*, „Kultura – Społeczeństwo – Edukacja”, 15 (2019) issue 1, pp. 85–86, DOI: 10.14746/kse.2019.15.6.
- 2 M. Wrona, *Sytuacje graniczne w chaosie pojęciowym – próba syntezy znaczeń*, in: *Sytuacje graniczne w biegu ludzkiego życia*, ed. J. Wiśniewska, Radom 2015, pp. 9–23.
- 3 H. Sęk, *Procesy twórczego zmagania się z krytycznymi wydarzeniami życiowymi a zdrowie psychiczne*, in: *Twórczość i kompetencje życiowe a zdrowie psychiczne*, ed. H. Sęk, Poznań 1991, p. 32.
- 4 T. Malec, *Biograficzne uczenie się osób z nabytym stygmatem*, Wrocław 2008, pp. 112–122.
- 5 N. K. Denzin, *Interpretative Biography*, Newbury Park 1989, p. 71; G. Gibbs, *Analizowanie danych jakościowych*, trans. M. Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, Warszawa 2011, p. 254; M. G. McDonald, *Epiphanies: An Existential, Philosophical and Psychological Inquiry*, Sidney 2005, p. 30.
- 6 A. L. Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks. The Search for Identity*, London 1977, p. 93; A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, *Chaos i przymus. Trajektorie wojenne Polaków – analiza biograficzna*, Łódź 2002, pp. 45–50.
- 7 A. L. Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*, p. 93.

This article exemplifies these theoretical constructs through the case of Marie Skłodowska-Curie by examining the far-reaching consequences of her husband Pierre Curie's untimely death. His loss abruptly, deeply, and irreversibly altered her personality and led her to accept a position at the Sorbonne—a decision that redefined her personal and professional trajectory. This case study draws on a wide array of biographical materials, such as Skłodowska-Curie's writings, such as her grief journal, autobiography, and letters, alongside biographies authored about her. Notably, it relies on the works of her daughters, Eve and Irène, and incorporates personal accounts (letters, memoirs, and diaries) from her close family, including her sisters Bronisława and Helena and her brother Józef, who witnessed her personal tragedy and ensuing transformation firsthand.

My discussion centres on Fritz Schütze's concept of *trajectory*, a term he uses to describe chaotic social processes and experiences of suffering.⁸ Schütze specifies that the scope of *trajectory* extends beyond the phenomenon of death to broader instances of personal disintegration and the destabilisation of life. Nevertheless, it is most often applied to the trajectory of dying. The anguish caused by losing a loved one—marked by feelings of helplessness and loss—places an individual in a liminal state—one that, though seemingly unbearable, can also inspire remarkable resilience and creative transformation, as demonstrated in the life of Marie Skłodowska-Curie.

For clarity, I must note that I will not provide a full account of Skłodowska-Curie's life for two reasons. First, her biography is well-known to Polish readers and readily available through a wealth of biographies, online resources, and cinematic portrayals. Second, my focus is specifically on the tragic death of her husband, Pierre Curie, which left an indelible impact on her psyche and character and steered her onto new professional paths.⁹ This pivotal moment in her life is often treated as

- 8 G. Riemann, F. Schütze, „Trajektoria” jako podstawowa koncepcja teoretyczna w analizach cierpienia i bezładnych procesów społecznych, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo”, 36 (1992) issue 2, p. 92.
- 9 T. Pospieszny, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie. Zakochana w nauce*, edit. 3, Warszawa 2024, pp. 203–232.

an ancillary detail, even in extensive and in-depth biographies. Two exceptions, however, stand out: Susan Quinn's *Marie Curie: A Life* (1997) and Tomasz Pospieszny's *Marie Skłodowska-Curie: Zakochana w nauce* [Marie Skłodowska-Curie: In Love with Science], both of which offer thorough accounts of Pierre Curie's tragic death, the difficult circumstances that Marie faced in its wake, and the heartrending despair and solitude that defined her life thereafter.

The rainy Thursday of 19 April 1906 marks the most harrowing day of Marie Skłodowska-Curie's life. Pierre, visibly limping,¹⁰ was struck and fatally run over by a speeding cart on a Paris street. This sudden and tragic loss sent shockwaves through Marie's life, fundamentally transforming her personality, her outlook on scientific work, interpersonal relationships, and her sense of self. Eyewitnesses to the aftermath of the tragedy attested to this immediate change: they described an impenetrable barrier that seemed to rise between her and the external world. Among the most detailed and evocative accounts of this transformation—frequently cited in later biographies¹¹—is the narrative provided by her younger daughter, Eve Curie, in her memoir:

The notion that a sudden tragedy can irrevocably transform a person's life may seem self-evident, even trite. Yet, it is impossible to overstate the transformative effect such moments had on my mother's character and the fabric of our lives. Marie Curie did not simply transform overnight from a joyful, vibrant woman into an inconsolable widow. The change was far deeper and less straightforward. The overwhelming despair that engulfed her, the agonising chaos of her thoughts and emotions were too harrowing to articulate through confession or lament. From the moment those three words—'Pierre is dead'—registered in her consciousness, she became enveloped in an impenetrable shroud of isolation and withdrawal.

- 10 Doctors diagnosed Pierre with rheumatism. However, the scientist's sister, Bronisława Dłuska—a trained physician and Poland's first gynaecologist—believed it to be the 'onset of locomotor ataxia'; *ibidem*, p. 211.
- 11 In her biography of Skłodowska-Curie, Barbara Goldsmith gave the chapter on Pierre Curie's death and its impact on his widow's life the evocative title *Meta-morfoza*. See: B. Goldsmith, *Geniusz i obsesja. Wewnętrzny świat Marii Curie*, trans. J. Szmołda, Wrocław 2011, pp. 124–132.

On that fateful April day, Madame Curie became not only a widow but also an irreparably and tragically solitary figure.¹²

This seismic shift in Marie's demeanour is recounted by her sister, Helena Skłodowska-Szalay, who visited Paris a month after Pierre's death. 'I was horrified by the transformation I saw in Marie's appearance and temperament,' she wrote in her memoirs. 'She rarely spoke, drifting silently through the apartment like a shadow, and she never once mentioned her husband.'¹³ Marie herself acknowledged this change in her autobiography: 'I cannot adequately describe the magnitude and significance of the upheaval that followed the loss of the one who was my closest companion and dearest friend. Shattered by the blow, I found myself utterly incapable of contemplating the future.'¹⁴

The accounts of Marie's family and colleagues reveal the sheer extent of this transformation. Within hours of Pierre's death, the sensitive, cheerful woman they had known appeared to have been replaced by what they described as a 'rigid, cold, and unnervingly calm automaton.'¹⁵ Even the sight of her children failed to stir a spark of emotion.¹⁶ Her sister, Bronisława Dłuska, who cared for her during these dark days, recalled:

This state deeply alarmed me. It was no longer just the melancholy and dejection of recent years, but a chilling calm that was truly unsettling. She seemed like a lifeless statue, an automaton, unresponsive to questions and oblivious to what was happening around her. I am certain she wished only for death, and it was her children who ultimately saved her from taking her own life.¹⁷

12 E. Curie, *Maria Curie*, Warszawa 1938, pp. 272–273.

13 H. Skłodowska-Szalay, *Ze wspomnień o Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie. Pamiątkowe wiersze, złapane chwile*, Warszawa 2019, p. 78.

14 M. Skłodowska-Curie, *Autobiografia i wspomnienia o Piotrze Curie*, Warszawa 2004, p. 30.

15 B. Goldsmith, *Geniusz i obsesja*, s. 136.

16 'I wish to raise my children as best I can, but even they cannot awaken life within me,' wrote Marie on 12 December 1906 in a letter to Kazimiera Przyborowska (*Maria Skłodowska-Curie: listy*, ed. A. Albrecht, trans. A. Zych, Warszawa 2012, p. 69).

17 Musée Curie. Fonds Privé Ève Curie, FP-EC/B1a10. *Documents biographiques fournis par Bronia Dłuska et Helena Szalay* (as cited in T. Pospieszny, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, p. 222).

Marie Curie's retreat from the world was all-encompassing. She seemed to have grown emotionally numb and lost all capacity for joy. Her daughter, Eve Curie, remarked: 'At times, it seems as though, while she did not follow her husband into death, she no longer truly dwells among the living either.'¹⁸ Similarly, her elder daughter, Irène Joliot-Curie, reflected: 'After my father's tragic accident, my mother needed years to recover from the shock. In truth, she never truly found happiness again, nor could she ever fully reconcile herself with his absence.'¹⁹ Françoise Giroud captured this transformation in her biography. The joyful, tender, and vibrant Marie, Giroud observed, had died alongside Pierre, replaced by a different person—as sombre as the black dresses she always wore. Describing the events of April 1906, Giroud remarked: 'She must now mourn not only Pierre but also a part of herself—a youthful, gentle sovereign of a great man—who vanished with him and whom no one could ever bring back.'²⁰

Marie Curie's writings reveal her self-awareness of her transformation and withdrawal into herself:

I neither love the sun nor flowers; their sight only causes me pain. ... My days are entirely consumed by work in the laboratory—that is all I seem capable of doing. ... The thought of living for myself feels utterly foreign; I lack both the ability and the faintest desire to attempt it. Life and joy feel entirely out of reach. I no longer know what joy or even pleasure means. Tomorrow, I will turn 39.²¹

In a letter dated 12 December 1906 to her close friend Kazimiera Przyborska, she expressed her grief:

My life has been shattered beyond repair, and I now live solely for my duties, which are many. I no longer exist for myself, nor would I even know

18 E. Curie, *Maria Curie*, p. 279.

19 I. Joliot-Curie, *Maria Curie, moja matka*, trans. M. H. Malewicz, Warszawa 2020, p. 22.

20 F. Giraud, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, trans. J. Pałęcka, Warszawa 1987, p. 137.

21 *Piotrze, mój Piotrze. Dziennik żałobny Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie*, ed. T. Pospieszny & E. Wajs-Baryła, trans. A. Tomaszewska, Warszawa 2022, p. 70.

how to. I have withdrawn entirely; I see no one and speak to no one except in connection with my work. Nothing brings me joy, and nothing captures my interest. I am resigned to the belief that this state will endure, and I see no reason to attempt to change it.²²

The weight of Marie's loss was both personal and professional. She lost not only her beloved husband, the father of her two daughters, and the family's provider but also her most trusted mentor and collaborator—the intellectual partner with whom she had shared pioneering research that earned them the Nobel Prize in 1903. Françoise Giroud poignantly captured the depth of this tragedy:

Marie did not merely lose her partner in toil and triumph, the steadfast companion of her days and nights; she lost her sense of security. She lost the one who loved her unconditionally—whether in victory or defeat, in moments of inspiration or doubt, in strength or hesitation—To Pierre, Marie was the very beat of his heart.²³

Her grief was made all the more agonising by the burden of guilt. In the diary that she began after Pierre's funeral, Marie reproached herself for not accompanying him to the laboratory on that ill-fated day, despite his explicit request. Instead, she chose to take her daughter on an outing. In earlier weeks, this tireless workaholic, known for pushing herself to the brink of exhaustion, had turned her heart toward nurturing her children and tending to the home—activities that, to her surprise, brought an unfamiliar sense of joy. Yet, what tormented her most was their last conversation. Pierre had urged her to go with him, but she brusquely dismissed him with a curt, 'Don't bother me.'²⁴

22 *Maria Skłodowska-Curie: listy*, p. 69.

23 F. Giraud, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, p. 137.

24 A page was torn out following the passage in which Marie disclosed that her final words to her husband lacked affection, a fact she deeply regretted and tormented herself over. It remains unclear who removed the page or why. The editors of her grief diary, T. Pospieszny and E. Wajs-Baryła, speculate that it may have contained deeply intimate personal confessions, excised by either Marie herself or her close family, in a moment of emotional turmoil or despair (*Piotrze, mój Piotrze*, p. 15).

Engulfed in overwhelming sorrow and wracked by guilt, Marie confided her thoughts and feelings to Pierre in her diary, just as she had conversed with him during his lifetime. This journal, maintained sporadically for nearly a year, became a chronicle of her grief and a form of therapy²⁵—a candid account of her struggle to come to terms with the loss of her beloved. Writing directly to Pierre, she poured out her anguish, sharing the suffocating emptiness of her days and the void left by his absence. Her entries throb with searing pain:

My Pierre, life without you is inhuman. Unimaginable dread, bottomless despair, boundless sorrow. You have been gone for 18 days, and not for a moment have I stopped thinking of you—except perhaps in the brief reprieve of sleep. ... My Pierre, you are in my thoughts constantly. My head is splitting, my mind refuses to function. I cannot fathom how I will go on without you, without seeing you, without smiling at my chosen one, my companion, my loyal friend.²⁶

My Pierre, I loved you, and I do not know how to live without you. ... With a clenched heart, I recall your face. The pain is so excruciating that I marvel my heart continues to beat. It ought to shatter and bring an end to this life from which you have departed. ... Pierre, I cannot bear it; I cannot endure any of it. Life has become impossible.²⁷

Sándor Ferenczi's concept of introjection—the internalisation of grief—finds a parallel in Marie Curie's diary, in which she seeks to articulate her suffering by recounting the void left by Pierre.²⁸ Yet, this 'laboratory notebook of despair'²⁹ is more than an outlet for mourning. It is also a testament to a life

25 According to Laurent Lemaire, 'Writing eased her pain. Never again would we see such unfiltered honesty, such a baring of her soul. These were the only moments when the scientist gave way to the woman.'; L. Lemaire, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, trans. G. and J. Schirmerowie, Warszawa 2017, p. 78.

26 *Piotrze, mój Piotrze*, p. 66.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 67.

28 S. Ferenczi, *On the Definition of Introjection* (1912), in: *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis*, ed. M. Balint, London 1955, p. 316.

29 F. Giraud, *Maria Skłodowska-Curie*, p. 137.

shared –a marriage steeped in scientific collaboration and filled with joys, concerns, and plans for the future that were cruelly obliterated by fate.³⁰ The diary encapsulates a life fractured in two: the past, filled with Pierre's presence, and the unyielding reality of his absence. Husband and grief, love and irreparable loss frame this document, suspended in the liminal space between what once was and what now is.

These entries, capturing the varying shades of sorrow, remembrance, anger, and helplessness, evoke the compulsive labour of mourning—a visceral attempt to process unendurable loss. Yet, this writing is not a therapeutic exercise designed to resolve grief through language, nor a deliberate effort to reconstruct an inner life and find one's footing in an irrevocably altered reality.³¹ Such writing has its precedents in literary history: Jan Kochanowski's *Laments*, Waclaw Potocki's *Epitaphs*, Tadeusz Różewicz's *Mother Leaves*, Inga Iwasiów's *Umarł mi. Notatnik żałoby* [He Died on Me. A Mourning Notebook], and Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary*. These authors channelled their creative energies into intimate funeral texts—rituals of passage through despair, acts of catharsis, and attempts (not always fruitful) to re-enter the rhythms of life. Yet, for Marie Curie, her grief diary offered neither solace nor resolution. On its final page, dated April 1907, she wrote:

A year has passed. I continue to live. For his children, for his elderly father. The pain lingers, only slightly dulled. A heavy weight bears down upon me. I long to sleep and never wake again. My poor little daughters are still so young. And I am so terribly exhausted. Will I ever dare to write again?³²

30 The memoirs penned after Pierre's death unveil a new and lesser-known side of Marie Skłodowska-Curie, as they offer a rare glimpse into her emotions. Her grief diary stands as an intimate portrait of this extraordinary scientist—both brilliant and deeply sensitive. As noted by its editors, Tomasz Pospieszny and Ewa Wajs-Baryła, it embodies 'the highest expression of love in the wake of an irreparable loss'; *Piotrze, mój Piotrze*, p. 15.

31 J. Bowlby, *Przywiązanie*, trans. M. Polaszewska-Nicke, Warszawa 2007.

32 *Piotrze, mój Piotrze*, p. 76.

Marie Curie's diary³³ is not merely a record of her heart-wrenching mourning and devastating grief for her late husband, but also an account of a pivotal moment in her life—one that set her on the path to continue her remarkable scientific career. Anthony Giddens' concept of a turning point aptly describes this event: a moment that carries life-altering consequences demands transgressive decisions and ushers in sweeping changes in a person's life.³⁴

After Pierre's funeral, rather than staying with her family to mourn in the quiet solace of home, Marie chose to return to the laboratory to 'speak with him in silence' and 'relive their last days together.'³⁵ Though the empty space only magnified her sense of loss and deepened her sorrow, she felt compelled to carry forward Pierre's work—propelled by love, respect, and a desire to honour his brilliance. Her work also gave her a sense of proximity to her husband: 'This laboratory allows me to be with you, to remain in your world. It stands as proof that you were here,'³⁶ she wrote in her diary. These words are meaningful as they reveal the reasons why she plunged herself into her work with such all-consuming dedication.

In parallel with her mourning diary, Marie began a laboratory notebook to document her experiments on radioactivity. Her entries brimmed with passion and painstaking care to capture every detail, fuelled by two intertwining aspirations: to preserve Pierre's groundbreaking achievements for posterity and continue the research they had begun together. Immersing herself in her work became her survival strategy—a means to endure her grief, to escape her

33 In 1990, Marie Skłodowska-Curie's family donated her diary to the National Library in Paris. It was first published in French in 1996, and the Polish translation was featured on 31 May 2001 in the *Gazeta Wyborcza Magazine* under the title *Odkąd przestałeś istnieć* (*Since You Ceased to Exist*), translated by Sławomir Zagórski. In 2022, the diary was released in book form as *Piotrze mój Piotrze. Dziennik żałobny Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie* (*Pierre, My Pierre: Marie Skłodowska-Curie's Grief Diary*), translated by Agata Tomaszewska and edited by Tomasz Pospieszny and Ewa Wajs-Baryła. The book also includes the original French version of the diary and a biography of Pierre Curie.

34 See also A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późniejszej nowoczesności*, trans. A. Szulżycka, Warszawa 2021, pp. 151–157.

35 *Piotrze, mój Piotrze*, p. 51.

36 *Ibidem*, p. 71.

harrowing thoughts, and perhaps, to absolve herself of guilt. She confessed to Pierre: 'I spend every day in the laboratory— it is all I am capable of now. Here, I feel better than anywhere else.'³⁷ Sigmund Freud might argue that, for Marie, it was not the act of writing her grief diary but her dedication to scientific work that constituted her 'work of mourning'—a way of processing her husband's death. In the end, this process proved successful, for after years of relentless research undertaken for Pierre and in his memory, the raw agony of his absence evolved into a quieter, more bearable ache.³⁸

Barely a month after her husband's tragic death, Marie made a life-altering decision—one that not only transformed her future but also opened doors for other women in science to enter the male-dominated world of academia. Pierre's colleagues at the Sorbonne, Georges Gouy and Paul Appell, successfully petitioned for Marie to receive a pension, but, true to her character, she firmly declined, leaving university authorities—obliged to provide for the widow and orphans—in disarray. Resolute and fiercely independent, she vowed to earn a living to support her family and remained steadfast in her resolve. Concerned about her future,³⁹ her friends proposed a bold and unprecedented⁴⁰ idea: that she take on Pierre's academic responsibilities at the Sorbonne. After their persistent lobbying in ministerial circles, the university, breaking with long-

37 Ibidem, p. 70.

38 In his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia,' Sigmund Freud observes that 'after the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.' (p. 245). He further explains that mourning 'impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live.' (p. 244). These observations illuminate the psychological process by which the bereaved individual detaches emotional energy from the lost object, which facilitates a return to normal functioning. S. Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. J. Strachey, vol. 14, London 1917/1957, pp. 243–258 (original work published 1917).

39 Bronisława Dłuska, Pierre's brother Jakub Curie, his closest friend, physicist Georges Gouy, along with Marcellin Berthelot, Paul Appell, and Lucas Liard, were among those who supported Marie during this time.

40 It is worth recalling that Marie was the first woman to hold the title of professor at the Sorbonne, where she was appointed as a lecturer; N. Pigeard-Micault, *Marie Curie et les femmes de son laboratoire*, „Orléans Actes”, 2018, pp. 1–11.

-standing traditions and customs, offered Marie the chair of physics established for Pierre in 1904. This appointment would see her 'delivering commissioned lectures' and managing the laboratory he had once directed.

Marie did not accept immediately. She wavered, torn by grief and self-doubt, acutely aware of the immense responsibility and the arduous work that this prestigious yet demanding position entailed. The tragedy she had experienced clouded her judgment. As her brother Józef Skłodowski observed: 'Marie was utterly devastated, incapable of making decisions, much less advocating for her future.'⁴¹ It was Georges Gouy's measured arguments that ultimately swayed her: firstly, no physicist in France could carry on Pierre's work, and all who knew him believed that his legacy should continue and the chair should remain with the Curie name; secondly, Pierre would have been pleased to know that his legacy was being cared for by his wife, 'his closest collaborator, the one who best understood his plans and methods.'⁴² Despite her lingering doubts and the knowledge that she was stepping into a hostile academic world riddled with envy, gender discrimination, and nationalist prejudice,⁴³ Marie decided to stand up to the test. She was inspired by Pierre's parting words, which she carried as both a command and a testament: 'Whatever happens, even if we feel like a body without a soul, we must continue to work.'⁴⁴ She also recalled his dream of her one day becoming an academic lecturer. With these thoughts in mind, she decided to try.

41 T. Pospieszny, E. Wajs-Baryła, P. Chrzastowski, *Aby ocalić od zapomnienia. Pamiętniki Władysława, Józefa i Marii Skłodowskich*, Warszawa 2023, p. 337.

42 Bibliothèque Nationale, G. Gouy, *Lettre à Marie Curie*, le 30 avril 1906, Paris.

43 She experienced this hostility acutely in 1911 when she applied for membership in the French Academy of Sciences. Its members made every effort to exclude her—not only because she was a woman but also because she was a foreigner—despite her Nobel Prize and numerous other achievements. Curie had already been honoured three times by the Paris Academy of Sciences, held honorary doctorates from universities in Edinburgh, Geneva, and Manchester, and was a member of prestigious institutions such as the Academies of Science in St. Petersburg, Bologna, and Prague, as well as the Academy of Learning in Kraków.

44 M. Skłodowska-Curie, *Autobiografia i wspomnienia o Piotrze Curie*, p. 112.

For the first time in the history of France, a woman—a foreigner no less—was appointed to a university post.⁴⁵ Yet this milestone was not born of ambition or the pursuit of a career but by her love for her late husband and the passion they had shared for science. Her reflections on this day, recorded in her diary, speak volumes:

I was offered your role—lectures, your laboratory to oversee—and I accepted. I still don't know if it was the right decision. Time and again, you said you wished for me to lecture at the Sorbonne. I would like to at least try to work. Perhaps it will make life more bearable. But then I think it might be madness.⁴⁶

This unshakeable sense of duty in succeeding Pierre was unmistakable in the way Marie delivered her first lecture at the Sorbonne on 5 November 1906. Crowds packed the hall, eager to witness the 'renowned widow' step into her husband's shoes. Many anticipated an emotional display, perhaps tears or a heartfelt tribute to Pierre. Yet, nothing of the sort occurred. Marie betrayed no emotion and made no mention of Pierre, even though it was customary to pay homage to one's predecessor. Her lecture was devoid of personal musings or any grandiose acknowledgement of the historic fact that a woman had been entrusted with a Sorbonne chair for the first time. Determined to remain inconspicuous, she slipped into the lecture hall through a side door and began

45 Years later, Marie reflected on the event: 'It was an exceptional occurrence, as no woman had ever been accorded a similar honour before. In doing so, the University extended exceptional recognition to my work and provided me with an opportunity to continue my research—an opportunity I would have otherwise been denied. I had never expected such a privilege; I had no aspirations for it. My sole desire was to work freely in the service of science. However, the honour bestowed upon me was deeply painful under the circumstances at the time. Moreover, I questioned whether I could rise to such a grave responsibility. After much hesitation, I decided that I must at least attempt to shoulder the burden. Thus, in 1906, I began lecturing at the Sorbonne as an associate professor, and two years later, I was appointed a full professor.' *Ibidem*, p. 31.

46 *Piotrze, mój Piotrze*, p. 64.

her clinical, disciplined lecture exactly where Pierre had left off. Later, in her diary, she captured the heartache of that day:

Yesterday, I lectured for the first time, standing in for my Pierre. Such sorrow and despair! You would have been so rejoiced to see me as a Sorbonne professor. I would have done this gladly, for you. But to be a professor instead of you—it's unbearable. There is nothing more terrible. I suffered greatly and felt utterly despondent, void of the will to live. Yet, I know I must raise our children, and I must also see through the task I have taken upon myself. Perhaps it is my way of proving to the world—and to myself—that the woman you loved so deeply was capable of something remarkable. ... I must persevere so that I can one day tell you I succeeded. It is the only thing that matters to me now.⁴⁷

When Marie accepted her position at the Sorbonne, she did so at great personal cost, laying her private life on the altar of scientific pursuit—not for personal accolades, but as a tribute to Pierre and in service to science. Her mission was to create the professional laboratory Pierre had always dreamed of but never lived to see. To bring it to life, she worked tirelessly, with doubled intensity, becoming both Marie and Pierre in one. 'I now had to shoulder the burden we had once carried together,'⁴⁸ she wrote in her autobiography. A year after Pierre's death, she published an article on the weight of radioactive substances that he had begun drafting in his final months. She opened it with the acknowledgement: 'Pierre Curie observed several years ago'⁴⁹ She also verified his findings on the effects of gravitational forces on radium and thorium, edited his unfinished works, and eventually compiled them into a monumental 600-page monograph, *The Works of Pierre Curie*⁵⁰ (1908). In the introduction, she

47 Ibidem, p. 74.

48 M. Skłodowska-Curie, *Autobiografia i wspomnienia o Piotrze Curie*, p. 31.

49 P. Curie, *Action de la pesanteur sur le dépôt de la radioactivité induit*, „Radium” (Paris), 4 (1907) issue 11, pp. 381–382, DOI: 10.1051/radium:01907004011038100.jpao0242262.

50 P. Curie, *Préface aux Oeuvres de Pierre Curie*, in: *Oeuvres de Pierre Curie*, ed. M. Curie, Paris 1908, pp. 5–22.

honoured Pierre's brilliance, his ability to inspire through his intellect, moral fortitude, and an irresistible charm.⁵¹

In the four years after his death, Marie accomplished remarkable feats. She obtained radium in its metallic state, refined methods for isolating and producing new substances, and defined the international standard for radium. She also participated in numerous international conferences, including the prestigious Solvay Conference in Brussels, where she was the sole woman in attendance. Marie's crowning achievements—the 1911 Nobel Prize in Chemistry and the founding of a state-of-the-art laboratory at the Radium Institute in Paris, where she served as director⁵² (now the Curie Institute)—embodied the ultimate fulfilment of her promise to Pierre. She consistently and unfailingly dedicated all honours associated with these triumphs to his memory. In her speech to the Royal Swedish Academy, she declared:

I wish to emphasise that the discoveries of radium and polonium were made jointly with Pierre Curie. Much of the pioneering work in the field of radioactivity, whether conducted independently, with me, or with his students, is his legacy. Though I carried out the chemical work to isolate radium salts and define their properties, this accomplishment is inseparable from our shared endeavours. ... I believe I am justified in interpreting this Nobel Prize as not only an acknowledgement of my contributions but also as a tribute to Pierre Curie.⁵³

When thanking Gustaf Mittag-Leffler, a member of the Swedish Academy, during a private reception, Marie Curie invoked the memory of her late husband and his contributions to science. She spoke of her 'reverence for his beautiful life, devoted to selfless work,' and the pride she and their daughter

51 Ibidem, p. 22.

52 This institute became a cradle of Nobel laureates, as it produced four more recipients of the prize, including Marie Skłodowska-Curie's daughter, Irène, and her son-in-law, Frédéric Joliot-Curie. It was a hub for pioneering research on radioactivity and radioisotopes.

53 K. Blanc, *Marie Curie et le Nobel*, Uppsala 1999, p. 157.

felt 'whenever they heard his name lauded.'⁵⁴ Marie also ensured that the unit of radioactivity she developed bore his name—Curie (Ci)—a tribute that represents the ultimate form of immortality for a scientist. Not even her romantic involvement in 1911 with Paul Langevin, Pierre's former assistant, wavered her devotion to her husband's memory. In 1921, when publishing *Radiology and War*, she chose to sign the work as 'Madame Pierre Curie,' demonstrating once again that Pierre remained a constant presence in her life and an inseparable part of her identity. Perhaps the greatest tribute Marie could offer her husband was to secure his scientific legacy through their elder daughter, Irène, whom she raised into a scientist of equal stature to her legendary parents. In 1935, Irène and her husband, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, were awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for their discovery of artificial radioactivity, the synthesis of new radioactive nuclides.

Marie Skłodowska-Curie's story exemplifies how even the most devastating tragedies, though overwhelming and immobilising, can fuel a drive for purpose and action, ultimately leading to fulfilment and success. The death of her husband marked a turning point in her life, which propelled her towards a second Nobel Prize and a host of other scientific accolades. One cannot help but wonder how her career might have unfolded had she declined the invitation to succeed Pierre as professor at the Sorbonne.

What might have become of her scientific career, mused her granddaughter, Hélène Langevin-Joliot, if things had taken a different turn. Would she have been forced to change her field of study to one dictated by a new supervisor? Could she have contemplated returning to Poland? Anything would have been possible.⁵⁵

However, determined to carry forward the work of her beloved husband, Marie embraced the opportunity, a decision that transformed not only her own life but also the course of global science. By breaking into spaces histori-

54 S. Quinn, *Życie Marii Curie*, trans. A. Soszyńska, Warszawa 1997, p. 469.

55 *Maria Skłodowska-Curie: listy*, p. 62.

cally closed to women, she broke barriers, opening academic lecture halls and research institutions to future generations of female scientists. Her accomplishments indelibly etched Poland's name into the annals of international science. She became the first woman to hold a professorship at a university, the first to attend Solvay physics congresses, and the first person to earn two Nobel Prizes. Indeed, this trailblazer was a Polish woman.⁵⁶

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie, a w szczególności zmianom, jakie dokonały się w jej życiu z powodu nagłej śmierci męża, Piotra Curie, w 1906 r. Autorka analizuje, jak owo tragiczne wydarzenie zmieniło osobowość Marii, jej stosunek do świata, do siebie samej i pracy naukowej. Bada również wpływ tej tożsamościowej zmiany na decyzję objęcia katedry fizyki na Sorbonie i kontynuację badań nad radioaktywnością. Decyzja ta stanowiła punkt zwrotny w życiu badaczki, który stał się siłą napędową do jej dalszej kariery naukowej, doprowadzając ją do drugiej Nagrody Nobla i otwarcia kobietom drzwi do świata nauki.

Słowa kluczowe: Maria Skłodowska-Curie, śmierć Piotra Curie, punkt zwrotny, zmiana tożsamościowa, praca żałoby.

56 In the collective memory of Poles, Marie Skłodowska-Curie is undeniably regarded as Polish. However, from a formal standpoint, her national identity is less clear-cut. She never held Polish citizenship: by birth, she was a Russian subject (as Poland was under partition at the time), and through her marriage to Pierre Curie, she acquired French citizenship. Despite this, she always considered herself Polish and remained deeply attached to her homeland, the Polish language, and the patriotic values instilled in her during her upbringing. Although she conducted her scientific work in France, she maintained close relationships with Poland, as well as with her family and friends who remained in Warsaw. Her ties to her native country, though varying in intensity throughout her life, also extended to professional collaborations. Her correspondence provides ample evidence of her keen interest in Polish affairs and the advancement of science in her homeland (*Korespondencja polska Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie*, eds. K. Kabzińska, M. H. Malewicz, J. Piskurewicz, J. Różewicz, Warsaw 1994).

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