Helena Radlinska: A Portrait of the Person, Researcher, Teacher and Social Activist

The Person – the multidimensional passions of Helena Radlinska

Helena Radlinska, née Rajchman, was born in Warsaw in 1879. Her biography is an example of a life rich with many, varied interests. Community work, education and politics were to have a major influence on her development as a person, teacher and researcher. She worked in these fields during various times in her life and on many levels (national and international), with individuals and communities.

She began her teaching and community activism early (1897-1905), first as a private teacher, then as a teacher of Polish and history in schools and for clandestine study groups. She worked as a nurse in a number of institutions and associations (the Warsaw Charitable Association, the Institute of Child Hygiene of the Leon Lenval Foundation, for example). Her community and educational involvement was closely linked to the political and national independence movements of that era. In the early stage of her professional life (the Krakow period), she was actively involved in or co-founded many associations (the Adam Mickiewicz Association of the Peasant University with adult education courses provided in communities, the Union of Assistance to Political Prisoners, the Association of the Polish Institute of Pedagogy, and the Friends of Children Association). In 1915 she established the Central School Bureau. She lectured in history and library science for the Social Department of the A. Branicki Higher Educational Courses for Women. She was also the co-founder of the S. Staszica Institute of Education and Culture.

A separate branch of her extensive community activism was a special interest in rural development. She organized and worked for the educational and community development of rural villages in Poland. She contributed to

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the work of the Union of Polish Rural Teaching (1917) and the Central Union of Agricultural Circles in 1918-1939. She also organized community education programs for adults in small towns and rural areas (known as ‘folk universities’ in the sense of Gruntvig). Her political involvement included advocacy on behalf of Polish schools, the struggle for national independence and the creation of the Polish state. Between 1913 and 1918, she assumed many roles in the organizational structures of the independence movement. After Poland regained its sovereignty, she was actively involved in the Polish Peasant Movement ‘Liberation.’

Radlinska’s studies in medieval history, completed in 1911 at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, provided the foundation of her systematic activities in research and education. In letters to Irena Lepalczyk, she recalls how these studies contributed to her research skills. Her systematic research studies and academic work began in 1921 at the Polish Free University in Warsaw, where she started as a teaching assistant in adult education. In 1925 she achieved habilitation in the history of community work, with her dissertation ‘Staszic as a social activist.’ She was appointed lecturer, and in 1927 became a special professor in history and adult education in the Pedagogy Department of the Polish Free University. Ten years later, in 1937, she was nominated full professor in social pedagogy.

One of her most important academic achievements is undoubtedly the development and organization of Poland’s first program in social work at an institute of higher learning – the Social and Education Studies Program (Studium Pracy Społeczno – Ogwiatowej) of the Polish Free University in 1925. This School, directed by Radlinska until 1944, significantly influenced the understanding of the role of social work in society, as well as the overall development of social work education in Poland.

Another important area of Radlinska’s work is her involvement in the international academic movement. She actively participated in many academic conferences. Among them are: the Third International Congress of Moral Behavioural Development in Geneva (1922), the Third International Meeting of New Behavioural Development in Montreux (1924), the International Conference of Social Work in Paris (1928), the Third Congress of the World Federation of Pedagogical Associations in Geneva (1929), the Fifth International Congress of the League of New Behavioural Development in Denmark (1929), the International Conference of Adult Education in Cambridge (1929), the Fifth Congress of Moral Behavioural Development in Paris (1930), the Sixth International Congress of the League of New Behavioural Development in Frankfurt (1932), the Second International Conference on Social Work in Frankfurt (1932) and the Third International Conference on Social Work in London (1936). Last but not least it should be mentioned that Helena Radlinska has been one of the fifteen founding members of the ‘International Committee of Schools of Social Work’ in Berlin (1929) which is nowadays known as the ‘International Association of Schools of Social Work/IASSW’.