

Honorary Members

Since its founding in 1898, the Polish Women's Alliance of America has opened its doors and its heart to many people from all walks of life. Some of them were celebrated and many of them were women - writers, poets, artists, scientists, educators, social workers, members of religious orders, business leaders, journalists, and politicians.

Relationships with Polish women who were activists and patriots, dedicated to changing the world and helping the disadvantaged, were especially meaningful. Their work brought them in contact with members of the PWA who were inspired to offer help and solidarity.

To honor special bonds of friendship and a commitment to shared causes, the PWA National Board has, since 1903, extended Honorary Membership to nine internationally renowned women:

- [Maria Konopnicka, poet and author](#)
- [Eliza Orzeszkowa, author](#)
- [Helena Modrzejewska, actress](#)
- [Helena Paderewska, humanitarian](#)
- [Marie Sklodowska Curie, scientist](#)
- [Maria Rodziewiczowna, author](#)
- [Helena Sikorska, social activist](#)
- [Barbara Mikulski, U.S. Senator](#)
- [Irena Sendler, social worker](#)

These nine women were honored for their courage, integrity, and achievement. Their lives narrate the story of the empowerment of Polish women in the 20th century—from a writer who had only the power of her pen to act against the tyranny of an occupier to a U.S. Senator elected to the highest level of democratic government; from an internationally acclaimed scientist who was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize to a young social worker secretly saving the lives of children in the dark alleys of the Warsaw Ghetto.

The lives of the Honorary Members exemplify the motto of the PWA, "The ideals of a woman are the strength of a nation."

Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910)



Maria Konopnicka was a poet, novelist, translator, and essayist. Beloved for children's tales, her patriotic legacy is enshrined by the poem *Rota* (The Oath), set in 1910 to powerful music by Feliks Nowowiejski. It became a popular anthem throughout partitioned Poland.

Poland was not a free nation during her lifetime, occupied by the three superpowers of the era: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Konopnicka was dedicated to keeping the Polish language and culture alive. Her emotional and accessible words encouraged not only the oppressed people in Poland, but also Polish immigrants in distant lands. She became their voice as they struggled for freedom and dignity in forging new lives.

The Polish Women's Alliance sent wishes to Konopnicka in 1902 on the occasion of her 25th jubilee as a writer. At a time when Poland did not exist as a nation and its writers and artists were stifled, Konopnicka was inspired by the fact that far away, in another country, Polish women founded their own organization and made their voices heard. She encouraged the fledgling organization in its work and motivated members to extend the reach of PWA's mission beyond the parameters of their personal lives. In 1907, she sent an emotional appeal to PWA members, requesting aid for Polish political prisoners in Siberia. The membership responded overwhelmingly.

She was an intellectual and spiritual force for the PWA in its formative years and can be credited with guiding the young organization on its path toward the dedication to social causes that have defined the PWA throughout its history.

She died at age 68 and is buried in Lwów (Lviv, now in the Ukraine). In 1935, the 17th National Convention of the PWA designated funds for a memorial, which was erected at the cemetery. The PWA also honored the writer with contributions to her museum in Zarnowiec, Poland, and endowed a school there, which bears her name.

Maria Konopnicka was named the first Honorary Member of the PWA in 1903.

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Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910)



Eliza Pawłowska Orzeszkowa was a novelist and, like Maria Rodziewiczówna, an adherent of the Polish Positivists, who advocated the exercise of reason before emotion to sustain a Polish national identity.

Women writers at the turn of the 20th century played a forceful role in the emancipation of women and Orzeszkowa was a social spokeswoman for her readers.

Born in what is today Belarus, Orzeszkowa married at age 17 a Polish nobleman Piotr Orzeszko. The marriage was unsuccessful, largely because Orzeszkowa was not only passionately and actively pro-independence but also sought emancipation of the serfs. When the marriage was annulled 11 years later, she settled in her native Grodno, where, in 1879 she opened a bookshop and publishing house. The Russian censors closed down her business in 1882, and she was placed under surveillance for five years. She remarried in 1894; her beloved second husband, Stanisław Nahorski died two years later.

She wrote a series of powerful novels and essays addressing the social conditions of her country. She described the peasant milieu in shocking depictions of the ignorance and superstition of poor farmers, as well as portrayals of the impoverished gentry of small villages. Considered Orzeszkowa's masterpiece, *Nad Niemnem* /*On the Banks of the Niemen* (1888), describes the life of Polish society in Lithuania.

Maria Konopnicka influenced PWA members to honor Orzeszkowa on the 40th anniversary of her writing career and raise funds for a pedagogical association bearing Orzeszkowa's name.

Orzeszkowa wrote to preserve Polish heritage for her contemporaries who lived under foreign occupation during the partitions of their country. Her patriotic writings resonated just as deeply with immigrants in America as they did with Poles. Her novels are translated in twenty languages and she was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Orzeszkowa died in Grodno at age 68.

Eliza Orzeszkowa was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 1904.

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Helena Modrzejewska (1840 –1909)



Born in Krakow, Helena Modrzejewska [Modjeska], née Benda, developed a spectacular career in the theatres of her native city and Warsaw. Employing a modern, psychological approach to dramatic interpretation, she became the most sought-after actress of her era in Europe.

At the age of 36, at the height of her career, she decided to leave Poland with her husband and manager, Karol Bozenta Chlapowski, a Polish politician and critic, and, together with a group of friends - writer Henryk Sienkiewicz among them - to establish a utopian community in Orange County, California. The endeavor was a failure, but after intensive study of English, she made a debut at the California Theatre and skyrocketed to worldwide fame attributed to her Shakespearean roles and abetted by her magnetic personality.

Modrzejewska became a U.S. citizen in 1893. That year she was invited to speak at a women's conference at the Columbian Exposition, the Chicago World's Fair. She described the dire situation of Polish women in the occupied territories of partitioned Poland, invoking a Tsarist ban on her subsequent travel to Russia. The PWA contacted the actress soon afterwards with the intent to utilize her stature in the world to promote Polish charities and the causes of oppressed women. Modrzejewska was a generous and willing supporter of PWA endeavors.

The actress suffered a debilitating stroke in 1897, and, upon her recovery performed sporadically and exclusively in benefit performances. After her death, at age 69, her remains were taken to Poland and buried in the family plot at the Rakowicki Cemetery in Kraków. Her funeral was a great patriotic manifestation.

In a resolution, the Polish Parliament paid homage to Helena Modrzejewska, honoring her as an international celebrity and an extraordinary personality who promoted Polish arts and culture around the world.

Helena Modrzejewska was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 1908.

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Helena Paderewska (1856–1934)



Helena Gorska Paderewska, Baroness de Rosen, was the second wife of Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941), the renowned 20th century Polish musician, philanthropist, and statesman. When World War I broke out, Paderewski and his wife came to the United States to lobby President Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. government to support Polish independence. During four years Paderewski gave concerts to raise funds for Poland, visiting over 200 cities in the U.S. and playing before an estimated five million people. Helena accompanied him on these tours and she was a welcome presence in the concert halls and meetings he attended, but she also devoted herself to her own causes and worked on mobilizing not only the U.S. government but Polish Americans to assist their homeland. Active with the International Red Cross, she formed the Polish White Cross, an organization serving the Polish Army in France. She recruited nurses from the Polish American community to volunteer abroad; it was during this time she first met PWA members in Chicago and Detroit, who contributed consistently to her causes. Paderewska was the U.S. president of the Gray Samaritans who provided relief to POWs and soldiers by sending parcels with bandages and supplies.

After WWI ended, Paderewski became the Prime Minister of free Poland and Helena its much beloved First Lady. The Paderewskis were great patriots, highly visible on the international stage, devoting their lives to the cause of Poland's freedom.

Paderewska advocated courageously for those who suffered most in the wars that ravaged Europe for so much of her lifetime - children, orphans, the elderly, and the wounded. For her extraordinary humanitarian efforts on both sides of the Atlantic, Pope Benedict XV conferred upon her the golden cross "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice," a distinction rarely bestowed upon women, but richly deserved by this woman of honor and compassion. Helena Paderewska died at her home, Riond-Bosson, in Morges, Switzerland, at age 77.

Helena Paderewska was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 1915.

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Marie Sklodowska Curie (1867–1934)



Born into a family of renowned teachers in Warsaw, Marie Sklodowska began scientific training in Kraków and, in 1891, went to Paris to continue studies in physics and mathematics at the Sorbonne. She married Pierre Curie, Professor in the School of Physics, in 1895. In 1898 the Curies isolated the elements radium and polonium, the latter named for Sklodowska's native Poland. Together with Henri Becquerel, the Curies received the 1903 Nobel Prize in Physics for their study of spontaneous radiation.

Sklodowska Curie pursued the study of radium, especially its therapeutic properties, work she continued after her husband died in 1906. In 1911 she received a second Nobel Prize, this time in Chemistry, in recognition of her work in radioactivity. With the visibility the Nobel Prizes accorded, she promoted the use of radium to alleviate suffering and, during World War I, she devoted herself to this remedial work, outfitting mobile x-ray units and traveling to the front to instruct nurses and medics in their use. She donated the gold Nobel medals she and her husband had been awarded to the war effort.

Sklodowska Curie traveled to the United States to propagate the use of radium in medicine and to raise funds for her research. She first met with PWA members in 1921, during a fundraiser in Chicago, initiating a fruitful relationship. The PWA contributed to her cause again during a visit in 1929, this time raising funds for her Warsaw Radium Institute. She corresponded with the PWA and a friendship was formed that lasted until her death from leukemia in France at age 67, caused by overexposure to radiation. The auditorium in the former PWA headquarters on Ashland Avenue in Chicago was named in her honor.

Curie was the first woman appointed professor at the University of Paris, the first woman to receive a Nobel Prize, and the only woman to receive the award twice.

Marie Sklodowska Curie was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 1921.

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Maria Rodziewiczowna (1863–1944)



Maria Rodziewiczowna was one of the most popular Polish authors of the interwar years in the 20th century. Her writings idealized rural life and praised the peasants' attachment to land. She wrote of the need to maintain a national identity and support for traditional values of the landed gentry, presenting anti-urban views and a dislike for bourgeois mentality, topics that were close to the hearts of Polish American immigrants.

Rodziewiczowna's parents were exiled to Russia for their political beliefs after the unsuccessful January Uprising of 1863, a protest by Poles against conscription into the Imperial Russian Army. When her parents returned from exile, the family moved from Warsaw to an estate in Hruszowa, in the eastern Polesie region. Upon her father's death, seventeen year-old Maria assumed the management of the estate and remained closely bound to it for the rest of her life.

An adherent of the Polish Positivists - who advocated the exercise of reason before emotion and viewed work, not uprisings, as the way to maintain a Polish national identity and constructive patriotism - she founded a clandestine society for women, Unia (Union), in 1906. Inspired by the ideals of the PWA, Rodziewiczówna initiated a correspondence with PWA members in 1920, encouraging their mission and communicating about the unimaginable blight of poverty in Poland. The membership responded and remitted funds to support her work with the poor in rural areas. When PWA members traveled to Poland in 1923 for the first official homecoming of the young American organization, she was on hand to welcome the delegation.

Rodziewiczowna never married, devoting her life to writing, working the land she loved, and improving the lives of women. She was indomitable, living life independently at a time when not many women could pursue careers. WW II forced her departure from Hruszowa to Warsaw, where, suffering material hardship, she was supported by friends. She succumbed to pneumonia at age 81.

Maria Rodziewiczowna was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 1927.

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Helena Sikorska (1888–1972)



Helena Zubczewska Sikorska was the wife of Wladyslaw Sikorski, Prime Minister of Poland and Minister of Military Affairs (1922-25) in the early years of the Second Republic. During World War II, Sikorski served as Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile in London.

Sikorska accompanied her husband, a vigorous advocate of the Polish cause in the diplomatic sphere, on trips to the U.S. and, through her charitable work with refugees, established contacts with the PWA. She was invited to speak at the 19th National Convention of the PWA in Philadelphia in September, 1943, but was obliged to cancel the trip after her husband's and daughters tragic deaths in an airplane crash over Gibraltar in July of that year. At that convention, a \$100,000 war relief fund for Poland was established in her name by the PWA delegates.

During WW II, the Polish Red Cross was based in London and Sikorska became closely involved with the organization, assisting occupied Poland as well as Polish refugees beyond its borders. During the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, when the Russian Army waited on the outskirts of the city withholding aid to the Polish Home Army fighting the Nazis, Sikorska, by then a widow, led a group of prominent Poles in London who protested the lack of support for the Uprising from the British government.

In 1947, Sikorska published *The Dark Side of the Moon*, an account of the suffering of Polish people exiled to Russia, in which the victimization of Polish captives by the Soviet regime is compellingly portrayed. She donated her husband's papers and memorabilia to The General Sikorski Historical Institute, founded in London in 1945.

General and Mrs. Sikorski were respected internationally and they were especially admired by Polish Americans for their work in the struggle for Poland's freedom. Helena died at age 84 in Surrey, England.

Helena Sikorska was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 1943.

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Barbara Mikulski (1936–)



Barbara Mikulski is the Senior Democratic Senator from Maryland. Elected in 1986, she is the highest-ranking and longest-serving woman in the U.S. Senate. A PWA member since childhood, she was raised in a Polish neighborhood in East Baltimore, where she learned the values of hard work, neighbor helping neighbor, and heartfelt patriotism. Determined to make a difference in her community, Mikulski became a social worker in Baltimore, helping at-risk children and educating seniors about the Medicare program. Social work evolved into community activism when Mikulski successfully organized against a plan to build a 16-lane highway through Baltimore's historic neighborhoods, transforming Fells Point and Baltimore's Inner Harbor into thriving residential and commercial communities.

Her first election was to the Baltimore City Council in 1971, followed by election in 1976 to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maryland's 3rd District. In 1986, she ran for Senate and became the first Democratic woman Senator from Maryland. Mikulski's experiences as a social worker and activist provided valuable lessons that she draws on as a Senator. She is often the sponsor of resolutions and bills in the U.S. Senate that address Polish issues, such as support of Poland's membership in NATO or the Visa Waiver for Polish citizens.

From community activist to U.S. Senator, she never changed her view that all politics and policy are local, and that her job is to serve the people in their day-to-day needs as well as to prepare this country for the future. She serves on several Senate committees in Washington and is especially committed to securing access to quality education for all, equal pay for equal work, and other issues affecting working women.

Alongside her political activity, Senator Mikulski shares what she learns in the corridors of power in the form of novels about a woman senator whose activist ways win her fans at home but endear few in the back rooms of Capitol Hill.

Barbara Miklusk, a PWA member since childhood, was awarded Honorary Membership in 1998, the year of the 100th anniversary of the organization.

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Irena Sendler (1910–2008)



Irena Krzyzanowska Sendler (Sendlerowa) was a Catholic physician's daughter whose Warsaw practice served many Jews. He was the role model for the compassion and sense of social justice that marked her life.

Sendler was a social worker for the Warsaw Social Welfare Department when World War II broke out. In December of 1942, the newly created Zegota Committee, the Polish Council to Aid Jews - operating under the auspices of the Polish Government-in-Exile based in London - nominated Sendler to head its children's department. As a social worker and nurse, she received a special permit to enter the Warsaw Ghetto and, as a sign of solidarity, she fearlessly wore the notorious armband with a Star of David.

Horrified by the conditions she encountered in the Ghetto, she began clandestinely to transport children out in ambulances, suitcases, sacks, and even coffins. With the help of the Warsaw Social Welfare Department,

Sendler successfully smuggled almost 2,500 Jewish children to safety and gave them temporary identities, placing them with Polish families, orphanages, or convents. She buried lists of their real names in jars to keep track of their identities and in order to find the children and return them to their parents after the war.

Arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo, she was brutally tortured and sentenced to death. Zegota managed to bribe the German guards and Sendler escaped on the way to her execution. She continued her underground activity, living in deep hiding, until after the war.

She lived her life quietly after WW II, working and raising a family, until, in 1999; high school students in rural Kansas State produced a play based on Sendler's life, entitled *Life in a Jar*, bringing her renewed international acclaim. Sendler was nominated in 2007 for the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 96.

She died in Warsaw in 2008.

Irena Sendler was named an Honorary Member of the PWA in 2007.