

EPILOGUE TO THE TRANSLATION OF NASZA SZKAPA/OUR HACK TRANSLATOR'S COMMENTS AND BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Maria Konopnicka (1842-1910) was one of the most popular and most discussed Polish authors in her days. Known for her novels, poetry, short stories, literary criticism and journalism, Konopnicka revolutionized the genre of children's literature by endowing it with artistic esthetics that replaced a moralizing approach. Having left an arranged marriage of 16 years to raise her six children in Warsaw as a writer and tutor, she was awarded a rural farming property for her accomplishments of 25 years as a poet. Her life partner became Maria Dulębianka, a portrait painter and feminist twenty years her junior who introduced Konopnicka to the women's movement. Maria Konopnicka became an activist for women's rights, but she rejected the label of a feminist.

"Nasza szkapa" ("Our Hack"), first published in 1890, is a prominent example of Polish literary realism. At once confrontational and stirring up deep consternation and a sentiment of inevitability as its young protagonist relates the story with shocking indifference and superficiality that are his tools for survival, this novella portrays the life of poor urban street urchins under Poland's occupation by the partitioning powers Russia, Prussia and Austria. Konopnicka's literary techniques, though obvious, are also subtle and profoundly compassionate – yet it is always the reader who is gently led to the most damning conclusions of his or her own.

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I am a Polish-American mathematician educated at Columbia University with a broad range of interests that includes translation of classical and modern post-dependent Polish novels into various languages. My fascination with Maria Konopnicka dates back to high school days at the Emilia Plater Lyceum where I first studied the contribution of female intellectuals to Polish nationhood and its contemporary shape. When it became apparent that this short story had never been translated into English to this day, closing that gap became a debt of honor I felt I owe to one of the great literary heroines of my adolescence.

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