1 From the Legs Up

The Rise and Retreat of the Chorus Girl in Interwar Poland

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In spring 1932, the renowned theater critic and essayist Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński (1874–1941) paid tribute to the chorus girls who performed in Warsaw's most famous Polish-language revue, *Morskie Oko* (*The Eye of the Sea*):

> Be it summer or winter, cold, rainy, or hot, these sweet young girls remain the same—never tired, hoarse, or cross, with invariably bright smiles pasted on their faces, moving their shapely legs to the rhythm of the music. They hold the show together with their parades back and forth, successfully spelling the sweaty *conferenciers* [masters of ceremonies]. Like white blood cells, they rush immediately to any weakening spot in the show. Their leg play works better than word play in supporting us through the dog days of summer.
>
> (cited in Boy-Żeleński 1965, 659)

Boy's spotlight on the chorus girl or *girlsa*, as she was known in interwar Poland, was prompted by the recent death of Florenz Ziegfield, Jr., the American-based entrepreneur whose *Follies* had achieved world renown for their parades and tableaux of statuesque, outlandishly costumed show girls. As Susan A. Glenn argues in her feminist reading of the American chorus girl, Ziegfield and his dance director, Ned Wayburn, popularized a system of engineering young women to incarnate "beautiful, pliant erotic objects" (for male consumption) and "figures of feminine excess and hedonism" (for female emulation) (Glenn 2000, 161, 187). Ziegfield and other producers in metropolitan America processed a huge influx of applicants for their shows. In the early twentieth century, most women in the American entertainment industry were employed as chorus girls in a broad array of popular performing venues ranging from musical comedy to vaudeville, spectacular revue to burlesque (Latham 2000, 113). As worker, product, and consumer model, the chorus girl was big business in the United States.

Boy's Ziegfield-inspired tribute, however, reflects the quite different situation of the chorus girl in the capital of a newly independent, postwar Poland. Though Boy bases his collective portrait on the chorus girls at *Morskie Oko*,

Warsaw's closest approximation of the *Follies* or the famed Parisian *Folies Bergères*, he focuses more on their troupers' pluck and valiant service (their performance regardless of physical conditions, their "healing" of the show's infections) than their precision kicklines and sumptuous array. His review conveys the familiarity and sympathy of a seasoned theatergoer in a smaller city with fewer venues. In contrast to New York and Paris, where chorus girls had been packing houses since the end of the nineteenth century, Warsaw introduced chorus girls "in moderation" during the 1920s, the first decade of independent Poland (Fox 2007, 125, 175). Initially these modest ensembles filled in the gaps between revue or cabaret acts by performing shimmies and foxtrots (Fox 2007, 14). Their attraction for the audience was undeniable, the more so because these jazz babies were demonstrating the latest dance steps for a fashion-hungry audience of dance enthusiasts. Yet very few Warsaw producers could sustain the high costs of the spacious theaters, big casts, and lavish costumes and sets required for a *Follies* type of production. By the late 1920s, moreover, some female dancers were gaining respect as well-trained artistic troupes, practitioners of the modern dance pioneered by Isadora Duncan and others.

This is not to argue that all *girlsy* eluded the objectification, deindividuation, and commodification chorus girls endured elsewhere. Yet a smaller theater and more select audience cultivated a kind of intimacy that mitigated against the monolithic perception of the chorus as assembly line or spectacular geometrical formation and the diminution of female dancer to automaton. As Boy remarks when the season at *Morskie Oko* reopened a month later, in September 1932, the sight of the same chorus girls' "well-known faces and legs almost makes one want to ask where this or that *girlaska* spent her vacation and got so tan." He characterizes the atmosphere that they create onstage as "almost familial—as if the kids are getting ready for bed and running around naked" (Boy-Żeleński 1965, 661).[1] His attitude towards these dancers tempers the erotic with the avuncular. Much as Boy applauds the chorus girls for their work ethic and service in his earlier portrait, so here he humanizes and individuates them, if only a little, acknowledging their lives offstage, recognizing them by their legs *and* faces, and comparing them to mischievous children.

The Chorus Girl and the Intelligentsia

In sharp contrast to Boy's indulgent attitude, American producers and directors ostentatiously disciplined their potentially "bad" girls so that they did not threaten America's middle-class values. Their army of girls was trained, uniformed, and deployed in parade formation under overt patriarchal control. Pitching their costly shows to mass audiences, Ziegfield and others made sure that their control was underscored onstage and in the media, through regimented choreography and the whitewashed presentation of

the girls as obliging, vacuous, interchangeable females. Glenn explains the source of their apprehension about the chorus girl's agency and appetite:

> A central obsession of American popular culture at the time, the chorus girl embodied modern society's buoyant optimism for change and novelty and its deepest fears about loss of control and tradition. Cultural commentators debated whether chorus girls were a special and particularly dangerous "species" of New Woman or whether, as one theatrical press release suggested, they were "like all the rest of womankind, only more so." (Glenn 2000, 189)

Beyond the control of her policing employer, the chorus girl challenged conventional gender and class norms with her unabashed pursuit of sexual gratification, conspicuous consumption, and aspirations for professional and social upward mobility. A lower-class New Woman in her attitudes and behavior, the chorus girl did not hesitate to wield the power of her body, visibility, and worldliness for her own advancement.

In Warsaw and other Polish cities, however, the chorus girl never figured as a mass phenomenon, that "particularly dangerous species of 'New Woman,' " in large part because she performed for a circumscribed upper-to-middle class audience. The Polish-language theater venues that flourished in the cities comprised a few revues and many more cabarets, and both catered to discerning, generally affluent patrons rather than a general public. Vying with the serious theater, ballet, and opera that had dominated the performing arts during partitioned Poland (1795–1919), cabaret artists accentuated urbane topicality, informality, and playfulness in their shows. Witty cabaret sketches and songs were composed by great poets and satirists who enjoyed slumming in this less serious medium, even as their work guaranteed the show's quality and drawing power. In particular, Warsaw cabarets aimed to prove that the talent and sophistication of the new capital equaled that of great European capitals such as Berlin and Vienna. The audience for cabarets and revues generally overlapped with the city's increasingly diverse intelligentsia, including poor university students and swank aristocrats, officers and politicians, liberal Polish Christians and acculturated Jews.

The performers in both cabarets and revues tended to be young people born around the turn of the twentieth century. They did not mirror their audience, but they also demonstrated a blend of classes and ethnicities. These primarily young artists were the sons and daughters of professional acculturated Jews (doctors, lawyers, businessmen big and small); blue-collar Polish Catholic city workers (often fathers who worked for the railroad); and, in a few cases, families with experience in regional theaters or traveling troupes. Cabaret performers bonded together to form a community distinct from their intelligentsia public, yet informed by that public's great appetite for modernity.

Most chorus girls gravitated to the cabaret and revue stage in hopes of higher wages, eventual fame, and the extra perks often accruing to a pretty woman onstage. They usually had some training as dancers, but they absorbed a much broader schooling on the job, exposed through sketches and songs to foreign affairs and domestic politics; the latest in music, dances, and fashions; and the cachet of a sexually liberated lifestyle. Warsaw *girlsy* had happened upon the one performative space in Polish society where their risqué appearance, work, and behavior were approved by savvy producers and chic patrons. In this context, Victorian-era notions of the "bad girl" were not merely irrelevant, but laughable.

Chorus girls in Warsaw also benefited from eloquent social champions in the persons of Boy and Irena Krzywicka (1889–1994), Boy's fellow activist and romantic partner. Boy and Krzywicka strived to normalize a liberated lifestyle for all women in Poland. As Eva Plach elaborates in her sociocultural history of interwar Poland, Boy lobbied indefatigably for the rights of the New Woman, helping to lead "a sexual revolution in the Second Republic by advocating the right to civil marriage and to divorce and by supporting a woman's right to birth control and to safe and legal abortions" (2006, 134). Krzywicka, like Boy, wrote for the liberal and influential journal *Wiadomości literackie* (*Literary news*), where she, too, argued the merits of civil unions, easy divorce, and readily available contraception, and insisted on women's sexual liberation and right to non-subordinate selfhood, a life unbowed by the ideals of the virtuous wife and self-sacrificing mother so long enforced in Poland (Górnicka-Boratyńska 2001, 193–95). In 1933, Krzywicka and Boy worked together to establish The League to Reform Mores (Liga Reformy Obyczajów) that was modeled on the medical and social organization titled The World League for Sexual Reform (Górnicka-Boratyńska 2001, 203). Boy also founded the first family planning clinic in Poland and created the journal *Planned Living* (*Życie świadome*) that "was devoted to exploring family planning, 'free love,' and eugenics" (Plach 2006, 134).

Boy and Krzywicka's writings, actions, and extramarital relationship stirred up heated debate among journalists and activists across the political spectrum, though the right-wing National Democrats could be relied on to respond with the most vitriolic racist and sexist slurs.[2] Boy and Krzywicka's agenda also angered an older generation of female Positivists who had dedicated themselves to winning women the vote once Poland had regained its national sovereignty (Górnicka-Boratyńska 2001, 6–8).[3] Suffragists such as the revered novelist Eliza Orzeszkowa and the activist Paulina Kuczalska-Renschmitt vehemently disapproved of what they deemed to be the hedonism and immorality of New Women out for themselves. They had not toiled so long for women's enfranchisement only to watch their juniors seemingly abandon the nation as faithless wives, bad mothers, and irresponsible Poles.

To a certain extent, this rift between Polish suffragists and New Women paralleled a generational split between progressive-era feminists and flamboyantly emancipated women during America's roaring '20s. As Angela Latham

observes, "pre-suffrage feminists could not take lightly what they viewed to be younger women's crass consumerism, especially since it overshadowed such injustices as tenement work and child labor, not to mention a lack of patriotism" (2000, 39). In the eyes of dutiful suffragists on either side of the ocean, the chorus girls and their emulators who bobbed their hair, smoked, drank, took lovers, dressed gaudily like flappers, and mastered explicitly sexual new dances such as the Charleston or the black bottom epitomized this heedless betrayal. They had sold their political rights for a mess of frippery and free love.

Yet good cabarets in interwar Poland never lost their valorizing tie with a modernist left-leaning intelligentsia. Reflecting on women's "right to write" in Poland, critic Urszula Chowaniec points out how "the modernist project" prompted a "critique of philistine society" and the promotion of female sexuality (2012, 38). Well before Krzywicka and Boy had made waves with their proposed reforms of sexual mores, modernist female artists were challenging readers with new sorts of heroines. Renowned novelist and dramatist Zofia Nałkowska (1884–1954) developed a series of female protagonists who empowered themselves through narcissism, self-indulgence, and the unconditional embrace of the female body and female sexuality (Górnicka-Boratyńska 2001, 163). The sassy, sexy female performers who declared their desires figured as comic descendants of this modernist gynocentric lineage. The cabaret's twentieth-century variation on the commedia dell'arte redefined female character types in the spirit of the age, experimenting with carefree flappers, shameless gold diggers, irrepressible gamines, and melancholic vamps. These new types were prized by their intelligentsia patrons, praised by an approving Boy, and in tune with the agendas of both liberal activists and modernist women writers.

The Professional Rise of the *Girlsa*

Polish chorus girls enhanced their appeal for audiences and readers of the burgeoning entertainment press by stepping out of the chorus into the spotlight. Once again the shared atmosphere and intimate scale of the cabaret or revue facilitated their mobility. Because the cabaret was a small shop, these *girlsy* became privileged, often partisan, observers of all the other acts—the featured dancers, singers, sketch artists, and conferenciers. *Girlsy* were privy to the stars' rehearsals and enjoyed varying degrees of camaraderie with those higher up in the cabaret's always-mobile hierarchy. The cabaret likewise cultivated an intimate, unceremonious relationship with its affluent big-city patrons. Audiences embraced individual performers and their personae as favorites, and performers felt free to improvise "as themselves" in responding to the fans. Though cabarets were often performed on traditional stages, either in actual theaters or on the shallow stage of a movie palace, neither the players nor the audience ever bothered with the stage's traditional fourth wall.

In one telling instance, an entire troupe of *girlsy* received special placement in the show's roster. The critical success of the "Tacjann-Girls," elsewhere

billed as "The Ballet of Tacjanna Wysocka," reflected the rising prestige of expressive modern dance. Tacjanna Wysocka (1894–1970) had trained in "rhythmic gymnastics" in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg and founded "The School for Musical Education and Theatrical Dance" in independent Warsaw (Wysocka 1962, 134). A select group of her students, proficient in ballet, general musicality, and acrobatics, performed dances that Wysocka choreographed to "visualize" classical music pieces in The Polish Theater (Teatr Polski) (Wysocka 1962, 142–43). By the time the management of *Qui pro Quo*, Warsaw's best and most ambitious cabaret, sought out the "Tacjann-Girls," they courted Wysocka and her troupe as a high-quality artistic ensemble, not a typical revue chorus. In fact, Wysocka had to school herself in the mechanics of American-style revue dancing in order to train her artists for certain pedestrian *Qui pro Quo* numbers (Wysocka 1962, 197).

Much more often, however, individual chorus girls won coveted solo spots through singing and speaking parts. Even Stefania (Stefcia) Górska (1907–1986), a member of the admired "Tacjann-Girls," achieved stardom on the cabaret stage as a singer and a composer. Górska stepped out of her prestigious chorus with the solo number, "Nie bój się mamy, bo mama też nie była święta" [Don't be afraid of mama, since she was no saint either] (Krukowski 1957, 83). One of Górska's other early hits playfully alludes to her former position in a chorus line: "I'm fourth from the left in the front row/Take two steps forward and one step back/A pirouette, splits, and off I go/Give it a try, you'll get the knack" (Jurandot 1959, 31). The flourishing of Górska's solo career drew her audience's attention up from her legs to her face. A star singer, she was one of the few women who succeeded as a song composer, with the hits "Nasza jest noc" ("Ours is the night"), "Dziewczynka z zapałkami" ("The match girl"), "Sex Appeal," and others to her credit.

The most famous chorus girl success story belonged to Maria Pietruszyńska, better known as interwar Poland's most popular star Hanka Ordonówna, or Ordonka (1895?–1950). The child of a railway worker, sent to the ballet school that the Grand Theater (Teatr Wielki) sponsored for the underprivileged, Ordonka not only conquered the cabaret as everyone's favorite Romantic vamp-turned-victim, but also married her "prince" in the person of Count Michał Tyszkiewicz, a cabaret habitué and occasional songwriter. Cabaret historian Ryszard Marek Groński argues that Ordonka abetted the myth of her Cinderella-like rise by manipulating the mass media with tales of her grim past and fairytale-like present (1978, 107–08). Though the Tyszkiewicz family never fully embraced Ordonka, the press persisted in framing her as a chic countess in the early days of her marriage.

Ordonka's actual career proceeded in fits, starts, and detours. She began performing in the chorus during World War I, eventually secured a spot as a pair dancer, left Warsaw to school herself as a singer and an actress on less demanding stages, and was finally hired at *Qui pro Quo* in 1922. Most popular histories of 1920s Warsaw culture claim that Járosy, after falling in love with Ordonka, discovered and honed her talent as a diseuse, an

actress-singer who could shift between singing and speaking with believable emotion and perfect diction. But those who worked with Ordonka, even her female competitors, were awed by her nonstop work ethic, ambition, and stamina. As Konrad Tom, the cabaret writer and actor, testified in his perceptive obituary of the star: "Backstage they always spoke of Ordonka as a blend of butterfly and work horse in one person . . . She could clear every hurdle to the top with zeal and concentration. She was a phenomenon in her mimetic technique and quick study" (quoted in Mieszkowska 2006, 70–71). Slender and long-limbed, with the face of a 1920s-style Greek goddess (penciled brows, extended lashes), Ordonka was famed for her balletic grace and dramatic poses.

Ordonka's talent as a diseuse and her savvy in developing the right repertoire and staging for her one-woman shows catapulted her into solo concert tours at home and overseas. Through these tours, guest-star appearances in cabarets, and occasional film roles, Ordonka's orbit widened from that of Warsaw celebrity to national star. Rumors reported in the press about her post-marital escapades never damaged her cachet with her patrons. Her "bad girl" behavior was tolerated and even relished offstage in the rarefied star territory in which she circulated. To the distress of right-wing commentator Adolf Nowaczyński, more young women aspired to reproduce "the likes of . . . Hanka Ordonówna rather than a true national model in the style of Emilia Plater, a national heroine of the great November uprising of 1830–31 against the Russians." In the estimation of Nowaczyński and other conservatives, women's material indulgence, all-night dancing, and sexual freedom prevented them from becoming good citizens and upholding "the ideals of civic virtue" (Plach 2006, 146).

Górska and Ordonka achieved individuation and subsequent success through their skill as solo singers, giving the sort of performance that amplified their emotional effect and aesthetic value for their audiences. The careers of Zofia (Zula) Pogorzelska and Mira Zimińska overlapped with Ordonka's, but blazed a somewhat different path to interwar stardom in a greater variety of venues. Neither of their careers fits strictly within the chorus girl's professional limits, though both performers initially relied on their dancing ability. It was Zula, after all, who introduced Polish audiences to the Charleston, the consummate flapper dance. Zula came to Warsaw from Kharkov in the early 1920s blessed with three distinct advantages: her training as a dancer and a singer, arranged by her middle-class mother who had been denied a performing career because her family had insisted on respectability; her pleasant soprano, which first qualified her for choruses and operetta roles; and the patronage of her lover, Konrad Tom, who had debuted as a cabaret writer and actor before the war. Zula lost one advantage soon after she arrived in the capital, when a botched operation on her throat left her with a hoarse, husky alto. Despite her dancing ability and shapely body, Zula found no featured player niche in cabaret for several years—perhaps because she could not be a conventional girl singer.

Instead, Zula won stardom by less orthodox means, captivating her audience as a first-rate comedienne and impersonator and singling herself out with a female persona designed expressly for the Warsaw intelligentsia's modified version of the roaring '20s. Zula parried her objectification as a bombshell by refusing to take it seriously, projecting sexual experience as both a given and a plus for the New Woman. Sex did not define and stigmatize her, but signaled her overarching desire to live life to the fullest. Groński credits Pogorzelska with the creation of the new "girl chum" whose advertisement of her charms does not doom her to the part of "fallen angel or a lady of the camellias with a bad reputation," but instead equips her to participate in every adventure (Groński 1978, 109). Zula acted as a free agent. She appeared onstage as woman and man, child and adult. Zula matter-of-factly broke social taboos about female sexual desire by singing, in her low, hoarse voice, about what she wanted in a lover and how she was too afraid to sleep alone. In as many other numbers, she cross-dressed as a man and impersonated a street tough or a newspaper boy or one of her co-stars. A publicity shot poses Zula taking a punch at Belgian boxer Georges Carpentier in 1926; the photo advertises the star's feistiness and shows off her gorgeous legs (Figure 1.1) For as long as Pogorzelska could perform in the

Figure 1.1 Zula Pogorzelska with boxer Georges Carpentier, 1926. From the Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe.

cabaret (she died of cancer in 1936), patrons adored her for her good looks, good nature, unbridled appetite, and great gift for parody.

Zula Pogorzelska's example paved the way for Mira Zimińska's success as a comedienne, though the latter's rise was long in the making, thwarted by poverty and professional missteps. Born Marianna Burzyńska (1901–1997) to a stagehand and a theater cashier in Płock, Zimińska moved to Warsaw right after World War I on the promise of a contract at *Qui pro Quo*. That contract did not materialize and she tried out for no chorus, since she had not yet trained as a dancer or singer. A few years younger than Ordonka and Pogorzelska, Zimińska had the advantage of observing what they had achieved and possessed the aptitude for mimicking popular onstage characters. In the early 1920s she primarily substituted for sick or vacationing performers at various cabarets, supplementing her miserable income by posing nude for an artist, keeping warm by wandering around art galleries all day, and sleeping in the theater wardrobe at night (Zimińska-Sygiętyńska 1985, 75, 82). In contrast to other female cabaret stars of the interwar period, Zimińska was clever and bold enough to commit stories of her transgressive youth to print. It bears noting that her first and best memoir, *Nie żyłam samotnie* (*I did not live lonely*), materialized late in her life as a transcript of her voluble conversations with a younger, more organized fan.

Zimińska's breakthrough at *Qui pro Quo* happened in the mid-1920s, when she played a fast-talking dizzy dame onstage with straight man Konrad Tom. She became a star by speaking her own words her own way. "It turned out," Zimińska recalls, "that I had this native wit, a kind of devil in me" (Zimińska-Sygiętyńska 1985, 75). The directors and writers at *Qui pro Quo* recognized that she was the cleverest, most versatile comedienne in the troupe and they produced many sketches that paired her with the explosive mimic Adolf Dymsza, whom Zimińska matched in rapid-fire comic timing and improvisational genius. With or without Dymsza, Zimińska entertained audiences with "incomparable imitations" of an amazing array of characters—wisecracking shop girls, country bumpkins visiting the big city, imperious opera singers, and even Ordonka herself (Krukowski 1957, 85). She could switch class and sensibility altogether to present an "unretouched" parody-portrait of a society lady, a specialization of her own design (Groński 1978, 112). In some shows, Zimińska wrote her own material on the fly, without permission, but with enormous success. Her co-star Kazimierz Krukowski vouches for her natural genius as a conferencier in the show *Halo, Ciotka!* (*Hello there, auntie!*): "Onstage Mira didn't repeat a word of what had been written for her and improvised the entire script. She paid a fine for this . . . but she'd conquered the audience at the premiere and then all of Warsaw" (Krukowski 1957, 84).

What truly marked Mira's birth as a fellow "artist," however, were more formal projects that she authored or oversaw. When in 1934 she was invited to edit a satirical journal titled *Duby smalone* (*Tall tales*) that appeared as a supplement to the popular daily *Kurier poranny* (*Morning courier*),

she took her responsibility seriously, vetting everything from the journal's contents to its cover. Her most ambitious project combined the roles of performer, impresario, and performing arts historian. A successful concert in which she reprised the songs of the late nineteenth-century star Adolfina Zimajer inspired Zimińska to attempt a much more ambitious retrospective show. Mira planned a historical review of popular song performed by popular female singers, including gypsy ballads, arias from prewar operettas, the naughty innuendo-filled numbers of the early 1900s, irreverent street songs, and her own current hits. She not only studied how to perform these numbers with the help of the original singers whenever possible, but also copiously researched the corresponding choreography, coiffures, costumes, and perfumes (Zimińska-Sygiętyńska 1985, 153).

Zimińska's one-woman "Evening of Songs," performed February 18, 1933, won rave reviews for her exquisite taste, versatile talent, and devotion to accuracy. On that February night, Zimińska turned the tables on the writers and directors usually credited with the cabaret's success. She spotlighted the female performing artists who painstakingly prepared their visual, gestural, and acoustic incarnation of each song. She matched brilliant writing with brilliant reconstruction, treating the audience and her cabaret peers to her masterful re-creation of the actress-singer's art.

Zimińska also distinguished herself among her cabaret sisters in her offstage ambitions. She planned nothing so conventional as marrying a handsome count. At *Qui pro Quo* Zimińska put up with the writers' teasing, practical jokes, and taking over her dressing room for chess games. She retaliated by pushing Tuwim or Tom to write songs and sketches for her based on her "pomysły"—topics she had dreamed up. After the shows Zimińska palled around with her "boys" at the famous "Oaza" restaurant and was one of a very few actresses granted a seat at the exclusive table of poets and critics in the café Ziemiańska.

More than any other female star in Warsaw, Zimińska excelled as the mock queen of a sophisticated, yet unpretentious bohemia. Connected through cabaret, she socialized with the literati as well as aristocrats who were attracted to her wit and madcap behavior. When Boy and other writers for the *Literary News*—poets Tuwim and Jan Lechoń, poet and satirist Antoni Słonimski—needed a place to write and rehearse their periodic shows of political satire (*szopki*), they naturally occupied Mira's large apartment. Irena Krzywicka was another regular guest (Zimińska-Sygiętyńska 1985, 112). The activist not only admired this most articulate exemplar of a performing New Woman, but also paid court to Zimińska's specifically female-marked art. It was Krzywicka who celebrated Zimińska's "Evening of Songs" in *Literary News*, proclaiming the comedienne's innovation of "a new stage genre": "This intelligent and subtle artist, possessed of incomparable comedic power, has created an exceptional repertoire, dispelling bad taste and stupidity with acidic satire while preserving all that is stylish, charming, and poetic in the music."[4]

That Zimińska became a respected, courted darling of the literati signified how much interwar urban Polish culture had developed into a two-way street, on the one hand enticing highbrow poets, musicians, and cultural critics to tap into the innovation and energy of an ambitious popular theater and, on the other hand, encouraging young untried talent to improvise their way into the hearts of a liberal literary establishment and a loyal middle-to-upper-class audience. In the topsy-turvy world of independent Poland's two-decade span, the cabaret and its people best performed and modeled the look, speed, sophistication, indulgence, irreverence, and liberation of modernity. *Girlsy* occupied the cabaret's lowest echelon, yet they benefited from its emancipated worldview. The individualizing stardom of a chorus girl was a wonder to behold, involving all of her as she danced, sang, joked, impersonated others, and created her own script. At the peak of her career, the one-time *girlsa* became an admired artist and a social force. The performances of such brand-new female cabaret stars as Górska, Ordonka, Zula, and Zimińska wielded enormous influence on their fans, advertising the allure and power of dancing, dressing, acting, hobnobbing, and sounding off like a thoroughly modern woman.

The Retreat of the *Girlsa* into Traditional Womanhood

The elevation of certain Warsaw chorus girls into metropolitan and even national stars inspired many Polish women to emulate their look and leisure pastimes, if not their sexual liberation. Former chorus girls-become-celebrities were featured in the entertainment press and entertainment supplements to regular newspapers. Yet the two-way street joining high artists and activists with cabaret performers never expanded to accommodate and impress Polish mass audiences. Though female cabaret stars appeared on the silver screen, the most accessible entertainment medium nationwide, the chorus girl as such only became a protagonist, and a perplexing one, in 1938, near the very end of the era. *Ghosts,* her "star vehicle," does not herald the *girlsa*'s advancement into the big time, but depicts her fearful acquiescence to conventional morality.

In this regard, American entertainment—specifically, the film industry—succeeded where the Polish industry failed, in large part because of its nationwide reach and better-developed expertise in engaging mass audiences. The American chorus girl and her offstage imitators proliferated in Hollywood film throughout the 1920s and 1930s. After World War I, flappers and sexy wives replaced good girls and idealized mothers as more attractive protagonists in scores of films such as *Flaming Youth* (1923), *Dancing Mothers* (1926), *Ella Cinders* (1926), *It* (1927), and *The Wild Party* (1929). The new heroines' penchant for immodest fashion, unnatural-looking makeup, and exhibitionist behavior enticed female moviegoers with the option of "performing the bad girl" wherever they happened to live and claiming modernity in their defense (Latham 2000, 18, 20, 103).

Nevertheless, though producers and writers well appreciated the flapper's dynamite combination of sex and speed, they never forgot that their market encompassed a vast hinterland remote from America's few sophisticated cities. They could not afford local boycotting of films that were perceived to endorse immoral behavior. As film historian Sara Ross points out, the industry developed two strategies in packaging "the bohemian feminist, the madcap, the baby vamp, and the flapper" for a mass audience (2001, 409). Like the melodramatic heroines dominating the nineteenth-century stage, these unruly women could be disciplined in time-honored fashion—redeemed in the last act and doomed to an expiating death. The other approach involved transforming the flapper into a temporarily entertaining fool, a self-indicting comedienne. This much more productive strategy managed a near miracle, effectively conveying the flapper as a good girl whose indulgence in bad behavior made her at once funny and sympathetic (Ross 2001, 409). Ross delineates how the liberated flapper evolved into the acceptable American girl through the performances of top box office draws Colleen Moore and Clara Bow. Bow in particular convinced audiences that sexual pleasure was both natural and desirable in a young woman: "Established aspects of the flapper type, such as the character's irreverence, energetic movements, and enjoyment of masquerade and posing, were all part of Bow's performance style. She combined them with rapid-fire changes in facial expression and mood, an assumed, though playful sexiness and, a display of pleasure in sensual activities" (Ross 2001, 418).

American film in the 1930s only improved the image of the chorus girl. The Depression put paid to the high life of the flapper. Starting with Warner Brothers' *42nd Street* (1933), the chorus girl as working girl became a film regular in backstage musicals, a plucky trouper who refused to give up until she had achieved her big break onstage. Against the stark backdrop of nationwide poverty and hard times, the chorus girl onscreen was recast as shock worker and cheerleader or, in Glenn's words, "a gutsy heroine whose energy and determination helped solve the unemployment problem" (Glenn 2000, 209).[5]

In Polish film neither interwar decade ushered in popular musicals with their usual cast of characters. Michał Waszyński and other directors utilized cabaret stars with some success in romantic comedies produced in the second half of the 1930s. Yet, as Sheila Skaff points out in her study of Polish cinema before World War II, musicals made in Poland won few fans and no critical respect: "While their songs and musical compositions remained popular long after the films left the screens and the performances of some of the songs by famous cabaret actors often earned praise, the musical genre itself was widely disparaged as a second-rate limitation of an American convention" (2008, 156).

The most vivid, lasting portrait of the chorus girl in Polish cinema appears in *Strachy* (*Ghosts*), a 1938 film adapted from a novel with same title and published in the same year. Author Maria Kuśniewiczowa (1907–1962), writing under the pseudonym Maria Ukniewska, prefaces her work with

a guarantee: *Ghosts* draws from her eight-year experience as a dancer in the chorus before tuberculosis forced her off the stage (1968). Her novel presents social exposé, the stream of consciousness testimony of a traumatized young woman, and, occasionally, breathtaking descriptions of dances in progress. Boy endorsed the first edition of *Ghosts* as a truthful account and a mandatory read for theatergoers. Forty years later, Groński likewise claims the novel's documentary value, explaining that Kuśniewiczowa had been a *girlsa* at *Morskie Oko* and therefore delivered an authentic "view from the depths" (spojrzenie z dołu)—that is, its depiction of a chorus girl's daily struggle with hunger, debt, erratic employment, miserable working and living conditions, and prostitution (Groński 1978, 101).

This novel/exposé contrasts with Hollywood's portrayal of the chorus girl on several important counts. First, a *girlsa* herself articulates her sorry plight, though she does so after she has retired and likely needs to make money with a sensationalized story. Second, the chorus girl's revelations need not be designed to win her readers' approval, but to predispose the intelligentsia who frequented cabarets to feel pity for her unfamiliar, lower-class conditions and problems. A Polish *girlsa* could write with a sympathetic audience in mind. Finally, this chorus girl's story concludes in neither professional triumph nor personal tragedy, but contented domestication. The "ghosts" of her title, which haunt her as the consequences of her frantic career, disperse once she has settled down and left show business. It is not clear if this was Kuśniewiczowa's intent, yet such a resolution conveniently saves the protagonist from the mortal consequences of "bad girl" behavior.

The film *Ghosts*, directed by Eugeniusz Cękalski and Karol Szołowski, necessarily streamlines the novel's plot, yet does not censor its sexual scandals. That it was released so quickly after the book's publication suggests that the producers wanted to capitalize on the novel's shocking exposé, yet the film represented a much more auspicious venture in terms of its creators and goals. The studio behind *Ghosts*, the Cooperative of Film Authors (Spółdzielna Autorów Filmowych), included members of the former Society for the Promotion of Film Art, an organization dedicated to creating socially useful and even experimental art in lieu of the commercial fare dominating the market. Cabaret star Eugeniusz Bodo and talented actors such as Jadwiga Andrzejewska, Mieczysława Cieklińska, Józef Węgrzyn, and Jacek Woszczerowicz deliver strong performances in the film. Writers ranging from poets Władysław Broniewski and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński to cabaret lyricists Emanuel Schlechter and Tadeusz Wittlin contributed to its screenplay and songs (Haltof 2002, 37–39). Despite the film's focus on the often-sordid realia of a chorus girl's experience, Tacjanna Wysocka herself choreographed the dances in *Ghosts*, and the "Tacjanna Wysocka Ballet" performs as the film's various chorus troupes. Unlike Hollywood musicals, *Ghosts* does not depend on big production numbers for its climax and denouement, but the contribution of Wysocka and her ballet ensured that the film honors ensemble dancing as high-quality performance art.

The film, like the book, also highlights the professional aspirations of its sixteen-year-old protagonist, the chorus girl Teresa Sikorzanka (Hanna Karwowska). Teresa dreams of solo spots and attendant fame and fortune. The underside to her dreams is that her beleaguered mother, freeloading father, and younger siblings depend on Teresa to make good and provide for them all. The family lives one step away from the street. *Ghosts* exposes how such shared aspirations coexist in fact with social opprobrium—specifically, disapproval of the chorus girl's lifestyle by members of her lower-class milieu (*not* her intelligentsia patrons). The film and the novel likewise reveal the patriarchal system at work in the theater itself, as directors and the "professors" in charge of training the dancers levy fines on the girls for the "bad behavior" that they witness backstage and offstage—dressing room fights, costume damage, smoking, drinking, and fraternizing with would-be sugar daddies. In both film and novel, however, the *girlsa*'s point of view is privileged and those who would police her are pilloried as out-of-touch hypocrites. Teresa openly scorns her aunt's philistine moralizing and protests loudly against her "professor's" unjust punishment.

Yet Teresa does not prove to be as liberated as her intelligentsia readers/viewers and social champions might expect her to be. The title and largely melodramatic genre of the film flag bad omens and suffering from the outset. Kuśniewiczowa modernizes Teresa's melodrama by psychologizing old-fashioned sin and guilt as the debilitating trauma of being haunted. Throughout the film, Teresa subsists in a more or less frenzied state, anxious about her performances, salary, debts, loved ones, and future. No figures of authority—parents, directors, dancing teachers—are equipped to provide her with a moral compass or mental peace. Religion, or so it would seem, plays no part in Teresa's life. The film conveys Teresa's "ghosts" through whispered voiceovers repeating an ominous refrain, images of racing shadows or a rushing river, faces superimposed on each other, and double exposures of shadowy figures leading the heroine into danger.

The fears that nearly kill Teresa invoke the mortal sins of traditional Catholicism. Before Teresa meets a doppelgänger "sister" in the character of Paulina (Linka) Kłoskówna, she anguishes most about her relationship with Zygmunt Modecki (Eugeniusz Bodo), a song and dance man several decades her senior. In love with Modecki, Teresa sleeps with him after a chance meeting and is mortified by his reaction: Modecki is angry that she, a virgin, gave herself to him so foolishly and he suspects that she plans to exploit him. Far from acting like a self-confident New Woman, Teresa flees Warsaw in confusion, wanting to prove her love to Modecki and to dispel his misperception of her as flighty and fast. An old double standard reemerges on the new, supposedly liberated territory of the cabaret. Modecki is willing to pursue a romance with Teresa only on condition that she has been with no one else in the interim. This particular plotline resolves much as a romantic comedy would, in marriage and an implied happily ever after.

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Teresa and Modecki's progress to marriage, however, is complicated by the heroine's dangerous "haunting." During her temporary flight from Modecki, Teresa makes fast friends with Linka (Jadwiga Andrzejewska), a talented chorus girl who likewise provides for her family. Yet Linka's misfortunes terrify Teresa—almost to death. This still from the film captures Teresa's invariably frightened reaction to Linka's hard luck story (Figure 1.2). First, Teresa has to help Linka through a dangerous abortion, an ordeal that haunts her ever after. Months later, once Teresa has returned to Warsaw, she receives her friend's suicide note, in which Linka confesses that she cannot resume a normal life and career after what she has done. This letter arrives soon after Teresa, already living with Modecki, discovers that she is pregnant. Linka's ghost visits Teresa in a dream and lures her, half-awake, to a high window from which she is urged to join Linka in death and "happiness."

Ghosts strongly implies the sanity-destroying perils of abortion as well as the powerful men in show business who demand such sacrifice. Or, to state this message in conventional terms, even the most talented chorus girl should prefer a devoted husband and children to a professional career onstage. Indeed, Teresa is saved from suicide by Modecki, who is overjoyed by the news of her pregnancy, determined to marry her, yet equally determined that

Figure 1.2 Linka's confession begins to haunt Teresa (left). *Strachy* (*Ghosts*, dir. Eugeniusz Cękalski and Karol Szołowski, 1938). From Filmoteka Narodowa.

she no longer perform. Teresa exits the film as happy wife and expectant mother. Her haunting has scared her into traditional Catholic virtue, saving her from the cardinal sins of abortion and suicide, removing her from the stage altogether, and drawing viewers' attention up from legs to womb.

The Limits of Media Redemption

During the two decades of the Second Polish Republic, when metropolitan producers, writers, and performers eagerly invested in creating a more sophisticated national popular culture, the chorus girl's fortunes seemed bright and her upward mobility (professional and social) within reach. The concentration of artistic and intellectual talent in Warsaw, Lwów, Kraków, and other Polish cities enabled the rise of an astonishing number of female dancers from titillating jazz babies in the chorus line to the status of respected artists and admired national celebrities. Stardom transformed these bad girls into icons and idols. Yet Poland's city-bound producers and critics possessed neither the vision nor the means—in particular, a developed film industry—to expiate the *girlsa*'s bad behavior before a far more conservative national public. By the late 1930s, stage and film stars such as Zula and Ordonka could do no wrong; yet the aspiring Teresas and Linkas, who made their appearance on the silver screen just as this era was ending, remained susceptible to the ghosts of their sins and subject to the nation's judgment.

Notes

1. Original review appeared in *Kurier Poranny,* 20 IX 1932.
2. See Antony Polonsky, "'Why Did They Hate Tuwim and Boy So Much?' Jews and 'Artificial Jews' in the Literary Polemics of the Second Polish Republic," in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. Robert Blobaum (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2005), 189–209.
3. See also Urszula Chowaniec, "Listening to Women's Voices: Historical Overview of Women's Right to Write in Poland," in *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory*, ed. Urszula Chowaniec and Ursula Phillips (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 26–46.
4. This review appeared as "Mira Zimińska w IPS-ie," *Wiadomości literackie*, 1933, nr. 12, 283, and quoted from Zimińska 1985, 153.
5. For more information on backstage musicals, see Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. London: The Macmillan Press, 1993. 71–80.

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