

Typing beyond tradition: Women's writing practices and the challenge to heteronormative domesticity in socialist Poland

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Abstract

This article delves into the nuanced interplay between the domestication of women's labor and writing practices in 1970s Poland, focusing on the literary community of Obory near Warsaw and the typewriter as a symbolic tool. Set against the backdrop of patriarchal norms, communist promises of emancipation, and late socialist consumption aspirations, Obory's house of creative work melds women's writing with both waged and unwaged feminized roles. Drawing on Alva Gotby's notion of emotional reproduction, this investigation highlights enduring societal frameworks, particularly the structures of the heterosexual family, domestic roles, and gender-specific labor. Using oral histories, interviews with 1960s-70s translators, and 1978-1979 applications to the Polish Writers' Union, the study incorporates Diana Taylor's concepts of *archive* and *repertoire*. This approach captures the distinct practices of Obory's women writers while reviving the embodied memory of their typing and the venue's unique legacy.

Keywords: literary community, domestic space, spaces of writing, women's labor, Poland.

Résumé

Cet article explore l'intersection du travail domestique des femmes et des pratiques d'écriture dans la Pologne des années 1970, et se concentre sur la communauté littéraire d'Obory près de Varsovie et la machine à écrire comme outil symbolique. Dans le contexte des normes patriarcales, des promesses communistes d'émancipation et des aspirations de consommation du socialisme tardif, l'institution d'Obory fusionne l'écriture des femmes avec des rôles féminisés, rémunérés et non rémunérés. S'inspirant de la notion d'Alva Gotby de reproduction émotionnelle, cette enquête met en lumière les cadres sociétaux durables, en particulier les structures de la famille hétérosexuelle, des rôles domestiques et du travail spécifique au genre. En utilisant des témoignages oraux, des entretiens avec des traducteurs des années 1960-70 et des demandes adressées à l'Union des écrivains polonais de 1978-1979, l'étude intègre les idées d'archive et de répertoire de Diana Taylor. Cette méthode éclaire les pratiques uniques des écrivaines d'Obory et ravive les souvenirs incarnés de leur travail et de l'histoire particulière de l'institution.

Mots-clés : communauté littéraire, espace domestique, espaces d'écriture, travail des femmes, Pologne.

Introduction

At a recent exhibition honoring Julia Hartwig in the Józef Czechowicz Literary Museum in Lublin,¹ beneath a portrait of the literary heroine, an author's Continental typewriter was showcased on a raised pedestal, reminiscent of a sacred object on an altar. Although Hartwig, a prolific writer from 1921-2017, may not have typed her entire output, the typewriter was almost automatically recognized as emblematic of her profession. It stood there, a silent testament to her legacy and the very essence of the writer's craft. It acted as a prop, as if the machine itself evoked the person's status.

Building on this cultural snapshot, this article delves into the cultural history of typewriters in Poland within the context of transnational phenomenon of the 'typewriter era'.² It places particular emphasis on the 1970s, when these machines began their transition from offices to homes. The paper examines the intersections of the typewriter's role, women's writing practices, and gender policies of socialist Poland during that decade. Central to the exploration is how the domestication of women's work was influenced by the broader socio-political and cultural landscape of postwar Poland: shift, nuances, or continuities from historical norms.

The paper uses the house of creative work in Obory near Warsaw as a case study. The Obory manor, dating back to the 17th century, exemplifies the "Polish manor" and symbolizes patriarchal gentry culture, reinforcing the traditional role of women in Polish Catholic society, embodied in the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) ideal. While norms differed based on social class, this notion most often emphasizes the home's centrality in maintaining Polish identity, especially during times without a Polish state (Fidelis 2015). From 1948, this manor was used by the Polish Writers' Union (ZLP³) and housed Poland's most esteemed house of creative work, a concept originating from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, designed to provide conducive environments for artists, in this case, predominantly writers. As consumer socialism grew in the 1970s, these establishments, catering to various professions, proliferated, offering a blend of work and leisure. However, the Obory house shut down in 2015 and, after changing hands, currently undergoes renovations, with its future uncertain.⁴

1 Julia Hartwig, "Przestrzenie literatury", an exhibition organized by the branch of the National Museum in Lublin – Józef Czechowicz Museum, and the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (30 September 2021-30 April 2022).

2 "The typewriter century" is usually dated from the 1880s to the 1980s, that is, from the time of general commercial availability of the typewriter to the dominance of the word processor as a writing tool in the Western world (Lyons 2021).

3 It is worth emphasizing that initially ZLP was a trade union (ZZLP), only then was it transformed into a creative union, which meant that it lost many of its rights.

4 It was acquired by prewar owner, Teresa Potulicka-Łatyńska, and later sold to an art NGO managed by businessman Jerzy Starak.

On a final note, the paper draws on Diana Taylor’s concept of embodied memory to shed light on the process of shaping the memory of women’s activities in Obory. Given the scant archival materials related to the institution’s history, mainly due to mishandlings in the 2000s, this article purposefully combines an analysis of requests –or what might be called *archival memory*, encompassing written and material text stored in the archives, with the repertoire. This latter concept is what Taylor calls embodied memory: “performances, gestures, orality, movement [...] – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 2003, 20).

The research underpinning this article is rooted in oral history: 10 interviews I conducted between 2019 and 2020 with male and female guests of the house in Obory, with the majority of those who were translators actively involved in the community during the 1970s. The ‘snowball’ method was employed to find interlocutors. From a methodological standpoint, the research utilized narrative interviews structured around thematic fields and guided by specific topics. Another significant source for this paper includes formal requests for stays at the house, filed with Polish Writers Union in 1978 and 1979, and now stored at the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw. To further enrich the topic, prewar press advertisements for typewriters in Poland were consulted, as well as textbooks from the National Library in Warsaw. The study also made use of photographs captured by Grażyna Rutowska, which are documented in *The National Digital Archives*.

1. Women's work: typing in the background

The typewriter, invented by Christopher Latham Sholes⁵ in 1868, initially symbolized the rise of women into modern office roles,⁶ yet often confined them to entry-level positions, reinforcing gender-based economic hierarchies (Davies 1982; Cohn 1985; Strom 1989).

The landscape of Polish typewriting began with Władysław Paciorkiewicz who introduced the first Polish typewriter in 1903, later innovated by Edmund Krzesiński in 1927. Other notable models include ‘Orzeł’ by Stanisław Skóra i Spółka and ‘F.K.’ produced by the State Rifle Factory in Warsaw. Inter-war advertisements often highlighted elements of a transnational ‘typewriter girl’ trope, combining male gaze,

⁵ Though Sholes was the first person to use the name ‘typewriter’ for this invention, he is in fact regarded as the 52nd inventor of the machine. In 1873 Remington agreed to manufacture the invention. It is important, as Martyn Lyons stresses, to perceive the design of such inventions as processes –the results of the work of many people throughout decades.

⁶ “There is no doubt that when its use became widespread, the typewriter was operated primarily by women. In 1870, while the typewriter was still a model in the Kleinstauber Machine Shop, there were seven women stenographers, by 1900 there were 200,000, and by 1930, there were 2,000,000.” (Hoke 1979, 77).

female corporeality during writing, and the financial success of enterprises. For example, The Royal Typewriter Company (see **Figure 1**) used a symptomatic slogan on one of its leaflets: “For the eye of the customer... For the secretary’s fingers... For the company’s cash register [...] the most appropriate typewriter is Royal” (**Figure 2**). While some textbooks emphasized the risk of occupational diseases (**Figure 3**),⁷ they mainly perpetuated submissive and sexualized views of women typists. Highlighting this, the materials employed the Polish feminine form of the noun ‘typists’.



Figure 1. Leaflet of the Royal Trade Mark (Warsaw c. 1910-1919). Transl. “America’s most advanced typewriter”
© National Library in Warsaw DŹS XIE 3



Figure 2. Leaflet of the Royal Trade Mark (Warsaw 1931).
© National Library in Warsaw DŹS XIV A 3a



Figure 3. Cywiński, W., Hanusiak, Z. 1938. *Typing. Handbook for high schools of commerce, administration and junior high schools of commerce.*
© National Library in Warsaw 1.400.082

⁷ “Nervous diseases”, “ankle inflammation”, “vision impairment”, “lung diseases”, “poor blood circulation”, “spinal curvature”, “chest collapse”, “anemia”, “neuralgia”, “joint strain” (Cywiński and Hanusiak 1938, 12).

In the 1931 American typewriting manual, adapted for Polish keyboards, we see the exacting specifications of how one should type, emphasizing the physicality of the act (Figure 4). The repetitive nature of the exercises and the detailed instructions on key presses and body movements show a strong effort to standardize a particular kind of typing behavior. This goes beyond just typing proficiency; it is an attempt to inculcate a specific discipline and bodily comportment, especially in women. These lessons trained the body for work, echoing *Les techniques du corps* (Mauss 1973) in how they melded with the surrounding discourse:

Accuracy in typing is crucial for a typist.
 Stenography and typing are many women's livelihoods.
 Following the boss's orders accurately is vital in offices.
 Speed and efficiency' define American offices.

This manual provides a clear example of what Diana Taylor identifies as the interplay between the 'archive' and the 'repertoire'. While the manual itself, with its written instructions, forms part of the archival memory, the physical act of typing and the embodied practices it entails correspond to the repertoire –or Taylor's embodied memory. The repeated instructions to write sentences, the emphasis on aesthetic uniformity, and the avoidance of erratic movements all dictate a specific performance of the female body which becomes an ingrained, practiced memory.



Figure 4. The American typewriting system (so called blind) applied to the Polish keyboard, Tow. Handl. Royal Typewriters in Poland, Warsaw 1931.
 © National Library in Warsaw 558.681, p.5

In the transition to state socialism, Poland saw a marked shift in the representation and roles of women in the workforce. Trying to move beyond traditional roles, there was an increased push for women’s broader participation in the workplace, including roles that required skills in typing and shorthand (Marcinkiewicz-Kaczmarczyk 2018, 174). Grażyna Rutowska’s photographs from the 1970s serve as vivid snapshots of this era. Working at the *People’s Daily* editorial office [Dziennik Ludowy] from 1968 onwards, her images candidly captured staff members in their daily routines. One notable photo shows a woman engrossed in her work, with an electric typewriter and other office paraphernalia around her. The worker’s posture, her gaze fixed on the text, and her casual discussion seem like she probably did not feel being photographed, or was just used to her co-worker taking photographs at ease (Figure 5). In another photo, taken during the 8th congress of The United People’s Party [Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe], the typewriter –a prominent Optima M12 model⁸– takes center stage, emphasizing both technological progression and the continued importance of women in administrative roles (Figure 6).



Figure 5. People’s Daily editorial staff
© Grażyna Rutowska’s Collection, [Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, 3/40/0/8/159](https://www.narodowearchiwumcyfrowe.pl/3/40/0/8/159).



Figure 6. 8th Congress of the United People’s Party
© Grażyna Rutowska’s Collection, [Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, 3/40/0/1/108](https://www.narodowearchiwumcyfrowe.pl/3/40/0/1/108).

⁸ It is Optima M12, a model manufactured by VEB Olympia Büromaschinenwerk Erfurt in 1960s and widely used in Polish offices. To hear the [sound of typing on](#) Optima M12; the [sound of inserting paper](#). The machines are described in a sentimental way on numerous hobby websites, e.g., the [website of the Muzeum Maszyn Biurowych](#). In the 1970s, Polish typewriters were produced in Zakłady Metalowe in Radom under the name ‘Predom’, ‘Predom-Łucznik’ and ‘Łucznik’. The manual machine ‘Łucznik’ was a must-have for every office in the Polish People’s Republic. Jerzy Kruk and Andrzej Wójcik, who worked in the factory, recalled with emotion in a press interview: “We were a beautiful, modern workplace” (Korc 2022). They reported that about 95,000 typewriters were produced annually. After expanding the offer with a more modern electric and more compact model, machines were successfully exported: “How good and valued this machine was, let it be proved by the fact that when the Swedes sold our machines, they gave them a 10-year warranty. They had such confidence in us, in the team” (Korc 2022).

There is a dichotomy of the typewriter’s representation –as both an instrument of emancipation and a tool of restriction. While the typewriter, as an archival object, symbolized progress and liberation, the daily act of typing –particularly as prescribed by the manuals– was a continuous performance that reinforced gendered expectations, acting as a repetitive embodiment of societal norms.

The typewriter became more than just a mechanical object; it embodied the complexities of gendered and class identities. As Arjun Appadurai notes, such objects become “things-in-motion that illuminate their social context” (Appadurai 1986, 5). Within this framework, the typewriter highlighted gendered office divisions and even influenced elite literary circles.⁹ Notably, many women in the translation community hailed from prewar intelligentsia backgrounds with landed gentry roots, retaining a privileged position even during socialism. Some even hired housekeepers for chores and typists for manuscript revisions (Marzec 2014, 409).

Yet, privilege didn’t exempt them from the challenges of incorporating the typewriter into domestic life, underscoring the broader struggle of managing work and home responsibilities. This negotiation becomes essential when understanding gendered writing practices in the 20th century. The era marked the beginning of women attempting to write from their homes, causing a reevaluation of domestic spaces. Martyn Lyons touches on this tension, pointing out that:

The typewriter crystallized the dilemma: where could it fit within the domestic sphere, without undermining the woman’s family obligations? (Lyons, 175).

This spatial challenge became even more acute in post-war Poland due to housing shortages, especially in the immediate aftermath of World War II (Zaremba 2012; Grzebałkowska 2015).

2. Homeless typewriters

The establishment of the institution in Obory was influenced by the post-war housing crisis in Warsaw. The word “house” in the institution’s name alludes to the Greek term *oikos*, underscoring the importance of housing. This sentiment is captured in a letter from Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, Stefan Żółkiewski, and Leopold Lewin to the State Council in April 1948.

⁹ “When male novelists hired female typists from secretarial agencies or asked their wives or lovers to type accurate drafts for them, they were replicating an organization of work that originated in the bureaucratic sphere. The boss’s office and the writer’s study were not very different in this respect.” (Lyons 2021, 63). The recent hashtag #thankfortyping showed the scale of the phenomenon (Dresvina, 2021).

As they say, this institution is the response to chronic shortage of living-space in Poland:

Members [of ZZLP] are in very poor housing conditions in the ruined capital, which prevents them from working normally. Therefore, ZZLP decided to arrange in Obory not a holiday home, but a Work House for writers who will be able to come there successively for a specified purpose and period of time.¹⁰ (Figure 7).

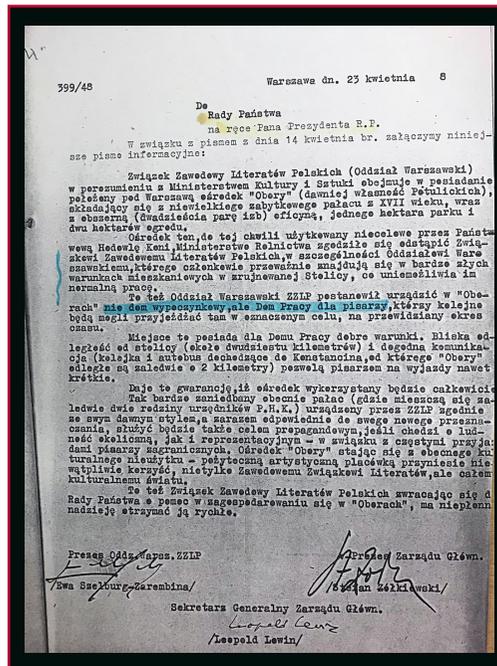


Figure 7. Letter addressed to the State Council by the initiators of establishing a house of creative work in Obory, signed by Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, Stefan Żółkiewski and Leopold Lewin (Warsaw, 23 April 1948).

© Marek Zaleski's private archives.

The accommodation requests for Obory in 1978 and 1979 reveal diverse reasons for seeking space there. While their formal tone might sometimes exaggerate certain reasons accordingly to the rhetoric inscribed in the functionality of official letters, the recurring mention of the housing crisis underscores its significance. Although both male and female writers faced housing challenges, their motivations for seeking accommodation appeared to differ based on gender, suggesting that their presence (or lack thereof) at the institution had gendered implications.

One illustrative example is Natalia Modzelewska's letter. A literary critic and translator of Russian literature, her motivations offer insight into the broader spectrum of reasons women had for seeking space at Obory (Figure 8).

¹⁰ Sometimes writers lived in the manor for a long time, treating it as a real home until they were allocated an apartment. One example is the poet and translator, Julia Hartwig. She lived in the manor in Obory after returning to Warsaw from a Parisian scholarship in 1950 (Hartwig 2011, 38).

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KOMISJA DPT przy ZG ZLP

p.2

Szanowni Koledzy,
 składając poprzednim razem podanie o skierowanie do Obór na dwumiesięczny pobyt /czerwiec i lipiec/ wyjaśniłam, że bardzo mi zależy na pracy nieprzerwanej ze względu na ogromną ilość materiałów – książki, maszyopisy, wydania źródłowe, słowniki itd. – nieodzowne przy opracowaniu "Listów Czechowa" /poaad 60 arkuszy/, których jestem redaktorem i zarazem autorem wstępu i wszystkich komentarzy. Niestety, przyznano mi pobyt dwumiesięczny, ale z przerwą na lipiec, co bardzo skomplikowało i utrudniło mi proces roboczy.

Proszę teraz usilnie Kolegów, żeby zechcieli uwzględnić specyfikę mojej pracy i przedłużyć mój sierpniowy pobyt w Oborach na cały wrzesień, w tymże pokoju nr 2 na parterze. Chciałabym wykorzystać pobyt w naszym Domu Pracy Twórczej z maksymalnym efektem i zgodnie z podstawowym przeznaczeniem tego Domu. Dodam, że w ciągu przebiegu roku nie korzystałam z jego dobrodziejstw.

Natalia Modzelewska
/Natalia Modzelewska/

24.VII.1979

Figure 8. Request by Natalia Modzelewska (23 July 1979). "p.2" written in pencil is the number of the assigned room - © The Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw, 5831.

Translation:

Dear Colleagues,

When applying for a referral to Obory for a two-month stay /June and July/ I explained that I really care about uninterrupted work due to the enormous number of materials – books, typescripts, source editions, dictionaries, etc. – indispensable in the preparation of Chekhov's Letters /over 60 sheets/, of which I am the editor and author of the introduction and all comments. Unfortunately, I was granted a two-month stay, but with a break for July, which made the work process very complicated and difficult for me.

Now, I request my colleagues to take into account the specifics of my work and to extend my August stay in Obory for the whole of September, in the same room No. 2 on the ground floor. I would like to make the most of my stay in our House of Creative Work with maximum effect and in accordance with the basic purpose of this House.¹¹

Most accommodation requests at Obory were succinct, specifying room preferences. However, Modzelewska's detailed request stands out. She aims to underscore the gravity of her uninterrupted work, emphasizing the need for her vast work materials and that breaks, or relocation would be detrimental. Her emphasis on "the basic purpose of this House" underscores her primary goal: dedicated work, mirroring the precision found in typewriter manuals from the 1930s.

¹¹ Request by Natalia Modzelewska, 24 July 1979. All the requests come from The Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw, signature 5831.

In contrast, narratives about Obory often spotlight men’s leisurely activities, including drinking and gossiping. Jacek Bocheński’s account depicts a spectrum of activities, from relaxation to political opposition, yet overlooks writing as a central pursuit. For women, the focus was clear; as evidenced by one’s request to extend her ‘holidays’ because of unfinished work: “Due to the failure to complete the intended work, I kindly ask you to extend my stay in Obory until the end of April”.¹²

The range of motivations accompanying requests to stay in Obory is also exemplified by Camilla Mondral, a translator of Hungarian literature. She detailed the working and living conditions she faced in Warsaw during the late 1970s (Figure 9):

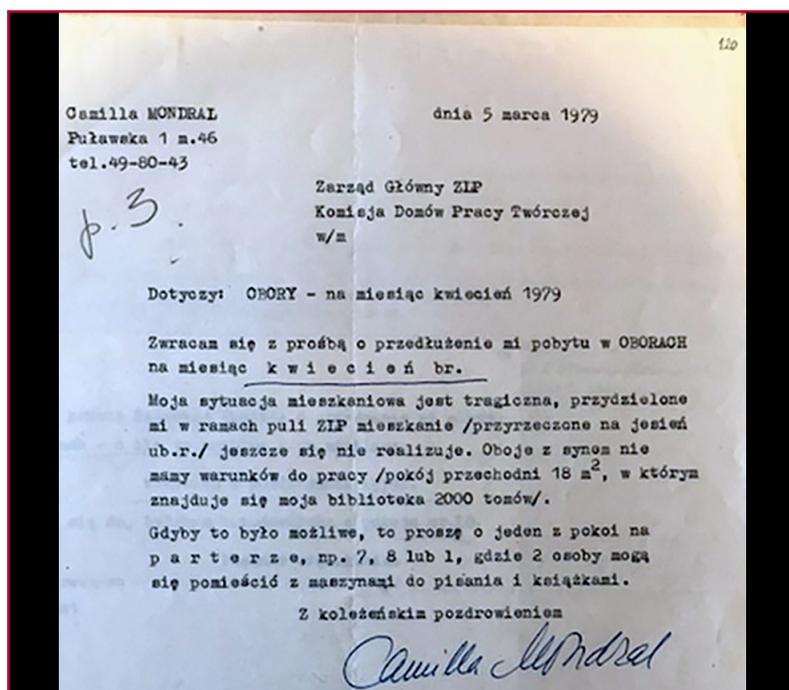


Figure 9. Request by Camilla Mondral (5 March 1979).

© The Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw, 5831.

Translation:

I request an extension of my stay in Obory for the month of April. My housing situation is dire; the apartment allocated to me by the ZLP pool, promised last autumn, is still pending. Both my son and I lack proper working conditions; we have an 18m² walk-through room that contains my 2,000-volume library. If possible, I’d prefer one of the rooms on the ground floor, such as 7, 8, or 1, where two people can fit with their typewriters and books.¹³

¹² Request by Julia Hartwig, 7 March 1979.

¹³ Request by Camilla Mondral, 5 March 1979.

For writers, finding a place to live intertwines with the necessity to accommodate work materials. Thus, the suitability of a room to house both individuals and their equipment, like typewriters and books, is essential. This motif recurs in the request from Mondral’s son, Stefan Pęksa, another translator of Hungarian literature:

I kindly request a stay at DPT in Obory for six weeks starting January 15, 1979. I live in cramped conditions in one room with my mother (Camilla Mondral) on a fold-out bed, with no space for two typewriters, especially in a walk-through room. If possible, I’d like room number 10 since my mother will be staying with me temporarily.¹⁴

The responsibility of caring for her grown son fell squarely on Camilla’s shoulders. Their mother-son dynamic was challenging, as highlighted in Mondral’s biography. She wrote about living successively with her son, then with her son and his wife, next with her son, his wife, and their child, and following the couple’s divorce, initially with her daughter-in-law and granddaughter, and ultimately with her son again. As Mondral described,

It isn’t hard to envision the ‘working conditions’ within a forty-two-square-meter space, with a typewriter on a table in a walk-through room (Mondral 1998, 237).

The ongoing relocation of the desk and typewriter was a persistent aspect of their daily lives. This object wasn’t just in perpetual motion within the apartment; it also traveled with its owner to the house of creative work. Considering the needs that the house catered to and its initial promises, it’s time to evaluate whether the house’s concept lived up to its expectations.

3. Trouble of conscience

To access the house in Obory, one simply needed ZLP affiliation. Visitor numbers in Obory rose since the 1960s, with this era seeing the highest visits to Obory by the interviewed women. Between 1968-1975, Obory had 24 rooms available, excluding renovation periods. Annual visitors were: 312 (1968), 368 (1969), 426 (1970), 408 (1971), and 456 (1972). Gender was roughly even: in 1970, there were 205 women to 221 men.

Yet, diving into ZLP membership reveals clear gender disparities. Sociological data from 1929 and 1964 show that most Polish writers were men (see **Table 1**). While Andrzej Siciński notes a post-war rise in ZLP membership despite fewer writers overall, he observes that male writers tended to be younger. What he omits is the trend that the Union more rarely admitted young female writers (Marzec 2014, 391).

¹⁴ Request by Stefan Pęksa, 27 November 1978.

Table 1. Members of the Polish Writers’ Union (by gender)

Gender	1929	1964
Men	74%	70%
Women	26%	30%

Source: Siciński 1971.

It’s worth noting that, according to Siciński, the ‘rejuvenation’ of the literary community is why writers were less equipped in 1964 compared to 1959. Those not yet fully established joined the ZLP. By the late 1950s, 82% of members owned a typewriter, a number that dropped to 78% by 1964 (Siciński 1971, **Table 2**).

Table 2. Writer’s possessions in percentage (%)

Possessions	1959	1964
Radio	no data	86
Typewriter	82	78
Telephone	87	72
Refrigerator	24	43
Television	13	31
Car	14	11

Source: Siciński 1971.

When looking back at the years spent working in Obory, people pointed out generational differences and romanticized the characteristics of their own generation over time: “The young ones were often unruly, but this was understood in Obory and their antics were often overlooked”, said Julia Hartwig.

Writers of my generation came to the palace to work undisturbed on a book for two or three months. We usually managed to do it quite well. In the evening, as I walked down the corridor, I could hear the steady sound of typewriters coming from many rooms. It must be said that this had a motivating effect on some, while it plunged others into depression. (Marzec 2003).

The clattering of typewriters is a vivid memory for many. Anna Przedpełska-Trzeciakowska, a translator of English literature, fondly recalls the 1960s and 1970s at Obory:

It was typical of Obory [...]. When you went out into the corridor, the sound of typing [...]. Yes, quite typical. Because all this work was still done on machines that knocked so loudly.

From the mid-1960s, Trzeciakowska, a ZLP member, had access to Obory, though the exact date eludes her. Interviews suggest that while women had official access, actual trips were challenging. Success in visiting often carried a weight of guilt and an intensified need to be productive. This contrasts with the behavior of elite male writers like Jan Brzechwa or Antoni Słonimski, who enjoyed leisure activities:

They loved playing bridge, and I was always so scared that they wouldn’t have a fourth person and that I would have to play, but I couldn’t. And I really didn’t want to. [...] I had the feeling that I was wasting my time. There, my mother takes care of my children for me, so it was my ... trouble of conscience.¹⁵

Despite noting Obory’s conveniences for work, like prepared meals (by the staff, usually composed of women), male writers leaned into leisure over labor. Analyzing the cultural narrative surrounding Obory, I contend it perpetuates patriarchal themes, as exemplified by Tadeusz Konwicki’s work, which often frames the locale as a bastion for the cultivation of heteromascularity.

I somehow seem to remember that at one time the environs of Konstancin were a wild sex preserve. [...] Not me of course, I was always a venerable and stately man of letters, who quarrels with God and history, who goes out strolling wearing a straw hat, and who later holds forth resoundingly on poetry while sprawling in an armchair. [...]

Here I’m speaking of my colleagues, acquaintances, and friends, those Warsaw Romeos who were so industrious in flattening meadow grass on both sides of the Vistula, around Konstancin, and near Otwock. [...]

Romantic walks in the springtime. Smelling the flowers, sighing, observing nature. In the summer there were games played in the water, suntanning, a pretense of sport. But in the fall, with its heavy, clumsy clothing, there was mournful, passionate, –furious copulation on the dry leaves, beneath a frost-withered rowan bush, or in the back seat of a car obtained with coupons from a friend in government. (Konwicki 1987, 155-156)

Janusz Głowacki, a Polish playwright and screenwriter, vividly captured the tensions prevailing in the house of creative work during the times of the Polish People’s Republic in his memoirs:

Some believed that in Obory, people just drank. I remember that in the palace, we worked with Marek Piwowski on a screenplay. [...] We dictated to the archivist from “Kultura”, Danuta Stawska. The day was beautiful, so we decided to move to the park. We dragged out chairs, a table, and a typewriter. Suddenly, from the bushes, the editor-in-chief of Moczarski magazine *Barwy* peeked out. He was watching us, convinced that we were heading outdoors to indulge in alcohol, and that the typewriter was just a camouflage. (Marzec 2003)

¹⁵ Interview with Anna Trzeciakowska, 9 May 2019.

In Obory, men certainly worked and even evolved cultural practices that blurred traditional distinctions in their professional, personal, gendered lives. However, unlike women, they seldom connected their time there with parental duties. Most women, on the other hand, framed their writing experiences within the backdrop of inherited domestic responsibilities.

I could only visit when my mother watched the children, so I couldn’t go frequently. I would have loved to stay there constantly, given its immense comfort. A good room, everything catered to by the staff, everything taken care of. Especially during those times when even the smallest things took effort. But it was challenging to burden my mother with my responsibilities, so I never stayed long. Usually just a week or ten days. I’d always prepare the household in advance.¹⁶

The luxury of comfortable conditions to focus solely on writing felt like a dream for women balancing roles as writers, wives, and mothers with unpaid domestic duties. Trzeciakowska put it aptly:

Joining the Polish Writers’ Union gave me the right to stay in Obory. It was invaluable to me, not just emotionally, but practically. With three children, the chance to work in peace was priceless.¹⁷

Household responsibilities emerge as a recurrent theme in women’s requests, like screenwriter Wanda Żółkiewska’s:

I feel unwell with my heart and wish to escape the pre-holiday frenzy of cleaning and cooking. I’m also worn out from work and the onset of spring fatigue.¹⁸

4. Emotional reproduction

The socialist state largely ensured conducive environments for writers, and the 1970s stood out as exemplary. As Rokicki (2011, 510) notes,

In the initial years of the decade, Gierek’s team crafted the most favorable conditions for writers in the Polish People’s Republic era, particularly in terms of resources.

However, this era also marked a change in women’s societal roles, where consumption began to define the domestic sphere led mainly by women. This emphasis was partly a strategy to boost birth rates, so traditional gender roles became tools for the party activists to strengthen their governance. Although socialism professed progressive ideals, the state paradoxically leaned on women for unpaid domestic roles, reproduction, and consumption, often sidelining progressive gender policies for political acquiescence (Fidelis 2015). Essentially, the state’s reluctance to challenge traditional female roles became part of an unspoken societal contract: in exchange

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁷ *Ibidem*

¹⁸ Request by Wanda Żółkiewska 12 March 1979.

for political conformity, the state would improve living standards and stay out of private lives (Ost 1996, 36; Kenney 1999).¹⁹ This unspoken pact effectively stymied progressive gender initiatives.

In spite of numerous notions of women’s emancipation in Eastern bloc countries, including the influence of thinkers like Alexandra Kollontai and Fannina Halle, when women’s departments emerged in trade unions in 1946, their primary aim was workplace support, not domestic (Fidelis 2015). The demarcation between public and private solidified women’s roles as protectors of private spaces from external intervention.

Similarly, the subjects of this article valued the support they received in their professional capacity as writers but seldom acknowledged a need for change in the domestic realm. They demonstrated their agency in managing dual responsibilities, often depending on familial female support, such as from their mothers, to navigate these burdens.²⁰ In Obory, this gendered responsibility was evident. Cooking, serving food, and cleaning were still primarily shouldered by women.

In this creative work setting, the concept of a ‘home’ took on a unique dimension, where both women and men replicated roles familiar from their traditional domestic spheres, albeit in a more collective environment. The labor associated with femininity persisted, including emotional labor. As Silvia Federeci puts it: “femininity is a work function” (after Gotby 2023, 56), and their emotional capacity, in the words of Alva Gotby, is “embodied knowledge” (Gotby 2023, 69). Gotby’s insights are influenced by the Wages for Housework movement initiated in 1972. She points out that in a traditional heterosexual family setting, women are often tasked with ensuring both the emotional well-being of individual family members and the cohesion of the family unit. Similarly, many service-oriented professions require a genuine affinity for care-giving as a basis for effective performance. The act of emotional care-giving also reflects societal hierarchies: those in privileged positions are more often tended to than those in lower socio-economic standings (Gotby 2023, 8).

¹⁹ The functioning of the house in Obory as an ‘safety valve’ was seen within the framework of a similar social contract the government provided writers with a place where their status is exalted, but where, conversely, they are easily controlled. This perception was amplified by its Soviet lineage. As Ronald Hingley notes, housing, especially in clusters by profession, can be a potent tool for governance, pointing to Soviet institutions like Mandelstam’s House of Arts (Hingley 1979, 176). See Haraszti 1988. However, such a blanket judgment oversimplifies Obory’s multifaceted nature. Archival materials and firsthand accounts reveal diverse, lesser-known perspectives, especially from its female attendees.

²⁰ Recently, Natalia Jarska has published on the topic of relying on women’s networks and family relations instead of the state (2022, 82-102).

Obory’s case casts a spotlight on the challenges to establish alternative collective bonds. Janusz Głowacki’s memories from Obory, particularly of staff mistreatment, reveal the dominance of heteromale guests that cultivated patriarchal institutions:

Once, I went to Obory with Krzysztof Mętrak and Janusz Kondratiuk. [...] At that time, Himilbach and Maklakiewicz paid us a visit. We held a ball in their honor at the palace, in which the cooks and maids agreed to participate. I’d rather not mention the terrible details (Marzec 2003).

Furthermore, Obory constituted a yet another place of emotional reproduction:

[...] that is, tied up with forms of sociality and ideology that continually recreate, and privilege privatized social bonds and hierarchically constituted subjectivities (Gotby 2023, 123).

The hierarchical social structure of the house in Obory was reflected, for example, in the ‘canteen geography’, according to which writers were seated at the dinner tables (Zaleski 2002). Individualistic subjectivities were magnified there due to the cultural imaginings of a writer working in solitude.

However, this isn’t merely a critique of Obory’s shortcomings. The focus is not solely on its inability to offer a sanctuary that challenges the ongoing perpetuation of labour/labor roles. Instead, Obory, with its redefined notion of ‘home’ where traditional domestic roles were mirrored within a collective community, stands as a potential beacon for challenging societal conventions. The functioning of the home, sources have shown, was associated with challenges in terms of community housing, childcare, and support care workers. Finally, it underscores the pressing need for transformative changes in domestic roles and the gendered division of labor (Gotby 2023, 106).

And yet, research consistently points to the paucity of alternatives to conventional female roles in socialist Poland (Stańczak-Wiślicz et al. 2020). While the introduction of such institutions might have carved out more avenues for women’s creativity, it comes with the peril of further exploiting workers and fails to truly alter societal dynamics. As Gotby elucidates, the push for domestic labor compensation isn’t just an opposition to particular feminine roles but a challenge to entrenched heterosexual paradigms. It was never about mere resource redistribution within the prevailing system; the ultimate goal is to obliterate certain deep-seated distinctions:

The point is not just to improve domestic working conditions but rather to undo the material and ideological lines between the domestic and the public, the reproductive and the productive, as these divisions currently serve to individualize responsibility and enable exploitation (Gotby 2023, 53).

Gotby outlines a political stance in which we resist the perpetuation of traditional emotional roles. The overarching goal is to “fundamentally change the current organization of the heterosexual nuclear family, the household, and the gender

division of labor” (Gotby 2023, 106). By advocating for the abolition of feminized labor, the family, and gender as we know them, Gotby suggests that these radical shifts in thinking offer starting points for deeper societal challenges (Gotby 2023, 130).

Strengthening Poland’s non-conservative and non-Catholic cultural foundations could pave the way for shifts in the organization of social life. This is particularly crucial given some non-obvious societal perspectives: established relationship between ‘private’ and ‘public’ domains in Poland was defined during a period when the public sphere signified a lack of state autonomy, and private life was heavily influenced by socio-political matters. This was especially true for women who rapidly transitioned into professional or social roles. Also, the archetype of *Matka-Polka* was initially portrayed as a symbol of women’s civic engagement, where the home took on public functions associated with pro-state education. Rediscovering and reinforcing this tradition could offer a fresh perspective on conventional institutions. In summary, it was the absence of alternatives to heterosexual institutions that constrained women’s opportunities in Obory. Despite its potential for transformation, Obory remained tied to cultural stereotypes. Even though its spaces and structures held the latent potential to foster non-normative relationships, the influence of conservative norms proved to be challenging to overcome (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Photos from Obory
© Martyna Miernecka 2020.



5. Chipping the dictionaries: embodied memory

Poland’s deep-rooted attachment to the domestic sphere carries a unique historical weight, with much of its political underground activity nestled within private homes, including during the Polish People’s Republic era. Intriguingly, activists ingeniously manipulated the stereotype of a woman’s apolitical domestic life, hiding illicit materials in feminized spaces like nooks, thinking authorities wouldn’t inspect such places (Penn 2005, 181).

Central to these covert activities were typewriters. While the Eastern bloc’s relationship with typewriters varied –Romania, for instance, necessitated official registration, promoting manual reproduction– in Czechoslovakia, they epitomized the underground, being dubbed ‘the culture of the typewriter’ (Parfianowicz 2016, 97). This tool not only symbolized writing but also served as a cultural emblem, albeit often fetishized. Yet, considering the labor-intensive task of reproducing texts, often carried out by women, it might be more appropriate to term it “The Female Copyist’s Suffering”.²¹

Obory’s secluded, forested location made it an ideal clandestine meeting spot. Jacek Kuroń and Antoni Macierewicz, for instance, met there early in KOR’s lifespan, seeking discretion from potential surveillance.²² However, the ephemerality of these moments poses challenges for historians. Information sheets from this period, potentially incriminating if found by police, were often quickly destroyed: “Information was literally light. Nothing could be carved in stone” (Penn 2005, 161).

While tales of male activism in Obory, such as from Bocheński, are relatively available, female opposition roles remain obscure, signaling a need for more research. Bocheński’s remarks on Trzeciakowska,²³ a friend and fellow Obory visitor, at her 80th anniversary, sheds light on this discretion. He observed that her political endeavors, although significant, always felt covert: “[...] they always wanted to sneak past discreetly and hide somewhere in a hole [...]” (Bocheński 2007). Given this backdrop, how can we uncover the hidden and silent contributions of women in Obory?

²¹ Parfianowicz develops a formula by Paweł Majewski (Majewski 2015). As for the Czechoslovakian context, Parfianowicz refers to the memories of Jiří Gruntorád: “At that time, I already had people to rewrite [...]. There were many women and girls who knew how to handle these weapons, that is, typewriters, so I only searched for contacts” (Gruntorád 2005, 79; after Parfianowicz). The recollections of Tomáš Vrba also show that most women in Czechoslovakia treated copying as part-time job. They often did it during maternity leave or retirement, especially as the demand was high, the payment was similar to that on the official market (Vrba 2001, after Parfianowicz).

²² Interview with Jacek Bocheński, 31 October 2019. Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR) is a Polish civil society group which opposed the policy of the Polish People’s Republic authorities. It was established to help people repressed as a result of June 1976 protests.

²³ For example, it was Anna Trzeciakowska who took over the leadership of the Translators’ Club in the Polish People’s Union and worked there vigorously when there was a struggle not to remove translators from the Writers’ Union, and not to deprive them of their status as writers. It was against the aspirations of the government, which was convinced that the translation community was politically dangerous (Bartoszewski 2013, 131).

This exploration into women's creative work in the 1970s, with the conspicuous scarcity of traditional sources, prompted an exploration of novel research methodologies, chiefly, Diana Taylor's concept of embodied memory. Taylor's approach isn't confined to the written versus the spoken. Instead, it diverges into two realms: the *archive*, housing enduring artifacts like texts and buildings, and the *repertoire*, rooted in embodied practices like spoken language, each encoding and transmitting knowledge:

Instead of privileging texts and narratives, we could also look to scenarios as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes (Taylor 2003, 28).

For Taylor, these dichotomous forms are intertwined, mutually reinforcing historical narratives (Taylor 2003, 21).

Navigating the history of Obory demands a "thinking with bodies in history" approach (Worthen 2008, 16), suggesting that bodily experiences and object interactions form an intrinsic medium of history. Recollections from interviews highlight this vividly. An English translator spoke of the physicality of her work, grappling with hefty dictionaries that "always fall out of my hands".²⁴ The omnipresent issue of paper scarcity during the Polish People's Republic further underscores this material connection, painting a tangible, multi-sensory picture of that era: "There was a notorious shortage of paper, so it was a chase after paper, so nightmarish, gray".²⁵ She focused on the corporeality of her work, her struggles with both *Les techniques du corps* and materials needed for writing.

By stepping away from over-reliance on literary and historical documents, especially when examining the ephemeral practices of women in Obory, we unmask their "stories, memories, and struggles" (Taylor 2008, 18). An encompassing research perspective should reverberate with both human discussions and the ambient sounds in Obory, capturing moments like that one: "How did life go on there? In the summer –I used to go there in the summer, although at other times as well– when the windows were open, you could hear the clatter of typewriters".²⁶ By "thinking with bodies in history", we amplify the muted symphony of women's voices and the resonant cadence of their typewriters, emphasizing their significant contributions in Obory.

The memory of women's practices in Obory was limited by focusing too much on traditional sources, *i.e.*, written materials. In this context, research on practices related to the typewriter might come as rather ironic. Because it is a symbol of creating literary

²⁴ Interview with a translator who stayed at Obory, 11 March 2020.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

and historical documents in the 20th century, there is a danger of falling again into the trap of forgetting or distorting the history of women in this institution. However, the perspective of the object’s history in embodied, and not just “archival” culture, allowed to include the interactions between archive and repertoire. Adding the *repertoire* to the *archive* hopefully allowed for a better understanding of the challenges that women faced in their writing practices in Obory.

Conclusion

The typewriter was only one of the forces –technological, social, economic– that conveyed and embodied power relations, but its role in shaping the cultural imaginary of the 20th century was significant. Although the volume limitation of the article allowed to analyze only selected elements of the cultural history of the typewriter in Obory and briefly outline those that indicate its Central and Eastern European specificity, they served well to reflect on the materiality of women’s writing practices in the Polish People’s Republic.

As the article proved, the socialist institutionalization of the workspace turned out to be beneficial for women in terms of its original purpose: providing appropriate working conditions.²⁷ However, these advantages were not without boundaries. The limits were sculpted by the clash between traditional gender roles and the post-war communist vision of emancipation. This tension manifested itself in both waged and unwaged work. A robust state welfare system was insufficient on its own. More pointedly, advocating for remuneration for domestic labor is not merely an institutional or financial issue –it confronts, and challenges entrenched heterosexual norms and the broader patriarchal structures.

In examining the situation in Obory, we gain insights into the challenge against long-standing emotional and societal norms –specifically, the deeply rooted structures of the heterosexual nuclear family, domestic roles, and the division of labor based on gender (Gotby 2023, 106). This case highlights the urgent need to reassess, and possibly overhaul, our conventional understandings of feminized work, family dynamics, and gender identities. Such radical reinterpretations aren’t merely theoretical; they provide the foundation for wider societal shifts (Gotby 2023, 130). Today’s world intensifies this urgency, pressing for the establishment of alternative forms of care relationships. Obory exemplifies these challenges, emphasizing the necessity for building new forms of collective ties and spaces that resist traditional labor power dynamics.

²⁷ However, a separate study is needed to reflect on all women-workers in Obory, also including their negative experiences there, for example sexist comments from male writers staying at the house or the risk of sexual violence while walking in the nearby forest. Interview with Jacek Bocheński, 31 October 2019.

The socialist state largely ensured conducive environments for writers, and the 1970s stood out as exemplary –but not in the case of women. The state sought regime stabilization. By referencing national identity, it aimed to fortify the conservative majority's alignment with the government. Furthermore, the gender policies of the 1970s fostered a consumer society, which ideologically and economically distanced itself from the communist ideals of the 1950s. This late socialist era in Poland displayed a hesitancy toward emancipation ideologies, given the state's reliance on women performing unpaid domestic labor.

This article concludes by reflecting on the fleeting memory of women's writing practices in Obory. It posits that the challenge in capturing this memory stems, in part, from a constrained view of what constitutes sources of knowledge generation, recording, and transmission. Echoing Diana Taylor's notion of embodied memory, the article contends that we should not merely prioritize texts and narratives (*archival memory*) but also embrace the *repertoire* of embodied practices such as performances, gestures, and orality. These, too, are “meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (Taylor 2003, 28).

The overarching aim of this article is to underscore the value of analyzing writing practices through such repertoires. By doing so, the typewriter is reimagined as a ‘carrier’ of cultural memory, a semiophore (Pomian 2006). When placed within Obory's cultural landscape of creative work, the female memories of this locale assume their rightful prominence. In Obory's context, this repertoire consists of the memories of bodies moving between diverse workspaces. Bodies busy in the kitchen preparing meals and cleaning up, with hands laden with notes, books, and the rhythmic tapping of typewriter keys: “Stutututu”. This multifaceted *repertoire* of institutions, materials, and objects used by women in Obory in the 1970s allowed us to look at this memory a bit differently.

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