

# Maria Wisnowska: Under the Spell of Love and Death

A legend of days long past is the subject of a new book *Maria Wisnowska* written by a young historian Agata Tuszyńska. Maria Wisnowska, a thirty-five-year-old stunning beauty, a darling of theatre audiences and a woman of easy virtue, was shot dead by her lover, a Russian officer on June 30, 1890. She died because she had longed to die. She staged and played the part of her own death.

The event gave rise to a legend, very much in keeping with the epoch's climate. It is this legend that Agata Tuszyńska's book looks into. The historian scrutinizes a tangle of events that scandalized Warsaw more than one hundred years ago. The monograph's author writes: "Wisnowska's life and death was surrounded by an intricate web of rumour and guesswork, which is so complex that it is very hard to tell the truth from fiction, all the more so that during her life Wisnowska was involved in the making of her own legend, adding to it a wealth of spicy details, imaginary events and facts. She wanted to appear enigmatic and mysterious."

Talented, beautiful, unpredictable, provocative, seductive Wisnowska lived in the demi-monde disregarding conventional morality. She was desired by men of all walks of life. The artist favoured stormy but short-lived relationships, which often ended tragically. She treated men lightly, caused unbridled passions, provoked scandals and generally tempted Providence. Apparently, already in her youth she longed for a big

great asset. Tuszyńska got an insight into Wisnowska's character and conjured up her image in her mind. The result is a very special biography: not a classic *vie romancée* or a popular sensational piece preying on familiar melodramatic stereotypes to attract readers, but a profound psycho-sociological study, very well researched and written with an undeniable flair. It is a truly fascinating book, though the author never resorts to cheap tricks to make her task easier.

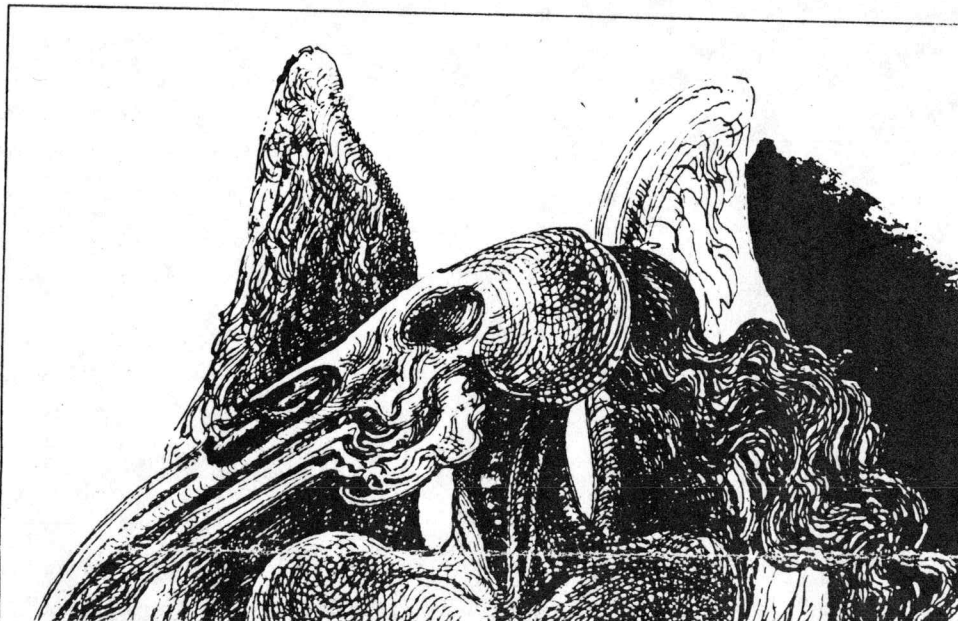
And what about the case itself? It will re-



Wisnowska: Seductive

sense of existence, total despondency and imminent catastrophes. Wisnowska became aware of all that due to her heightened sensitivity. By performing her decadent act she staged a happening according to the principles of the time that was approaching. It may seem irritating and distasteful judging by today's standards, but it was authenticated with the artist's death.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Wisnowska's grave in a Warsaw cemetery is always covered with fresh flowers. What-



## Bartenev's Testimony

She had asked me to come along at 6 p.m. I was there on the dot with a bottle of champagne, two glasses and some *eau de cologne* in a spray. She arrived at 7 p.m. holding two packages. I was told she wanted to get undressed and that I should wait in the hall. When I returned she was reclining on a sofa, her frilly dressing gown revealing her bare legs and feet. I saw a loaded pistol within arm's reach. When I asked her why she had brought it here, she replied she no longer had any use for it and that it would be better to keep it here, in this flat, just in case someone might come along.

I kept on remembering what she told me the previous night. She started to speak about her departure, first to Galicia and then to London or America. I sat down next to her on the sofa and started petting her, talking about my love for her and that I just refused to countenance any thought of her leaving. She said how sorry she was that she could not become my wife, what with all the cards stacked against us. That if I weren't a Russian, things would sort themselves out and we would be able to live together.

After some time she said she was hungry, so I got up and walked down to the shopowner who rented me the flat and gave him 10 roubles to get two pounds of ham, a piece of Strasbourg Ravioli, two bottles of dark beer, five pounds of wild cherries and two siphons of soda water.

She only nibbled at the food and asked me not to buy so much in the future. Then she said: "You know, I feel I should be going but just don't find it in me to leave". I couldn't get the drift of that statement but knowing how feather-brained she was I paid little attention to it and carried on petting.

She lay down. We did not speak much. Then she asked me to leave her alone for a while. She wanted to rest and doze for a moment. But

walks of life. The artist favoured stormy but short-lived relationships, which often ended tragically. She treated men lightly, caused unbridled passions, provoked scandals and generally tempted Providence. Apparently, already in her youth she longed for a big sleep, for her life seemed like an insatiable craving for death, the final fulfilment.

Wisnowska's open challenge against normal existence was a source of countless rumours, hearsay and all manner of conjecture. As the well-publicized trial of her murderer revealed, the victim had repeatedly demanded that her lover kill her. People even read patriotic motives into her behaviour. Polish-Russian relationships at the time both on the national and personal levels were very complicated and abounded in conflicts and dramatic events tainted by the atmosphere of national subjugation and persecution of things Polish. However, Wisnowska's murder was definitely not a case in point. The killer, hussar officer Alexander Bartenev was put on trial, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a long prison term in a maximum security jail. Thus, we must clearly look elsewhere for an explanation.

A year after Wisnowska's death, Chekhov wrote that only Dostoyevsky could get to the bottom of such a complex absurdity that the poor artist's life had been. Regrettably, Dostoyevsky was no longer around, but nevertheless the actress's fate attracted the attention of a multitude of writers. Apart from those of mediocre talent, there was also a man of great calibre: Ivan Bunin, later to become a Nobel prize winner. He presented his view of the tangle of passion and death in *The Case of Cornet Yelagin*. In Poland, Wisnowska's case was the subject of a recent novel *Black Romance* by acclaimed author Wladyslaw Terlecki.

The writing of fiction based on historical themes allows a novelist much freedom of manoeuvre. It helps him to form his own hypotheses that are verifiable only in such an approach. Agata Tuszyńska chose a more modest, but at the same time a more difficult method, that of a thorough and meticulous examination of original sources. She read all there was to read on the subject. She compared testimonies, checked records and looked closely at each and every detail. Then she tackled her analysis in which a literary imagination proved a



Gawłowski - *Voix*

main enigmatic, like similar, though not as dramatic cases. Agata Tuszyńska shows us how to accept its mysteries with humility: "After several years of meticulous studies, I am unable categorically to say whether Wisnowska was shot dead with her consent or not. We shall possibly never get an answer to that." The author suggests that the actress was obsessed with death, anticipating the approach of the age of decadence, *fin de siècle*, collapse of the belief in the

ever we think about that legend, it is very much alive. In the present day, so full of worries, so immediate and so prosaic, don't we all long for something extraordinary, even if we do not realize it; the magic spell of love and death, an explosion of passion, art and madness.

**Andrzej Drawicz**

drift of that statement but knowing how feather-brained she was I paid little attention to it and carried on petting.

She lay down. We did not speak much. Then she asked me to leave her alone for a while. She wanted to rest and doze for a moment. But then she suddenly got up and added: "Oh, I forgot that I came here to give you back your rings. You wanted to break off everything yesterday, so what do I need those rings for." She took them off, got up and threw them into the mouth of the oven saying: "Do you love me? If you really did you wouldn't have threatened me by saying you would kill yourself but would have killed me when we first decided to do so."

I was all in a dither. I told her I just did not have sufficient nerve to kill her. That I could finish myself off but not her. I was holding the revolver and I remember that I pointed it at her once and then dropped it saying I just could not fire it. Then, having taken the safety catch off several times, I pointed the barrel at myself. I was not joking, I really did think that there was nothing left in life.

I felt I had to shoot myself but that the proper moment had not yet arrived. Wisnowska read my feelings. She moved the barrel aside each time repeating that that was not the way to do it, that it would be too awful for me to die in her presence while she remained alive.

"You know I've loved you for so long," she said. "I know that often I haven't treated you right but that's the way I am. I didn't let you have me out of pure selfishness. You see, we can neither marry nor live together. Give me my clothes."

I gave her her skirt. She took two small jars out of it. I understood and asked: "Is this really the time?" "Yes, this is the end. Will you be able to live without me?" she asked. I said I could not, that to part would be unbearable. Then she said: "All right, then. I've taken your heart like so many others who loved me. Do you have the strength to do away with yourself?" I said yes, but then she added, "It doesn't really matter. You will have to love me and suffer for ever. If you really are decided, then take me with you. You'll die in the conviction that I am yours for all time."

Then she once again began speaking of our love, of an irreconcilable situation, that all we had left was death.

(Excerpts from the book *Marja Wisnowska* by Agata Tuszyńska to be published soon.)

"If it's come as far as this, let's get it over quickly," I said. She wanted to take the opium first just in case it didn't work with me. She wanted to fade into unconsciousness. Then I was to shoot her first and myself later. She placed the opium in a glass and I filled it up with beer. She drank the fluid in small sips, sitting upright on the sofa. I drank what remained. She lay down. She soaked her handkerchief and mine with chloroform and placed both on her face. I remember she asked me for some more opium. I gave it to her but she could not take it. She began to feel sick. She begged me to kill her in the name of our love, repeating urgently: "If you love me, kill me!" Once she even said it in Polish. We were talking in French all the time. My command of Polish is far from strong.

She was lying undressed. I was fully dressed.

I sat on the edge of the sofa on which she lay, revolver in hand, the safety catch off. I put my left hand round her neck. She kept on re-

peating that I must kill her if I loved her.

Something like a misty dream enveloped me. I kissed her, hugged her to me, shot her at point-blank range just under her left breast. She called out: "Adieu, je t'aime."

I shivered all over. My finger seemed to reach for the trigger under its own volition. After the shot I felt a sense of horror pervade me and in the moment which immediately followed I not only did not think about killing myself; I just thought about nothing at all. An absolute vacuum. I just did not know what to do. I can remember grabbing the soda-water siphon and spraying water over Maria's head. I just do not know what came upon me. I also had no idea what time it was. It might have been three, perhaps later. I also cannot remember whether I stayed for long in the flat and what I did. I went through the motions of putting on my overcoat and cap and then went out, to go to my regiment. I do not even know whether I locked the door.

# Testimony at Alexander Bartenev's Trial

## Antoni Mieszkowski:

It's hard for me to say what purpose she had in asking to meet him. Surely she wanted to have a final and decisive talk with him before he left and to make love to him. She could never have enough of that.

## Feliks Fryze:

It would have been nothing unusual for her to play a comedy of death and I believe

she really was playing out a comedy with Bartenev even five minutes before her death, looking for the strong punch-line. This time, obviously, she was wrong. Bartenev just wasn't a person who could be made a fool of interminably. She felt that the comedy of love and death as she played it should not have led to a bloody end. In any case, Wisnowska never thought of it happening, though she wasn't joking. The thing is, the other person had second thoughts,

obviously, and when Wisnowska saw that she had successfully aroused in Bartenev the intention to kill and, perhaps, commit suicide, the comedy had suddenly turned to tragedy with an ending she had never wanted.

## Kazimierz Zalewski:

Wisnowska played a comedy with Bartenev, which he was too gullible to understand. She just couldn't get along without theatrical gestures. She identified life with the stage to such an extent that she was never herself. To play with feelings was her favourite pastime, which she transferred from the stage to life. This time, clearly, she had miscalculated.

Knowing her character, I am sure that, even when she was drinking opium, she just didn't believe Bartenev wouldn't snatch away the poison and let her die.

It was just like her to bring along the poison and the pistol. That was her style. But to die — no, that was not what she wanted. She might have been elated to the state where she might down the opium because Bartenev did not stop her but she would then have asked him to send for a doctor and not to shoot. She liked life too much to just throw it away.

I think that both Wisnowska and Bartenev had a lot to drink. Alcohol had a strong effect in her state of nerves.

Her game with Bartenev was a dangerous one and should be seen as just one of her usual eccentricities. You've got to keep in mind her personality, otherwise you'll never comprehend many of her acts of behaviour.

## From a letter written by her mother Maria Wisnowska to the court.

I want to know the truth, which is why I have asked to be allowed to be present at the trial. I am fully aware, and there is no mystery about it for me, that my child was dragged into a trap, cleverly made unconscious and then killed. Maria was the victim of a criminal who had drawn up his vile plans of murder long ago.

My Maria's lips are sealed for ever! She

has no voice and is defenceless. But she will remain chaste.

## The results of the autopsy on Maria Wisnowska performed on July 2, 1890

1. Death was caused by a wound from a bullet found in the body and took place not less than two days ago.

2. No microscopic traces of poison were found. Prior to a chemical analysis of the internal organs it cannot be said whether poison had been administered and, if so, which.

3. The wound was received while she was alive.

4. The shot was fired at close range.

5. To judge by the path of the wound it can be stated with certainty that it was administered by a second person. Wisnowska could have wounded herself in this way, only by using a small-calibre pistol held in her left hand.

6. There are no traces of a struggle or the use of force evident on the body. Nothing like that occurred before death.

7. Death occurred immediately.

8. Wisnowska could have uttered one or two words in her last moments immediately after the shot, but only if she were conscious before the shot.

9. Bearing in mind the changes in Wisnowska's sexual organs, it can be said with much probability that the deceased suffered from hysteria which could lead to abnormal mental behaviour. Apart from these changes in her sexual organs, traces of tuberculosis were found in her left lung. There was also a chronic kidney inflammation. Both illnesses at that stage of development could not have been dangerous nor could they have affected Wisnowska's mental state.

10. Wisnowska had had sexual intercourse in her last hours. The Warsaw District Court found Alexander Bartenev guilty and sentenced him to be stripped of his title, of all rights, and to be sentenced to 8 years hard labour. After that, to life exile in Siberia.

(Excerpts from the book *Maria Wisnowska* by Agata Tuszyńska to be published soon.)