

## Sophie Suzanne Gaudier-Brzeska [née Zofia Stefania Brzeska] (1872–1925)

by Anna Ready | from Oxford Dictionary of National Biography | Published online: 12 July 2018

Brzeska, Sophie Suzanne Gaudier- [née Zofia Stefania Brzeska] (1872–1925), writer and poet, was born in Galicia on 6 June 1872, the third of nine children of Mieczysław Brzeski (1840–1899), a lawyer and participant in the Polish uprising of 1863 against the Russian Empire, and his wife Ida, née Witski, a noblewoman. Four of the Brzeski children died in infancy; Sophie was the only daughter who survived to adulthood. She was brought up on the family estate in the village of Łączki ('Meadows'), about 90 miles east of Kraków in the poor and conservative region of Galicia, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In childhood, Sophie Brzeska was mainly left to her own devices; her father was rarely at home, managing law firms in various towns and participating in local political life, while her mother ran the estate. Sophie explored the countryside and played with peasant children, despite the strong objections of her mother. Alongside her own solitude, peasants often featured in her early short stories, some of which would form the first part of her trilogy, *Stepowiec* ('An outcast'), recounting her unhappy childhood and youth. She received a limited amount of private tuition at home and at convent school but unlike her brothers was never allowed a formal education, which became an enduring source of resentment towards her parents and a recurring theme in her writings. After the failure of two arranged engagements, her situation at home deteriorated. Her mother, with whom she had a very tense relationship, did not want to provide for her. To make matters worse the family went bankrupt. Sophie's father tried desperately to improve the yield of his land by investing heavily in fertilizers; unable to meet his debts, he fled the country for France, where he died in 1899. Sophie recalled this dramatic moment in her autobiography *Matka* ('Mother'), the third part of her trilogy.

Both in Poland and abroad, Brzeska would always struggle to find employment owing to her lack of qualifications and references. She held positions as nanny, governess, teacher, and language tutor, but these never lasted long as she did not like children, and had low self-esteem combined with high ambitions, which often led to conflicts with her employers. After saving up enough money in Galicia, where she often went hungry, she went to Paris where her mother's brother lived. She hoped he would help her settle there but he himself was struggling financially. Towards the end of 1900 she went to work for a wealthy American family in Philadelphia to teach their children German. She stayed with them for a few months before being made redundant; her employer took her to New York so that she could try her luck there. She was placed in *Jeanne d'Arc Home*, a hotel for single women run by nuns, where she stayed on and off between 1901 and 1905, whenever she was out of work. She worked mainly for affluent American families. She hated New York, its noise and commercial focus, and eventually returned to Europe around the end of 1905. Her aim was to settle permanently in Paris but she could not find employment there; her savings dwindling, she was forced to go back to Galicia. Her experience of living in France and America was reflected in her unfinished autobiographical novel, *Histeryczki* ('Hysterical women'), the second part of her trilogy, which told the story of an ambitious but poor young woman who was determined to remain independent despite being socially disadvantaged. The novel abounds in irony, sarcasm, and self-pity, and serves both as a critique of contemporary social inequalities and as a satire of French and American societies. It also revealed Brzeska's anti-Semitic and anti-clerical sentiments.

Although she was able to find work in Galicia, Brzeska felt increasingly depressed and spent some time in mountain resorts, recovering from a nervous breakdown and embarking on a love affair with a wealthy industrialist. When her hopes of marrying him came to nothing, she was forced to move in with her mother. In 1910 she decided to go to Paris to end her life, but having arrived there she had a change of heart and started attending public courses at the Sorbonne, mainly on literature and history, and went to listen to the lectures given by Romain Rolland, to whom she addressed *Matka*, the brief account of her life written in 1915.

While in Paris, Brzeska met young people with similar interests who were also struggling to make ends meet. The French sculptor Henri Alphonse Séraphin Marie Gaudier (1891–1915), nearly twenty years her junior, was one of them. They met at the Sainte-Geneviève Library and became partners, although Sophie claimed she was too old to become his lover and decided to mother him instead. Though they never married, Henri took her surname, becoming Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and when they arrived in London in early 1911 she presented herself in society as his half-sister.

Sophie and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska wanted to start their life anew in London, but without connections and friends they found it very difficult to establish their artistic careers. Henri managed to gain recognition for his talents; Sophie did not. On Henri's recommendation, she showed some of her work to Ezra Pound but nothing came of it. She treated writing as a way of dealing with her troubled past, and it became an almost daily—and, later in life, nocturnal—activity. She switched genres and languages, writing in Polish, French, and English, often to tell the same story. Her characteristic style, with its absence of punctuation and abundance of direct speech, makes for very vivid, unpredictable prose.

Sophie and Henri spent a great deal of time apart, as he worked in London (a city she disliked) while she found temporary jobs in smaller towns. In 1914 they were parted forever when Henri decided to join the French army. He was killed in June 1915, shortly after receiving an unpleasant letter from Sophie, who was suffering from severe depression. She lived on for another ten years, haunted by guilt and writing her magnum opus, *Per Ta Très Chère Memoire*, a type of diary in which she mourned her loss and recounted her daily life. She inherited Henri's work by an *inter vivos* gift and dedicated considerable efforts to preparing his posthumous exhibition.

In 1917 Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska moved to Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire, where her mental health deteriorated further. She kept in touch with Nina Hamnett and Sydney Schiff but felt increasingly lonely and isolated, became suspicious, and suffered from mania and depression. In 1922 she was taken to court for disturbing her neighbours, and in November that year she was confined to Barnwood House Hospital, a mental asylum in Gloucestershire. She died there on 17 March 1925 of pneumonia, and was buried in a pauper's grave in Gloucester. Her life with Henri was recounted in H. S. Ede's *A Life of Gaudier-Brzeska* (1930); this was republished as *Savage Messiah* in 1931, and adapted for cinema by Ken Russell in 1972, with Dorothy Tutin playing the part of Sophie. After reading this book, which was heavily based on Sophie's writings, W. B. Yeats wondered if 'she was a great novelist after all' (*Letters*, 782–3).

## Wealth at Death

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£768 4s. 4d.: admin, 20 Apr 1926, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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