

Nightmares, lethargy, and wandering in the afterlife: visions of the mysteries of life and death in Agnieszka Pilchowa's novel *Zmora*

Małgorzata Alicja Dulska¹

Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland
E-mail: malgorzatadulska@gmail.com

Karolina Maria Hess²

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
E-mail: karolinamariahess@gmail.com

Sent: 11/07/2019

Accepted: 15/08/2019

ISSN 2526-1096

melancolia@revistamelancolia.com

ABSTRACT:

Agnieszka Pilchowa (1888–1945) was a renowned healer, herbalist, and believed to have uncommon clairvoyant abilities. The „Clairvoyant from Wisła” wrote many Occult novels, which were very popular in her time. Among others, in 1932–1933 she published a book in two volumes – *Zmora: Occult Novel Based on Real Occurrences* and *The Dead Speak*. *Zmora* can be translated as phantom or night terror in English, but it has a very specific meaning in Slavic culture that connects it with a personalized hallucination that occurs during an episode of Sleep Paralysis. The paper analyses outcomes like visions based on Pilchowa’s experience of uncommon states of consciousness, preceded by the introduction of esoteric activity on the Polish-Czechoslovakian borderlands in the interwar period.

KEYWORDS:

Spiritualism, Esotericism and Literature, Sleep Paralysis, Clairvoyance.

¹ This research of M. A. Dulska concerning the Wisła Esoteric Milieu was financed from the sources of the National Science Centre, Poland, awarded on the basis of decision no. DEC--2017/25/N/HS1/01317.

² The research of K.M. Hess concerning health-related ideas in the esoteric circles at the turn of the 20th century was carried out within the framework of the Minister of Science and Higher Education's programme entitled "National Programme for the Development of Humanities" in the years 2016-2019: Polish Culture in Relations to the Western Esoteric Philosophy in the Years 1890-1939 (0186/NPRH4/H2b/83/2016).

Małgorzata Alicja Dulska. Małgorzata Alicja Dulska, is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Institute for the Study of Religions, Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University. She holds an MA in Art, specialization: monumental painting (2008) from the History Department at the Pontifical Academy of Theology. She is a co-founder of the Polish Society for the Study of Western Esotericism and member of national and international organizations devoted to Religious Studies and academic research on Western Esotericism. Her dissertation title is *The messianic program of the renewal of the world. The specificity of the soteriological concept in the Wisła esoteric milieu (1918-1939)*. Her current research focuses on the influences of Western Esotericism in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as on the relationship between esotericism and politics, but also between esotericism and art (especially in 19th and 20th century).

Karolina Maria Hess. Karolina Maria Hess is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Institute of Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, and in the Institute of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. She has published a number of papers focused on Western esotericism, NRM in Poland, and related topics, and a co-edited four books devoted to Western Esotericism, among others *Studies on Western Esotericism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Szeged: JATEPress 2019). She holds two MA degrees: in ethnology and cultural anthropology (2013) and pedagogics – philosophical and social education (2009). She is a co-founder of the Polish Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, and a Board member of CEENASWE (Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism), the regional network of the ESSWE. Her research interests include Theosophy, NRM, and boundaries of Occultism and Science at the turn of the 20th century.

Nightmares, lethargy, and wandering in the afterlife: visions of the mysteries of life and death in Agnieszka Pilchowa's novel *Zmora*

Uncanny experiences, health issues, sleep disorders, and self-induced altered states of consciousness, could lead one to take interest in phenomena from the wide imaginarium of Western Esotericism. The latter offers very elaborated explanations of such occurrences. Health problems, and a need to distance oneself from physical suffering, are sometimes related to experiencing the world, and one's body, differently – leading to ideas of spiritual nature. Some will say that states of this kind are a part of the disease, others – that some people understand they are not wholly out of flesh, which leads to opening the gates for the soul to go out of the material body, so it can dwell through the astral worlds of afterlife, while still being alive. Some even treat the illness itself as a sign of the changes that were initiated on the spiritual basis and call it a “Shamanic illness”. Illness is a liminal experience, and therefore it is easily connected to other liminal states. There are many famous esotericists whose experiences and later – ideas, were rooted in a state of physical (and/or psychological) disorders. Such a statement however is tricky, because reductionists would reduce all these experiences to the illness itself. We won't dwell on this, because in the case that is discussed here, the element of health-related issues is a part both of an author's biography, and of a novel plot. It will be analyzed in connection to spiritual teachings, but as a separate topic.

At the turn of the 20th century people inspired by the Spiritual world often joined Spiritualistic circles, Theosophical groups, or Magical orders. Here we will focus on a woman leading her so-called “earthly existence” at the beginning of the 20th century in Central Europe, named Agnieszka Pilchowa. Her experiences with states of lethargy, and most probably Sleep Paralysis in early childhood, led her, she believed, to become one of the most recognizable clairvoyants in interwar Poland.

Agnieszka Pilchowa's adventures in material and astral worlds

Zofia Kossak-Szczucka described Agnieszka Pilchowa as a bright-eyed, resourceful woman and devoted mother who would take a break from cooking water for tea and baking a cake to contact the spiritual world and to see the past and future. (PILCH, MS:30). However, the life story of this woman – who at first sight would appear a

surprisingly common person– even today is an extraordinary tale. She was one of the best-known Polish clairvoyants in the interwar period, who also thought herself to be a spiritual healer and gifted herbalist. In some circles she is believed to foresee not only World War II and the detonation of the atomic bomb, but also the date of her own death. It was truly tragic, as she was one of the victims of Nazi concentration camps.



Agnieszka Pilchowa. Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signature IG P I 226.

Agnieszka was born in Zárubek (today a district of Ostrava, The Czech Republic) in December 16th, 1888, as Agnieszka Wysocka (MAGIERA 2011:26). Her family was Polish, which was not uncommon in the borderland region. Before the partitions of Poland in late 18th century, the area was partly Polish, then in 1919 it became Czechoslovakian and is now in the Czech Republic. A part of today's city of Ostrava was called Polish Ostrava, and then Silesian Ostrava. Silesia is a region in Polish, Czech and German borderlands, and minorities of these other countries were visibly present in the whole

region (as well as various languages in the public sphere, to which we should also add Yiddish). Population flows, migrations, constant political changes, leading to border changes in the period that interests us, impacted the life of people in the area on a daily basis.

The time of childhood and early adulthood which Agnieszka spent in the area of Ostrava is poorly documented and known primarily from her own memories. She recalled displaying unusual abilities already in her childhood (PILCHOWA 1930:73–96). Her spiritual activity originated in Radvanice in Polish Ostrava (now a part of Ostrava in Czech Republic), where a strong Spiritualist center operated in. At the age of 21, she was forced³ to marry Józef Kurletto. She later presented the fate of this tragic marriage in her biography *Pamiętniki jasnowidzącej* [“The Memoirs of the Clairvoyant”]. (PILCHOWA, *op cit.*: 107–121). During the First World War, Pilchowa reported to meet a spirit of a doctor in the astral world who taught her how to recognize and cure diseases. Later spirits also came to her asking if she wanted to help the sick and suffering – Pilchowa responded affirmatively and this moment she describes as the beginning of her work for the “Realm of the Spirit”. She began to heal people and when the news of her extraordinary abilities spread, she quickly gained a circle of patients (PILCHOWA, *op cit.*: 126–150).

After the war, in 1919 she left Czechoslovakia and together with her two children (Anna and Stanisław,⁴ who was a talented painter and illustrator) from her first marriage, and moved to Wisła – she was supposed to do it “[...] *with the advice of her guardian and guide from the world of the Spirit* [...]” (CHOBOT 1937:162). She got married again, to the teacher Józef Pilch, with whom she had three children; the last child died shortly after birth. The older daughter of Agnieszka and Jan – Janina – was a poet and writer, the younger was named Agnieszka, but her date of birth and future are unknown. In Wisła in the early 1920s a thriving esoteric center formed, of which Agnieszka became the leader (CHOBOT 1937:161–166). She wrote numerous books and articles. Her writings contain spiritual knowledge which was the core of the esoteric philosophy of the so called Wisła Spiritualist Circle, but also a wider esoteric milieu (MAGIERA 2011:25–38). Her first texts appeared under her maiden name. In addition to the already mentioned memoirs (published in 1930), she also wrote *Życie na ziemi i w zaświecie* [Life on Earth and in the

³ It is unclear from the memoirs, but she was probably raped by him, became pregnant and was then forced into the marriage, which was later annulled because of violent abuse.

⁴ Stanisław Kurletto was a painter, who also created art as a Medium. He collaborated with the editorial staff of “Hejnał”, and illustrated articles in the journal. He also created portraits. A collection of their photographs is in Muzeum Beskidzkie im. Andrzeja Podzorskiego in Wisła.

Afterlife], *Jasnowidzenie* [Clairvoyance, 1935], *Spojrzenie w przyszłość* [A Look into the Future, 1939]. and numerous articles that appeared in the pages of the esoteric journals in Wisła. She also penned two novels – *Zmora*, and its continuation *Umarli mówią* [The Dead Speak, 1935].

Stanisław Hadyna wrote

[...] Agnieszka's best period was in the early thirties, when shrouded in the spirit of altruism and helping people who were sick or distressed or poor, she had a puzzling and significant effect of healing in both physical and spiritual terms.” (HADYNA 1993:13). During this period, she became famous and „[...] pilgrimages of believers began to climb on Jarzębata [...]”.⁵ (HADYNA, *op. cit.*:13).



A photograph of Agni (in the middle) with Jan Hadyna (on the right) in the villa Sphinx in Wisła on the Jarzębata mountain. The painting in the background is by Stanisław Kurlotto, Agni's son, and a part of Pilchs' library. On the table a few issues of "Hejnał" from 1931 can be seen (the cover varied from year to year), so we can guess the date of the picture. Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signature: IG P I 2262.

According to her husband's report, Agnieszka received the sick in Wisła, where she lived. Each person was treated separately, Agnieszka checked the patient's health by taking their hand. Through making contact she felt the sickness in her own body. She was

⁵ Jarzębata is a mountain in the village of Wisła, where Agnieszka and Jan Pilch lived.

supposed to heal with Magnetism and it was thanks to her miraculous powers that the patients recovered; sometimes she also recommended herbal treatments or so called “shock treatments” (literally “horse treatments”, which is colloquial Polish for a strong therapy), but Pilch never explained precisely how they worked. She also provided other types of advice, including on material, professional issues, love and relationships, interpersonal relations; she interpreted dreams and supernatural phenomena but also consulted on criminal cases, thefts, murders, disappearances, etc. She also received a lot of correspondence. She never charged for her advice (PILCH, *op. cit.*, 14–17).

Throughout the time before the outbreak of World War II, Pilchowa was active as a clairvoyant, healer, and writer. The war put an end to her activities. In 1943, the Pilchs were arrested by the Gestapo, probably due to their involvement in helping the Home Army resistance movement. The son of Pilchowa from the first marriage, the painter Stanisław Kurletto, was a member of the Army (MAGIERA 2011:37). Jan Pilch was taken to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen near Berlin and Agnieszka and her daughter Janina were in the Ravensbrück camp. Agnieszka was shot in 1944, probably in the last execution to take place in this camp (PILCH, *op. cit.* 54; DZWONEK 1988:26).

In her books Pilchowa discusses issues regarding reincarnation, life and death, suffering, the New Era but also various types of clairvoyance. One of the chapters of the already mentioned diaries is devoted to a description of the incarnation in which she was to live in the time of Christ. She was supposed to be a young Jewish dancer named Surya and thanks to her meeting with Christ, she regained her “spiritual sight” and came to know her true self (PILCHOWA 1930:28–51).

A note should be added concerning Agnieszka’s name. Her surname is written here, and in other sources, as she used it herself: Pilchowa. This derives from her husband’s surname Pilch – the Polish custom at the time was for women to use names with special suffixes added to the husband’s (-owa) or, before marriage, father’s (-ówna or -anka) name. And so both Pilch and Pilchowa are correct versions of the surname, and today the derived forms are largely out of use. Similarly, in literature devoted to one of the mediums experimenting in Wisła, we can find her name as both Stanisława Tomczyk, and Stanisława Tomczykówna. Another thing, much more esoteric in a sense, is a shortened form of her first name that Agnieszka used – Agni. It is not a typical Polish form, but in Sanskrit Agni means fire, and it appears not only in the Vedic tradition in India, but also in Western Esoteric currents inspired by Eastern thought, like Agni Yoga of Roerichs.

Sometimes she signed her works as Agni P., sometimes just A.P. Thus, Agnieszka Pilchowa and Agni Pilch are the same person.

Esoteric circles in the Polish-Czechoslovakian borderlands during interwar period

Before 1920, in the small village of Wisła, in the Cieszyn Silesia region, an esoteric center was formed, consisting of a dozen people. Contrary to appearances, the milieu was neither insignificant nor hermetic. Its core was formed by people permanently residing in the town of Wisła, including Andrzej Podzorski (1886–1971), Agnieszka Pilchowa (1887–1944), Jan Hadyna (1899–1971), Józef Chobot (1875–1942), Kazimiera Chobotowa (1897–1976), Maria Florkowa (1892–1972). However, they cooperated with many figures from all over Poland, including well known and influential Polish esotericists like Józef Świtkowski (1876–1942), Kazimierz Chodkiewicz (1892–1980), or Stanisław Breyer (1873–1939).





Esoteric meetings in Wisła in the 1920s and 1930s. Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signatures: IG F I 2266 and IG F I 2265.

When it comes to religion, Cieszyn Silesia is a specific region even in today's Poland – the population of religious minorities is the most significant in the country, and there is the highest number of Protestant denominations and believers in the country which is nominally over 90% Roman Catholic. The situation has historical and cultural reasons we will not elaborate on here, but it also had a significant impact on the formation of groups devoted to heterodoxal spirituality in the area in the first decades of the 20th century. As the esoteric circle in Wisła became active around 1920, we must add that it was just after the World War I, which for Poland meant regaining independence after 123 years of occupation by Russia, Germany and Austria. It is difficult to write about the activities and philosophy of the Wisła esoteric group without taking into account their historical, cultural, and religious context. The rural life of the village, its closeness to Nature, the religiously diverse region, the Spiritualistic background of the participants, and Polish Roman Catholicism and National Messianic ideas rooted in Romanticism combined in the aftermath of re-gaining the independence to give birth to new ideas concerning renewal and rebirth of both the individual and the Nation.

The Wisła esoteric environment was an informal group that shared the characteristics of the so-called *cultic milieu* (a term coined by Colin Campbell) which is the social basis on which ephemeral, innovative religious phenomena have the potential to evolve into a denomination (CAMPBELL 1972:119–136). Intending to spread a vision of redemption of the world, the Esotericists from Wisła conducted extensive publishing activities. In the pages of their publications, they presented a program which, if systematically implemented, was to lead to the salvation of Poland and the world. They tried not only to persuade the readers of their writings to take on an interest in spiritual matters, but also to undertake social initiatives, such as the Society of National Revival [Bractwo Odrodzenia Narodowego] founded by Józef Chobot (1875–1942). What is particularly important, in the program shaped in the Wisła Esoteric milieu Poland played a key role as the Christ of Nations and a guide to the fulfillment of the Christian Kingdom on Earth. As we will see later, this Christian aspect played a great role in the esoteric system of Agni, and her interpretations of elements known from different esoteric teachings.

In the area of Cieszyn Silesia there was more than one esoteric initiative at the time. The first chronologically was the Polish Theosophical Society in Cieszyn Silesia based in Nydek, established by Andrzej Kajfosz (1889–1970), who together with Andrzej Podzorski (1889–1970) published the first esoteric periodical *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation] in 1919, which was later published by Kajfosz only as *Teozofja* [Theosophy]. Jan Hadyna (1899–1871) and Józef Chobot (1875–1942), *spiritus moventes* of the publishing activities of the milieu, published, among others, several periodicals: *Odrodzenie* [Rebirth, 1921–29], *Hejnał* [Bugle Call, 1929–39], *Wiedza Duchowa* [Spiritual Knowledge, 1934], of which a continuation was *Lotos* [Lotus, 1935–39], and established two very important publishing houses⁶. The *Lotos* magazine was an organ of the Julian Ochowicz Parapsychic Society in Lvov (named after a Polish researcher of Medium-related phenomena, who was not a Spiritualist himself), Circle of Esoteric and

⁶ In 1921, the Library of Spiritual Knowledge was initiated by Chobot. It operated until 1939 and during the 18 years of its activity, it published almost 40 books and brochures “in the field of Spiritual Knowledge, Spiritualism, Polish Messianism, and natural healing” (Chobot 1937: 151). Chobot shared in a publication from 1937, that the house “(...) spread over 100,000 copies of these works throughout the entire territory of the Republic, and partly abroad, under the Czech occupation and among emigrants in France, and North and South America. In addition, it distributed more than 5,000 copies of various excellent Polish and foreign works about Spiritualism, Mysticism, Messianism, Occultism and healing, satisfying the hunger and the need for Spiritual knowledge in our homeland” (Chobot 1937: 151). At the same time, the publishing house *Hejnał* ([Bugle call] was run by Hadyna. It mainly published works by Pilchowa, which were key publications for Wisła Esoteric Milieu.

Metapsychic Research in Krakow, and Association of Friends of Spiritual Knowledge in Poznan. As we can see, the ideas and people of the Wisła Esoteric group had widespread connections all over the Polish lands. One of the examples of the cooperation between Polish esotericists is The First National Congress of Esotericists and Metapsychics organized in Poznań in Dec. 6–8th 1936 (*Nowy Kurjer* 1936), in which representatives of many esoteric organizations from all over the country met to discuss the matters of Spirit⁷. In one of rare photographs from the event, Agni sits in the first row, fourth from the right.



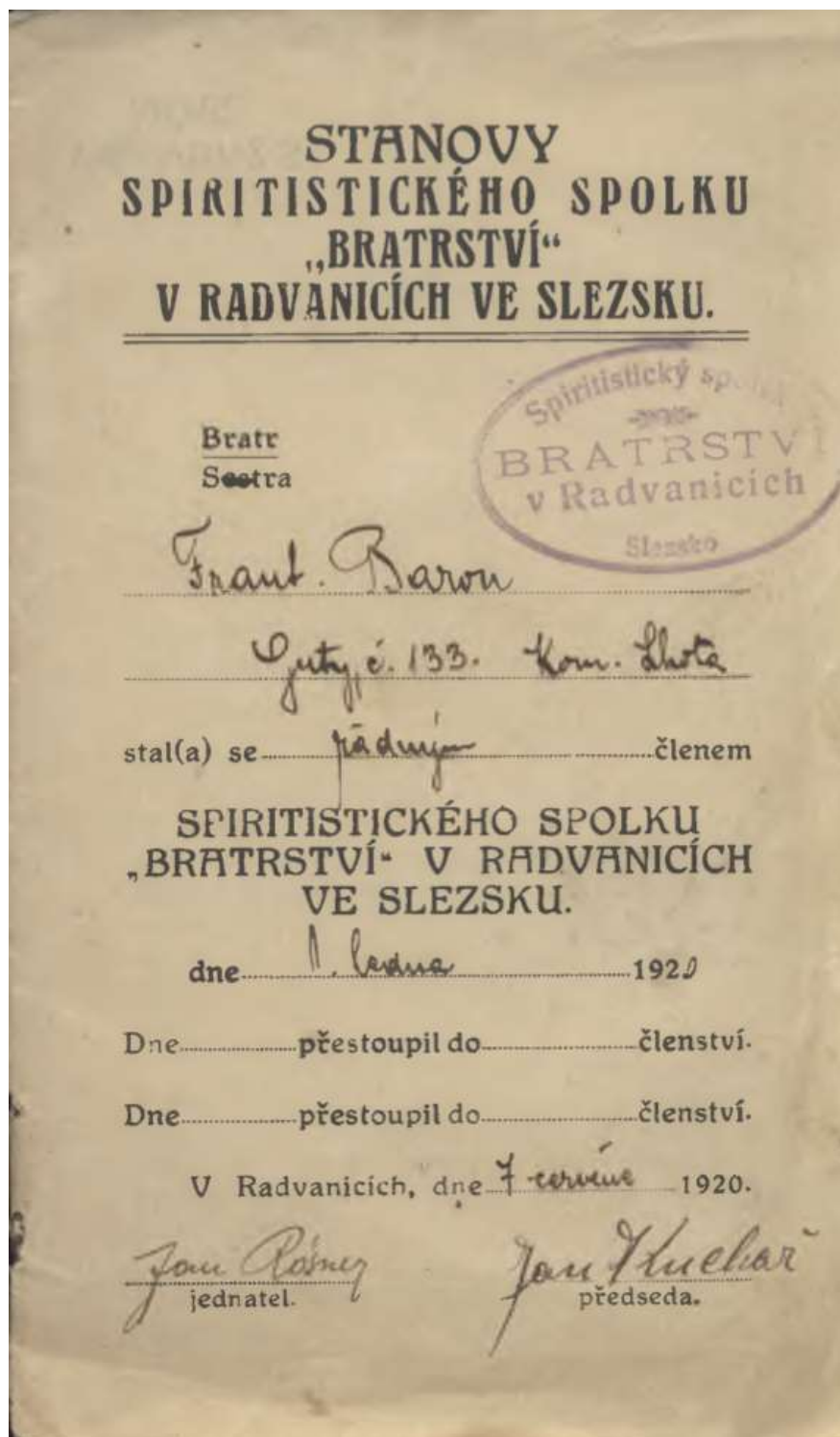
A group photo from The First National Congress of Esotericists and Metapsychics in Poznań (1936). Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signature IG FI 2267.

In an unpublished text *From the life of clairvoyance of Agnieszka Pilchowa* Jan Pilch mentions people who were hostile towards Agni: they were supposedly associated with the Spiritualist movement from the Czechoslovak town of Radvanice (now a part of Ostrava). The hostility of this milieu, as well as rumors and slanders spread by them, were to be one of the reasons why Agni moved away (PILCH, *op. cit.*:13). Since we know that she was a Spiritualist, and became first inspired by the Radvanice circle (or even had

⁷ Excluding representatives of the Polish Theosophical Society, as we learn from the Theosophical archives. Theosophists were against Spiritualism in general, but later some of the members regretted not joining the memorable event (cf. KARASIÓWNA).

greater ties with it), it is important to look at the other side of the border. About this particular group from Radvanice we can learn from research conducted by Martin Jemelka and his paper *Religious Life in an Industrial Town: The Example of Ostrava, 1850-1950* (JEMELKA 2014:875–904). As Jemelka notes, this part of Ostrava (called Lesser Ostravsko) was an area where three important ideological and religious movements met: the National-Catholic Czechoslovak Church, the Czechoslovak atheistic movement, and the Spiritualist association Bratrství [Brotherhood], with their publishing house and periodicals – just like in the Polish part of Silesia. Followers of the Spiritualistic ideas in the country in the interwar period counted around 200,000 people, both of agnostic and Christian background.

The Brotherhood was established in 1914, but what is most interesting for our topic, Spiritualism was already rooted in Zárubek and dated back to the last decade of the 19th century (JEMELKA 2014:888). It was Zárubek where Agni was born, so she probably had many opportunities to become familiar with Spiritualist activities from her early childhood. From 1914, when the Brotherhood was formed, until 1919, when Agni left Radvanice, she was somehow connected to the Spiritualist group, although little known is about it at this time. In any case, there is a great need for a comparative study of those milieus on the two sides of today's Polish-Czech border, and their ideas. We know for certain that the groups inspired each other: the Polish group preserved a copy the statute of the Radvanice group (which was later digitized, and the first page can be seen below), and we know that Polish Spiritualists used Czech Spiritualist song books before they published one of their own (ZBIÓR PIEŚNI, un.). The journals published by the milieu were titled: *Spiritistická Revue. Orgán slezsko-moravských spiritistu* [Spiritualistic Revue. Organ of Silesian-Moravian Spiritualists], *Československá Revue Psychická. Časopis pro studia psychická* [Czechoslovak Psychic. Journal for psychic studies], and *Psychická Revue. Časopis pro psychická studia* [Psychic Revue. Journal for Psychic Studies]. Of course there were more publications in other areas of the country too (Jemelka 2014:888–889).



The first page of the statute: Stanovy Spiritistického spolku "Bratrství" v Radvanicích ve Slezsku (1920). Source: The Silesian Digital Library.

Pilchowa's early childhood and teenage experiences

As far as we can learn from Agni's writings, she experienced some visions spontaneously since the early childhood, but they were dismissed by adults. The girl closed herself then, and was rather focused on her inner experiences than active play. The

most important episode she had was as a teenager; she described it as a three-day state similar to a lethargy. The reasons for which she found herself in that condition are quite unclear. She explains it in the pages of her diaries in the following way:

In my young years I liked to go to a nearby monastery with the thought that later I would stay there and there I would be able to truly work for my fellow men. I imagined that nuns and priests were angels, and the monastery itself is a paradise for the soul, because there is no corruption, no trivial earthly matters, only pure, beautiful life there. But I saw the opposite. There was a naked abomination of life before the child's innocent eyes. It shocked me so violently that I didn't want to live. In this discouragement of life, I fell into a swoon, which stretched into a state similar to lethargy (...) (PILCHOWA 1930:76).

It is not known what Agni saw, or what she experienced in the monastery, but it caused a shock and a three-day lethargy. However, as the Clairvoyant writes, she lost consciousness only for a moment. When she woke up, however, she did not feel her physical body. Pilchowa described in detail how she floated above her body and how she could observe what was happening in the room in which she was staying. In this way, Agni began her first journey in the Astral world. She soon met her Spiritual Guardian, who became her guide and consoler. In this first trip they circumnavigated the entire globe, and Pilchowa was able to connect through 'magnetic threads' with all the countries in the world so that later she would be able to think about them and observe what was happening there. The guide also showed her the distant past and scenes from the life of Christ and the apostles. Pilchowa spoke of the episode as her spiritual awakening, and although she reported that she later found herself repeatedly with her Guardian in the Astral world, this lethargy in her childhood was remembered by her as a turning point in her life. Her first visit to 'the Astral' was a pleasant experience, she felt free and light, and the guardian became her closest friend and confidant. It was only during the subsequent wanderings that she came to know about the evil spirits, larvae and other creatures inhabiting the astral, which she later described in the form of a novel.



Pilchowa and Chobotowa, the essential women leaders of Wisła Esoteric Milieu.
Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signature IG F I 2263.

We will never know what shook the girl's world on such a scale that she reacted physically. But it definitely had something to do with an institution of religious character. Those institutions, fossilized structures filled with malpractices, were later criticized by Agni and the whole Wisła Esoteric Milieu – while Christianity remained in the center of its religious and ethical teachings.

Novel *Zmora*: the Nightmare Begins

The novel *Zmora. Powieść okultystyczna osnuta na tle prawdziwych przeżyć* [*Zmora* {bane, nightmare} An Occult novel based on real experiences] was published in 1932 by the publishing house Hejnał in Wisła. A second part, entitled *Umarli mówią* [The Dead Speak] appeared in 1933. In the foreword from the Publishing House we read that Pilchowa's book is to be a consolation for people who believe that the material world is not all that exists, but the source of life is in the spiritual world, which is the matrix of all phenomena. The novel treats the transformation of the young boy Antoni, who, through both mental and physical suffering, wakes up to a “new life”. The book is also to be a guide for all those who seek an internal awakening and want to know the sources of

suffering experienced by both individuals and entire nations (ZMORA III–V).⁸ In her own introduction Agni explains that the novel was inspired by her wanderings in the Astral world, where from 1915 she would meet the spirit of Antoni, who told her stories of his life – or rather his many incarnations. Antoni repeatedly asked her to share the knowledge she gained from him with as many people as possible. That is why Pilchowa decided to write a novel in which she describes Antoni's last earthly life. In fact, the novel, as the Clairvoyant claimed, has been written partly by her but also often by Antoni, through her hand. The first manuscript of the book was written during Agni's stay in Czechoslovakia before she moved to Wisła. However, it went missing during the move. She wrote the second version around 1920, but was unlucky again – the second manuscript burned in a fire. At the beginning of the 1930s, the author made another attempt to write down Antoni's memories and this time she was able to publish it successfully (ZMORA V–VIII).

In the novel, Antoni, the only son of a wealthy widow, until the age of twenty-three lived in a beautiful old manor house in a Polish village. Unexpectedly, however, on the day of his birthday, his life changed and became a string of suffering. The nightmare began to come to him at night:

He was falling asleep and almost dreaming – when suddenly he saw in the doorway a figure who fixed his eyes on him, as if paralyzing him. To his increasing horror he sees that the figure in the door is growing, growing... already piercing the head of the frame, and reaching the wall. He hears clearly how the wall crumbles and falls – and this nightmare, as his relatives and friends later called it, approaches him. He wants to shout, cry for help – but he cannot get his voice out of a squeezed throat. And she is already bending over him - oh! she falls on his chest and presses her mouth into his neck. (...) He feels a terrible burden; it seems that life is already passing from his body. He decides to defend himself by the last effort of the will (...) (ZMORA:2).

From that day, the strange figure began to persecute Antoni regularly. The boy, exhausted by lack of sleep and fear, was looking for ways to get rid of the sleepy intruder. For three years he traveled around the world to escape the nightmare, but his efforts did not succeed. When he turned 27, he also began to see new phenomena: at night, three naked dancers came to him, danced in front of him and then embraced him. Antoni was

⁸ The author of the introduction *Words from the Publishing House* was probably Jan Hadyňa, who at that time was the editor and publisher of “Hejnał”, a journal devoted to Spiritual Knowledge, published in Wisła.

horrified at seeing them. In the novel, we read that: “*The result of these nocturnal visits were frequent wet dreams, huge nervous exhaustion and spiritual dullness (...)*” and

the vampire bodies, connecting with Antoni's body, sucked out so many life fluids from him that after these nocturnal visits he always had broken lips and felt a fever in all his members. The ghosts filled him with some kind of fire in return for the prana taken away (ZMORA:16–20).

Fleeing from the nightmares, he once more began to travel around the world and when he turned thirty he went to a place next to which Gypsies camped. Coincidentally, Antoni met a Gypsy who, during a reading of his palm, identified the three dancers as his mistresses from previous incarnations that he had supposedly murdered, and who now haunted him for his former crimes. The Gypsy woman also gave Antoni a dagger to protect him from nightmares. In return, however, she demanded that he become her lover. When Antoni refused, she changed beyond recognition and the evil soul began to speak through her, threatening Antoni with revenge and payback for deeds that he did not recall (ZMORA:19–36). The whole incident took place in the guesthouse where Antoni was staying and the staff could hear it perfectly. The man, agitated by the whole situation, went for a walk in the woods. There, however, he was attacked and beaten by a ghost, and felt the dark spirit sit on his chest and choke him. He saw that his body was lying limply on the ground as he was fighting the Spirit (ZMORA:54). However, he managed to free himself and return to the guest house, but as a result of the confusion of unfortunate circumstances and misunderstandings, he was accused by his hosts and local police officers of rape and murder (ZMORA:37–59). He was detained and imprisoned, and he fell ill with pneumonia. His condition was so serious that he was transferred to a hospital. There he fell into a three-day lethargy, during which his astral body separated from the physical body. Together with his spiritual guardian, he began to wander the astral world, and his guide showed him around its various levels.⁹

⁹ The structure of the Astral world according to Pilchowa's teachings was summarized in English in a chapter *Vision of Spiritual World in the Writings of Agnieszka Pilchowa* (Dulska 2019).

Astral Larvae, Vampires, and religious regulations of sexual life

Already at the beginning of his journey, Antoni noticed a strange phenomenon: in one of the zones of the astral world, to which the Guide took him, he saw not only various ghosts, but also strange creatures that looked like masks with long abdomens. The spiritual guide called them larvae and stated that in the Astral they have a special space in which they swim like fish in an aquarium (ZMORA:94–99). The larvae were supposed to have human-like heads, hypnotic eyes, long tongues, and *“from each of their heads (...) hung as if soaring tails, at one instant outlined more clearly, then again in the quickly forming folds of some bizarre fluid matter”* (ZMORA:99). Antoni’s spiritual guardian explained to him the mechanism of creating larvae. They are not ghosts of people, but beings arising during a sexual act, during which magnetism increases in the bodies of lovers. Their astral bodies begin to ‘burn’ and this literal astral ‘fire of passion’ attracts evil spirits who want to be as close as possible to the magnetic center, to be able to enjoy the absorption of the magnetism emanating from the dying semen” (ZMORA:165). During every sexual intercourse, when lovers have sex for a purpose other than conceiving a child, larvae are born in the mentioned magnetic focus. Each of them is attached to the human spirit. When the physical body dies, the larva falls into a kind of lethargy and returns back to life when the soul of their creator reincarnates on earth. The spiritual guardian described the larvae in details:

The teleplasm of the bodies of two beings, joined in an embrace, creates larvae of various shapes, more animal than human. Among these larvae, tongues of flames float, from which they draw strength for continuous movement, for life. These flames are the human magnetism with an admixture of animal magnetism, which many people have. (...) the larvae – this is a piece of hell (ZMORA:169).

Larvae feed on the magnetism of its creator, deprive him of energy and imbue him with negative thoughts. However, one can get rid of the larvae: it is enough to settle one’s karmic debts – be incarnated into the physical body again, stay pure and have sex only for procreative purposes. Larvae are of various types, although those with a human face and long tail are the most numerous. In the course of wandering in the beyond, the Guardian also indicated other types of larvae, e.g. a specimen consisting of only two interconnected giant heads with a wide-open mouth, which was created as a result of rape and brutal murder (ZMORA:144–172).

To rest after wandering in the astral zone in which the monstrous larvae live, the Guardian took Antoni to a place full of beautiful, enormous flowers with slender stems whose task was to clean Antoni's astral body of negative fluids and thoughts. Then the travelers visited the bottom of the sea, where Antoni's guide showed him the strange creatures inhabiting the underwater world, including polyps that feed on the astral bodies of drowned people (ZMORA:210). The guardian also took Antoni to a place where the souls reside immediately after the death of the physical body. In an unusual procession around the Earth, both human and half-animal figures moved there. All these souls were in a state of unconsciousness, a state of 'eternal sleep'. The more developed a soul, the shorter it stays in this procession, because it is a place for souls who did not want to wake up and did not respect divine laws while living on earth. As explained by Antoni's Guardian, there are many good spirits in the spirit world who want to wake up 'sleeping' travelers, wresting them from a sleepy procession. Although the doctors were almost certain that Antoni was dead, the book concludes with the young men's return to his physical body and awakening from the lethargy (ZMORA:211–238).

Zmora and Sleep Paralysis

The esoteric teachings of Agni, although very popular in the interwar period, are now mostly forgotten. Lately they received some interest from scholars of religious and cultural studies, who either focused on the Wisła Esoteric milieu and introduced Agni and analyzed some components of her rich system, (PASEK 2008: 45–50) or focused on Agni herself (GĘSIKOWSKA 2013:129–143; TRZCIŃSKA, ŚWIERZOWSKA 2018:49–70; DULSKA 2019:129–146). The first two of those publications devoted to Agni herself address health-related issues, but neither even mentions the disorder which is directly related to the phenomena of *Zmora* included in the novel's title, and most probably one that was experienced by Agni herself, that is Sleep Paralysis. Both the description in her diaries of looking at her own body laying down while floating in the air, which today we would refer to as OBE (out of body experience), and stressful events experienced by Antoni are textbook examples of the course of episodes of Sleep Paralysis. To be clear – we are not reducing the teachings, or the visions, to a sleep disorder only. It would explain what Antoni experienced during his six years travel but would not tell us anything about the three-day lethargy itself. It is also not our intention to suppose that Agni had some kind of condition that shaped her experiences – sleep paralysis is a sleep disorder which

in different ways could be experienced even by 50% of population without any neurological issues (SANTOMAURO, FRENCH 2009:672–675). We are speaking then about a possibly very common phenomenon, the interpretations of which, however, vary in different cultural contexts, and in Agni's case it could be one of the components of her uncommon experiences.

What is sleep paralysis then, and what does it have to do with seeing phantoms, and naked dancers, having wet dreams, and out of body experiences? This sleep disorder is connected to the REM phase of sleep. In the normal course of sleep the body remains in atony (immobilized) in order not to react to visions in the dream state, which could be very dangerous. Normally the state is entered and left without notice. In episodes of Sleep Paralysis, the body remains unable to move after consciousness is already awake. As Olunu et al. explain,

it is one of the most common types of rapid eye movement (REM) parasomnia encountered by the neurologists. The physiology of REM sleep is associated with increased blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing. The activities of neurons in REM sleep are usually similar when an individual is awake, and sometimes, REM sleep may be associated with more neuronal firing, especially in the pons, lateral geniculate nucleus, and occipital cortex (OLUNU *et. al.*, 2018:137–142).

The experience of sleep paralysis may be very unpleasant, to say the least. The moment of being awake but unable to move or speak or scream can lead to a panic attack. The experience is often accompanied by a feeling of pressure on one's chest, or a feeling of someone's presence. Moreover, it can be also connected to various hallucinations. The research team of James Allan Cheyne examined 2973 persons who experienced the disorder. The team has compiled a list of hallucinatory types along with their frequency connected to Sleep Paralysis, and we can learn, among others, that 79% of participants had an experience of a feeling of presence. Among those respondents whose hallucinations were connected to bodily movement, OBE was experienced in almost 40% cases at least once (CHEYNE 2002:10–12).

But what about the demonic dancers, causing wet dreams and terrifying a young boy? During sleep paralysis, reduction of oxygen inflow to the brain occurs sometimes, which causes the stimulation of sexual arousal centers. Hallucinations in that state are associated with erotic fantasies, which are the reason for images of, for example, demonic

succubi and incubi. This outcome of the disorder (without knowledge of the disorder itself) has been known for centuries, and often appears in literature.

Hundreds of years ago, SP was traditionally defined as not a bad dream, but rather, the nocturnal visit of an evil being that threatens to press the very life out of its terrified victim. People who experienced SP claimed they felt paralyzed, could not speak, felt helpless, and were overwhelmed by extreme fear and terror (OLUNU *et. al.*, 2018:137–142, MASON 2012:255–7).

There is one more factor that fits perfectly with the characteristics of Sleep Paralysis and was described by Pilchowa. It is the age of the boy. At the beginning of the book we learn that *Zmora* started to haunt Antoni when he turned 23. From Cheyne's research we learn that episodes of Sleep Paralysis occur the most frequently in persons between 20 and 26 years old (CHEYNE 2002:9). There are many cases of connections between esoteric ideas and occurrences of sleep paralysis; Agnieszka Pilchowa's *Zmora* is most probably such a case too.

Influences on Agni's thought

Even though Agni claimed she gained all of her knowledge from her wandering in the Astral zones, it is not hard to notice that from early childhood she was exposed to an environment inclined to psychical research. Her connections with the group from Radwanice also should be explored in detail in future studies. To build her system Agni reached to literature, and sometimes tried to shed a new light on some phenomena. An example of this are larvae – beings known as evil spirits of descendants from ancient Roman religion, spiritual beings found in writings of Cornelius Agrippa, as the souls that had not reached any good place. Appearing in many traditions, but construed differently, larvae in esoteric thought in Poland in the interwar period were interpreted more as a kind of egregors, beings which came to life on the basis of one's desires. It was larvae who at the Spiritualist séances pretended to be someone else's souls. In Agni's teachings the Spiritualist themes, sometimes focused on Spiritist elements from the writings of Allan Kardec or Leon Dennis, definitely taking into account reincarnation, meet with Christian ethics, where sexual encounter is something sinful. Knowing Agni's tragic youth, we can assume that the sexual aspect of human life must have been interpreted by her as something negative. But besides Spiritualism and Spiritism, in both writings and

organized groups, and already mentioned Christianity, Agni was influenced by many more currents and figures.

She was exposed to Theosophy by Andrzej Kajfosz (1889–1970) and Andrzej Podzorski (1886–1971) who lived in Wisła (Kajfosz established the Polish Theosophical Society in Cieszyn Silesia based in Nydek in 1919, but it never became a part of the National Polish Branch of the Theosophical Society.) But most importantly, Agni was inspired by those currents which focused on mystical Christianity, that is Anthroposophy, and most importantly – Rosicrucianism. The latter one was represented in at least two currents in Wisła. The first were the teachings of a French mystic, Paul Sedir, which were very popular in Wisła and Cieszyn Silesia in general. Sedir was translated to Polish and gained a lot of interest in the area. The second is the Rosicrucian Fellowship. A Polish researcher of Freemasonry, Leon Chajn wrote that the Chobot brothers were connected with the Fellowship (CHAJN 1984:485). Unfortunately, he did not give any sources for this information, so it has to be checked carefully. From different sources we know that the organization of Max Heindel gained some recognition after the war in the territory of Silesia (HESS, DULSKA 2016:57–79.).



On the left: Pilchs and Chobots in the villa on Jarzębata mountain in Wisła. In the background there are shelves filled with publications of the Wisła Esoteric milieu. The portrait hanging in the middle of the shelf is a photograph of Julian Ochorowicz by J. Mieczkowski, cf. the copy on the right (Wikimedia Commons). Ochorowicz was an authority on academic research of Medium-related phenomena, and he was also highly esteemed in esoteric circles in Polish lands. Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signature IG F I 2264.

The last but not least of important influences on Agni was Julian Ochorowicz (1850–1917). Ochorowicz was an academic researcher, a philosopher, psychologist, and a gifted inventor. He received his PhD in Leipzig, and his habilitation in Lvov. His interest

in Mediumism had a negative impact on his academic carrier – even though he was committed to strictly scientific methods and interpretations not connected to Spiritualism, he was not awarded professorship and had problems with medical professionals in Poland. However, he was a renowned scientist and inventor, who was very famous and appreciated, especially in France and Russia, and he was one of Polish forerunners of psychology. Ochorowicz had a history with Wisła. He moved to the village and founded his laboratory there. He conducted experiments with sound, light, X-ray, and others, but is especially known for his experiments on Mediumism. During gatherings staged like séances (but with no afterworld interpretations), he conducted research on the abilities of Mediums, experiments with levitation, Mediumic radiation, telekinesis, and many others (cf. HESS 2018). Ochorowicz died in Warsaw in 1917, before the Wisła esoteric milieu was established, but his research had a great impact on the group.

Conclusion

Even if Agnieszka Pilchowa was a part of an esoteric group, her teachings were intended for a wider audience of people ready to change their lives. Agni treated her novel writing as a way to not only expose readers to some interesting phenomena of Spirituality and human psyche, but she saw it as a way to popularize her very serious spiritual teachings. It is hard to say what impact she had, but we know for sure that Agni became a famous interwar writer, her books gained popularity, and *Zmora* was her most read work. As we showed here already, her writings also attracted people who wanted to be healed by the Clairvoyant of Wisła. *Zmora* is a great example of how esoteric teachings were received by not necessarily esoteric audiences. Using the motif of *Zmora* as the outcome of the experience of Sleep Paralysis might also have some impact on the book's popularity, as the experience is familiar to many potential readers. Learning something new based on something that we know works well for a book's reception. In this paper we focused not only on Pilchowa's novel itself, but we offered a wider context, which we hope is a good introduction to the Wisła Esoteric Milieu. We also hope that this research will initiate some comparative studies of the esoteric groups in the interwar period in the future. The paper is accompanied by photographs to give readers a glance into the Clairvoyant of Wisła's life. Most of them have not been published before.



Józef Chobot and Kazimiera Chobotowa (on the left), Jan and Agnieszka Pilch (on the right) with their daughter Janka (Janina) in the middle. Source: Cieszyn Library (Książnica Cieszyńska), photo signature: IG P I 2268.

Bibliography

- CAMPBELL, C. (1972). *The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization*. In *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5.
- CHAJN, L. (1984). *Polskie wolnomularstwo 1920–1938*. Warszawa. Czytelnik.
- CHEYNE, J. A. (2002). *Waterloo Unusual Sleep Experiences Questionnaire – VIII a*. Technical Report. Waterloo. Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, May 02.
- CHOBOT, J. (1937). *Nowoczesny ruch spirytualistyczny w Polsce z szczególnym uwzględnieniem Polski z licznymi ilustracjami*. Wisła. Książnica Wiedzy Duchowej.
- DULSKA, M. (2019). *Vision of Spiritual World in the Writings of Agnieszka Pilchowa*. In: *Studies in Esotericism in Central and Eastern Europe (Studies in Cultural Iconology 1)*, N. Radulović, K. M. Hess (ed.). Publications of the Research Center for Cultural Iconology and Semiography, University of Szeged, Szeged. JATEPress.
- DZWONEK, J. (1988). *Wisła w jarzmie hitlerowskim 1939–1945*. Wisła. Koło Miejskie ZBOWiD Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację. Towarzystwo Miłośników Wisły.
- GĘSIKOWSKA, K. (2013). *Doświadczenie postrzegania pozazmysłowego – przypadek Agni Pilch*. In: *Zanikanie i istnienie niepełne: w labiryntach romantycznej i współczesnej podmiotowości*. A. Dębska-Kossakowska, P. Paszek, L. Zwierzyński (ed.). Katowice. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- HADYNA, S. (1993). *Przez okna czasu: jasnowidząca z Wisły*. Kraków. Instytut Ekologii i Zdrowia.
- HESS, K. M. (2018). *The Idea of Ideoplasty and Occult Phenomena in the Theoretical and Empirical Research of Julian Ochorowicz*. “Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural” Vol. 7, No. 2.
- HESS, K. M.; DULSKA, M. A. (2016). *Rose Cross, Saturn’s Menagerie and the Coal Mines of Silesia: Strange Visions of Teofil Ociepka*. “Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions” 19, No. 4.
- JEMELKA, M. (2014). *Religious Life in an Industrial Town: The Example of Ostrava, 1850-1950*. “The Hungarian Historical Review”, Vol. 3, No. 4.
- KARASIÓWNA (year unknown). *Towarzystwo Teozoficzne (wspomnienia)*. Unpublished manuscript. Archiwum PAN i PAU w Krakowie, Kazimierz Tokarski K III – 180, j.a. 18.

- MAGIERA, W. (2011). *Cieszyński szlak kobiet 2*. Czeski Cieszyn. Stowarzyszenie Klub Kobiet Kreatywnych : Kongres Polaków w Republice Czeskiej.
- MASON, P. H. (2012). Sleep paralysis: Night-mares, Nocebos, and the Mind-body Connection, by Shelley R. Adler. "Anthropology & Medicine" 19 (2).
- Pierwszy Ogólnopolski Zjazd Ezoteryków i Metapsychików*. „Nowy Kurjer”. Poznań Dec. 16th, 1936.
- PASEK, Z. (2008). *Spirytyzm i ruch rozwoju duchowego*. In: *Kościół i wspólnota religijne Wisły (Monografia Wisły 3)*. Renata Czyż, Zbigniew Pasek (eds.). Wisła. Galeria "Na Gojach."
- PILCH, J. (year unknown). *Z życia jasnovidzącej Agnieszki Pilchowej*. Unpublished manuscript (typescript) in Muzeum Beskidzkie in Wisła.
- PILCHOWA, A. (1930). *Pamiętniki jasnovidzącej z wędrówki życiowej poprzez wieki : poprzedzone wstępem o istocie jasnowiedzenia, nowej erze etc. i uzupełnione dodatkiem, w którym przytoczono m.i. szereg przykładów na przejawianie się prawa karmy i reinkarnacji w życiu znanych powszechnie ludzi. T. I*. Wisła. „Hejnał”.
- PILCHOWA, A. [A. P.] (1932). *Zmora. Powieść okultystyczna osnuta na tle prawdziwych przeżyć*. Wisła. „Hejnał”.
- Santomauro, J.; French, Ch. C. (2009). Terror in the Night, "The Psychologist" 2009, Vol. 8, No. 22.
- TRZCIŃSKA, I.; ŚWIERZOWSKA, A. (2018). *Illness narratives in the Esoteric vision of the world: Agnieszka Pilchowa's views and concepts*. "Religio: revue pro religionistiku." Vol. 26, No. 1.
- VALIS-SCHYLENY, S. (1995). *Zachowane w pamięci: ludzie wiślańskiego „Zacisza”*. Wisła. Towarzystwo Miłośników Wisły.
- WYSOCKA, A. [A.P.] (1933). *Umarli mówią: powieść*. Wisła. „Hejnał”. *Zbiór pieśni*. Wisła Śląsk Cieszyński. „Hejnał”.