

Who was Maria Skłodowska-Curie?



A distinguished scholar, discoverer of the radioactive elements polonium and radium, **the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize (twice, in two different fields)**, and first woman to become a titled Sorbonne professor. She was also the first woman born outside France to be interred in the Parisian Pantheon. Her pioneering achievements have been well-described in official biographies. Yet should your interest run deeper, **there is no better place to get to know this amazing woman than her birthplace of Warsaw**. Here you can learn more about Maria's vocation, her childhood, and the history of her family. Exploring her Warsaw venues and the stories they tell, you will unexpectedly discover something quite fascinating. The statuesque Maria Skłodowska-Curie is overshadowed by a girl whose character had been moulded by her family and the times she lived in – but also by the tragic turns and twists of fate she had been forced to face. You are warmly invited to meet Maria in Warsa – the place of her youth.



DID YOU KNOW?

The bicycle was Maria Skłodowska-Curie's favourite means of transportation. You can go to one of the Veturilo stations, rent a bike, and follow in her path.

The Birthplace – Maria Skłodowska-Curie Museum in Warsaw (Dom urodzenia - Muzeum Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie)

In all probability, this New Town tenement house would have been unremarkable, one of the many, were it not for an event that secured it a permanent place on the map of key Warsaw venues. Maria Skłodowska was born here on 7 November 1867. The building housed a finishing school for girls run by Maria's mother Marianna Bronisława. Her father, Władysław Skłodowski, was a well-known mathematician and physics teacher in Warsaw's secondary schools. When he was appointed sub-inspector at a grammar school for boys – one year after his youngest daughter had been born – the family moved house. **At No. 16 Freta Street, a biographical museum was established, the only such facility worldwide dedicated in its entirety to Maria Skłodowska-Curie.** At the exhibition devoted to the life and work of the great scientist you will see authentic equipment and objects belonging to the Nobel Prize winner such as Marie's personal and professional correspondence, her last desk, her father's gold watch,



numerous photographs of the scientist from various stages of her life, as well as laboratory measuring instruments used by the Curies. Pay attention to the elephant donated to Maria by President Herbert Hoover and the leather purse in which she received the money to set up the Radium Institute.

• ul. Freta 16, www.mmsc.waw.pl



Church of the Visitation of the blessed Virgin Mary (Kościół Nawiedzenia Najświętszej Marii Panny)



One of the oldest temples in Warsaw, this was the parish church of the Skłodowski family. **This is where baby Maria was baptised**, as – in all probability – were her siblings. Maria's baptism certificate has been preserved until this day. Mania, as she was called at home, was the youngest of Mr. and Mrs. Skłodowski's five

children. In her childhood years, she was extremely close to her eldest sister Zofia, who took care of her and kept her company. **Maria remained close to Józef, Bronisława, and Helena throughout her life**, and many a time, her immediate family provided her with invaluable support. The Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary was erected in the early 15th century, as word has it, on grounds formerly occupied by a pagan temple. The distinctive Gothic-style tower was added one hundred years later; it is flanked by a terrace with a picturesque view of the Vistula River and the right-bank side of the city.

• ul. Przyrynek 2

DID YOU KNOW?

Maria's father struggled with money issues, and could not afford to secure expensive higher education for all his children. Given the circumstances, Maria made a kind of deal with her sister Bronia. She began working as a governess with all her earnings going to her sister for a few years, making it possible for Bronia to study at the Sorbonne. The deal had been for Bronia to later return the favour.



The Vistula escarpment (Skarpa wiślana)

Warsaw is a city of true architectonic jewels, which have fortunately survived, and are constantly beautified. There is a picturesque Old Town [...] The Vistula River flows nearby, with a wide boulevard upon it. The neighbourhood has many spacious parks, green squares, and private gardens.

– excerpt from Maria's letter to daughter Irene, 6 October 1921

Maria retained vivid childhood memories of the Vistula escarpment – one of her favourite locations for leisurely walks, and she dropped in on it during her last visit to Warsaw in 1932. **This river holds inexplicable charm for me** – she wrote.

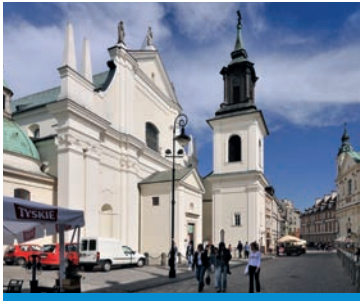
In the second half of the 19th century, the Vistula escarpment area was densely developed, life thriving on the river-bank: breweries, transportation companies, women coming to draw water and wash clothes; the Vistula's two banks were bound by a newly erected Alexandrian bridge, dubbed the Kierbedź Bridge in homage to its constructor.

Today, the riverside landscape is nowhere near to what Maria once saw. While the Vistula's banks are full of life, during the summer season in particular, it is chiefly used for recreation. Urban beaches, numerous bars, open-air concerts and Multimedia Fountain Park evening shows attract local residents and tourists alike. At the top of the slope, in the place she loved so much, stands a monument to the Nobel Prize winner.



St. Hyacinth's Church (Kościół św. Jacka)

It was at this church, but a few steps away from Maria's birthplace, that the girl received her First Communion. She recalled the event as one which had affected her greatly. Little did she expect that future events would truly put her faith to the test. Her beloved sister Zosia contracted typhoid fever and died at fifteen. During that same period, Maria's mother was in a grave battle with swiftly progressing tuberculosis. Expensive treatment and the family's devout prayers to no avail, she passed away. The girl was eleven at the time.



The 18th-century church was erected outside city walls for the Dominican order. During the Warsaw Rising of 1944, it housed a field infirmary, but paying no heed, the Nazis bombed it, killing over 1,000 wounded and hospital staff. The church was rebuilt in 1968.

• ul. Freta 10

Central Agricultural Library (Centralna Biblioteka Rolnicza)



This is where the Museum of Industry and Agriculture stood – an educational and scientific research facility. The outbuilding at the back of the building housed a physics and chemistry room and laboratory where Maria – thanks to the gracious assistance of her cousin who managed the facility – could perform her experiments. **Had they not taught me chemical analysis well in Warsaw [...] I could not have separated out radium** – she confessed years later.

Today, the building is home to the Central Agricultural Library,

holder and custodian of valuable old prints and 19th-century historical Polish books and writings on agriculture and natural sciences. Today, the outbuilding where the physics laboratory had been houses guest rooms offering marvellous views of the garden and the eastern bank of the Vistula River.

• ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 66, www.cbr.edu.pl

DID YOU KNOW?

Though Maria received her second Nobel Prize in 1911 for the discovery of polonium and radium, she was a self-taught chemist. She read key works in the field all on her own upon graduation from grammar school, to then engage in experiments at the Krakowskie Przedmieście laboratory. She studied mathematics and physics at the Sorbonne.

Bristol Hotel

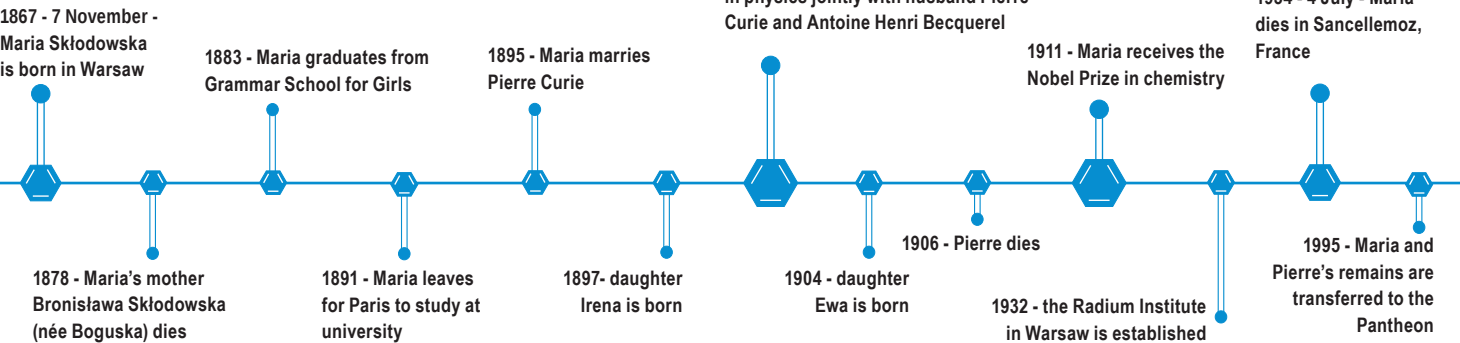


When Maria visited Warsaw in 1913 after having received her second Nobel Prize, Warsaw elites welcomed her with great reverence. A banquet was held in the Malinowa Room of the Bristol Hotel in the great scholar's honour. This is how Maria's sister Helena Szalay described the ceremony: **Listening to interventions by many speakers, Maria took an occasional note in her notebook. At the end of the ceremony, she thanked everyone for their words of appreciation.** As it turned out, she was not listening to the speeches – she was working on a maths problem. **And I was happy, because I solved it** – she concluded. Bristol was then Warsaw's most modern hotel. It had its own power plant, central heating, and a cutglass lift. It survived World War II with slight damage only, and underwent major renovation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Political leaders and stars of culture have stayed at the Bristol. The impressive guest list includes Edvard Grieg, Pablo Picasso, Marlene Dietrich, Woody Allen, and Martin Scorsese.

• ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 42/44



Maria's original notebook





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DID YOU KNOW?

Maria Skłodowska-Curie was one of the first women to get a driver's licence. She took classes during World War I, to be able to drive vans fitted with X-ray machines. This is how the "small Curies", as the vehicles Maria designed were dubbed, reached the front to X-ray wounded soldiers.

University of Warsaw (Uniwersytet Warszawski)



*Dearest Ewunia,
[...] My journey was fine – I reached Warsaw on time, to find flowers and university delegations waiting for me at the railway station –*
excerpt from a letter to Ewa Curie, 4 October 1921.

The scholar had arrived to attend the inauguration of the academic year 1921/1922. Two years before, she had been offered the position of Chair of Experimental Physics, and although she refused, Maria kept in touch with the university.
When she visited the Institute of Physics in 1925, crowds of people tried to enter the lecture hall to listen to her speak about radioactivity research. The University awarded Maria the title of Honorary Professor of the Philosophy Department.

In the 19th century, women who wanted to study had to fight against stereotypes concerning their role. Few universities accepted female students, who were frequently ignored and patronised by their male colleagues. The University of Warsaw is the largest and one of the best Polish universities.
• [ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, www.uw.edu.pl](#)

Jabłonowski Palace (Pałac Jabłonowskich)

Before the outbreak of World War II, the palace housed Warsaw's City Hall.

In 1924, Maria Skłodowska-Curie was presented with the Diploma of Honorary Citizen of Warsaw at the palace. The founding act for an association which was to result in the establishing of the Radium Institute in Warsaw was proclaimed at the ceremony which took place one year later, Maria having made every effort for the facility to be launched. The evening closed with a banquet in honour of the scholar.

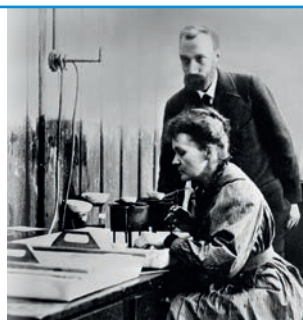
While Maria was never to return to Poland permanently, she visited the country frequently, referring to Warsaw as "my dear little Warsaw". **She named the element she had discovered "polonium" in honour of her homeland.**

Damaged during the Warsaw Rising in 1944, the palace was dismantled after the war. Its contemporary form is the result of renovation works in the 1990s.
• [ul. Senatorska 14/16](#)



DID YOU KNOW?

Maria disliked official parties and banquets held in her honour, and tried to avoid acclaim. Her friend Albert Einstein said:
Mrs. Curie is the only person in the world who has remained unspoilt by fame.



Warsaw University of Technology (Politechnika Warszawska)



When the scholar visited the University in 1925, she was received by all the professors with great reverence, and one year later, **the Physics Department awarded her their honorary doctorate.** In 2005, a monument to Maria Skłodowska-Curie sculpted by Maksymilian Biskupski was erected in the hall of the University's Main Building.

The Warsaw University of Technology is one of the best technical universities in Poland. Its impressive Main Building was erected at the turn of the 19th c.; construction works took a mere two years. Crowned with a glass roof, it houses a wondrous cloistered courtyard.
• [plac Politechniki 1, www.pw.edu.pl](#)



Radiological laboratory (Pracownia radiologiczna)

In the year 1912, I had the opportunity to join forces with Warsaw's Scientific Society for purposes of developing a radiological laboratory. I was entrusted with its chairmanship. Although I could not leave France and return to Poland, I was more than willing to engage in the process of organising research works at the new facility – Maria wrote in her autobiography, describing the Warsaw Radiological Laboratory, which opened in 1913 as the first facility of its kind in Polish history. The institution remained in operation with great scientific success until the outbreak of World War Two. Today the building houses the Institute of Mathematics of the Polish Academy of Sciences. A plaque mounted on the building's facade tells the story of its past.
• [ul. Śniadeckich 8 \(formerly Kaliksta 8\)](#)

DID YOU KNOW?

Maria and her husband Pierre Curie did not apply for a patent for their radium acquisition method. They believed that scientific accomplishments should benefit everyone, and they had no wish to make any profit on their discoveries.



The Radium Institute (Maria Skłodowska-Curie National Institute of Oncology)



Maria made every effort to open this facility, which was to engage in physics and chemistry research, and in treating the ill with the use of radium and its properties. **The first Radium Institute opened in Paris in 1914, and its twin in Warsaw in 1932, two years before the scholar's death.**

Maria presented the Institute with a gift of 1 gram of radium, purchased with funds received from representatives of the Polish community in the United States of America. While the institute had also been operating during wartime, the Nazis attacked the facility with great cruelty in 1944.

Today, the Maria Skłodowska-Curie National Institute of Oncology operates here, with a tree planted by Maria growing in the garden adjacent to the building.

A small street immediately outside the fence of the former Institute was named after Maria Skłodowska-Curie, the scholar herself immortalised by a monument closer to the centre of the tiny local park.
• [ul. Wawelska 15, nio.gov.pl](#)



MARIA SKŁODOWSKA-CURIE

I was born in Warsaw



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