

*From the History of Science in Ancient Gdansk*

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**MRS HEVELIUS — THE FIRST FEMALE  
ASTRONOMER IN POLAND**

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As a member of city authorities and a scientist of international fame, Johannes Hevelius had a wide circle of acquaintances, friends and collaborators. He corresponded widely with scientists all over the world. He was especially close to J. Gassendi, I. Boulliau, E. Halley and P. des Noyers; and in Gdansk to a scientist and councillor E. Schmieden, doctor I. Conradt, and J. Hecker, a relative on the distaff side, whom he taught to cut lenses and to perform astrological observations. However, his best pupil and assistant, without whose help he wouldn't have achieved so much, especially at the end of his life, was his second wife — Elisabeth Koopman. Her parents came to Gdansk from Amsterdam. Her father — Nicolaus — was a merchant. He must have been rich, as he could afford to buy a property in Bakowo. Elisabeth received profound education - she spoke Latin and English among others. In 1663, at the age of 16, she married the astronomer who was 36 years older than herself. A poem prepared specially for that occasion said that since then two new stars entered the house of Hevelius — his wife's eyes in which he would now have to look. The groom gave the bride an ornamented jewel box made by himself. The marriage was a happy one.

Elisabeth, who was full of energy and charm, soon got accustomed to the unusual duties. She was indefatigable. She ruled the household and the brewery with her small yet strong hand, helping her husband at the same time in observations and his scientific work. In that was Mrs Hevelius became the first woman — astronomer in Poland. All that did not stop her from giving birth to four children — three daughters and a son, who died in his childhood.

Hevelius himself valued her very much, which he expressed writing “Women are equally able to men, everything lies in enthusiasm and experience.”

His wife's help appeared to be inappreciable for the astronomer especially after the fire which destroyed the whole property and the results of many years of work in 1679. Hevelius was then 68 and if it were not for Elisabeth's energy and optimism, he

would surely never decide to start everything from the scratch. It was thanks to her that after rebuilding the observatory on the roofs of houses between Korzenna and Rajska streets started its normal operation again.

After the astronomer's death the widow works on the materials left by him and edits a Permanent Stars Catalogue (1687), Sobieski's Firmament (1690) with 56 maps, and *Prodromus Astronomiae* (1690), including, among others, the positions of 1564 stars, and dedicated to the king. In the signature she describes herself as "Elisabeth, Hevelius' widow".

Elisabeth died in 1693, six years after her husband's death. She was buried in the family tomb in St Catherine's church in Gdansk. A distinguished French scientist F. Arago wrote about her: "A memory full of worship has to be turned towards Mrs Hevelius, the first woman I know who did not fear to carry the burden of astronomical observations and calculations". In spite of the scientific fame she enjoyed, Elisabeth did not lose her feminine charm. In 1687 Halley himself bought for her in London a silk dress made according to the requirements of the latest fashion!

*Translation: Anna Kucharska.*