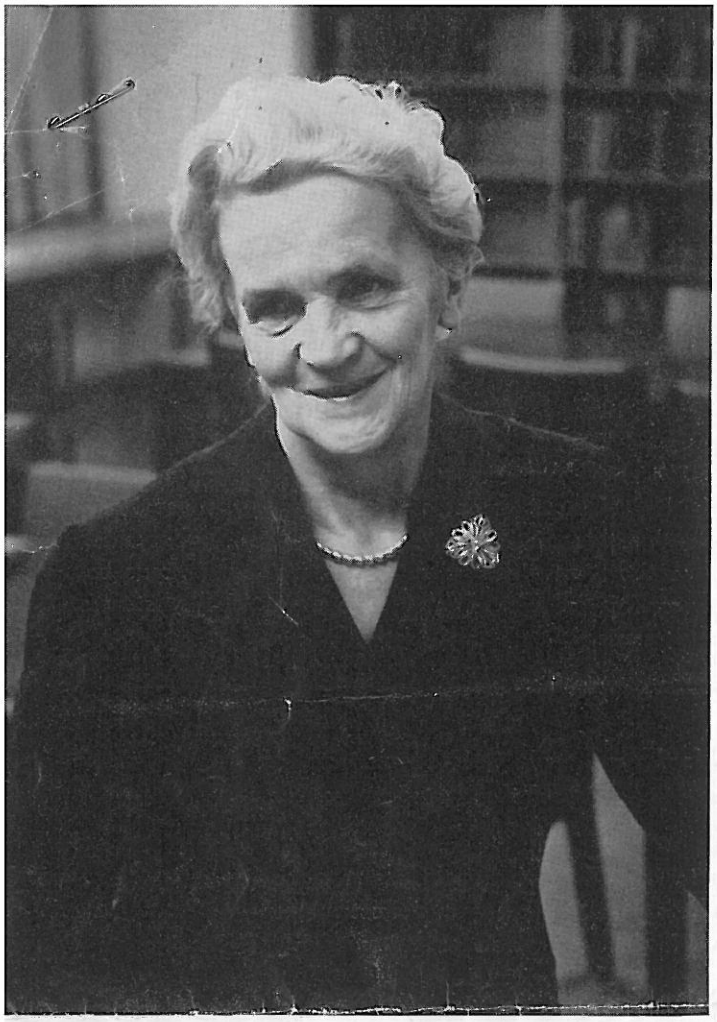

MME. MARIA OSSOWSKA

Visiting Virginia C. Gildersleeve Professor

By Virginia Potter Held '50

There used to exist two kinds of iron curtain: that which prevented all but a very few individuals from the United States and the Communist countries from exchanging visits, and that which made it almost impossible for members of the two spheres to communicate with one another even when they met.

The presence of Professor Maria Ossowska at Barnard this semester exemplifies the steady erosion of both kinds, and the useful results this opening up of the two worlds to each other can have.

Mme. Ossowska is Professor of Descriptive Ethics at the University of Warsaw. Some months ago Professors Frankel and Lazarsfeld of Columbia visited Poland as part of the Ford Foundation program that has already arranged and financed the exchange of 136 Polish and twenty American educators and scientists.

When candidates were being considered for the Virginia C. Gildersleeve Visiting Professorship at Barnard —a post established in 1957 thanks to a gift from the Associate Alumnae—Professor Frankel suggested Mme. Ossowska and she was chosen.

She is teaching this semester at Barnard "Sociology of Ethics," which deals with various influences on moral life, among them economic and demographic factors, the division of labor, and social stratification. She has given a lecture—"Can Ethics be Systematized?"—and a number of informal talks to students and faculty .

In her office in the new library building, with a copy of "The Lonely Crowd" before her on her desk, Professor Ossowska spoke about the political changes in Poland since the advent of the Gomulka government in 1956. There had been, she said, "a great increase in freedom of speech. The students and the faculty can now discuss whatever interests them."

Between 1952 and 1956 no sociology was taught in Poland. A Stalinist outlook prevailed, Mme. Ossowska said; Marxism was thought to answer all sociological questions, and she and her husband, also a sociologist, could not lecture or have their work published, though they continued to receive their salaries. During this period she wrote a book on "Bourgeois Morality," promptly published in 1956, when she and her husband were able to return to teaching. Now sociology is flourishing, and more students want to study it than the department can accept.

On sociological and philosophical matters there seem to be no barriers to the exchange of opinions. In her talk on ethics she offered many of the same objections as have been offered by certain Western philosophers to Utilitarianism and to the attempts of the operationalists and others to reduce all ethical questions to empirical ones.

A few days later in her office, Mme. Ossowska explained that she had written a book dealing with this subject, "The Foundation of the Science of Ethics" (none of her books have been translated into English). And she spoke warmly of her sympathy with the ideas expressed in "Ethics and Language," by Professor Charles L. Stevenson of the University of Michigan, whom she may meet later in the year when she plans to travel to Yale, Harvard, Chicago and California. Her ideas are also close, she said, to those in the Belgian philosopher E. Dupréel's "*Traité de Morale.*"

Mme. Ossowska answered some questions about the Polish educational system. Since 1956, ethics are taught in the primary and secondary schools as a part of religion, in which students may, upon request, receive instruction, given by a priest. There are plans to teach ethics separately but the textbooks for this have not yet been written and the program is still under study.

Since 1923 Mme. Ossowska has been teaching at the

University of Warsaw, from which she received her Ph.D. At that time, until they were able to acquire a Chair, the so-called *privat-docents* were not paid, and to earn her living she worked for a publishing company which produced a scientific yearbook in several languages. She has studied at the Sorbonne and at Oxford and Cambridge. During the war, the Germans occupying Poland closed the University, but it went underground, and small groups of students continued to meet with faculty members in private apartments. One such group was caught, and all but one of the participants were shot.

After the war the University was reorganized, and now, Professor Ossowska said, university teachers belong, as far as salaries are concerned, to the privileged class. For all students in the seven state universities (there is one private Catholic university) tuition is free, and many receive scholarships for living expenses. But the dormitories are "overcrowded, and not as comfortable as here."

Out of a total population of 29,000,000, Poland has 157,000 students—about one-third of them women. Almost half of the university students are the children of workers and peasants; the rest are the children of the intelligentsia—doctors, lawyers, educators.

The students, said Mme. Ossowska, avoid political organizations, and concentrate on "organizing their personal lives."

She said there used to be some misunderstanding of the United States among Polish students and vice versa, but that this is steadily diminishing. And she hopes for a continuation of the valuable exchanges of persons between East and West. With this hope most of her listeners must agree.

Can Ethics Be Systematized?

In March Mme. Ossowska addressed Barnard alumnae, faculty and students on the subject "Can Ethics Be Systematized?" Following is an excerpt from that lecture.

We have chosen for anlysis a few systems to which human thought has returned more than once during the centuries. The first being an application of deductive and the second of empirical methods. The reasonings found there were of a limited variety and could be reduced to principal types: either certain behavior was first recommended in general and then a given act belonging to that category was demonstrated to be also an act of virtue, or else a goal for our actions was initially fixed and the conduct necessary or sufficient for its attainment was recommended accordingly. These are not the only possible reasonings. Various logicians are trying, not without success, to create a logic of norms. The fact that in this domain the concept of truth in its Aristotelian sense does not apply, does not prevent us from speaking of truth as consistency of the derived norms with the norms accepted as axioms. Following the example of the systems of logic, we may require that the axioms be independent and non-contradictory. The construction of a normative system still requires preliminary work, because one must adapt to the new domain the notion of implication, negation, contradiction and others. Even though the choice between different systems will always remain free where it depends on our emotional formation, other things being equal, an orderly and coherent system is better than a disconnected set of opinions.

As for myself, I do not doubt that the moral theory may profit from the gropings which precede and accompany the labors of systematization. Therefore, I think that this task is worth the efforts of the moral philosopher. But what he has to keep in mind is that things are much more complicated than was admitted by Bentham or those who advocated a purely empirical ethics. I do not believe that it is possible to give to a system of deductive ethics the shape of a pyramid, taking one single premise as a starting point. I do not believe that one can make out of normative ethics an empirical science, since—as I have tried to show—hidden value judgements are constantly emerging from our reasoning. And I do not see any possibility of treating normative ethics without having in view both the functioning of society with respect to a given ideal of inter-human relations and the perfection of those who are the members of that society. In the eyes of modern ethics these two groups of problems appear inseparable and seem to represent ethics in the strict sense of the word. As Bertrand Russell has stated recently: "Without civic morality communities perish; without personal morality their survival has no value."