

Sofía Casanova (1861-1958):
Spanish Poet, Journalist and Author

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Preface

Sofia Casanova: A Forgotten Legend

Born in 1861 at the beginning of the Civil War in the United States, Sofia Casanova was formed by the nineteenth century ambient of her upbringing and early adulthood, absorbing its outlook and values. Yet she lived well into the second half of the twentieth century, chronicling World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution as a foreign correspondent, surviving World War II in Eastern Europe, and spending her last two decades behind the Iron Curtain in Communist Poland. Her vast historical experience is echoed by equally wide-ranging geographical and cultural settings: from the remote, almost medieval Galician village of her birth and first twelve years, to the provincial, bourgeois atmosphere of Pérez Galdós's Madrid where she resided some fifteen years until her marriage, Casanova moved to become a world citizen, travelling throughout Europe and becoming sufficiently well assimilated into Polish culture to publish in that language and to play a prominent role in Poland's most select literary and political circles.

Casanova's extensive literary and journalistic output is equally wide-ranging, from early post-Romantic poetry and somber, pessimistic Parnassist verse to novels of the frivolous international elite in the years between the wars and narratives of ideological conflict between Bolsheviks and counter-revolutionaries. She enjoyed Royal patronage along with the friendship of Liberal literati, descended from the conservative rural Galician aristocracy, yet lived to become an impartial international observer of social revolution. During her marriage to a Polish political activist and visionary philosopher of eugenics, she lived in places as diverse as an oriental, provincial Russian town in Central Asia, an isolated fishing hamlet on the Galician coast, a rural manor north of Warsaw, and the old Polish university town of Cracow. From her early admiration of Rosalía de Castro to acquaintance with major writers of European and Polish Modernism, from translating Nobel prize-winning Polish novelists to becoming Spain's first female war correspondent, Casanova lived an extraordinary intellectual life of exceptional achievement. As the major conduit whereby the Spanish public learned of Poland, Russian and Eastern Europe, as well as Spain's primary interpreter for peoples of the East, she exercised incalculable political and cultural influence.

In the literary and cultural life of turn-of-the century Spain, Casanova maintained a salon frequented by the likes of Galdós, Pardo Bazán, the

Machado brothers and Benavente; wrote in Madrid dailies on topics ranging from Polish culture, history and politics to art and public hygiene, campaigned against negative stereotypes of Spanish women in European literature and became a social activist on behalf of preventive medicine and public health in Spain. She wrote on the prevention of tuberculosis and joined the Spanish Red Cross while earning her living and caring for her children as a journalist. Her lectures, collections of poetry, and books of short and long fiction were sufficiently well received that she became a member of the Real Academia Gallega (1906) and the Academia de Poesía Española (1910).

Casanova, a convinced pacifist, volunteered as a Red Cross nurse and Sister of Charity in Warsaw during 1914-1915, riding military trains into battle zones to bring back the wounded, and wrote a series of anti-war articles for Madrid's most influential daily, *ABC*. Her eyewitness accounts, widely reprinted throughout Spain and Latin America, were produced in a violently politicized context, yet she maintained her objectivity. Amid rampant anti-Semitism in Poland, mocked by friends and relatives for her views, she defended Jews, and having detailed the horrors of the evacuation of Warsaw, returned to report the city's apocalyptic fall to the Germans. Working for war relief while in exile in Russia, she reported on the 1917 Revolution in Petrograd --the first accounts to reach Spain-- and her columns were headlined on the front pages of *ABC*. She even interviewed Trotsky at Bolshevik headquarters, a journalistic coup, only days before the October takeover. She lived through the German siege of Petrograd, the Red Terror of 1918, managing through diplomatic contacts to escape with her family back to German-held Warsaw, and later portrayed these world-shaking events in her novels.

Casanova's literary and journalistic achievements were remarkable by any yardstick, and notwithstanding her long years of expatriation, it seems incredible that she could have been so completely forgotten by Spain's literary and cultural establishment. She is among the first to be rescued by the joint publishing program initiated by the Instituto de la Mujer and Editorial Castalia, which has recently reprinted one of her novels, and included one of her stories in a collection of short fiction by women. Ofelia Alayeto's sensitive intellectual and literary biography of Casanova, a ground-breaking achievement, represents a major contribution to the understanding of one of this century's truly great women.

Janet Pérez