Marie Curie

Manya Sklodowski was born in Poland in 1867. Her father was a professor of physics and math at a high school. Manya excelled in school and graduated with honors when she was 16.

At the time, Poland was ruled by The Soviet Union. Women were not allowed to go to college in Poland. Manya and her sister Bronya decided they would take turns going to school at the Sorbonne in France. First Manya worked as a governess to put Bronya through school. Then when Bronya became a doctor, she sent for Manya. When Manya came to France she changed her name to Marie.

Marie attended the Sorbonne and got a degree in physics. Next she got a degree in mathematics. Again she excelled in her studies, earning many awards.

Then she met Pierre. He was a professor and scientist at the Sorbonne. They built a strong friendship due to their mutual love of science. Their friendship grew into love and they were married.

Marie decided to make radioactivity the subject for her doctorate degree. Marie knew that uranium gave off radioactive rays. She tested all the chemical elements and found that thorium also gave off these rays.

She found that no other known elements gave off these rays. She started measuring the rays in many samples of rock. She found that in some, the quantity of radioactive rays was higher than the amount of uranium and thorium. Something else must be giving off radioactive rays.

After many experiments she and Pierre concluded that there was indeed another element, previously unknown to science. They named it radium. One substance that seemed to be particularly high in radium was pitchblende. Marie and Pierre worked for four years to purify the radium out of pitchblende. The work was slow and strenuous. They did not know the dangers of radiation and they had to take frequent trips to the country to rest and recover from illness.