

**Agnieszka Dulęba**  
Warsaw University

### **Pole, Jew, Artist, Politician - Life, Work and Political Ideas of Jonasz Stern (1904-1988)**

The aim of my doctoral research is to fill the gaps of Stern's life. My proposal is based on archival and museum researches that are planned to build an answer to questions on Stern's early life and its influence on his adult political and artistic choices, his connections and relations with Polish artistic communities (both institutional and informal, such as School of Fine Arts or Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors in Krakow, Czapka Frygijska). As an effect of my research I would like to be able to explain Stern's political, identity, personality and artistic changes, breakthroughs and its grounds. I would like to confront Stern life choices with the myth of "Żydokomuna" (*Judeo-Communism*). As Michał Bilewicz noted communist political views 'were attractive only for a part of Jewish assimilated intelligentsia'<sup>1</sup>, and I would like to examine Jonasz Stern's life, political and artistic environment from this perspective. I would also like to include Jeff Schatz's, Marcin Zaremba's and Małgorzata Melchior's perspective both on interwar Polish-Jewish political life especially while studying the subject of complex (hyphenated) identity, and on microhistory of Jonasz Stern.

Since Stern's death in 1988 no effort was done to fully describe his life, political and artistic ideas, his *oeuvre*. In 1978 Helena Blum wrote first and so far last monograph of Jonasz Stern. For obvious reasons this publication cannot give the reader a full picture of the artist. Not only was it written ten years before Stern's passing but it was written by someone related to Stern, making it more a source of knowledge on artist's relations and perception than a coherent and fundamental narration.

Modern publication and papers on Stern's life and work can be divided in two categories, one can notice certain duality of how was he recognized. From one point of view, he was seen as founder of artistic associations 'Cracow Group I' and 'Cracow Group II', and from another - as a WWII Survivor, whose work was established by border situations such as surviving Nazi execution in 1943. Only few researchers and art curators took an interest in Stern's both pre

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Bilewicz, *Jidele*, spring 2000, p. 6.

and after-war artistic development, and their work is without no doubt worth mentioning. Even though Maria Zientara, curator of the exhibition “Holocaust Survivors. Artur Nacht – Samborski, Erna Rosenstein, Jonasz Stern”, held in 2013 in Schiendler’s Factory (Krakow, Poland), was concentrated on certain narration and circumstances of Stern’s life, her introduction to the exhibition’s catalogue was a brilliant attempt to draw a bigger picture of the artist, making it one of the best methodological proposal of how to approach the subject of complex Polish – Jewish – political identity as well as the problem of art and political community of pre and post – war Poland<sup>2</sup>.

The key to understand Stern’s oeuvre is his biography, inseparably tied with his artistic development. He grew up in Polish- Ukrainian - Jewish city Kalusz, than he moved do Art Academy in Cracow, already influenced by Marx’s Manifesto, which automatically put him in a very concrete artistic and political centre. Supported by Leon Chwistek aside with Maria Jarema and Tadeusz Kantor, Stern was one of the founder of active avant-garde movement in pre-war Poland for what he was sentenced to Bereza Kartuska detention camp in 1937. War found him in Lviv and although circumstances of his being in Lviv at that time are unclear<sup>3</sup> he stayed in the city until the very end: ghetto liquidation in 1943. During his imprisonment he worked at a Sknilow airport, tried to escaped once and almost succeed, and survived, despite all odds, Nazi execution in June 1943. He returned to Cracow in 1945 after long and exhausting escape through Hungary. His artwork from that period is an excellent source of understanding what he was suffering through. After war previous “Cracow’s Group’ was banned from official art and political life by socialist authorities until 1955. Although Stern’s artistic life is quite well documented in polish artistic and popular press, his changing approach to art and politics is still unanalyzed.

Since no research so far focused on building the whole picture of Stern based on profound archive search, during my doctoral research I plan to explore the archives of Cracov’s Academy of Fine Arts, The Cricoteka archive in Cracov, The Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, The Archive of Art Intitute in Polish Academy of Science, National Museum of Cracov in purpose of searching information on Stern’s life and work. The other source for Stern’s life is press, I plan to examine polish art journals, popular papers from 1932 to 1988 in purpose of recreating as wide portrait of Stern and the historical and political

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Zientara, *Holocaust Survivors. Artur Nacht – Samborski, Erna Rosenstein, Jonasz Stern*, Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, Kraków 2012, pp. 19-67.

<sup>3</sup> In 1988 in interview with Stanisław Wiśniewski Stern explained that he was at that time in Lviv on “Red Army quests” and had to stay in the city because of dislocated leg. Unfortunately none of archive sources seems to prove his active service in soviet military forces. ‘Magazyn Kulturalny’, no 4, 1989, p. 15.

context represented in those publications as possible. This review also contains Stern's autobiographical statements, that are included to build a context. The papers I already examined but plan to examine further are, among other, such titles: „Wiek Nowy”, „Tygodnik Artystów”, „Gazeta Artystów”, „Głos Plastyków”, „Twórczość”, „Odrodzenie”, „Kuźnica”, „Przegląd artystyczny”, „Sztuka”, „Nowa Kultura”, „Trybuna Ludu”, „Dziennik Polski”, „Polska”, „Wiedza i Życie”, „Kobieta i Życie”, „Dziennik Łódzki”, „Echo Krakowa”, „Ekran”, „Tygodnik Powszechny”, „Plastyka”. I also plan to gather and catalog Stern's artworks, scattered in many Polish museums and galleries after Stern's monographic exhibitions 1972 and between 1980 and 1985. For that purpose I plan several visits to: Cracov, Poznań, Lublin, Sopot, Koszalin, Kołobrzeg, Olsztyn, Białystok and Chełm in purpose of gathering every information on Stern's exhibitions and reception.