

BETWEEN THE ART AND THE POLITICS.  
JONASZ STERN (1904-1988)<sup>1</sup>

Magdalena Cześniak-Zielińska

Jonasz Leon Stern was born in Kałusz near Stanisławów in Galicia, a part of the Habsburg Empire (today Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine). He came from a Jewish workers' family. He was a painter, a graphic artist and an educator working in the Academy of Fine Arts (ASP) in Krakow. He is thought to be one of the most important creators of the Polish modern art<sup>2</sup>.

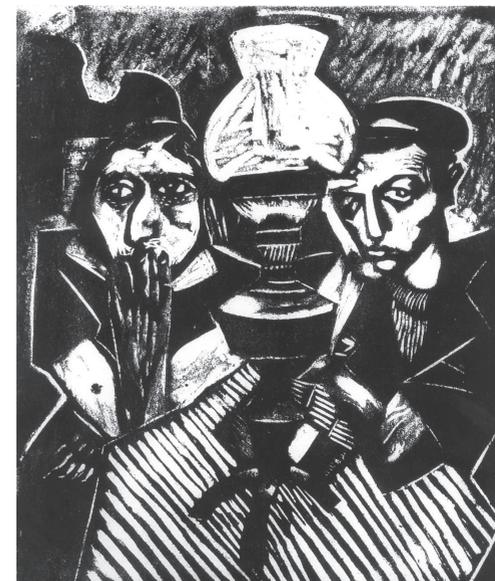
Stern began his education in the primary school in his hometown, and in 1916, probably because of the oncoming Galicia front and the occupation of a part of Galicia by the Russians, the Stern Family moved over to Bohemia<sup>3</sup>. Jonasz attended an Austrian school there for a year which enabled him to obtain a very good command of the German language. After his return to Kałusz he continued his education in the primary school and then in a Polish private high school. However, even then he concentrated not entirely on education; he established contacts with artists, together with Leopold Buczkowski he painted icons for the Russian Orthodox Church in the vicinity of Kałusz, and he also accepted orders from the Polish manor houses. In 1922, he began education in Professor Paweł Gajewski's class in the Department of the Decorative Arts at the State Industrial School in Lviv at the same time earning a living in a printer's workshop. Gradually losing an interest in traditional painting he returned to Kałusz, working as a laborer — among others — in a joiner's shop, and leading a political activity which — after painting — was his second passion<sup>4</sup>. His hometown was at that time — of course as for the realities of Galicia — quite a thriving center of the workers' movement.

In 1925, he attempted unsuccessfully to pass the entrance examinations to the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, and in 1926, he joined the Communist Party of the Western Ukraine becoming — in time — a member of the County Committee in Kałusz. Due to his activity in the party he was arrested several times. Two years later, he moved to Krakow where he got himself employed in the «Tęcza» [Rainbow] Fittings Factory as a laborer and in the printing houses at retouching reproductions, taking — at the same time — lessons of painting in Ludwika Mehoffler's private school. He was luckily accepted at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts and since October 1929 he began his studies being successively a student of a few outstanding Polish professors of painting: Władysław Jarocki, Fryderyk Pautsch, Teodor Axentowicz, and Stanisław Kamocki. He also got acquainted with Andrzej Stopka, Henryk Wiciński and Janusz Woźniakowski, with whom

in 1929, he established a unit of the Communist Union of the Polish Youth at the Krakow ASP. In the same year, he began his activity at the Jagiellonian University in the Union of the Independent Socialist Youth «*Życie*» [Life]<sup>5</sup>.

However, Stern did not feel at ease at the ASP among lecturers representing mostly the art of the Young Poland and the Artistic Society «*Sztuka*» [the Art], consolidating the members of the Academy around its program. An important artistic event in 1931 in Krakow was an exhibition of the so called Paris Committee, the group of artists who — after their return from the French capital — had continued the traditions of the European painting in the area of colors. Stern did not remain indifferent to the changes and got engaged in the innovation course in art. The continuation of those changes was the establishment of the so called First Krakow Group, within the ranks of which — beside Stern — were such artists as Henryk Wiciński, Leopold Lewicki, Sasza Blonder, Maria Jeremianka, Stanisław Osostowicz, Bolesław Stawiński, Berta Grünberg<sup>6</sup>. The members of the Group, coming from different social and national milieus (there were Poles, Jews and Ukrainians), each of them was influenced by cubism, abstractionism and surrealism, but at the same time they were linked with the leftist political views of the revolutionary social program. Stern had played a significant role in the ideological development of the Group both on the artistic and political platforms<sup>7</sup>. Due to his knowledge of German he translated the works written in that language for his colleagues and two of those works had strongly influenced the shaping up of the artistic viewpoints of the members of the Group: *On Spirituality in Art* by Kandinsky and *The Book of New Artists* by Laszlo Maholy-Nagy (a lecturer of the Bauhaus). The book by Vassily Kandinsky was a sort of a manifesto and the beginning of the introduction of the abstractionist trend: an artist cannot present the world through the forms presenting the elements of the real world<sup>8</sup>.

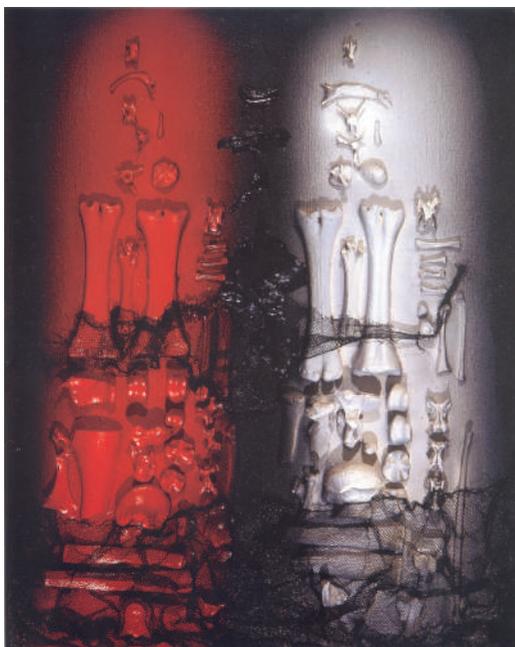
At that time, the meeting place of the Group was a study of famous Polish sculptor Professor Xawery Dunikowski, and the first common exhibition took place in 1933 in the Society of the Friends of Fine Arts in Lviv, and then in Krzemieniec (1934), and in the House of Visual Artists in Krakow. Not too many Stern's works have been preserved from that period of his creative activity, and among them it is worthy to mention a few drawings made in various techniques, like *The Unemployed* from 1933 (the ASP in Krakow), *The Card Players* from 1934, *At the Lamp* from 1934, and *The Masks* from 1934 (at a private collection in Poznań) in which he mainly dealt with social issues<sup>9</sup>. The most significant for Stern's pre-war works is the drawing entitled *The Unemployed*. The deformed silhouette of a man, the enlargement of his idle hands and his bare feet additionally enhance the expressionism of the form and the power of the work's meaning. A motif of the unemployed quite often appeared in the works of the members of the Krakow Group mostly those of Sasha Blonder and Leopold Lewicki but it



1. Jonasz Stern. *At the Lamp*, 1934  
(private collection in Poznań)



2. Jonasz Stern. *Still Life*, 1948  
(private collection in Poznań)



3. Jonasz Stern. *Table X*, 1977  
(private collection in Poznań)



4. Jonasz Stern. Cover. *Catalogue of Lviv Exhibition (The National Museum in Lviv, 22.07.2008-17.08.2008)*

was Stern who was able to depict best «the drama of idleness and poverty» of the unemployed from the times of the Great Economic Crisis of the 30s.

Apart from the more realistic drawings, Stern also cultivated the painting of the plastic solutions close to abstraction. He created cubist compositions with the elements of surrealism. One of the few preserved pictures from that period is *The Act* from 1932 (The National Museum in Krakow) presenting a woman in sharp blocks and colors which makes an impression of brutality. What's interesting, the work was created when Stern practiced in Professor Axentowicz' study who was an adherent of a different mannerism in art. It was first exhibited at the group Exhibition of the Modern Visual Artists in the Institute of the Propaganda of Art in Warsaw. The art critics were not impressed and the reviews were unfavorable<sup>10</sup>.

One cannot ignore yet another area of Stern's activities in the mid-war times. After having finished his studies in 1935, he joined the Union of the Polish Visual Artists (ZPAP) and started to cooperate with Józef Jarema's visual art theatre «Cricot», for the performances of which he created stage designs. Although no traces of his stage design works have been preserved, nonetheless, the co-creators remember the activities of particular artists. It is known for sure that Stern developed decorations for such dramas as *The Female Element* in 1936, *The Liberation* by Stanisław Wyspiański in 1938; he also designed costumes for Józef Jarema's satirical puppet show *The Krakow Tartar Rider, the Corporate Employee and Hamlet*, as well as the costumes and masks for the political satire *Herod and the Ariovs* in 1937. Besides, he performed in the «Tam Tam» Theatre in the season of 1935/36 playing the role of a Terrible Robber in a parody of *The Return of a Father* by Adam Mickiewicz and the Letter C in *The Joyful Krakow Radio Wave*<sup>11</sup>.

The performances, particularly those of a political tinge, and the membership in political movements regarded «subversive» brought onto the Artist repressive measures on the part of the Krakow Governor. In February 1937, Stern's name was deleted from the list of the ZPAP, and a year later he was sent to Bereza Kartuska, a detention camp destined mostly for the opponents of the current regime, and among them the radical Leftists. It is known that the influential artistic circles intervened on his behalf, yet he left the prison only after — the routine in such cases — six months<sup>12</sup>.

After the outbreak of World War II, Stern with his wife Teofila Kleinberger went to Lviv (his wife died after throwing herself at the high voltage barbed wire in Auschwitz), where in 1940 he became the chairman of the artistic cooperative «Chudoźnik» [A Painter]; a year later in spring, he was called up to serve in the Anti-Aircraft Defense Units of the Red Army and in autumn — after the city had been taken over by the Germans — he found himself in the Lviv Ghetto. For nearly two years, he had been a forced laborer in — among others — airfield in Skniłów. At the beginning of 1943, he became a member of the Polish Workers'

Party in Lviv<sup>13</sup>. In that year, he escaped from a transport to the extermination camp in Sobibór and returned to the Ghetto (in the Artist's biographical notes the false Belżec destination of the transport is cited; in fact, the transports from Lviv were then directed to the death camp in Sobibór in the Lublin district)<sup>14</sup>. On 1 June, Stern faced the execution squad in the Janowski Gorge in Lviv but due to falling down he miraculously avoided being hit with a bullet. He made his way over the Carpathian Mountains to Hungary and reached Budapest obtaining help from the Polish Committee and Professor Stefan Filipkiewicz. He was sent to a refugee camp near Budapest and remained there until the liberation<sup>15</sup>. In April 1945, he returned to Krakow, yet again joined the Polish Workers' Party (since 1948, the United Polish Workers' Party), resumed activities in the ZPAP, renewed his friendship with Jaremińska and her husband Kornel Filipowicz, and got himself engaged in the artistic life of the city<sup>16</sup>.

Stern's creative activity after 1945 had been — for a few successive years — a continuation of the pre-war abstraction; a series of monotypes, drawings and watercolors of a surrealist nature appeared. In December 1948, the Artist's works were shown at the 1st Exhibition of Modern Art organized by the Artists' Club in the halls of the Society of the Friends of Fine Arts in Krakow. In 1948-49, Stern stayed in Paris on a scholarship funded by the Ministry of Culture and Art observing a gradual development of the modern art, its possibilities, directions, and the emerging tendencies. After his return to Krakow, he stopped exhibiting his works since he could not or did not want to accept soc-realism. He continued to create, however, and in nearly 10 years about 200 abstractionist and surrealist compositions were created. An example of the works from that period of time is a cycle of oil paintings entitled *The Compositions*<sup>17</sup>.

Since 1952, Stern had been working in the Department of Stage Designs of the Krakow ASP, and two years later he became a full time assistant professor in the Department of Painting. In 1955-57, he acted as a Vice-Chancellor of the Academy<sup>18</sup>.

At the same time, the Krakow Group was reactivated (known as the Krakow Group II), and Stern was its chairman multiple times. The Group included also Maria Jeremińska, Tadeusz Kantor, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Jadwiga Maziarska, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Erna Rosenstein and Jerzy Skarżyński, and its headquarters were located — by the decision of the Board of the City of Krakow — in historical cellars in Krzysztofory. Stern — together with other members of the Group — participated in all exhibitions in Poland and abroad<sup>19</sup>.

The year of 1959 was for Stern also a year of a six months stay in Italy financed by the Minister of Culture and Art. He met Alberto Burri there and got acquainted with the paintings of a matter. After his return to Poland, the Artist began textural and structural experiments; using the techniques of collage and assemblage he gradually introduced animal and fish bones, and fisherman's

nets into his pictures. In the cycle entitled *The Destruction* he returned to the reminiscences of the war. The title covers the whole series of paintings being a set of works linked by the subject and mood. After 1965, he more and more often utilized the fish skeletons and leather, which he treated as signs of the passing of time and the Holocaust. He created a cycle of collages, the examples of which are such compositions as *The Fish Are Leaving Us* from 1965, *The Fate of Eels* from 1965, *Summa Summarum* from 1967, and *The Fish That Wanted to Swim* from 1969. The paintings combine fabric, plastic net, fish remnants, and a dried flower creating a composition which might be called an underwater landscape<sup>20</sup>.

It is worthy to mention that in 1959, he was nominated an associated professor and became again a Vice-Chancellor of the Academy, yet after the anti-Semitic riots and attacks of the communist authority against the Jews and people of Jewish origin in March 1968, he was — informally and before the end of the term — dismissed; however, a year later, he received an award of the Minister of Culture and Art 1 Class in the area of visual arts. In February 1973, he was nominated a full professor, and in 1974, he retired<sup>21</sup>.

In the 70s, richer and more complicated formal sets started to appear in his paintings, made mostly from fabric in one color and varied light settings. They are called *The Zones* and were created in 1974. A few years before his death, Stern created a cycle composed of bone pieces directly referring to the Tables of Moses, and being gravestones of the murdered Jewish Nation. The collage under the title *The Humiliation* from 1984 is — as Włodzimierz Nowaczyk wrote in his introduction to the catalogue from the exhibition *100 Years of Stern. The Works of Jonasz Stern (1904-1988) from 30s till 80s*, Sopot 2005 — «one of the most moving works on the Holocaust that were created in Poland»<sup>22</sup>.

Jonasz Stern had — in total — 20 exhibitions and individual shows in Poland, beginning with the first one in 1958 in Sopot, and ending with the last one in 1986 in the Gallery of Stanisław Witkiewicz Theatre in Zakopane. He additionally participated in about 150 group exhibitions in Poland and abroad<sup>23</sup>.

After his death, Stern's works were exhibited less frequently and the last individual exhibition took place in 2005 in the State Art Gallery in Sopot. Due to the initiative of its directorate and Ukrainian partners the presentation of the Artist's works was prepared in 2008 in Ukraine to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Stern's death. The exhibition entitled «Jonasz Stern (1904-1988) — The Return to Lviv. The Landscape of Silence» took place in Andrzej Szeptycki National Museum in Lviv and was running from 22 July to 17 August 2008. The exhibition contained Stern's works coming from all the stages of his creative life, beginning with the pre-war drawings on social subjects, through the geometrical abstractions of the 50s, to the compositions with bones. Besides, there were also collages making a

reference to the war experiences of the Artist and the fate of the Jewish Nation sentenced to extermination<sup>24</sup>.

The Lviv exhibition was a certain kind of Stern's «return to the roots» since it was staged in the city where he made his first attempts to paint in Professor Gajewski's study...

#### Notes:

1. The article is based on the paper entitled 'Jonah Stern, 1904-1988. A Forgotten Artist?', delivered at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem during the 15th World Congress of Jewish Studies (1-6 August, 2009).

2. «Polski Słownik Biograficzny» (later on: PSB), Tom XLIII/3, z. 178, p. 461-465; Archive of the Academy of the Fine Arts in Krakow (later on: ASP), Students' Cards: Jonasz Stern [no number].

3. On the Russian policy in Galicia and Jewish refugees in Vienna and in the other countries of the Habsburg monarchy, see: Bachturina, A. *Politika rossijskoj impierii w wostocznoj Galicji w gody pierwszej mirowej wojny*, Moskwa 2000; Bieńkowski, W. *Polacy w Wiedniu w latach pierwszej wojny światowej (Działalność społeczno-polityczna i kulturalno-oświatowa)*, «Studia Historyczne» 1992, nr 3; Hödl K., *Galician Jewish Migration to Vienna*, «Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry» 1999, vol. 12.

4. Blum, H. *Jonasz Stern*, Kraków 1978, p. 4-6.

5. Markowska, A. *Język Neuera. O twórczości Jonasza Sterna*, Cieszyn 1998, p. 11-12.

6. Ibidem, s. 12-13.

7. *Artyści żydowscy w Krakowie 1873-1939*, Kraków 2008, p. 238

8. Polish edition: Kandinsky, W. *O duchowości w sztuce*, Łódź 1996.

9. *Stulecie Sterna. Prace Jonasza Sterna (1904-1988) z lat 30.-80.*, Sopot 2005; Henryk Wiciński i I Grupa Krakowska 1932-1937, Sopot 2007, p. 61.

10. *Henryk Wiciński i I Grupa Krakowska 1932-1937*, Sopot 2007, p. 70.

11. Blum, H., p. 14, 18.

12. Markowska, A., p. 12-13.

13. Ibidem.

14. Kuwałek, R. *Obóz Zagłady w Bełżcu*, Lublin-Bełżec 2005, p. 30.

15. PSB, Tom XLIII/3, z. 178, p. 463.

16. Ibidem. See also: Filipowicz, K. *Rozstanie i spotkanie*, Kraków 1995, p. 212.

17. Blum, H., P. 23-30.

18. ASP, Personal Documents of the Lecturers of the Academy of the Fine Arts in Krakow, Jonasz Stern's File: S. 133 [no number].

19. *Stulecie Sterna*, p. 66-71.

20. Ibidem, p. 15.

21. PSB, Tom XLIII/3, z. 178, p. 463-464.

22. *Stulecie Sterna*, p. 69.

23. Ibidem.

24. See catalogue in Polish and Ukrainian languages: *Jonasz Stern (1904-1988). Powrót do Lwowa. Krajobraz z milczenia*, Sopot 2008.