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Lost and Found, or about Henryk Gotlib's *Polish War-Time Triptych* and its Changing Fate

In December 1948, on the occasion of the Unification Congress of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), an unusual parcel arrived in Poland from London, which contained three rolled up canvas paintings of monumental size. After they were unrolled, the addressees' of the parcel saw oil paintings that were signed but not dated. They formed one piece of art, so it was necessary to follow a specific order when viewing them. The largest painting had to be placed in the center, with the other two smaller paintings as wings on the sides. The view was astonishing, especially because of the extremely vivid and intense colors. They were used to show a vision of the occupation of Warsaw (central composition), a symbolic representation of the rebuilding of the country (left wing), and the tragedy of a peasant family affected by the war (right wing).

Each painting was given its own title as a separate work, and the name given to the entire composition, *Polish war-time triptych*, combined them into a synthesis designed to show "Poland at war"¹ and commemorate the country's hardship.

¹ This is what reviewers sometimes called the work; see: A. Drwęska, "Wspomnienie o Henryku Gotlibie" [A memory of Henryk Gotlib], *Tydzień Polski* 1967, no. 2, p. 4.

The first painting is titled *Warsaw, September 1939*,² the second – *Mickiewicz's Return to Krakow*, and the third *Stabat Mater*. They were all painted outside of Poland, during World War II. It was a gift, not an official order. The parcel was accepted, and its sender (and author of the works) was Henryk Gotlib.

Born in 1890 in Cracow, the artist was educated at the local Academy of Fine Arts (in Wojciech Weiss's studio) and at the same time at the Faculty of Economics and Law at Jagiellonian University.³ In 1910, Gotlib started his studies at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna, and three years later he moved to Munich, where he continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Angelo Jank's studio. He then returned to Poland and settled in Warsaw; after the outbreak of World War I, he was drafted into the army. The artist did not actively participate in combat operations, as he was assigned to the press department. Gotlib spent the entire war in Warsaw and organized his first exhibitions at the time. In 1919, the artist returned to Krakow, where he became a member of the Formist group, among others. He left Cracow in 1923 to settle in Paris, and only returned to his home city seven years later. In 1930–1938, he was actively involved in the development of cultural life in Poland: he organized exhibitions; he taught drawing and painting at Mehoffer's *Wolna Szkoła Malarstwa* [Free School of Painting] in Cracow; he was a member of The Association of Polish Artists and Designers and an editor of the *Głos Plastyków* periodical.⁴ He also made numerous trips abroad at the time, including to Italy, Greece, Spain, and the Netherlands. In 1937, he returned to Warsaw, and during a brief trip to England, he met Janet Blanche Marcham, to whom he proposed the next day.⁵ Shortly after their wedding, the couple planned to settle in Poland. In the summer of 1939, they left for England with the intention of a three-month vacation stay. Gotlib wanted to use that time to paint some

² The entire triptych is currently stored at the National Museum in Warsaw under inventory number MPW 3675–3677.

³ National Museum in Warsaw, Prints and Drawings Study (hereinafter: PDS), "Curriculum Vitae of Henryk Gotlib," typescript.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ J. Gotlib, "Janet's story," <http://henrykgotlib.com/janets-story/> [accessed on May 26, 2016].

landscapes in Cornwall.⁶ He did not expect that the outbreak of war would force him to stay in Britain.

In wartime London, Henry Gotlib led a very active life.⁷ He was the head of the Polish Painting Studio,⁸ which was used by recognized artists;⁹ at their request, he revised the works created, and initiated “permanent discussions on painting topics.”¹⁰ The artist was involved in the promotion knowledge of Polish art in England. He published synthesized presentations in English, in which he tried to describe Polish art from the Middle Ages to modern times.¹¹ He also commented fairly regularly on current exhibitions in the pages of the Polish press in England.¹² He also devoted considerable attention to theoretical thought about art, writing down his observations in his diary,¹³ and published reflections on the subject.¹⁴

Gotlib usually painted several paintings at the same time. He presented them in individual exhibitions and with the London Group, a member of which he became in 1942.¹⁵ Gotlib’s works were reminiscent of the paintings of Pierre Bonnard, from whom Gotlib gained the knowledge of “clear and logical organization of the painting, where forms flow from the needs of

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ A. Drwęska, “Wspomnienie o Henryku Gotlibie” [A memory of Henryk Gotlib].

⁸ “Pracownia malarska w Londynie” [Painting studio in London], *Dziennik Polski*, November 17, 1943.

⁹ Among others, Bronisława Michałowska, Zofia Sturm de Strem, Adam Kossowski, and Tadeusz Potworowski; occasionally also Zygmunt Haupt and Tadeusz Koper; see: ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ This refers to a book published in London in 1942 titled *Polish Painting*, with an introduction by R. H. Wilenski. This is a rather selective and subjective study, however, intended for an English reader and presenting at least a small part of what Poles created in Poland and abroad; see: H. Gotlib, *Polish Painting*, London 1942.

¹² Most importantly, in *Wiadomości Polskie* and *Polska Walcząca*.

¹³ PDS, H. Gotlib, “Dziennik Londyński” [London diary], manuscript. Published by Stanisław Frenkiel in 1969: “Dziennik Londyński” [London diary], introduction by S. Frenkiel, *Wiadomości* 1969, no. 10 (1197), p. 2.

¹⁴ Written in late 1938/1939, published in Polish in 1947; see: H. Gotlib, *Wędrowki malarza* [Wanderings of a painter], Warsaw 1947.

¹⁵ T. Terlecki, “O sztuce malarskiej Henryka Gotliba” [On Henryk Gotlib’s painting art], *Wiadomości Polskie, Polityczne i Literackie* 1942, no. 51/52 (145/146), p. 4.

color, which in turn is enclosed in strictly measured and sensed shapes.”¹⁶ Painted in the “Bonnard” manner, the paintings gained great popularity in London and found their admirers and regular collectors.¹⁷

In the fog-shrouded city, his painting “stood out and shone,”¹⁸ being “a kind of painting revelation.”¹⁹ The triptych was also a “revelation.” The monumental size of the paintings (263 × 302 cm, 242 × 212 cm, and 241.5 × 214 cm), a novelty for the art community in England, was very impressive. His decision to paint three large-format oil paintings during the war, at a time when the purchase of the necessary materials far exceeded his budget,²⁰ and buying some of them was quite difficult,²¹ was astonishing. “It is strange,” wrote Zdzisław Ruszkowski, “that during the total war [...] Gotlib’s painting does not stop, but consistently approaches greater and greater strength and fullness of expression.”²² Tymon Terlecki even believed that Gotlib “creates beyond all ‘profitability’ and practices painting that completely ‘does not pay off’ and is ‘inviabile’.”²³

Gotlib’s decision was all the more astonishing because until then, with the exception of one work,²⁴ he had never created such monumental paintings and had never before taken up the subject of war. He assumed that painting should “bring joy and enrich the spiritual life of as many people as possible,”²⁵ and therefore his works comprised mostly nudes, portraits,

¹⁶ PDS, Z. Ruszkowski, “Henryk Gotlib,” manuscript, London 1947, 8 pages.

¹⁷ A. Drwęska, “Wspomnienie o Henryku Gotlibie” [A memory of Henryk Gotlib].

¹⁸ Z. Ruszkowski, “Henryk Gotlib,” p. 5.

¹⁹ A. Drwęska, “Wspomnienie o Henryku Gotlibie” [A memory of Henryk Gotlib].

²⁰ As Janet Gotlib wrote, they lacked the money to purchase the painting support for their first painting. So she machine-stitched together several pieces of regular linen. Her words are confirmed by the visible stitching marks on the surface of the canvas; see: J Gotlib, “Janet’s story.”

²¹ Gotlib needed several dozen eggs to prime the canvas, and these were already rationed at the time; see: *ibidem*.

²² Z. Ruszkowski, “Henryk Gotlib,” p. 1.

²³ T. Terlecki, “O sztuce malarskiej Henryka Gotliba” [On Henryk Gotlib’s painting art].

²⁴ This concerns the painting *In Spain* showing a vision of the country’s civil war in 1937. It was also a large-format canvas, but smaller than the ones Gotlib used to paint the triptych. The painting has not survived; see: S. Zahorska, “Malarstwo Henryka Gotliba” [Henryk Gotlib’s painting], *Wiadomości Literackie* 1938, no. 21, p. 10.

²⁵ H. Gotlib, “Sztuka dla mas” [Art for the masses], *Kurier Polski*, December 19, 1945, p. 2.

landscapes, and still lifes. He also believed that there are exceptional moments in the life of nations, such as wars and revolutions, when it is justifiable to make paintings on themes different than in peacetime.²⁶

However, the change in subject matter did not alter the form of his works. The paintings making up the triptych were painted using Gotlib's characteristic post-impressionist style and a typically "'Gotlibian' tonality of bright and definite colors,"²⁷ in which "greens are interspersed with yellowish spots of cadmiums and ochres, with pink shades of sienna."²⁸ This produced an astonishing end result: a cheerful, even joyful, luminous color scheme depicting a vision of war. This dissonance is most evident in the *Stabat Mater* painting. Even if the situation shown is meant to express tragedy (a couple of peasants standing over the dead bodies of a young girl and a farmhand, the title *Stabat Mater*:²⁹ a woman, immersed in sorrow and thoughts, and a man, his back turned to those murdered), the colors by no means reflect this. It is hard to get rid of the impression that the girl's pink naked body lying in the foreground looks perfectly healthy. Gotlib's position in London was so well established³⁰ that even such a clearly discernible dissonance was perceived as an advantage:

There is something very mature about this work, whose painterly qualities do not hinder its literary impact. This is because artistic contemplation does not interfere with the fact that the viewer must feel the sadness of the tragic

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ B. M. [B. Michałowska], "Artyści polscy w 'London Group'" [Polish artists in the "London Group"], *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza* 1944, no. 259, p. 3.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ The title of the painting and the motif of a mother standing over her killed child are associated with the medieval work *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, in which the Mother of God grieves over the dead Christ. Most likely, Gotlib was also familiar with Józef Wittlin's 1942 poem that was also titled *Stabat Mater*. Perhaps the painting was influenced by the poem, as some of its stanzas reflect well the situation in the painting: "The grieving mother stood on the square. / Her dead son was hanging there. / In the frightful world the mother stood, / A servant's kerchief on her head" (translated by Joy Davidman); see: J. Wittlin, *Stabat mater*, in: idem, *Poezje* [Poems], Warsaw 1981, p. 127.

³⁰ It was not only Gotlib's activities that earned him respect, but also his age. He was the oldest Polish painter in exile in England during the war; see: C. Poznański, *Polish Artist in Great Britain*, London 1944.

twilight of the Polish countryside, where a family stands over the corpses of those killed.³¹

It is worth adding that only those who had the opportunity to view the images in person could feel this dissonance. The press publish only black-and-white reproductions, which did not allow the discovery of the colors of these works. Incredibly, the first color photographs of the triptych were not published until 2008, in Douglas Hall's book *Art in Exile: Polish Painters in Post-War Britain*.³² Not surprisingly, the paintings have so far received little attention from art historians.

The research concerning Henryk Gotlib's triptych is not very extensive. Except for Hall's book, which contains several interesting subchapters on the subject, mention of these paintings appeared in the catalogue of an exhibition held in 2011 in Gdańsk, which presented the work of several émigré artists, including Henryk Gotlib.³³

Mentions concerning the triptych can also be found in the catalogue³⁴ accompanying the artist's retrospective exhibition held in 1980³⁵ at the National Museum in Warsaw. Biographical materials (including a large collection of press clippings, a list of Henryk Gotlib's publications and exhibitions, and his biography), donated to the PDS in 1977 by Janet Gotlib,³⁶ also provide valuable information. They also include the artist's diary³⁷ and a large collection of his drawings, including 20 preparatory studies for the

³¹ B. M. [B. Michałowska], "Artyści polscy w 'London Group'" [Polish artists in the "London Group"].

³² D. Hall, *Art in Exile: Polish Painters in Post-war Britain*, Bristol 2008.

³³ *Sztuka na uchodźstwie: Gotlib, Ruszkowski, Topolski, Żuławski: z kolekcji Tomasza Zieleniewskiego* [Art in exile: Gotlib, Ruszkowski, Topolski, Żuławski: from Tomasz Zieleniewski's collection], [exhibition catalogue], St. John Center in Gdańsk, August 31–September 25, 2011, Gdańsk 2011.

³⁴ *Henryk Gotlib 1890–1966 Katalog wystawy malarstwa i rysunku* [Henryk Gotlib 1890–1966 Painting and drawing exhibition catalogue], Warsaw, January–February 1980.

³⁵ Organized on the initiative of Prof. Stanisław Lorentz and Irena Jakimowicz in cooperation with Janet Gotlib.

³⁶ They are currently housed in the Prints and Drawings Study of the PDS.

³⁷ H. Gotlib, "Dziennik Londyński" [London diary].

triolet, done in pencil and watercolor on paper. A memoir written down by Janet Gotlib³⁸ is also a valuable resource. They contain, among other things, detailed information on the creation of the triiolet.

Another interesting source of information about the triiolet has survived: a several-minutes long recording kept in the collection of The Archives of Polish Emigration in Toruń.³⁹ It is an interview with Henryk Gotlib, the content of which, incidentally, inspired this article. In the interview, the artist talked about, among other things, the immediate reason for painting the triiolet and what the individual paintings represent. Gotlib gave more such interviews, but their excerpts have been preserved only in the contents of the articles.⁴⁰ This time we are dealing with an original recording, the contents of which are probably being published for the first time.

The interviewer was a woman, but her identity remains unknown, as does the institution for which she conducted the interview. Instead, the mysterious interviewer introduced her interlocutor and precisely defined the moment of the meeting: Gotlib was about to make a trip to Warsaw at the special invitation of the Polish Government. The visit was of considerable importance to the artist, as it was to culminate in an exhibition of the triiolet at the National Museum in Warsaw. This was to be the first presentation of these paintings in Poland, on top of which it was the first time they were to be shown all together. In England, they have always been presented separately. The first part was probably exhibited in late 1940,⁴¹ and certainly in 1941 at an exhibition of Contemporary Continental Art at the J. Leger and Son Gallery.⁴² In 1943, it was also presented at

³⁸ J. Gotlib, "Janet's story."

³⁹ University Library in Toruń, Archives of Emigration, "Wywiad z Henrykiem Gotlibem na początku października 1966 roku" [Interview with Henryk Gotlib in early October 1966], [recording]; see: Annex to the article.

⁴⁰ See: "Lost Triiolet presented to Poland," *The Times*, October 3, 1966; E. Garzdecka, "Polski tryiolet wojenny. Spotkanie z Henrykiem Gotlibem" [Polish war-time triiolet. A meeting with Henryk Gotlib], *Trybuna Ludu* 1966, no. 285, p. 6.

⁴¹ "'Warszawa' Henryka Gotliba" [Henryk Gotlib's "Warsaw"], *Wiadomości Polskie, Polityczne i Literackie* 1940, no. 30, p. 5.

⁴² *Exhibition of Contemporary Continental Art: paintings, watercolours, sculptures, including a monumental work by Henryk Gotlib 'Warsaw, Sept. 1939'*, [folder], London 1941.

the YMCA,⁴³ and the second part was shown at the Royal Academy.⁴⁴ The parts of the triptych were also shown at the Fifth⁴⁵ and Sixth War-Time Exhibition⁴⁶ organized by the London Group.

The presentation in Warsaw was significant for yet another reason: it fulfilled one of the artist's greatest dreams, which was to exhibit his works at the National Museum.⁴⁷ However, what is most relevant to this argument is the date of that exhibition. Both the interview and the exhibition took place in October 1966, which was 18 years after the artist sent the paintings to Poland. What happened to them for so many years? Why were they not displayed? How did it happen that the exhibition was organized after such a long time? Let us follow this interesting story.

The triptych's message to Poland in 1948 had its tangible effects. The artist in exile made it clear that he supported the Communist Party and, in the long run, would try to return to the country. Gotlib never hid his leftist views. In 1917, he joined the Polish Socialist Party⁴⁸ and even gave occasional speeches to workers.⁴⁹ Gotlib sought possibilities to return from exile after the war. In 1945 he came to Poland, but for a short time, for the duration of a PEN Club convention.⁵⁰ Although he returned to England,⁵¹ he was very positive about the future of the country, ruled by the emerging Communist government.⁵² The artist must have acquired this optimism as early as in 1943, when he painted the composition *Mickiewicz's Return*

⁴³ E. Markowa, "Sztuka dla żołnierza z udziałem artystów polskich" [Art for the soldier with the participation of Polish artists], *Dziennik Polski* 1943, no. 796, p. 3.

⁴⁴ H. Gotlib, "Mickiewicz wraca do Krakowa" [Mickiewicz's Return to Cracow], *Polska Walcząca* 1943, no. 32, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *The London Group. October 26–November 25th 1943 Fifth War-Time Exhibition, 26 Oct.–25 Nov. 1943*, [exhibition catalog], London 1943; "Malarze polscy w Wielkiej Brytanii" [Polish painters in the Great Britain], *Wiadomości Polskie, Polityczne i Literackie* 1943, no. 39 (185), p. 5.

⁴⁶ *The London Group. Sixth War-Time Exhibition. October 12th to November 9th, 1944. Royal Academy*, [exhibition catalogue], London 1944.

⁴⁷ E. Garztecka, "Polski tryptyk wojenny. Spotkanie z Henrykiem Gotlibem" [Polish war-time triptych. A meeting with Henryk Gotlib].

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁹ H. Gotlib, "Sztuka dla mas" [Art for the masses].

⁵⁰ J. Gotlib, "Janet's story."

⁵¹ *Ibidem.*

⁵² *Ibidem.*

to Cracow. In his opinion, it was “a vision of Poland coming back to life. [...] a vision of the return of Polish culture. Of everything that is alive and valuable in Poland.”⁵³ For Gotlib, the symbol of these finest Polish qualities was the figure of Adam Mickiewicz. The painting shows a revived statue of the bard designed by Tadeusz Rydygier in Cracow’s Main Square, which returns to its pedestal after being destroyed by the Nazis in 1940. He is accompanied by muses (allegories)⁵⁴ and a crowd of cheering people.

Sending the paintings to Poland proved to be beneficial. A few months later Gotlib was offered to return to Poland, where he was to assume the position of a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. The artist accepted the offer without a second thought. His enthusiasm was fueled by his belief in the unlimited creativity he would find in the country.⁵⁵ He left London and returned to Poland. By the academic year of 1949/1950, he was already a professor at the Academy.

The disappointment he experienced upon his arrival in Poland was bitter. This is because it was “a period of pushing Socialist Realism [...] There were public apologies and choral ideological discussions in Poland at the time denouncing the formalist Western art.”⁵⁶

“Gotlib lasted one year,”⁵⁷ balancing between the preservation of autonomy and fitting in with the rules of socialist realism that the communist government imposed on artists.⁵⁸ In May 1950, he returned to England.

⁵³ “Wywiad z Henrykiem Gotlibem na początku października 1966 roku” [Interview with Henryk Gotlib in early October 1966].

⁵⁴ It is likely that Janet Gotlib posed for all of them, and she certainly did for two. This can be confirmed by the fact that in the 1940s the artist made several gypsum sculptures according to earlier paintings, including at least two according to *Mickiewicz’s Return to Cracow*. The sculptures were described as images of his wife. These are depictions of Janet combing her hair with her fingers and Janet raising her right hand; see: *Sztuka na uchodźstwie* [Art in exile], p. 44; L. G. Bonhams, *Works from the Studio of Henryk Gotlib, L. G.*, [exhibition catalog], October 22, 1991.

⁵⁵ J. Gotlib, “Janet’s story.”

⁵⁶ S. Frenkiel, “Słowo o Henryku Gotlibie” [A word about Henryk Gotlib], *Wiadomości* 1967, no. 16 (1098), p. 5.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ E.g., at the 1st National Exhibition of Fine Arts in Warsaw in March 1950, when exhibiting a painting entitled *Foreman from the Zieleniewski factory*; see: *1st National Exhibition of Fine Arts: National Museum in Warsaw, March – April 1950*, [exhibition catalogue], Warsaw 1950.

Embittered and disillusioned, he assessed the state of art in Poland completely differently:

When a painter like Cybis apologizes [...], admits that he is too old to learn to paint all over again from the beginning, apologizes for his ineptitude, and promises to improve, I think Polish art could not decline any further!⁵⁹

How did the communist government react to the news of Gotlib's departure, and the representatives of the émigré community to the news of his return? Both sides considered him *persona non grata*. In London, he was suspected of contacts with the Eastern Bloc,⁶⁰ was treated with reserve, and his friends distanced themselves from him. The stigma of Gotlib's departure also began to affect the reception of his work. An example is provided by Alicja Drwęska, who recalled with much reluctance one of his paintings, exhibited after his return from Poland. In her opinion, it clearly testified to "how brief exposure to 'social realism' has a disastrous effect on painters, even those with such deep ties to the West as Gotlib."⁶¹ Disapproval of Gotlib's stance was also expressed by the Polish side: the triptych, as an inconvenient memento, was considered lost. In practice, according to Stanisław Frenkiel, it was placed in the basement of the National Museum in Warsaw, where it "awaited better times."⁶² Frenkiel wrote that in 1956 Gotlib was to make efforts to find the paintings.⁶³ However, he did not mention what he was planning to do. Even if the artist, taking advantage of the relaxed policy of the Polish People's Republic towards émigrés at the time, took some action or talked with the Polish side, these efforts would be of no use.

The paintings were not found until 1966, thanks to the artist's wife, who asked for help from Eugeniusz Milnikiel, the former ambassador of the

⁵⁹ S. Frenkiel, "Słowo o Henryku Gotlibie" [A word about Henryk Gotlib].

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ A. Drwęska, "Polscy malarze w London Group" [Polish painters in the London Group], *Orzeł Biały* 1951, no. 9, p. 3.

⁶² S. Frenkiel, "Słowo o Henryku Gotlibie" [A word about Henryk Gotlib].

⁶³ Ibidem.

Polish People's Republic to the UK.⁶⁴ In June 1966, Milnikiel, while passing through England, paid a visit to Gotlib to work out the details regarding the exhibition of the triptych at the National Museum in Warsaw.

The artist recalled in a recorded interview that earlier the ambassador called him, saying: "Listen Henryk, your painting, your triptych has been found!"⁶⁵ One of the originators of the exhibition, according to the ambassador, was supposedly Professor Stanisław Lorentz.⁶⁶ Gotlib was not aware⁶⁷ that it was his wife who was the main initiator of the venture. We learn about her involvement in the matter from her memoirs.⁶⁸

Keeping it secret from her husband, she contacted the ambassador, as she was aware that her husband did not have many years left to live.⁶⁹ Janet understood that art was more important to her husband than anything else.⁷⁰ She convinced the ambassador that efforts to show the triptych in Warsaw were worthwhile. The date for the presentation of Gotlib's triptych was set for the autumn. However, it is difficult to find detailed information regarding this exposition. The artist's name cannot be found in the exhibition calendars for 1966.⁷¹ The Prints and Drawings Study archives also do not list Gotlib's individual exhibition at the time. The Grand Theater in Warsaw hosted the Congress of Polish Culture in early October, and the exhibition titled 1000 Years of Polish Culture was opened at the National Museum.⁷² Perhaps it was during that exhibition that an entire museum room was designated for the artist,⁷³ and the opening was to be held "with

⁶⁴ In office from 1953 to 1960.

⁶⁵ "Wywiad z Henrykiem Gotlibem w październiku 1966 roku" [Interview with Henryk Gotlib in October 1966].

⁶⁶ Stanisław Lorentz (1899–1991), an art historian, museologist, director of the National Museum in Warsaw in 1936–1982.

⁶⁷ This is evidenced by his statement; see: "Wywiad z Henrykiem Gotlibem w październiku 1966 roku" [Interview with Henryk Gotlib in October 1966].

⁶⁸ J. Gotlib, "Janet's story."

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ J. Kaczmarek, "Przegląd galerii warszawskich (IX–X 66)" [Review of Warsaw's galleries (September–October 1966)], *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1967, no. 1 (35).

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ A. Drwęska, "Wspomnienie o Henryku Gotlibie" [A memory of Henryk Gotlib].

public pomp and parade.”⁷⁴ However, this is only a guess, as there is no evidence whatsoever that the paintings were presented as part of that exhibition. According to Ignacy Witz, the artist was to be the guest of honor at the Congress.⁷⁵ Was that actually the case? Even if he was a guest of honor, he was an unofficial one, because in the publication that followed the Congress,⁷⁶ Gotlib’s name was not mentioned even once. It is also possible that the exhibition was not official and was organized only for the time of the artist’s visit.

One can also only guess what impression the paintings made on the viewers. It seems that the central segment of the triptych, depicting Warsaw being bombarded, must have attracted the most attention at that exhibition. This is quite an original vision. Among the civilians and soldiers and the bodies of the fallen, the figure of Christ in a crown of thorns and perizoma unexpectedly appears. The depiction of the Savior in the painting led to the work also being called “Christ in Warsaw.”⁷⁷ Interestingly, his physiognomy clearly resembles the facial features of Henryk Gotlib. Thus, we are dealing here with a crypto-self-portrait. On top of that, if one looks at the images a little more closely, one can recognize some other faces.

The assembled triptych presents nearly fifty figures (only heads, busts, half figures, and whole figures). When it turns out that these are portraits of prominent representatives of the Polish cultural milieu in London, on top of that depicted in a Polish landscape setting, the paintings become definitely more intriguing. It is difficult to recognize all the people, as Gotlib did not care about accurately depicting the details of the physiognomy. Faces painted with spots are not very clear. Only some of them are identifiable at first glance, most notably the portraits of Feliks Topolski,⁷⁸ Tymon Terlecki, and Adam Kossowski.⁷⁹ Sketches for the paintings, mostly described by Janet Gotlib, proved invaluable in identifying the others.

⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁷⁵ I. W. [I. Witz], “Henryk Gotlib,” *Życie Warszawy* 1967, no. 4, p. 4.

⁷⁶ *Kongres Kultury Polskiej 7–9 października 1966: materiały i dokumenty* [Congress of Polish culture 7–9 October 1966: materials and documents], Warsaw 1967.

⁷⁷ See: J. Gotlib, “Janet’s story.”

⁷⁸ In the painting titled *Warszawa, wrzesień 1939* [Warsaw, September 1939].

⁷⁹ In the painting *Mickiewicz’s Return to Cracow*.

Thanks to her work, it was possible to at least partially identify the persons portrayed in the triptych.

It was necessary to compare the images shown in the sketches and in the paintings, keeping in mind the likelihood of an error in the identification done by the artist's spouse⁸⁰ and the possibility of the artist himself changing the concept.⁸¹ Thanks to the sketches, we know, for example, that the paintings still depict the film director and screenwriter Eugeniusz Cękański⁸² and the sculptor Tadeusz Koper.⁸³

Most of the people portrayed posed for the triptych. The images are also carefully composed. There is no denying that they were created as a result of many hours of thinking, not on the spur of the moment. Gotlib did not need to record phenomena quickly and precisely. His concept of the work crystallized gradually, sometimes undergoing transformations. He rarely created under the influence of first impressions. As a matter of fact, we only know of one figure in the triptych that was created in this way. It is the portrait of a woman looking up and shading her eyes with her hand in the painting *Warsaw, September 1939*. Such a gesture was made by a half frightened, half curious Janet Gotlib during the first German air

⁸⁰ It seems that Janet Gotlib actually made a mistake in identifying the sketch with the PDS inventory number Fig. W. 6558, in which the figure of Marek Żuławski was described by the name of Eugeniusz Cękański. Cękański's figure appears in the sketch with the PDS number Fig. W. 6566. A comparison of the two sketches leads to the belief that this is not a portrait of the same person, and a comparison with Żuławski's photographs allows us to hypothesize that the sketch shows his features. This is confirmed by his wife's memoir. Indeed, she mentioned Żuławski among those posing for the triptych. Of those mentioned, only his image was missing from the set of sketches; see: J. Gotlib, "Janet's story."

⁸¹ Gotlib's creation of a portrait study for a painting did not always mean that the person would be included in the composition. An example is the figures of children portrayed in *Stabat Mater*. From the composition sketch (PDS Fig. W. 6548) for the painting *Warsaw, September 1939*, it appears that they were originally intended to appear in that painting. However, the artist changed the original concept, and it seems that this change was beneficial, as it increased the tension between the figures in the painting. The contrast between the innocent, oblivious children and the two murdered young people has a significant impact on the reception of this work.

⁸² In the painting titled *Warszawa, wrzesień 1939* [Warsaw, September 1939].

⁸³ In the painting *Mickiewicz's Return to Cracow*.

raids on London⁸⁴ when she and her husband ran outside for fear of being injured by shards of glass forming the roof of the studio that served as their apartment.⁸⁵ After the raid was over, Gotlib decided to immediately capture his wife's silhouette, paying special attention to her emotions and gestures.⁸⁶ A sketch was created depicting a silhouette of a woman down to her waist, shown *en trois quarts*, with her left hand raised to her forehead,⁸⁷ which was later placed in the central part of the triptych.

The experience of German air raids on London must have been an important one for the artist. Talking about it in an interview recorded in 1966, he even stated that it was the direct impulse that caused him to paint the first segment of the triptych.⁸⁸ Knowing that a month later parts of the work were reproduced in the pages of the *Wiadomości Polskie*,⁸⁹ it can be said without any doubt that such a large painting could not have been painted in a month. The thought of creating the first painting must have occurred to the artist much earlier than his statement would indicate.

Indeed, in an interview given to the English press, also in October 1966, Gotlib stated that he was prompted to make the paintings by information about the bombing of Warsaw in September 1939⁹⁰ that he heard on the radio.⁹¹ What is the reason for such a difference in the two versions of events? The artist's age and health may have contributed to this. At the

⁸⁴ So-called *Blitz* in September 1940.

⁸⁵ "Wywiad z Henrykiem Gotlibem w październiku 1966 roku" [Interview with Henryk Gotlib in October 1966].

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ PDS, *Studium żony artysty, szkic do obrazu Warszawa, wrzesień 1939* [Study of the artist's wife, a sketch for the painting Warsaw, September 1939], approx. 1940, watercolor, pencil, paper 76 × 56 cm, inv. no. Fig. W. 6547.

⁸⁸ "Wywiad z Henrykiem Gotlibem w październiku 1966 roku" [Interview with Henryk Gotlib in October 1966].

⁸⁹ "'Warszawa' Henryka Gotliba" [Henryk Gotlib's "Warsaw"], *Wiadomości Polskie* 1940, no. 30, p. 5.

⁹⁰ The distressing impression this information must have caused was compounded by the news that the artist's former apartment in the capital at the time and all the works left there had been destroyed; see: M. Kubicki [noted], "Twórczość Henryka Gotliba w oczach żony malarza" [The works of Henryk Gotlib in the eyes of the painter's wife], *Życie Literackie* 1975, no. 34, p. 15.

⁹¹ "Lost Triptych presented to Poland."

time of the interviews, Gotlib was 76 years old, and, as it later turned out, these were the last months of his life.⁹² He may have found it difficult to go back in his memory to the events that took place more than a quarter century earlier. His wife, more than 20 years younger, remembered many more relevant details.⁹³ According to her, the idea for the *Polish War-Time Triptych* was born in the apartment at Clifton Gardens⁹⁴ in London where they lived in late 1939 and early 1940. However, the apartment was too small to paint a painting of monumental proportions. A way out of the inconvenient situation was the information they heard from Feliks Topolski about a studio available for rent. Having taken advantage of that opportunity, Gotlib occupied that studio from January to July (or August) 1940 and at that time he was already working on “Warsaw.” Only later did he rent a house with a glass-roofed studio, which, after experiencing several German air raids, they also decided to leave.⁹⁵ Janet Gotlib’s version of the story seems convincing.

Perhaps the artist, claiming that the triptych was created under the influence of dramatic personal experiences, wanted to give more prominence to his wartime works as ones that documented current events. However, this does not change the fact that Gotlib created his paintings in the studio, not at the front. Due to his age, he was unable to take part in the war⁹⁶ and, with the exception of the experience in question, has seen virtually no warfare. He was not an artist-soldier⁹⁷ or an official War Artist.⁹⁸ According to Stefania Zahorska, Gotlib was “a painter of calm optimism”⁹⁹ and even the most “tragic expression of social struggles cannot [...] taint the serene

⁹² Gotlib died three months later, in December 1966; see: S. Frenkiel, “Słowo o Henryku Gotlibie” [A word about Henryk Gotlib].

⁹³ She wrote them down in her memoir; see: J. Gotlib, “Janet’s story.”

⁹⁴ This is where the first sketches for the triptych were created.

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ His age prevented him from serving in the military. At the time of the war, he was already 50 years old.

⁹⁷ Unlike Aleksander Żyw or Antoni Wasilewski, for example.

⁹⁸ Unlike Feliks Topolski, for example, who holds the status of the Official War Artist of Great Britain.

⁹⁹ S. Zahorska, “Malarstwo Henryka Gotliba” [Henryk Gotlib’s painting].

and peaceful vision of the world that shines through from his paintings.”¹⁰⁰ There is no denying that the *Polish War-Time Triptych* reflects the artist’s attitude to life. This is because it presents an “incredibly idyllic”¹⁰¹ and extremely static war.

Gotlib did not show the trenches, bomb shelters, and battles drawn by such artists as, for example, Feliks Topolski. In the paintings that make up the triptych, attention is drawn to the lack of any dynamics of warfare.¹⁰² However surprising such a concept of a wartime painting may seem, it is justified by the fact that the triptych depicts war as the artist knew it from his experience.

Note that Gotlib survived both world wars, but he did not actively participate in either. It can be said that he was mainly an observer. Similarly, most of the characters portrayed in the triptych are simply passive observers who take no initiative. Their feelings are sometimes only betrayed by gestures: agitation, surprise, interest, anxiety, worry, resignation, and impotence. The artist presented what he knew well. The two most significant Polish cities in Gotlib’s biography (Warsaw and Cracow) became the locations where the scenes of the first two paintings of the triptych take place. For the third painting, depicting the Polish countryside, Gotlib used the Breton landscape, which he knew well. It is hard not to notice that the basis for the composition of *Stabat Mater* was Gotlib’s 1929 painting *Landscape from Brittany*, with a cow and a shepherd.¹⁰³ The artist painted not only the landscapes he knew, but also the people he dealt with on a daily basis. Since the paintings show a plethora of prominent émigrés, they act as a meaningful document.

In addition, the triptych contains the quintessence of Henryk Gotlib’s creative work. The love of color and giving it primacy over drawing; the creation of extremely thoughtful compositions; the interest in nudes,

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹ D. Hall, *Art in Exile*.

¹⁰² Only sometimes tiny silhouettes on the horizon are meant to suggest the conduct of battles.

¹⁰³ Henryk Gotlib, *Pejzaż z Bretanii/Breton Landscape* 1929/1930, oil on canvas, 65 × 51, Boundary Gallery, <http://boundarygalleryonline.com/modern-british-artists-1900-1960/henryk-gotlib/breton-landscape-2/> (accessed on May 26, 2016).

portraits, and landscapes; and the frequent analysis of a single motif are just some of the hallmarks of his painting. The author of the triptych was very pleased with the final result of his work, considering them to be the most important paintings he had ever painted.¹⁰⁴ In our memory, however, the works have been lost and are waiting to be rediscovered. Who knows, maybe after they see the light of day they have a chance to be a “painting revelation” again?

ANNEX

INTERVIEW WITH HENRYK GOTLIB IN EARLY OCTOBER 1966¹⁰⁵

Journalist: *Mr. Henryk Gotlib still found some time just before his flight Warsaw to talk to me for a while. Indeed, I would like to take this opportunity to ask, first of all, what influenced you to paint this great and wonderful painting. What was the cause that made you choose this specific topic?*

H.G.: The cause was... as usual in such times... coincidence. It was the first German air raid on London. We lived in the studio at the time, our whole dwelling was in the studio – there was a bedroom, a dining room, and everything in general... It was quite a good studio, but it had this inconvenience that it was covered completely with glass. When the raid was..., when the raid was...

In progress?

... in progress, my wife, who always has a practical sense that is stronger than mine, says: “Listen, let’s run away from this studio first of all, for example to the courtyard, maybe they’ll kill us there, but at least we won’t be hurt by these... by this... glass from the studio. We went out into the courtyard and at the same moment German airplanes arrived. My wife, who saw German airplanes for the first time (as I did), raised her hands, covered (shielded her eyes) and looked up. I looked at my wife and this movement of hers and the whole atmosphere affected me so that a few minutes later, when the raid was over (because it lasted only a few minutes), we went into the studio, I didn’t say anything to my wife, I took some random canvas and painted this scene: Janet raising her hands up and looking at those flying airplanes. A few days later, this vision of Janet developed in my imagination into a vision of Warsaw – the last air raids over Warsaw and the final phases of Warsaw’s defense. I painted

¹⁰⁴ “Lost Triptych presented to Poland.”

¹⁰⁵ Based on a recording made available by Anne Dock.

a picture... I painted a picture then that I hadn't planned... and I painted it for a couple of months. It was actually the first "serious" painting, the first one I exhibited in Paris (in London). Later I painted two others, because it was not enough for me... I painted a painting I called *Stabat mater*, which depicts a time when the German occupiers pass through a Polish village. A mother, a peasant woman, a peasant man standing next to her, and two small children, and a cow in the back, a typical Polish picture – empty [...], and in the foreground – two lying corpses: a girl and a young farmhand.

And what does the third part of the painting depict?

The third part of the painting is rather optimistic. I painted it already in 1930..., in 1943, (early 1944) and it is called, I called it: *Mickiewicz returns to Cracow*. Because it is a vision of Poland coming back to life. This is a vision of a return of Polish culture. Of everything that is alive and valuable in Poland. For me the representative of this most beautiful Polish spirit is Mickiewicz. And I depict him as Mickiewicz, who returns personally, with this hand... his hand on his chest and climbs up on his pedestal.

So while saying goodbye to the vision of despair and tragedy, you also wanted to give a note of hope for the future?

Yes, yes...

What prompted you to send this painting to Poland and give it to Poland?

Madam, I was thinking about Poland all the time here in this country. Spiritually, I was in Poland. This is natural. And when the war ended, the first thing for me was to document for Poland. This huge painting, because it is a very large painting... I've never seen it in its entirety, because it was exhibited in these three parts – each one separately, and now I'm very happy that I'll finally (finally!) see this painting together and at the place where it was intended (the place for which it was intended).

It was a painting about Poland and for Poland, and it should be in Poland. And finally last question: What impression did you get from the news that it was found?

I was very happy... It was Mr. [Eugeniusz] Milnikiel, the former Polish ambassador, who came, on his way to America, stopped by... here and called me one day: "Listen Henryk, your painting, your triptych has been found." I was stunned, I didn't respond to this at all. We had dinner, well, and Milnikiel didn't have much time, but in any case we agreed that he would..., that if the painting, that... (aha!) he says that the director of the National Museum (director Lorentz), approached him to inform that he wanted to exhibit the painting. And well, Milnikiel promised to communicate with Lorentz when this painting would be exhibited.

This means that you are now going to Warsaw, at the invitation of the Polish Government for the opening of an exhibition of your paintings.

Yes.

Thank you very much and I wish you a very pleasant stay in Poland.

Thank you.

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