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Karol Tchorek – an Artist Justly Forgotten?

Who was Karol Tchorek, the founder of the studio we are in right now? In the correspondence between two of the main characters of Polish modernity, Ryszard Stanisławski and Alina Szapocznikow, he gets a mention as a creator of kitschy sculptures à la nineteenth-century Naturalism. If so, is there a point in paying attention to this figure? His main achievement was a cycle of memorial tablets marking places of executions from the time of the Nazi occupation in Warsaw, which we all know very well; a fairly successful project, admittedly. Another of his widely known sculptures is “Kobieta z dzieckiem” [Woman and Child], adorning the façade of a block of flats in the MDM district in Warsaw; this is clearly a poorer piece – realistic, although rather distant from the naturalist canon. At the same time, the studio we are in, the collections and archives we can see here reveal a rather good taste as well as a broad and original range of interests of the person who assembled them. In this regard, I suggest that we should take a closer look at Tchorek and decide whether it is worthwhile to rediscover his work or, perhaps, whether we should consider him an artist justly forgotten.

Karol Tchorek was born on 30th October 1904 in Serock and died on 10th April 1985 in Warsaw. He was a sculptor, a medallist, an art dealer and a collector, as well as husband to Zofia née Kochanowicz (a

textile artist) with whom he had two sons, Mariusz and Olaf. He came from a poor peasant family, which resulted in his education taking an arduous and slow course. In 1922-26, he studied sculpture at the Municipal School of Decorative Arts and Painting in Warsaw, where he was tutored by Jan Szczepkowski and since 1931 he continued his studies at the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, as a student of Tadeusz Breyer. When he was still at school, he became an active participant in artistic circles (he was a member of the “Forma” Sculpture Cooperative since 1929), took part in numerous competitions and exhibitions, including the contest to design sarcophagus for Józef Piłsudski in 1937-38, and international exhibitions in Paris (1937) and New York (1939). In 1943-44 and 1945-51, he ran the Nike Art Salon in Warsaw. Shortly after the war, he was involved in the reestablishment of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP), where he held the position of a secretary of the Presidium of the Management Board in 1945-46, and later on he was active in the Sculpture Section of the Warsaw Branch¹. In 1960-67, he worked as an artistic adviser for the Studio of Sculpture of the Fine Arts Studios. He participated in all important post-war exhibitions, including the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Polish Exhibition of Visual Art, “Plastycy w walce o pokój” [Visual Artists Fight for Peace] (1950), “Rzeźba warszawska 1945-1958” [Warsaw Sculpture 1945-58], “Rzeźba Polska 1945-60” [Polish Sculpture 1945-60], “Rzeźba w XV-lecie PRL” [Sculpture at the 15th Anniversary of the People’s Republic of Poland], “XX lat Ludowego Wojska Polskiego w twórczości plastycznej” [20 Years of Polish People’s Army in Visual Arts]; in 1955 he was awarded the Medal of the Tenth Anniversary of the People’s Republic of Poland as well as the Silver Cross of Merit, in 1966 – the Brown Medal of Merit for National Defence and in 1980 – the Knight’s Cross of Polonia Restituta.

Before the war, Tchorek created such sculptures as “Kurpianka” [A Woman from the Kurpie Region] (1933), “Kolędnicy” [Carollers] and

¹ The Association was a state-controlled organisation holding a monopoly in representing the interests of professional visual artists. Its bureaucratic structure extended over the whole country.

“Portret Matki” [Mother’s Portrait] (both 1934), and “Dziecko leżące” [A Lying Child] (1938), amongst others. Soon after the war, in 1949, he won the national competition to design plaques commemorating places of combat and martyrology in Warsaw, organised by SARP (Association of Polish Architects); approximately two hundred plaques were executed. Apart from the plaques, his most important works include the above-mentioned “Kobieta z dzieckiem” [Woman and Child] (1952), a tympanum and ornaments of the theatre room at the Cultural Centre in the district of Targówek (1955), “Warszawska Syrenka” [Warsaw Mermaid] – a statuette awarded by the SDP Film Critics’ Club (1958), the Monument to Soldiers and Partisans in Ostrów Mazowiecka (1960), the bust of Ignacy J. Kraszewski in the Holy Cross Church (1961), Władysław Strzemiński’s headstone (1962), the monument to Polish soldiers in Perth, UK (1970) and the “Warszawska Jesień” [Warsaw Autumn] sculpture in the park by the Academy of Music in Warsaw (1975).

An Artist Unjustly Forgotten?

Even if we are to regard Karol Tchorek as a second-rate sculptor on artistic grounds, we ought to appreciate the perfect state of materials related to the artist – we have the studio and its equipment: Tchorek’s sculptures, his art and artistic craft collection (with primacy given to Leon Kudła’s works) and an extensive archive. We are thus able to research his biography and achievement in detail from a perspective close to the artist, pertaining to trivial matters that are not particularly significant in the macroscale but may shed some light on more common problems. Such approach would differ from what can be provided by the press offering an official and possibly propagandist picture, or archives of art institutions of the People’s Republic of Poland, which were edited in accordance with general official directives on what archival materials were to be considered irrelevant and, as a consequence, destroyed - both these types of sources tend to obscure subjects which state administration at various levels found inconvenient. The approach adopted by art

institutions dealing with documenting modern art, connected with the field of art and selecting material with special attention given to the tradition of the autonomy of art is also different.

I assume that Tchorek could be regarded as a representative example of the group of sculptors educated before the war in Tadeusz Breyer's studio, whose mature years fell on the post-war period. These artists seem to constitute a separate category because of their heavy dependence on state patronage – they scaled the heights of their artistic abilities in the 1950s and 60s when private commissions to create any serious works could hardly be expected, while there was a relatively wide range of possibilities for participation in decorating public space in the country that was being reconstructed after the war, and mostly in the capital. I believe that the position they occupied should be defined with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's art sociology – these artists operated in the heteronomous sector and bowed to political pressure coming from outside the field of art, but they could expect instant gratification in return (both in symbolic and economic terms). Tchorek's case perfectly exemplifies Bourdieu's thesis about positions in the heteronomous sector being mostly taken by individuals with lower class habitus and a fairly low cultural, social and economic capital. However, in the artistic field the concept of autonomy of art remains dominant and it is creators from the autonomic sector (counter to the heteronomous one) who profit in the long run; they withstand outside pressure and renounce immediate financial gratification for the sake of future symbolic gains. This was the sector Szapocznikow and Stanislawski belonged to; both were deeply involved in struggles within the field, so it comes as no surprise that they had a very poor opinion of Tchorek's work. In spite of the condemnation from the autonomous sector, it seems worthwhile to make the effort to draw up biographies and discuss the work of those in the heteronomous sector who contributed to the iconosphere of the People's Republic of Poland. Many of their works have survived and are still there in our surroundings. Even today, some determine the character of public space in Polish cities, others have worn out but they constitute the iconosphere of our memories. There are more and more grassroots activities aimed at

appreciating and protecting them. But we still confront problems when we are asked to provide complete information on presented objects; some very basic documentary and monographic work remains to be done.

Besides, even a cursory inspection of materials related to Karol Tchorek reveals a number of interesting, though never thoroughly examined, problems of the functioning of art and artists in the People's Republic of Poland. Today, I would like to discuss the following ones: the system of state institutions of patronage and control; everyday life issues; and lastly, factors determining the form of public art. Tchorek's materials pertain mostly to the early period (until the end of the 60s) and to matters which must once have been the common knowledge among visual artists but tend to be forgotten nowadays. Interestingly enough, it is Mariusz Tchorek who effected the preservation of these materials. In 1985-91 he sought with great consistency to have the studio as well as the collection included into the Register of Historic Places; he was surely aware of their potential.

The System of State Institutions of Patronage and Control

As for the system of state institutions of patronage and control – judging by Karol Tchorek's biography and archive, most matters were dealt with by the Visual Arts Studios (PSP) and the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP), with the Studios playing the crucial role, as it seems. It was a state establishment with an elaborate structure and bureaucratic apparatus, made up of specific studios specialising in production of works in particular fields of artistic practice, e.g. sculpture or graphic art. They held a monopoly on the agency and supervision of all visual works executed within the official circulation in the whole country, anything from monuments to diplomas. Each assignment was first to be received by the PSP and it was there that particular artists were chosen to complete it. The Studios made estimates and were responsible for every project; they charged a 15% commission for agency (even if the orderer had already decided on a specific producer). As a consequence, they were the main employer of visual artists as well as a tool for

controlling artistic circles as it was their employees who decided who got to perform particular tasks, which differed in prestige, the degree of artistic challenge and the generosity of payment. This kind of dependence precipitated countless intrigues and corruption, inviting suspicion and provoking divisions among artists.

Creators' fate was also in the hands of the ZPAP and both institutions were connected in many ways. Assignments from the Studios could only be given to ZPAP members, and in 1957, following long negotiations, the Studios and the Association signed an agreement under which the latter selected candidates for the positions of the Principal Artist, Artistic Advisers for specific studios, as well as for the Board of Experts of the PSP. The experts were to distribute assignments to creators, supervise their work and its evaluation; in this way, ZPAP members in straitened circumstances could be given commissions. However, the collaboration tended to generate problems which were frequently discussed at ZPAP meetings; eventually, the Association founded ART, or the ZPAP Art Company, a rival to the PSP.

Since 1960, Tchorek was the Artistic Adviser for the PSP Sculpture Studio. It seems surprising that the ZPAP Sculpture Section should suggest for the position an artist who had demanded discontinuing of the Studios, an institution that took over whatever "meagre employment sources for qualified visual artists" there were, added mark-ups thus increasing prices, imposed high charges for their agency and assigned tasks to dilettantes. During his seven-year-long employment with the Studios, he also objected to the lack of a properly equipped sculpture atelier, violations of the rules and regulations of artistic supervision and copyright, as well as delayed remuneration. Tchorek's own interest was also in question, as the huge set of memorial tablets was executed via the Studios which put a limit to the scope of documentation for particular tablets, classifying the project as a typical one. The artist, however, believed that because of varying inscriptions two drafts – in scales of 1:5 and 1:1 – had to be produced for every piece, which would naturally raise his royalty. Tchorek informed the ZPAP and the Ministry of Arts and Culture about his reservations; he then sued the Studios regarding the

documentation of plaques and won the case in the lower and appeal court. In 1967 he finally resigned as Artistic Adviser.

Everyday Life Issues

An archive of a particular artist allows insight into their living difficulties and strategies of coping, phenomena that were rather specific in the People's Republic of Poland as they resulted from both, the dominant role of various state institutions and shortage economy. Such problems as the impossibility to get a studio or limited contact with foreign artists are well-known and I am not going to discuss them now for the lack of time. Instead, I wish to focus on a question that tends to appear obscured from today's perspective – the cardinal importance of so-called “commemorations” as the basis for the existence (or prosperity in some cases) of sculptors.

I mean the opportunities resulting from mass production of plaques, rocks, monoliths and monuments of varying sizes to commemorate events of the Second World War, funded by authorities at different levels and social organizations, which considered such conduct as obligation. Sculptors entered competitions, designed typical projects published in special albums or took one-off commissions from the Studios. The scale of production meant that many artists had ready models and designs for commemorative purposes which were then used on different occasions – this is apparent especially when one thinks of monuments. In Tchorek's case, for instance, the 1955 monument to Polish and Soviet soldiers who had lost their lives fighting against Nazi invaders was replicated to stand as the *Polska Walcząca* [Fighting Poland] symbol of the struggle of independence in 1958, with necessary alterations including replacing the five-pointed star with the letter 'P' and an anchor as well as other minor modifications, while in 1960 it was erected in Ostrów Mazowiecka as so-called “Ostrowska Nike” [Nike of Ostrów], Monument to Soldiers and Partisans.

We should remember, though, that even if young artists from the autonomous sector, whose professional careers began in the 1970s (such

as, for example Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek), considered commemorative work as an unchallenging sideline, Tchorek and some other sculptors of his generation from the heteronomous sector were truly dedicated to it. That was because of the specific nature of professional ideology adopted by artists working on commission but also because of their age – most of them remembered the war and occupation. Tchorek, who had remained in the capital during the Warsaw Uprising and the most part of the Nazi occupation, was highly active in executing memorial tablets; he collected documentary material related to the events to be saluted, corrected the wording of inscriptions, travelled to determine the particular location of each tablet (not only in Warsaw), and supervised their state later on to oppose any changes and ‘embellishments’ made by those responsible for their maintenance. The data he assembled provide a perfect point of departure for reflection on the questions of memory and commemoration.

Factors Determining the Form of Public Art

A review of Tchorek’s work and archive points to certain conclusions regarding the form of public art in the People’s Republic of Poland shaped – typically of the heteronomous sector – under pressure from outside the artistic field. Sculptors of Tchorek’s generation and, first of all, his colleagues from Breyer’s studio were mostly quite capable in terms of form; these realists prone to Classical influences possessed good skills as well as knowledge of modern quest, including the avant-garde. Tchorek himself is a good example as his style tended to be realist with a classical touch and yet he was in search of a “new form of solid construction”, based on modern, slightly cubist geometrisation (its contemporary nature has recently inspired British artist Matthew Darbyshire to create an installation entitled *Public Workshop*, which can be seen at the Ujazdowski Castle, (“BRITISH BRITISH POLISH POLISH: Sztuka krańców Europy, długie lata 90. i dziś” [BRITISH BRITISH POLISH POLISH: Art from Europe’s Edges in the Long 90s

and Today], 7th September – 15th November 2013). In his case the duality of form probably results from his having been taught by Breyer and Szczepkowski, but as a matter of fact it reflects the mainstream tendencies of the interwar period when his artistic identity was formed. Also, his fascination with folk and naive art, which is the native version of primitive art, was of decisive importance.

In his notes from the 1950s and 60s Tchorek expressed his aversion to academic naturalism and predicted that art would develop towards abstraction. He welcomed the effects of the “thaw” – greater openness to the outside world and allowing more formal freedom in art, he did not, however, feel enthusiastic about avant-garde which to him was equivalent to hasty experiments, particularly unsuited to the art of sculpture that relied on durable medium. As time went by, he developed a relativist and – to use the language of social sciences – constructivist concept of art in which the artistic value of a given artwork would be no more than a “temporary delusion” spread by critics.

Tchorek’s most successful realistic works were those executed before the war and not in the period of socialist realism that saw distinctive stiffening of form, possibly brought about by the artist’s awareness of the fundamental importance to the authorities of faithfulness to doctrine and potential consequences of its violation. Numerous directives from various commissions assessing works also counted. Here is a fragment of the instructions on what changes should be introduced to “Kobieta z dzieckiem” [Woman and Child]: “[...] the female figure ought to be sturdier, the ugliness of her face is to be replaced with Slavonic features, the lower part of the figure to be extended, sculptural aspects of the skirt highlighted to break its monotony, the base removed and made consistent with other reliefs”; after a visitation from state authorities new commands arrived: “[...] the hands holding the child and the mouth of the woman to be corrected. The child should be re-composed to appear pretty, healthy and happy.” Later on, formal aspects of sculptures could also be influenced by Artistic Advisers and the Expert Board at the Studios as well as by the PSP price lists which attached significance to the dimensions of artworks. This last

factor determined, for instance, the popularity of monumental portrait heads (which can still be found in many nooks of contemporary institutions), or “upward elongation” of memorial compositions by means of all kinds of swords, torches, laurel wreaths or olive branches.

Reasons behind Oblivion

Artists like Karol Tchorek are not willingly discussed by art historians, the reasons behind which – in my opinion – are mostly political and aesthetic. The political ones include, first and foremost, the universal aversion to whatever is considered as related with the communist era and, as a consequence, to the legacy of the People’s Republic of Poland. No-one wishes to be seen as a supporter of the former system and many researchers of the older generation feel fairly natural and deep dislike for the official art of that time (it can be surmised that these attitudes will get fewer in years to come). We tend to distrust artists from the heteronomous sector who received significant commissions, cooperated with state institutions of artistic patronage and were frequently awarded by the authorities; we associate them with the communist establishment and suspect of ideological involvement, conformity and corrupt relations.

Politics and aesthetics are inseparable here as subordination to power is an important feature of the heteronomous sector; the socialist realist period can be interpreted as an attempt at complete eradication of the autonomous sector. The approach of historians of “modern” art as well as other people professionally related to the artistic field is founded on the autonomous concept of art, imposed within this field around the mid-19th century and replicated till this day. Moreover, these art historians take part in struggles waged within the field on the side of the autonomous sector – they deliver verdicts on their own behalf or on the behalf of the institutions they represent, “uncovering” or “consecrating” specific artists. Their rights in this regard are repeatedly questioned so they have to fortify their positions assembling capital peculiar to the field. Karol Tchorek is not a figure to be used in this fight – the most

effective strategy is referring to people and phenomena that are explicitly associated with the great avant-garde tradition.

As long as the autonomous concept of art remains dominant, the artists of the heteronomous sector do not stand a chance, at least in the eyes of people who have internalised the assumptions of this concept, first of all participants of plays and struggles carried out in the artistic field. According to Bourdieu, this phenomenon significantly limits the cognitive potential of the history of art as researchers remain trapped within what they have chosen to be the subject matter of their work and are incapable of taking a look “from the outside”. In this regard, the questions I have presented in this paper can only be interesting to those art historians (with “historians” being the key term here) who are willing to regard them “from the outside” and who would rather understand than pass judgment.

Translation: Monika Ujma