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HENRYK STAŻEWSKI AND WANDA MELCER. A HISTORY OF A PORTRAIT*

In the 1965 book *Wrzesień kobiety*, Wanda Melcer described in a naturalistic way the course of the war from the perspective of the eponymous woman. The story of the fictional heroine had much in common with the author's biography: just like her protagonist, the novelist had two children whom she tried to protect from poverty, hunger and death by a herculean effort. When the young intellectual, abandoned by her husband, arrived in Warsaw after moving from place to place, she observed that "all the locks in her apartment were broken; huge coat hooks had been driven in the ancient ash furniture, the floors were full of puddles and waste in shapeless piles, the bulbs had been removed, some rags were being dried on bell strings, there was not a single window pane and the tapestries were nailed to the window frames with gigantic nails; one of the window frames was blocked by my damaged portrait"¹. It is not known to what extent Melcer's wartime experiences served as the background for her novel, yet the writer's personal accounts show that she repeatedly used real events to create her books². We do know,

* The article is a translation of the Polish version of the text.

1 W. Melcer, *Wrzesień kobiety* [A Woman's September], Łódź 1965, p. 45.

2 "I've always been passionate about something and I wrote to get it out of my system. Let me give you one example. Our cook's son was in a correctional facility called Studzieniec. When he would come home, he would tell his mother how he was starving, how his tutors were beating him up and how his mates were teaching him how to steal. At that time I was writing *Święta kucharka* [Holy Cook], quoting his stories and letters. But when the book was published, Studzieniec had already been sued and the newspapers wrote a lot about the facility. And so reckless critics, not realizing how long the production cycle of the book lasted, judged that I had taken its content from court records. My award-winning novel *Morele Madzi* [Madzia's Apricots], awarded just before the war and published after the war, was devoted to Kasprzak's case, but I won't tell you what I cared about when I wrote it. This is what the reader has to figure out and the accuracy of his speculations will prove that I really cared about something". After: W. Melcer, *O sobie samej*, *radio dnia* 12 września 1959, typescript available Wanda Melcer Archive in the Warsaw Museum of Literature, inv. no. 5351.

however, that before World War Two, Henryk Stażewski painted a portrait of a fellow student, Wanda Melcer, and it survived in the family collection for many years. The wartime provenance of the painting remain uncertain, yet the history described in *Wrzesień kobiety* may have been inspired by both actual events from the author's life or by her very rational fear of destroying the most precious pre-war keepsake.

In 1995, the Historical Museum of Warsaw purchased from Eryk Szteker a painting by Henryk Stażewski, dated as 1917. It depicts a young girl in a brown study, absent-minded to the point of being actually absent. Dressed in a blue oriental dressing gown, she holds a folded fan of ostrich feathers in her right hand, wears a white cap with an artificial flower and a broad black band. The hair, visible from underneath the headgear, is arranged into characteristic curls, whose modelling repeats the pattern known from Stażewski's watercolour compositions from the same period³. The portrait is painted realistically, but with distinct brushstrokes: it shows stylistic features characteristic of both painters associated with realistic tendencies and Young Poland academic artists.

The figure in the portrait is Wanda Melcer, a writer and painter, known mainly for her scathing reportages written in the interwar period⁴. However, the story of her life and literary career is much more complex: it abounds in many dramatic twists and turns, both in her personal life and in her professional career. Thanks to her celebrity marriages and a distinct outlook on the world, she became a public figure whose actions were often commented on in the press.

Wanda Melcer the writer

She was born in 1896 in Helsinki, yet the documents reiterate the original name of Finland's capital, Helsingfors⁵. Her father Henryk Melcer, a pianist and composer, was at that time a professor of the music conservatory. After a longer stay in Vienna, at the age of 12, Wanda moved to Warsaw together with her father and mother Helena nee Szczawińska. She graduated from Antonina Walicka's boarding school in Warsaw, then studied philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Warsaw under the supervision of professors Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Jan Łukasiewicz. In the years 1915-18 she also studied painting and sculpture at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts un-

3 The most intriguing watercolours by Stażewski from the time when he was a student can be found in the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Noteworthy as comparative material are especially: *Woman's Head* of 1915 (inv. no. MS/SN/RYS/642), the composition *At the Piano*, also dated to 1915 (MS/SN/RYS/648) and a nude titled *Model* (MS/SN/RYS/643). All of the above compositions demonstrate the characteristic manner of developing form and modelling; it is likewise evident in the portrait of Wanda Melcer. I am thankful to Maria Franecka from the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź for doing relevant research.

4 Some of the texts have been made available on-line: <http://retropress.pl/autor-artykulu/wanda-melcer/> [access: 28 VIII 2019].

5 Documents available in the Wanda Melcer Archive in the Museum of Literature in Warsaw, inv. no. 5351.

der professors Stanisław Lentz and Edward Wittig. She debuted as a poet at the age of 16, under the surname of her father and mother, as Wanda Melcer-Szczawińska, publishing in the *Sfinks* magazine. The poems later came out in her first poetry volume titled *Płynące godziny* [The Floating Hours] of 1917⁶. She published another poetry book three years later; 1920 saw the publication of *Na pewno książka kobiety* [Surely a Woman's Book]. After the success of her first poems, Melcer decided to write a novel and thus *Józefina* appeared in bookstores in 1921. In the following years she published *Podwójne życie Piotra Wernera* [Double Life of Piotr Werner] (1922) and *Miasto zwierząt* [Animal Town] (1923). The following year, together with Zofia Nałkowska and Xawery Glinka, she founded the Union of Polish Writers, with Stefan Żeromski as its first president. That very year she left for Constantinople, Turkey, as the secretary of the Polish Industry Show. Inspired by the trip, she wrote *Sułtan i niewolnica* [Sultan and a Slave] (1925), *Narzęczona z Angory* [Fiancée from Angora] (1928) and *Turcja dzisiaj* [Turkey Today] (1925)⁷. At that time Wanda Melcer was married to Szczesny Rutkowski, painter and traveller⁸, who was also an art critic, publicist and author of texts on the reform of Polish housing. Together they tried to arrange a meeting with Le Corbusier in Poland, which never took place⁹. Their marriage broke up around 1927. At the same time Melcer started to collaborate with *Wiadomości Literackie*, publishing there a series of reportages about contemporary Warsaw. The texts were venomously scathing, uncompromising and full of stunningly sharp opinions. Melcer was able to spend the night in a shelter, wander around public houses or infiltrate the Jewish community and write critically of it. Valuation and personal commentary are perhaps the most important features of her texts from this period. She did not use journalistic objectivism, on the contrary: she showed Warsaw's poor without beating around the bush, sharply criticizing the complacency of the general public.

At that time she had already met her second husband, Teodor Sztেকker¹⁰, who was immensely popular in Warsaw before World War Two. He was one of the most famous strongmen of his time, two-time world champion and three-time Polish champion; he most often performed in the Staniewski Brothers' Circus. The first meeting with Wanda Melcer took place probably

6 There is a certain discrepancy here: in the autobiographical texts available in the Archive in the Museum of Literature in Warsaw, Wanda Melcer recalled that she published her first poetry volume in 1919. However, in reality the book came out two years before.

7 A. Górnicka-Boratyńska, "W poszukiwaniu starszych siostr. Wanda Melcer – próba portretu", in: *Teksty Drugie*, 1995, no. 3–4, p. 214.

8 More about Szczesny Rutkowski: <https://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/szczesny-rutkowski> [access: 16 IX 2019].

9 More on this subject: G. Piątek, "Pierwsza uczennica Le Corbusiera w Polsce", in: *Herito*, no. 34 (2019), p. 128–137.

10 In her *Dzienniki* [Diaries], Zofia Nałkowska called Sztেকker "a magnificent human animal". A similar expression can be found in memoirs from the party thrown by the writer, attended by Wanda and Teodor: "this magnificent human animal sat on my ancient sofa and did no harm to anyone, being potentially capable of a lot of it" (Z. Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, vol. III, Warszawa 1980, p. 414).

in the summer of 1925¹¹. In 1928 they were married yet actually from the very start this was a very unhappy marriage. Testimonies to their quarrels can be found in diaries of Zofia Nałkowska¹², in the diaries of Sztekker himself¹³ and those of Melcer¹⁴. Wanda's memoirs often refer to the numerous betrayals of the strongman, who even when his wife was pregnant with twins, Elżbieta and Eryk, "took his mistresses to parties" and did not work¹⁵. A painful divorce and a high-profile media property division case coincided with the peak of Melcer's reportage activity. In 1934 she published a collection of texts under a collective title *Kochanek zamordowanych dziewcząt* [Murdered Girls' Lover] and got engaged in furthering women's equality. At that time also she was working on another series of reportages: *Czarny Ląd – Warszawa* [Black Land – Warsaw], a piercing critique of what she saw as old-fashioned (and harmful) practices of the Warsaw-based orthodox Jewish community. For many months she also served as secretary of the League of Moral Reforms, an organization founded by Boy-Żeleński, whose statute included e.g. «a rational reform of customs, [...] the protection of women and children, the fight against venereal and gynaecological diseases», and «women's empowerment»¹⁶.

The Second World War was a significant caesura in Wanda Melcer's work. She spent the entire occupation in Warsaw, working in sabotage groups of the Home Army. She moreover collaborated with *Głos Demokracji* underground periodical¹⁷, yet she first and foremost took care of her children¹⁸.

In 1946 she joined the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) and then the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR)¹⁹. She translated French literature, and in the 1940s and 1950s wrote reportages whose propagandistic tone was later sharply censured by critics of her output. In the 1960s, she published several novels, including *Kontury życia* [Life's Contours] (1964), the aforementioned *Wrzesień kobiety* [A Woman's September] (1965) and *Zazdrośna* [The Envious

11 A. Górnicka-Boratyńska, "W poszukiwaniu starszych sióstr...", p. 216.

12 After the New Year's Eve spent at the Sztekkers, Nałkowska wrote: "all the women present were for some reason tired of their men, especially Wanda" (Z. Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, vol. IV, part 1, p. 39).

13 Teodor Sztekker wrote: "[...] I had by that time found a woman who, while she added more misery than joy to my life, I am loath to part with" (A. Górnicka-Boratyńska, "W poszukiwaniu starszych sióstr. Wanda Melcer – próba portretu", in: *Teksty Drugie*, 1995, no. 3–4, p. 217).

14 Wanda Melcer, *Pamiętnik – okres warszawski*, Wanda Melcer Archive, Museum of Literature, book 1–4, chart 150, inv. no. 5348, vol. 1.

15 The aforementioned *Pamiętnik...* by Wanda Melcer implies that the couple were meaning to get divorced in the late 1920s, yet neither was able to take the final step. Thus their formal divorce took place shortly after their children were born. Sztekker married Jadwiga nee Tobiasz, but he died as early as 1934. Until the end of her life Wanda Melcer defined herself as a "widow" in all forms including the "marital status" question.

16 Ibidem. Eugenics appears as a second point of interest in the organisation's statute. Grzegorz Radomski made a brief summary of the relations between social engineering and politics in Poland in his article "Eugenika i przejawy jej recepcji w polskiej myśli politycznej do 1939 roku", in: *Historia i polityka*, no. 4 (II)/2010, p. 85–100.

17 A. Górnicka-Boratyńska, "W poszukiwaniu starszych sióstr. Wanda Melcer – próba portretu", in: *Teksty Drugie*, 1995, no. 3–4, p. 214.

18 Życiorys Wandy Melcer, typescript available Wanda Melcer Archive in the Warsaw Museum of Literature, inv. no. of the portfolio 5351.

19 Ibidem.

One] (1967). None of them, however, were as popular as her publications from before the war²⁰. She lived in a detached house at 5 Ślizgowcowa Street, which was pulled down during the construction of the Polish Radio building. She moved to a multi-family building in Próźna Street in the centre of Warsaw, where she lived until her death in 1972. The portrait by Henryk Stażewski probably accompanied her throughout her adult life.

Portrait – state of the art

The painting was in family collections for several decades: after Wanda's death, it was inherited by her son, Eryk Sztekker. It remained an important memento of the deceased mother, kept for years in the family apartment in Próźna Street. The portrait first appeared in public in 1994: the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź organised the first extensive monographic exhibition of the Warsaw-based painter. The exhibition took place six years after the artist's death and gathered over 200 of his paintings, drawings, sketches, and studies. The show was accompanied by in-depth research on the chronology of life and work of the avant-garde classicist, yet his academic beginnings and studies were only generally sketched by the curators Janina Ładnowska and Zenobia Karnicka. This was a deliberate measure, since the exhibition was devoted to the later, avant-garde work of Stażewski, who is associated primarily with geometric abstraction, ingrained in leftist constructivism and neoplasticism²¹. The realistic and meticulous, slightly Secession-like portrait painted when Stażewski was a student was only an interesting example which demonstrated the author's academic avenue education and the relatively conservative roots of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts.

Eryk Sztekker loaned the work for the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue featured in a few places information that the painting belongs to Wanda Melcer's son's private collection²². Janina Ładnowska was unequivocally positive about Stażewski's composition, issuing to its owner a certificate of the painting's authenticity²³. The curator wrote in the certificate that the work

20 The post-war publishing houses with which the writer collaborated often forced her to extensively change her texts, which Melcer would not accept. This led to numerous disputes and quarrels with publishers, whose traces are preserved in the Wanda Melcer Archive, accessible at the Warsaw Museum of Literature (inv. no. 5354). The refusals and critical letters often referred to the incompatibility of her texts with the workers' reality: the writer consistently refused to introduce the suggested corrections but tried to find a new publisher. Often these attempts were to no avail.

21 More on this subject: A. Turowski, "Dyskurs o Geometrii, Wolności i Rozumie", in: *Henryk Stażewski 1894–1988. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1995, p. 28–41 and J. Kleiverda, "Stażewski i De Stijl", *ibidem*, p. 42–51.

22 J. Jedliński, "Podziękowania", p. 8, J. Ładnowska, "Kalendarium życia i dzieła Henryka Stażewskiego", p. 104, "Katalog dzieł wystawianych", no. 6, p. 205, in: *Henryk Stażewski 1894–1988. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1995.

23 Signature no.: SN/410–311/322/95, a copy available in the file of documents of the painting in the Museum of Warsaw (inv. no. MHW 24885). The original document and the acceptance protocols for the work are contained in the Wanda Melcer Archive in the Museum of Literature in Warsaw, inv. no. 5354. The portfolio includes letters by Eryk Sztekker about Wanda Melcer.

had been subject to conservation: the canvas was strengthened with another layer and the stretcher and the frame were replaced. There is also an interesting statement (repeated in the exhibition catalogue²⁴) that in the late 1960s the work was resigned and dated by the artist as originating in 1917²⁵. We can therefore assume that the contacts between Henryk Stażewski and Wanda Melcer stood the test of time: they most likely met in 1915 in the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, in Prof. Stanisław Lentz's studio, where they both studied. The archive of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts has a number of documents with Henryk Stażewski's name: the first record comes from the *List of students of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts from 1911/12 till 1915/16*. However, his name is spelt there as Henryk Starzewski, an obvious mistake of the school's secretary²⁶. The documents show that the artist enrolled in classes in the second half of the academic year 1913/14 in the studio of Stanisław Lentz. He obtained an exemption from paying tuition fees. He lived at 46 Piękna Street and took part in an all-day course. Until the academic year 1919/20 he was exempt from paying tuition fees every year, but in the last year of his education he "received a separate studio free of charge"²⁷. His name appears moreover in the *Book of minutes of the board meetings of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts 1904–1920 and of the minutes of the Supreme Board meetings of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts*. An entry of 1 July 1918 recorded that "The School Board try to obtain in the Ministry of Education an amount of 4,500 Polish marks as awards for the students. The most advanced ones would get 2,000 Polish marks each, one for a painter and one for a sculptor [...]. In general, professors introduced Henryk Stażewski, a student of Prof. Lentz's, and Stefan Kaczmarek, a student of Prof. Wittig's, to whom 2,000 Polish marks were granted"²⁸. The records indicate that Stażewski was a valuable student. Wanda Melcer was in another situation: her name appears on the *List of students of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts from 1911/12 until 1915/16* – she enrolled in classes in early February 1915 in Lentz's studio and paid up-front for the entire course²⁹. At that time she was living at 54 Wspólna Street. According to archival records, unlike Stażewski, Melcer changed her studios twice: in the following academic year she switched to Wittig, and in the next year to Prof.

24 J. Ładnowska, "Sztuka wolnego ładu", in: *Henryk Stażewski 1894–1988. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1995, p. 26.

25 However, the signature is significantly different from those known from the reverses of Henryk Stażewski's reliefs made in the 1960s and 1970s. It is devoid of the characteristic „ż”, whose decorative form was most probably taken from the French „z”. Despite the highly recognizable (and repetitive) manner of the signature, Stażewski also used other typefaces; he signed his paintings in surprisingly different ways throughout the decades of his creative career. The signature from the portrait of Wanda Melcer stylistically refers to the signatures used by the artist in the 1950s, where all letters are clearly separated and the name is neatly written down. This brings to mind e.g. the signature on the obverse of the *Figural Composition* of 1950, in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (inv. no. MPW 2760 MNW) and the painting *Collaboration (Crane)* from that very year, also in the MNW collection (inv. no. MPW 2971 MNW).

26 Information available in the archive of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, data obtained in correspondence on 30.05.2019.

27 Ibidem.

28 Ibidem.

29 Ibidem.

Trojanowski. In the academic year 1918/19 she did not collect the identification card issued at that time for the students, and in the *General list of students of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts and the account of paid fees* from the years 1916/17 – 1919/20 we read that her tuition fees were lifted “as of half-year” and in effect she “stopped attending” classes from the third terce of the year³⁰. According to the documents, she “stopped attending” classes already at the beginning of the academic year 1918/19³¹; Melcer had decided to develop her literary career and gave up arts studies.

We can conclude from the above documents that Melcer and Stażewski most probably met in 1915: it was then that they studied together in one studio. The portrait was created two years later; it was more of a commission from the writer (but with an informal, friendly character) than a student exercise for which Melcer sat. This is evidenced by the initial lack of a signature and thus clearly confirmed authorship. In one of the texts accompanying the Łódź exhibition, Janina Ładnowska drew attention to Stażewski's formal background. She mentioned that «he was a student of a well-known portraitist, the realist Stanisław Lentz. Henryk Stażewski's earliest known watercolours from 1915 are characterized by an efficient, realistic sense of form and still bear traces of late Art Nouveau. The portrait of a young girl (a co-student, later writer Wanda Melcer) had to be influenced by the realism of Professor Lentz. This feature also applies to later portraits painted for profit»³². Joanna Sosnowska, too, drew attention to the strong ties between Stażewski's early works and Lentz's formal academism. “The trust expressed in professors is particularly interesting in relation to Henryk Stażewski, who later minimised or even denied the importance of studying at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, where he spent over five years in Lentz's studio. His professor's influence on his early works is indisputable”³³. By way of example, Sosnowska refers to a portrait of Ignacy Kretkowski, a philanthropist and democrat, painted in the same year as that of Wanda Melcer. At that time Stażewski was staying at the Kretkowskis family estate of Więclawice³⁴, where he worked on commissions from the family members. It was most likely then that he met Ignacy Kretkowski and was asked to paint his portrait.

The portrait depicts a middle-aged man with fair hair and blue eyes, dressed in a dove-grey suit and a slightly lighter ash vest³⁵. He is seated in a rosewood armchair upholstered with *fraise saffian*³⁶. Under his vest we can see a white

30 Ibidem.

31 Ibidem.

32 J. Ładnowska, “Sztuka wolnego ładu”, in: *Henryk Stażewski 1894–1988. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1995, p. 14–15.

33 J. Sosnowska, “Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole Sztuk Pięknych nauczyła się awangarda?”, in: *Polskie szkolnictwo artystyczne. Dzieje – teoria – praktyka. Materiały LIII ogólnopolskiej sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Warszawa 14–16 października 2004*, ed. M. Poprzęcka, Warszawa 2005, p. 208.

34 J. Waniewska, “Portrety Kretkowskich”, in: *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, year XXXII, 1988, p. 334.

35 Ibidem.

36 Ibidem.

shirt with a stiff collar and a dove-grey patterned tie³⁷. The sitter's right hand is placed on the armchair rest; he is holding a burning cigar in his left hand. The cigar smoke and the reflexive yet cheerful gaze seem to indicate the passage of time³⁸. The background is the study interior of the second Kretkowski residence, in Grodno: on the greenish-brown wall on the left there is a fragment of the painting, on the right there is a marble, navy blue and yellow vase on a mahogany platform. A signature is placed at the bottom left-hand side: H. Stażewski | 1917³⁹.

The painting reveals all formal features of Stażewski's painting from the aforementioned period. It also shows a strong resemblance to Melcer's portrait: a characteristic way of modelling drapery, realism in the perspective of the face and subtle gestures. Sosnowska wrote about Kretkowski's portrait as follows: "Its expert execution is a testament to the great talent of the young artist, immediately recognised by the professor. Stażewski, like Szczuka, was the host of the studio and did not pay tuition for his studies; both of them were the most frequently and most highly awarded students"⁴⁰.

These two paintings are the only oil portraits by Henryk Stażewski from the period of his studies identified in scientific literature to date.

Second signature and its history

As mentioned earlier, the portrait of Wanda Melcer was added to the collection of the Historical Museum of Warsaw in 1995, i.e. just after the end of the Łódź exhibition. Apart from Eryk Sztekker, the institution talked also with Zuzanna Stromenger, the niece of the painting's owner. As a result, the work was purchased from them in November. The painting was accompanied by the following documents: the aforementioned certificate from the Museum of Art in Łódź, a copy of the photograph taken in 1917, showing the writer and her family, and the extensive life story of Wanda Melcer, told by the heirs to the curator of the painting collection, Krystyna Liszewska. Everything was scrupulously recorded on the museum card: the information about Stażewski's secondary signing of the painting at the request of Wanda Melcer in the 1960s also appeared there.

The confirmation can be found in the Wanda Melcer's Archive at the Warsaw Museum of Literature. The writer kept detailed memoirs since the 1920s. In a literary style, often via a captivating narrative, she described her life adventures, emotional struggles with her (former) husband, family and herself, but also everyday events, meetings with relatives, things to do, and shopping lists. She ran a special kind of chronicle of her own life, in which great dramas were intertwined with the planning of train expenses. In this way, we can trace many seemingly insignificant events, which in effect had a substantial influence on the author's oeuvre.

37 Ibidem.

38 Ibidem.

39 Ibidem.

40 J. Sosnowska, *Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole...*, p. 208.

In 1965 Wanda Melcer wrote about Henryk Stażewski's visit. It can be concluded from the content of the notes that the meeting had been postponed, but eventually took place on 29 June. The diary entry reads as follows:

Yesterday, on Monday, I had Żabińska, Henryk Stażewski and Zuza over at my place. All very kind, Henryk, simple and nice as always, was glad that his portrait had been so well renovated in Marconi's studio and although he paints in a completely different way now, he signed it, preparing the paint in Żabińska's tin can, with a brush he brought with him. He joked that he would give an earlier date, that it was 1917; ultimately, he put 1919, yet that it was already the year of my marriage to Szczęsny, so of course it was 17 - I was 21 years old then.

We recalled Ogórkiewicz, Rafałowski, who has so many problems with his sick eyes, and the Kamińskis. Zimcio came back from Lviv, where he had spent two months - he said that they were very kind, that nobody misses Poland and that they are doing fine. He wore a Tirol hat, but he had got very rude. Henryk laughed that Zimcio said that Srokowski had aged so much! Henio was going to Italy for a month. [illegible] they refused Ela a passport insert - an aunt in America: this is really insane - they needn't have spent 5,000 zlotys for the peasants' league and were looking forward to this first trip together! Perhaps this is the case of [illegible], which would be a bad sign. Henryk quipped that he did not remember anything and that he would write his name as Chenryk and his surname as Starzewski⁴¹.

Thanks to the content of the notes, we know the exact daily date of the artist's resigning the painting - 29 June 1965. We also know the reason for the blurred date on the portrait's obverse: it had to be corrected by the artist at the request of the writer. The text also shows where the conservation of the painting, mentioned in the document published by the Museum of Art in Łódź, was carried out⁴²; it was the studio of Bohdan Marconi, a professor of the Academy of Fine Arts, a famous Warsaw inspector of ancient monuments. The above short note includes also information about a few people, which were identified in the archive of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts: at the beginning of the academic year 1915/16 Aleksander Rafałowski enrolled in Prof. Trojanowski's studio, while Zofia Kamińska studied at the Academy of Fine Arts between 1911 and 1917⁴³. The Srokowski from the conversation between Wanda Melcer and Henryk Stażewski, is most likely Jerzy Srokowski, a graphic artist and author of illustrations in the press⁴⁴.

41 W. Melcer, *Dzienniki*, book 5-7, chart 250, inv. no. 5348 vol. 2, unnumbered page. I am thankful to Agnieszka Dąbrowska, Agnieszka Iwaszkiewicz and Jacek Bochiński for their assistance in reading the manuscript.

42 See note 24.

43 Information available in the archive of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, data obtained in correspondence on 29.08.2019.

44 *Artyści plastycy okręgu warszawskiego, 1945-1970. Słownik biograficzny*, ed. M. Serafińska, Warszawa 1972, p. 532.

The above text clearly shows Henryk Stażewski's legendary sense of humour, spiked with intelligent mischief, it showed his distance to his own work and his position, which was undoubtedly exceptional in the 1960s. At that time, he was already considered the patron saint and the *spiritus movens* of the Polish avant-garde, all the more so because he was always looking for new formal solutions. In the year the above meeting between Melcer and Stażewski took place, the painter celebrated forty years of his creative career: he received the First Class Award from the Minister of Culture and Art in the field of fine arts, participated in the First Biennial of Spatial Forms in Elbląg, and a few months later, in late 1965 and early 1966, he had an exhibition at the Central Office of Artistic Exhibitions in Warsaw of his latest works - reliefs created in the 1964-1965 period⁴⁵. It was around 1964 that Stażewski introduced relief into his art, perhaps as a result of insightful observations of Western trends, including the emerging op-art and kinetic developments. Stażewski could get to know them thanks to the presence of his works at two New York exhibitions taking place in 1964: *Mondrian, de Stijl and Their Impact* at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery and *The Classical Spirit in 20th Century Art* at the Sidney Janis Gallery⁴⁶. 1964 was moreover a time of intense preparations for the famous show *The Responsive Eye*⁴⁷ at the MoMA in New York, which established the place of art of optical illusion internationally. Stażewski, who had already been a highly acclaimed artist at that time, did not have much in common with his student portraits. This may explain the writer's request to re-sign the painting.

Henryk Stażewski and Wanda Melcer. A History of a Portrait

In 2017, the painting was included in the newly created Portrait Room of the Museum of Warsaw. Wanda Melcer appeared at the exhibition as a Warsaw writer whose output was directly related to the specific character of the city. In the context of her biography, her painting beginnings are only a minor episode, which, however, significantly influenced her later literary career⁴⁸.

The painting is currently the oldest oil portrait by Henryk Stażewski, permanently on display at a public art institution. This is at the same time the only painting portrait of a valued writer⁴⁹. Before the composition joined the main

45 I. Luba, 02.12.1965 - 02.01.1966, *Henryk Stażewski; wystawa prac*, <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/henryk-stazewski-malarstwo> [access: 25 IX 2019].

46 Ibidem.

47 More about the exhibition: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2914> [access: 25 IX 2019].

48 The collection of the Museum of Warsaw boasts two works by Wanda Melcer, an oil portrait of her father, Henryk Melcer-Szczawiński (MHW 24642) and the bronze head of Bronisława Szczawińska née Gumbrycht (MHW 24884).

49 The Wanda Melcer Archive in the Museum of Literature in Warsaw holds a number of her photographic portraits, inv. no. 5352.

exhibit, it was subject to conservation review and slightly cleaned. It turned out that the painting had been seriously retouched earlier; the canvas was duplicated with a wax-resin mass and the cavities in the upper right part of the canvas were secured with a putty. The traces of the painting's destruction, dealt with by Marconi, may have occurred during the war. This may indicate that the story of the "damaged portrait" from the excerpt of the novel quoted at the beginning of the text, *Wrzesień kobiety* is not necessarily literary fiction.

Keywords: painting, portrait, Warsaw, Melcer, Stażewski, School of Fine Arts