

Samuel Willenberg¹

Perec Willenberg

In Częstochowa lived the outstanding artist, Perec Willenberg. He was born on 19th July 1874 in Maków Mazowiecki. His parents, Ita and Samuel, had five children. Perec had two older brothers and two sisters. His father was a religious Jew, a follower of the *Gaon of Wilna*. He was a grain trader. Even in his younger years, Perec was not inclined towards prayer. He spent every spare moment drawing and painting. He gained the support and care of his father's friend, the Jewish writer, Nahum Sokołów.

In 1893, he was accepted into the Warsaw School of Art. He received funds in the form of a scholarship granted to him by Count Ludwik Krasiński. In Warsaw, he became a student in the drawing class of the famous painter Wojciech Gerson. In 1899, he presented his famous painting "The Kidnapping of Helena by Paris" to the wider public.

After leaving Warsaw for Łódź, from 1903 until the outbreak of the revolution in 1905, he was actively involved in the underground. For his pro-independence underground activity and for creating and publicly issuing the *Orzeł Biały* ("The White Eagle"), he was sentenced to death by the Tsarist Russian General Kozniakov.

In 1906, he succeeded in escaping to Częstochowa. He joined into the artistic life of his new place of residence. He opened the city's first *School of Drawing and Painting*. It was attended by both Jewish and Christian young people. In 1909, the School was awarded a silver medal at the great Industry and Agriculture Exhibition in Częstochowa. In 1919, students of this school, together with my father, took part in the commemorations of the anniversary of the May 3rd Constitution.

My father took an active part in Jewish educational activity. Already by 1906, he worked in the Talmud Torah school and was employed as a middle school professor in the Jewish High School.

After World War II, the Jewish press described the talent and works of Perec Willenberg thus, "Already in the dawning of his work, his artistic individuality is revealed, trying, above all, to depict the world of his Jewish psyche. Already from the earliest years of creative activity, he noticed that his people used foreign styles in the building of their Houses of G-d (Mauritanian, Byzantine, Gothic, etc.). In all his creative visions, he returns to the Sinai characters of Moses. These form the grounding and basis for Willenberg's raw material. Full of inborn self-criticism, this titan of patience and work, after 45 years of experimentation and improvement of his personal style, attained the creation of a Jewish Neo-Renaissance".

¹ Samuel Willenberg – currently lives in Israel.

In a feature article entitled “The Legacy of the Artist Perec Willenberg – His Work”, which appeared after Willenberg’s death in *Nasza Słowa* (“Our Word”), Szymon Spund states, “A student of Repin and Gerson, a graduate of the Academies of Saint Petersburg and Warsaw, he observes, experiences ... passing every line and stroke through the prism of his beloved Jewishness”.

In another excerpt of the same featured article, the author refers to the style of Willenberg’s characters stating, “And Perec Willenberg did not emerge from under the charm and ballast of these letters until he was well advanced in his years. They penetrated into his ego, his brain and his heart. They became a signpost and a pulp juicy with his thoughts and feelings. Going behind the symmetry of these religious emblems, he discerned them as not only aesthetic imperatives, but also as grandeur! He simply achieved new style in vivid word and sentence associations, a style which was, above all, absolutely Jewish. And not only in the characters alone, but he found new stylistic material in the Hebrew punctuation. He matched up and shaped artistically, and stylistically forged together a kind of elaborate chain of negative and positive links. He intertwined contrasts and, crossing regularity, the result he brought out was as though it had been conjured up in space by kabbalistic hands (...)”.

In 1894, a feature article appeared in the Hebrew periodical *Ha’Tzefira* about the artistic works of a young Jewish painter Willenberg. In 1910, the Jewish society “Ika” in St.Petersburg awarded him a scholarship and brought him to St.Petersburg for further studies. In addition, he took part in study tours to Germany and Switzerland, where he met the famous Jewish painter Maurycy Minkowski. His paintings were highly regarded. Particularly valuable was the portrait my father painted of Lev Tolstoy, whom he knew personally. He had a series of exhibitions together with famous artists - Kramsztyk, Wyspiański, Malczewski and Hirszenberg. He was friends with famous Jewish writers - Nahum Sokołów and Ilya Perec. One of his closest friends in Częstochowa was the writer and journalist Galiński. In 1916, he organised an exhibition of his own work in Częstochowa. The exhibition was visited by and widely commented upon in the press by J. L. Perec, Szalom Asz and Prof. M. Bałaban

In 1917, he married a Russian Orthodox woman, Manifa Popov, who had worked as a nurse in the Częstochowa Jewish Hospital before the wedding. Their first daughter, Ita, was born in 1919, their son Samuel (the author of this memoir) in 1923 and their younger daughter Tamara was born in 1936.

Perec Willenberg’s passion was to create a Jewish style in painting. He created works using stylised Hebrew characters, which he applied to the multi-coloured ceilings of synagogues in Częstochowa and Piotrków Trybunalski. He also created stained glass windows and flooring in this style. He designed the books of famous people. Critics and journalists called his style “Jewish Neo-Renaissance”.

In the years 1928-29, Perec Willenberg undertook the design and renovation of the Old Synagogue in Częstochowa. He interrupted his pedagogic activity and directed all his energy and talent towards the work involved in renovating the synagogue. The renovated Old Synagogue's original Jewish character stood out, not only through its architectural elements, but also through its decor created according to its designer's outlines. It consisted of, among other things, symbolic motifs based upon stylised Hebrew characters. Two shields of David adorned the Synagogue's ceiling, with seven-branched candelabras in their centre. A description of the renovated Old Synagogue appeared in the "Częstochowa Express" in 1929, "In accordance with the spirit of the Jewish religion which rules out the portrayal of the human form in religious painting, we see here only the commandments, bloody snakes, lightning bolts, etc.. The emblems of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, artistic rosettes, an overhead view of Rachel's Tomb as well as the Wailing Wall on the side walls and the Polish coat-of-arms fill the newly-decorated synagogue. They pleasantly hit the eye with a harmonious assortment of colours, artistically finished".

In 1936, the Willenberg family left Częstochowa. My father had been commissioned to carry out another internal design following the Częstochowa and the Piotrków Tybunalski synagogues. This time it was the ceiling of the 16th Century synagogue in Opatów. At the time that the War broke out, the family was living in Opatów. My father continued to complete his next work.

Then, when there was more and more talk about the Jews being transported to an unknown destination, a friend of my father's, the road engineer Karbowniczek, tried to get false birth certificates for the whole family. My mother, Maniefa, had her own original birth certificate on the reverse side of which was a stamp from the authorities in Bielsko Biała that Maniefa Popov had converted to Judaism. Perec pasted some canvas to the reverse side thereby hiding her conversion to Judaism. Thanks to this action, she received a grey *kennkarte* under her maiden first name and surname.

Unfortunately, my sisters were arrested on the "Aryan side" in Częstochowa. From the gaol, they were sent to Treblinka. I, Samuel, son of Perec, survived the Treblinka death camp. I was there for over ten months. I took an active part in the camp rebellion on the 2nd August 1943. Fortunately, I managed to get to Warsaw. I was a saboteur in the resistance movement and a soldier in the Warsaw Uprising.

Following the loss of his daughters, my father lived under the false name, "Karol Baltazar Pękosławski". On the "Aryan side", he supported himself by painting. During the time of the Warsaw Uprising, he was living at 60 Marszałkowska Street. On the entrance to the basement he was hiding, using coal, he drew the head of Christ on the background of a cross with the inscription "Jesus I Believe in You".

On page 125 of their guide to Warsaw during the Uprising, Jerzy S. Majewski and Tomasz Urzykowski have included the following:

Christ in a Hiding Place at 60 Marszałkowska Street (Marschallstrasse).

Here, on the ceiling of the basement, one can see an unusual work of art – the image of Christ with the inscription ‘Christ, I Believe in You’. On the right side of its picture, we read “Drawn by B. Pękostawski, 11th September 1944”. In reality, the author of the painting was the well-known, Jewish artist, Professor Perec Willenberg (1874–1947). Educated in Warsaw (with Wojciech Gerson and in Saint Petersburg), founder of the Art School in Częstochowa, he now had to hide under the false Aryan name of ‘Karol Baltazar Pękostawski’. During the Uprising, he lived at 60 Marszałkowska Street. In order not to reveal his “bad” accent, he pretended to be mute. During one air raid, he went down to the basement with his neighbours. Here, he began to speak and drew the head of Christ on the ceiling. The professor’s son, Samuel Willenberg, an escapee from Treblinka and a soldier during the Warsaw Uprising, described the scene thus, “I found him, by the stairs leading to the basement, amongst a group of the building’s residents. With dextrous movements, he drew, in coal, the head of Christ on a background of the cross. (...) In grateful thanks, his neighbours invited him and me to share in their modest meals. Christ really did save that tenement. During the time of the Uprising, this building was one of the few along Marszałkowska Street which was not even grazed by bullets. After the War, their former residents returned to these apartments which had avoided being looted”.

After the War, together with his wife who had also fortunately survived the War, and his son, Professor Perec Willenberg lived in Łódź. He became the Honorary President of the Jewish Artists Union and Honorary President of the “Sztuka” Painters Co-operative. He was also a member of the Polish Artists Union. He did not cease his artistic activities after the War. He took part in the first post-War exhibition in Łódź, presenting his work, “The Talmudists”. He died in his Łódź apartment on 17th July 1947. He was suffering from tuberculosis.

On the first anniversary of my father’s death, in the post-War Jewish newspaper, I reminded readers of a few facts which my father had passed on to me about his life under German occupation:

My father told me how, in April 1943, as the ghetto burned, he walked along the familiar streets alongside the ghetto and, all the while, even though he had never been religious, he whispered the prayer “Rabunem tilim”. During that period, he repeatedly changed apartments. As a result of his own carelessness, being impulsive and absent-minded, he forgot that he was supposed to be a mute. That led to some comical complications which, under those conditions, could have ended very sadly. Like, for example, in one apartment, the housewife came into our room and asked for the window to be closed. Suddenly, my father replies, “I’ll close it in

a moment". That was enough to force him to leave that apartment. A second incident occurred two months before the Warsaw Uprising. One evening, we were sitting with our hosts. One of them was reading aloud about the fighting on the Orsza-Smoleńsk road. In the newspaper, it stated that 12,000 bombs had been dropped over a stretch of 14 kilometres. That news must have had an effect on my father, because he suddenly responded with, "I can imagine how hot it must have been there". I felt like crawling into the ground, but fortunately our hosts were decent people and didn't let on that they had heard anything. During the Uprising, I lost sight of my father. He went through that entire hell alone and, only by some miracle, survived.

The memories of his father, Perec Willenberg, were written by his son, Samuel Willenberg, in 2009.

Samuel Willenberg is a famous Jewish sculptor and painter, born in Częstochowa. He was wounded during the 1939 September Campaign. He was a prisoner of the Treblinka extermination camp and took part in the Jewish rebellion in that camp on 2nd August 1943. Following his escape from the camp, he took an active part in the anti-Nazi resistance movement and also fought in the Warsaw Uprising as a soldier in the Home Army (AK). He was awarded the *Virtuti Militari* for bravery.

After the War, he left the Polish Army and joined the ICHUD Zionist organisation, where he arranged self-defence courses for young Jews. (There were many pogroms in Poland at the time.) He also guided illegal groups on their way to Palestine. While in Rome, he received a newspaper in which was announced that his father had passed away. He then returned to Poland where he continued to work for Zionist organisations, arranging summer camps for groups of young Jews. One of his most important jobs was to look for Jewish children who had been given away to Polish families during the War.

His greatest artistic works are a cycle of sculptures portraying the tragedy of the Jews in the Treblinka extermination camp and a monument, unveiled in 2009 in Częstochowa, which stands on the site of the railway station from which the Germans deported the Jews of Częstochowa to the extermination camp in Treblinka. In his book "Rebellion at Treblinka", Samuel Willenberg writes extensively about his life and that of his family. That book became the scenario for a documentary film which has been shown several times on Polish television and on television in many countries.

