Magdalena Tarnowska

Artists' Attitudes Towards the Holocaust Experience: Tadeusz Bornstein, Gela Seksztajn and Alexander Bogen

Abstract

The article discusses various attitudes toward the terrifying reality of World War II, which is depicted in the works of three painters, Tadeusz Bornstein (1919–1942), Gela Seksztajn (1907–1943) and Alexander Bogen (1916–2010). The first two were forced to live in the Warsaw Ghetto and did not survive. Bornstein was a talented poet and painter, and only his poems survived. Seksztajn is well-known because her work formed part of what became known as the Ringelblum Archive, which contains several examples of her work that were made in the ghetto. Bogen's fate was different. Connected with Vilna, Bogen was a partisan who helped rescue many people from the Vilna Ghetto. He also created art during this time, art that was a sort of fight against the Germans. After the war, in Poland and then in Israel, he became a symbol of fighting Jewish artists.

Keywords: Holocaust art, Jewish art, Alexander Bogen, Tadeusz Bornstein, Gela Seksztajn

Art created by Jews during the Holocaust is an exceptional phenomenon for many reasons – the time and circumstances of its creation and functions, the way in which it survived, the material, techniques and artistic expression employed and the personal fate of the artists and their attitude towards the reality surrounding them. It seems that nowadays, when we already have a lot of fundamental studies containing documented

catalogues of works, the most interesting subject of analyses are the issues concerning the creator and their art, that is, their fate during the war, transformations of identity, and attitude towards the experience.[1]

As evidenced by my research on the artwork produced by painters connected with Poland, particularly with Warsaw, it is possible to distinguish a few basic types of art according to the function: (1) art as a document of the times of the Holocaust, (2) art as a form of struggle with Germans, (3) art as a form of escape from tragic reality and (4) art as a form of saving the Jewish community and cultural heritage from oblivion. Apart from those mentioned, for example in the Warsaw Ghetto, there was also the so-called official art performed on behalf of the Judenrat and commissioned by the financial ghetto elites.

In the article herein, I would like to present the profiles of three artists whose work is representative of the above-mentioned basic types of Holocaust art. The entourages that shaped their worldview, attitudes and fate during World War II were all significantly different and are reflected in their work. Two of the artists lived in the Warsaw Ghetto and died during its liquidation (July 1942) or in the Uprising (April 1943).[2] Their memories survived thanks to their preserved artwork, archives and the accounts of people who had been close to them. One artist survived and continued his artistic work after the Holocaust.

The first of the artists to be examined is Tadeusz Bornstein (1919–1942), to whom I have devoted a separate monographic article published in the *Jewish History Quarterly* in 2017 (Tarnowska 2011: 47–62). A talented poet and painter, Bornstein came from an assimilated family of wealthy industrialists from Tomaszow Mazowiecki.[3] In 1937, he began studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków and had just begun his artistic

[1]For the art of the Holocaust, see: Constanza, Mary S., *The Living Witness. Art. In the Concentration Camps and Ghettos*, London 1982; Jaworska, Janina, *Nie wszystek umrę…. [I shall not wholly die….] Twórczość plastyczna Polaków w hitlerowskich więzieniach i obozach koncentracyjnych 1939-1945 [Artistic Work of Poles in Nazi Prisons and Concentration Camps 1939-1945]*, Warsaw, 1975; Milton, Sybil, *In Fitting Memory: the Art and Politics of Holocaust memorials*, Detroit, 1991; Lang, Berel, *Holocaust representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, Baltimore, 2000; *Spiritual Resistance. Art. From Concentration Camps 1940-1945. A selection drawings and paintings from the collection of Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetaot*, Israel, USA, 1981; Sujo, Glen, *Legacies of silence. The visual arts and Holocaust memory, Imperial War Museum, London 5 April-27 August 2001*, London, 2001; *Testimony Art of the Holocaust,* Yad Vashem—The Holocaust Martyr's and Heroes Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem, 1986

[2]For more details connected with art in the Warsaw Ghetto, see: Tarnowska 2011; Tarnowska 2015; Brutin 2020.

[3]His father, Emanuel Bornstein (1879—1942), co-owner of the Factory of Cloth Products in Starzyce of Zusman (Zygmunt) Bornstein, social activist, in the years 1931-1936 President of the Jewish Religious Community. He died on 5 August 1942 in the Warsaw Ghetto. His mother, Romana née Koral (1888—1942), died at the Treblinka extermination camp. His sister, Wanda Aronson (1911-?), was shot in a village near Tomaszów, where she had been hiding with her son Alek. Alek Aronson and his father survived the war in a German prisoner-of-war camp, and after the liberation they both left for the United States. For more details about Tadeusz Bornstein see: Witczak 2010: 58-64; Sandel 1957/I: 54-55.

career. He participated in exhibitions and wrote poems. After the outbreak of World War II, until summer 1941 he and his parents had been staying in the so-called Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic annexed by the USSR, in Lwów [Lviv] and Białystok. At the time, he participated in exhibitions organised by the Soviet authorities. When the German troops entered Poland in June 1941, they escaped to the General Government and the Warsaw Ghetto. They lived in the so-called Small Ghetto on its main thoroughfare, Sienna Street.

It is known that Bornstein lived in isolation and suffered from depression, but he was still engaged in creative work. He wrote poetry, painted views of the ghetto streets and colourful still lives. The Majda family that lived outside the ghetto at 61 Grzybowska Street helped him from the so-called Aryan side. Bronisław Majda, who from 1942 to 1943 was a messenger of the Tax Office to the ghetto, delivered letters and food packages to him. Alexander Majda, a friend of Tadeusz from their school years, was a member of the Conspiracy Consensus Committee of Doctors Democrats and Socialists, which provided medical aid for the ghetto.[4] He tried to persuade Bornstein to escape to the Aryan side. Everything had already been organised, however Bornstein refused because of his parents. Bornstein was murdered during the so-called liquidation action in September 1942. Almost all members of his family perished during the Holocaust, and most of his artwork was destroyed. A few poems, a narrative poem and a description of the artist's personality and his fate have survived, which thanks to the courtesy of Majda-Mincowa were handed over to collections at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

From the point of view of reflections on the art of the Holocaust, the most important is the representation of his attitude in the ghetto's extreme conditions in the context of issues associated with identity. The artist fully identified himself with Poland and its intellectual elite. He wrote his poetry in Polish. In the ghetto poems, which have survived, he uses the codes of meaning related to European culture — to the Napoleonic wars, Lord Byron and the Greek struggle for liberation from Turkish occupation in 1830. As Majda-Mincowa writes: "Raised in an entourage of deeply cultured people, he had great knowledge, great erudition. He was characterized by great world-view individualism" (Majda-Mincowa 1957).

His reaction to the reality of the ghetto was characteristic of a member of the elite, an escape into a sphere capable of protection from contact with the tragedy taking

[4]The Conspiracy Consensus Committee of Doctors Democrats and Socialists was active in Warsaw from mid-1940 to 1944. Its tasks included organising resistance against the occupier among the physicians, collecting evidence of Nazi crimes, taking care of the wounded, medical aid for the ghetto and hiding Jews on the Aryan side. The committee published a periodical called *Abecadło Lekarskie* [Medical Alphabet], distributed to larger hospitals and outpatient clinics. The journal would firmly speak in defence of the Jews (Dobroszycki 2019).

place around them.[5] In the case of Bornstein, this reaction was expressed in poetry, painting and religion. As Majda-Mincowa recalls in her letter:

> "[Tadeusz Bornstein] escaped from all forms of social life in that district, too shocking to accept them as reality. [..] In addition to intense poetic and painting creativity, he would try to find consolation in religion, [...] in his life he had a long period of specific emotional engagement in Christianity [..]" (Majda-Mincowa 1957).

As far as painting is concerned, it is known that during Bornstein's studies he belonged to the circles of the partisans of the Colourists. He was also a fan of the French Post-Impressionists, especially of Van Gogh. As I already mentioned, the artist tried to continue his artistic activity in the ghetto. Bornstein's friend from the Aryan side supplied him with paint, although unfortunately he did not hand his works over to her. Similarly to his poetry, he would seek liberation in painting from the oppression of reality. Like many other artists who dealt with the theme of misery, he preferred the healing power of art to its documentary functions.[6] Majda-Mincowa recalls his "tremendous emotion [when] he welcomed the album of Van Gogh's reproductions which I managed to convey to him during the time of extreme misery and hunger in the ghetto" (Majda-Mincowa 1957). She recalls his painting:

> "[The reproductions] were [in the genre of] still life [..] different variants of a set table. [..], but I hadn't seen anything as beautiful as these in Polish painting. [..] it seems to me that they were a specific and very individual continuation of Impressionism. Crystal objects, glasses and bottles with water penetrated by the sun rays instilled a serenity that for me [..] was incomprehensible However, several works were completely different than those still lives, their Gypsy tablecloths with a black

[5]The author of memoirs adds that Bornstein had been aware of the danger even before the war broke out: "He was stigmatised by the real talent of an artist—poet, painter. [..] Life was standing in front of him in all its beauty; it seemed to him that he would win everything. But he was also a Jew. This modest 'advantage' balanced so many others. I remember he used to tell me this before the war. He spoke with bitter laughter. However, at that time he had not known that it had such a heavy weight on his life and would soon outweigh the scales of everything" (Majda-Mincowa 1957).

[6]An analysis of the art of the Holocaust allows one to distinguish its two fundamental functions—documentary (resulting from the desire to save the dying world and the documentation of the Nazi crimes) and therapy. In the art of the Warsaw Ghetto, we can distinguish two basic trends—the trend of 'engaged, documentary art', referring to current events, and the trend of art which refers to the idea of beauty and harmony, which is both a cure and an escape from reality. In the ghetto's extreme conditions, art's therapeutic function was extremely important. Contact with it, whether through the act of creation or its reception, provided a chance to forget at least for a short while, and allowed an opportunity to experience catharsis. For more information see: Tarnowska 2011; Tarnowska 2015.

background and bright flowers. [..] There were 3 or 4 landscapes from the ghetto in the folder. Grey, muddy, terrifying..." (Majda-Mincowa 1957).

The fragment quoted above shows that Bornstein tried to face the ghetto's reality, to preserve its image and the evoked feelings.[7] The painter's works did not survive the war, despite the efforts of his friend who, after deportation from the Small Ghetto, in August 1942 found a folder with 20 of his works in a pile of things left over by the residents of the house on Sienna Street. They burnt during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 along with her house at 61 Grzybowska Street. According to Rachela Auerbach, a writer and journalist saved from the ghetto, an ambivalent attitude toward the reality was typical of artists imprisoned in the closed district:

"[..] I remember how one of them [urged to record the tragedy of the ghetto] answered me that then it was necessary to paint bright, sunny things that would give the artist and the viewer the opportunity to escape from the terrifying reality. And when the current reality was over, it would be possible to return to it from retrospection. Nevertheless, each one of them had full portfolios of contemporary works that unfortunately were lost to a large extent" (Auerbach 1948).

Gela Seksztajn (1907–1943), an artist associated with Warsaw and insignificant before the war, today is one of the most well-known figures in the art of the Holocaust owing to the fact that more than 300 of her works along with biography, testaments of both herself and her husband, the writer, teacher, and member of the 'Oneg Shabbat' in the ghetto, Israel Lichtensztejn (1904-1943), as well as various other personal documents constitute a part of the so-called Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (ARG, since 1999 in the UNESCO's Memory of the World Register).[8]

Her life and creative work are well known thanks to a solo exhibition at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw in 2007 and a catalogue of Seksztajn's works (Tarnowska 2007) dedicated to the publication of a series edited by the Jewish Historical Institute titled *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Tom IV. Gela Seksztajn 1907–1943. Życie i twórczość* [Ringelblum Archive, vol. 4: Gela Seksztajn 1907-1943: Life and Art] of which I am the author (Tarnowska 2011). It is worth recalling, however, that her environment, educa-

[7]Two paintings (the first and the third) were once owned by Bohdana Majda-Minc, while the second one was owned by the artist's family in Tomaszów Mazowiecki.

[8]Izsael [Izrael] Lichtensztejn, born in 1904 in Radzyn Podlaski. He was a teacher, writer, and social activist. He attended the Jewish and then the Hebrew Teacher's Seminary in Vilnius/Wilno (until 1925). In 1932 he moved to Warsaw, where he conducted pedagogical activities and cooperated with the children's press. He was the editorial secretary of the magazine *Literarisze Bleter.* During the German occupation, he took an active part in conspiratorial education and social self-help. In the Underground Archive of the Ghetto he was a secretary, ran the school department and was responsible for hiding a part of the Archive materials. He was killed in the early days of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

tion and political views differed from those of Bornstein. First of all, she was associated with Yiddish culture (although in her adult life she wrote in Polish). She came from a working-class family, and completed her primary education under the patronage of the CISZO [*Centrale Idysze Szul Organizacje*] at 68 Nowolipki Street. Her talent was discovered by the writer Israel Joshua Singer, and thanks to him she joined the circle of the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw. She studied for only two months at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. Starting in 1931, she regularly participated in exhibitions by Jewish artists that were organised in Warsaw. She belonged to two associations — the Association of Jewish Artists and the Jewish Society for the Promotion of Fine Arts. She specialised mainly in portraiture. Among others, she painted the portraits of Jewish writers, as well as children's portraits for a future exhibition entitled *The Jewish Child*. In 1938 she married Israel Lichtensztejn. She worked in Jewish schools teaching children drawing and handicraft. According to the art historian and art dealer Jozef Sandel (1894—1962):

> "To paint was [Seksztajn's] only desire. [..] The development of her artistic abilities was constantly hampered by harsh living conditions, but she would never lose hope that she would eventually achieve her goal. She drew children with special affection. She loved children and was able to conjure up beauty out of each one of them. She lived, rested and rejoiced when she was painting a Jewish child" (Sandel 1948).

After the war broke out, Gela Seksztajn and Israel Lichtensztejn found themselves in the Warsaw Ghetto, just before its gates were sealed. On 4 November 1940 Seksztajn gave birth to her daughter, Margelit. Apart from his work in the ghetto at 'Oneg Shabbat', Lichtensztejn was active in welfare organisations, and belonged to the kitchen management of School No 145, located on the second floor of the school at 68 Nowolipki Street. Seksztajn taught drawing there, curated exhibitions of her students' work and made costumes and decorations for performances, including *Seasons*, staged at *Femina*, a pre-war cinema hall, in May 1942. Known and appreciated for her commitment, in 1942 she received an award from the Chairman of the Judenrat, Adam Czerniaków.[9] After the liquidation of the ghetto, she stayed with her daughter in the so-

[9]Adam Czerniaków (1880-1942), engineer, activist of Jewish artisan unions, senator of the Republic of Poland (1931–1935), counsellor of the city of Warsaw. He received a degree in chemical engineering from the Warsaw University of Technology and a second diploma from the Faculty of Industry of the Technical University of Dresden. For many years, he served as a legal counsellor to the Jewish Community in Warsaw. He contributed to the expansion of the Mathias Bersohn Museum, and later became its honorary curator. He wrote many scientific works. During the German occupation, he became the Chairman of the Judenrat (Jewish Council) in the Warsaw Ghetto. He co-organised civil resistance and social aid in the ghetto, helped create a covert archive and maintained contacts with the underground, although he opposed plans for armed resistance. He refused to sign the announcement on the forced 'resettlement' of Jews on July, 1942, and committed suicide on July 23.

called 'residual ghetto'. Most likely, both of them perished in April or May 1943 during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Seksztajn's attitude towards the reality of the ghetto was very clearly stated: "I cannot convey the details of our terrible fate, the great tragedy of our nation. I leave it to my colleagues, the Jewish writers" (Seksztajn Gela 1942). Avoiding documenting the tragedy, the artist turned towards life, looking for its positive aspects. Having carried out a formal and thematic analysis, I certified that a self-portrait, as well as portraits of her husband and daughter, pictures of her friends — among them Pola Folman, a paediatrician who worked at the same school — sketches of children, a cigarette seller and three gouache paintings of young girls are all genuine. Most of them are characterised by gentleness in both formal and emotional terms. They are a kind of shelter in a world of feelings for the family, of caring and friendship. Seksztajn's self-portrait has a different, warlike character. This is clearly visible when we compare it with the photograph taken just before the war where one can see a happy woman full of energy and charm. The portrait has only a slight trace of the past image, despite the two images being separated by just two or three years. The lines are restless. Seksztajn's look is hard. Her lips have the expression of fierceness, as if she wanted to say that although she was ready to die, she would save something more than her own life — she would save her work. A similar claim can be noticed in the three portraits that I certified as works created inside the ghetto and depicting young girls whom the artist had portrayed earlier in 1938. However, unlike her earlier compositions these portraits emanate with the overwhelming feelings of cold, resignation and abandonment. The portrayed girls are emaciated, dressed in rags and seen on an almost smooth grey background. The colours of the works are dominated by cool, dark tones. The omnipresence of death is intensified by the addition of a clear shadow of the figure of a small beggar leaning against the wall. This motif had never appeared in her paintings before. It seems that the three portraits, obviously placed intentionally among the works intended to be hidden, were Seksztajn's only acceptable form of portraying the tragedy of the closed district's prisoners.

It should be noted that the extreme existential conditions during the Holocaust raised the need to appeal to a world of positive values, to preserve the memory of the people sharing the same fate as them. Therefore, the most professional and amateur artists devoted themselves to portraiture in the face of ubiquitous death. Hoping that their works would survive the war, they tried to use the art to save a world condemned to be destroyed. Such was the goal pursued by Gela Seksztajn.

"I am an artist, I will use this term, broken in half. I went out of the hell of darkness into the light of the sun. Here in Israel I was reborn. I breathe with its light, the sun and the air. They say that I'm a colourist. Yes. Because I sing all my songs with colours" (Ćwiakowska 1984). These are the words Alexander Bogen used to describe his attitude towards the past and the present. Bogen (actually Katzenbogen, 1916-2010)

was an exceptional figure. A painter and a partisan, Bogen was one of the few 'survivor' artists and fighters who took up arms against the occupiers joining the partisan troops in the forests around the Lake Narach in Belarus. Owing to his heroic war past, he became a kind of symbol of the cultural policy of Israel, where he settled in 1951. Bogen was actively involved in the art field his whole life. He was the President of the Union of Artists in Israel and a, lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His solo exhibitions, more than thirty-five, took place all over the world. Many catalogues and books are dedicated to him, where the album titled *Alexander Bogen* (Amishai-Msisels et al., 2005) and the catalogue *Bogen Alexander, Revolt* (Ghetto Fighters House, 1989) can be mentioned as the most significant ones. His time in Poland between the years 1948-1951 is described in an article written by me (Tarnowska 2014).

From the age of about two, the Tartu-born artist was associated with Vilnius, the second centre of Jewish secular and religious culture after Warsaw.[10] His parents were doctors with left-wing sympathies, and advocates of Jewish culture in the diaspora. At home, an atmosphere of freedom prevailed, confirmed by the fact that Bogen was a member of the Zionist youth organisation, Hashomer Hatzair.[11] After graduating from the secondary school in 1934, he joined the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Stefan Batory University in 1936, where he studied sculpture and painting until June 1941.[12] He debuted in the mid-1930s at exhibitions of the Vilnius' Jewish artistic milieu (Malinowski 2000: 393—394). In May 1940, he married Rachel Szachor (1914—1998).[13]

After the outbreak of the German-Soviet war in 1941, he found himself in the Święciany Ghetto. He escaped from there, and joined the Belarusian partisan fighters in the forest around the Lake Narach located about 100 km from Vilna. Under the pseudonym Szura, he became the commander of the Nekama — or Revenge — platoon. Among the actions carried out by his troops, 150 *Farejnikte Partizaner Organizacje* (FPO) volunteers were transferred from the Vilna Ghetto to the partisans during the liquidation of the ghetto (11 September, 1943). Later, until 1945, he worked for a documentary troop in Voroshilov's brigade, thanks to which he could continue the work that he had begun whilst still in the ghetto to record the everyday life of soldiers. His artistic

[10]Vilnius was called 'Little Jerusalem', and before 1939 the Jewish kehillah numbered 70,000 people.

[11]Hashomer Hatzair (Hebrew from young guard, or scout), left-wing Zionist pioneer organisation, established in Galicia in 1916. Its task was to prepare the youth for kibbutz settlement in Palestine. In 1928, the organisation joined the youth organisation HeChalutz—or Pioneer—on the principle of autonomy. After the war, it conducted social activities and dealt with the organisation of emigration to Palestine. The organisation was dissolved in 1949.

[12]Stefan Batory University was re-opened in 1919 by the Polish authorities, among the lecturers there were Warsaw artists, including Ferdynand Ruszczyc, Ludomir Ślendziński and Tymon Niesiołowski. Forty-five Jews studied there.

[13] The Alexander Bogen Foundation in Tel-Aviv is the owner of Bogen's documents and works of art.

attitude towards the Holocaust contained a desire to save the memory of his combat comrades through art and to preserve for posterity the tragedy that was unfolding:

> "When I asked myself why I was drawing all this, when I am almost constantly fighting, I discovered that I had been guided by the instinct of physical survival. Every person is guided by this instinct, the desire to continue the species in the family, in their children who are part of him in the future. Another motive was to hand over information about German crimes to the free world" (JPEF 2011).

Bogen owes his post-war popularity to a series of drawings he created during the occupation, of which 50 survived, showing events in the ghetto, images of the partisans and the silhouettes and faces of his brothers in arms. They are a testimony to the armed struggle of the Jews, and are particularly desirable by both Polish and Israeli propaganda.

In 1944, Bogen returned to the recently liberated Vilnius and resumed his interrupted studies. He graduated in 1947 with a diploma thesis *Ostatnia rodzina w getcie* [The Last Family in the Ghetto], which, as he said in an interview in 1984, was his symbolic end to the settlement with the past (Ćwiakowska 1984), although he did not completely forget the tragedy that he witnessed. During the three years of his stay in the city, he also created a series of drawings showing the destruction of war. A small girl with a doll, whom he first drew in the ghetto in 1943, started to appear in his paintings towards the end of his life. According to his granddaughter, he used the girl motif as a symbol of the Holocaust tragedy. In 1947, he settled with his wife and son Michał in Łódź. In 1951, they emigrated to Israel and settled in Tel Aviv, and his international painting career started to develop. He continued his education at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, travelled extensively and exhibited his works all over the world, becoming one of the most respected artists in contemporary Israel. For over 60 years, he enjoyed international fame as well as recognition from critics and connoisseurs of art.[14] His works can be found in museum and private collections around the globe. Many of his wartime drawings are in the collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., Israel and several places in Poland including the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Museum of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

The discussion about the three artists with different fates, their social and cultural backgrounds and their attitudes towards the Holocaust is a small fragment of my research on the subject. However, it seems that they are, on the one hand, representative examples of the functions that art performed during World War II. On the other

[14]The First State Prize of the Polish People's Republic 1950, in Israel – the Histadrut Prize (1961), the Israel Ministry of Education & Culture Prize (1962), Tel Aviv and Negev awards (1980, 1983).

hand, they are also a point of departure for further reflection on this subject, namely the relationship between a sense of an artist's national or cultural identity, the reality surrounding him or her and art created in response to it.

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