

Barbara Ruszczyc by Jadwiga Lipinska

Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, Egyptian archaeologist and museum curator, was born in Vilnius on September 18th, 1928, the youngest of six children (three daughters and three sons) of the prominent Polish painter Ferdynand Ruszczyc (1870-1936), and Regina Rouck, from a family of Danish descent.

Her father was a professor at several universities and academies of art and was well known as an organizer of cultural life in Vilnius. Unfortunately both her parents died when Barbara was still a child.

Living in eastern Poland, with its complicated political circumstances, exposed young Barbara to troubled, stormy times during her first sixteen years. Until 1940, Vilnius, together with its surrounding countryside, belonged to Poland, but after World War II it became part of Lithuania. During the war it was occupied twice by the Soviets, and once, but for a longer period of time (1941-1944), by the Germans. The second Soviet occupation resulted in deportations for most of the Poles from this territory. When war broke out in 1939 (the same year she lost her mother), Barbara was forced to leave school and stay with two sisters and a brother in the family's country house on an estate named Bohdanow. The oldest sister Janina (1914-1988) had studied art history first in Vilnius and then in Germany for two years at Goettingen and also, until 1939, at Warsaw University. She had to abandon her study to care for her dying mother and then her younger siblings when they were left orphans.

In 1939 Soviet troops attacked Poland and occupied Vilnius and the family estate.

The younger children were then sent to their uncle's property near Vilnius, but Janina decided to stay on in Bohdanow, where all the books and documents of her father's career had been kept in view of creating a future museum. She managed to hide much of the material in houses of friends. After the arrival of the Germans in 1941, Janina brought her siblings back to the estate where they lived quietly until the second coming of the Soviets in July of 1944. The country house was burned and Janina was arrested and jailed, suffering during her internment a severe case of typhoid fever. Relentless pressure on the authorities from her neighbors resulted in her release, but Janina was ordered to leave the country. Meanwhile, Barbara and her brother and sisters were forced to leave the estate and move first to the city of Torun in Poland and then to the resort town of Zakopane in the Tatra mountains. There, in the post-war years, Barbara had her secondary school education, but after the death of her older sister Eva, she moved to Warsaw where now her sister Janina, an art historian, had a position at the National Museum. Janina, working with one blind eye, created a complete register of the Polish portraits from the 16th to 18th century and authored about 70 articles during her career. Following her, Barbara started to work at the National Museum in 1949, first as a guide, but after graduating from secondary school (1950) and entering Warsaw University, she transferred to the Department of Ancient Art, where she worked until the end of her life, moving up through all positions from assistant to senior curator (1973-1990).

It should be mentioned here, that the general director of the National Museum, Professor Stanislaw Lorentz, a prominent Polish historian of art, who had lived and worked for a long time in Vilnius before World War II and was a friend of Ferdynand Ruszczyc, did his best to help members of the Ruszczyc family. All three of Barbara's brothers had enlisted in the Polish Underground Army and all three survived the war to

pursue careers. The oldest brother Edward, became an electrical engineer and still lives in Poland where he published his father's diaries in two volumes. His son, Ferdynand followed the family tradition and became an art historian and is currently General Director of the National Museum in Warsaw. Barbara's second oldest brother Oscar emigrated to the United States and studied at Columbia University, becoming a professor of psychology. Her third brother Andrzej became a physician in Poland.

At the University, Barbara studied Mediterranean Archaeology with a specialization in ancient Egypt and the Near East. Nobody could explain this career choice, but family members recall that she loved to garden and dig in the soil. However, the leap from gardening to archaeology is a long one, and she seems not to have disclosed the reasons for her career choice. She was, indeed, a deeply withdrawn, shy and timid person, concealing herself and very reluctant to speak about herself. She never married and, being deeply religious, found support through her association with Roman-Catholic church organizations.

Barbara received her M.A. in 1955, working on the false door of the mastaba of Isi, of the Sixth Dynasty, from Edfu, which was one of the most important objects in the museum's collection. She then continued work toward her Ph.D. (granted in 1972) as a pupil of the world-renowned Polish archaeologist Professor Kazimierz Michalowski (1901-1981), who supported her and took her along as a participant on his various field expeditions: to Tell Atrib in the Egyptian Delta, to Alexandria, and to Faras in the Sudan. There the Poles had uncovered and saved from destruction the early Christian Cathedral with its gallery of well preserved wall paintings. Barbara was so successful in learning excavating techniques that she was appointed field director at Tell Atrib from 1969-1984.

The object of the Polish work at Atrib, the new site was called Kom Sidi Youssuf,

in the suburbs of Bebnha, some 50 kilometers north of Cairo, was to find the remains of a early Coptic church when Athribis was seat of a bishopric in the 8th century, a time of Moslem repression of the Christians. The Copts had perished defending the church, and the chairman of the Coptic Committee, Pahor Labib, and Michalowski had signed an agreement in 1961 to begin joint excavations in search of remains of the church. Barbara Rusczyk served as director of the mission, but work was broken off by war in the Middle East, and for ten years it was impossible to resume excavations because of a military camp having been established in the neighborhood. Finally the work was resumed in 1979 and continued until 1984. Proof that the local tradition about an exceptionally ornate church having stood on the site was found by recovering fragments of mosaics and gilt capitals as well as parts of the polychrome wall decorations, but unfortunately there was no trace of the foundations. Dr. Rusczyk published a monograph on the results of the excavations in 1997. It should be noted here, that as an expression of their resistance to both their Soviet and German oppressors, Polish archaeologists, particularly in the post-war years, wrote in French rather than in Russian or German, both languages having been forced upon them, and in recognition that Polish was not universally understood.

At the National Museum in Warsaw, she published a number of the objects in the collection and alone or with colleagues several guide-books on the Gallery of Ancient Art and its temporary exhibits. She was curator for many exhibitions, some of them not concerned at all with Ancient Egypt, but with such distant subjects, as for example the “Art of ancient Cyprus” or “The Gold of the Scythians.” She was, with Professor Michalowski, an organizer of the exhibitions of the early Christian Faras murals in Berlin, Essen, the Hague, Zurich and Vienna.

Besides her work at the National Museum, Dr. Ruszczyk was very active as an educator, teaching ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art at Warsaw University, substituting for Professor Michalowski during his absences due to his various duties. For twenty years (1973-93) she lectured at the Academy of Roman Catholic Theology on art and archaeology of the ancient Near East. She received praise for that activity in a letter from Archbishop Muszynski, sent to her family after her death.

Dr. Ruszczyk's enthusiasm for archaeology and her conscientiousness toward her work were appreciated, not only by her professor, but also by a wide circle of her colleagues and collaborators. One fact is very significant for her attitude toward the archaeological materials: when she retired from her curatorial position at the National Museum in 1990, she regularly kept coming to work there as a volunteer, without any compensation, to study and to put in order large collections of potsherds and fragments of ancient glass kept in the stores. That material was the result of the destruction during World War II, and it was mixed with other fragments, brought back from various excavations. Nobody until then had time enough to go through that mass of unpromising sherds, but Barbara was quite enthusiastic about being able to work on it full time, without distractions. Results were quite spectacular: she was able to reconstruct a number of the Egyptian, Greek and Roman pots and glass vessels out of the mass of broken fragments. That work she continued almost until her death. The Museum exhibited the recovered and reconstructed pottery and glass in a special case during the "Museum's Open Day" in May of 2002, with a photo of Barbara Ruszczyk as a Memoriam.

Besides her professional activity, Dr. Ruszczyk was also very active and dedicated to social actions. Since 1952, and thus for almost fifty years, she was a very

competent librarian for the Library of Writers of the Jesuit Association in Warsaw. In the last decade of her life, she collaborated with the Dominicans of Krakow, transporting the books and cataloguing them in a library she helped to establish in Czortkow, in the Ukraine. She also recorded the vestiges of Polish presence in several of the Ukrainian localities. This work consisted mostly of copying the inscriptions on tombstones in old, devastated cemeteries. She also belonged to the association for spreading the cult of the holy Andrzej Bobola (1591-1657), taking part in the excursions to the places connected with the presence of that saint and to his death. She also collaborated with the Papala Institute of the Church Studies.

Dr. Ruszczyc was a member of the International Association of Egyptologists and the (Polish) Society of Historians of Art. For her merits, she was awarded in 1987 the golden Knight's Cross of the Revival of Poland (*Polonia Restituta*).

Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc died in Warsaw on September 11th, 2001 and was buried in her family's tomb beside her brothers and sister. She was accompanied to the grave by a crowd of her friends, family members, and colleagues. She is sadly missed by all who knew and worked with her and it can be said that she parted this world as quietly and silently as she lived.

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