

# **Ryszard Kiełczewski**

(15 March 1940 – 23 July 2016)

Ryszard (Rysiek) Kiełczewski was born in Warsaw on 15 March 1940 as the son of Stefan and Stanisława, née Proszkiewicz.

I met Rysiek in September 1955 in Żoliborz,<sup>1</sup> in what was then officially called 4<sup>th</sup> Secondary School in Warsaw (today's Joachim Lelewel Secondary School), in a unique, post-festival atmosphere. The World Festival of Youth and Students had come to an end two weeks before. For our generation, it represented a cultural breakthrough, only later followed by a political one: the Polish October.<sup>2</sup> The festival opened our eyes to the world and its cultural diversity, we were enthralled by the number of people having fun together, and – most importantly – it allowed us to discover jazz music, which was regarded as hostile to the socialist doctrine of raising young people during the post-war years. Rysiek and I were fascinated with jazz. Willis Conover's "Music USA" broadcasts provided our daily spiritual nourishment, and we celebrated the first issue of *Jazz* magazine (summer 1956) and the 1<sup>st</sup> Jazz Festival in Sopot (1956) as epochal events.

We lived close to each other in Bielany,<sup>3</sup> so we could share our impressions from the previous night's "Music USA" already on our way to school (listening to the broadcasts required considerable patience and perseverance, since the frequency kept changing and, to put it mildly, our parents were not overly fond of this type of music). Our first school contacts soon turned into an inseparable friendship. We spent every free moment together. Apart from the aforementioned jazz music, our attention – instead of being focused on classes – diverted to the history of cinema (screenings in the recently opened Iluzjon cinema on today's Aleja Szucha – the same building that currently houses the Constitutional Tribunal!), exhibitions, museums (we skipped school to go to the National Museum or Zachęta Art Gallery), and, above all, social life. The latter gained momentum after the opening of two student clubs in Warsaw: Stodoła in 1956 and Hybrydy in 1957, where – as secondary school students – we theoretically had no entry. Consequently, finding a way to get inside was a difficult challenge we always took up with satisfaction. We helped each other with the study material (Rysiek was good at maths, I was better at humanities), but, frankly speaking, we never applied ourselves excessively to doing our homework. The pre-war teaching staff reluctantly tolerated our "excesses." Our parents were frequently called on the carpet by our form teachers – for us, this meant harsh reprimands and punishments, which mostly involved limiting our escapades to said clubs.

We preferred to think about the future, making plans to study directing or art history. At that time, in order to be accepted to study directing at the film school in Łódź, a degree in the humanities or the arts was a prerequisite, so our natural choice was to start from art history. Needless to say, this was not an easy task, since art history was the most popular course at Polish universities. And yet we made it. After passing our school-leaving exam and getting straight

<sup>1</sup> District of Warsaw (all notes are the translator's).

<sup>2</sup> October 1956, which marked a transition from post-war Stalinist rule towards a more liberal regime led by Władysław Gomułka (also referred to as the "Polish thaw").

<sup>3</sup> District of Warsaw.

A's at the entrance examinations (the credit for which largely goes to the aforementioned exacting pre-war teachers), in October 1959 we started studying art history at the Faculty of History of the University of Warsaw.

When he was in his fourth year, in the spring of 1963, Rysiek already began working at the Department of Polish Painting at the National Museum in Warsaw, which he combined with writing his MA thesis about the life and work of the painter Wincenty Kasprzycki (successfully defended in 1969). I joined him several months later, and we spend the next twelve years gradually learning the museum profession. Our teachers were extraordinary. Rysiek's talents were nurtured by Prof. Stefan Kozakiewicz, eminent expert on Polish and Italian painting and curator of the Gallery of Polish Painting (until his death in 1974), while my academic supervisor was none other than the director of the National Museum in Warsaw, Prof. Stanisław Lorentz.

Rysiek Kiełczewski had a talent for exhibitions. Apart from knowledge of art, organizing exhibitions requires teamwork skills, and – above all – an easy manner with specialists responsible for the assembly of exhibition equipment, hanging paintings, lighting exhibits, unpacking and packing works of art, etc. Rysiek quickly gained authority and trust among this important group of the museum's employees. Rysiek's other, equally important talent, was a sense of the exhibition space, backed with a sensitivity to colour and light – in short, he had mastered the basic elements of constructing exhibitions in a museum space. Soon not even the smallest corrections in the Gallery of Polish Painting could be effected without him, and he was involved in all exhibitions organized by said gallery between 1964 and 1974 – both in the National Museum in Warsaw and in other museums in Poland. Our debut was the exhibition *Dresden and Warsaw in the Oeuvre of Bernardo Bellotto* (1964–65). Though our share in this endeavour mostly involved supplementing the exhibition with architectural drawings associated with the buildings painted by Bellotto, it became deeply etched in our memory, alongside *Architectural Views in Polish Painting 1780–1880* (1964–65), which was organized and opened at the same time. In the latter, if I remember correctly, we were responsible for overseeing transports of artworks loaned from other museums. Other exhibitions followed, for instance *Polish Historical and Battle Scene Painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1965), *1000 Years of Polish Culture in Silesia, Lubusz Land, Pomerania, Warmia and Masuria* (1966–67) or *Poland's History in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Painting* (1969), which Rysiek organized on his own. Our next major joint endeavour was the extensive exhibition on Marcello Bacciarelli (1970), which represented our entire milieu's call for the reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw.<sup>4</sup> Bacciarelli's paintings were used as a pretext to showcase the salvaged artworks and fragments of architectural decorations from the castle. In my opinion, the fact that the decision to rebuild the castle was taken a mere year later proves how instrumental this exhibition was. It was then, during the memorable winter of 1971, that we were tasked with preparing and organizing the exhibition *The Royal Castle in Warsaw*, to symbolically mark the beginning of reconstruction work. The showcase presented the gradual destruction and devastation of the Castle, recalled the heroic effort to salvage works of art and fragments of interior decorations, and, above all, it brought home the wealth of the future collection to the broader public.

Rysiek and I independently prepared and organized the exhibition *The Commission of National Education and Its Time* (1973–74), which commemorated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing this institution, and posed many challenges in terms of logistics. The main difficulty lay in the selection and accumulation of such diverse objects as works of art, militaria,

<sup>4</sup> It was destroyed during the Second World War.

manuscripts, archive records, maps, but also natural, geological and technical exhibits from the collections of several dozen museums, libraries and archives nationwide.

Work at the National Museum in Warsaw gave us tremendous satisfaction and an opportunity to experience all aspects of museum work. Its only downside was the exceptionally low remuneration. We had to supplement our income by taking on extra assignments. In 1969, we accepted a job offered by the Heritage Documentation Centre affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Art, to prepare an inventory of movable heritage in the Biskupiec Reszelski area of Warmia. This was possible, because Rysiek was one of my few friends who owned a car: his very own Fiat 600. Over a couple of months, we managed to prepare the inventory, supplemented with photographic documentation, of artworks held at several dozen churches, chapels and roadside shrines in Warmia. To this end, Rysiek made several hundred professional photographs. For us, this job was a fantastic learning experience and a practical test of what we had learned at the museum. Judging by the opinions and praise voiced by the Centre's management, this was another exam that we successfully passed.

Rysiek was a natural people person. I remember situations when, during fieldwork, we landed in places neither of us had known before. After just a couple of hours and meetings, complete strangers began treating Rysiek as their close acquaintance. During our mission in Warmia, whenever we spent more time in one place, after but a few days Rysiek would not only be familiar with the most prominent inhabitants of the given town, but – more importantly – they were on familiar terms with him. This made our work much easier: not only could we enter the relatively easily accessible church facilities (we had a special permit from the diocesan bishop), but we were also allowed to visit private storerooms or attics, where people hid “holy” figures from shrines scattered across Warmian fields.

In 1972, Prof. Stanisław Lorentz decided to transfer Rysiek to Royal Łazienki, which at that time was a division of the National Museum. This was due to the beginning of reconstruction work on the Royal Castle and establishing the Royal Castle in the Warsaw division of the National Museum. The Royal Łazienki were tasked with organizing the new division and setting up a permanent exhibition of works of art salvaged from the castle in 1939 in the former Royal Library in the Copper-Roof Palace. The following year, when the Royal Castle division became an independent unit and I was appointed its curator, Rysiek became my deputy. Over the course of two years, we prepared the exhibition script of the rebuilt castle interiors. Apart from myself and Rysiek, our small team included Alicja Lutostańska, Katarzyna Kwiecińska, Maria Przewoźna, and Jerzy Lileyko, and we were later joined by Jerzy Baranowski, Danuta Łuniewicz-Koper and Barbara Brus-Malinowska. Rysiek's major contribution was drafting the principles of reconstructing missing artworks: sculptures, furniture, frames, bronzes, upholstery, haberdashery, chandeliers, as well as wall and plafond paintings. He was an indispensable member of dozens of committees evaluating and approving reconstruction and conservation works.

We also spent considerable time searching for objects that would match our script of furnishing the Castle in the storerooms of the National Museum in Warsaw. It was in this type of work that Rysiek's impeccable taste and appreciation of all nuances of style truly became apparent. He combined the sensitivity of an arts specialist with unique technical abilities. On the one hand, he could appreciate the subtleties of painting, on the other – repair the technically complex mechanism of an age-old device or, in emergency situations, a broken car.

The Warsaw milieu of art historians also remembered his amazing sense of humour, empathy and ability to derive pleasure out of each and every social gathering. Stories about the guided tours of Warsaw that we gave to a famous art history professor from India (Prof. Stefan

Kozakiewicz in disguise) have since become the stuff of urban legends. Thanks to the professor, with his flawless English and expertly wrapped turban (our colleague, Jola Wyleżyńska, was a true master in that respect), we were automatically allowed to enter the bar in the Bristol Hotel and even the so-called Kamieniołomy club in the Europejski Hotel (where ordinary Varsovians were not welcome).

There came a time, though, when we went our separate ways. In September 1975, Professor Lorentz appointed me his deputy at the National Museum in Warsaw. My path at the Royal Castle was at times difficult (owing to martial law), but mostly a pleasing one. Following a brief (1975–76) and turbulent stint in the Management Board of the Royal Castle associated with the Citizens' Castle Reconstruction Committee, Rysiek "emigrated" to Płock, where he used the experience gained at the National Museum in one of the best regional museums in Poland: the Mazovian Museum. Between 1976 and 1977, he was its deputy director. In mid-1977, he returned to Warsaw. Between 1977 and 1983, he headed the Research Planning and Coordination department at the Heritage Documentation Centre. From 1983 until his retirement in 2008, he was a curator and head of the Department of Evaluating Works of Art at the National Museum in Warsaw. This work brought out the full extent of his connoisseurship – the consequence of his long-standing cooperation with Prof. Stefan Kozakiewicz, fieldwork experience of preparing inventories, knowledge gained in the process of rebuilding and reconstructing the Royal Castle as well as his directorship in Płock.

I deeply regret the fact that Rysiek did not share his knowledge and experience with us in writing. This is a very typical trait for most of the connoisseurs I have known. He preferred to share what he knew in everyday, direct contacts, while giving advice or assessing the results of our work. However, mention should be made here of his article "The Protection of Historical Cemeteries in Poland..."<sup>5</sup> and his contribution to catalogues *Widoki architektoniczne w malarstwie polskim 1780–1880* [Architectural views in Polish painting 1780–1880] (Warsaw, 1964), *Portrety osobistości polskich znajdujących się w pokojach i w Galerii Pałacu w Wilanowie* [Portraits of important Polish personages found in the rooms and gallery of the Wilanów Palace] (Warsaw, 1967), and the guidebook *Zamek Królewski w Warszawie* [Royal Castle in Warsaw], which we wrote together (Warsaw, 1971). He also co-wrote (with Aleksander Nieśmiałek) the script of an art documentary *Marcello Bacciarelli – Painter of the Last King* (1970) and worked as a consultant for the documentary *Leon Wyczółkowski's Portfolio* (1971).

His subordinates remembered him as an exemplary and fair boss, who looked after his team, avoided red tape, and was extremely efficient in dealing with various predicaments, which were a common occurrence in the department he headed. It should be noted here that he was in the front line, so to speak – in direct contact with persons wanting to obtain permits to transport works of art outside of Poland. His tact and personal charm on the one hand, backed with full professionalism on the other, meant that his work was always highly valued. Ryszard Kiełczewski was not just a skilled and experienced art historian. Above all, he was a genuine, multifaceted connoisseur of art – a rare find in this day and age.

The news of Rysiek's impending death reached me in Florence, as I was visiting the newly rearranged Cathedral Museum. I tried to contact him straight away. Though he picked up the phone, he was too weak to talk. As I rambled through subsequent rooms of the museum, I was unable to focus on the masterpieces of Florentine art. My thoughts wandered back to

<sup>5</sup> "Ochrona zabytkowych cmentarzy w Polsce...", *Ochrona Zabytków*, no. 3(130), 1980, vol. 33, pp. 265–66 (with Aleksandra Komornicka).

our youthful friendship, when we both rejoiced in the world that stood ajar before us, to the times when we absorbed knowledge about culture and art, when we enthusiastically prepared subsequent exhibitions, drafted scripts for the interiors of the reconstructed Royal Castle, and shared difficult private problems.

After a few hours, I received the message that Rysiek had left us forever. You departed too early, Rysiek. You should still be enjoying life, showing love to your dearest and admiring the world that surrounds us.

Ryszard Kielczewski died on Saturday, 23 July 2016. He was buried in the family grave at Wawrzyszewski Cemetery in Warsaw. He is survived by two daughters: Anna (1975) and Marta (1977) as well as grandchildren: Nina (2014) and Milan (2016).

Andrzej Rottermund

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska