

# *Gela in the Playground*

An essay by Ellen Lapidus Stern

Gela Seksztein Lichtenstein (1907 - 1943)



*Gela Anointed with Oil* oil on canvas 210x114cm.

ג'לה סקשטין ליכטנשטיין

*Forward edition:*

## *Gela in the Playground - Gela Seksztein Lichtenstein (1907 - 1943)*



“Warsaw itself had become a sort of playground for the Germans. Ziberberg p 63

*So too, the writing of holocaust history, like the physical memorial could express the void and not the fullness thereof.*

*Blessed are You, O Lord our G-d, King of the world, Judge of the truth.*

*The Warsaw Ghetto was one of the many playgrounds of the Third Reich. The see-saws were*



*the Jewish inhabitants. The swings were the weapons of destruction. The sliding ponds were the trains descending toward Treblinka. The jungle gyms were the lies which gave exertion continued meaning for the victims. The water fountains were the soup kitchens. The sand piles, graves, and the paths, the streets of Poland.*

“Franz Weber, a black-triangle prisoner, was our ‘Oberkapo’. His speciality was to throw an inmate to the ground, place a cane on his neck and see-saw up and down on it until the unfortunate prisoner expired.” (The Union Kommando in Auschwitz by Lore Shelly, p. 292).

*The fun lasted three years during which time hundreds of thousands of Jewish people were exterminated. Among them, our artist Gela Seksztein.*

*The intellectuals were murdered first. Poland, like some but not all diaspora communities, had for centuries, ten to be exact, elected and appointed its own community leaders for religious and secular affairs. There were divided opinions*

**Genia Landau (a woman refugee from Zduńska Wola) in an account:**

On Sunday [3 September] the air-raid sirens began to sound in the morning. [...] Aeroplanes circled low, dropping bombs continuously. However, it was not the bombs which terrified me as much as the aeroplanes themselves. I felt as if any moment they would fall on my head. I couldn't get rid of that terrifying thought. With every screech, the earth trembled beneath us, it would lift us up momentarily and then we would descend again. That was the worst. [...] I cannot understand what it was that was happening to me. This was no ordinary, human fear, it was something quite different — a wild, consuming, panic stricken terror... I could not control it [...].

I was at the end of my tether when my father announced in an authoritative tone that we would be fleeing the town immediately. [...] As we emerged from the maze of gardens onto the street, I saw a unique and extraordinary scene before me [...]. People were pouring out of side streets — men, women and children — either walking or riding on carts or on wagons which were loaded up with all manner of hurriedly gathered belongings. This enormous mass advanced, wave after wave, pushing its way forward, unchecked, in tight massed ranks. It grew with every minute as new crowds joined it from all sides. [...]

On the outskirts of the town, we saw the results of the previous air raids: uprooted telegraph posts, jagged remains of houses lining the whole road, the ground strewn with cables, glass, timber and other debris. There were patrols on the railway bridges near the train station and once again there were aeroplanes above us.

Once we had manoeuvred our way round the dangerous obstacles, we found ourselves on the open road. Here the crowd began to break up into smaller groups which dispersed along side roads. [...] The dust and heat were unbearable. [...] Our journey was becoming increasingly difficult; not only did motorcycles and cars carrying military personnel and civilians keep passing us, but the road was becoming congested with peasant carts as people hurriedly left their farms. [...]

After a few kilometres, as we turned to look behind us, we saw clouds of smoke obscuring the entire area we had left. The sky was grey. People turned round, gesturing at the town which was now in flames. The effect this had on us was terrible. Everybody thought that Zduńska Wola would be reduced to a rubble of stones. It seemed as if the entire town was engulfed in flames. [...]

We did not stop for even a moment, hurried on by the aeroplanes which continuously circled over our heads. Those were the worst moments; time after time we would dive into ditches or throw ourselves to the ground. [...] We took shelter under the eaves of roofs, and among tall, dried out reeds... Once things had quietened down, we would continue on our way.

Escape from Zduńska Wola, 3 September 1939

[I1061]

THE RINGELBLUM ARCHIVE: Annihilation - Day by Day, Carta Center, Warsaw 2008 pp. 8, 9

Declaration of Gela's death in April, 1943. (brother-in-law) Shlomo Lichtenstein

The document is a handwritten form in Hebrew. At the top, it says 'דרישה' (Declaration) and 'לרשום חלקי השוואה והגבורה' (to register the part of the award and bravery). It contains the following information:
 

- Name: ג'לה סקצטין - ג'לה סקצטין - ג'לה סקצטין
- Date of Birth: 1909
- Address: 106 324, 106 324
- Signature: Shlomo Lichtenstein
- Date: 11/4/43

 The form has several sections with checkboxes and lines for text, some of which are filled in with handwritten notes.

Yad Vashem Archives

*about education, worship and even art. Opinions that had developed into organizations. Gela was an artist, a Jewess, a member of the left-wing organization Shomer HaTzair. She was also a member of "Oneg Shabbat", the secret, underground resistance organization of the Ghetto, whose policy was, as the English proverb goes, "the pen is mightier than the sword". An organization whose primary objective was to record the daily life in the ghetto through first hand witness accounts and questionnaires. In addition it ran soup kitchens. Running one of these kitchens was Gela's mother-in-law, Mrs. Lichtenstein's, official,*



Isn't that Mrs. Lichtenstein?

*and public employment. Seeing hundreds and hundreds of children every day gave Gela access to the most valuable element for subject matter, the ghetto children. Water color portraits of Jewish children. Stately portraits of clean, quiet, intelligent, beautiful children. The German invaders played in their "park", and the children learned. Learning, formal school learning in the ghetto, during the first two years of its three year duration, and while the German lies were still believed, was more sought after by the youth itself than even before the war.*

*Gela, who had studied art in Cracow before the war and was qualified to teach, taught. She taught clandestine lessons in art, not graphics, painting and drawing*



The Lichtensteins - Israel, Gela, Margalit, Mrs. Lichtenstein (bubbe)

*one of the liberal arts, the humanities, which can help develop self-esteem, dignity, even clarity of mind, some believe, in the person who pursues his studies. This was, of course, in direct opposition to Nazi policy. A see-saw, a Jew, was to be sat upon and shifted upward and down again, banging on the hard ground with each bounce.*

*The organizational structure of Jewish communal life was manipulated by the invaders towards their own ends. A hierarchical bureaucracy of Jews was ordered by the Germans immediately following the extermination of the community's leaders. A housing department, a department of agriculture, a Jewish police, burial squads, and a Jewish Self-help Organization were encouraged by the invading government after it quite early on changed its policy of total ghetto starvation. Originally the Nazi plan for the Warsaw Jewish community was forced relocation into a walled off area within the city, into which a bare minimum of food would be regularly*

*diminished until the population starved to death. This soon became impractical as the underworld profession of smuggling began to thrive. Food was surreptitiously brought in from outside the ghetto walls. The anti-Semitic goal of the Jew-hater throughout history has been to undermine the Jew of his Torah values. Thus, charity and kindness were successfully replaced, at first, by the irrepressible desire for survival, and in some cases even greed. Businesses that remade clothing from the dead, as well as from smuggled goods opened. Greed tried to seep it's way into the life of the inhabitants of the Ghetto. However, it was not common, pervasive or even frequent. People who could not resist the moral and physical abuse put upon*

*them by the Nazis were encouraged to participate in what became known as "Spiritual Resistance", i.e., to "Live with Honor and To Die with Honor".*

APPENDIX: LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.  
WHAT CAN ONE SAY AND REQUEST AT THIS MOMENT IN TIME?

As I stand on the border between life and death — being more certain of my death than of my survival — I wish to take leave from my friends and my works.

For ten years I have collected my creations, which I painted, ripped-up and then recreated, to prepare my works for display and especially for the exhibition of 'The Portrait of the Jewish Child'. Now, given the limited space at my disposal, I will try saving as many works as I possibly can. For this reason I am relinquishing to God's care dozens of oil paintings, portraits of Jewish writers, sketches and other works [which could not be included].

I request no praise, I wish only that my name be remembered and also that of my little daughter, the talented Margalit Lichtensztajn, who carries the name of my husband [Israel] Lichtensztajn, and who at the age of twenty months shows signs of artistic talent. A Jewish girl who speaks a beautiful Yiddish and has developed nicely, both spiritually and physically. My works I bequeath to the Jewish museum to be built in the future in order to recreate pre-war Jewish cultural life, prior to the fateful tragedy of the Jewish community in Poland.

I am not capable to relate the details of our terrible fate, about the greatest tragedy which ever befell our people. This I entrust to my colleagues the Jewish writers. I request, that the persons or the community who find my works, should know that I had to cut and adapt the size of the works to the circumstances [of the storage space].

I request that my fate and the fate of my husband and little daughter be made known to my dear sister-in-law, Yenta Lichtensztajn and her husband Abraham Foderman in Buenos Aires (I do not know them personally), to my brother-in-law Shlomo Lichtensztajn and his wife Genja Friedman in Tel Aviv, Eretz Israel (my brother-in-law I also do not know personally), to my dear friend B. Z. Horidon, the writer and public figure in New York, my artist colleagues from Warsaw and Vilna who have left for the Soviet Union, the great author, I. J. Singer, who was the first to discover my talent. Also, to all my friends, colleagues and writers who know me.

Now I am at peace, I must perish but I have done what I could, I have attempted to hide a testament of my works. Be well my colleagues and friends, be well Jewish people and never again allow for such tragedies to occur.

Gela Seksztajn  
August 1, 1942



Wedding photograph: Israel, Gela, and (sister-in law) Yentke

\*Gela Seksztajn's 'Last Will and Testament' was found among her works and material hidden in the Ringelblum Archives and published in Yosef Sandel, *Umgekommene Yidishe Kunstler* (Jewish Artists Who Perished), Vol. 1 (Warsaw: Yiddish Buch, 1957), pp. 237-8. Translated from the Yiddish by Yitzchak Mais.

*Gela was married to Israel Lichtenstein, assistant to Emmanuel Ringelblum. She assisted her husband in his work. As director of the Technical Committee of Oneg Shabbat it was his "task to conceal its documents and papers in the ground." The documents were buried in metal boxes and milk cans.*

*Gela continued to be an artist, as she was prior to*

*the war, continued to be an art teacher, continued to care for her fellow man at the risk*

*of her own safety, at the risk of her and her family's lives. She had believed that art was a powerful guide towards human betterment, before the war, and continued to pursue her ideals in the Ghetto.*



Birth in the Ghetto      oil on canvas      120 x 90 cm.      by Ellen Lapidus Stern (lapidot)

*What did change was that by the summer of 1942 no one who had any voice in the Ghetto at all, whose opinion was listened to let alone acted upon, continued to believe the German lies. Everyone understood that no one was to be spared, that the entire Ghetto was selected for total extermination. The Resistance Organization began to think of armed alternatives. The Oneg Shabbat archives were buried, some by Gela, who included three hundred of her paintings and drawings in one metal box. These included in addition to portraits of the children, portraits in pencil and charcoal of writers and artists, the intelligentsia of Warsaw, plus some watercolors. This was her hidden material uncovered in 1946, in the first metal box revealing the treasure of the Ringelblum Archives.*

*Three hundred sheets of paper take up alot of room. Clearly, the depth of belief in the*

*importance and value of her own work led her to this independant decision..*

*Art for Art's sake. Art for G-d's sake. Art for humanity's sake.*

*They required of us a song. It was to have no melody, no rhythm, no words, no exile, no memory and no traces. This trace is precisely what Gela Seksztein-Lichtenstein has given us. In Post-modern terms this act of saving the works is a work of art in itself. Audacity, courage, talent, fortitude, commitment, concern for one's fellow-man ! Aren't these the authentic traditional requirements for artistic achievement? And Gela had them all.*

*We hope that this paper will bring Gela into the language of the present tense.*

*.Ellen Lapidus Stern (lapidot)  
.Jerusalem, May 15,2005*



*<http://www.artistlapidot.com> ESSAYS Gela in the Playground*

*Gela's painting and drawings.*



En un momento determinado "Los alemanes dieron permiso para abrir una escuela de arte en el guetto de Varsovia

Este proyecto investiga por primera vez la obra artística de una de las maestras de arte en el guetto. La maestra se llama Gela Seksztein

Su obra se encontró el 18 de Septiembre de 1946 entre las ruinas enterrada bajo el pavimento y escondida junto con los códigos radiofónicos del Archivo Ringelblum

Hoy, los Trecientos dibujos y pinturas que se salvaron se encuentran en el Museo Histórico-Judío de Polonia en Varsovia

Este ensayo discute y analiza la obra artística de Gela Seksztein. Deseo probar que Gela se merece un lugar en los anales de la Historia del Arte y que se encuentra entre los pintores figurativos de la primera mitad del Siglo XX. Esta posición de honor le pertenece a causa de la calidad artística de su obra.

Haremos un análisis de las pinturas y intentaremos entender la fuerza de carácter que le hizo posible crear bajo las mas atrozes circunstancias.

Su biografía incluirá las condiciones



culturales y sociológicas de su tiempo y los acontecimientos que la llevaron al arte y también su vida bajo la ocupación nazi.

¿ Como fué posible que una mujer de limitados medios económicos colmara su deseo de ser artista?

¿ Cuál es el lugar de la mujer en el mundo artístico de Polonia en los años precedentes a la guerra?

¿ Que significaba para un judío tener "libertad artística" en tiempos del "Post-Enlightment"?

La respuesta a estas preguntas va a ayudarnos a entender las decisiones tomadas por la artista en cuanto a tema, técnica y todo lo que forma parte integral del Arte Moderno.

También clarificaremos el simbolismo de las pinturas

Este ensayo empezará con un estilo no-lineal y después dejará caer hilos que se recogerán al final para que la restante información sea tejida y forme una sólida vestimenta que sea capaz de resistir las frías miradas de la sofisticación y la hoguera del insulto

En un momento determinado, al mismo tiempo que se abrió la escuela de Arte del Ghetto también se prohibió crear. Cualquier expresión personal, si era descubierta, se castigaba con la muerte. Sin embargo, los artistas desafiaban secretamente estas restricciones.

A este acto de valentía se le llamó la "Resistencia Espiritual" y significó el mantenimiento de la humanidad del individuo en medio de las fuerzas del mal.

Los ghettos crearon actividades culturales, algunas legales y otras secretas para poder resistir la conquista de su espíritu.

Esta conquista era una maniobra militar esencial calculada para producir bajas tanto físicas como espirituales.

Si Gela hubiera gozado de una larga vida tendría ahora 98 años.

Pero los hechos nos cuentan una historia diferente. La vida le fue cortada en su flor. En un día el Ghetto experimentaba cambios que normalmente toman años.

¿Son estos cambios aparentes en la expresión del artista?

¿Están las acciones "aktionen" del enemigo



y opresor visibles en las pinturas?

¿ Podemos detectar al " leer " los elementos plásticos del arte, tal como en la línea el espacio, volumen y color alguna significativa expresión simbólica?

¿ tienen los pocos materiales que tenían al alcance algún significado en relación con la guerra a su alrededor?

Estas preguntas serán contestadas en el ensayo y también la pregunta más inquietante ¿ Porque Gela S. a sido virtualmente pasada por alto todos estos años?

Todo esto es algo que espero sacar a la luz.



# MALLORQUÍ

En un moment determinat "Els Alemanys van donar permís per obrir una escola d'Art al Ghetto de Varsovia"

Aquest projecte investiga per primer cop la obra artística de una de les mestres d'Art al Ghetto de Varsovia, Gela Seksztejn

La seva obra es trobà el Devuit de Setembre de 1946 sota les runas, enterrada baix del paviment i amagada amb els codis radiofònics del Archiu Ringelblum

Auui, els trescents dibuixos i pinturas que van salvarse es troban al Museu Juen Historic de Polonia a Varsovia.

El present assaix discuteix i analitza l'obra artística de Gela S. Vull provar que Gela es mereix un lloc als anals de l'Historia de l'Art i que es troba entre els pintors figuratius de la primera meitat del secle XX. La posició d'honor li ~~per~~ pertany a causa de la qualitat artística de l'obra. Analitzarem las pinturas i intentarem entendre la força i caràcter que va fer possible crear baix un suplici tan atroç.

La bibliografia inclourá las condicions culturals i sociologiquas de l'epoca, i els

fets que la portaren a l'art, també la seva vida baix l'ocupació Nazi.

¿Com va esser possible que una dona de medis economics tan limitats fes realitat el seu desitg de ser artista?

¿Quin es el lloc de la dona al mon artistic de Polònia als anys anteriors a la guerra?

¿Que significaba per un jueu tenir "llibertat artistica" en temps del "Post-Enlightment"?

La resposta a aquestes preguntes ens ajudarà a entendre el que la nostra artista escollí ~~com~~ com a tema, tecnica etc i tot el que forma part integral de l'Art Modern.

També aclarirem el simbolisme ~~de~~ de les pintures.

El assaig començarà amb un estil no pas lineal i mes tard deixarà caure fils que es recolliran al final perque la informació restant sigui teixida en un solid Tapís que serà capaç de resistir les miradas gélides de la sofisticació i la foguera del insult.

En un determinat moment, al mateix temps que obriren l'escola d'Art del Ghetto de Varsonia També prohibiren el fet de crear.

L'expressió personal, si era descuberta, es ~~cast~~ castigaba amb la mort. Empero' els artistes desafiaban secretament les restriccions.

Aquest acte de coratge i valentia s'anomena "Resistència Espiritual" i donà la possibilitat de mantenir la dignitat humana del individu enmig de les forces del mal.

Els Ghettos crearen activitats culturals tan legals com secretas per poder resistir-se a la conquesta del seu ~~esprít~~ esperit.

La conquesta del ~~esprít~~ esperit era una maniobra militar essencial, calculada per produir baixes tant físiques com espirituals.

Si Gela hagués disfrutat d'una llarga vida tindria ara noranta vuit anys.

Però els fets són diferents. La vida li va ésser tallada a la flor de la joventut.

En un dia comú el Ghetto experimentava canvis que normalment tardan anys en ser experimentats

¿Són aquests canvis aparents dins la expressió del artista?

¿Són les accions "aktionen" del enemic i opressor visibles dins les pinturas?

Al "llegir" els elements plàstics del art com la línia, l'espai, el volum i color ¿Podem detectar una expressió simbòlica significativa?

¿Tenen els pocs materials que tenien a mà alguna relació amb la guerra?

Aquestes preguntes seran contestades en el  
assaix i també la pregunta mes inquietan  
¿Perqué Gelas a estat virtualment passada  
per alt tots aquests anys?

Tot això ho penso treure a la llum.













