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AN EVER UNFOLDING STORY OF THE GEORGIAN POLISH DIASPORA

At the end of the 18th century and during the 19th century nobles, intelligentsia of the Polish national uprisings against tsarism were displaced to Georgia. The tsarist authorities used the Caucasus as a place of punishment. Poles found themselves in Georgia as exiles and called the Caucasus – “A Warm Siberia”, however, they also voluntarily came and settled down there.

There were educated people in the Polish community. Artists Kirill and Ilia Zdanevich, Sygmunt Waliszewski, Ilia Zankowski, Mikołaj Sklifasowski, painter and architect Henryk Hryniewski, architect Aleksander Szymkiewicz, naturalists Ludwik Młokosiewicz, Władysław Bagrinowsky, writers Wojciech Potocki, Kazimierz Łapczyński, operatic soprano Melania Wohl-Lewicka and etc. They have made a significant contribution to the development of Georgian culture. Some of these figures became victims of Stalin’s terror. Unfortunately, the names of some of these victims are no longer known to the general public.

These people have been introducing European culture for years, instilling European values in Georgia through their activities, and promoting Georgian culture in Europe as much as they could.

I had a desire to show an ever unfolding story related to the Poles for almost two hundred years in Georgia that was happening at different times, in different circumstances, and is still going on today.

KEYWORDS: Polish community, European culture

The Caucasus has always been a place of coexistence and meeting of different cultures and ethnicities. At the end of the 18th century and during the 19th century nobles, intelligentsia of the Polish national uprisings against tsarism were displaced to Georgia. The tsarist authorities used the Caucasus as a place of punishment. Poles found themselves in Georgia as exiles and called the Caucasus – “A Warm Siberia”, however, they also voluntarily came and settled down there.

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Lewicka and etc. They have made a significant contribution to the development of Georgian culture. Some of these figures became victims of Stalin's terror. Unfortunately, the names of some of these victims are no longer known to the general public.

Thus, in this article will be presented what the representatives of the Polish community has been doing for almost two centuries in Georgia.

A group of Polish writers and poets worked fruitfully during the Romantic period in Tbilisi, which was the cultural center of the whole region. Polish society for first time got acquainted with the Georgian masterpiece in 1863, when the prose version of "the Knight in the Panther's Skin" into Polish was published in a literary newspaper "Warsaw Library" translated by Kazimierz Łapczyński (1823–1892)¹.

Some of writers worked in the Tsarist administration and were educators of the children of the Georgian elite society, for instance, Wojciech Potocki (1801-18??) was an advisor to Mikheil Vorontsov², the Viceroy of the Caucasus in 1844-1854. In addition, Potocki was the educator of the children of David Dadiani, the prince of Mingrelia³. He also took an active part in the founding of the Public Library of Georgia. It should be noted, that the first registered book of the Library is a gift from Wojciech Potocki⁴. Yet another Polish writer living in Georgia Tadeusz Łada-Zabłocki (1811-1847) donated a large number of books to the Georgian National Library⁵, which was founded in 1846 as the Tiflis⁶ Public Library⁷.

Georgian-based Polish naturalists Ludwik Młokosiewicz and Władysław Bagrinowsky are the most distinguished. Polish botanist Ludwik Młokosiewicz (1831-1909) founded Lagodekhi Nature Reserve (Eastern Georgia).⁸ Today this reserve is the most important destination in Georgia for both visitors and locals. In the 1840s, a Polish pharmacist Władysław Bagrinowsky cultivated medicinal plants in Sokhumi. Very soon the Sokhumi Botanical Garden was founded on this place exactly where Bagrinowsky cultivated the plants and became the first director of the Garden⁹.

Polish architects have a special place in Georgian-Polish relations. There were Polish architects and engineers in Georgia who designed theatres, higher education institutions, courts, palaces of princes or Russian

1 Biblioteka Warszawska, *Skóra Tygrysa*, Kazimierz Łapczyński, 1863, T. 4, s.1-38.

2 Mikhail Vorontsov was the Commander-in-Chief and Viceroy of the Caucasus in 1844–1854.

3 The Principality of Mingrelia (West Georgia) also known as Odishi and Samegrelo ruled by the Dadiani dynasty. The House of Dadiani was a Georgian family of nobles.

4 Albert Potocki, at https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Potocki

5 Henryka Justyńska, *Polscy artyści w Gruzji*, Tbilisi 2006, s. 8.

6 The capital of Georgia was called Tiflis until 1936.

7 National Bibliography of Georgia, at <https://www.library.illinois.edu/ias/spx/slavicresearchguides/nationalbib/natbibgeorgia/>

8 Piotr Zgonnikow, Ludwik Młokosiewicz (1831-1909), at <http://www.polenia-baku.org/pl/mlokosiewicz.phtml> Last seen 05.11.2020.

9 Sokhumi Botanical Garden is 180 years old, available in Georgian at <https://www.radioatinati.ge/gadacemebi/2019-02-13-14-07-10/article/71929-sokhumis-botaniku-ri-baghi-180-tslisaa.html> Last seen 04.11.2020.

exarchs, engineered the road infrastructure.

It can be said that the most distinguished among Polish architects is Aleksander Szymkiewicz (1858-1908). He made the greatest contribution to shaping the European look of Tbilisi. The buildings of a number of important institutions are designed by Szymkiewicz – The Tbilisi Conservatory, the Rustaveli Academic Theater (With Cornell Tatishchev), the Silk Museum, the Tbilisi Supreme Court, the Kutaisi Court and a few more tenement houses¹.

Another Polish architect is Aleksander Stanisław Rogoyski (18??-1912) who designed the Tbilisi Orthodox Theological Seminary, headquarters of the Caucasian Officers' Economic Society (currently TBS Bank Head Office), the former Roman-Catholic Church in Batumi. Rogoyski also completed the inner part of Prince Oldenburg Palace (currently State Museum of Theater, Music, Cinema and Choreography)².

A very attractive building in the very center of Tbilisi, known as the House of Alexander Melik- Azariants, was also designed by Polish architect Mikołaj Obłóński.

The building of the People's House, built at the beginning of the 20th century, which is now the Marjanishvili Academic Drama Theater, was designed by Polish architect Stefan Kryczyński.

Henryk Hryniewski was a Polish origin architect and painter. He was born to a Polish noble family of exiles in Kutaisi in 1869. He had received a solid education in Florence and Karlsruhe, lived for some time in France. He knew Georgian architecture and the history of Georgian art very well, which is reflected in his projected and painted works.

Henryk Hryniewski together with architect Anatoly Kalgin designed the building of the Bank of Georgia and painted its halls (the current National Library), also partly painted the Kashveti temple in the center of Tbilisi, which are picturesque and enchant the visitors. He was a co-author of the "Boni" project of the temporary monetary unit of independent Georgia, before that he created very beautiful illustrations of the works of the classic of Georgian literature Ilia Chavchavadze in 1914. He was actively involved in academic activities, participated in the establishment of the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, and was a Professor at the Academy³.

During the Great Terror, the Soviet authorities also began to persecute Professor Henryk Hryniewski at the age of 68. NKVD functionaries destroyed his studio at the Academy of Arts. He was arrested and shot as a spy of the West in 1938. According to the shooting protocol, he was involved in espionage activities in favor of foreign countries intelligence services for 20 years, but the protocol does not provide any evidence⁴.

1 Janusz Opaska, *Działalność Polskich architektów w Tbilisi w XIX i początkach XX wieku*, s.12, <http://journals.pan.pl/dlibra/publication/101433/edition/87482/content/dzialalnosc-polskich-architektow-w-tbilisi-w-xix-i-poczatkach-xx-wieku--opaska-janusz?language=en>

2 Ibid, s. 15-18.

3 Henryka Justyńska, *Polscy artyści...* s. 30.

4 Archives of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance BU 2907/179 digi – arch, p. 2.

The life of a man who left behind a unique legacy in Georgia was placed by the NKVD on only one sheet of paper.

Maria Perini, the Italian wife of Henryk Hryniewski, the famous ballerina, is considered the founder of the Georgian ballet school. In the early 1890s, she arrived in Tiflis, by that time Opera and Ballet Theatre had already been established for 40 years, but Maria Perini was the first to perform 32 fouetté turns for the Georgian audience. For ten years she was a prima ballerina at the Tiflis Opera and Ballet Theatre. Later, she founded and ran a ballet studio. One of her students were Nino Ramishvili, Iliko Sukhishvili, Vakhtang Chabukiani, a ballet master and founder of professional ballet in Georgia. The Soviet Government forced Maria Perini to leave the territory of the Soviet Union, first she went to Turin, and then to Nice, where her sister had a guesthouse. Maria Perini died in Nice in 1939¹.

Later in the Soviet period, most likely, the talk in a low voice about Professor Hryniewski at the Tbilisi Academy of Arts was determined by the remaining fear. Henryka Justyńska, Professor of the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts writes in her book - "Polish Painters in Georgia:"

While studying at the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, representatives of the older generation spoke in a low voice about the famous Polish painter Henryk Hryniewski, who was shot in 1937..., they talked about Sygmunt Waliszewski, a young talented painter full of energy, as they remembered him in Georgia before he left for Poland. My teachers used to pronounce Sklifasowski's name at the Tbilisi Art Academy with a kind of pause, which then continued like this: "Sklifasowsky said so ... he would say so, ... you should start painting like this... and so on".

At the beginning of the 20th century, new theaters, studios, theatrical cafes, literary salons and art associations opened in Tbilisi. The interest and diversity of the Tbilisi avant-garde in Georgia was due to the then political situation and the country's short-lived independence. Artists and poets created new art. In fact, Tbilisi became the center of the avant-garde in the Caucasus. Art cafes hosted cultural evenings in which Polish, German, Russian, Armenian artists participated. By that time, all fields of art seemed to be united and filled with creative energy.

Avant-garde artists were called futurists, formalists, and cubists. The Zdanevich brothers, who brought avant-garde art to Georgia, not only left a rich legacy, but also greatly popularized Georgian culture in Europe.

Kirill Zdanevich (1892-1969) was an artist, theatrical designer, illustrator, the inspirer of the Tiflis's avant-garde. He worked with Kote Marjanishvili² and designed a number of theatrical performances, created paintings on the theme of old Tbilisi. Together with Lado Gudiashvili, Sergei Sudeikin and other artists he painted the walls of Tbilisi art cafes: "The Argonauts' Boat", "The Fantastic Tavern", "Kimerioni" (Basement of Rustaveli Theater). Kirill Zdanevich himself writes in his memoirs: "In my biography of the time of Menshevism I will highlight two creative events: The first – painting

1 P. Nagy, P. Rouyer, D. Rubin, "Georgia", in the *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, 1st ed., vol. 1, New York, 2013, pp.333.

2 Kote Marjanishvili was a Georgian theater director (1872-1933).

of the club restaurant “Argonauts’ boat”, performed in the style of Matisse and Van Dongen...”¹

Kirill Zdanevich is one of the important contributors to the discovery of the Georgian genius artist Niko Pirosmani.

In the summer of 1912, Ilia and Kirill Zdanevich, together with their French friend Michel Le Dantiou discovered paintings on display in one of the Tiflis’s wine cellars. The paintings caught their attention... The Zdanevich brothers immediately began searching for the author of the paintings and found him, as well as began to collect all the scattered paintings².

Niko Pirosmani’s first exhibition in Georgia was held at the atelier of Kirill Zdanevich on May 5, 1916³. Through the efforts of the Zdanevich brothers, Georgian society saw Pirosmani’s work for the first time on that day.

Ilia Zdanevich (1894-1975) left the Soviet Union in the 1930s and moved to Paris, but naturally, his work remained and will always be an integral part of Georgian culture. As for Kirill Zdanevich, he stayed in Georgia and suffered from Stalin’s repressions in the late 1940s⁴. Like many other repressed people, Kirill Zdanevich was exiled to the Gulag on charges of espionage, just because he drank whiskey with a Scottish friend⁵.

Another prominent Polish origin artist was Sygmunt Waliszewski (1897-1936). He spent his childhood in Batumi, where he studied at the studio of Mikołaj Sklifosowski, then he moved to Tbilisi and was actively involved in the cultural life of Tiflis. Kirill Zdanevich and Sygmunt Waliszewski took part in the First World War. They were also relatives: Sister of Sygmunt Waliszewski was the first wife of Kirill Zdanevich⁶. Along with other artists he painted art-café “Kimerioni”, created a number of masterpieces: designed scenery and posters, grotesque scenes, created book illustrations, painted caricatures, was a member of the “Futurist Syndicate”. Like the Zdanevich brothers, he later joined a new group of artists called “41”. In 1920 Sygmunt Waliszewski designed the Curtain of Tbilisi Opera House, which depicted Tariel on horseback, the character of “The Knight in the Panther Skin”. This version of the opera curtain has not survived up to this time, but there are memories of eyewitnesses about this curtain. In the early 1920s, he departed for Poland and continued his activities there. In 1922, he entered the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts. For a short time Sygmunt Waliszewski also studied in Paris. He died at the young age of 39 in Cracow in 1936⁷.

At the end of 1915, the Polish soprano Melania Wohl-Lewicka (1885-1937) appeared on the Georgian opera stage. According to the Polish press

1 Tea Tabatadze, Theater-Studio “Argonaut Boat” and Kirill Zdanevich Argonautics, available in Georgian at <http://www.georgianart.ge/index.php/ka/2019-01-03-08-49-05/228-2019-01-24-16-36-13.html> Last seen 04.11.2020

2 Henryka Justyńska, *Polscy artyści...* s. 101.

3 Sakhalkho Furceli, 1916 May 4, no. 566, p. 2.

4 Maka Khutsishvili, *A Repressed Polish Painter in Soviet Georgia During Stalin’s Terror – Kirill Zdanevich*, “Pro Georgia”, no. 28, Warsaw, 2018, p. 223.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Henryka Justyńska, *Polscy artyści...* s.88-89.

at that time, she is mentioned as a fairly popular soprano on the stage of Warsaw Opera House. She arrived in Georgia in 1915 with her family at the invitation of the Tbilisi Opera Impresario. Overall, on the stage of Tbilisi Opera House, she performed the main arias in more than 35 operas: Giacomo Puccini – “Madame Butterfly”, aria Cio-Cio San, La Boheme, aria Mimi; Richard Wagner – “Mastersingers of Nuremberg”, aria Eva, “Lohengrin”, aria Elsa, including Georgian opera “Abesalom and Eteri”, aria Eteri and etc¹. Melania Wohl-Lewicka was actively involved in public life, for example, she often participated in charity evenings held in Tiflis art cafes². After the Bolshevik annexation she decided to stay in Georgia. In 1937 she was arrested and shot on charges of espionage³.

It should be noted that during this period Polish Professor Mikołaj Lewicki (1870-1944) taught vocal at the Tbilisi Conservatory, which was newly established, the first higher musical education facility in the Caucasus. He arrived in Georgia with his wife Melania Wohl-Lewicka and lived there until 1923, then returned to Poland. Mikołaj Lewicki was from eastern Galicia. He received a solid music education in Italy, was a very successful opera director, stage-manager at the Warsaw Opera House. It is clear from the Warsaw Opera posters and the then Polish press that he had been active since 1898. As a stage-manager he realized the Polish premiere of Puccini’s Turandot at the Warsaw Opera in 1932. He died on the first day of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944⁴.

In Warsaw, quite recently, I learned completely by accident about a family of Swedish-Polish origin living in Georgia in the first half of the 20th century. I knew that there were two well-known photographers during tsarist period in Georgia: Alexander Roinashvili and Dmitry Ermakov. Nothing is known about Edmund Osterloff as a photographer. The most likely reason is that only his family members and some unknown people are in his photo lens⁵. Barbara Osterloff, Professor at the Warsaw Theater Academy, the descendant of Edmund Osterloff notes in her article:

Until today, I have not found any of the available Osterloff’s collection of photographs, not even one, that would show the picturesque, multicultural Tiflis, yes willingly photographed by others... Osterloff, an admirer of beauty, he found them above all in his own circle loved ones, and in the surrounding nature, which he treated as visible evidence of the Creator’s

1 Maka Khutsishvili, *The Unknown Fate of Melania Wohl-Lewicka, Polish Prima Donna of Tbilisi*, “Pro Georgia”, no. 27, Warsaw, 2017, pp. 268-269.

2 Mzia Chikhradze, Tbilisi in 1910-1921 (Historical overview of cultural life), available in Georgian at <http://www.georgianart.ge/index.php/ka/2010-12-03-16-25-41/51--1910-1921-.html>

3 Maka Khutsishvili, *The Unknown Fate of Melania Wohl-Lewicka...* “Pro Georgia”, pp. 273-274.

4 Mikołaj Lewicki, at <https://archiwum.teatr Wielki.pl/baza/-/o/mikolaj-lewicki/229253/20181> Last seen November 02. 2020.

5 National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, <http://www.dspace.nplg.gov.ge/simple-search?query=%E1%83%94%E1%83%93%E1%83%9B%E1%83%A3%E1%83%9C%E1%83%93+%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A2%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A4>

ower”¹.

Edmund Osterloff was involved in secret activities against the tsarist regime. He was arrested and imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel for about a year and later as a rebel was involuntarily deported to Georgia in 1886². He lived in Georgia until 1921, was also quite an appreciated German language teacher in the Caucasus and taught German at the Russian Gymnasium in Tbilisi. After the annexation of the Bolsheviks he decided to return to free Poland. Some of his family members stayed in Georgia, for example, his daughter Zofia got married in Georgia and continued to live in the new political reality³.

The Soviet regime used various methods of repression – arrests, shootings or deportations, for instance in the case of Poles living in Georgia, some were arrested, some were shot, there was also deportation of ethnic groups, in the case of the Germans, the entire ethnic group was deported to Central Asia from the South Caucasus.

The Osterloff family was also affected by Soviet repression. Edmund Osterloff’s son was deported to Central Asia in 1941. Prof. Barbara Osterloff passed me the memoirs of Zofia Osterloff-Łazutina about her brothers from the family archives. In these memoirs, Zofia writes about her three brothers, Arne, Wilrich and Ralph. I would like to draw attention to the life of one of the brothers Arne Osterloff in the context of Stalin’s repressions. We learn that Arne Osterloff was exiled to Kazakhstan as a German.

Arne Osterloff was a naturalist. He finished a gardening school in Derbent, as an excellent student was sent to the well-known Falz-Fein estate of Askania-Nova⁴ to work as an agronomist. After returning to Georgia he worked at the Tbilisi Botanical Garden, conducted laboratory research at the Institute of Agriculture under the guidance of Professor Yuzbashian, participated in scientific expeditions to explore the Kutaisi Caves. From Zofia’s memoirs it is clear that Arne was quite loyal to the Soviet Government and he did not allow anyone to speak out against this regime. Arne Osterloff seemed to be quite cautious.

They came for him from the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) and demanded that he immediately appear at the station and leave in 24 hours. I went to the Institute to call Arne, he came straight from class and went to the station. The train stood at the station for several days. I brought him food every day. He bravely endured everything⁵.

Zofia Osterloff-Łazutina describes with great pain her brother’s further short-term and tragic stay in Kazakhstan. Arne Osterloff was an educated man and in this way he also found his place even in exile. According to

1 Barbara Osterloff, *Edmund Osterloff – Gruzjiński Trop*, “Aspiracje”, Warszawa 2013, s.12.

2 Barbara Osterloff, *Serdecznie i całą duszą: Edmund Osterloff i jego fotografie*, „Aspiracje”, Warszawa 2012, s.8.

3 Ibid.

4 Askania-Nova is a biosphere reserve located in Kherson Oblast, Ukraine, at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Askania-Nova>

5 Unpublished Memoirs of Zofia Osterloff-Łazutina. All information given in the article about Arne Osterloff is from the memories of his sister Zofia Osterloff-Łazutina.

the memoirs, at first Arne Osterloff worked in the Labor Army but was demobilized due to his health condition then he worked as an agronomist in the Pakhta-Aral state farm and in the same school he began to teach physics and chemistry. About a year after the deportation he died of a tragic accident. Arne Osterloff's life turned out to end very mournfully. Zofia Osterloff could not get detailed information about her brother's last days in exile.

Thus, it turned out that Arne Osterloff arrived in Georgia as a Swedish-Polish and the Soviet Government deported him as a German, thence he could not return alive.

There are two Catholic churches in Tbilisi. One of them: St. Peter & Paul Roman Catholic Church is associated with Poles because it was built in 1877 with donations from the Polish Diaspora and the Georgian philanthropist Constantine Zubalashvili¹. The church was designed by the German architect Albert Zaltsman. This church was the main meeting place for Poles in Tbilisi in the last century. Perhaps this circumstance was taken into account by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs when repressions began against the Poles in the Soviet Union. The former NKVD archive materials of many victims of repression show that in 1937-1938 years the parish of the Roman Catholic Church of St. Peter and Paul became the subject of special interest of the secret services². By 1923, this church numbered about 800 parishioners³.

The First Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) occupied an important place in the Eastern politics of the Second Republic of Poland (1918-1939). Poland was well aware of the fact – the geostrategic importance of the Caucasus. After the Bolshevik annexation Georgian officers were accepted to serve by Chief of State and First Marshal of Poland Józef Piłsudski in the Armia Krajowa. Georgian officers defended Warsaw in 1944 like as they defended Tbilisi in 1921.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Georgia became an independent state. At the same time, the decommunization of Eastern Europe led to the creation of the Polish Free State over again. Georgia and Poland restored relations. In these respects, the Polish Diaspora (Polonia) has a very important role, Queen Jadwiga Polish School, as well as the Polish Institute which was established in 2018 in Tbilisi. Numerous cultural events have taken place, which make these relationships strong: The exhibition "Polish Artists in Georgia" was organized for the first time in Tbilisi in 1999 and was published a catalog by the Professor Henryka Justyńska of the Tbilisi Academy of Fine Arts. Maria Filina, full Professor of Tbilisi State University, Head of Polonia is the organizer of numerous academic projects and author, editor of academic publications, works dedicated to Georgian-Polish issues. The International Festival of Contemporary Art in Honor of The

1 Constantine Zubalashvili (1828–1901) was a Georgian philanthropist.

2 St. Peter and St. Paul's Church, Tbilisi, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Peter_and_St._Paul%27s_Church,_Tbilisi

3 Tbilisi, at <https://wolyn-metryki.pl/joomla/spisy-parafian-index/78-artykuly-metryki-wolyn/107-tbilisi>

Brothers Zdanevich has been held annually since 2009 established on the initiative of artist Karaman Kutateladze, the grandson of Kirill Zdanevich. In 2013 at the Europe House in Tbilisi, the Embassy of Poland and the Archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia organized an exhibition on the basis of archival materials that were exhibited for the first time ever: "Polish repressions in Soviet Georgia". In 2018, Henryk Hryniewski Hall of Arts and Polish Literature was opened at the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia. Marshal Józef Piłsudski Avenue was opened in Tbilisi in 2017. On April 10, 2010, the Polish presidential plane crashed near the Russian city of Smolensk, Georgian society met this tragedy with great sorrow. President Kaczynski was awarded with the title of National Hero of Georgia posthumously and two years later bust honoring Polish President unveiled on a square named after Lech Kaczynski in Tbilisi as a sign of respect for the support the President expressed to Georgia.

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