

WILLENBERG (WILENBERG) Perec Paweł (1874-1947), assumed name “Baltazar Pękostawski”. Painter-artist, teacher. He was born on 16th July 1874 in Maków Mazowiecki, the son of Samuel, a grain trader, and Ita.

Already in his youth, Willenberg displayed a talent for painting. The well-known Zionist activist and columnist Nachum Sokołów helped him in artistic development. From 1893, he studied at the Fine Arts School in Warsaw. (He attended Wojciech Gerson’s drawing class.). He was supported by a scholarship granted to him by Count Ludwik Krasiński.

In 1899, to the public of the nation, he presented his painting *The Abduction of Helen by Paris*. In 1903, he moved to Łódź, where he became involved in patriotic activities. In 1905, he was briefly imprisoned for painting the picture *The White Eagle* and then exhibiting it.

Fearing further repressions, in 1906, he left for Częstochowa, where he began working as a teacher of sketching at the *Talmud Torah* Crafts School. He initiated the launch of and later organised the School of Drawing and Painting, at I Aleja 13, on the corner of ul. Dojazd. It later moved to ul. Fabryczna 3. The school was attended by both Jewish and Christian youth. In 1909, during the Industry and Agriculture Exhibition in Częstochowa, the school was awarded a small, silver medal.

In 1909-1910, Willenberg was a member of the board of the “Lira” Musical-Literary Society. He created scenery for the “Lira” concerts. In 1910, the Jewish St. Petersburg Jewish Colonisation Association (ICA) awarded him a scholarship, thanks to which he continued his painting studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. He took part in study trips to Germany and Switzerland.

In 1913, he returned to Częstochowa and, from that same year, he taught technical drawing at the Crafts School for Jews. From the middle of the 1920s, he taught art in the Association of Jewish Secondary School’s Gimnazjum.

As an artist, he mainly painted portraits of Jews. He presented his paintings at collective exhibitions including, in 1916, at the Salon of Fine Arts in Częstochowa, which he organised at his school (I Aleja 13). There, he exhibited his own paintings and works (including sculptures) by other artists – the “Goniec Częstochowski” newspaper reported it as “first-rate”. He decorated local venues with his paintings: the “Lira” Musical-Literary Society (in 1910), the “Odeon”

cinema (in 1916) and one of Antoni Błaszczyński's cake shops in the building on the corner of I Aleja and ul. Piłsudskiego (in 1930).

In 1928-1930, he created a number of paintings for the Old Synagogue in Częstochowa. He decorated the walls and the ornate ceiling with "paintings in a Jewish national spirit". In that same style, he also created stained glass and floor designs. He also created other art works – in 1928, he designed the banner for the Union of Jewish Craftsmen in Częstochowa. He created bookplates. In the first half of the 1930s, he decorated the synagogue in Piotrków Trybunalski.

In 1936, with his family, he moved to Opatów, where he was entrusted with the task of creating a decorative ceiling in the local synagogue. He was there when the War broke out and was forced to live in the Opatów ghetto. He escaped to Warsaw.

In Warsaw, under the assumed name of "K.B. Pękoślawski", he lived in various places, the longest period being at ul. Grójecka 104. He pretended to be deaf¹. He supported himself, at that time, by painting portraits to order and pictures of saints². He survived the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. At that time, he was living at al. Marszałkowska 60. In the basement of that building, protecting himself from the bombing, on 11th September 1944, he painted the face of Christ. It is still there to this day. A copy of it is displayed in the Warsaw Uprising Museum.

In 1945, together with his wife and son, he moved to Łódź. In May 1945, he visited Częstochowa in search of his paintings – he was preparing an exhibition. He was honorary president of the Union of Jewish Artists and Designers and president of the "Sztuka" Painters Work Cooperative. He participated in the first post-war collective exhibition of visual artists in Łódź. There, he present his painting entitled *Talmudists*.

He died in Łódź on 17th February 1947 and was buried in the local Jewish cemetery (right-hand side, section M).

Willenberg's paintings can be found, among other places, in the Częstochowa Museum collection.

¹ [TN: According to his son, Samuel, he pretended to be deaf and dumb, because he spoke Polish with a heavy Jewish accent. He feared being denounced.]

² [TN: According to his son, Samuel, these were ordered by Christian Poles. Many were portraits of families, showing Jesus standing behind them, blessing them with outstretched arms.]

In 1917, he married Maniefa née Popov (-1973), who was descended from a [Christian] Orthodox family, and later converted to Judaism. She worked as a nurse in the “Dobroczynność” Charitable Society for Jews Hospital in Częstochowa. During the occupation, with her daughters, she initially hid in Częstochowa. She later worked in the Norblin arms factory near Łódź. She survived the German occupation.

The couple had three children:

- a son → Samuel
- a daughter Tamara who, during the occupation, used “Zosia” as her first name (1936-1942), and
- a daughter Ita (Hala) (1919-1942).

During the occupation, both daughters hid in Częstochowa. As the result of a denunciation, they were arrested by the Germans and perished in the Treblinka extermination camp.

Spis nauczycieli 1926, p. 292. – A. Hreczuk, *To ja wygrałem*, “Polityka” 2017, No. 31, pp. 60, 61; I. Kersz, *Szkice z dziejów gminy żydowskiej oraz cmentarza w Łodzi*, Łódź 1999, p. 122; A. Miry, *Nabytki Działu Sztuki w 2018 roku*, “Rocznik Muzeum Częstochowskiego” 2018, Częstochowa 2019, pp. 293–300; Mizgalski, *Tożsamość polityczna*, pp. 110, 111; Rędziński, *Szkolnictwo żydowskie*, p. 41. – Willenberg, *Bunt w Treblince*, pp. 14, 45, 125, 130, 205; P. Willenberg, *Perec Willenberg*, in: *Żydzi częstochowianie. Losy Żydów częstochowian 1945–2009*, ed. J. Mizgalski, J. Sielski, Toruń 2011, pp. 402–408. – “Express Częstochowski” 1928, No. 248, p. 3, 1929, No. 258, p. 2, 1930, No. 5, p. 3, No. 143, p. 2, No. 160, p. 2, No. 182, p. 3; “Głos Narodu” 1945, No. 84, p. 3; “Goniec Częstochowski” 1909, No. 181, p. 2, 1910, No. 27, p. 3, No. 31, p. 3, 1916, No. 92, p. 8, No. 270, p. 3; “Ostatnie Wiadomości Częstochowskie” 1934, No. 16, p. 6. – *Handlowiec. Kalendarz 1913*, p. 214; “Rocznik Muzeum w Częstochowie” III (A. Jaśkiewicz), Częstochowa 1973, p. 324; “Rzemieślnik Żydowski” (one-off issue), p. 1, – Materials (incl. press cuttings) in the ODDC collections.

Juliusz Sętowski