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Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, a Krakow artist born in Tuchów

Tuchów is known for being home to one of the most popular Marian sanctuaries in southern Poland, the oldest one in Tarnów diocese. However, the town is important not only to Catholics. Jews also used to live there before World War II. Their percentage wasn't big: in 1921 it was slightly over 13 per cent.¹ At least two artists hailed from the community. The older one, Mordecai Ardon, born in Tuchów in 1896, became a famous painter. He was educated at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar under the tuition of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, in Berlin as well as in Munich. In 1933 he decided to emigrate to Palestine. In the country of Israel, established in 1949, he had a successful career and became known as one of the best Israeli painters; from 1940 to 1952 he was head of the Bezalel School of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, teacher at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and advisor to the Israeli Minister of Education and Culture in the years 1952–1962.² He received numerous prestigious awards. His works were exhibited e.g. in Tate Gallery in London and Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, nearly a generation younger than Mordecai, was not so fortunate. Ardon lived happily in Jerusalem until the age of 96 (he died in 1992) and left a wealth of interesting works allowing in-depth and exhaustive analyses. Reconstructing the life of Helena Grabschrift-Taffet and finding her few extant works proved much more complicated. The outbreak

1. Exactly 13.4 per cent, after: K. Samsonowska, *Wyznaniowe gminy żydowskie i ich społeczności w województwie krakowskim (1918–1939)*, Kraków 2005, p. 58.
2. <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/biogramy/5842-ardon-mordechaj> (19.02.2020).

of the Second World War played a role in this, as it upended her whole life; afterwards, her difficult story prevented her from fully coming back to her artistic work when the war had ended. It is even more unfortunate if we consider that the start of her career looked very promising. She started her artistic education at the end of the 1920s at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, and her progress was rated highly. Having finished her studies in late 1930s, she became involved with the city's vibrant Jewish art community, and was one of the most active members of Krakow's Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors. Not only did she participate in the Association's exhibitions, presenting her works which aroused much interest, but she also co-organised them. It seems that it was mostly thanks to her effort that the community functioned efficiently until as late as the last months before the war.

When the Second World War broke out, she was barely thirty, and her membership in the Krakow organisation of Jewish artists had up to that point been the most significant part of her artistic career. After many years of complete oblivion, it is thanks to her involvement in the organisation that memory of her was revived in a book on the Krakow Association of Jewish Artists, written by the author of the present study in 2009.³ At that point Helena Grabschrift, who was discussed in the study alongside almost seventy other creators linked to the organisation, was still believed to have died during the Second World War. We find such information published in 1947 in periodical "Głos Plastyków;" it is repeated in 1970 in "Biuletyn Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków" [Newsletter of the Association of Polish Visual Artists], and five years later in a biographical entry in a dictionary entitled *Słownik artystów polskich i obcych w Polsce działających*.⁴ The dictionary is quite concise and contains only basic biographical information, so the artist's most complete biography so far was in the book mentioned above. In this article, apart from the correction of the date and circumstances of Helena's death, they will be supplemented with many new details determined in the course of research, as well as conclusions drawn from their analysis.

3. N. Styrna, *Zrzeszenie Żydowskich Artystów Malarzy i Rzeźbiarzy w Krakowie 1931–1939*, Warszawa 2009.

4. *Lista uzupełniająca pomordowanych przez Niemców, poległych i zmarłych w latach 1939–1946 artystów plastyków*, "Głos Plastyków" 8 (1947) grudzień, pp. 7–8; "Biuletyn Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków" 1970, special issue to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the victory over Nazis, p. 15; *Helena Grabschrift-Taffet*, in: *Słownik artystów polskich i obcych w Polsce działających*, red. M. Bardini, J. Białostocka, A. Ryszkiewicz, t. 2, Wrocław 1975, p. 452.

Helena Grabschrift's exact date of birth is 18 April 1909. Although official records name Tuchów as her place of birth, Edia Gilead (the artist's niece, currently in Israel) is unable to explain the circumstances or the reason why her family arrived in that town.⁵ In her memory, Krakow was invariably the place associated with Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, and Edia was unaware of her aunt's connections with Tuchów. It appears that the artist came from a rather traditional community. Such an assumption is suggested by first names of her parents, Chune and Frimeta. The information is found in the Krakow branch of the National Archives, in records pertaining to the young artist's application for an identity document.⁶ Interestingly, first names of Grabschrift's parents in the records of the Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow are different. According to the records, her parents were named Henryk and Franciszka.⁷ At present it is difficult to decide whether the artist wished to make her parents' names similar to those of non-Jewish citizens, or perhaps the alteration was suggested in the course of enrolment. The first scenario seems more likely, since academic records contain many names of other students' parents which sound foreign or exotic to the Polish ear. Thus, it does not appear that the Polish 'equivalents' were inspired by the university's authorities.

As mentioned by Edia Gilead, Helena's father was a wood merchant.⁸ In the records of the Academy of Fine Arts, the field on father's occupation contains the words "private official;" in academic year 1937/1938, when



1. Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, ca. 1929, Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow

5. I was able to contact the Helena's family thanks to the assistance of Lili Haber of the Association of Cracovians in Israel.
6. Frimeta, family name Goldberger, National Archives in Kraków, StGKr 871.
7. Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, T21B.
8. Henryk (Chune) Grabschrift was born to Fryga and Cwi in 1876 in Pilzno near Dębica. He died on 26 June 1938 in Krakow. National Archives in Kraków, Health Authority in Krakow, Records of deceased Israelis of 1938, 29/83/272.



2. Wojciech Weiss with a group of students at a competition in the Academy of Fine Arts, Helena Grabschrift-Taffet first from the right, a photograph from 1930, Wojciech Weiss Museum Foundation

he was an elderly man, the entry reads "unemployed."⁹ Apart from Helena, the married couple had four other children: Laura (born 1906 in Brzesko), Herman (born 1911 in Chrzanów), Felicja (born 1914 in Wadowice) and Dolek, a boy who died in his childhood. It is worth noting that each of them was born in a different town, which was probably due to their father's job. When Laura Grabschrift went to the Jagiellonian University in mid-1920s, Henryk Grabschrift lived in Częstochowa.¹⁰ Later records consistently indicate Długa 54 in Krakow as the family's address of residence.¹¹

Helena, the second of the offspring, was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts in the academic year 1929/1930. After finishing the seventh year of middle school, she enrolled in the Academy as a student with extraordinary status. As previously mentioned, in the subsequent years she would become one of the most active representatives of the community of Jewish artists in Krakow. Back then, in late 1920s, the community was still in its formative years. Its first significant initiatives were taken during Grabschrift's first year at the Academy. The end of 1929 and the beginning of 1930 saw the establishment of the Jewish Society for the Popularisation of Fine Arts in Krakow; it was the first organisation in Krakow whose intention was to care for Jewish artists and creators in the city and to promote their creative output. Soon afterwards, on 16 February, members of the Society opened the first exhibition of the works of Jewish artists in Krakow, with as many as 150 exhibits.¹² It is highly probable that young Helena, who would join the community in a matter

9. Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, enrolment records of 1929/30–1937/38.
10. Laura, Herman and Felicja studied at the Jagiellonian University; Laura was a student at the Faculty of Law from the academic year 1924/25, Herman at the Faculty of Pharmacy from 1930/31, Felicja at the Faculty of Law from 1931/32 (in the same year she applied for admission to the first year of studies at the Faculty of Pharmacy). In 1934 Herman became involved in the establishment of the mutual aid organisation of Jewish students of the faculties of chemistry and pharmacy. He was conferred his diploma on 25 June 1934. Jagiellonian University Archives, OFm 21, OFm 77, S II – 371, S II – 379, WP II – 312; see also: M. Kulczykowski, *Żydzi – studenci Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Kraków 2004, p. 560; "Nowy Dziennik" 1934 nr 129, p. 10.
11. The same address also appears in *Księga adresowa miasta Krakowa i województwa krakowskiego*, Kraków 1932, p. 270. Earlier, in 1924, Laura Grabschrift supplied Kremerowska 4 in Krakow as her place of residence. Jagiellonian University Archives, WP II – 312.
12. *Wystawa malarzy żydowskich*, "Sztuki Piękne" 6 (1930), p. 110; *Otwarcie I Wystawy Malarzy Żydowskich w Krakowie*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1930 nr 45, p. 4.

of years, visited the exhibition. She also must have followed subsequent initiatives taken by Jewish artists in Krakow, namely the next exhibition of Jewish visual artists, which was organised soon afterwards, or the creation of the Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors in lieu of the Jewish Society for the Popularisation of Fine Arts. The Association was an organisation for Jewish visual artists, which survived until as late as 1939, and was quite active over the years.

Up to that point, however, she mostly spent her time studying. During the first three years at the academy, she gained experience under the supervision of professor Władysław Jarocki; for the following two years Wojciech Weiss was her tutor. Her academic performance gradually improved, and under Weiss's instruction she received only exceptionally good marks.¹³ Unfortunately, at that time she was forced to drop out. This was caused by her serious health problems. From December 1934 to July 1937 she was treated by doctor D. Gottlieb for pulmonary complaints and anaemia; she also had to undergo an operation. She returned to the Academy as late as 1937 to complete artistic education in the class of Stanisław Kamocki.

Starting education from the atelier of Jarocki, who headed the main school of drawing in the Academy, was a typical solution. Nevertheless, we may wonder why Helena's instruction at Jarocki's lasted as long as six semesters. Perhaps this was due to the need to hone skills with a professor who initially was not enthusiastic about her works. Maybe her predilection for drawing was a factor? Note that later in her life Helena would be acclaimed for her achievements in drawing and printmaking.

Some hints as to Helena's preferences can be traced in the choices which she subsequently made. The decision to continue her training in 1932 in Weiss's class could have been influenced by the expressionist influence in his works, which was in line with her own interests. The atmosphere in Weiss's atelier, described in detail by Janusz Antos, must have been a factor too.¹⁴ Antos quotes memories of people who knew the professor personally, and he is remembered as a cultured person who was respectful of others and who refrained from imposing his own opinion, which was of particular

13. Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Album of the Faculty of Painting, KS 27.

14. J. Antos, *Profesor Weiss i jego uczniowie: kapiści i koloryści*, in: *Wojciech Weiss w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, red. J. Antos, Z. Weiss-Nowina Konopka, Kraków 2010, pp. 50–69.

importance when giving feedback to students. Weiss took instruction seriously, he was keen on sharing his knowledge, albeit in a way which did not undermine students' self-confidence and which acknowledged their effort. Alongside the high opinion of Weiss's output, this could have been one of the reasons why his class was attended by Helena, who Edia Gilead who also appreciated greatly her traits of character.

As previously mentioned, the path that Helena Grabschrift took was not without obstacles. After several years of struggle with health problems, Helena spent her final year at the Academy in Kamocki's class. Again, her choice was probably dictated by her preferences, as landscapes were the dominant theme of her works. Like Weiss, Kamocki also held a high opinion of her progress.¹⁵

At this point it is worth discussing contacts which Helena established with artists at the Academy. She started her studies in a quite interesting period. I have already mentioned the development of the Jewish art community at that time. Its members were active mainly in the Jewish quarter, and the Jewish Academic House in Przemyska 3 in Krakow's Kazimierz became a kind of centre for their activities and venue for their exhibitions. However, what went on in Przemyska in those years was merely an offshoot of the events in Krakow as a whole. We do not know whether Grabschrift witnessed Stanisław Szukalski's excesses in spring 1929 prior to the creation of Szczep Rogate Serce, an art group made up of his students who idolised their eccentric master. Still, it is highly likely that in February 1930 she saw their first exhibition, which opened two weeks after the 1st Exhibition of Jewish Artists (*I Wystawa Artystów Żydowskich*) in Przemyska street. Assuming that she was a regular visitor at the exhibitions of the Krakow Society of Friends of Fine Arts organised in the Palace

15. Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Album of the Faculty of Painting, KS 27.



3. Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, *Podwórko* [The Backyard], etching, 1929–1938, Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow

of Art, already during the first months of her studies she became acquainted with the works of the members of the "Zwornik" association or the "Kwadryga" group. Both organisations included Jewish artists above her age and experience, who later became her friends, as she became involved in the activity of the Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors in Krakow.

Equally important events in the area of visual arts in Krakow took place at the Academy of Fine Arts. The year in which Grabschrift went to the Academy, a left-wing artistic community started consolidating there. In the future, the community would establish the 1st Krakow Group, one of the most significant art movements in Krakow in the 1930s, which contributed plenty of creative stimuli to life at the Academy. Jonasz Stern, the unquestionable leader of the community, at least in political matters, started studying in the same class as Grabschrift. In 1931 Jarocki's class was joined by Berta Grünberg. The remaining members of the future Krakow Group studied in other classes. Grabschrift probably met them often, and her contacts with Stern or Grünberg were naturally frequent. However, there is no evidence that Helena gravitated towards the community, even if Jews were also part of it. On the contrary, the opposite could also be true: she could have kept her distance because of its members' strongly left-wing political opinions. The distance may have been further increased by the attitude of Jonasz Stern, who openly manifested his aversion towards the activity of Krakow's nascent Jewish art community.¹⁶

A record of Jonasz Stern's views on the pre-war activity of Jewish artists in Krakow was made in the 1980s, when he was a man of advanced age. Still, this temporal distance does not play down the relevance of his account. On the contrary, if the artist spoke of his dislike towards the acts of his Jewish counterparts even fifty years down the line, when the community had long ceased to exist, we may only wonder how averse he was when he contacted them directly?

From what we know about Helena, she identified herself more with the Jewish art circles condemned by Stern rather than her leftist fellow artists. The reasons for Stern's aversion included connections with the Zionists and "commercial" attitude towards art (according to Stern) displayed by the artists who hoped to sell their paintings to the members of the Jewish community.¹⁷ Neither aspect was met with Stern's understanding.

16. A.M. Potocka, *Ostatni wywiad z Jonaszem Sternem*, "Odra" 1988 nr 11, p. 31.

17. A.M. Potocka, *Ostatni wywiad z Jonaszem Sternem*, p. 31.

It is therefore worth tracing Grabschrift's contacts with other Jewish students at the Academy. When she started her education at the Academy in 1929, among its students were: Herman Ehrman, Hanka Landau, Anna Weingrün, Gizela Nebenzahl and Mojżesz Schwanefeld.¹⁸ In subsequent years, all of them participated in the life of the Krakow's Jewish art community. Those who were several years older than Grabschrift had joined the community a few years earlier. The presence of older female colleagues from the same circle must have given her courage and confidence that her career choice was the right one. Later on, in the halls of the Academy she would meet e.g. Elisze Weintraub; she would also study in the same classrooms with Antonina Richter, Abba Fenichel and Fryda Sternberg (her peer). Like Helena, they would also take part in the undertakings of the Jewish art community in Krakow.

Why did Helena Grabschrift make such choices? Why did the majority of Jewish students of the Academy of Fine Arts in those years follow a similar path? Their leftist fellow students managed to attract only few of them, and most chose to cooperate, to a lesser or greater extent, with the Jewish community or more moderate non-Jewish groups.

In its non-acceptance of the status quo, the ideologically-oriented artistic left could have repelled other students with its subversive programme, perhaps even more by the potential consequences of their rebellious attitudes. The Jewish community beckoned artists, just to mention the fact that it made it easier for them to exhibit their works and gain recognition — since being a Jewish artist was enough to function as its member. On the other hand, the non-Jewish community was also very attractive. Many of Grabschrift's older friends became involved with the latter. However, she never joined it or took part in any exhibitions in Krakow apart from those organised by the Association of Jewish Artists. Maybe the timing was wrong? She finished her studies just a year before the war. Perhaps the end of the 1930s was not conducive to such common initiatives and the artist felt safer and more confident under the auspices of a Jewish organisation?

Undoubtedly, the 30s — the time when she studied at the Academy — were full of social and political tensions, right before the outbreak of the

18. Mojżesz Schwanefeld was a member of the 1st Krakow Group, yet unlike Stern he did not avoid contacts with the Jewish art circles. He exhibited his works in the Jewish Academic House in 1933.

war. Back in the 1920s, her older friends had acted in a fairly optimistic mood; their relations with their Polish counterparts, with some minor exceptions, were friendly, and there are no extant traces of serious anti-Jewish incidents in that period. However, Grabschrift's experiences were rather different. First severe anti-Jewish incidents at the Academy of Fine Arts, i.e. on 17 November 1931, occurred when Helena was in her third year. During the incident, attempts were made to make Jews leave the classrooms; some of them were thrown down the stairs. Violence was used also towards their non-Jewish fellow students who tried to rush to their assistance.¹⁹ In the eyes of Jewish commentators, the behaviour of Władysław Jarocki, who at that point also taught Helena Grabschrift, was also controversial.²⁰ It was believed that the professor yielded to the pressure of the instigators of the riot by telling his Jewish students to stop coming to his classes for several days until things calmed down. When the Jews arrived in the Academy regardless, he prohibited them from entering and refused to honour their request to ask their fellow students if they really did not want to work with them.

The events at the Academy should be seen in a broader context. In 1931, Poland saw the first wave of anti-Jewish riots, instigated mostly at universities. Such incidents occurred repeatedly in the following years. Grabschrift must have witnessed them also outside the walls of the Academy. This may be the reason why she became involved with the Jewish art circles, not feeling comfortable enough among her Polish friends, or for some other reason failing to find a place for herself in a different community than the Jewish one.

In such circumstances, her attention must have been drawn to the way in which the newly-formed Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors reacted to the events at the Academy in 1931. The artists condemned the perpetrators of the incidents in "Nowy Dziennik" daily and did not omit to thank "our friends, the majority of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, (...) for

19. W. Ślesiński, *Studenci*, in: *Materiały do dziejów Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, t. 2: 1895–1939, oprac. J. E. Dutkiewicz, J. Jeleniewska-Ślesińska, W. Ślesiński, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1969, pp. 223–4; *Brutalny występ adeptów sztuki*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1931 nr 310, p. 11. On 16 November 1931, a day before the events at the Academy, infamous incidents took place at Długa street, where Helena lived. This happened in the aftermath of shops blockaded as part of anti-Jewish protests, including e.g. Lipman Schönfeld's paint store. *Na froncie zajęć antyżydowskich w Krakowie*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1931 nr 310, p. 11.
20. *Niesłychany skandal w Akademii Sztuk Pięknych*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1931 nr 311, p. 4.

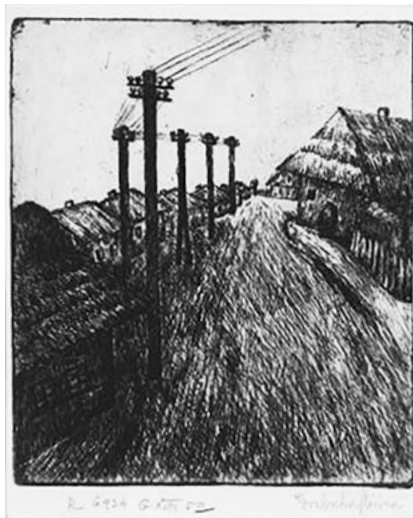
a praiseworthy defence of their Jewish fellow students."²¹ The signatories of the letter also showed their concern for the likes of Helena Grabschrift: "Our thoughts are with our younger fellow students and we encourage them to endure and defend their own rights to study at the Academy, and offer our support in standing up for our rights guaranteed in the Constitution."²²

It was the Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors that Helena Grabschrift became involved with after the completion of her education at the Academy of Fine Arts. Although she must have regularly seen Jewish artists' exhibitions in Krakow and participated in the parties which they organised, her active involvement with the organisation started only after her graduation. Her name appears for the first time in documents related to the Association in autumn 1938. On 25 November 1938, after seven years of fruitful work, the final recorded change in the organisation's board took place. At an age of less than thirty, Grabschrift became member of the board, which may be seen as a proof of her intimacy with the members of the association and trust placed in her by her colleagues.²³

Her appointment to the board soon turned out to be a well-thought-out and right decision. Helena became one of the most committed members of the organisation in the last months before the war. It appears that it was mainly to thanks to her effort that the last three exhibitions of the Association of Jewish Artists in Krakow prior to the outbreak of the Second World War were made possible.



4. Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, *Wnętrze* [Interior], etching, 1929–1938, Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow



5. Helena Grabschrift-Taffet, *Domy* [Houses], etching, 1929–1938, Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow

21. *Protest krakowskich malarzy-Żydów*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1931 nr 312, p. 4.
22. *Protest krakowskich malarzy-Żydów*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1931 nr 312, p. 4.
23. National Archives in Kraków, StGKr 247.

Helena took on organisational responsibility for the first time in February 1939.²⁴ The exhibition which she organised was held in the premises of the Jewish Theatrical Society, where Jewish artists moved their exhibitions during the final phase of the organisation. At the event, works of eight artists of older and younger generations were presented, including Helena Grabschrift's former fellow student Abba Fenichel.

A month later, Helena displayed her own works in the same premises. The exhibition was announced many times in the Jewish daily "New Dziennik" issued in Krakow, a basic medium in which the Jewish artists in Krakow promoted their activity. It seems that Helena was highly regarded or especially popular not only among artists, but also in press, since no other first-timer was met with so many positive early reviews: "High artistic level and diversity of her works will generate a great deal of interest in our society," wrote one reviewer on 23 March.²⁵ Two days later we read that "the artist's exhibition of several dozens of canvases and prints is impressive due to its high artistic level and thematic diversity."²⁶ The exhibition was opened a day later, and Helena presented e.g. Tatra landscapes, figural pictures, portraits and still lifes.²⁷

On 4 April "Nowy Dziennik" published a lengthy review of the exhibition by Henryk Weber — a "tried-and-tested" critic commenting the events in Krakow's world of visual arts.²⁸ It is one of the most important sources of information on the artist's output, her interests, artistic directions and preferred techniques, for, unfortunately, little has survived from her achievements.

Weber was a very demanding critic. He started his review by reminding that Grabschrift was a young person and recent graduate of the Academy. In his view, a lot of her instruction at Academy still remains in her work, as can be seen in the choice of the most basic academic themes and the manner in which they are depicted. At the same time, Weber's words of critique were meant to encourage the artist to be more adventurous, independent, since such attitude would certainly be an asset, as the critic also learned directly

24. *Zrzeszenie Żyd. Art. Malarzy*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 42, p. 18.

25. *Zrzeszenie Żyd. Art. Malarzy*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 82, p. 15.

26. *Otwarcie wystawy obrazów Heleny Grabschriftówny*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 84, p. 17.

27. *Otwarcie wystawy obrazów Heleny Grabschriftówny*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 84, p. 17.

28. H. Weber, *Wystawa Heleny Grabschriftówny*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 94, pp. 19–20.

at the exhibition. The painting entitled *Starzec* [The Old Man], which stands out due to its power of expression, revealing the artist's visceral, emotional approach to the subject, was singled out by Weber as being particularly good. This is what she needs, he wrote. When painting is done with real commitment, this is reflected in the form of the picture being painted, as the artist's will takes control of her array of visual tools, commits shapes to canvas with more freedom, confidence and uses colour with more relevance. Summing up, the critic wrote that "the painter's interpretation is directly proportional to the intensity of the experience."²⁹

Helena's prints were rated even higher by Weber. Mostly etchings were shown at the exhibition. Apparently, they depicted mainly landscapes, suburban vistas, old backstreets, residential clusters or telegraph posts. Everything was suffused with sadness and resignation. "Again, they prove the existence of powerful emotional potential in the work of (...) the artist," the reviewer concluded.³⁰

Helena Grabschrift's graphics from the years of her studies, preserved in the collections of the Library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, confirm his words. They are dominated by etchings similar to those presented at the exhibition in 1939 – urban and rural landscapes, views of poor, leaning buildings, deserted yards, single trees devoid of leaves. The forms are simplified, with no attention to detail. The artist's entire attention is focused on conveying the mood of these places, the miserable living conditions of their inhabitants and the severity of the late autumn landscape. The faces of the portrayed people are also saddened. Only in the presentation of a modest interior, the only one in this set, you can find more warmth and consolation. It is this melancholic, slightly gloomy character that distinguishes the artist's works the most. It was not the picturesque nature of the topic that motivated her to work, although in some cases she did not avoid such an effect (Fig. 3). It seems that more about her true temperament, and perhaps also about the direction in which her work could develop, can be found in the composition titled *Houses*, austere in its simplicity (Fig. 5). Of all the works preserved at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, it is this one who corresponds best

29. H. Weber, *Wystawa Heleny Grabschriftówny*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 94, pp. 19–20.
30. H. Weber, *Wystawa Heleny Grabschriftówny*, "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 94, pp. 19–20.

with the words of Weber, who learned about the artist's work in the largest selection and emphasized its expressive value.

In the weeks that followed the exhibition, Helena did not cease to be active. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was growing tense, and the tension was felt by everyone. Despite such difficult circumstances there were attempts at some activities, some gestures or efforts to avert the impending catastrophe. The last exhibition of the Association of Jewish Artists in Krakow was opened on 28 May 1939; a total of twenty-two artists took part. Again, it was organised by Helena Grabschrift. The entire proceeds of sale were donated by the painters to the National Defence Fund.³¹

Helena was in Krakow when the war broke out. She was arrested in September 1939, labelled with the star of David and sent to perform forced labour. From 1941 she stayed in the ghetto. After two years, in March 1943, she was sent to the Płaszów camp.³² It is unclear how this frail young woman, a sensitive artist managed to escape after five months from there. Did anyone help her? Back then she was already a wife; she had married lawyer Henryk Taffet (born 1908) in 1939.³³ Henryk survived too, and together they made it to Hungary in mid-1943. The same year, 18 oil and watercolour paintings by Helena Grabschrift were shown at the exhibition of the Association of Polish Visual Artists

31. *Wystawa obrazów ofiarowanych przez członków Zrzeszenia Żyd. Art. Mal. na F.O.N., "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 142, p. 14; Dziś otwarcie wystawy obrazów darowanych przez żyd. art. na F.O.N., "Nowy Dziennik" 1939 nr 145, p. 16.*
32. Arolsen Archives, International Centre on Nazi Persecution, 307 198 (T/D 732 453). I am grateful to Alicja Jarkowska-Natkaniec for her assistance in retrieving the relevant information.
33. Henryk Taffet was son of Abraham Taffet, born 1868 in Tarnów, and Rebeka Freidel Taffet née Heidenfeld, born 1867 in Krakow. He went to Nowodworski Middle School, and in the academic year 1927/28 he started studying at the Faculty of Law at the Jagiellonian University. In the early 1930s he started training in the District Court in Krakow as a trainee lawyer; his name is found on the mid-1937 list of attorneys with registered offices in Krakow. As his place of residence he supplied Koletek 5/3 in Krakow – his parents' address; later he changed his address to Gertrudy 19/7. See <https://www.geni.com/people/Abraham-Taffet/600000024324096655>; <https://www.geni.com/people/Rebeka-Taffet/600000024323845488> (15.07.2020); *Sprawozdanie dyrektora Państwowego Gimnazjum Nowodworskiego, czyli św. Anny w Krakowie za rok 1927/27*, Kraków 1927, p. 30; M. Kulczykowski, *Żydzi – studenci Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, p. 677; National Archives in Kraków, personal files 29/1989/13544; "Dziennik Urzędowy Ministerstwa Sprawiedliwości" [Official Journal of the Minister of Justice] 1937 nr 7, p. 91; *Spis abonentów sieci telefonicznych państwowych i koncesjonowanych w Polsce (z wyjątkiem m. st. Warszawy) na 1939 r.*, Warszawa 1939, p. 435.

in Tehran.³⁴ How did they manage to travel so far? Did they join General Anders's Army? In a questionnaire filled in 1959, Helena omitted this subject altogether. Edia Gilead thought that Helena had escaped to the east already in 1939, like most of her family. The only information supplied by Grabschrift about her journey was that in 1943 she reached Palestine by sea.

Aleksander Plutzer, another member of the Association of Jewish Artists, arts and crafts teacher from Tarnów, officer of the military reserve force of the Polish Armed Forces, also took part in the same exhibition. His son Mordechai Palzur, first Israeli ambassador in Poland after the renewal of diplomatic relations, gave a detailed description of the circumstances in which he and his parents had travelled from Tehran to Tel Aviv. The Jews were helped by the emissaries of the Jewish Agency for Israel, who arranged for their visas and took them on a ship. They travelled via Bombay, Aden and the Red Sea to Suez. Then, due to a bombing, the passengers had to board a train. They reached Tel Aviv on 20 December 1943.³⁵ It was probably this ship that carried Helena Grabschrift, her husband, mother and siblings.

In many respects this was a happy ending to the story. Edia Gilead felt that the family had led a happy life in Israel. Helena's younger sister Felicja (Lusia), a very energetic lawyer, played an important role in the family's survival.³⁶ In Israel she married Shlomo Skulski, a poet and writer. Her brother Herman worked as a pharmacist. Helena's husband Henryk Taffet found a job at the Ministry of Treasury. The husband of Helena's older sister Laura, Jan Bader (Jochanan, Yohanan Bader) from Krakow, a lawyer educated at the Jagiellonian University, had an impressive career in Israel.³⁷ He worked closely with Menachem Begin, who later became Prime Minister. In 1949 he was elected member of the Israeli Parliament in the first parliamentary elections in Israel, and re-elected on as many as seven occasions. He was very active politically; among his many achievements, he is best known as the co-author

34. *Katalog wystawy Związku Zawodowego Artystów Plastyków*, Tehran 1943.

35. <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/juedische-welt/tarnow-teheran-tel-aviv/> (16.02.2020).

36. Jan Draus wrote in an article on the history of the Society of Iranian Studies in Tehran during the war on Felicja Grabschrift, a member of the Association of Women with Higher Education who received the scholarship from the organisation, and who translated the Iranian criminal code into Polish. J. Draus, *Towarzystwo Studiów Irańskich w Teheranie w latach 1942–1945*, "Rocznik Nauk Społecznych" 13 (1985) nr 2, p. 62.

37. Jagiellonian University Archives, SII – 290a; M. Kulczykowski, *Żydzi – studenci Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, p. 507.

of the Bader-Ofer method, which has been used to distribute seats in the Knesset since 1973.³⁸ Streets in Israeli cities and towns are named after him.

Life was not been so kind to Helena Grabschrift-Taffet. Several years after her arrival in Palestine, she suffered a personal loss. In late 1940s, she gave birth to a son. Unfortunately, an accident happened in the hospital directly after birth: a careless nurse hit the newborn on the head and the boy died. This led to Helena's nervous breakdown from which she never fully recovered. She had a committed husband, but their happy married life could not erase the trauma. Helena did not return to her pre-war life; she refused to participate in exhibitions or become involved in artistic events. She continued painting, but did not attach much importance to the activity. She gave her works away to friends and relatives. Her husband died in 1995, she passed away seven years later, in 2002. Childless, she spent the last years of her life in a nursing home.

38. https://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/seats_eng.htm (19.02.2020).

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Archives

Archive of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow

Arolsen Archives, International Center on Nazi Persecution

National Archives in Kraków

Jagiellonian University Archives

Abstract

Natasza Styrna

*Helena Grabschrift-Taffet,
a Krakow artist born in Tuchów*

Helena Grabschrift was born on 18 April 1909 in Tuchów. Starting 1929, she studied at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, taught by such artists as Władysław Jaroński, Wojciech Weiss and Stanisław Kamocki. In late 1930s she became involved with the Krakow Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors. She was one of the most active members of the organisation, and made arrangements for the last Krakow exhibitions of the works of Jewish painters before the war. For a long time, nothing was known of her life after the end of the Second World War; she was considered either dead or missing. The author of the present article managed to find sources confirming that the artist had survived the war, and to contact her family in Israel. Consequently, it was possible to add to the artist's biography many new details from pre-war years, the period of Nazi occupation, as well as her later life in Israel, where she moved with her husband Henryk Taffet. Unfortunately, not much has survived from the artist's pre-war output, therefore the inter-war press remains the most important source of information about her work.

Keywords:
art, Krakow, Jews,
interwar period

Abstrakt

Natasza Styrna

*Helena Grabschrift-Taffet,
a Krakow artist born in Tuchów*

Słowa kluczowe:

sztuka, Kraków,
Żydzi, lata
międzywojenne

Helena Grabschrift urodziła się 18 kwietnia 1909 roku w Tuchowie. Od 1929 roku studiowała na krakowskiej Akademii Sztuk Pięknych pod kierunkiem Władysława Jarockiego, Wojciecha Weissa i Stanisława Kamockiego. Pod koniec lat 30. XX wieku została członkiem krakowskiego Zrzeszenia Żydowskich Artystów Malarzy i Rzeźbiarzy i okazała się jedną z najaktywniejszych osób w tym gronie, współorganizowała ostatnie przed wojną wystawy malarzy żydowskich w mieście. Po zakończeniu drugiej wojny światowej bardzo długo jej los był nieznany, uchodziła za osobę, która zmarła lub zginęła. Autorce artykułu udało się dotrzeć do źródeł świadczących, że artystka przeżyła wojnę, oraz nawiązać kontakt z jej rodziną mieszkającą w Izraelu. Dzięki temu udało się odtworzyć wiele szczegółów z przedwojennej biografii artystki, wydarzenia z lat wojny oraz przytoczyć najważniejsze informacje dotyczące jej późniejszych losów w Izraelu, gdzie zamieszkała razem z mężem Henrykiem Taffetem. Niestety z przedwojennego dorobku artystki przetrwało niewiele, dlatego najważniejszym źródłem informacji o jej twórczości pozostaje międzywojenna prasa.