

# Institute of National Remembrance

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## A Fighter in Hell and His Unusual Sculptures

Look into the eyes of Samuel Willenberg. A swaddling, brave and challenging look. I know many such eyes. They belong to people who wanted to escape from the hell of the Holocaust and thanks to their determination and courage they fled from it.



## **Maciej Kwaśniewski**

But Samuel didn't just run away. He was a fighter. A fighter who overcame the hell of Treblinka itself. The Institute of National Remembrance will show his unique sculptures in Poland, but it will actually show the soul of Samuel. The last will of humanity of him and his wonderful wife, Krystyna.

## **Naked Ruth asks about the time of death**

It is October 1942. Young Samuel is sent to the German death camp in Treblinka. Although it sounds cruel, he is lucky. He doesn't go straight to the gas chamber. He gets into the work commando. Nothing in this factory can be wasted. Clothes go on one pile, shoes on another, suitcases on another. Samuel segregates the clothes of the murdered. Then he shaves the hair of those brought to the camp. A girl stands in front of him. She is nineteen years old. She just passed her final exams in the Warsaw ghetto. She is beautiful and naked. Samuel must shave her long hair with which the mattresses on German submarines will be stuffed. "How long does it take to die?" Asks the girl suddenly. "Fifteen, twenty minutes," he says. It was Rut Dorfman. The only person whose name Samuel remembered.

And you will be able to see Rut Dorfman, immersed in bronze, minutes before her death. This is one of the fifteen figures that Samuel Willenberg snatched from the Treblinka death factory, turned into bronze castings and left us as his legacy and testament of memory.

Samuel started sculpting very late. He was already 77 years old. Only as a pensioner did he study art history and sculpture. Treblinka experiences came to his eyes. He created fifteen characters and scenes almost in a trance.

Here is a father unlacing his child's shoes, because they are still needed by the Third Reich. The child is not. However, there is a whole

ocean of despair in this gesture. In a moment both the father and the child will be in the gas chamber.

This is Scheissmeister, a function prisoner who makes sure that nobody uses the latrine for more than a minute.

Here is a Man with a cart whose task is to collect bottles abandoned by those going to die.

Here is the Painter, a particularly tragic figure. A prisoner who not only painted the rooms of the railway siding in Treblinka so that they pretended to be a railway station (Germans took care of appearances to the very end, so there were inscriptions: "First class waiting room", "Second class waiting room" and a clock on the wall), but he painted *Monidło* type paintings for the Germans. The painter created commemorative portraits using photos of children sent to SS-men serving in the camp by their wives.

This is the sculpture of Artur Gold's Band, musicians in sophisticated tailcoats and grotesque bow ties, playing on their way to death.

In the sculptures, Samuel Willenberg did not capture only a single sequence, but the full drama of human degradation in which death was the only liberation. After all, Rut Dorfman could come to a painted station with a clock, the hands of which never moved, she could even hear Arthur Gold's band known before the war, she could assume that her hair was needed for something ... But she couldn't be fooled. She was as smart as Samuel. She knew she was going to die. Szewach Weiss wrote that Willenberg's sculptures will remain before his eyes for

life.

## **Who was Samuel Willenberg?**

Who was he? No. Who is Samuel Willenberg? He was born in Częstochowa in 1923 in free Poland, in the family of Perec and Maniefa. She was a Russian, he was a Polish Jew with an artistic soul, a student at two academies of fine arts, and although he exhibited his paintings with Jacek Malczewski and Leon Wyczółkowski, he became a teacher at an agricultural school and, as we would say today, a synagogue designer. The house was not prosperous, says Samuel. My father could not cash his talents. He seemed to belong more to the world of spirit than mundane. There were two more sisters in the family - Ita and Tamara.

Samuel was endowed with the temperament of the conqueror, adventurer. He escaped from the Częstochowa station into the world. He climbed into the harmonic connection between the wagons of the Viennese express and simply rode into the distance. Here in Częstochowa at Fabryczna street (everyone has a youthful, mythical street) he polished his temper in skirmishes with local bullies. And here he defended against the harassment of poorly speaking Polish Alfred Boehm whose family, living in Germany for generations, had been expelled from there. They chose Poland as their new homeland.

Just before the war, the Willenberg family moved to Opatów (today the Świętokrzyskie province), where Perec decorated the synagogue.

Samuel, as a majority of the Jewish intelligentsia, identified with

Poland. Polish was spoken at home, the father was a fan of Piłsudski. In September 1939, during a family escape to the east, young Willenberg volunteered to the Polish Army. His unit wandered around the eastern borders until they got into a skirmish with the Soviets near Chełm, during which Samuel was wounded and paralyzed. But his temper once again made itself known. Despite his damaged spine, he escaped from a prisoner-of-war hospital and returned to his family for some time.

Initially, they lived in Opatów. Perec began painting Catholic paintings for churches and private individuals to earn a living. Finally, when the Germans closed the ghetto, local priests, through friends, arranged new papers for the Willenberg family in which there was no trace of their Jewish origin. Maniefa, however, decided to hide her daughters in Częstochowa. It was a mistake - they were reported by neighbors. Perec went to Warsaw as Baltazar Karol Pękosławski, and Samuel was sent directly from the Opatów ghetto to the Treblinka camp.

## **Treblinka hell**

A forced labor camp intended primarily for Polish citizens of Polish descent was located just over 100 km from Warsaw in the north-east, near Treblinka, from September 1941. A year later, two kilometers away, the second most terrible place of mass extermination of Jews in Europe was created next to Auschwitz. *SS-Sonderkommando* Treblinka - the most efficient death factory. In sixteen months, between July 1942 and November 1943, Germans murdered about 850,000 Polish Jews as well as Jews from Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia and Germany here. The Roma and Sinti

were also killed. It was assumed that Polish Jews from the General Government were supposed to come here. Willenberg was brought here along with six thousand Jews from Opatów on October 20, 1942. Three events determined his fate.

Firstly. Still on the ramp, shortly after leaving the wagon, one of the older prisoners - a colleague from Częstochowa - Alfred Boehm - whispered to him that he would claim to be a bricklayer. They were needed by the Germans ... he was the only one who survived the transport from Opatów.

The Germans assigned him to a group of prisoners serving the camp. They did various technical works, they were also forced to prepare prisoners for death, they took corpses from gas chambers to the crematoria ... Regardless of what is written about what work in such departments, it will be out of place. Samuel's first job was to sort clothes of the people going to their deaths.

Secondly. It was during this work that he found the clothes of his sisters. He never told his parents.

Thirdly. He met his history teacher from Częstochowa, Mering, who had lost his wife and daughter in the camp. "You must escape from here to tell the world what you saw here and what else you will see. It will be your task" - he was to hear from him.

He started thinking about running away.

## **Revolt**

The prisoners' revolt in Treblinka was an exceptional event, amazing determination and courage. While maintaining the scale of the event, it can be compared to the Warsaw Uprising or the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. A center of German-occupied Europe. In a community covered by inhuman terror, in a concentration camp where only one law was in force - the right to die, where prisoners were to pass only a few hundred meters from the railway ramp to the gas chamber, where people gave up all hope, several hundred Jews were planning a revolt. Not only an escape, but also an attempt to paralyze the camp's work. Samuel Willenberg was among them.

The plan ripened from September 1942. Participants were prisoners of working groups involved in servicing the camp. Weapons were bought and tools were collected. The first date, set for June 15, 1943, did not come to fruition. The signal to attack the German and Ukrainian crew of the camp sounded at the end of August 2, 1943. First, a grenade was thrown into the barracks of German guards, a gas tank was lit and branches masking barbed wires. The camp was on fire. Germans and Ukrainians fired blindly, but the mass of prisoners was so large that the bullets did not wander. The fugitives armed with axes and rifles stormed one of the camp gates and the place where the fire burned the fence and, stepping on the corpses of their colleagues, moved forward. Of the 800 prisoners imprisoned in Treblinka at that time, 200-300 people escaped. Most of them were caught in the great pursuit. About 70 people became free. Including Samuel Willenberg. He recalled years later:

“Our revolt aimed at two things: setting the camp on fire so that it could not function anymore, and the escape of a number of eyewitnesses of the crimes that took place in Treblinka. It was known in advance that only a few of us would be able to get out of the camp, and they would also be exposed to a number of dangers. It was only the beginning of August 1943 - and the war did not seem to be over”.

### **On the barricades of Warsaw**

It wasn't easy to get help, and yet there were those who risked their lives for the fugitive. Thanks to them, Samuel appeared in Warsaw, in which he was hiding - or actually lived with a false identity - his father's. Like his son, Perec did not have a Semitic appearance, only a Russian accent. That's why he pretended to be mute. And he continued to paint.

Samuel couldn't sit still. Already using a new false name, Ignacy Popow, he became involved in underground activities. In the conspiracy, he was to join the leftist Polish People's Army, which initially did not join the consolidation of the Home Army, but also kept a distance from the Soviet-inspired PPR. PAL should not be confused with the People's Army, which is organizationally adjacent to the PPR.

At the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, however, he was a soldier of the Home Army. In the ranks of the "Ruczaj" Battalion he fought at Koszykowa St. (for the building of the Czechoslovakian Mission), at Marszałkowska St. and at Zbawiciela Square. Here an unpleasant episode happened to him. During the fights someone from among their

own positions shot him. His girlfriend told him that some soldiers of the National Armed Forces were blaming her for her relationship with a Jew. After the incidents he returned to PAL. He mentioned that he had felt very well in the Home Army. His friendships from the "Ruczaj" Battalion survived until the end of their lives.

After the capitulation of the uprising, he left the city as a civilian. Then, there was another escape from transport and the end of the war.

### **Christ with the face of Samuel**

However, it is worth returning to the Warsaw Uprising for a moment. Percec Willenberg lived in a tenement house at Marszałkowska 60. A German missile hit the house already at the end of the fighting, on September 11, 1944. It stopped almost above Percec's bed. The son, who had just visited his father, despite the resistance, told him to go down to the basement, where most of the inhabitants were protected. And just then, suspended somewhere between death and life, Percec Willenberg, a painter of synagogues, decided to paint Jesus Christ on the basement wall under the stairs. He signed "Jesus, I trust in You". The Christ has a face similar to that of the famous image, but not the original, which was "dictated" in Vilnius by Saint Faustina Kowalska, but the work of Adolf Hyła, which is recognizable today, it was also created in 1944. However, you can also see the features of Samuel in the Christ's face. The image quickly became known to the inhabitants of Marszałkowska 60 and nearby houses. According to some accounts, tenants attributed this image to the saving of the tenement, also from destruction by the Germans after the uprising. When Samuel came to

Poland for the first time in 1983, he was surprised to see that the image of Christ is still in place. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, the image was copied and placed in the Warsaw Uprising Museum, and the original one is still secured at Marszałkowska 60.

## **People smuggler**

Immediately after the war, Samuel went to the army, to the unit associated with aviation, quite quickly, as he claimed, he managed to get out of there. It was a rather mysterious period in the life of our character. Judging by his accounts, he could have been involved in the massive illegal migration of European Jews to Palestine at the time - *Alija Bet*. As a reminder, the power over Palestine was then exercised by the United Kingdom, which began to inhibit the arrivals of Holocaust survivors to the Middle East. In Poland the pogrom took place in Kielce. Many survivors had nowhere to return. Their houses and flats were destroyed or occupied while they were hiding from the Germans. There was a shortage of flats throughout Poland, because a huge number of houses were demolished as a result of war or deliberate destruction by Germans, for example in Warsaw. The fear of the future came as a result of the trauma caused by the destruction of entire families. Nobody wanted to live in the cemetery which Poland became for people of Jewish origin. Many wanted to emigrate. Emissaries of Hagana (a paramilitary organization of the emerging Israeli state), reached countries where Jews still lived, creating illegal transfer channels and even self-defense units. As Samuel says, he even

conducted courses or self-defense training against pogroms. In December 1946, he led a group of fifty fugitives across the green border who were to travel to Palestine through the Alps and Italy. He found out about the death of his father in Rome. So he gave up everything and returned to Poland to bury him. He also managed to collect his painting legacy. After returning, he became involved in the search for Jewish children hidden during the war by Polish families. Various types of Zionist charity organizations dealt with such searches. It was done, for example, by the famous London rabbi Solomon Schonfeld, known as God's Cossack. He travelled Poland in a fictional uniform he designed, taking Jewish children from monasteries, state orphanages and from families.

As Samuel recalls, it was not easy. Some people were already families for the children, others wanted money.

He finally left for Israel in 1950, together with the newly-met Krystyna Lubelczyk, who was rescued by a Polish family.

## **A man of reconciliation**

Samuel Willenberg never divided the world into Polish and Jewish, for him the choice between good and evil was more important. He is not an easy hero. He spoke bluntly and did not embellish the world. His stories include both Polish heroes and Poles bastards. He was strict in courts. He did not forgive the Germans. He claimed that you could only forgive whoever does something wrong by accident, not deliberately and planned for a long time. He quickly threw off his mantle of trauma.

He returned to his wanderings and adventures, openness to people. He started coming to Poland regularly in the 1980s. He visited Treblinka thirty times. He appeared on every anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, met his colleagues from the Home Army and wore an insurgent beret with a crowned eagle. He received orders from the President of Israel and the President of Poland. He is a main character of several documentaries, dozens of reportages, and even a fragment of the book about Saint Faustina. He created a project of a monument to the memory of the Częstochowa Jews. During the war he lost faith in God, but after the death of John Paul II he immortalized him with a sculpture. He came to Poland with his wife, leading trips for Israeli youth.

He talked about it:

They come here and think: Poles were murdered. They need clarification that this was not the case. And this is not easy. And this is because grandma told them it was so. I talk about those who betrayed Jews, robbed them, and those who saved my wife, and about those who saved me and helped me, knowing who I was after my escape from Treblinka. Only then does the young generation begin to look differently. My wife and I worked a lot on this, clarified and explained what war was like for Poland and Poles. And only then do their eyes open. This is the most important thing to bring our nations closer together.

He dreamed that the memorial with his sculptures would stand in Treblinka.

## Excerpts

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