

**“EVERYTHING
THAT PASSED WILL
PLAY OUT ANEW.”
THE HISTORICAL
AND ARTISTIC
CIRCUMSTANCES
OF ANDRZEJ
WRÓBLEWSKI’S TRIP
TO YUGOSLAVIA IN
THE AUTUMN OF 1956**

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The camera glides over their motionless silhouettes and still faces. It is as if focusing on something they froze for a moment, waiting for something about to happen, standing side by side in a world suspended in time, on the edge of an indefinite future. Anonymous—they are more specters than heroes—they stand in the streets, in town squares and at bus stops, train stations and waiting rooms, in endless queues. Although we see them as a multiplicity, within it they remain lonely beings—they do not care about each other, do not talk or look at each other. In this group, this passive form, their individualities merge together. “They exist

side by side alongside a bus stop,” wrote Jean-Paul Sartre about people waiting in Saint-Germaine Square, focusing on groups that share physical closeness as a result of simply being in the same place at the same time.¹ Sartre saw in them the plurality of separations that become the negation of reciprocity. “The isolation of the organism ... is revealed through the isolation everyone lives as the provisional negation of their reciprocal relation with Others. This man is isolated not only by his body as such, but also by the fact that he turns his back on his neighbor—who, moreover, has not even noticed him”—he emphasized.² The “bus stop community” has no internal structure other than the internal otherness connecting it, otherness related to the collective dimension and form.

A similar, mesmerizing inventory of human physiognomy—an inventory of nameless people, people without qualities—can often be found in Andrzej Wróblewski’s work. Standing against a wall in anticipation of being shot, seated on benches in a train station’s waiting room, residents of towns and villages frozen still at the news of Stalin’s death—their acts of waiting are connected by something that is essential to the experience of togetherness. At some points in history, such seemingly unproductive time—time spent everyday at a tram stop, in a queue at the shops, commonly known as “a line,” or to receive certain rationed goods—is transformed into a spell of the dignity of waiting and acceptance of history unraveling “at its own pace.” These moments become a meaningful, documenting time. In this essay I would like to reflect on such historical moments. Below, I outline the artistic, political and social dimensions in which, following the years of postwar scarcity, Stalinist terror, and a period of creative apathy and indifference, Wróblewski’s “thaw”—period paintings were created: his *Chairings* and *Queues*. I am interested in the parallel nature of the historical events leading up to Władysław Gomułka’s rise to power and Wróblewski’s work at the time, reflecting the burden of life experiences and personal challenges that their author carried on the eve of his trip to the countries of former Yugoslavia on the penultimate day of October 1956. I am seeking to answer the following question: what kind of art critic and painter was Wróblewski in the early autumn of that year, and in what circumstances was he chosen as the official artistic representative of the political changes of the Polish October period.

I “THE MASTERY OF A LONG PAINTERLY STUDY”

Wróblewski’s unrivalled depictions of the atmosphere of “inaudible timelessness” and being suspended within it, are described in Anna Akhmatova’s elegy, *Requiem*: “And I pray not for myself alone ... / for all who stood outside the jail, / in bitter cold or summer’s blaze, / with me under that blind red wall.”³ The poet dedicates these words to mothers who looked out for their sons, just as she did, below the windows of a Leningrad prison during Yezhov’s reign of terror.⁴ In the early 1990s, with Akhmatova in mind, Chantal Akerman went to Moscow. There, instead of a film about the poet, she produced an epic record of the overwhelming emptiness of the post-socialist, post-perestroika landscape. In *From*

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Dialectic of Critical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004), p. 256.

2 Quoted in Sean Blenkinsop, “From Waiting for the Bus to Storming the Bastille: From Sartrean seriality to the relationships that form classroom communities,” in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2012), p. 184.

3 Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*, trans. Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward, <https://ronnowpoetry.com/contents/akhmatova/Requiem.html> (accessed May 3, 2020).

4 The peak period of the Stalinist Great Purge has become synonymous with the last name of Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov (1895–1940), nicknamed “The Bloody Dwarf.” From 1936, he was the НКВД People’s Commissar in charge of mass purges as the main executor of the Great Terror policy (purges in the party apparatus, security organs, army, repression of the population), which in 1937–38 took several million lives.

the East [D'Est] (1992–93), the camera hurries along the streets and rural roads, past windows, shop displays, and bus stops for over one hundred minutes. In silence, in natural light, from Moscow's winter squares to the summers in Baltic resorts, time goes by, minutes pass, and yet the mood remains unchanged. The movement is superficial: this collective portrait of a new society is captured in a gap between two eras: between the debris of one regime—with its ubiquitous Sovietization of life—and the arrival of another—predatory Western capitalism. Decades of authoritarian rule have not destroyed the enduring characteristics of the community. On the contrary, they have allowed many established practices of everyday life to survive. "At each face I felt a history ... the camps, Stalin, denunciation"⁵—emphasized Akerman, documenting the flashes of transformation of not just the political system, but also its smallest component—man.

I draw attention to this extraordinary mapping of the post-Soviet republics, Poland and the GDR, countries known as "Europe's waiting room" and their citizens who were, for years, socialized, indoctrinated, and forced to adapt to imposed political models and regulations—because Akerman shares with Wróblewski not only a sensitivity for historical changes, formal affinity of approach and depicted scenes, but also a certain "mastery of a long painterly study"⁶ that leads to this very affinity—in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. It is a kind of skill

- 5 Quoted in Ivone Margulies, "Echo and voice in 'Meetings with Anna,'" in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), pp. 61–62.
- 6 Andrzej Wróblewski, "[I Have Been Living the Life of the Studio for Several Weeks Now]," in *Avoiding Intermediary States. Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957)*, eds. Magdalena Ziolkowska and Wojciech Grzybała (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz; Warsaw: Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, 2014), p. 45.



[GROUP SCENE]

undated; ink, paper; 33 × 44.5 cm
private collection

of portraying social moods, physiognomic types, creating all-pervading characteristics of groups and individuals that reflect historical conditions and realities. Wróblewski is a virtuoso of “all-encompassing-cognoscibility,”⁷ which he mentions—as a kind of artistic credo—in his diary notes from January 3, 1948. Three weeks later, in the same diary, he strongly emphasizes that his own work is about creating “definitively convincing paintings, beyond time and space.”⁸ Even though his *Executions* belong to the repertoire of the most recognizable, morally explicit, and symbolically loaded themes in Polish postwar art, it is in the depictions of people pinned to chairs and absorbed in thought that Wróblewski achieves the absolute mastery of the psychological portrait. In a brochure accompanying the only individual exhibition organized during the artist’s lifetime (at the Club of the Polish Writers’ Union, Warsaw, February 1956), Wróblewski explains the choice of particular themes thus:

While working on them [drawings], I avoided: firstly, my “own style” and “my own” aesthetics to which I would have to bend each idea, and secondly, turning accidental observations into important and final statements. ... Such premature specialization forces many to close their eyes to the world before they can look at it properly. My drawings are, therefore, such an unassuming way of looking at life.⁹

7 Ibid., p. 78.

8 Ibid., p. 87.

9 In addition to the list of thirty-six exhibited works on paper, made using ink and tempera techniques, we know very little about the exhibition itself. Among the works Wróblewski presented were *Champs Elysees* and *The Office*—exhibited in the autumn at the exhibition “*Po Prostu*” Salon—illustrations for poems (*Miss Rosita* by Federico García Lorca and Guillaume Apollinaire’s *The Hills*), but also works from previous years, e.g., *Brigade for Excellence* known as *Striving Towards Excellence*, from 1952. *Exhibition of Works by Andrzej Wróblewski*, catalogue no. 28, (Warsaw: Klub Związku Literatów Polskich, 1956).

10 Among other awards, for his painting *At the Meeting*, Wróblewski received an honorary diploma at the International Cultural Competition on the occasion of the 4th World Youth and Student Festival in Bucharest, and an honorable mention from the Ministry of Culture at the 4th National Art Exhibition. Quoted from *Od A do Z*, no. 28 (1954), p. 1 and “*Z zagranicy*,” *Życie Literackie*, no. 33 (1953), p. 7.

11 Both terms come from Barbara Majewska, “Niech bogowie się zlitują nad malarzami – albowiem bardzo tego potrzebują. O sztuce Andrzeja Wróblewskiego,” *Sztandar Młodych*, no. 207 (1957), p. 5.

12 Andrzej Wróblewski, “Poczekalnia,” in *Wróblewski nieznanym*, ed. Jan Michalski (Kraków: Zderzak Gallery, 1993), p. 179.

Following a few years of work formally resembling “Socialist Realist Surrealism, disgusting and gloomy,” years of producing Socialist Realist studies of the working class (laborers, labor leaders, activists from the Związek Młodzieży Polskiej [Union or Association of Polish Youth, ZMP]), which brought him a few commissions from the Ministry of Culture and Art for large-format canvases commemorating historical events and national holidays (including *Union of Polish Youth Takes Command of the Air Force*, 1953 and *Bloody Sunday 1905*, 1953–54), as well as awards and distinctions,¹⁰ in his portraits from the thaw period Wróblewski returns to painting people “hopelessly waiting, tormented by the oppression and degeneration of the social system.”¹¹ For Wróblewski, *Executions* and *Chairings* played the leading role in his artistic oeuvre. Following the last scene, when the “film fades out” and people turn into chairs, the closing shot of Wróblewski’s *Waiting Room* screenplay is the juxtaposition of two paintings. Let me focus for a moment on this publication’s eponymous text, a few pages from Wróblewski’s sketchbook from the turn of 1955–56.

One might compare Akerman and Wróblewski’s monumental social features to the nineteenth-century genre of historical panoramas. The camera work in *From the East*, the unsettling, uncomfortable, insistent proximity of the passing faces and the characters’ eyes aimed at the viewer are just as piercing as the *en face* compositions of the *Executions* and *Queues*. We are placed next to their protagonists, and not just in the role of witnesses of inevitable events, but also participants. While Akerman documents a certain interlude announcing a new social order, the subsequent *Waiting Room* scenes illustrate the permanent breakdown of the social organism. A man “disappears from the head down; his shoulders become white and schematic; his belly disappears; legs from a line (or become transparent).”¹²

Finally, the human shape becomes synonymous with the chair. "People change into chairs—long, laborious process with recurrences."¹³ A society of the chaired emerges—this is the imminent future. Adam Ważyk in the famous *A Poem for Adults* [*Poemat dla dorosłych*] published in *Nowa Kultura* flawlessly describes this new iconography of the thaw period's transformations: "there are people waiting for papers, / there are people waiting for justice, / there are people who have been waiting for a long time."¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Adam Ważyk, "Poemat dla dorosłych," *Nowa Kultura*, no. 34 (1956), p. 2. The inclusion of the text in the official publication of the Association of Polish Writers led to repercussions and polemics. The poem was criticized by writers Bohdan Czeszko, Stefan Żółkiewski (head of the Department of Science and Culture of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party), and Jerzy Putrament, and following a meeting at the Staszic Palace, at which the publication was defended by Jerzy Andrzejewski, Mieczysław Jastrun, and Julian Przyboś, editor-in-chief Paweł Hoffman was removed from office. "A few days after the issue was released, they tried to withdraw it from kiosks, but there was nothing to withdraw. ... Typists in offices re-typed the poem for friends and strangers. ... After returning to Warsaw, I was invited to see [Jakub] Berman. He encouraged me to think deeply about what I did, now, because of me, thousands of young people cannot sleep at night. ... Attempts were made to combat the poem by other means. Activist meetings were organized, and teachers were sent to cultural institutions. Strange things were happening." Adam Ważyk, "Losy poematu," *Polityka*, no. 1 (1981), p. 10. Archive of the Artist's Heirs contains a copy of the poem handwritten by the artist's mother, Krystyna Wróblewska.

¹⁵ Andrzej Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski 1914–1993*, vol. 2 (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 1995), p. 298.

¹⁶ Ważyk, "Poemat dla dorosłych," p. 1.

¹⁷ The word "line" appears once more in the diary, in the final list of paintings created that year by Wróblewski, as a "small fragment of a tail." In addition, the artist added the word "continues" next to the penciled in title of *Queue*, over the title *Waiting Room I*, and in the line below, next to the title *Waiting Room II* he noted "a human crucifixion" in parentheses. All entries from the calendar quoted in the essay are from the artist's calendar, 1956, Archive of the Artist's Heirs.

II AN ICONOGRAPHER OF TIMELESSNESS

Wróblewski gradually enters the world of people spiritually degraded by party guardianship that extends into every element of their lives, tarnished by the apparatus of state bureaucracy, weary and tired of everyday life with its half-truths and newspeak. In a caricature gouache [*Office, Figural Composition no. 871*], a signpost divides the world into a village and a town, tractors in the field versus an office filled to the brim with administrative conformists: careerists and yes-men uncritically faithful to the system. Institutions and spectacles produced by the system itself. An example? Those who queue, people standing, waiting in lines. In April 1956, Wróblewski created the first sketches for the canvases: *Waiting Room I* and *Waiting Room II*, now known as *Waiting Room I, The Queue Continues* and *Waiting Room II, (Chairing I)*. They follow that which Ważyk described as being "dazzled by the real world of normal people."¹⁵ "People wearing whatever, overalls; women age quickly here" added the poet.¹⁶

Wróblewski continues his painting work in May and June (interestingly, on April 20, when writing the first diary entry on his depictions of queues and chairings, he writes the word "tail," which he strikes out and turns into "queue")—the months in which political tension solidifies, and the attitudes of the young intelligentsia and workers are radicalizing.¹⁷ There are intensifying demands for the rejection of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and for the introduction of "socialist democracy" based on the idea of socializing production and self-management of the workers. There is also growing criticism of censorship and the secret police, and disagreement with the cult of following the Soviet example and submission to the Kremlin. On May 4, 1956, Jakub Berman—the "all-powerful agent of the Kremlin," and from 1948, the second—next to Bolesław Bierut—"administrator" of the People's Republic of Poland, supervisor of the apparatus of Stalinist persecutions, co-responsible for the repressive activities of the Ministry of Public Security, including political murders—resigns from the post of deputy prime minister and member of the PZPR Central Committee Political Bureau.

On May 15, *Echo Krakowa* publishes the first fragment of *The Thaw* by Ilja Ehrenburg, and Andrzej K. Wróblewski, the artist's namesake and contemporary, notes a few days later:

The windows have finally been opened, as the joke goes, not to air the room, but to see who thought it was stuffy. ... We discussed Berman today. Some are experiencing an



DIPLOMATIC GUEST, (THE ARRIVAL OF THE DIPLOMAT)

1955; watercolor, gouache, ink, paper;
29.3 × 41.6 cm
collection of Hanna and Jarosław
Przyborowski

interesting gurgling of the undigested, hastily swallowed Marxism. For thousands of people who practice communism too eagerly, it's a terrible shock.¹⁸

The young intelligentsia fueled the turmoil, which, coupled with the deteriorating economy (the implementation of the six-year plan, the so-called “plan for building the foundations of socialism” only deepened the disparities across industry, agriculture, mining, transport, and housing) portended the inevitable crisis and fell on fertile ground. Workers, students, and intellectuals—representatives of two generations—the generation of German occupation and the Warsaw Uprising, who grew up and were ideologically formed in the realities of the People’s Republic of Poland, thirty-year-olds such as Andrzej Wróblewski (artist) and Andrzej K. Wróblewski (journalist and publicist) were the voice of demonstrations, rallies, protests, public speeches, and activist meetings. They asked about the meaning of “socialist” slogans in the gloomy and gray everyday life, created forums for discussion and shaping civic attitudes, worked to raise awareness among workers in factories (in March 1955, the activity of the Crooked Circle Club discussion club began, and by the end of the year there were forty branches throughout the country).¹⁹

Following Stalin’s death, the monolithic structure of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) did not change, signs of the thaw were emerging very slowly. Conservative tendencies in the party leadership were preserved by the 2nd Congress of the PUWP (March 10–17, 1954), during which the speech by Bolesław Bierut (First Secretary of the Central Committee) aimed to “cover up the terrible

¹⁸ Andrzej K. Wróblewski, *Dzienniki zabrane przez bezpiekę* (Warsaw: Agora, 2008), p. 43. Andrzej K. Wróblewski (1935–2012) orig. Fejgin, a graduate of the Faculty of Polish Philology at the University of Warsaw, also born in Vilnius into a Jewish family. Fejgin, a journalist and writer, was working first in the 1950s with *Po Prostu* and associated with the magazine *Sztandar Młodych*. The family used the name Wróblewski after going into hiding during the war.

¹⁹ Quoted in Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski*, p. 298.

economic situation and the revival among the masses of party members with several conciliatory formulas. Bierut emphasized that the party should be purged of inept bureaucrats, which was an unrealistic slogan insofar as a consistent purge of the bureaucrats would destroy the PUPP because its core—the professional apparatus—was based on this very social group.”²⁰ The Congress itself was supervised by the watchful eye of Khrushchev. The new party statute cemented the PUPP’s role as a “leading outlet of the working class,” pointed to the October Revolution as its ideological horizon, and called for “the fusion of society’s patriotic forces in the ranks of the National Front.”²¹ The political landscape remained unchanged—anti-Semitic purges in the army, military trials and actions aimed at destroying the independence underground continued, varied in intensity, while security abuses abounded.

The first collective protest of the workers at the Cegielski factory in Poznań (Zakłady Metalowe im. Józefa Stalina, ZISPO) against low wages and unfair housing distribution broke the barrier of fear in autumn 1954. Deteriorating working conditions, stringent production standards set for heavy industry, shortages of materials and machine supplies, and finally, months-long bogus talks with the party and departmental authorities, led to a warning strike in June of the following year. In April 1956, FSO workers in Żerań, shipyard workers on the coast, workers at Nowa Huta, and other professional groups who were not silenced by temporary wage increases granted to miners and shipyard workers, put forward demands for the creation of workers’ councils. While their demands remained unanswered, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in

²⁰ Ibid., p. 287.

²¹ Quoted in *Nowe Drogi*, no. 3 (1954) pp. 509–23.



**(THE QUEUE CONTINUES),
[THE QUEUE NO. 1004]**

undated; watercolor, ink, paper;
29.5 × 41.7 cm
National Museum, Warsaw



**WAITING ROOM I, THE QUEUE
CONTINUES**

1956; oil, canvas; 140 × 200 cm
National Museum, Warsaw

²² Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski*, p. 309.

²³ The speech was published as a brochure by the Instytut Literacki—among others—in Paris in 1956. The first print edition—March 1956 in Warsaw—was intended for internal party use, but was also read widely beyond closed party meetings.

Moscow (February 14–25), beyond Khrushchev’s famous secret report criticizing the “pathological cult of Stalin, abuse of the concept of ‘enemies of the people’ justifying the brutal suppression of all independent thinking, the extermination of ‘thousands of innocent communists’”²² brought in a top-down process of liberalization and democratization of the system, allowing for various models of “socialism.” Reform projects (including scaling back the unsuccessful collectivization of agriculture, decentralization of economic management, reduction of censorship) were supported by some of the PUPW leadership, and the secret speech *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences* achieved wide social impact.²³ Wróblewski had access to the speech as early as three days after its official summary at the 6th Plenum of the Central Committee of the PUPW, after which, as a duplicate print, twenty thousand copies were distributed at meetings of party organizations. On March 23, the artist notes in his calendar: “AFT[ernoon?] meet[ing] A[s]sociation of] P[olish] A[rtists and] D[esigners] read[ing] K[hrushchev].” The following day,

Wróblewski meets with Roman Zimand, then editor of the weekly *Po Prostu*, literary critic and journalist at *Trybuna Ludu*, the press outlet of the PUWP's Central Committee.

Nine days earlier, Bierut had died in Moscow. The mourning celebrations were accompanied by disbelief (after all, infallible party leaders were supposed to enjoy eternal health), widespread doubts about the causes of his sudden death (the official statement indicated illness) and its equally unclear circumstances (comparisons were made with the death of the Bulgarian leader Georgy Dimitrov in 1949 and Czechoslovakia's Klement Gottwald in 1953). People queued to pay respects at the president's coffin, on display at the Central Committee in Warsaw. They stood in a kilometer-long line, in the rain, snow, freezing temperatures—and it was the era of the longest queues in the PRL's history. The voices of writers and the intelligentsia stood in opposition to solemn official messages. Author Jan Józef Szczepański, at the time under special censorship supervision, commented: "Typical reaction of our society: some facetious smiles, but generally—absolute indifference. This was someone too alien even for hatred. ... Here one can see, more clearly than on any other occasion, that there was no connection. That this is not our business. The death of an official."²⁴ Andrzej K. Wróblewski commented: "The press came out at noon, elegantly dressed, with portraits and frames. We all agreed that the best that Bierut could have done in the current situation—that is, after the 20th Congress of the CPSU, after the official criticism of that period, and the party line he himself represented—was to die. And before he died, he managed to say at this congress, that we have never been as united with the Soviet Union, as we are now. ... Bierut was an anachronism."²⁵

Following Bierut's death, the totalitarian corset was loosened. At the end of March, the first press articles about soldiers and officers of the Polish underground army from the time of occupation began to appear in the press, and April saw an amnesty for almost six thousand prisoners convicted of "crimes against the PRL" and imprisoned for "prewar crimes." The death penalty was abolished; life imprisonment was shortened to twelve years. At the beginning of June 1956, approximately twenty-eight thousand political prisoners were freed.²⁶ Progressing liberalization was on course to reach a critical point, that is, the limit tolerated by the Kremlin, which Polish sovereignty and democracy was not allowed to exceed.

The outlet for social tensions and radicalizing moods were the June events, or "Poznań events"—as Wróblewski noted on June 28. There, the PRL's first general social revolt broke out. It was a wide-scale, dramatic, and anti-establishment riot suppressed with the use of firearms, tanks, and the army. Letters, petitions, and delegations sent by ZISPO workers to the Ministry of Machine Industry were unsuccessful, while their demands (abolishing higher taxes for better paid labor leaders and pieceworkers, improving poor organization and working conditions, curtailing the prominent lifestyles of management and party activists) were ignored or even ridiculed by the authorities. In the name of solidarity, workers from other Poznań factories and plants joined the strike, threatening a mass demonstration on the eve of the upcoming 25th Poznań International Fair hosting foreign exhibitors. The strike, which was also joined by Zakłady Naprawcze Taboru Kolejowego [Rail

²⁴ Michał Wenklar, *Śmierć i pogrzeb Bolesława Bieruta*, <https://dziennikpolski24.pl/smierc-i-pogrzeb-boleslawa-bieruta/ar/3369167> (accessed March 3, 2020).

²⁵ Wróblewski, *Dzienniki zabrane przez bezpiekę*, p. 15.

²⁶ Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski*, p. 315.

27 Ibid., p. 321.

28 A communication about the Poznań events, from the Polish Press Agency, June 29, 1956, in *Kronika miasta Poznania*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1957), p. 170. The announcement was posted, among others, on the front page of the daily newspaper *Echo Krakowa*, no. 115 (1957), p. 1.

29 Witold Damasiewicz (1919–96) was a graduate of Polish philology at the Jagiellonian University and the Faculty of Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. He was a member of the Self-Educational Team and took part in the state schools' inter-school displays for higher artistic education in Poznań (1949). The name of Jan Przelomiec appears in the Calendar on June 17, which may indicate Wróblewski met with the painter.

30 Jerzy Nowosielski (1923–2011) was admitted to the Faculty of Painting at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts for the 1945–46 semester. He studied for three semesters but did not receive his diploma until 1961. Jan Przelomiec (1920–2013) was a graduate of the Painting Department in the studio of Professor Zbigniew Pronaszko and Professor Czesław Rzepiński. Maria Erdmann-Przelomiec (1923–99) was a graduate of the Painting Department in the studio of Professor Zbigniew Pronaszko and Professor Zbigniew Radnicki. From 1950–54, she continued her studies in the Faculty of Art Conservation.

31 In the records of the parish book for 1957, Wróblewski is listed among the artists who worked on the church's polychromes. See the parish book, manuscript, p. 57. Here I would like to thank Pastor Jakub Rozum for providing the archival materials. Also, in the final entry in his 1956 Calendar, Wróblewski records Olszyny as one of the places where he painted that year.

32 Only Anna Król refers to Wróblewski's work in Olszyny. Cf. "Kalendarium życia i twórczości" in *Andrzej Wróblewski* (Warsaw: Zachęta Contemporary Art Gallery, National Museum in Kraków, Fundacja Instytut Promocji Sztuki, 1998), p. 188. In the study on the work of Jerzy Nowosielski in Małopolska, Krystyna Czerni does not mention the participation of Andrzej Wróblewski in the project in Olszyny. See Krystyna Czerni, *Nowosielski w Małopolsce. Sztuka sakralna* (Kraków: Małopolska Fundacja Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej, 2015), pp. 63–71.

Rolling Stock Repair Workshops] and Miejskie Przedsiębiorstwo Komunikacyjne [Municipal Transport Company], broke out on the morning of June 28, and moved from factories to the streets. Almost a hundred thousand workers passed through the city. A day later, in an evening radio speech, Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz addressed the nation with the infamous words: "any provocateur or lunatic who raises his hand against the people's government may be sure that this hand will be chopped off."²⁷ The Political Bureau's message named "imperialist agents and a reactionary underground" as the perpetrators who "managed to provoke street riots."²⁸ In propaganda caricatures (for example, by Jerzy Zaruba in *Szpilki*) American and West German authorities were shown as enemy agents and instigators of provocative and subversive actions. The official outcome of the bloodily suppressed Poznań riots was seventy-five killed, including a thirteen-year-old boy, and about eight hundred injured. When, in mid-August, Wróblewski returns to the subsequent versions of *Waiting Rooms* and *Queues*, and simultaneously paints *The Lovers*—a dark and mysterious study of love bordering two separate worlds—investigations regarding the Poznań events, subsequent waves of arrests, interrogations, and convictions, are ongoing. The tragedy of political events resonated with the authorities, exacerbating the split in the party leadership, and informed society of the indecision regarding the future direction of changes in Polish-Soviet relations, interweaved with the gloom of the inner world of Wróblewski's paintings. An alluring premonition of the world's end emerges from *The Lovers*. It is a vision of society at a terminal stage, one inhabited by characters lacking feeling, shattered and degenerating, in the final phase of physical and mental decay.

The Poznań events found Wróblewski working on polychromes and wall decorations at the parish church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Olszyny near Wojnicz. On June 26 and 27, Wróblewski notes in his Calendar: "spolvero on the walls of presbytery," then "alcove with Christ in a mandorla" (June 29–30) and "draw[ing] of the choir and porch (July 2–6). The next day, he returns to Kraków, but from Monday (July 9) he continues painting the choir (July 10), "des[ign] of the bench ornament" (July 16–17). On July 23, probably, he returns to Olszyny with the "draw[ing] of Polish s[aints], draw. doctors in the church, draw. of the ornament." The author of the extensive iconographic program of frescoes, which included scenes of the Annunciation, the Last Supper, the Creation of the World, and Christ-Pantokrator, was Witold Damasiewicz, one of the artist's closest friends, a former member of the Self-Educational Team, and co-author of the group's ideological program.²⁹ Regular collaborators also included other graduates of the Kraków Academy: Jerzy Nowosielski, Jan Przelomiec, and Maria Erdmann-[Przelomiec].³⁰ Although painting work began on August 22, 1955, and continued in the summer and early autumn of the following year, the artist's name appears only once in the parish books.³¹ With all probability, this holiday work was supposed to ease the dire financial situation of the Wróblewski family (at the time, the artist was the father of a two-year-old son and one-year-old twin baby girls), which perhaps explains only one mention of this work in the existing monographs about the artist. For Wróblewski's biographers, this episode is not so much overlooked, as simply unknown.³²

33 Witold Damasiewicz and Włodzimierz Kunz (1926–2002) also took part in the exhibition. Kunz was a graduate of Professor Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa’s studio at the Fine Art Academy in Kraków. From September 1953, he was an employee of the Lithography Department within the Graphic Arts Department of the Academy of Fine Arts, and from 1955 an assistant there. He took part in the 4th Polish National Art Exhibition [IV Ogólnopolska Wystawa Plastyki] (Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1954). The salon, which occupied one of the rooms of the State Jewish Theater at 13 Królewska Street in Warsaw, was run under the patronage of the student and young intelligentsia weekly publication, *Po Prostu*. The salon’s host Marek Oberländer emphasized, “The salon is intentionally characterized by a lack of orientation, a deliberate lack of one tendency. I exhibit everything that I think is interesting at a given time.” Quoted in Mariusz Hermansdorfer, ed., *Marek Oberländer: Malarstwo, grafika, rysunek* (Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe, 1980), p. 12. Wróblewski was present at the debut exhibition of the salon—a group show of artists from the Warsaw circles (June 23–July 26, 1956), featuring Marian Bogusz, Isaac Celnikier, Barbara Jonscher, and Zbigniew Dłubak. In addition, Wróblewski’s correspondence with Oberländer indicates close, friendly relations between the two. For a reconstruction of the exhibition, see Ziolkowska and Grzybała, *Avoiding Intermediary States*, pp. 442–63.

The short text by Ignacy Witz—published in the January issue of *Żołnierz Polski* as a commentary on the first exhibition at the “Po Prostu” Discussion Art Salon, September 2–27, 1956³³—may serve as the link between the several-weeks-long study of Christian iconography and Wróblewski’s work on subsequent portrayals of the chaired. Noting the similar Polish wording for “chairing” and “crucifixion” [“ukrzesłowienie” and “ukrzyżowanie”], Witz encourages a bold interpretation of *Waiting Room II, (Chairing I)*—one of several paintings presented at the exhibition,



(PROFILE)

undated; gouache, watercolor, paper;
37.3 × 24.7 cm
private collection



WAITING ROOM II, (CHAIRING I)

1956; oil, canvas; 155 x 125 cm
National Museum, Kraków

next to the canvases *Mother and Daughter*, *Laundry*, *Waiting Room I*, *The Queue Continues*, *Focused Portrait*, and several works on paper (including: *Champs Elysees*, *The Office*, *(Interior)*, *Landscape with Blue Wall*, *(Houses on a Slope)*, *Everything Bends Toward the Sun*, *Store Racks*). "This tired pregnant woman, waiting among apathy, boorishness and indifference, is not a particular woman," wrote Witz. "... Wróblewski painted her so generally that she became a universal phenomenon,

arousing compassion and anxiety."³⁴ I suggest reading this image of an expectant woman seated on a chair as a new character in the iconography of Wróblewski's "thaw period." Despite the torment of everyday life and inner desolation, this mother-to-be conveys the majesty and grandeur characteristic of Christian symbolic figures depicted upon a throne. What distinguishes this work from other images depicting queues and waiting rooms is the precise composition of the outline: situated exactly opposite the viewer and drawn with a thick line (the distinctly marked edge of the empty chair and the black and white contour of the skirt balancing it tonally, the light falling from the upper right corner sharpens the vast silhouette, fabric creases, and sharp facial features). This is Wróblewski's proposal for creating an iconography of waiting time, the time of subsequent demagogic demands, expressed in typical party newspeak ("strengthening ties with the masses," "eliminating errors and distortions"), expressed after the 7th Plenum (at the end of July), during which Władysław Gomułka, removed from power and imprisoned for "right-wing nationalist deviations" was restored to party ranks. With each week of autumn, the gap between the growing social demands and indolent authorities was increasing. The "Poznań events" became grounds for bolder demands for transparency in public life, participation in the management of production facilities ("more bread and more freedom"), and respect for workers' dignity. The latter more and more often identified Gomułka with guarantees of reforms and democratization, while his chance for a political return depended on several internal party dismissals and obtaining the position of First Secretary. During the negotiations, Gomułka's stake increased, but he was an acceptable candidate for both party factions. The weekly *Po Prostu*³⁵ played an important role in the changing political situation—it exposed the abuses of power, hypocrisy, and vassal relations with the USSR, the all-encompassing chaos, commented upon economic and industry matters (e.g., it vehemently criticized the collectivization of agriculture), culture (including columns and stories by Marek Hłasko),³⁶ artistic life, and above all, built a strong support front for protesting workers "against the prominent lifestyle of the party bureaucrats."³⁷ *Po Prostu* was the intelligentsia's voice advocating for anticipated change and democratization of the system. In this light, the exhibition at the "Po Prostu" Salon, where Wróblewski's works resonated as the most accurate for capturing—both literally and metaphorically—the social situation at the time, was a turning point for the artist's portfolio. The artist, whose *Mothers, Anti-Fascists* painting³⁸ went unnoticed at an exhibition at the Arsenal a year earlier, was omitted at the accompanying awards and distinctions ceremony, mentioned in just one or two reviews; the artist who submitted a poor painting³⁹ here gave a poignant testimony of the truth of years spent among "the harsh climate of our everyday affairs."⁴⁰ Wróblewski's large-format oil paintings were met with both criticism and recognition. In the *Visitors' Book*, Kajetan Sosnowski from Group 55 congratulated the artist, while the critic Szymon Bojko appreciated his studies in tempera (*Interior*), simultaneously rejecting all the canvases for their "raw, undigested paint." Two commentators drew attention to the coincidence of mood and iconography with the scenes of everyday life, while others saw this as a weakness ("Wróblewski's art relies purely on an interesting

34 Ignacy Witz, "Ukrzesłowienie," *Żołnierz Polski*, no. 1 (1957), p. 16.

35 A socio-political journal published between 1947 and 1957 in Warsaw, initially as a biweekly, and from 1949 as a weekly. Between 1948 and 1954, it was associated with the main board of the Polish Youth Academic Association, and from 1955 it appeared as a weekly publication for students and the young intelligentsia.

36 Marek Hłasko (1934–69) was a writer and screenwriter. From 1954 he was working with *Po Prostu* as a regular columnist and editor of the literature section, publishing stories showing the brutality of everyday life. Years later, in the literary autobiography, *Beautiful Twentysomethings [Piękni dwudziestoletni]* (1966), he would describe the march of the Red Army and NKVD troops and the "homo sovieticus" mentality, based on his own experience of the Soviet offensive and march on Berlin.

37 In Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski*, p. 325.

38 At the Arsenal exhibition, Wróblewski titled the painting *Mothers*. He added the second title on the eve of sending it to the exhibition, on June 3, 1955. See Calendar, 1955. Archive of the Artist's Heirs.

39 Elżbieta Grabska, "Sztuka była na pierwszym miejscu. Rozmawiał Waldemar Baraniewski," in *Powinność i bunt* (Warsaw: Academy of Fine Arts, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, 2004), p. 111.

40 Andrzej Osęka, "Wokół salonu 'Po Prostu,'" *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 289 (1956), p. 6.

anecdote”). “*Chaired Woman* perfectly captures the atmosphere of a several hours long wait, e.g., in the waiting room in the clinic,” wrote an author signing as J. Prószyński. Another anonymous writer added: “A clear protest against oppression. I’m wondering if any of those who criticized these paintings so harshly have ever waited in a queue—at the doctor’s, for a certificate, etc., and whether they ever got into a blind rage over the fact that they had to sit like this—and that nothing could be done about it?”⁴¹

III TRAGICALLY ENTANGLED

Perhaps the harshest review of the “Po Prostu” Salon came from Barbara Majewska, a young graduate of art history and debuting critic of *Przegląd Kulturalny*. Incidentally, just a few weeks later, Majewska traveled to Yugoslavia with Wróblewski. The artist makes reference to her in a diary entry from September 22: “Majewska’s re[view] P[rzegląd] K[ulturalny]”; the day before he writes: “Gomułka and other revivalists.” According to Majewska, while other artists—Wróblewski’s peers, Włodzimierz Kunz, and Witold Damasiewicz—“did not show works that would provide arguments for a negative assessment,” created worlds brimming with “suggestive mood, a wide range of emotions and knowledge about human affairs,” Wróblewski certainly did not. “The world [in his] paintings should ... rather be pieced together and read as individual elements, none of his works is convincing as a separate entity.”⁴² Majewska points to the “literary concept” of his paintings (especially *The Queue Continues*) “built around pessimistic reflections concerning life [which] burdens the formally shallow paintings, and becomes a pretentious and artistically unjustified addition,” “too strong an attachment to the actual appearance of objects, hindering the formation of distinctive forms, truly artistic forms—meaningful forms, which are the equivalent of painting. ... The same applies to color that appears on canvas—often unjustified, vague.” To sum up: according to Majewska, Wróblewski shows a lack of consistency in determining the overarching goal of a given painting and a lack of his own incorporation of selected means and forms, thus often achieving caricature and cliché. The next sentence in the review carries a different weight, as the author shares one of the most accurate, precise and penetrating diagnoses about Wróblewski’s painting, similar to his own view expressed in 1948: “The difference between a metal file and a painting is that a painting is more versatile in its use. It can convey a revolution through abstraction.”⁴³ Majewska writes: “The artist does not condone painting’s acquiescence in the face of social problems and makes them a source of conflict in his paintings.” And this is the very essence of Wróblewski’s art that leads us through his subsequent ideological projects—from the abstraction that organizes the new world order (*Exhibition of Modern Art*, 1948) through the programs of the Self-Educational Team (e.g. the concept of “social contrasts” and the anti-war program, 1949), searching for one’s own socially engaged realism in opposition to academic Socialist Realism, right up to the thaw period studies of the social condition, created in opposition to “[the] thoughtlessness of the thaw period,” as

⁴¹ All quotes from *Księga gości*, Archiwum Emigracji, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, Toruń. See Ziółkowska and Grzybała, *Avoiding Intermediary States*, p. 462.

⁴² All quotes from Barbara Majewska’s review, “Salon ‘Po Prostu’ we wrześniu,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, no. 50 (1956) p. 8.

⁴³ Andrzej Wróblewski, “Jak odczuć ludzkość sztuki abstrakcyjnej?” *Dziennik Literacki*, no. 22 (1948), p. 4.

FOCUSED PORTRAIT

1956; oil, canvas; 140 × 100 cm
work missing; archival reproduction
from 1958



Wróblewski put in a letter to Andrzej Wajda.⁴⁴ Let us focus on this letter, most probably written in 1956. It is the only evidence of the artist's comments on this particular sociopolitical moment. In it, Wróblewski focuses on the MULTIARTISTIC exhibition project, created by the MULTIARTISTIC GROUP of artists and the MULTIARTISTIC EXHIBITION COMMITTEE set up at the Council of Culture. This can be understood as the artist's proposal for another artistic reform within his work. The first in a series of planned exhibitions—as Wróblewski writes—“depicts the responsibility we should all take for those who died or grew complacent in the name of socialism. The exhibition will oppose the thoughtlessness of the ‘thaw’ period and the loss of all purpose in life bar food and entertainment.”⁴⁵ It is a strong statement directed not only against artists committed to Socialist Realism, but also those who naïvely followed the false promises of democratization

⁴⁴ Andrzej Wróblewski, undated letter to Andrzej Wajda in *Wróblewski według Wajdy*, ed. Anna Król (Kraków: Muzeum Sztuki i Techniki Japońskiej Manggha, 2015), p. 33.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and of the thaw period. It seems that Wróblewski is equally disappointed both with the thaw and Socialist Realism.

On October 20, Wróblewski receives a telegram from an employee of the Polish Department for International Cooperation with a request to mail two photographs. The night before, Soviet troops stationed in Pomerania and Lower Silesia begin their march to Warsaw, and are finally stopped by factory workers in Żerań. At a time when political castling was underway in the atmosphere of uneasy tension, the goal of which was Gomulka acquiring the highest office in the country, Wróblewski and Majewska are preparing for a three-week delegation to Yugoslavia as art critics and experienced reviewers (it is worth noting that in 1956, Wróblewski published one article in the press, and five in the previous year). It is hard to believe that on the day of receiving the telegram preparations for the trip were not already advanced, since on October 13 Wróblewski posts his ID card, probably in order to receive a passport. However, did the invitation come during the exhibition at the “Po Prostu” Salon or was it much earlier? Were Wróblewski’s participation, and his presence on the artistic stage of the capital, the direct reason for the invitation? There is no unequivocal answer to these questions. Wróblewski’s diary provides some scarce evidence: it includes information that on September 13, the artist goes to Warsaw for this purpose (“WARSAW in connection with Yugosla[via]”). Were Oberländer and the editors of the weekly *Po Prostu*, whose September issue included reproductions of works from the exhibition, responsible for the invitation? Perhaps Mieczysław Porębski supported Wróblewski as candidate for the trip—he was one of the co-organizers and commissioners of the *Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kraków. Living in Warsaw since the 1950s, then the editor of *Artistic Review* and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts, from September 10–14, Porębski represented Polish art critics (together with Juliusz Starzyński, director of the State Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw) at the 8th General Assembly of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), in Dubrovnik. As one of the reports on the activities of the Polish embassy in Belgrade indicates, Porębski and Starzyński established international contacts with critics, exhibition commissioners, and artists, during the AICA congress. Perhaps they had the decisive voice in identifying delegates for the cultural exchange to prepare for the traveling exhibition of Polish art planned for the following year.

Recently, there has been some interest amongst the local creative environment in Polish painting from the most recent period—we read in the report—proof of this was the Yugoslav proposition to display in Yugoslavia an exhibition of contemporary Polish painting. Since this did not happen this year, it would be right to consider the possibility of organizing it in 1957. In the autumn, exhibitions will resume in painting salons, and therefore the exchange of art critics provided for in the cultural exchange plans for this year will be beneficial.⁴⁶

In mid-October, both Wróblewski’s preparations for departure and the political turmoil were in full swing. The Party’s Political Bureau, or its governing body,

⁴⁶ “Cultural report for the third quarter of 1956,” in *Cultural Reports of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Poland in Belgrade in 1955*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs archive, group 21, folder 749, bundle 53, p. 6. Two exhibition catalogues were attached to the report: *60 tableaux de la peinture moderne Yougoslave* (Belgrade, 1953) and *Salon 56: suvremeno, slikarstvo, i kiparstvo*, Galerija likovnih umjetnosti (Rijeka, 1956).

approved the plan of changes and dismantling of existing structures (October 13). The latter was to be discussed at the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee planned to take place six days later. The party faction of pro-Soviet conservatives, in the face of diminishing influence, a weakening position, and upcoming radical changes among those in power, alerted the Kremlin, and its leaders called the entire Politburo to Moscow. Gomułka did not go to Moscow. When the Soviet army, supported by Polish troops, moved toward the capital, the agitation reached the army. On the eve of the decision-making plenum, workers were given weapons, and strategic streets and buildings were patrolled and protected. On October 19, at dawn, the Soviet delegation headed by Khrushchev and the generals landed in Warsaw. While the Polish-Soviet negotiations were underway at Belweder, over five thousand supporters rallied for Gomułka at the Warsaw Polytechnic, with the participation of workers from the capital, Nowa Huta, and Kraków's universities. The next morning, the official announcement heralded the end of talks and the suspension of the Soviet army movements, while in the evening a second rally was held at the Polytechnic, with radical speeches by Eligiusz Lasota, then editor-in-chief of *Po Prostu*, and Lechosław Goździk, secretary of the FSO, on democracy and sovereignty. Gomułka was seen as a great hope for the reconstruction of the depreciated values of socialism, and each of the social groups held different beliefs: "The intelligentsia believed that the new party leadership would retain freedom of expression; agricultural workers—that it would guarantee private ownership of the land; laborers—that it would give them the right to organize in workers councils and provide better living conditions, and the party apparatus—that it would maintain its "leadership" role."⁴⁷ Three days after taking the office of First Secretary, at Plac Defilad in Warsaw (October 21), Gomułka addressed a crowd of 400,000 waiting for liberalization and civil liberties. However, he did not declare that the Soviet army would leave Poland. The army remained, and the previous day, the first Soviet intervention took place in Hungary.

Wróblewski himself talks about his role during the visit to Yugoslavia. As soon as he lands in Belgrade he says: "What can we say about ourselves? The fight against Socialist Realism started a long time ago. The resistance was particularly noticeable around 1950. External pressures, I mean especially the worst of them, which came from the Soviet Union, in fact, could never find followers in our artistic practice. Last year was a milestone in the life of Polish visual arts. The Exhibition in the Arsenal showed real paintings and gathered real painters ..."⁴⁸ Does erasing one's own Socialist-Realist past equal self-censorship? After all, it was Wróblewski's Socialist Realist canvases from 1951–54 that brought him the largest number of scholarships, awards, commissions, and purchases on behalf of the Ministry. *At the Meeting, Youth Rally in West Berlin, Search - Arrest, Union of Polish Youth Takes Command of the Air Force*, biting political caricatures attacking bureaucrats, the capitalist world's war plans or Home Army soldiers—these are just some examples of the stigma on Wróblewski's artistic biography, the fact that he "was up to his ears in it," as Anna Markowska writes.⁴⁹ Or perhaps Wróblewski, as an envoy of the Polish thaw, should not be reminded of his own bankrupt experience of Socialist Realism, the submitted and rejected application to join the

⁴⁷ Albert, *Najnowsza historia Polski*, p. 342.

⁴⁸ "A Moment with ... Andrzej Wróblewski and Barbara Majewska," *NIN*, no. 305 (1956), p. 6.

⁴⁹ Anna Markowska, *Definiowanie sztuki - objawienie świata. O pojmowaniu sztuki w PRL-u* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), p. 103.

Party, especially when the trip takes place after Gomulka officially took power? Does Wróblewski consider himself to be one of those “real painters”?⁵⁰ According to his letter to Wajda, yes. Some years later Janusz Bogucki will write: “as always, persistently, Wróblewski creates paintings in which shapes and colors are devoid of an autonomous existence in the prescribed world of art. They are above all signs that determine the fate of man, and especially his social and moral condition.”⁵¹ Wroblewski clings to this socio-moral relationship of art from start to finish.

“Everything that passed will play out anew”—the title of this essay is borrowed from the poet Rafał Wojaczek’s letter to Stefania Cisek—however, it will play out “often, in different scenery, multiplied, sometimes much more intensely.”⁵² Wojaczek died as young as Wróblewski and was equally absorbed with irony, agony, and aversion toward the world’s hypocrisy. Quite often, chairings and queues play out around us. Everyday we pass by those who silently wait without noticing their resemblance to images that we already know, because perhaps we assume that here and now they mean something else entirely. In fact it is the exact opposite, because the social spectacle is playing out anew.

50 The artist takes with him copies of his own works on paper (including the gouache *Woman and Birds, (Birds)* whose reproduction accompanies the conversation with the Polish guests in the Serbian journal), and perhaps a selection of other works.

51 Janusz Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1983), p. 132.

52 Rafał Wojaczek, *Listy miłosne i nie*, ed. Stanisław Beres (Wrocław: Warstwy, 2019), p. 33.

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MR PRESIDENT

1955; watercolor, paper; 29.5 × 41.6 cm
private collection