

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak

Institute of National Remembrance, Warsaw Ghetto Museum

ORCID 0000-0001-8805-0616

PAINTER, GRAPHIC ARTIST AND WOOD ENGRAVER
(UN)FORGOTTEN. *JAKOB STEINHARDT (1887–1968)*.
*ŻYCIE I DZIAŁALNOŚĆ*¹ BY DOMINIK FLISIAK

Every year in Polish historiography appear studies devoted to the Jewish people living in Poland across the ages. There are also monographs that are generally dedicated to research on particular questions and biographies of noted individuals as well as the history of specific institutions or organisations, not to mention publications that popularise various themes and processes. The range of research with respect to the Jewish population in Poland is broad. Therefore, studies are devoted to aspects of daily life, politics, society, economics, religion, the arts and literature. Researchers increasingly reach out to fields of study hitherto unexplored, taking the opportunity of increasingly easy access to archives and libraries as well as the fact that many such studies and sources have been published online. Indubitably, one such research question that has been waiting for comprehensive study is the biography of Jakob Steinhardt, painter, graphic artist and wood engraver. To date, only brief studies in Polish² and other languages have appea-

¹ *Jakob Steinhardt (1887–1968). Życie i działalność* (Jakob Steinhardt [1887–1968]. Life And Work) (Chrzan: Wydawnictwo Stara Szuflada, 2022), 139 pp.

² See A. Kostołowski, *Jakob Steinhardt (1887–1968). Malarz i grafik z Żerkowa* (Żerków, 2017); T. Knasiecka-Sztyma, “Przyczynek do problematyki mecenatu kulturalnego poznańskich Żydów. Życie i twórczość Jakoba Steinhardta (1887–1968),” *Kronika Miasta Poznania* 3 (2006), pp. 250–260; K. Szerle, *Jakob Steinhardt. Wielki artysta z Żerkowa* (Żerków, 2017); I. Wawroska, “Jakob Steinhardt – Żyd

red.³ In this respect, it is good that this subject has again provoked interest, one result being the publication under review enriched by the reproduction of the artist's select works, allowing readers to become familiar with at least some of his oeuvre.

The author of the publication under review is Dominik Flisiak, a historian and alumnus of the Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce. He is best known for the complex question of revisionist Zionists and their history. He has a large number of research publications to his name, among others *Działalność syjonistów rewizjonistów w Polsce w latach 1944/1945–1950* (Activity of Revisionist Zionists in Poland 1944–1950), as well as *Wybrane materiały ideologiczne i propagandowe Syjonistyczno-Socjalistycznej Partii Robotniczej Poalej Syjon-Hitachdut* (Select Ideological and Propaganda Materials of the Jewish Zionist-Socialist Labor Party Poalej Syjon-Hitachdut). However, this particular study under review is on a somewhat different subject than his previous studies.

The book in question comprises five chapters with an introduction and appendixes, including reproductions of Jakob Steinhardt's artworks. The latter clearly suggests inspirations from traditional Jewish religious life and customs of the shtetl. These reproductions also contain references to Jewish holidays, particular motifs from the Old Testament as well as current events such as pogroms. The work by Dominik Flisiak also includes a list of abbreviations, a bibliography, an index of persons mentioned and geographical, administrative and ethnic names. Of particular note are the supplementary materials in the appendixes, where the author cites large fragments of articles on Steinhardt.

From the introduction, the reader will not learn much about the particular aims that Dominik Flisiak has set himself or, indeed, to what extent he succeeded in finding sources and studies allowing for a comprehensive unveiling of his protagonist's life work: "This publication is devoted to the memory of Jakob (Jacob) Steinhardt, a Jewish artist born in 1887 at Żerków."⁴

z Żerkowa i jego metryka," in *Ochrona dziedzictwa kulturowego, intertemporalność, archiwum pamięci*, ed. by S. Kowalska (Poznań–Kalisz, 2018), pp. 28–60.

³ *Jakob's Dream: Steinhardt in Prints, Drawings and Paintings*, ed. by R. Sorek, transl. by S. Schneiderman (Jerusalem, 2010); *Jakob Steinhardt. Der Prophet. Ausstellungs- und Bestandskatalog* (Berlin, 1995).

⁴ Flisiak, *Jakob Steinhardt*, p. 7.

It is, therefore, difficult based on the introduction, to say to what extent the subject and biographical themes were thoroughly researched or whether perhaps the author was unable to find a particular aspect of his legacy or relevant documents that could have made his life work more complete as well as information on the creative work of Steinhardt and its reception. It should be noted, however, that the study was written in a logical format, organised and reader-friendly – well-written so that the reader can readily engage in the subsequent unveiling of the artist's biography.

Chapter one, “Społeczność żydowska na ziemiach polskich ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Wielkopolski. Zarys tematyki” (The Jews in Poland, in particular with respect to Wielkopolska. An outline), outlines the historical background of the presence of Jews in Poland across the ages. This is by no means unusual, for many scholars, in this particular way, set the scope of their work's main subject. The chapter has only a dozen or so pages and contains many bibliographical references and explanations relating to various historical moments. In the opinion of this author, without in any way weakening the study, it would have been possible to omit the well-known episodes on the beginnings of Jewish presence in Poland in the Middle Ages and instead, in greater detail, show their history in Wielkopolska itself. It could thus be said that this chapter only in part refers to the specific nature of Jewish settlement in this region. In this respect, Flisiak did not bring to the fore aspects of their life in the community, such as the issues of assimilation or attitude to religion, or indeed the nature of how they functioned in Wielkopolska in the context of other Polish regions where Jewish communities lived. It will be argued that shedding light, as it were, on the region where the protagonist of the study was born and grew up can, as a consequence, lead to a more complete understanding of both his biography and his later creative work. Moreover, one should note the literature that the author resorted to in this part of his study. Among these are specialist studies, for example, those edited by Jerzy Topolski and Krzysztof Modelski, those of Ezra Mendelsohn, Ignacy Schiper, Ari Tartakower or Heinrich Graetz (though some now are of value more as a source *per se*, than a factographic work). There are also studies clearly showing sensibilities of that particular epoch, such as those by Marek Arczyński and Wiesław Balcerak relating to “Żegota”, or the comprehensive academic course

books relating to the history of Poland by Stanisław Szczur, Mariusz Markiewicz and Andrzej Chwalba.

In fact, Flisiak does not refer to many important issues for this general subject. For example, only three sentences are devoted to the Second World War. Therefore for the reader to understand the period well in which Steinhardt lived as an artist, more space should have been given to an analysis of the respective transformations at the turn of the twentieth century taking place among Jewish communities, the events of the 1905 revolution as well as the First World War, the interbellum, the Second World War, and the early post-war years thereafter. The remaining information is only a chronological introduction to the life of this artist – that is the period 1887–1968. The right decision it could be said, to shed light on the context of the so-called Little Homeland, Wielkopolska, was only in part completed in this study.

Further, in the Introduction, there was not even basic information given on the location of Żerków, where Steinhardt was born, which after all not every reader is necessarily familiar with. The second chapter, “Dzieje Żerków i jego żydowskiej społeczności. Zarys tematyki” (History of Żerków and its Jewish community) contains a succinct outline of the history of this town as well as the situation of the Jewish community living there. One learns the geopolitical meaning of Żerków and the most important events relating to it. Notwithstanding, in this aspect also, there remains a sense of incompleteness. In a somewhat telegraphic shorthand, the author presents information from the first mention of the presence of Jews in this town in the Middle Ages to the events of the beginning of the twentieth century. Here, therefore, the study takes on a signalling, as it were character, chronologically organising the background to the biography of Steinhardt. Perhaps this is a result of the available literature, but there was no explanation given. Flisiak does not present the social context or the community that Steinhardt grew up in – though after all it surely influenced his later creative output. Further, in many places of the study under review it should be noted, one reads Steinhardt many a time resorted to scenes observed on the streets of his home town and brought them to life in his works throughout the various periods of his creative output.

In this chapter as well as in other parts of his work, Dominik Flisiak uses the expression “Jews” and that of “followers of Judaism” alternatively. These, however, are not equivalents.

The former relates to nationality, origin – whereas the latter to religious affiliation, which doesn’t have to be the same. Not every person of Jewish nationality therefore is a follower of Judaism. On this account therefore, a certain chaos it could be said permeates into this work in respect to information and the account of facts. Moreover, it is relevant in this place to make a general note that this study provides little on the self-identification and sense of identity of the artist in question. Further, again it is not clear whether this is on account of the paucity of sources or indeed, the author’s conscious decision not to pursue these issues.

The statistics presented in this chapter showing the growth of the Jewish population in Żerków can be said to be interesting. The reader, nonetheless, would benefit from information regarding the general population of this town. The statistics are given selectively, for example, in 1908 one learns that at that time there were 121 Jews for 1631 residents of Żerków – that is Jews constituted almost 7.5% of the town’s population. Of particular note is the rather dramatic rate of departure of Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century. Here the author emphasises that in that period “the Jewish community in Żerków fell by 80–90%.”⁵ This does not explain, however, what the causes were. Further, the reader learns that in this particular regard the town was no exception, similar phenomena could be found in Opalenica, Grodzisko or Książ – though there is no explanation for the causes of this mechanism. This would no doubt be a point of interest in the context of Steinhardt’s biography and the fact that he only left Żerków after the First World War in 1920. A broader outline of the town’s Jewish community at a time when Steinhardt lived there would, therefore, allow for a better understanding of both relevant family matters and his artistic oeuvre.

The main part of the artist’s biography is presented by the last three chapters of the study, which are divided into two stages of his creative life. This is decidedly the most interesting part of the publication under review. In chapter three, “Jakob

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Steinhardt. *Życie i działalność w latach 1887–1920*” (Jakob Steinhardt, Life and Work in 1887–1920), his private life and work just after the Great War is outlined, when in the end he left Żerków for Germany. Here, Flisiak gives information on the artist’s family as well as the change of surname from Schmul to Steinhardt. Further in the chapter it is possible to learn a great deal about his material situation, particular members of his family, death of his father and his mother’s attempts to provide her children a decent life, as well as – importantly – the stages of Jacob’s education, among others in Berlin and Paris. The author also mentions the factors responsible for shaping the later artistic skills of Steinhardt and his establishing ties during this period with other artists.

In this context, Flisiak notes the motifs occurring in the artist’s earlier work: “Being a witness to anti-Semitic moods in Europe, Jakob in 1913 created several etchings by the same title, *Pogrom*, where he presented Jews as victims of anti-Semitic incidents. In the same year, he made a wood engraving, *Zniszczenie* (Destruction), where he presented a small town consumed by fire.”⁶ It should be noted that the author apart from references to anti-Jewish events that took place throughout Central and Eastern Europe, notes in the work of the artist inspirations from other conflicts such as those in the Balkans. In this chapter, there is relatively little space devoted to information on biographical experiences from the First World War and the wave of pogroms against Jews taking place during this time and just after its end. Perhaps again this is a matter of sources and their accessibility. The departure of Jakob Steinhardt to Berlin closes this chapter and one learns that the artist’s immediate family also left the Second Polish Republic, settling, among others, in Germany and Palestine.

In chapter four, “Jakob Steinhardt. *Życie i działalność w latach 1920–1968*” (Jakob Steinhardt. Life and work in 1920–1968), Flisiak outlines the work of the artist in Berlin and his family life, notably his marriage to Minni Gumpert. It is there in Germany that his only daughter was born. The author then goes on to enumerate the remaining works by the artist and his exhibitions. The coming of the Nazis to power, attacks on Jews, political opponents including communists, and fear about his and his family’s future all meant that already in 1933, Steinhardt, together with

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

his wife and daughter, emigrated to Palestine – the most immediate factors that were responsible for this that are worth noting are the searching of his home and threatening phone calls. Flisiak then goes on to say, “In his new homeland, Jakob concentrated on painting and wood engraving, at the same time resigning from other graphic techniques.”⁷ Here, a question mark can be raised as to the relatively short fragment devoted to the murder during the Holocaust of Steinhardt’s family members in Europe. Nor does Flisiak account for how events between 1939 and 1945 influenced the life and work of the artist, only that Steinhardt experienced difficulties in his newfound homeland and professional work. Further, the author also points out Steinhardt’s employment in the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem and Steinhardt receiving an award in recognition of his creative work.

In this part, similar to the previous, there are references to the subject of his work. Many a time during this period Steinhardt reached for biblical motifs, among others the figure of Jobe as well as scenes of traditional life among religious Jews that were well-known to him. After the tragic experiences of Jews during the Holocaust these took on an additional meaning – they reveal a world that was consumed by total destruction. Here, Flisiak focused on a chronological account of the artist’s life and work up to Steinhardt’s passing in 1968 in Nahariji, where he was laid to rest.

Chapter five, “Upamiętnienie Jakob Steinhardt. Zakończenie” (Commemorating Jakob Steinhardt. Conclusion) closes the study by Flisiak, where various initiatives undertaken to commemorate the artist are outlined. It is in this context that the author places his study: “After his [Steinhardt] death in 1968, in several countries such as Israel, Germany and Poland measures were taken to honour the memory of this artistic figure. I have the hope that this book also can contribute to a broader understanding of Steinhardt’s life work.”⁸

Dominik Flisiak’s study of Steinhardt is an uneven work. On the one hand, there are important and detailed fragments of particular interest regarding the biography of this painter – graphic artist and wood engraver – mixed in with thematic outlines regarding the fate of Jewish communities in Poland and explanations of particular lexis that is in general known (Pesach and masonry). On the other,

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

the text itself and footnotes, though as a matter of rule well written, are not free from stylistic and linguistic errors. Moreover, the depth of analysis and degree of discussion in particular issues leaves much to be desired – as noted above – not to mention a frequent reluctance to attempt a more comprehensive examination of Steinhardt's oeuvre. In addition, there is a lack of a clear explanation as to what sources the author used and which ones he was unable to. All of the above factors mean that the reader may well have the impression that the work by Flisiak under review is in fact a good contribution to the biography of Jakob Steinhardt, though still not one that reveals a complete picture of his life and artistic work. This in no way changes the fact that this is a study constructed in an interesting way and one that can be seen to have many positive aspects, finding readers for whom it shall be a motivation for further research. The intriguing artistic work of Jakob Steinhardt, apparently forgotten, has received another study that has gained a wider collective of readers. There is no doubt, therefore, that this artist and his works deserve further exploration.