

Zdzisław Pietrzyk

Zofia Ameisen (1897–1967)

Zofia Ameisen was born on the 31st of May 1897 in Nowy Sącz. Her father Maurycy was a well-respected doctor. Ameisen's mother, Jadwiga (Jachet), came from the Schödmak (Siodmak) family. Zofia developed her love of books from home. Her father had a large and valuable library, from which she was to draw from her earliest years the habit for intellectual work. At home she had the opportunity to meet her father's guests, these being politicians and literary figures, amongst others Ignacy Daszyński and Stefan Żeromski. Zofia's father was one of the founders of the Folk University in Nowy Sącz. Zofia Ameisen showed much promise at primary school. In the years 1903 to 1907 she attended the Queen Jadwiga 4-class folk school in Nowy Sącz. After finishing this school she continued her education from 1907 to 1914 at the Private Girls Secondary School in Nowy Sącz. Up until the last class of secondary school she attended the Emilia Plater Secondary School in Cracow. She obtained her School Leaving Certificate on the 15th of July 1915 with a mark of distinction. In the self same year she commenced her degree at the Jagiellonian University. The greatest influence on her at the Faculty of Philosophy, where she studied art history and archaeology, was exerted by Jerzy Mycielski, the art historian, and the archaeologist Piotr Bienkowski.

On the 7th of April 1920 she applied to be accepted on the doctoral study programme on the basis of the doctoral thesis *Medieval Murals in the Clois-*

ters of the Augustinian Brothers and the Franciscans in Cracow, which she wrote under the supervision of J. Mycielski. She passed the examination in art history, as well as in archaeology as a supplementary subject, with distinction in front of an examination commission headed by Prof. Tadeusz Sinko. It was to be similar with her examination in philosophy. Professor Julian Pagaczewski in his review of the doctoral work wrote: 'The work's construction, one clearly written, concise with clear literary talent and a knowledge of research methods, is beyond criticism.' After the Ph.D. defence she officially completed her studies at the Faculty of Philosophy on 17th of February 1920, when she was invested with the title of doctor of philosophy.

In 1920 she started to work at the Jagiellonian University Library. Initially she worked for free as a trainee under the direction of the curator of the Graphic Collections, the assistant professor Jerzy Kieszkowski, who was appointed vice-director of the Jagiellonian Library in 1922. In 1921, Z. Ameisen obtained a paid position as auxiliary help, while in 1922 she attained the post of assistant. After a year of working at the Jagiellonian Library she went on an academic scholarship to the Graphische Sammlung in Dresden. Her specialist internship in Dresden was supplemented by her visits to collections held in Leipzig, Berlin, Nuremberg and Munich. In the years prior to World War II she travelled extensively in Austria, France and Germany, to become, from among other reasons, acquainted with works of art in the original. In 1923 J. Kieszkowski died, who had been her guide around the graphic collections of the Jagiellonian Library, and so it was to be Z. Ameisen who became the person in charge of the graphic collections.

On the 1st of August 1923 Zofia married her distant cousin, Aleksander Ameisen, a dermatologist. He was an expert on literature, as well as being one of the foremost chess players in Cracow during the inter-war period. The young Ameisen couple lived in Cracow on Karmelicka Street.

In 1923 her doctoral dissertation with a somewhat modified title: *Medieval Murals in Cracow* appeared in print in the journal *Rocznik Krakowski*. In 1924 Z. Ameisen left for three months to Italy, where she deepened her knowledge of Italian art, and first and foremost the decorative art of books

To the basic tasks expected of Z. Ameisen as an employee looking after the graphic collections of the Jagiellonian Library were the ordering and cataloguing of relatively neglected deposits. It is here worth noting that the graphic collections had started to be separated from the entirety of the Library's resources in 1918 on the initiative of J. Kieszkowski. Z. Ameisen aimed at increasing the collections. Her efforts were thwarted by the meagreness of the funding which the University earmarked for the purchase of specialist collections; collections which were even assembled in the Jagiellonian Library as display items or deposits. For that very reason it was not possible to

purchase the Moszyński collection, running to tens of thousands of items yet which had landed within the walls of the Jagiellonian Library thanks to the efforts of Ameisen. This collection was, however, impossible to buy and was to finally end up in the Library of the Polish Academy of Learning in Cracow. One of the ways employed by Ameisen to obtain graphics for the collections of the Jagiellonian Library were appeals to creators to deposit their works at the Cracow library. This appeal was met by, among others, Władysław Skoczylas, who gave to the Jagiellonian Library a part of his own works and those of his pupils at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The obtainment of donations from well-known artists was one of the basic ways in which special collections were obtained for the Jagiellonian Library collections.

During her work at the Jagiellonian Library Z. Ameisen popularised knowledge about art, through the preparation of exhibitions. In 1931 she wrote the introduction to the *Catalogue of an exhibition of old prints from the collections of the Polish Academy of Learning* (Cracow 1931). In 1934 she prepared an exhibition of illuminated Italian manuscripts. This illustrated the wealth of Italian illuminative art and its deposits at the Jagiellonian Library. The exhibition had a catalogue prepared, the introduction to which was naturally written by Z. Ameisen. The idea for organising this exhibition had come from Z. Ameisen's earlier interests in Italian miniature painting. From 1929 to 1931 she published articles on this very subject: *The Italian Miniatures of the Jagiellonian Library. Trecento* (1929), *The antiphonary with miniatures by Jacop di Casentino at Wawel* (1931). In 1935 an exhibition of 150 illustrated prints from the 15th century took place at the Jagiellonian Library. This was a subsequent exhibition requiring an excellent knowledge of the Jagiellonian Library's incunabulum. The works associated with it were to bear fruit years later in the work *Manuscripts and illustrated first prints of the Jagiellonian Library* (1958), which is widely used to this day in research into the collections of the university library in Cracow. This exhibition, in a way similar to the workings of earlier exhibitions, had a catalogue drawn up by Z. Ameisen – *The exhibition catalogue of one hundred and fifty illustrated prints of the 15th century* (Cracow 1935) – to which she wrote a foreword: *An outline of the history of illustrated wood engraving in the 15th century*.

In working on a study of the graphic collections of the Jagiellonian Library she came upon and identified wood engravings previously unknown to science. She was to write several articles on the subject, which showed the wealth of deposits held at the Jagiellonian Library. Academically she also worked on the collections of other libraries, not merely those based in Cracow. During her visits to the National Library in Warsaw she produced an extensive article on the subject of the so-called *Puławy Book*, a richly illustrated work which contains the entries of those visiting the Temple of Sybilla

in Puławy. There are also to be found in this book miniatures cut from manuscripts. Z. Ameisen was able to identify the manuscripts from which the miniatures had been taken. She also identified three miniatures from two 15th-century manuscripts and from one pontifical 14th-century manuscript produced in France.

One of the greatest research achievements within the history of art during the pre-war period was the publishing of Z. Ameisen's dissertation in *Münchener Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst* in 1935, entitled *Eine süddeutsche frühgotische Prachtbibel auf Schloss Sucha*. Here she proved that the richly illustrated manuscript of the Bible held at the castle in Sucha was not of French origin but had come from the monastery of the St. Nicholas canon regulars in nearby Passawa. Her argumentation was, according to Lech Kalinowski, 'a study so classic in its construction and content that it should serve as a model in description, iconographic analysis, stylistic analysis, dating and defining the artistic milieu from which this type of decoration derives for every young academic within the field of book painting.'

Before the outbreak of World War II Z. Ameisen had involved herself in the question of the Jewish iconography of the Old Testament. On the basis of an analysis of the Hebrew Bible held by the Jewish community in Cracow and compiled in Regensburg in the 14th century, she confirmed the thesis that during the period of the early Middle Ages there existed a Jewish iconography of the Old Testament (*The 14th-century Hebrew Bible in Cracow and its artistic decoration*, 1929). She was also involved in an iconographic study of the Hebrew Bible held at the Ambrosiana Library in Milan, which in conjunction with the discoveries of other researchers allowed her to prove the thesis as to the early medieval iconic canon of Jewish biblical hermeneutics (*Das messianische Gastmahl der Gerechten in einer hebräischen Bibel aus dem 13. Jahrhundert*, 1935). The third work connected with the subject of Hebrew iconography was the dissertation, printed in 1936 at the Menor publishing house in Warsaw – *Bestiarius in the Hebrew Bible of the 13th Century. An iconographic study with 6 reproductions*. In this dissertation she worked on the iconographic content of the Hebrew Bible kept at the Pawlikowski Library in Lvov. Before the Second World War there appeared in the *Journal of the Warburg Institute* an article by Z. Ameisen summing up her research into Hebrew iconography, and containing also a particular mention of the motif of the tree within this iconography. This article – *The tree of life in Jewish iconography* (1939) – she wrote in the spirit of the school propagated by Aby Warburg, in which research into the history of art has to be connected with the history of ideas, of culture and the history of religion.

Zofia Ameisen was one of the leading researchers into medieval history, but as a result of her involvement with the graphic collections at the Jagiel-

lonian Library she was also extremely well versed in contemporary graphic art. In 1939 she prepared an exhibition of graphic works as well as the accompanying catalogue *A catalogue of the exhibition of contemporary Polish graphic art*, for which she wrote the introduction: *A glance at contemporary Polish graphic art*. World War II was to interrupt the preparations. The exhibition was to be staged only in 1946.

Following the German invasion of Poland on the 1st of September 1939 she left Cracow together with her husband. Before leaving she participated in work to safeguard the most valuable of the collections. She departed Cracow on the clear instructions of the University rector, Tadeusz Lehr-Spławiński. The first stage of the escape from the Germans was Lvov, from where she travelled on to Lutsk, staying there together with her husband from 28th of September 1939 to 4th of April 1940. From Lutsk the couple made it to Kosów Huculski (Kosiv) on the border with Romania. In Kosów Aleksander Ameisen was employed as a doctor at the venereological hospital. This was an institution for the treatment of refugees situated within the local hospital. Aleksander Ameisen was both an experienced practicing doctor as well as someone who had given scientific papers on venereology. After the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, the Ameisens found themselves under German occupation and were forced to live in a ghetto. On the 16th of October, Z. Ameisen was taken to prison. The Germans eradicated the ghetto in Kosów, murdering the Jews both there and in the prison. Following two acts of pure criminality on the part of the Germans, those carried out on the 9th of April and 7th of September 1942, of the 2,700 Jews residing in Kosów there remained only the Ameisens and a dental surgeon – as individuals deemed of need for the local population. In October 1942 the Ameisens decided to escape to Romania. They crossed the border on foot and found themselves in Bukovina. From the end of October 1942 to 24th of March 1944 they lived in Czernowitz. From Czernowitz Z. Ameisen was to conduct correspondence with acquaintances and academics in Poland, including with Aleksander Birkenmajer. Following another threat of arrest they decided to travel to Bucharest. They found shelter in a nunnery. During their stay in Romania they used a passport issued by the Swiss embassy. They remained hidden in the nunnery until the end of the war. On the 3rd of October 1945 they left for Poland.

On the 24th of October the Ameisens returned to Cracow after over six years of wandering. Without any delay whatsoever Z. Ameisen took up work on her beloved graphic collections at the Jagiellonian University Library, which had already been moved from Collegium Maius to the then new library building on Adam Mickiewicz Avenue. She took up the position of assistant as she had before the war. She was to advance to the position of curator only on the 1st of January 1951. In 1945, the possibility of moving to Palestine

was proposed to the Ameisens. In 1947 Prof. Stanisław Kot, the then Polish ambassador in Rome, tried to get a post for Z. Ameisen in UNESCO. She, however, despite complaining in a letter to A. Birkenmajer about the bad atmosphere at the Library, had no intention of leaving 'her' collections. In 1947 she went on a scholarship to London. This was funded by an organisation aiding academics who had suffered during the war (The Occupied Countries Fund Committee), and which functioned within the British Federation of University Women.

Z. Ameisen conducted research at the British Museum and at the Warburg Institute. After her return to Cracow at the beginning of 1949 she worked intensively on procuring the collections and their ordering. After 1948 the obtaining of specialist literature was especially difficult as a result of the politically disturbed relations between Poland and Western Europe. Z. Ameisen with immense competence and dedication strove for the subject literature necessary for research into works of art. She obtained books both through purchases as well as exchanges and gifts from friends abroad. In working on the Jagiellonian University Library collections during the post-war period she published several works which are at present fundamental sources of information on the graphic art collections of the university library. From the pre-war period of her activities right up until the 1960s she involved herself with the Baltazar Behem codex and devoted several studies to the miniatures found in this priceless manuscript of Polish culture. She completed her involvement on this with a general work drawing together all hitherto knowledge on the matter – *Kodeks Baltazara Behema* [The Baltazar Behem Codex] (1961). In recognition of her outstanding academic achievements, despite not formally having taught any students herself, Z. Ameisen was awarded on the 5th of April 1955 the title of full professor. The most important of Z. Ameisen's works – the one most frequently quoted and which constitutes the basic source of information on the illuminated incunabulum and manuscripts of the Jagiellonian University Library is *Rękopisy i pierwodruki iluminowane Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej* [Illuminated manuscripts and first editions of the Jagiellonian Library]. Karol Estreicher junior, an extremely severe critic of works of art history, called it a great work, '[...] in-depth, exhaustive, full of knowledge.'

Z. Ameisen was greatly involved in the life and work of the Jagiellonian University Library. It can be seen from her letters to A. Birkenmajer how emotionally she involved herself in procuring the manuscript of Nicholas Copernicus' work *De revolutionibus* for the Jagiellonian Library. On 25th of September 1956, when this priceless piece of human thought was given to the Jagiellonian Library, she sent a telegram to Rome, where A. Birkenmajer was enjoying himself, saying simply: 'We have Copernicus' manuscript.' It was then that matters were to lead to a fierce conflict between herself and

the director of the Jagiellonian University's Museum, K. Estreicher junior, when it was established where Copernicus' manuscript was to be housed and the question of the taking over of the globes by the university's museum which had hitherto been under the care of Z. Ameisen in the graphic art collections of the Jagiellonian University Library.

In 1953 Aleksander Ameisen became paralysed. Zofia looked after her seriously ill husband on her own. This care, lasting eight years, was to take an increasing toll on her, as she herself had started to suffer from coronary heart disease. Aleksander Ameisen died on the 25th of December 1961.

During the final years before she retired Z. Ameisen worked most intensively. From the very beginning of her academic work at the Jagiellonian Library she had been a so-called study academic. She had never wanted to be an academic teacher, preferring to be exclusively a researcher. Although she never conducted any form of academic teaching, she shaped many MA theses and Ph.D.s in art history herself. She willingly helped in providing bibliographic and source pointers and she was readily sought out by Ph.D. students for her advice on methodological matters.

Z. Ameisen's last book was the study *Cztery polskie rękopisy iluminowane z lat 1524–1528 w zbiorach obcych* [Four illuminated Polish manuscripts of 1524–1528 held in foreign collections] (1967). Here she described four prayer books: of Zygmunt I, Krzysztof Szydłowiecki, Queen Bona and Witold Gąszołta, held in London, Milan, Oxford and Munich. The illuminations to these manuscripts had been created at the workshop of Stanisław Samostrzelnik. For several decades she also worked on the subject of the two-headed eagle in iconography from antiquity to the 18th century. The materials assembled by Prof. Z. Ameisen were to years later make their way to the Jagiellonian University Library and it is possible that they will constitute the beginnings, as well as a model, for another researcher into this most exceptionally interesting field.

Zofia Ameisen died on the 25th of December 1967 at the Stefan Żeromski Hospital in Nowa Huta, at present a district of Cracow, on the 6th anniversary of her husband's death. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Cracow on Miodowa Street. She left a will which, according to K. Estreicher junior 'showed the entirety of her good nature. For she was a person of a noble spark. The whole of her property – moveables and real estate – she bequeathed to the Jagiellonian University.'

Bibliography

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