

Zdzisław Pietrzyk

## Marek Wajsblum (1903–1962)

He came from an assimilated Jewish merchant family living in Warsaw. Marek Wajsblum was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1903 in Warsaw. His father, Michał (d. 13<sup>th</sup> of July 1930) was a merchant, who, unfortunately, did not have a talent for business. His mother was Sura (Celina) née Prager. Izabela Stachowicz (Czajka) recalled in a letter to M. Wajsblum years later that his mother had been ‘a delicate and beautiful woman.’ An indicator of the degree of assimilation and Polonisation of the Wajsblum family is the fact that in 1959 in completing a questionnaire about language competencies, M. Wajsblum placed Yiddish in the last position – as ninth – and clarified his knowledge of the said as weak. His childhood and youth were spent in Warsaw. He attended the Michael Kreczmar Secondary School in Warsaw. From his school leaving certificate, which he obtained on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1922, it results that he was an extremely good pupil; with his average marks being B+ on a scale of A to E. Several months later, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1922, he was enrolled as a student of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. He studied the history of the reformation in seminars and tutorials on the history of culture given by Prof. Stanisław Kot, which were highly pluralistic classes. Besides M. Wajsblum, whose views were decisively leftist, S. Kot’s students included the Jesuit Stanisław Bednarski, and the ardent Catholic Henryk Barycz. The greatest of S. Kot’s pupils included, besides those men-

tioned above: Wiktor Weintraub, Stanisław Bodniak, Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, Ignacy Zarębski, Jerzy Zathej. M. Wajsblum's period of study in Cracow was a difficult one, full of sacrifices and downright poverty. Initially he lived in Cracow in the army barracks at Rajska Street, which the army had given over to students of the university. Later he rented a room together with his friend and seminar classmate Józef Birn, who came from Nowy Sącz. Professor Kot was a demanding tutor and all his pupils had to be well prepared, for Prof. Kot struck those who failed to fulfil their academic obligations off the register. Evidence of M. Wajsblum's academic investigations under the guidance of S. Kot is his seminar work on the history of the Reformation. This has been preserved in Stanisław Kot's legacy as *Materiały do historii reformacji w Polsce 1548–1567* [Materials for a History of the Reformation in Poland 1548–1567]. M. Wajsblum's seminar work is highly valued, as the books of the Royal Assessorial Court preserved in the Warsaw Central Archives of Historical Records was, after the collapse of the Warsaw Uprising, torched by the German army. He graduated in history, gaining his degree on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1926.

In April 1927 M. Wajsblum sent a letter to the Council of the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Philosophy with a request to be allowed to enrol on a doctoral degree programme. The basis for the doctoral degree was to be the Ph.D. thesis *Dyteiści małopolscy: Stanisław Farnowski i Farnowianie* [The Little Poland Ditheists: Stanisław Farnowski and the Farnowskians], which had come to fruition during the seminar programme run by Prof. S. Kot. The ditheists were one of the first sects which separated themselves from the Anti-Trinitarians and were to survive in the region of Sącz for several decades. Wajsblum described their origin, ideological-philosophical views and social outlook. In the dissertation he presented theses on the social basis of Polish Anti-Trinitarianism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which as he wrote were to provoke discussion 'on this neglected question.' The eminent historian of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Stanisław Bodniak wrote, in a letter to S. Kot, on the matter of the thesis thus:

I am impressed by Wajsblum's work. Possibly at times its premises are rather too sharply drawn, with the tone being a little elevated, but for that it is a model piece most conscientiously put together. One can see that the author feels himself in his field, crossing it with a measured step which is as much to do with the embracing and exhausting of the material as the inherent properties of his intellect itself, somewhat as if 'rabbinic' I would say.

The examinations, known at the time as the rigours, he was to sit before a commission comprising his tutor and two eminent academics, these being Ignacy Chrzanowski and Waclaw Sobieski, who openly sympathised with National Democracy [a Polish right-wing nationalist political movement –

GT]. The outcome of the examination was a pass with merit, which reflected the excellent preparation and knowledge of the Ph.D. examinee but also the separation on the part of the Cracow professors of political views from academia itself. Stanisław Kot published M. Wajsblum's doctoral thesis in 1928 with a certain abridgement in a most excellent journal of which he was editor *Reformacja w Polsce* [The Reformation in Poland]. Following the awarding of a Ph.D. M. Wajsblum was to leave Cracow for good and return to Warsaw. His close relations with his academic master are borne out by the correspondence which they conducted from 1927 to 1961. Professor Kot's pupils knew of this intimacy, with Wiktor Weintraub's letter of the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 1962 to M. Wajsblum constituting proof. The professor was losing his sight and after political defeats he locked himself away within the close grouping of the Polish People's Party. Even the doctor he made use of was a party member: he had his eye illness treated at an internist's. Marek Wajsblum was sufficiently close to the professor to be able to coax him out of this type of treatment. Wiktor Weintraub entrusted Wajsblum himself to bring round the professor. In the aforementioned letter W. Weintraub wrote:

I am shocked by the news that he is being treated for cataracts by Dr. Jaworski. Even if it is not as one hears here in London that the man is a charlatan, he is even so merely an internist, and no ophthalmologist. It's the first time I've ever heard that someone has 'scattered' cataracts. Is it not possible to persuade the professor that one's eyes are not mere politics but something really serious, and that in such a case one's choice of doctor should be directed by something greater than the holding of a party membership card.

The obtaining of a Ph.D. changed little in M. Wajsblum's life. He returned to Warsaw and started the struggle for his daily bread. He found himself in a difficult financial situation, particularly following the death of his father in 1930, who left debts well in excess of the inheritance. The years 1927 to 1939 saw a constant search for work which would give him a living wage, while from 1932 he had in addition a family to support. For in this year he married a secondary school teacher, Rut Markin. He worked as a teacher in private secondary schools. Longer employment as a teacher he found from 1930 to 1933 at the 'Laor' secondary school, and from 1936 to 1939 in two secondary schools: The Ascal and the B. Limanowski Secondary. At the time he wrote bitterly to S. Kot: 'I have always been a Jew for Poles and a Pole for Jews.' Marek Wajsblum did not belong to the Jewish community, while his markedly left-wing views made his employment at certain of the Polish universities an impossibility. In the mid-1930s he was offered an academic post in Moscow. Fortunately he did not decide to take up the offer, for presumably he would have suffered the same fate the Polish socialists and communists were to suffer at the end of the 1930s.

One may divide M. Wajsblum's creative output for the years 1927–1939 into two principal parts:

- the history of the Reformation in Poland and research into the Polish reformation and renaissance;
- publicist works and the commissioned writing of texts from an array of disciplines in order to earn some money to live on.

M. Wajsblum's limited works on the history of the Reformation, which came out from 1930 to 1935, are exceptionally important for the history of Polish Protestantism. The first work was the article *Wyznaniowe oblicze protestantyzmu polskiego i jego podstawy społeczne* [The denominational faces of Polish Protestantism and its social bases], in which he showed the dependency of the Reformation in Poland's development on the relations of the Polish nobility to the legal, political, social and economic situation. He showed that first and foremost the legal and economic situation determined the Polish nobility's relations to Protestantism. Marek Wajsblum recognised that the Reformation was an instrument in the fight for privileges for the Polish nobility. Following their obtainment, the Reformation was rejected.

The second work was a review of Konrad Górski's study *Grzegorz Paweł z Brzezin* [Grzegorz Paweł of Brzeziny], constituting one of the fundamental monographs on the beginnings of Anti-Trinitarianism in Poland. In an extensive review article *O genezę antytrynitaryzmu* [On the genesis of Anti-Trinitarianism] Wajsblum showed that the views of Grzegorz Paweł, one of the first Polish Arians in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, are interpreted by K. Górski through the prism of his own views on religion. According to Wajsblum, a methodological basis distorted the presentation of Grzegorz Paweł of Brzeziny's arrival at Anti-Trinitarianism. In a letter to S. Kot he wrote about the study and its author: '[...] his convictions are an expression not so much of conformity with his faith, as an expression of faith in the conformity of his convictions with the subject of this faith.' In 1930 there appeared an interesting review article by M. Wajsblum, entitled *Nędze złotego wieku* [The indigence of the Golden Age]. This was a review of the correspondence of Szymon Marycjusz of Pilzno [Simon Maricius Pilsnensis] edited by S. Kot, and more correctly a sketch of the Polish intelligentsia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He divided the intelligentsia into the landed and the professional. According to M. Wajsblum the landed intelligentsia was courageous in actions, while the professional intelligentsia being dependent materially on their patrons realised their own interests. This sketch was written by Wajsblum under the pseudonym of M. Arco. Within *The Reformation in Poland* he placed several reviews, of which each brought new elements to the history of the Reforma-

tion in Poland, for M. Wajsblum worked on sources derived chiefly from the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw.

From the beginning of the 1930s M. Wajsblum worked on the study *Ex regestro arianismi*. Initially it was to have been an extensive article on the subject of the struggle of different denominations in the Polish Commonwealth during the victorious Counter-Reformation. The source research of manuscripts, particularly from the Central Archives of Historical Records, the acts of various denominational synods as well as research into the extensive subject literature, including first of all publications from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, resulted in the creation of an extensive study. He presented within it how the victorious Counter-Reformation from the so-called Arian *register* did for the Lutherans and Calvinists. This is one of the best works on the Reformation in Poland ever written. This work was published in parts in *The Reformation in Poland* and as a separate print just after World War II (in 1948). From 1935 to 1939 M. Wajsblum contributed a lot to the new national biography i.e., *Polski słownik biograficzny* [The Polish Biographical Dictionary]. He considered that extensive space should be given in *The Polish Biographical Dictionary* to articles about those who were unknown, while for those with already published biographical monographs article size should be short and concise, making reference to the said monographs.

The other spheres of M. Wajsblum's academic and publicist activity involved writing works from an array of fields. He wrote thus to S. Kot about his position and the need for such activity: '[...] between school and courses I write idiotic hack pieces for various trash publications just to bring in the necessary few hundred zloty or so.'

'Trash publications' were for M. Wajsblum everything that did not refer to the history of the Reformation, and that which was not based on sources. He was the author of works which would have been the source of pride for more than one author. In 1930 there appeared two editions of *Historia świata* [A History of the World]. This was an extensive two-volume work covering the history of the ancient world: in one volume the Ancient East, and in the second Greece. Unfortunately the publisher went bankrupt and the book brought neither money nor recognition as it made it to only certain libraries. The polemical-publicist temperament of M. Wajsblum manifested itself when he read in the journal *Rozwój* [Development] the following phrase: '[...] every Jew is qualified to be the king or prince of thieves.' He went on to write the study *Przestępczość wśród Żydów w Polsce (Szkiec statystyczny)* [Crime amongst Jews in Poland (A Statistical Outline)]. He showed on the basis of statistical data that for every one hundred thousand inhabitants the least crime was committed by Protestants, then Jews, with Catholics and

Orthodox Christians being at the top of these shameful statistics. The article was published under the pseudonym Mark Markvetz.

Professor Peter Brock, who wrote an obituary about his friend M. Wajsblum in *Wiadomości* (no. 1032, 1966) and left a manuscript account about him, shared with his milieu the information that M. Wajsblum had published a handbook to ballroom dancing. Extra spice being added to the undertaking by the fact that the author of the dance handbook could not... dance. Another trace of M. Wajsblum's interest in dance was his article of 1952, discussing the history of various dances in different countries.

During the period before World War II, M. Wajsblum had most varied occupations – from translator of French literature to working with the film company 'Ornak,' for whom he wrote screenplays for educational films. It is, unfortunately, difficult to identify all of M. Wajsblum's publications from the pre-Second World War period for he wrote using various pseudonyms, of which only a few have been established (M. Arco, M. Markvetz, M. Wielicki).

In September 1939 M. Wajsblum found himself on territory under the control of the Red Army. His family was under German occupation and was killed as a result of the systematic extermination of the Jewish population. At the turn of 1939/1940 Wajsblum worked in Pińsk as a librarian, and in 1940 in Łuniniec he was a... health inspector. From 1940 to 1941 he worked at the Library of the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences, where he was involved in the preparation of Polish and Latin manuscripts. At the end of 1941 he had reached the Polish embassy in Kuybyshev. The function of ambassador was being fulfilled at the time by Prof. S. Kot. Around him were concentrated several of his pupils and young intellectuals, who having been freed from Soviet detention and labour camps made it to the embassy in Kuybyshev. Marek Wajsblum was given the function of adviser to Prof. Kot on matters connected with the legislation (laws) and socio-religious matters of the Soviet Union, which he must have learnt during the course of his two years in the country. He also wrote articles for the press. The NKVD took an interest in Wajsblum's activities yet when the arm of the NKVD reached out for M. Wajsblum, Prof. S. Kot had hidden him in the Polish army as a certain lieutenant Józef Nowak. In the collections of the Jagiellonian Library the army booklet under the name of Józef Nowak with a photograph of M. Wajsblum and the signature of the then lieutenant Leopold Okulicki is preserved. Marek Wajsblum completed officer cadet school in second place and out of seniority was appointed second lieutenant of the reserves on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1943. In 1943 he found himself in Jerusalem where he worked in the office of the director of the Polish National Office for the Middle East. In 1945 he was assigned to the language section of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces in the West. During his service in Palestine a curious incident happened to

M. Wajsblum. As a result of an argument with another officer, a fight broke out. After negotiations by M. Wajsblum's and his opponent's representatives it was agreed that an armed duel would resolve the problem. Presumably the duel never came about.

In 1947 he was evacuated together with the Polish Army to Great Britain, where he served as a communications specialist. In 1948 he was demobbed and began the life of a wanderer. He had nobody in Poland to return to and he was never to return; he tried to emigrate to Australia but this never materialised. His master, S. Kot, had himself from mid-1947 become an *émigré* in the now hostile to him political environment. Consequently Marek Wajsblum could no longer rely on support from this quarter. By the turn of the 1950s Great Britain had become a magnet for a large number of *émigrés* of academic backgrounds, which made the search for work in one of Britain's academic institutions all the more difficult. An additional factor, as he wrote to S. Kot, was that his Polish-Jewish origins did not make it easy to apply for work, he expressed the view that the English ghetto was not better for a Pole than the Polish ghetto for a Jew. He worked in various positions while in England and in various places. Once he turned down a job, which was the gluing together of bags, explaining that it was difficult to force someone to do *gaol* work when free. He wanted to become a porter but after a provisional acceptance the employer, on learning that M. Wajsblum 'had committed a series of unforgivable crimes: had written and wrote academic books', refused him the position.

Marek Wajsblum did not participate in *émigré* political life, though he was active in the academic. From the end of the 1940s he gave papers at the Polish Academic Association in Exile (PTNO), which were variably received by those who attended. He was exceptionally erudite but the papers Wajsblum gave at PTNO were never published. In 1948 he put forward a project for the registration and coping of all sources relating to Polish history to be found within the territory of Great Britain. He called the project the 'reconstruction of the source basis of Polish history.' Wiktor Weintraub called the project unrealistic for economic and political reasons. At a later period M. Wajsblum rarely participated actively in the life of PTNO. According to the accounts of Prof. Peter Brock he was, at one of the sittings, 'accosted' by Stanisław Stroński, one of the 'most faithful' opponents of S. Kot, in order to be told what he thought of the paper given. This time M. Wajsblum had given a paper on the announced topic for over an hour. The surprise for the listeners was pronounced for it had not been a talk on the history of the Reformation and 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century history. Professor Peter Brock wrote thus about Wajsblum's talent and abilities: 'how a tragic light is shone onto our times by the fact that a man of such lecturing talent was never given the opportunity to teach at university level.'

During his time in England M. Wajsblum lived first and foremost in London. Besides the constant search for means to live he spent all of his free time in the British Library, where he worked on his newly determined research topics. He was interested in the connection between the Quakers and Poland. The first signal of this interest was the review of a work on Samuel Hartlib, published anonymously in *The Reformation in Poland*. Together with research into the history of this ironical religious fraction he entered into contact with its representatives in operation in England. This was indirectly connected with the providing of material help to Polish emigrants in France and Great Britain. Similarly to many currents in the life of M. Wajsblum this one sketches itself out paradoxically also, for he himself being in an exceptionally difficult financial state decided to provide help to the poorest emigrants, especially those who were unable to work. He was in this activity entirely apolitical, paying no attention to the political views of those in need of aid.

Marek Wajsblum also published in *Wiadomości* and he wrote a series of popular-academic articles under the title *Na ukos przez słowniki* [Obliquely through dictionaries]. He published his academic studies in scholarly journals, including works on the Reformation and the history of religion (*Isaak of Troki and Christian Controversy in the XVI Century*).

From his youth M. Wajsblum had had a deep-rooted passion for the artificial language Esperanto and he had been an authority and propagator from before World War II. In 1930 he had engaged in a press-published debate with the eminent classical philologist Ignacy Wieniewski on the subject of the usefulness of Esperanto for he considered that Esperanto could become the Latin of modern times, possibly the language in which all people would be able to converse. In 1953 on the invitation of Icelandic Esperantists, Wajsblum went to Iceland. His short stay on the island resulted in a study of Polish-Icelandic contacts. The work was initially published in Icelandic and then in English. M. Wajsblum was fascinated by the level of culture amongst Icelanders.

Wajsblum kept an array of notes on his research in the libraries and archives of Iceland, including materials on the relations of the Icelanders to fascist ideology and the shaping of Nordic ideology. While writing articles in Esperanto he referred in some of them to his pre-Second World War pseudonym: M. Arco.

In order to obtain funds to live on, he undertook the editing, preparation and translation of other academics' works. The biggest undertaking to end successfully was the preparing for print of Aleksandr Brückner's monumental work *Tysiąc lat kultury polskiej* [A Thousand Years of Polish Culture]. At the end of the 1950s he started work on the editing of Stanisław Lubieniecki's *Historia reformacji polskiej* [A History of the Polish Reformation]. As is borne out by the preserved fragments of the material he had wanted to do a perfect



job. Unfortunately, death was to stop him in his work on this fundamental piece for the history of the Polish Reformation. Marek Wajsblum also translated the works of Polish authors into English. There are preserved in his papers among others a translation of a work by Adam Vetulani on the history of Jews in Poland up until 1320. The translation in this case involved a sizeable supplementation of the text itself.

At the end of the 1950s he started to assemble materials and devise plans for research into Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. He even presented a methodology for the said to Prof. S. Kot. He wanted to deal with the Jewish question against the backcloth of Polish history from 1939–1945 as well as to show what the ‘Jewish participation in the armed effort of Polish society’ was, and how Poles evaluated this effort. He sent memorials to Jewish organisations with propositions for research into the Holocaust. He started to assemble materials for these questions yet he did not manage to compile them or write the work on this subject.

In 1954 M. Wajsblum married Hildegarda Sidonia Janca. The work and financial situation started to stabilise. In 1955 a daughter, Rus, was born. He started to lead a relatively normal life, having a stable position. In 1955 Prof. Zofia Ameisenowa attempted to persuade M. Wajsblum to return to Poland, promising help in finding work at the Polish Academy of Sciences. She pointed out the support for the undertaking from, among others, Kazimierz Lepszy and Bogusław Leśnodorski. M. Wajsblum did not, however, decide to return to Poland. After several years of being in London he had a reasonably stable lifestyle. He would often meet Prof. S. Kot in the British Library, where, drinking the professor’s favourite beverage, coffee, they would discuss the results of history source research as well as the current political situation.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 1962 M. Wajsblum died as a result of a heart attack.

Marek Wajsblum’s manuscript legacy was given in part to the Polish Library in London, while thanks to the efforts of Prof. Brock the rest of his papers were bequeathed in 1987 to the Jagiellonian University Library in Cracow.

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