

Weronika Kostyrko

The Dancer & The Holocaust: A Biography of Pola Nirenska

Three selected fragments, translated by Adam Żuławski

1932

“The first dance that I dictated from my mind into music, to musicians, was a great success,” recounted Pola Nirenska in the mid-1980s when she spoke to George Jackson, dance critic for *The Washington Post*. The audience was from Dresden, people who were interested in dance of the famous teacher Mary Wigman. “It was a small audience. And I remember that a woman came up to me and said: ‘You are going to be a great dancer.’ This was the first compliment I’d ever received in my life. And I remember the dance. I remember the melody. I remember that dance!”

Pola laughs softly and pauses here in the taped interview. Then she adds: “I called this solo dance *Leidenschaft*. I have never redone it, because it was much too primitive. But all my passion went into it.”

During her last year studying dance, Pola worked as hard as she could. She prepared a thesis, an essay titled *Women in Art*. It came to thirty-six pages, starting off with the work of medieval nuns. For the practical exam, Pola had to present three of her own compositions: a group dance, a lyrical solo and a dramatic solo.

“I was sitting in my little room on my bed, trying to find the movement for my eastern ballad. I put myself into a hypnosis, and found myself a few hours later still sitting like that” she told Jackson. “The logic and the order of the composition was inborn in me. The feeling for space I got from Wigman.”

Nirenska's first fully mature piece, *Japanese Ballad*, has a subtitle: *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil*, referring to the Japanese symbol of the three wise monkeys. There are different interpretations, but according to Buddhist tradition, the three monkeys tell us to look for evil not in other people, but in ourselves.

Pola first arranged the movements, then music for twelve percussive instruments. The resulting lyrical solo *Japanese Ballad* is a dance made of small hand gestures, facial expressions and light body bends. In later years, Pola performed it in a narrow black dress with gold trim that reached the ground. She tied her hair tightly into a bun, and painted long black lines on her eyelids.

For her dramatic solo, she came up with *Scream*, invented in the meadows on the banks of the Elbe. While walking there one evening, she heard a scream, repeated twice by an echo. It reminded her of the famed painting by Edvard Munch, an image that became the starting point for her new composition. She went on to dance it in a blood-red gown, running, falling and running again, raising her hands to the sky and opening her mouth in a silent scream. After an intense four minutes, completely exhausted, she would fall to the ground.

When she showed *Japanese Ballad* to her friend, Katia Bakalińska said: “I don't know. Either it will be the most beautiful dance or it will be kitsch.” Pola took the risk – and won. In June 1932, she sent home a telegram: “I've finished school with first place as the best graduate.”

She was happy, but also forlorn. School was over and she didn't know what to do next. Leaving for Germany, she had sworn to her father that after graduating, she would become a dance teacher, that she herself would never perform on stage.

“I was somewhere in the middle not knowing where to go,” she told Jackson much later. “I was somewhere very much on the surface, even with all my religious study. I was somewhere very superficial because the values of my home did not go together with the values of the Wigman school.”

In July 1932, Pola turned 22. Mary Wigman's School had given her much more than just a professional education. She had spent four Dresden years as part of a community of female artists. It was a group open to experimentation, liberal and multicultural, in which it did not matter where you came from. Her closest friends were a Jew from Odessa and a German communist from Hamburg.

Her favorite book at the time was *Steppenwolf*. The hero of Herman Hesse's famous novel comes to a German city to spend some time in its libraries and galleries. He brings with him a small statue of Buddha and a chest of books. He is supposed to write an essay, but instead plunges into a dark underworld and his own phantasmagoria. His love for the bisexual Hermine, who calls herself a “courtesan of good taste”, leads him to suicide. We are told the story of Harry Haller from the perspective of an honest and modest narrator, for whom the highest value is bourgeois decency.

The collision of these two worlds must have appealed to Pola's imagination. She knew what awaited her in Warsaw: strict parents, religious aunts, a middle-class home, perhaps a teacher's job, and, sooner or later, marriage.

Pola delayed her return home.

Three weeks later, another telegram arrived in Warsaw: “I'm going to America to tour with Mary Wigman's dance group.”

She received no reply.

1939

“Franula dearest, let me know how you are doing. Write to my address via Geneva. Kisses, Pola,” wrote Nireńska on December 14th, 1939, from London to Warsaw via the International Red Cross. A reply came back to her on that very same piece of paper: “The addressee moved out on October 29th, 1939, from 1-5 Sienkiewicza Street, destination unknown.”

Of all the family correspondence, this is the only piece of paper that Pola kept. Barely four sentences.

How long had she waited for some sort of message from her beloved sister? The Germans did not pass on letters from Poland to countries they were at war with. It was even more difficult to contact the Jewish district, even though there were telephones and a post office in the Warsaw Ghetto until July 1942. Franka had been able to phone her friends on the “Aryan” side of Warsaw and send them censored postcards, but Pola did not know her sister's fate. Jan Karski said that it was only after the war that she found out from her friend in Israel about Franka's death.

“My wife claimed that she had been the most beautiful girl in Warsaw. Before the war, many Poles were skipping around her, one even wanted to get married. Then the war came. Pola's beautiful sister escaped the ghetto and visited the Poles who had been so keen on her. None gave her shelter. One, the one who had wanted to marry her,

said that every two or three days he would leave her food under the stairs. Nobody helped her and she died,” said Karski a year before his death in an interview for the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

“The loss of her family left my wife depressed for many years. My wife did not have a heart for Poles,” he added. “We spoke English at home.”

Looking for Franka’s traces is like shuffling through the dark. I have been unable to find a picture of her anywhere, so I have to take Pola’s word for it that she was beautiful. Nor have I been able to establish how she was doing before the war broke out. I know that she graduated from the same school as Pola, a private Catholic high school. In the early 1930s she married the filmmaker Frank Szwarcwald. Did she divorce him? After all, a childless divorcee would not have received alimony. Franka had no profession, and she could not return to her parents, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1935. Why does the remaining evidence end in October 1939 at the address of Szwarcwald’s office?

According to Jan Karski, Franka escaped from the ghetto to the “Aryan side”. The first step was not that difficult: you had to bribe one of the men who led groups of Jewish workers to work every morning through one of the gates. Past the gate though, things would become grim:

“Right after the gate, you had to remove the armband and mingle into the crowd. It was not easy at all, because right next to the guard was a crowd of those looking to get easy money, as well as *szmalcowniki* – blackmailers hunting bribery income, or those wanting a reward for bringing a Jew to the Germans. Nor was it uncommon for a Jew to be robbed blind just outside the wall, with no escape. He would return to the ghetto and wait for death. Without money, there was nothing to look for on the Aryan side,” recalls former officer of the Jewish Combat Organization Adina Blady-Szwajger in her book *I Remember Nothing More*.

Franka was lucky that she managed to reach her Polish friends. How did these meetings look? Here again we have to give the floor to Adina:

“Manusia, as we used to call her before the war, welcomed me with heart, tears and well-hidden fear. After all, the announcements that death awaited those hiding a Jew were already hanging on the walls. And these were not idle threats. I somehow immediately sensed that Maria was afraid, so after greeting her, I assured her that it was only for one night. I said that tomorrow I already had a place to go, although I wasn’t certain of that at all.”

Adina did not get shelter for longer, but she did get supper.

“After I went to lie down to go to sleep, Maria found a fur collar in a chest of drawers and sewed it into my trench coat. A lack of fur was one way you could recognize ghetto fugitives on the street. The Jews did not have any furs because they had to hand them all over to the German army.”

Equipped with a fur collar and some good advice, this Jewish girl “of good appearance” went out to see Warsaw:

“I walked. Somehow my legs carried me, from *Złota* to *Marszałkowska*, *Królewska* near Saxon Gardens to *Krakowskie Przedmieście*, and then I turned into *Miodowa*, the way I usually went home to *Świętojerska*. But I felt nothing, despite all those days, months and years I had longed for my city outside the walls. I didn’t feel anything, because I was still there, always there, behind the wall, in the middle of what was going on there, and this ordinary city was somehow not mine now, or I wasn’t from here anymore”.

Even when Adina finally managed to find shelter, the feeling of foreignness did not leave her: "I walked together with Marysia very often. It was safer, because we were walking around laughing and talking, two young girls on Warsaw streets full of people. And when only one of them was walking, sometimes she forgot herself and had the 'wrong' eyes, that is, eyes in which you could see that something pained her."

Many Jews returned to the ghetto when they ran out of money, or simply to free themselves from suffocating fear. In the ghetto, they were among their relatives, they did not have to hide there. In the ghetto, "the Jew was legal." Franka went back too. According to her brother's testimony, she died in the ghetto in 1941 or 1942.

How did she die? If she was not shot during the deportations in the summer of 1942, she may well have contracted typhus. She probably did not die of starvation; she was not poor, even though the Germans did block the bank accounts of Jews in October 1939. However, she had family in the ghetto.

Most people transported to the Warsaw ghetto from other towns, crammed into makeshift shelters, died of hunger. Franka had had to move there from an elegant apartment in the center of Warsaw. However, the homes of two aunts fell within the walls of the ghetto: Perla Perec lived at 21 Niska Street, and Brandla Waksman at 14 Elektoralna Street. Both were her mother's sisters, so they were closely related. Families in the ghettos took relatives under their roof. Both aunts died in the Holocaust, but Brandla's daughter Sara Kuper survived in a hideout. After the war, she settled in Tel Aviv, and it was probably from her that the Nirensteins heard about the fates of their daughters, sons-in-law and granddaughters.

There is one detail of Franka's death certificate at Yad Vashem that puzzles me: her brother writes that she died in the ghetto, but he is not sure of the date. This may actually mean that she stayed away from her family in the ghetto. This may have been the case if she converted to Christianity before the war.

Karski's biographer Waldemar Piasecki claims that, before the war, a 'Catholic Pole' in love not only 'wanted to marry' Pola's sister, but that the date of the wedding had already been set – for Christmas 1939. To marry a Catholic, Franka would have to have been baptized. If this did happen, her Jewish family could have renounced it. Conversion to Catholicism was treated in conservative families as a betrayal, and a convert as deceased – a week of mourning was held for them. The word used in Hebrew for "deviation from the faith" has the same root as "annihilation": *szmad*.

So what happened to Franka Szwarcwald, who could not get help from Poles and returned to the ghetto? I am tormented by the thought that her fate has indeed been recorded somewhere. That she was mentioned by one of the 1,400 Warsaw Ghetto survivors who reported for the Shoah Foundation. That she appears somewhere, only we cannot recognize her: that Jewish woman without a name, who was left alone and died of hunger. The one that was shot in the street. The one who died of typhus. The one who committed suicide.

1990

The mother is the central figure of the *The Holocaust Tetralogy*. And exactly this figure must have been in the mind of George Jackson when he told a *New York Times* journalist after Nirenska's death: "Her dances are strong and stark, like massive three-dimensional sculptures in volume and weight. Her figures are larger than life, but with very distinct personalities."

The first part of the tetralogy is called *Life*. The barefoot mother figure in her dark dress is watching her five dancing daughters. They are bright, light, carefree, and they show each other love. *Whatever Begins also Ends*,

says the piece's subtitle. Ernest Bloch's music evokes anxiety. The empty stage is filled with blue light. The gestures and expressions are almost as eloquent as in a silent movie.

If *Life* is a depiction of a community of women, then *Dirge* represents its annihilation. The daughters move slowly, hesitantly, as if wandering in the dark. They find each other, support and lose each other again. They are afraid. The mother scoops them up with a protective gesture. She is trying to appease Fate.

The mother and her daughters disappear from the stage when it is filled with *Shout*. This is no longer a story written for roles, but rather a solo *Guernica*. There are no decorations and props here. A lonely dancer in a frayed red dress fills the stage space like a raging flame.

In the last part, entitled *The Train*, a rectangle of light appears on the stage's boards. In the finale, the daughters die one by one in front of their powerless mother. Their gestures express despair and anger. In Pola's performance, the perpetrators are not visible, there are only the victims who accuse an empty sky.

The first performance of the tetralogy in its entirety was to take place in March 1989 at the Kennedy Center. The date had already been set, rehearsals were underway, only *The Train* had to be finished. I do not know if Pola had read Karski's account of the death camp in Izbica, published in his book *Story of a Secret State*. In the lead up to the premiere, Rima Faber remembers her looking at photos of the deportations.

A few weeks before, Jan told Rima that Pola was feeling unwell. "He took her to a doctor who said she was delusional," recounted Rima. "She shouted that insects were crawling all over her. She tore up the photos." Rima took Pola to a psychiatrist, and the premiere was canceled.

After a few weeks, Nirenska returned home, but she did not appear back in the studio. Faber finished the choreography of *The Train* for her. "I invited her to see it only once we were ready. She just said: 'Very good.'"

The premiere of *The Holocaust Tetralogy* took place on July 28th, 1990, Nirenska's 80th birthday, at Dance Place in Washington. Alan Kriegsman in *The Washington Post* called it "a soul-searing experience" and "a daring attempt, within the humanistic tradition of modern dance, to bear the unbearable and speak the unspeakable."

Nirenska's life was recalled in the descriptions of the performance, and *The Washington Times* announced the definitive end of her career: "I don't feel I can create anything more," she says slowly, her words heavily accented. Indeed, the most mobile thing about Miss Nirenska these days is the smoke that curls from her ever-present Salem ultra light."

Translated by Adam Żułowski