

Remarks on the Jewish Art Colony in Kazimierz Dolny¹

Kazimierz Dolny is a small town in Central Poland, Lublin Voivodeship, located on the right bank of the Vistula River. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Kazimierz economically flourished due to the grain trade conducted along the Vistula. After that trade declined, the town turned into an economic backwater, and, fortunately for its architecture, the freeze in economic development enabled the town to preserve many buildings and its Renaissance urban plan. From the late 19th century, wealthy residents of Warsaw and Lublin became interested in the picturesque village, and in 1927 Kazimierz Dolny became a town once again, but what is more, it did not lose the charm and characteristics of a typical Jewish town – *shtetl*. In the meantime, the town became more famous owing to the release of *Yidl mitn fidl* and the *Dybbuk*, two classic Yiddish films made in Kazimierz Dolny. Many Jewish and non-Jewish writers described or referred to Jewish *Kuzmir*. The town was visited and painted by many artists from as early as the end of 18th century. Before the breakout of the First World War, and during the interwar period, there had been a lot of Jews among the artists, and the art colony of Kazimierz Dolny became one of the most important and popular places among them.

Nevertheless, Kazimierz Dolny and its artistic colony from the interwar period should be perceived in two dimensions, namely the artistic and the social one. Taking into consideration its location, cultural legacy, and local atmosphere, Kazimierz was a place, where open air artistic, painting and photography workshops were eagerly organized. At the same time, this town on the Vistula River, so popular among artists and men of letters, seemed to be an oasis of serenity, free from anti-Semitic remarks or party disputes. This state of matters concerning the atmosphere and location of Kazimierz Dolny was in contradiction with the rest of contemporary Poland.

A relatively large number of works have been written about Jewish artists creating in Kazimierz Dolny; however, first it is useful to frame a demographic and socio-political picture of the place which attracted so many tourists not only by its picturesque location, but also the unique architecture.

¹ The article is based on a paper delivering during the 16th World Congress of Jewish Studies (session: Modern Jewish Art 2: Eastern Europe) at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (28 July – 1 August 2013).

Kazimierz was a typical “Jewish” town located about 50 km from Lublin within the administrative boundaries of Puławy county. The majority of Kazimierz Dolny’s inhabitants were Jews, while in the neighboring villages, within municipality Kazimierz Dolny, the inhabitants were Catholics and mainly peasants. In 1921, 3407 inhabitants lived in this municipality, out of whom there were 1382 Jews, who constituted over 40% of the whole population². The majority of them lived in the very Kazimierz Dolny, and a considerably smaller number in the neighboring Bochoznica. However, this relation would be changing in the following years in favor of the Jewish population. As police reports from 1938 suggest, Christians formed 52% of the society, while Jews made up 48%³.

Kazimierz was a peaceful and quiet town to the delight of the local police officers. Police had to intervene in Puławy and the neighboring villages, for example, during electoral campaigns when many fights between supporters of various political parties burst, as well as during various speeches of outraged peasants or field workers’ strikes. In the meantime, in Kazimierz in 1927 it was considered a “great affair” to take away communist pamphlets from a passing agitator. There was in fact a small association consisting of Jews in particular, which collected money donations for war prisoners (Międzynarodowa Organizacja Pomocy Robotnikom – International Association for Helping Workers). From time to time, Jewish communist youth groups organized their meetings or invited guests from Lublin or Warsaw⁴. Still, Kazimierz Dolny was one of the most peaceful and “politically boring” places in Lublin voivodeship of that time. Even the National Democracy, an organisation traditionally hostile to Jews, which local Polish elites belonged to, was not particularly active. It only limited its activity to the choice of delegates for regional or national conventions. According to a local police station, what appeared to be the most important assignment for a police constable was to catch thieves who were mostly active during summertime when a lot of holidaymakers were coming to this resorts. In the second half of the 30., from May to September, summer holidaymakers constituted about 5-6 thousand people which exceeded two times the number of residents from the whole Kazimierz municipality⁵. Holidaymakers’ stay was an additional source of income for the local inhabitants, which had an immense importance for the poor, badly industrialized part of the country. According to the police reports, the greatest number of holidaymakers were Jews, among whom the most noticeable but not the most numerous group were the artists⁶.

² B. Wasiutyński, *Ludność żydowska w Polsce w wiekach XIX i XX. Studium statystyczne*, Warszawa 1930, p. 34.

³ Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie (further: APL) Komenda Wojewódzka Policji Państwowej w Lublinie (further: KWPP) 216 k. 21.

⁴ APL Starostwo Powiatowe w Puławach (further: SPP) 2 k. 73, 91; APL SPP 3 k. 39, 121; APL SPP 4 k. 17, 225.

⁵ APL KWPP 216 k. 21.

⁶ *Ibidem*, k. 22.

It should not be surprising that Kazimierz Dolny became “not actually a symbol but a *shtetl* model and in the Jewish culture it was preserved unchanged until World War II”⁷. As Waldemar Odorowski wrote, “out of many small towns, scattered along Polish eastern lands, Jewish artists chose one – Kazimierz Dolny. What is more, it was at the beginning of 19th century”⁸. Among them there were not only painters – Shalom Ash set his story of *The Village (Shtetl)* in Kazimierz Dolny, the place where “the Vistula speaks Jewish”. One of the fathers of the Yiddish literature, Icchook Leib Peretz wanted the illustrator of his *Folktales* Ber Kratka to be inspired by Kazimierz Dolny⁹.

Many artists put up their easels, immortalized historic buildings or painted genre scenes. They were so numerous that they quickly became a common view for the local people, which was a great advantage that created favorable conditions for the artists. Moreover, a certain distance from “the great politics” had a positive impact on the artists’ work. It is possible that politics was discussed in studios and during private conversations but no source shows any evidence that holidaymakers participated in lectures or meetings of communizing youth. In Kazimierz there were no instances of anti-Semitic statements or assaults on the ethnic ground, except for petty thefts, but, these cases were connected with holidaymakers and were not related to national or religious status. Such statements or assaults happened in the second half of the 30., when anti-Semitic occurrences were frequent at artistic universities. For Polish artists, Kazimierz Dolny with its Renaissance granaries and tenement houses, was a reminder of the magnificent gentry of the “Old Poland” and the golden times of Polish culture. Kazimierz was an embodiment of *shtetl* in the eyes of Jewish artists, especially because the town was established by Casimir the Great, a king who’s rule also referred to tolerance and “golden times of Jews in Poland”. Those two symbolic meanings did not exclude each other, but did the opposite. As Tadeusz Pruszkowski wrote, “a life which a painter leads in Kazimierz Dolny can be easily compared to a paradise”¹⁰.

It would be difficult to mention all the artists who worked in Kazimierz Dolny before World War II. The choice must be limited to some of them, but what ought to be mentioned at this point is the fact that some of those artists came there at the end of the 18th century and this process is still in progress. Taking other European artistic colonies into consideration, the phenomenon of “long lasting” of colony in Kazimierz is an unprecedented situation. Jan Müntz and Zygmunt Vogler were the first court artists – painters and drawers, then, for example, Józef Richter, Jan Piwarski, Wojciech Gerson, Kazimierz Andriolli, and Józef Brandt started painting Kazimierz Dolny¹¹. Those artists’ pieces of art spread the opinion of the mag-

⁷ W. Odorowski, *Sztetł w sztuce, sztuka w sztetł* in: *Historia i kultura Żydów Janowca nad Wisłą, Kazimierza Dolnego i Puław. Fenomen kulturowy miasteczka – sztetł* (Materiały z sesji naukowej), red. F. Jaroszyński, Janowiec nad Wisłą 2003, p. 186.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*. See also: M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir – Kazimierz Dolny w zapisach literatury polskiej i jidysz* in: *Historia i kultura Żydów Janowca nad Wisłą, Kazimierza Dolnego i Puław*, p. 163-180; J. Schwarz, *Imagining Lives. Autobiographical of Yiddish Fiction*, Madison – London 2005, p. 118-123.

¹⁰ Quoted in A. Tanikowski, *Malarze żydowscy w Polsce*, cz. 2, Warszawa 2007, p. 36.

¹¹ W. Odorowski, *Kolonia artystyczna w Kazimierzu Dolnym XIX – XX wiek. Przewodnik po wystawie stałej w Kamienicy Celejowskiej*, Kazimierz Dolny 2005, p. 30-34.

nificent qualities of Kazimierz as a perfect place for the open air work. However, the town became popular among Warsaw intelligentsia circles, including artists, after opening the Warsaw – Lublin railway line in 1878. Since then it was possible and quite fast to get from the train station in Puławy to Kazimierz Dolny. Many new accommodation places and hotels were opened next to the very old and eagerly visited by artists Lipa Rabinowicz's tavern. The town was becoming more and more of a holiday resort. Józef Pankiewicz, Stanisław Masłowski or Aleksander Gierymski visited Kazimierz Dolny, but also at the beginning of the 20th century Jewish artists started to come there in greater and greater numbers¹².

One of the first visitors, whose presence is confirmed, was an already well-known sculptor, working in France before coming to Kazimierz Dolny, Józef Gabowicz. His work of art is the view of the town from the nearby Three Crosses Hill. After Gabowicz, Stanisława Centnerszwerowa, Maurycy Trębacz, Abraham Neuman, and Maurycy Minkowski and many others appeared in Kazimierz¹³. In 1913, Tadeusz Pruszkowski, Professor of art and painter, whose credit for creating an artistic colony in Kazimierz Dolny is unquestionable, spent his time there. The small and poor town, mostly inhabited by Jews, attracted many artists from Academy of the Fine Art in Warsaw. Among them there were Pruszkowski's students. Pruszkowski organized summer open air workshops and invited many artists who looked for inspiration in the views of the market square, churches, ruined side streets, Vistula landscapes or genre scenes¹⁴. Both Poles and Jews were among them, and as an architect Karol Siciński noticed (among other things he rebuilt the town after fires from the First World War period), Kazimierz Dolny is a place where "Slavism and ghetto shook hands which created a rare instance of architecture – a fantastic and picturesque, full of natural charm and time"¹⁵. This "harmony" in architecture of the town that combined Polish traditions with elements added by its Jewish inhabitants and integrated in the landscape, was appreciated by Szmul Shneiderman, living in Kazimierz Dolny. He stated that "Jews established shops under gothic arches (...). Then, a specific, romantic style developed from those improvised additions, but the style harmoniously merged with the local landscape"¹⁶. As many memories suggest, Jewish society which was predominantly orthodox, avoided posing for artists. However, local people were favorably inclined towards artists, and what is more, they eagerly helped newcomers in everyday matters or searching for accommodation. Local Jews were in fact the first to notice the possibilities that the influx of artists and holidaymakers could bring to Kazimierz Dolny.

After 1923, Pruszkowski's students from the Warsaw Academy were coming to the town. In the following years, students from other academies, even those not involved with Warsaw Academy, appeared. They presented many styles and manners, showed bigger

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 35-38.

¹³ R. Piątkowska, *Ja jestem z Kazimierza, z miasteczka Kazimierz, gdzie malarze przesiadują...* in: *W Kazimierzu Wisła mówiła do nich po żydowsku... malarze żydowscy w kazimierskiej kolonii artystycznej*, opr. W. Odorowski, Kazimierz Dolny 2008, p. 14, 16, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

¹⁵ Quoted in W. Odorowski, *Kolonia artystyczna w Kazimierzu Dolnym*, p. 48.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

and smaller talents, were Jews and Poles. However, “regardless of all the artistic ideas and not only artistic, Kazimierz Dolny itself became an idea or a programme for artists of all kinds of work staying here. Ideas were changing, some of them disappeared, new appeared, but Kazimierz remained as if above them, giving those ideas a kind of a shelter and a possibility of accomplishment¹⁷. It was something unique in the contemporary world for such a cosmopolitan Kazimierz Dolny colony to exist.

Poles and Jews, graduates from Academy of the Fine Arts in Warsaw, the participants of the first open air workshops in 1923, established Bractwo Św. Łukasza (St. Luke’s Fraternity) in 1925. One of the Jewish artist, Elias Kanarek soon joined it. Furthermore, the name of the Fraternity referred to the names of medieval guilds and did not have any religious connotations. The aim of the Fraternity, whose members were “connected by only friendship and common work”, was to “just paint as well as possible, within the limits¹⁸. It was not the only association which appeared in Kazimierz Dolny at that time, and none of them had a religious, national or political character.

Kazimierz became a place of integration and common activity for almost all artistic circles of Jewish artists in Poland. Generally, they were mainly from Warsaw and Lublin milieus but also there were newcomers from Cracow or Lvov. Abraham Nermann was one of the first known Jewish artists to depict Kazimierz (1902). It was here, in Kazimierz Dolny where the founders of the group “Kolor” (“Colour”) created. Among them there were Gizela Hufnagel, Elżbieta Hirszberzanka, and Mery Litauer; connected with Grupa Krakowska (the Cracow Group): Sasza Blonder, Jonasz Stern, and Berta Grünberg; with Łoża Wolnomalarska (A Free-Painters’ Lodge): Leonia Nadelman and Hanna Henneberg; with Bractwo Św. Łukasza: except for Pruszkowski, Seidenbeutel brothers and with Pruszkowski’s studio Jan Gotard. Among others the Łódź circle was represented by Natan Szpigel, Samuel Finkelstein, Adolf Behrman and Józef Kowner; the Lvov circle: Samuel Cygler and Izydor Goldhuber. Symcha Tracher and Henryk Lewensztadt used to come from the nearby Lublin. “Kazimierz Dolny became a colony which gathered Jewish artists, but not in separation from painters and Polish writers, yet in a peculiar integrity¹⁹. Artists-emigrants coming from communist Russia as well as, fugitives and escapees from Nazi Germany joined the association. They settled in the town and the neighboring villages. Their names (e.g. a photographer Aleksander Bołotow, an artist Raisa Friedenthal, and a painter Ferdynand Fischer) were not always remembered in artistic annals, however, they also formed this extraordinary phenomenon of artistic colony in Kazimierz Dolny by the Vistula river²⁰.

What is worth mentioning is the fact that Kazimierz had its own local artists who were probably inspired by the newcomers from Lublin or Warsaw. One of the most popular of them was a shoemaker Szmul Wodnicki, who made friends with Pruszkowski’s students.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

²⁰ APL SPP 5 k. 1-17.

He was renowned for portraits inspired by Van Gogh. Finally, Chaim Goldberg (died in 2004), a painter and sculptor, whose works are still exhibited in the New York's Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, came from a large Jewish family and lived in Kazimierz Dolny. Goldberg escaped to Russia and survived the time of Extermination; after the Second World War he came back to Poland and then emigrated in 1955. He became the main representative of painting depicting the non-existent world of *shtetl*²¹. In October 2000, he gave an interview where he said: "I remember Kazimierz well. I never left it. I have everything here, in my head, very clearly"²².

Let us state that in fact there never was anything like a strictly Jewish artistic colony or Jewish artistic community in Kazimierz Dolny and there never was exactly a Polish colony. In the 20., as many sources suggest, artists-Jews were the most numerous in Kazimierz Dolny. However, it is easier to speak about artists-Jews in Kazimierz Dolny's artistic colony or Kazimierz Dolny's artistic circle than about a "national" or "ethnic" colony. The boundaries among particular groups were flexible and it was not the nationality that defined those boundaries, even though some people spent more readily time with their fellow believers or compatriots. Apart from many other artistic aspects, the fact that there was so much tolerance, Kazimierz Dolny was a phenomenal place for an artistic colony.

Figures:

1. Adolf Behrman, *Part of a synagogue interior in Kazimierz on the Vistula*, 1937, Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, source: *W Kazimierzu Wisła mówiła do nich po żydowsku... malarze żydowscy w kazimierskiej kolonii artystycznej*, opr. W. Odorowski, Kazimierz Dolny 2008.
2. Sasza Blonder, *Houses (Kazimierz on the Vistula)*, circa 1936/37, Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, source: *W Kazimierzu Wisła mówiła do nich po żydowsku... malarze żydowscy w kazimierskiej kolonii artystycznej*, opr. W. Odorowski, Kazimierz Dolny 2008.
3. Menasze Seidenbeutel, *View of Kazimierz upon the Vistula River*, 1930, National Muzeum, Warsaw, source: *W Kazimierzu Wisła mówiła do nich po żydowsku... malarze żydowscy w kazimierskiej kolonii artystycznej*, opr. W. Odorowski, Kazimierz Dolny 2008.
4. Abraham Neumann, *Market Square in Kazimierz on the Vistula*, after 1902, Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, source: *W Kazimierzu Wisła mówiła do nich po żydowsku... malarze żydowscy w kazimierskiej kolonii artystycznej*, opr. W. Odorowski, Kazimierz Dolny 2008.

²¹ <http://chaimgoldberg.com/chaimgoldberg/30.06.2013>.

²² <http://www.wkazimierzudolnym.pl/chaim-goldberg.html> 30.06.2013.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Remarks on the Jewish Art Colony in Kazimierz Dolny

Kazimierz Dolny (*Kuzmir*) was visited and painted by many artists. Before 1914, and during the interwar period, there had been a lot of Jews among the artists, and the art colony of Kazimierz Dolny became one of the most important and popular places among them. However, there never was anything like a strictly Jewish artistic colony or Jewish artistic community in Kazimierz Dolny and there never was exactly a Polish colony. So, it is easier to speak about artists-Jews in Kazimierz Dolny's artistic colony or Kazimierz Dolny's artistic circle than about a "national" or "ethnic" colony. The boundaries among particular groups were flexible and it was not the nationality that defined those boundaries.