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WŁADYSŁAW KLIMCZAK (1923–2021), NAMELY PERSISTENCE IN ACHIEVING GOALS

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Born on 6 March 1923 in Solec Kujawski, Władysław Klimczak, aged 98, passed away on 9 April 2021 in Cracow, where he was buried at the Salwator Cemetery on 15 April. Being an individual of an undeniably clear-cut personality, he was controversial, eccentric, domineering, yet independent, strongly professional and effective. Dynamic, spontaneous, and hardworking, he followed the motto: *Eat tomorrow what you are intending to eat today, do today what you are intending to do tomorrow*.¹ Liked by some, he was criticized by others. People will remember him first of all as the creator and organizer of the Museum of Photography in Cracow and President of the Cracow Photographic Association (KTF).

Forever interested in photography and history, he paid the price of being arrested by the Nazis in 1943 for documenting the Holocaust, while in 1945 by the Soviets for documenting the first days of the liberation. Apart from photography, he was passionate about cars. He co-created the Polish Automobile and Motorcycle Association, and initiated the resuming of the pre-1939 activity by the Automobile Club of Poland.

Initially bonded with Poznań, he finally decided to settle down in Cracow. Although wishing to become a lawyer or a chemist, in 1947, he began studying at the Higher Economics School in Cracow and at the Historical-Philosophical Department at the Jagiellonian University. Having graduated in 1952, he began working as a teacher at the Szczepan Humbert State Industrial School in Cracow. Nevertheless, he chose to remain a photographer and journalist, in the 1960s having bonded himself with the editorial staff of 'Dziennik Polski' published in Cracow.

However, what remained Władysław Klimczak's greatest passion was the work for the Cracow Photographic Association (KTF), of which he was president as of 1961. He initiated KTF's monthly meetings called 'Wednesday Soirees by Candlelight' participated by practitioners and theoreticians, amateurs and lovers of photographic art, often future professionals and artists, such as e.g., Jan Sunderland, photographer of the mountains, or Kazimierz Foryński Eng, Director of the Bydgoszcz Photochemical Plant. The meetings launched in October 1971 were interesting and vivid. Władysław Klimczak was famed for his ability to talk about history and documents, photographs and their technique. During the meeting different photographs were frequently shown, and the moderator often evaluated them. He could be severe: no social connections attenuated the verdict.

As the Association's President, he tried to promote photography not only during the meetings he organised, but also serving as a curator of many exhibitions, dedicated both to history and to art, particularly those presenting the beauty of a female body. The latter were regarded as extremely controversial, and even aroused outrage. In 1961, he co-created the national photography exhibition 'A Soldier, a Friend, a Defender', and authored its catalogue under the same title. In 1964, he prepared the display 'Cracow and Its University' presented alongside the exhibition of Jerzy Werner's nudes, mounted at the gallery at 9 Stolarska Street. On the preview day, however, the nudes were covered up so as not to scandalize the public and Cracow's authorities. Two years later, he curated the 'Girl's Impressions' Exhibition made up of the photographs by Kazimiera Dyakowska, precursor of the female nude in



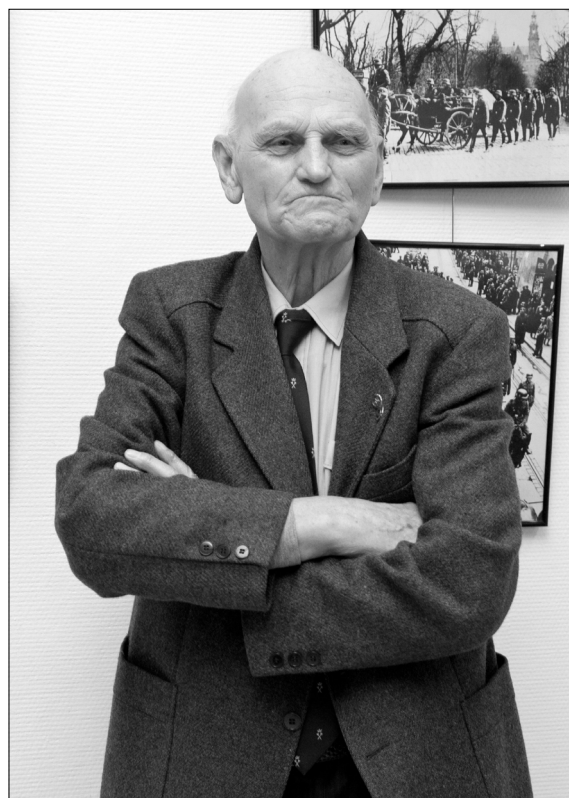
Poland. In 1968, he opened two exhibitions: 'From Classical to Modern Nude' and 'Landscape and Nature of the Cracow Region'. Two years later he discontinued his teaching activity, and dedicated himself entirely to KTF. Subsequently, Klimczak succeeded in acquiring the Puget Palace for the Association, located at 13 Heroes of Stalingrad Street (today restored to its pre-WW II name of Starowiślna), and immediately got down to renovating it. After the refurbishing it served as the venue for the 'Venus' Photography Salons. The first 'Venus 70' Polish Salon of Artistic Photography, still on a domestic scale, was opened on 6 May 1970, and, as it turned out later, was the most popular exhibition in Poland.² The display showed real grandeur: 231 authors from around Poland sent in 1.155 photograms of which the jury admitted 205 to the competition. In two gallery rooms 160 photograms were on show, while in the club room the display titled 'Experimental Wall' was mounted. Fearing protests and accusations of moral corruption, the posters announcing the Exhibition stated that *no admission for under 16*. The following year, 'Venus' was already an international salon. The jury awarded prizes in three categories: black-and-white photographs, coloured photographs, and slides. The authors could win the Grand Prix, namely a statuette of Venus, as well as gold, silver, and bronze medals, and honorary diplomas. The last 'Venus' photography exhibition of female nudes and portraits was held at the Pod Krzywym Kołem Gallery at 55 Karmelicka Street in 1991. Many exhibitions would not have been mounted had it not been for Władysław Klimczak's personal contacts; he strongly insisted on maintaining interpersonal relations and good relations between institutions. Furthermore, he incessantly emphasized the need for KTF members to participate

in foreign exhibitions. He co-operated with e.g., Dresden's Foto Klub Exakta, Fotokreis Wetter from the Ruhr, or Foto Klub Miskolc and Foto Klub Vac from Hungary.

Klimczak's recurrent dream around that time was to create the National Photo Collection which could serve for the collection and display of historic photographs up to the works of contemporary artists. In 1972, as a result of KTF President's efforts, the Association selected within its structure a collection called the Museum of History of Photography. Four years later, on 15 December 1976, Władysław Klimczak declared the foundation of the first in Poland Władysław Bogacki Museum of History of Photography, operating within KTF's structure at 13 Heroes of Stalingrad Street, next door to the Association's seat. At that point, the Museum boasted an archive of old photography and the section of all photographic equipment, instruments and devices from old ateliers. From the very beginning Klimczak also felt the urgency to collect books essential for working with photography.

On 18 March 1977, he published an announcement encouraging Cracow's residents to donate or sell objects for the newly established Museum, promising each donor to be entered into a list of honorary Museum founders. Oblivious to his personal comfort, he would travel across Poland in his private car in search of 'treasures'. Each such trip climaxed with interesting items, most of which were donations.

When on 31 December 1986 a separate state institution, no longer affiliated to KTF, was founded, he became its Director, heading the Museum until 1990. In autumn 1988, the Museum and the Association left the Puget Palace, moving to the Hetman Tenement House at 17 Main Market Square.



In this new environment, Klimczak began working on an exhibition dedicated to challenging historical topics. He was the originator and organiser of two displays sharing the same title 'It Is Them Who Perished at Katyn' (1989 and 1990). The exhibition was shown in Cracow and subsequently in Budapest to accompany the 'Totalitarianism in Central Europe' Conference, as well as in Moscow and Vilnius. Despite the times being difficult and uncertain, Klimczak did not yield to criticism and censorship's requirements. He was the first in Poland to boldly tackle the topic others before him had feared.

In 1992, with the previous owners having regained their ownership title to the tenement house, the Museum of Photography was allocated a different seat at 16 Józefitów Street, while as of 1993, KFT found home at the 'Nafta' Gallery in the Building of the Oil and Gas Exploration Company Cracow located at the Oil and Gas Institute at 25 Lubicz Street.

Władysław Klimczak did not cease his display activity. He mounted subsequent exhibitions, committing to the process with his usual energy. Among many displays, let us mention merely several: 'Unforgettable Oil Fields: Bóbrka, Borysław, Bitków, Drohobycz' (1996); 'Occupied Cracow in Saved Photographs' (2003): an exhibition prepared with Prof. Aleksander Skotnicki, Head of the Haematology Clinic at the Jagiellonian University Collegium Medicum and President of the Prof. Julian Aleksandrowicz Foundation; 'Jewish Community in Poland: Customs and Participation in the Struggle for Independence' (2004); 'Atmospheric Oil' (2009); 'Cracow under Occupation: Photographs and Documents', the latter at the Stradom Dialogue Centre at 11 Stradomska Street (2013).

Despite having formally parted with the state Museum of Photography, Władysław Klimczak never stopped his adventure of collecting photographs. He continued visiting the flea markets held at the Market Hall and frequented antique shops where he would uncover priceless historic objects testifying to photographic art. He never stopped following the Museum's activity, supporting it, however disputing with its every subsequent Director.

In March 2013, the Stradom Dialogue Centre in Cracow was the venue for a grand celebration of Władysław Klimczak's 90th Birthday.



All photos: Mirosław Żak, MuFo Image Documentation Studio

Together with Michał Klimecki, Klimczak authored the book *Polish Legions* published in 1990, and illustrated with unique documentary photographs; together with Aleksander Skotnicki he also prepared the following publications: *Jewish Community in Poland* and *Władysław Sikorski and His Soldiers*.

In 1971, he was admitted as a real member to The Photographic Society of America, the largest photographic society worldwide, with his membership card featuring the number: PSA 20568. Honoured with the distinction Excellence FIAP of the International Federation of Photographic Art and the Willy Heng Preis, in 2005, he became Honorary Member of the Cracow Photographic Club and, in 2007, was awarded the Medal of the 20 Years of the Museum of History of Photography in Cracow.

Abstract: The protagonist of the paper is Władysław Klimczak, a long-standing President of the Cracow Photographic Association as well as the founder and the first director of Cracow's Museum of History of Photography. The portrait of W. Klimczak is outlined: a controversial

individual of a clear-cut personality, eccentric, dynamic and hard-working, he was nevertheless extremely professional in his activities. The documentary exhibitions as well as the 'Venus' controversial ones mounted and curated by Władysław Klimczak are discussed.

Keywords: Władysław Klimczak, Museum of Photography in Cracow, Cracow Photographic Association, photography exhibition.

Endnotes

¹ *Władysław Klimczak. Człowiek, który stworzył „Venus”* [Klimczak. The Man Who Created 'Venus'], 'Przekrój' 1996, No. 11, p. 5.

² *II Międzynarodowy Salon Fotografii Artystycznej Venus 71. Akt i Portret. Ostatnie dni I części wystawy* [Venus 71 Second International Salon of Artistic Photography. Nude and Portrait. The Last Days of the First Part of the Exhibition], Guide, Krakowskie Towarzystwo Fotograficzne, Kraków grudzień-listopad 1971, p. 1.

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Table of contents 2021: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/13664>