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On the Relationship between History, Life, and Art

Reflections on the Biography of a Polish Sculptor, Grzegorz Pecuch (1923–2008), and his Artistic Work in the 1940s and 1950s*

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Chrudzimska-Uhera, Katarzyna: On the Relationship between History, Life, and Art Reflections on the Biography of a Polish Sculptor, Grzegorz Pecuch (1923–2008), and his Artistic Work in the 1940s and 1950s

The life and work of Grzegorz Pecuch (1923–2008), a Lemko sculptor active after World War II in Zakopane (Poland), will serve as a case study to illustrate how history, having taken its toll on nations, also determined many of Pecuch's personal and professional decisions. In this article, we will show this relationship, presenting art as an expression of emotions and a record of the artist's experiences during World War II and the Stalinist period in Poland. We view the artist's biography and opinions as crucial sources, serving not only as factual accounts in and of themselves, but also as the context for interpretation. We will adopt an approach close to anthropological aesthetics, suggested as a research method in literary studies and the history of art.

Key Words *Polish Lemkos; 20th Century; Poland; Sculpture; Art History; Zakopane*

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Grzegorz Pecuch, a Polish sculptor, was born on 23 January 1923 as the eldest of six children to Jan (died 1954) and Melania née Leszko (died 1985).[1] He grew up in the Lemko Region, a mountainous frontier area that is now part of Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. (Fig. 1) The Lemkos (Łemkowie) are an East Slavic ethnic group. At different times, they have identified themselves as a subgroup of the Ruthenians (Carpatho-Rusyns) or the Ukrainians. Pecuch, as a fully-fledged artist, often emphasized that his native land shaped his sensitivity and helped forge a unique and close relationship with nature. He would identify the dramatic history of this frontier as being significant for the development of his character, as well as spurring a creative impulse within him – in this case realized in sculpture – which helped him to survive and overcome difficult moments in his life.

* The text was translated by Ewa Muszyńska.

1 More about the life and artwork of the sculptor in: CHRUDZIMSKA-UHERA, Katarzyna: Rytm Natury : O życiu i rzeźbiarstwie Grzegorza Pecucha (1923–2008) [The Rhythm of Nature : On the Life and Sculptures of Grzegorz Pecuch (1923–2008) – this title, and all the following titles in the footnotes have been translated into English for the purpose of this article]. Warszawa 2022 (*open access*: https://wydawnictwo.uksw.edu.pl/ksiegarnia/976--e-book-rytm-natury-o-zyciu-i-rzezbiarstwie-grzegorza-pecucha-1923-2008.html).

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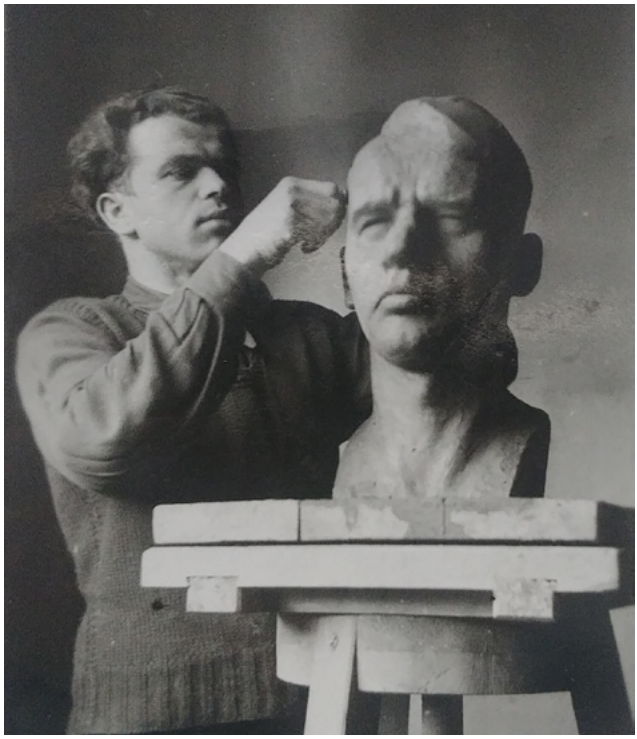


Fig. 1: Grzegorz Pecuch, a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 1950–1955. Photographer unknown, private collection.

History, having taken its toll on the Lemkos, also determined many of Pecuch's personal and professional decisions. In this article, we will show this relationship, presenting art as an expression of emotions and a record of the artist's experiences. We view the artist's biography and opinions as crucial sources, serving not only as factual accounts in and of themselves but also as the context for interpretation. We will adopt an approach close to anthropological aesthetics, suggested as a research method in literary studies and the history of art.[2] In accordance with the intention of its authors, we will refer to biographism and psychologism, methods discredited by the 20th-century avant-garde, who contested the idea of genius and the special status for the artist (as represented by, e.g., Wölfflin's idea of art history without names). Magdalena Popiel notes that in the second half of the 20th century (with postmodernism), the rational model of analysis of artifacts started to give way to *thinking determined by aesthetics*, and a postmodern philosophy of man that placed the *mythical image of the creator*[3] at its centre. This was in line with the modernist emphasis on conceptual thought and the recognition of the artist's intention as foundational to the artwork. Anthropological aesthetics, on the other hand, as a record

[2] POPIEL, Magdalena: Artysta awangardowy – między arcyludzkim a nieludzkim : Próba estetyki antropologicznej [An Avant-Garde Artist – Between All-Too-Human and Inhuman. An Attempt at Anthropological Aesthetics]. *Teksty Drugie* 2011, 6, pp. 49–73; Ead: *„Artysta jest obecny" : Problem tożsamości artysty nowoczesnego i ponowoczesnego ["An Artist is Present" : A Problem of the Identity of a Modern and Postmodern Artist*]. Białystok 2018.

[3] Ead: Artysta awangardowy, pp. 50–51.

of the history of creation, brings the *man who creates* to the foreground and describes *the condition of the doer*[4] rather than just treating the aesthetics of artists as an auxiliary source and autopoietic texts as material for basic research.

The methodology outlined in this way may raise doubts and expectations of a more distinct connection between life events and artistic expression. But how, beyond a doubt, can one prove the connection between art and the artist's mental state? Art historians who use psychoanalysis as a method of interpretation adopt two fundamental attitudes in this respect. First, they consider that the work reveals what is really important or, on the contrary, they treat creativity as a veil for what is painful.[5] In both of these cases, the anthropological method is justified. But one has to be convinced that there exists a multidimensional narrative with respect to artists – where the narrative is not limited to the level of an artifact but instead encompasses the artists' activities, events they participate in, and their experiences. In addition, it is justified when in research we are *more attracted to a man in their creative dimension rather than to formal analyses of their work, even though usually it is an artwork that draws our attention to the creator*.[6]

For this reason, in this article, the works of Grzegorz Pecuch will be presented in the context of the wartime experiences of the inhabitants of the Lemko Region and the postwar period of consolidation of the people's regime in Poland. As research material, in addition to the artifacts, we will use press interviews, fragments of private correspondence, and the artist's memoirs. They are subjective and sometimes deeply personal. Therefore, in accordance with the adopted methodology, we consider them to sufficiently substantiate the conclusions drawn about Pecuch's motivations and influences. At the same time, we are aware that some hypotheses may seem too speculative to historians, as they are not supported by additional evidence. But art does not tell a direct story. It expresses lived experiences and emotions. And understanding it often requires moving away from purely rational explanations. So, more direct evidence linking the artist's experiences to his artworks is very often just impossible to indicate.

War experiences

After the outbreak of World War II, the people in the Lemko Region, like those in the entire General Government, were subjected to forced labour.[7] In March 1940, Grzegorz Pecuch, who was not yet 17, and his brother Bazyl, two years his junior, were deported to perform forced labour in the German Reich.[8] His stay in Germany and the relationship with the family of the farmstead proprietor (his employer, Wriggers) can be partially recreated using later accounts and records. This includes a press interview and correspondence with Elke Petter from the Municipal Archives in Ahrensburg, and correspondence with Gertruda Preis, Wriggers's daughter.[9] Nearly thirty years after these events, Pecuch

4 Ibidem, p. 52.

5 SOSNOWSKA, Joanna: *Ukryte w obrazach* [Hidden in images]. Warszawa 2012, p. 11.

6 POPIEL M.: Artysta jest obecny, p. 26.

7 WILK, Anna: Łemkowie *: Między integracją a rozproszeniem (1918–1989)* [The Lemkos : Between the Integration and Dispersion (1918–1989)]. Warszawa 2019, p. 214.

8 He was assigned to the farm of Heinrich Wriggers in Bünningstedt near Hamburg.

9 ADAMIECKI, Wojciech: Zanim zaśpiewa drzewo [Before a Tree Sings]. *Ty i Ja* 1970, 11(127), pp. 24–27. The correspondence of Elke Petter from the years 2002–2003 concerns an exhibition prepared by the Germans about

confessed: *I happen to have awful dreams. Most often about war. The memory comes back to this. I took some hard knocks then. In March 1940, I was deported to do forced labour in Germany. I was 16 then. It is called the prime of youth. They hung a plate with a number around my neck. I became a man numbered 316.*[10] It is difficult to assess how the relationship between the young forced labourer and his employer changed over time. Initially, Pecuch lived with the farm animals. He took care of the animals, tended the garden, worked the land, and logged the trees. During the Western Allied invasion, he, along with other labourers, was forced to build an air-raid shelter and help with the transport of retreating German troops. Not reconciled to his fate, he made multiple attempts to escape, but art turned out to be a more efficient route to freedom.

One day, a spring storm uprooted an old pear tree growing in the employer's orchard, and Pecuch was ordered to remove the fallen tree. Direct contact with the wood felt like returning to his homeland. The sculptor reminisced: *In my village, my father and I often went to the forest. From my earliest years, he taught me how to use a saw and an axe. And now I was looking at this fallen pear tree, which the Bauer asked me to cut neatly for tinder, and thought about the grove in the Beskids and our forest near Kiczera. I cut the branch. The wood was soft, sappy. I pitied the wood* [...] *and I hid a few blocks in the stable where I lived with the horses and cattle. In the evening, I picked the nicest block and I axed it in half*.[11] At that time, he created two early works: *The Horse* and *The Lion*. The former is a small, painted figurine of a rider, his self-portrait.[12] (Fig. 2) The choice of this theme was not incidental. In Bünningstedt, Pecuch lived with horses, took care of them, and shared a *heartfelt and dangerous friendship*[13] with them. He was eager to take care of horses because in Florynka, his native village, owning horses was a sign of wealth and high status for a farmer.[14] It was probably with this intention – to emphasize 'being better' – that in Germany he sculpted himself: proudly straightened, wearing a well-fitted suit and shiny officer boots, bravely mounting a horse. *The Horse* is a very special artwork. After the war, Pecuch took it with him to Florynka and treated it as a talisman during important moments when his fate and career were being decided.

The circumstances in which the other sculpture from Bünningstedt was created, and its meaning, are mysterious. *The Lion* (Fig. 3) is also a small wooden statue, about 20 cm tall, representing a stylized figure of the king of animals in the pose of a heraldic supporter. In its lifted paws, the lion holds a shield with a trident – a symbol of the independence of Ukraine. The animal's pose resembles the national emblem of the West Ukrainian People's Republic (hereinafter WUPR), established in November 1918 in Eastern Galicia and the Lemko Region. The WUPR was established as an independent Ukrainian state, co-existing with the Ukrainian People's Republic, whose symbol was a golden trident on

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forced labour during the Second World War in Ahrensburg and the surrounding villages. On this occasion, contact was made with Gertruda Preis, the daughter of Wriggers, whom Pecuch remembered from his time in Germany. Correspondence preserved in G. Pecuch's family's collection.

[10] Ibidem, p. 26.

[11] ZEGADŁÓWNA, Zdzisława (ed.): *Pecuch Grzegorz : Wydobyłem rzeźbę z lasu* [I Took the Sculpture Out of the Woods]. Nowy Sącz 1987, pp. 5–6.

[12] Ibidem.

[13] Ibidem, p. 6.

[14] A statement in the documentary: *Wydobyłem rzeźbę z lasu* [I Took the Sculpture Out of the Woods], directed by Grzegorz Dubowski, TVP 1991.

a blue field. In January 1919 both states nominally united. However, shortly thereafter, in the spring of 1923, Eastern Galicia (where Pecuch hailed from) was incorporated into Poland as a result of military action.[15]



Fig. 2: The Horse, 1945. Photo: Norbert Piwowarczyk, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.



Fig. 3: The Lion, 1944. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.

[15] NIEŚCIORUK Jarosław: Polityka zagraniczna Zachodnio-Ukraińskiej Republiki Ludowej w latach 1918–1923 [The Foreign Policy of the West Ukrainian People's Republic in the Years 1918–1923]. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, sec. F (History) 11–12, 1997–1998, pp. 386ff.

It is unclear why, twenty years later, in far-away Bünningstedt, a young Lemko man performing slave labour for the proprietor of a farmstead used these national symbols. The answer is even more difficult to fathom as we do not know who instigated the notion of the sculpture or the circumstances of its execution. What is certain is that *The Lion* was appreciated, as it is still on display in Wriggers's home. In 2002, Gertruda, the daughter of the proprietor, emphasized that it continuously reminded the family of a young labourer from the East. The sculptor's explanations did not provide much insight, as he remembered only that the inspiration to create this particular sculpture came from ancient images of animals which he had seen in a book gifted to him by his German employer. The form of *The Lion*, however, is too far removed from ancient animalistic representations. Pecuch's story seems to be an attempt to hide the true meaning of the work. It is quite likely that he himself thought of the form and ideology for this composition. He learned about the history of Ukraine, probably including recent events, while attending the primary school in Univ. He remembered Mykola Diuk, his teacher, as a *true Ukrainian patriot*, who told his pupils about the history and culture of his homeland – *about Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, and other Ukrainian national poets*.[16] It can be assumed that for Pecuch, Ukraine at that time symbolized a nation close to the Lemkos that had reclaimed its freedom. The territory of Ukraine, its culture and people belonged to the frontier where Pecuch grew up. However, it should be noted that in the debate about the future of the Lemko Region, the inhabitants of its western part (where Florynka is located) were sceptical about Ukraine and leaned towards Russia. It should be kept in mind that the issues concerning the identity of the Lemko people were complicated by various influences in this multicultural environment and were not always clear to the Lemko people themselves.

The question of whether Wriggers understood the meaning of the gift from Pecuch remains unanswered. Was he aware that with this artwork, the young labourer demonstrated his dreams about freedom and independence? Maybe they discussed this sculpture together, deliberating over its form? It is certain that *The Lion* was executed after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union (1941), when the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists supported the actions of the German army. The Bauer's attitude towards war was also determined by his son's death at the front line. Maybe this chain of events made Wriggers reconsider his opinion on the Lemko, whom he had perceived as an enemy, and the sculpture was a confirmation of this change in attitude, marking a new chapter in their relationship?

Back home again

At the beginning of 1945, Grzegorz and Bazyl Pecuch left Bünningstedt, and in the summer, they returned to Florynka. The war had not finished there though. The eastern parts of Poland were still within the sphere of military activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. The atmosphere of those days was captured in Pecuch's memories of a wedding celebration in 1945, which was interrupted by a neighbour arriving with news of a robbery. The wedding guests abandoned their dances and ran to help, believing they were facing a raid by UIA fighters. As it turned out, the aggressors were soldiers of the Polish Army who mistook the approaching boys for partisans and opened fire. Pecuch barely saved his

[16] ПОПОВИЧ, Володимир: *Григорій Пецух. Нарис життя і творчости*. Між Сусідами. Między Sąsiadami. *Almanach Fundacji Świętego Włodzimierza Chrzciciela Rusi Kijowskiej* 5–6, 1995–1996, p. 76.

neck. And the memory of wedding music intermingled with the sounds of gunfire and flying bullets stayed with him forever. Fifteen years later, at his own wedding, there were no dances! Pecuch conveyed the impact of this experience in his sculpture titled *The Wedding* (*Dance*), which resembles a spinning top – a child's toy. (Fig. 4) On a semi-circular base, two men and two women dressed in folk clothing face each other. When put in motion, the Lemko couples spin in their dance, in complete silence. The sculptor admitted: *After all this I believe that playing music is not necessary at the wedding* [...] *Machine guns played*.[17]

This dramatic situation was a consequence of unresolved national antagonisms and territorial demands, and was further intensified by the post-war changes in borders. The need to suppress Ukrainian partisans was used as an excuse by the Polish government to carry out an operation of forced resettlement, codenamed *Vistula* (28 April – 31 July 1947), which also covered territories where Ukrainian guerilla forces were either weak or non-existent. According to historians, this was the case in the West Lemko Region, where there was only one external sotnia operating. Together with sparse partisan groups and a civilian network of supporters, they numbered just a few dozen people in total. Irrespective of this, almost twenty-five thousand people were resettled from the region. The true objective of the operation was to get rid of the Ukrainian population, hence ethnicity was the determining factor in selection. Moreover, the last resettlements were executed in 1950, three years after the formal completion of the operation, when the Ukrainian underground did not exist anymore.[18]



Fig. 4: The Wedding (Dance), 1960. Photo: Norbert Piwowarczyk, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.

17 A statement in the documentary: *Wydobyłem rzeźbę z lasu*.

18 PISULIŃSKI, Jan: *Akcja specjalna „Wisła"* [Operation "Vistula"]. Rzeszów 2017, pp. 451, 453.

Resettlements began on 28 April at four in the morning. Florynka was designated one of the assembly points, where the headquarters of the 6th Infantry Division coordinating the operation was stationed.[19] The Lemkos were informed about the deportation *usually a day before* [...]*, so that they packed, prepared foodstuffs (hardtack), and animal feed. It happened, though, that they were given only a few hours* [...]*, or even less*.[20] How much preparation time was given to Jan and Melania Pecuch? We do not know. It is only certain that in June 1947, they and their children arrived at an entraining station in nearby Grybów, where they were made to camp under difficult conditions, crowded behind barbed wire like thousands of their compatriots in similar places. They were resettled to the Recovered Territories in the west.[21]

At that time, Grzegorz Pecuch lived in Zakopane, where he studied at the school of sculpture.[22] He visited his parents during the summer holidays and witnessed traumatic scenes at the station in Grybów. Once he returned to Zakopane, he depicted these difficult experiences in a monumental painting on the wall of the director's office in the school building. The painting was called *The Resettlement* (and not, as Pecuch wanted – *The Resettlement of the Lemkos*) and survived for only a few years. The official cause for its removal was its bad technical condition, but one can think of a more serious political reason for its removal. Pecuch executed the painting at the prompting of his teacher – Antoni Kenar (1906–1959), who took care of the student in this difficult time. When the fate of the work was decided, Kenar suggested that some scenes from *The Resettlement* be *retained on pottery*. In this way, two pottery jugs were created, decorated with people carrying bundles and riding a horse-drawn cart. Next to these scenes, Pecuch depicted scared mothers hugging their children and a representation of a *man who was in charge of the resettlement,* [who] *had a gun and a dog*.[23] In retrospect, the sculptor concluded: *These were tough issues.* [...] *Fear and hatred were among people. Ten years later, I was in Florynka. Strangers lived in our house. I knocked at the door in the late evening. The householder finally opened the door with an axe in his hand*.[24]

Artistic education

The year 1950, in which Grzegorz Pecuch started his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, was a peak period for the doctrine of real socialism. Artistic freedom was subjugated to the propaganda of the people's government. Pecuch – talented, hard-working, born in a village – had all the characteristics desired by socialist ideologues. That is why in 1949, while still a secondary school student in Zakopane, he was featured in a column in the *Razem* weekly, which catered to young readers.[25] Later articles presented him as a student, one of the beneficiaries of the government stipend system, which enabled him

19 Ibidem, pp. 397, 399.

20 Ibidem, p. 398.

21 Ibidem, p. 447. The Pecuchs were relocated to the village of Pożrzadło, in the gmina of Łagów, in the Lubusz Voivodeship.

22 He started his education in 1947 at the Wood Industry School, which was renamed the Secondary School of Fine Arts in Zakopane in 1948. Since he did not live in Florynka at that time, he was not listed for relocation.

23 A statement in the documentary: *Wydobyłem rzeźbę z lasu*.

24 ADAMIECKI, W.: Zanim zaśpiewa drzewo, pp. 26–27.

25 Junak Pecuch jest rzeźbiarzem [Junak Pecuch Is a Sculptor]. *Razem* 1949, 5–11 October, [excerpt], n. pag.

to study in the capital.[26] Purely propagandistic in nature was a fully illustrated article dedicated to Pecuch published in 1953 in *Nowa Wieś*, a weekly magazine of the Union of Polish Youth.[27] The author of the text intentionally manipulated facts from the artist's life to emphasize the contrast between the antebellum period, which offered no opportunities for a talented village boy, and the welfare provided by a socialist government. While praising Pecuch's sculptures, she stressed: *In today's People's Republic of Poland, social advancement is open to peasant-worker youth*.[28]

This article is a valuable testimony of the times, revealing the mechanisms of pressure, manipulation, and disinformation that citizens were subjected to during the Stalinist era. Read today, it must disgust and appal. We may guess that it raised similar emotions in Grzegorz Pecuch, who remembered well the acute period of terror in the Lemko Region under the people's regime. He benefited from the new system, which opened a path for social advancement for peasants, primarily through universal access to education. However, his doubts about starting his studies at the Academy[29] reveal that he was aware of not only the advantages but also the compromises he would need to make. He retained a strong memory of his background. Just as in the past, during the Stalinist era, the awareness of his identity allowed him to find a safe haven and maintain his dignity. He recalled: *the Academy was under the influence of* [...] *the doctrine of socialist realism*. [...] *There was just one rule: you must copy nature. For me, it was a return to the original state. In Florynka, I also copied nature*.[30] This firm point of reference helped him to survive, dodge, and fake artistic and ideological correctness.

In 1955, Pecuch worked towards his graduation.[31] At the same time, invited by Antoni Kenar, he started teaching at the Secondary School of Fine Arts in Zakopane. *He arrived in Zakopane with a project for his diploma sculpture. Kenar looked at it and started a discussion, casually, like he used to during his school tutorials. He did not specify what or how things should be done, but he clearly indicated that while the sculpture contained all the 'academic' solutions, there was 'no Pecuch in it!' – 'Go back home* [...] *Make a sculpture as you like it, as if you did not study at the Academy'. This 'homecoming' was a second insight into the artist's personality*.[32] In reality, Pecuch showed Kenar not one – as the author of the quoted article wrote – but two diploma sculptures. These were *The Bandurist* and *The Corn* (*A Girl with Corn*) made in plaster, which he intended to execute on a larger scale in wood. Both models comply with the canon rules of figurative representations in socialist realism, but they are not conventional. *The Corn* (Fig. 5) presents a young woman

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26 WYSOCKI, Adam Witold: Nowi ludzie nowej Akademii : Skończyła się malarska „bryndza" [New People of the New Academy. The End of Painted Mediocrity]. *Polska i Świat* 1951, 4 November, [excerpt], n. pag.

27 GOLAŃSKA, Krystyna: *Nie święci garnki lepią* [Where There Is a Will, There Is a Way]. Nowa Wieś 1953, [excerpt], n. pag.

28 Ibidem.

29 From archived letters, we know that Pecuch hesitated for a long time before deciding to start his studies, a decision he was encouraged to make by Antoni and Halina Kenar (a teacher and the director of the school in Zakopane).

30 ADAMIECKI, W.: Zanim zaśpiewa drzewo, p. 27.

31 PECUCH, Grzegorz: *Podanie o przyjęcie tematów pracy dyplomowej* [An Application for the Approval of Diploma Topics], Zakopane, 18 October 1955, handwriting, the Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, c. 82; Idem: P*odanie o dopuszczenie do pracy dyplomow*ej [An Application for Admission to the Diploma Thesis Process], Warszawa 16 June 1955, handwriting, the Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, c. 108.

32 ANIOŁ, Jan: Akademia Kenara [Kenar's Academy]. *Wieści : Tygodnik społeczno-polityczny poświęcony sprawom wsi* 1969, 2 March, p. 1.





Fig. 5 (on the left): The Corn (A Girl with Corn), 1956. Photo: R. Stanik, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.
Fig. 6 (on the right): The Bandurist, 1956. Photo: R. Stanik, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.

reaching out to corn stalks and pulling them slightly towards her. She is far from the image of a shock worker (*udarnik*); the image is closer to the allegory of fertility and crops. The bandurist – the subject of the other work (Fig.6) is even less obvious. It was an authentic figure of a travelling singer, which nevertheless had a strong symbolic meaning relating to the tradition and national identity of Ukraine. From the second half of the 19th century, the travelling singer was a popular protagonist in romantic literature and paintings. In the Stalinist era bandurists were severely persecuted and executed en masse.[33] Using this meaningful symbol of national consolidation was not accidental. *The Bandurist* is an energetic and joyful young man, even though in reality these singers were usually disabled (blind) and assisted by a young apprentice.[34] Pecuch did not present a legendary or historical figure, but proposed a new embodiment of tradition and memory. The sculpture can be perceived as a commentary on the contemporary situation of the nations incorporated into the Soviet Union and on the artist's own fate – as someone from the borderlands.

Influenced by conversations with Kenar, Pecuch gave up further work on the plaster models of *The Corn* and *The Bandurist*. Instead, he started working on two new projects. This time he did not sketch and model, but carved the forms directly in wood. The first work – titled *The Lemko* (*On Sunday*) (Fig. 7) – is a figure of a young man wearing regional clothes: a hat with a rolled brim, a shirt (*sorochka*), wide trousers with straight legs, and shoes called *kierpce*. His shoulders are covered with a *czuha* – a wide cape with a large collar falling down his back. In the Lemko Region, czuha was an important element of male clothing – it was a sign of prestige. It was worn on special occasions and was mandatory

[33] KOŚCIÓŁEK, Jakub: Kobziarze-bandurzyści w kulturze i historii narodu ukraińskiego [Kobzar-Bandurists in Ukrainian Culture and History]. *Acta Neophilologica* XIV, 2012, No. 1, pp. 206–208.

[34] Ibidem, pp. 205–206.

for weddings.[35] The other sculpture – *The Life* (*Rest*) (Fig. 8) continues the motif of womanhood, first introduced in *The Corn*, in conjunction with the idea of fertility and harvest. It is a female nude, presenting a woman with wide hips and big breasts. The woman has her eyes closed and appears to be meditating, leaning against the trunk of a wide tree that seems to grow out of her body. At its crown, among leaves shaped like hearts, there is a bird sitting on its nest.



Fig. 7: The Lemko (On Sunday), a sculpture standing on a street in Warsaw, 1956. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.

When Kenar was convincing his students to *go back home*, he, in fact, encouraged them to rebuild an order of meanings and to find an *imaginarium*, lost or forgotten over the course of history. Pecuch reached into his own resources of symbols, which the war and Stalinism subdued but never managed to eradicate. He confirmed his relationship with the Lemko ethnic group and referred to the topos of the triumph of life over death driven by the power of nature. When asked about this period years later, he concluded: *I knew* [...]

35 REINFUSS, Roman: *Śladami Łemków* [In the Footsteps of the Lemkos]. Warsaw 1990, pp. 38–40.

that I had changed and found my way.[36] In sculpture, this "homecoming" translated into a fundamental change in his creative process. He rejected the academic system of working based on consecutive stages of sketching and modelling. From then on, he worked directly with the material, almost exclusively with wood.

In June 1956, Pecuch transported his diploma sculptures (*The Bandurist*, *The Corn*, *The Lemko* and *The Life*) by train from Zakopane to Warsaw. He showed them to Professor Marian Wnuk, who *said, rubbing his chin:* "*Maybe we need to sculpt like Pecuch does?*".[37] This response was not solely due to the professor's open-mindedness. At that time, the atmosphere at the Academy (and in the country) was already different from when Pecuch studied. Since 1954, gradual but noticeable changes heralding the upcoming political "thaw" were visible. After graduating with a diploma in sculpture in 1956, Grzegorz Pecuch returned to Zakopane, where he spent the rest of his life.

Pecuch's wartime and postwar stories – both sculptured and written – reveal an artist who contested the abusive dominance of man over the world, emphasizing harmony with the natural processes of existence. He built and confirmed his identity as a man from the borderlands. Viewing Pecuch from an anthropological perspective – which involves analysing artifacts in the light of their relationship to the creative process and the author's personality – also reflects contemporary contemplations on the world. After all, the questions we ask in front of works of art reflect upon us – viewers and researchers – revealing what we are looking for in art and what answers we expect. Do we want to "read" works of art or would we rather they talk to us and share their own history?



Fig. 8: The Life (Rest). Photo: Norbert Piwowarczyk, courtesy of Zofia and Dariusz Pecuch.

[36] ANIOŁ, J.: Akademia Kenara, p. 1.

[37] ADAMIECKI, W.: Zanim zaśpiewa drzewo, p. 27.

Pecuch's contribution to art

Grzegorz Pecuch linked his adult life (private and professional) with Zakopane, a fashionable tourist resort located at the foot of the Tatras – a unique mountain range in Poland. There, Pecuch worked as a teacher, passing on unconventional methods of work, a love of nature, and a respect for the material to subsequent generations of his students. He made all his sculptures in wood,[38] which he subjected to minimal processing. He was looking for synthesis. He described the creative process as *discovering the shape hidden in the tree* and *extracting the sculpture from the forest*. He emphasized his special relationship with the nature in which he was raised. Born on the border of cultures, he belonged to the mountain people, and like his ancestors, he drew inspiration from the natural riches and beauty of the world.

He carved massive figures of forest animals and ordinary people – the Lemkos and Podhale people. As he said: *to bring the sculptures even closer to nature, to make them similar to a living tree*, he covered them with colour. However, he very rarely used paint. He usually soaked the wood in a solution of metal in vinegar (iron, when he wanted to achieve a darker colour, copper – to obtain green).[39] The recipients of Pecuch's sculptures succumbed to the power of this exceptional universe. Exhibition reviewers tried to find the essence of his art in the kinship with the matter of the world. Maciej Gutowski wrote in the catalogue of an exhibition in 1969: *Grzegorz Pecuch's sculptures are strong and compact* [...] *like the trunk of the tree in which they are created. They are strong like the tectonics of the mountains, which the artist has known since childhood and which he looks at every day*.[40] Three years later, Maria Sten added: *Curiosity drives him forward. Curiosity about everything: matter, form, nature.* [...] *He wants to tear the matter apart and look inside*.[41]

Sculptors from Zakopane, students of Antoni Kenar, created an original and distinct group. The work of Kenar, Pecuch, Władysław Hasior, Antoni Rząsa, and others was highly valued in the 1950s and 1960s, but later fell into oblivion.[42] They were treated as not "modern" enough, creating in the provinces, in a language of forms and themes that was understandable only to them. However, recently, interest in their work has been revived. Researchers see the need for a different – not avant-garde – canon of the history of 20th-century art. Whereas contemporary recipients pay attention to the extremely current context of this art – telling about the need for harmonious coexistence of man in his natural environment.

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38 The only exceptions are small animal figurines carved in soap and plasticine, which should be treated as sketches.

39 SZYMAŃSKI, Andrzej R.: Artyści przy pracy : Zawsze blisko natury [Artists at Work : Always Close to Nature]. *Kurier Polski* 1986, [excerpt], n. pag.

40 GUTOWSKI, Maciej: *Grzegorz Pecuch : Wystawa rzeźby* [Grzegorz Pecuch : Sculpture Exhibition]. Rzeszów 1969, n. pag.

41 STEN, Maria: *Grzegorz Pecuch : Rzeźba* [Grzegorz Pecuch : Sculpture]. Kłodzko 1972, n. pag.

42 The only exception is Hasior, still considered one of the leading Polish artists of the second half of the 20th century. However, the reception of his work was influenced by the political context. On this subject, cf. CHRUDZIMSKA-UHERA, Katarzyna: Trudne dziedzictwo – strategie i perspektywy : Przypadek Władysława Hasiora [Difficult Heritage – Strategies and Perspectives : The Case of Władysław Hasior]. *Ochrona Zabytków* 2024, 2, pp. 11–25. (open access: https://ochronazabytkow.nid.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/OZ_2-2024_K-Chrudzimska-Uhera.pdf).

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Summary

On the Relationship between History, Life, and Art : Reflections on the Biography of a Polish Sculptor, Grzegorz Pecuch (1923–2008), and his Artistic Work in the 1940s and 1950s

The hero of this article is Grzegorz Pecuch (1923–2008), a sculptor born in the small village of Florynka (in the Lemko Region), who became well known after the Second World War as an artist

and a wood sculpture teacher at the Secondary School of Fine Arts in Zakopane – a popular mountain resort at the southern border of Poland. Pecuch's works have been presented in the context of the wartime experiences of the inhabitants of the Lemko Region and the postwar period of consolidation of the people's regime in Poland. They have reflected personal emotions as well as broader national ideas. As research material, in addition to the artifacts, we used press interviews, fragments of private correspondence, and the artist's memoirs. The article attempts to indicate the connections between the sculptor's professional life and the historical context.