



“Wrocław, that pitiful city of art.”

An announcement on the upcoming publication of the *Chronicle* by Joseph Langer (1865–1918)

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When I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the Silesian artist Joseph Langer (1865–1918), which was reviewed by Professor Marek Zgórniak, the existence of the painter’s *Chronicle* was a known fact. Nevertheless, the search for the actual document did not bring any results at that time. In 2006, a monograph on Langer was published, which I developed mainly on the basis of the abundant collection of paintings and photographic documentation stored in the Muzeum Domu Śląskiego (Museum of the Silesian Home) in Ziębice.¹ Recently, photographs of the *Chronicle* were presented by the custodians of the archive of German inhabitants of Ziębice (Münsterberger Heimatstube, Bielefeld-Brackwede) to the mayor of the city and to the director of the Ziębice museum.² The *Chronicle* had been written from 1895 to 1918. It allows us to verify the existing findings about Langer’s life and work, and to better understand his emotionality.

Let us briefly recall that Joseph Langer is known primarily as a distinguished art conservator of painting masterpieces. In the years 1900–1908 he worked on

1 The present text is a fragment of the elaboration of the *Chronicle*, which is to be published in its entirety thanks to the efforts of the Księstwo Ziębickie Foundation. I would like to thank Mr. Leszek Więckowski, President of the Foundation, and Mr. Jarosław Żurawski, Director of the Ziębice museum, for providing the photographs of the *Chronicle* and for all their help. On Langer’s work, see: A. Organisty, *Joseph Langer (1865–1918). Katalog prac artysty w zbiorach Muzeum Sprzętu Gospodarstwa Domowego w Ziębicach. Katalog der Werke aus den Sammlungen des Museums für historischen Hausrat in Münsterberg*, German translation by D. Petruk, Kraków 2002; idem, *Joseph Langer (1865–1918). Życie i twórczość wrocławskiego artysty*, Kraków 2006, pp. 12–13, note 12 (o *Kronice*); idem, *Joseph Langer w Gryfowie Śląskim, Ziębicach, Wiedniu i Japonii. Nowe ustalenia na temat spuścizny artysty*, “Rocznik Ziębicki”, II, 2016, pp. 45–77. Revised information on the transfer of Langer’s collections to the Ziębice Museum is provided by Gabriela Dziedzic, *Życie kulturalne Ziębic w latach 1871–1945*, [in:] *Ziębice – miasto św. Jerzego. Dzieje i kultura dawnej stolicy książęcej. Münsterberk – město sv. Jiří. Dějiny a kultura bývalého knížecího sídla*, B. Czechowicz (ed.), Wrocław 2010, pp. 241–243.

2 J. Langer, *Chronika* [MS], original in the collections of Heimatgruppe Münsterberg, inventory no. 283 (*Tagebuch von Prof. Langer*), Bielefeld-Brackwede. The translations from Langer’s *Chronicle* cited here are by Dominik Petruk, to whom I am grateful for his collaboration.

the restoration of Matthias Rauchmiller's compositions and the creation of new historical scenes in the Piast Mausoleum in Legnica; in the years 1900–1902 he restored the paintings in the Music Hall; and in the years 1908–1911 he conducted conservation works in the Leopoldina Hall at the University of Wrocław – on the spectacular paintings by Johann Christoph Handke. In 1902 he worked on frescoes by Georg Wilhelm Neunhertz in Żagań; in the years 1906–1908 he cleaned a painting by Christian Philip Bentum in the library of the Lubiąż monastery; in 1906 he renovated the illusionist ceiling paintings by Johann Kuben in the former Jesuit church in Brzeg; in the years 1906–1908 he renovated and supplemented the frescoes by Franz Anton Sebastini in the parish church in Głogówek; whereas in the years 1907–1909 he also became known as the conservator of works by Johann Georg Etgens and the creator of frescoes in the original style in the parish church (now cathedral) in Świdnica.³ The “breathless” review of Langer’s conservation activity concerns only unique early modern works. However, that list makes one realize how close they must have been to him. After completing his work in the Leopoldina Hall, Langer received the title of professor in 1911. To him personally, this was a particularly momentous event, as he had often felt underappreciated, especially after a period of intensive activity in the years 1894–1903 as a teacher in the classes of drawing and decorative painting as well as artistic embroidery, glass decoration and enamel at the Königliche Kunst und Kunstgewerbeschule zu Breslau (Royal School of Art and Artistic Crafts in Wrocław). The *Chronicle* also goes to show that Langer considered himself primarily a painter. His knowledge of conservation techniques was the source of his income, especially after he finished working at his *Alma Mater*. The *Chronicle* paints a proud image of the author of monumental-scale paintings and designs for furnishings in public buildings and churches created at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, easel paintings presented at the Lichtenberg Salon in Wrocław (1895, 1913), and illustrations in prestigious publications for various purposes (*Bilderwerk schlesischer Kunstdenkmäler* by Hans Lutsch, 1903; *Geschichte der Stadt Münsterberg in Schlesien* by Franz Hartmann, 1907; *Das malerische Breslau*, 1909). The artist also became known as an active participant in the Wrocław Artists’ Association, and the Association of Historians of Fine Arts in Wrocław. It is also worth highlighting that for the sake of his own mental health, as we would say today, Langer needed to “create at least a few studies from nature” (October 15, 1902), which did not involve carrying out commissions for money.

3 See: A. Organisty, *Joseph Langer (1865–1918). Życie i twórczość*, pp. 124–203; P. Dettloff, *Poglądy na ochronę i konserwację zabytków na przełomie XIX i XX wieku a działalność restauratorska Josepha Langer’a*, [in:] *Joseph Langer (1865–1918). W 140-lecie urodzin artysty. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej w dniach 26–27 listopada 2005 roku w Muzeum Sprzętu Gospodarstwa Domowego w Ziębicach*, A. Organisty, J. Żurawski (eds.), Kraków 2007, pp. 27–40; G. Schulze-Głazik, *Malowidło Philipa Christiana Bentuma z początku XVIII wieku w bibliotece pocysterskiego klasztoru w Lubiążu. Problemy konserwacji-restauracji monumentalnych barokowych malowideł na podłożu gipsowym*, Kraków 2013, pp. 181–185. Langer the conservator also appears in the book by Magdalena Palica, *Wrocław 1916. Kronika miasta w czasie wielkiej wojny*, Wrocław 2016, pp. 76–77. Langer’s Świdnica works were recently mentioned by Romuald Kaczmarek in his article *Uwagi o grupie rzeźbiarskiej Pietà w katedrze św. Stanisława i św. Wacława w Świdnicy*, [in:] *Piety krásného slohu. Příspěvky z mezinárodního symposia / Vesperbilder des Schönen Stils. Beiträge des Internationalen Symposiums*, J. Hrbáčová (ed.), Olomouc 2017, pp. 42–49, note 9.

I

The *Chronicle* consists of ninety-eight pages, which are not numbered, although the painter recorded events chronologically, and added the dates. These are followed by five pages on which press releases, obituaries and a photo of the artist were pasted – most likely by the painter's wife, Marta Langer-Schlaffke (1872–1957). The title of the work was given by the author. He also designed, and probably self-made, the leather binding. The front cover shows a griffin holding a shield with the artist's *JL* monogram interwoven within it.

The literary form adopted by Langer notwithstanding, the *Chronicle* is by no means a typical one. It is not easy to read. In the introduction, the author indicates that his notes would concern the past. At first, the work is a diary, which transforms into daily notes on May 1, 1896. The artist had been writing down his mementos for a year, starting from March 25, 1895. The fragment in which he describes his siblings is dated April 19, 1896. Between these dates, Langer became involved in creating a kind of autobiographical statue, a memorial.

The memoirs, which often touch upon difficult matters, are more interesting to read than the gradually made notes, written as if out of an internal commitment. Although loose, spontaneous, or even disjointed, they can produce an impression of systematically recorded events. Sometimes they take on an almost “accounting” like character, at other times they are evidence of conscious thoughts or emotions. This feature is characteristic of literary forms that are notoriously difficult to classify. The *Chronicle* may interest annalists, but, to some extent, it will disappoint researchers of the history of everyday life (German: *Alltagsgeschichte*).⁴ It is primarily a source of knowledge about the painting commissions undertaken by its author. Nevertheless, for an insightful reader, a picture of the times and even the way of thinking of citizens at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will emerge from the succession of artistic commissions enumerated therein.

The memoirs differ from the daily notes made since 1896. The former are written with a passionate turn of phrase. Langer takes a symbolic “journey to his birthplace” in order to better understand his own identity. He deliberately contrasts the Arcadian vision of a carefree period, typical of the sentimental trends of the nineteenth century, against the nightmares of an unhappy childhood. The wretched world of a child, a motif so popular in the literature of that time, reflects his complicated nature perhaps contrary to the painter's intentions. Therefore, early memories can be a source of understanding the problems and attitudes of the artist as a grown man. This being said, we should mention that the *Chronicle* contains no references to psychoanalysis, which must have been an alien concept to the author, and which was only developing as a science around the year 1900.

The author enjoys trips down the memory lane, back to his childhood. He is describing a world that is beautiful despite traumatic experiences. He invokes *topoi* (such as “Lucullus' feast”) and he uses literary metaphors. Along with this verbal imagery, one might expect Langer to have enriched his *Chronicle* with sketches. And yet, he did not make any drawings in the manuscript, not even small ones. He did not include press clippings about himself or the reality surrounding him

4 Compare: W. Schulze et al. (eds.), *Historia społeczna, historia codzienności, mikrohistoria*, translated by A. Kopacki, Warszawa 1996; E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, Poznań 2005.

in the binder. The adopted method therefore allows us to get to know the artist's nature. This is not a painter's sketchbook, in which, as is usually the case, drawings intertwine with thoughts vaguely jotted in verbal notes. An artist who keeps such a sketchbook records issues observed "live," in the reality surrounding him. Meanwhile, the *Chronicle* often confronts the reader with what the dryly compiled document represents. Still, the affective and intellectual horizons of the writer also emerge from the text. Langer gives the reader an opportunity to witness all that during the period when he worked as a teacher at his artistic *Alma Mater*. It was then that he appeared more open, willing not only to relate events, but also to report his thoughts about those events. The resignation from the teaching position, the lack of a steady income, and a certain emotional discouragement most likely contributed to the change in the artist's attitude towards the *Chronicle*. From the end of 1904, Langer increasingly combined noting current affairs with making a kind of summary of experiences. He would make the latter primarily on the occasion of the passing year. In this part of the *Chronicle*, the form of reminiscence returns. The artist was very busy at that time, almost escaping into work from his perceived failures, and in particular, running from emotional tensions. Therefore, he continued to put off systematically writing down experiences and registering adversities. He returned to his *Chronicle* infrequently, and mostly at the time of experiences that were particularly significant to him: he noted the day of his father's death (November 29, 1910), the visit – and a personal greeting – of the Emperor (September 9, 1906, December 6, 1911).

During the Great War, the *Chronicle* turns into a document of feverishly recorded reports from the front. At the same time, it is similar in nature to a private diary of an illness, as Langer increasingly confesses to the depressive state that plagues him (end of December 1914). Dramatic words contrast with the dryly noted, increasingly deepening, critical financial situation (15 February 1915, 7 January 1917). This is a singular testimony to interpreting or "familiarising" the reality of war. The symptoms of the illness noticed by the artist earlier cease to be hidden from the moment the armed conflict broke out. It is difficult to say whether the *Chronicle* was kept for therapeutic purposes at that time, although such reflections appear when we first read the notes made on the basis of press reports from the war's battlefields. Langer probably did not turn into a historian at that time, and merely treated his writing as proof of a patriotic attitude. He could have been prompted to do so by an "overabundance of impressions."⁵ When reading the last part of the *Chronicle*, one should be careful, and not judge Langer's views from a Polish perspective. Presentism is not advisable, as our country was in an utterly different political situation back then. The main task of an autobiography, as Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) writes,

is to present a man against the background of his era and to show to what extent all contemporary circumstances opposed him and to what extent they favoured him, how he shaped his view of the world and people against this background,

5 We encounter a similar diligence in describing military events among non-military materials in accounts from the period of the siege of "Festung Breslau", see: K. Jonca, A. Konieczny, *Przedmowa [Foreword]*, [in:] P. Peikert, *Kronika dni oblężenia, Wrocław 22 I–6 V 1945*, translated by K. Jonca, A. Konieczny, S. Reczek, Wrocław 1985, pp. 6–16.

and how he reflected this externally, if he was an artist, poet or writer. However, this is an almost impossible task, because a man would have to know himself and his era; he would need to know himself, in order to determine whether under the pressure of external circumstances he always remained himself; and he would need to know the era as a current that captivates both the willing and the reluctant, educating and molding them to such an extent that it can probably be said that everyone, even if only ten years earlier or later, would be an almost completely different person – as far as his own education and external influence are concerned.⁶

Therefore, the *Chronicle* as a genre eludes rigid definitions, because it becomes almost everything at once, as Philippe Lejeune, Alain Girard, and Polish researchers Lidia Łopatyńska, Michał Głowiński and Paweł Rodak have remarked when addressing that issue. It provides an opportunity to learn not only about bio-logy (Greek *bíos* – life; *lógos* – speech, writing about someone), in the sense of the artist's mode of being, or way of life.⁷ The *Chronicle* is an important document of his spiritual life, a testimony of his emotional writing practice. We might call Langer a diarist, although he did not keep a diary. A diary would require constant, daily practice, otherwise it ceases to be a diary in the strict sense. The *Chronicle*, as it were, obliged him to undertake this self-reflection – Langer kept notes in a binder, which from the very beginning acquired an ornamental cover. The *Chronicle* thus belongs to the formal category that Roman Zimand (1926–1992), using the terminology of humanist sociology, generally defined as personal document literature (such as letters, diaries, or journals). The latter can be divided into the “world of writing about oneself directly” (confession), the “world of eyewitness testimony” (testimony), and an additional element – a challenge⁸ (for instance Witold Gombrowicz's *Dzienniki* or *Diaries*).

II

The *Chronicle* provides insight into the meaning of the humanist ideal of “formation” (*Bildung*), typical of German-speaking culture, which originates from Goethe's “developmental” or “formative” novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796). The writer “highly recommended keeping a diary.”⁹ He emphasized the differences between autobiographical confessions and biographical studies. He was familiar with works in the field of modern historiography. He suggested that biography should not idealize the artist, that the author should not take responsibility for shaping the reader's moral attitude, as Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) and his

6 J.W. von Goethe, *Z mojego życia: zmyslenie i prawda*, translated by A. Guttry, [in:] idem, *Dzieła wybrane*, vol. IV: *Utwory prozą*, J.Z. Jakubowski, A. Milska (eds.), Warszawa 1954, p. 9.

7 M. Porębski, *Cylinder Gierymskiego, wakacje Picassa i deska Kantora*, [in:] *Życie artysty. Problemy biografiki artystycznej*, M. Poprzęcka (ed.), Warszawa 1995, pp. 11–26; L. Trzcionkowski, *Biografia starożytna – starożytność biografii*, [in:] *Biografia – historiografia dawniej i dziś. Biografia nowoczesna, nowoczesność biografii*, R. Kasperowicz, E. Wolicka (eds.), Lublin 2005, pp. 12–14; D. Kudelska, *Lepsza i gorsza biografia*, [in:] *Biografia – historiografia dawniej i dziś*, p. 268.

8 Compare: R. Zimand, *Diarysta Stefan Ż.*, Wrocław 1990; M. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadek, wyznanie, wyzwanie*, Kraków 2000; E. Wichrowska, *Zapisy codzienności... O dziewiętnastowiecznych dziennikach choroby i osobistych szkicownikach malarskich*, Warszawa 2023.

9 J.W. von Goethe, *Lata nauki Wilhelma Meistra*, translated by W. Kunicki, E. Szymani, Warszawa 2020, p. 242.

followers did. By this token, biography should not encourage us to like or imitate the hero's noble deeds, but to get to know his personality. For this reason, Goethe translated and provided a commentary (1796) on the most popular autobiography of an early modern artist in the nineteenth century – *The Autobiography* of Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571). These notes can also be shocking, as probably no one has ever presented himself in such a disarmingly honest and at the same time imaginative way. For Goethe, Cellini was “the representative of his century, and perhaps even of all humanity.”¹⁰ Since the Renaissance, recording and describing one's own achievements has become increasingly common. There have even been some rather bizarre testimonies, such as the *Diary* of Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo (1494–1556/1557), who meticulously noted what he ate and drank and what digestive problems he experienced as a result. Langer's *Chronicle* does not contain information about the meals he consumed. He did not describe everyday activities, which were too obvious to him. Still, the *Chronicle* served as a way of archiving everyday life, which allowed for an insight into “big” history through the prism of personal experiences.

Langer's *Chronicle* may be a response to the challenge posed by the Delphic oracle: know thyself. It fulfilled a similar function to the self-portraits painted by the artist. Individualism was supposedly “discovered” by the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), one of the most influential historians of the nineteenth century, not only in German-speaking countries. Burckhardt derived the idea of individualism from the culture of the Italian Renaissance.¹¹ He was supposed to have “invented” the “Renaissance individualism,” as is claimed by his critics. “A deep understanding of individuality”, he wrote, “can only be had by someone who has separated himself from the race as an individual.”¹²

Reading the *Chronicle* provokes the question: why does Langer meticulously and coolly note artistic commissions and why does he list, in an equally laconic style, important events significant of personal significance, such as his marriage to a student, or the death of his father? The answer may be provided by reflections that appear when reading similarly kept notes by the “greatest German artist” – Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). No other artist enjoyed such great fame in the countries north of the Alps. During his lifetime, the Nuremberger was compared to the ancient Apelles. Other masters – such as Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1480–1528), Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), or Rembrandt (1606–1669) – needed to wait to be discovered. Dürer, on the other hand, was surrounded by a kind of cult, which took

10 Quoted after: L. Staff, *Od tłumacza [From the translator]*, [in:] *Benvenuto Celliniego żywot własny spisany przez niego samego*, Warszawa 1994, p. 5. Compare: E. Koppen, *Goethes “Benvenuto Cellini”*. *Glanz und Elend einer Übersetzung*, “Jahrbuch des Wiener Goethe Vereins”, LXXXI–LXXXIII, 1977–1979, pp. 247–262.

11 Compare: J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*, Basel 1860, in the Polish version: *Kultura Odrodzenia we Włoszech. Próba ujęcia*, translated by M. Kreczowska, with introduction by M. Bahmer, Warszawa 1991, pp. 95–116 (chapter II: *Rozwój jednostki*), pp. 204–210 (chapter IV: *Odkrycie świata i człowieka*, IV. 5: *Biografia*). Compare: P. Burke, *Kultura i społeczeństwo w renesansowych Włoszech*, translated by W.K. Siewierski, Warszawa 1991, pp. 162–165, who critically discusses the concepts of the Swiss historian. On the meaning of the concept of “Renaissance” in the nineteenth century, see: Marek Zgórnai, *O znaczeniu pojęcia “renesans” w XIX wieku*, [in:] *Recepcja renesansu w XIX i XX wieku. Materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Łódź, listopad 2002*, M. Wróblewska-Markiewicz (ed.), Łódź 2003, pp. 45–48.

12 J. Burckhardt, *Kultura Odrodzenia*, p. 205.

on an almost grotesque form – suffice it to mention that his friends exhumed his body to make a cast of his hand and a death mask, whereas the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna keeps – much like a relic – a lock of Dürer’s hair, which was donated to the school in 1871, on the anniversary of the master’s birth, by the Frankfurt painter Edward Steinle (1810–1886).¹³ Dürer’s biography is among the best documented in the history of art – we know him from his letters, from statements of close relatives, from personal notes, theoretical treatises, a commemorative book, and finally, from the *Family Chronicle*. As Jan Białostocki writes, “in his letters, and especially in the *Records of Journeys to the Low Countries*, Dürer left behind extremely authentic, significant historical documents, opening access to the world of his thoughts, and highly instructive about the psyche, the perception and the experience of the great sixteenth-century artist.”¹⁴ In 1524, the artist finished writing the *Family Chronicle* (*Familienchronik Albrecht Dürers in einer Abschrift: Albrecht Dürer seiner Eltern herkommen Leben und Sterben / von Ihm self-described Anno 1524*).¹⁵ Langer titles his notes in a similar manner. And yet, the similarities can be observed primarily when analyzing the form of taking notes and the strange, detached, almost dry emotionality, emphasizing professional issues. Both artists appear businesslike; Dürer’s accounting may be emblematic of the Renaissance burghers of Nuremberg, and Langer’s reporting – of the mentality of the bourgeoisie of Wrocław (German: *Bürgertums*).

The main theme in Dürer’s correspondence and his *Chronicle* is financial problems. The almost dramatic fate of the artist emerges from those records. If we knew him only from the complaints he wrote down, we would conclude that he lived on the verge of poverty – he was always underpaid and exploited by the sinister surroundings. For Dürer, money and only money was the measure of success. The first letter he sent in January 1506 from Venice to Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530), a humanist in Nuremberg, was a settlement of the amount borrowed by the painter. In subsequent letters, Dürer confided successful business transactions, and purchases made for Pirckheimer, with which he wanted to repay the debt. Dürer headed for Venice and Bologna with a dual purpose – on the one hand, he wished to familiarize himself with the “secret” knowledge of perspective and the techniques of “modern” painters (Italian: *maniera moderna*), and on the other hand, of course, he desired fame, and he measured that fame – in the customary Nuremberg mercantile spirit – by financial success. He borrowed from Pirckheimer because he expected to earn a lot of money for paintings made in Italy. He criticized his Italian rivals in the profession, complaining that they “cheated cattle and people.”¹⁶ Dürer constantly complained that “he could have achieved a lot if it were not for...” After completing work on the painting *The Feast of the Rosary*,

13 B. Decker, *Essays: Dürer – Konstruktion eines Vorbildes (Dürer und das Geld); Gelingen oder Mißlingen des Fortschritts (Dürer, der Heilige)*, [in:] *Dürers Verwandlung in der Skulptur zwischen Renaissance und Barock*, exhibition catalogue, Liebieghaus Museum alter Plastik, Frankfurt am Main, 1 November 1981–17 January 1982, H. Beck, P.C. Bol (Hrsg.), Frankfurt am Main 1981, pp. 445–446, fig. 89.

14 J. Białostocki, [commentary on the writings of Albrecht Dürer], [in:] *Historia doktryn artystycznych. Wybór tekstów*, vol. 2: *Teoretycy, pisarze i artyści o sztuce 1500–1600*, selected and edited by J. Białostocki, Warszawa 1985, p. 94.

15 Compare: H. Rupprich (Hrsg.), *Dürer. Schriftlichen Nachlaß*, 3 Bde., Berlin 1956, 1966, 1969 (in Bd. 1: *Familienchronik*).

16 Quoted after: B. Decker, *Essays*, p. 426 (“Sie bescheißen Vieh und Leut”).

he reported his frustration: “I have received much praise, but little use.”¹⁷ Clearly, admiration was not enough for him. In his last two letters from Venice, the artist even wrote, half-jokingly, half-seriously, that he had discovered a grey hair, which had appeared due to poverty and overwork. Even greater complaints are contained in the *Records of Journeys to the Low Countries* from 1520–1521, the period during which Dürer enjoyed the greatest fame. This journal is the oldest evidence in the history of art of such honest notes made by the artist. He described the struggles in a style poor in emotion (“Gefühlsarmut”), permeated with notorious coldness (“notorische Kälte”),¹⁸ because Dürer – a pioneer of modern art, a teacher of German artists – is constantly occupied with financial matters in his diary. He records privileges, meals, gifts that he accepted and gave in return – he noted everything he did, always adding the financial equivalent. He kept the most precise accounting of expenses and revenues.

What is most surprising in Dürer’s *Diary*, as in Langer’s *Chronicle*, is the formula for keeping notes. Neither of the two artists used columns with numbers, nor did they introduce tables or accounting charts. Transactions, income and expenses, as well as events and meetings were recorded indiscriminately. All sorts of details, of various nature, were deliberately placed next to each other. Each note had the same weight: “I have introduced Master Lucas van Leyden with my pen. I have lost a guilder” (June 1521, in Antwerp). It is not an easy reading, because the information sounds like a list of invoice entries: “I have done... I have been... it cost...” What was this *Diary* for Dürer, then? Was it a control tool? Or an expression of compulsive need to record everything and convert it into financial terms? A minor event provides a partial explanation: Dürer, who was petty in money matters, tried his hand at gambling – he was drawn into games of fortune, allowing him to escape into chance, while eliminating economic and social pressure.

Dürer felt fulfilled when recognition went hand in hand with wealth. Self-affirmation consisted in the fact that recognition alone did not allow the artist to live freely, and fame had to be combined with economic gratification. Dürer’s *Diary* is therefore similar to a book of accounts, because it serves the role of an examination of conscience. The artist was accountable to God for his obligations to Him. He knew that he was talented, that he owed his talent to Divine Providence. For him, control of the economic situation was equivalent to giving testimony about his achievements before God, as if it were the Last Judgement.¹⁹

Langer’s *Chronicle* contains almost no references to God. It is difficult to even guess what the attitude of this Catholic Silesian artist was towards faith or religion. Nevertheless, the very fact of his detailed recording of his artistic accomplishments, emphasizing their significance – in parallel to Dürer – is also a kind of examination of conscience. Except that Langer was settling with himself, with his youthful artistic obligations, which he dared to pursue with the support of his mother.²⁰ Langer’s *Chronicle* was a kind of confession, enumerating events, skillfully used situations, and favourable turns of fate.

17 Ibidem. The painting, intended for the German church of S. Bartolomeo in Venice, is today in the National Gallery in Prague.

18 Expressions used by B. Decker, *Essays*, p. 429.

19 Ibidem, pp. 425–429.

20 A. Organisty, *Joseph Langer (1865–1918)*, p. 19.

From Dürer's *Family Chronicle* we learn about his Hungarian roots, about his great-grandparents' occupations, and about his father's years as a journeyman. Albrecht Dürer presented himself as a child marked by brilliant talent, born under a lucky star that brought a fortunate influence on the artist's destiny. Indeed, like no one before him, he was known not only as the best painter, but also as the "most beautiful man" north of the Alps. Even the shape of his "Mongolian", "Oriental" eyes was described. After him, the entire era was called "Dürer's time" (German: Dürerzeit), and his fame was consolidated by a tremendous amount of literature.²¹ Langer also left an extensive description of family ties and relations, emphasizing the talent that distinguished him from his environment. In photographs from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he poses for the viewer in costumes he designed himself. In Germany, Silesianness was perceived as an exotic aspect of beauty, as it contained elements of Slavicness. Dürer was promoted as the ideal of a beautiful man in posters of the Great Berlin Art Exhibition (Grosse Berliner Kunst Ausstellung) in 1898. He is crowned with a golden laurel wreath. At that time, Langer kept extensive notes in his *Chronicle*, recording information about the exhibitions he visited, and manifested his stature by posing in a wreath of flowers.²²

III

In the nineteenth century, following the process of disintegration of the old social systems in which the Ruler and the Church played key roles, German society became atomized. Now, in the new society, one's position began to be determined not by birth, but by individual education and achievements. The driving force for the development of German society was therefore the principle of efficient action, or action that brings good results (German: *Leistungsprinzip*).²³ We can observe its echoes in the example of Langer's fate: he came from a poor family, in his youth he put all his strength into achieving a good social standing through study and work, which was guaranteed to him by the title of professor received from the hands of the emperor himself. Langer gained a renowned position as a conservator and decorative painter of sacred and secular interiors, and in addition he had a sumptuous apartment in the capital of the region, equipped with a collection of diverse artistic objects. This was in Wrocław, "in this ancient Slavic trading city" – as the writer Karl Okonski (1880–1974) recalled – "where everything was still guided by the balance of profits and losses, as in had been the times of Thurzon and Fugger."²⁴ It was there that Langer reached the highest level of his career, "maintaining" the difference in social position and constituting a status symbol in a city that was not easy not only for the bohemians, but also for painters who advertised

21 J. Zaunbauer, *Albrecht Dürer. Eine Biografie*, [in:] *Albrecht Dürer*, exhibition catalogue, Albertina, Wien, 20 September 2019–6 January 2020, Ch. Metzger (Hrsg.), Wien 2019, pp. 13–35.

22 The issue of self-creation in nineteenth-century artistic photography is discussed by Marie Pospíšilová-Vohánková, *Fotografie v ruku umělců. České malířství a fotografie v 19. a na počátku 20. století*, doctoral thesis, Prague 2002, pp. 81–84.

23 T. Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat*, München 1993; A. Zablocka-Kos, *Omówienie księzek Thomasa Nipperdeya "Deutsche Geschichte" i Hansa-Ulricha Wehlera "Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte"*, "Dzieła i Interpretacje", II, 1994, pp. 159–163.

24 K. Okonski, *Paul Löbe*, translated by K. Żarski, [in:] *Śląsk. Rzeczywistości wyobrażone*, W. Kunicki (ed.), Poznań 2009, p. 433–455, in particular p. 436.

themselves, like he did, as a *Kunstmaler*, i.e., an artist performing the profession of a painter who realized various paintings of a utility nature.

The question therefore arises, why did Langer suffer from depression? Why in 1913 did he require treatment for neurosis in health resorts located far from his place of residence, as we learn from the *Chronicle*, since his actions – according to the principle of *Leistunsprinzip* – brought the desired results? His life allows us to reflect on the meaning of the system of efficient action, a social functioning that looks great from the outside, superficially attractive. At the turn of the century, one can hear increasingly frequent voices of contesting and criticising that system, in the environment of painters and writers, as well as philosophers (Friedrich Nietzsche).

Although the way the *Chronicle* is kept resembles the notes made by a notary in a book of accounts, the recorded costs and achievements paint a picture that is thought-provoking, and not merely about Langer's individual situation. The artist, who seemingly achieved the goals he set for himself in his youth, struggles to find his place in a society guided only by the idea of "supply and demand," as was the case in Wrocław, where the key role was played by the merchant community, described in the famous novel *Soll und haben* ("Debit and Credit" 1855) by Gustav Freytag (1816–1895). The *Chronicle* reveals the mentality of the so-called second society (German: *Zweite Gesellschaft*), even if in Langer's accounts we will only see complaints about the artist's individual fate. Officials "puff themselves up as much as they can before His Imperial Majesty" (9 September 1906), and moreover, they expect to be gifted paintings for free, such as those Langer made for the office of the Rector of the University of Wrocław. "Art for free," the "frustrated" painter declared after completing this decoration, emphasizing that it was a "Breslau habit" (November 10, 1910). Yes, we learn about generous collectors, such as Heinrich von Korn (1829–1907). But the latter is an exception, especially when we look not only at Langer's relations with other clients, but above all with his rivals in the profession, whose behaviour fits into the acerbic image of the Wilhelmine "society of subjects." The traits of Emperor Wilhelm II himself were considered the prototype of the modern German character: arrogance and pomposity, irritability, the use of psychological violence against subordinates, "inner uncertainty compensated by a loud pretense of certainty" – these are just a few of the traits that appear in the character descriptions of the new citizen.²⁵

Wrocław does not appear to be a city of dreams. Suffice it to recall that three attempts were made to persuade the outstanding sculptor, Theodor von Gosen (1873–1943), to take up the position of professor of sculpture at the Royal School of Art and Crafts in Wrocław.²⁶ In 1905 von Gosen accepted the position, although in his autobiography he recalls that "the first impression was not the most

25 Quote after: T. Nipperdey, *Rozważania o niemieckiej historii. Eseje*, translated by A. Kopacki, Warszawa 1999, p. 278. The author, reflecting on the image of Wilhelmine society usually presented as a "society of subjects", recalls several mechanisms shaping the imaginary clichés, perpetuated in the novel *The Loyal Subject (Der Untertan, 1914)* by H. Mann (1871–1950).

26 J.J. Trzynadłowski, *Uzupełnienia do autobiografii rzeźbiarza Theodora von Gosen / Ergänzungen zur Autobiografie des Bildhauers Theodor von Gosen*, [in:] *Ojciec i syn / Vater und Sohn. Theodor – Marcus von Gosen*, exhibition catalogue, Wrocław City Museum, Royal Castle / Städtisches Museum Breslau, Königsschloss, 2 July – 28 August 2011, B. Kozarska-Orzeszek, K. Łata, J.J. Trzynadłowski (eds.), Wrocław 2011, pp. 15–54, 21–22.

favourable. [...] I thought I wouldn't stay long."²⁷ At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Wrocław was perceived as a provincial city in terms of art. The sculptor refused to come; "he thought it was "somewhere very far away", and in 1903 he considered the place to be "the end of the world."²⁸ It was Langer's "profound desire to leave Wrocław, that pitiful city of art, to flee towards the great masters." When he wrote this, he was thinking about his need to travel to Brussels, Antwerp and Paris. In the study trips he had undertaken since his youth, he found motivation for his creative struggles "in the treadmill of everyday life" (November 10, 1905). Unhealthy academic rivalry was the reason Langer applied for the position of teacher of decorative painting at the art school in Kassel (June 29, August 23, 1896). Constant struggles for decent conditions and payment for the work performed, such as the unpleasantness "brought from the green table by the philistine management" over the revitalization of the Piast Mausoleum in Legnica (August 1906), formed Langer's unfavourable perception of the Silesian milieu. With the outbreak of World War I, his moods became increasingly melancholic. The natural cause was the obsessively monitored situation on the front lines, combined with the "lack of prospects for any commissions" and living off savings (February 15, 1915). At the end of December 1914, the artist reported that for the past two years, increasingly frequent "nervous ailments" had prevented him from "getting out of bed for most of the day", and "he had not picked up a single crayon or a brush." He had "the impression that he was lying on a bier" and was looking at death "with stoic calm." After these dramatic reflections, he added that "his life so far has always deceived him." He concluded with a question consistent with his earlier observations: is it worth to go on living?

The *Chronicle* is something more than a typical source of knowledge for art historians; it can provoke basic questions about the meaning of the above-mentioned principle of *Leistungsprinzip* into the bargain. As a result of the said principle, representatives of the *belle époque* were typically plagued with two medical conditions. Kazimierz Wyka called the first one "desperate hedonism." Unrestrained desire, which was supposed to be a transgressive state of transcending everyday life, characterized the Berlin bohemian environment, artists as famous as Richard Dehmel (1863–1920), Edvard Munch (1863–1944), August Strindberg (1849–1912), or Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927). The latter, shrouded in the legend of a Don Juan and an alcoholic, was the opposite of the other turn-of-the-century disease. Today we would call it workaholism.

The *Chronicle* is permeated by the myth of titanic work, glorified in the German state, focused on economic and political success (German: *Gründerzeit*). Langer's world is built on a Faustian ethos. It was difficult for him to live up to the patterns of behaviour – of corruption, and the corrupting of others in the environment of seemingly solid and honourable officials.²⁹ The idea of constant action, which also guided Faust, in Langer's case resulted in a condition of

27 P. Hölscher, *Perspektywy wrocławskiej Szkoły Sztuki*, [in:] *Od Otto Muellera do Oskara Schlemmera. Artyści wrocławskiej Akademii. Eksperyment, praktyka, przypomnienie*, exhibition catalogue, Staatliches Museum Schwerin, 11 May – 11 August 2002, Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg, 1 September – 27 October 2002, National Museum in Wrocław, 20 November 2002–19 January 2003, P. Łukaszewicz, B. Ilkosz (eds.), Schwerin 2002, p. 14.

28 Ibidem, p. 19.

29 T. Nipperdey, *Rozważania o niemieckiej historii*, pp. 275–276.

melancholy at best. Goethe himself noted: “Ruthless action, of any kind, eventually leads to bankruptcy.”³⁰ Langer found it difficult to see the mechanisms that are also present in today’s society. It was easier for him to find fault in the environment in which he created. At the end of 1917, he noted: “For every artist, the air in Wrocław reeks of rot, and sooner or later that will finish everyone off – both mentally and physically.”

Abstract

“Wrocław, that pitiful city of art.” A report on the *Chronicle* by Joseph Langer (1865–1918)

The *Chronicle* by Joseph Langer (1865–1918), a painter, noted conservator, and collector from Ziębice in Lower Silesia, was officially made available to the local authorities of this city in the form of photographic documentation in 2019. When I was writing my doctoral dissertation on Langer, which was reviewed by Professor Marek Zgórniak, the existence of the *Chronicle* was known, but efforts to locate the document were unsuccessful at that time. Today, the *Chronicle* not only provides insight into Langer’s “life and work” but reveals his personality as well. Written by the artist from 1895 until his death, it also covers earlier years. This report announces the existence of this valuable document and analyses the stylistic form of the text in the context of other similar written accounts. The *Chronicle* allows us to discover previously unknown sites of Langer’s works. It provides information on the terms of contracts between him and his clients, painting techniques and stages of his work, and the relationships within the Silesian artistic community, including the Royal School of Arts and Crafts in Wrocław. From reading the *Chronicle*, a picture emerges of a hardworking man suffering from depression, who had to cope with the behavioural norms prevalent in Wilhelmine society.

KEYWORDS:

Chronicle, art literature, painting, conservation, Ziębice, Lower Silesia, art school in Wrocław, Wilhelmine era

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³⁰ Quoted in translation after: J. Bolewski, *Głębia Goethego*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 160, note 70.

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