



The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series 14

(2/2021): 199–202 [RECENZJA]


DOI:10.4467/24506249PJ.21.024.15330

Eugenia Umińska: Between the Scene and the History

Marta Taranczewska, *Eugenia Umińska. A Chronicle of Life, a Contribution to Biography*, Publishing House of the Academy of Music in Kraków, Cracow 2020, pp. 604.

Paulina TENDERA

PAULINA TENDERA – PhD in humanities in the field of philosophy, assistant professor at Jagiellonian University.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4709-3086>

E-MAIL: paulina.tendera@uj.edu.pl

When I visit Marta and Paweł Taranczewski's apartment as a guest, I sometimes have an opportunity to look for a moment at a unique photograph of Eugenia Umińska, taken by Benedykt Jerzy Dorys, a celebrity photographer of interwar and postwar Poland. The photo itself evokes the atmosphere of the old times, but the woman immortalized in this picture is a completely unique phenomenon. There is no hesitation in her attitude, face, pure charisma, flame, and nobility emanating from her figure as if from an antique sculpture. I knew that Marta Taranczewska was writing a book about her mother, but I did not think that she would manage to include in this monograph probably all the available archives on Eugenia and at the same time a colorful reminder of the times when a heroic and courageous attitude was needed.

One should start, however, by mentioning the fact that we are dealing with an aristocrat, one of the world's most eminent violinists, professor and rector of the Krakow Academy of Music, performer on the stages of philharmonics all over the world, a genuine star of classical music and a great lady.

The book, which was published thanks to many years of Marta Taranczewska's work, is a compendium of knowledge about Eugenia Umińska. It consists of a history of the Umińska family, where the genealogy of the family is presented in great detail, a calendar covering the years 1910–1980 and posthumous events, as well as memories about the artist recounted by her friends and collaborators. The complete archive is rounded off with documentary data such as repertoire, recordings, editorials, lists of alumni and students, as well as honors and medals. All of this adds up to a resource of over six hundred pages for any subsequent research into the life and work of Eugenia Umińska.

The artist was born on October 4, 1910 (although there are changes or inaccuracies in the documentation, and the year 1908 is sometimes listed) in Warsaw. She took her first violin lessons at the age of four. She began her studies at the Warsaw Conservatory in 1919, graduating with a performance of Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 1, for whose interpretation she would later become famous. She celebrated her debut on the Warsaw Philharmonic stage in 1924. In 1928 she began giving concerts abroad, the first of which was at the Czech Philharmonic, where she performed works by Mieczysław Karłowicz.

The period spent in Paris with George Enescu (1930–1932) and her friendship with Ignacy Paderewski and Karol Szymanowski was of enormous importance for her development. Umińska was already a star of the world music scene when World War II broke out in 1939. The artist's fate during



the German occupation is an extremely important testimony to her nobility and character, as well as her patriotic attitude and love for art.

In occupied Poland, cultural life existed to the extent that it was allowed at that time, and Eugenia Umińska was also involved in it. Zofia Stryjeńska wrote about one of her concerts in the Artists' House in Kraków:

On February 5, Genia Umińska came with her magical violin and gave several concerts. She also played [in the Cracow cafeteria] "At the Artists". She played wonderfully – a great maestro. She was a truly great master, a noble character, and a worldly appearance. Someone who has the right to be called an artist (Stryjeńska 1995, 281).

The artist would probably have spent the entire war in Warsaw, but the Gestapo (inter alia, after her alleged cooperation with the resistance movement had been denounced) decided to organize the deportation of artists to Germany for labor. The denunciation was not unfounded; Umińska had undergone training in the Auxiliary Units of the Home Army and was therefore subordinate to its authorities, who decided to evacuate her from Warsaw.

We know, from the memoirs written by the artist herself, that the Warsaw Uprising erupted upon her return to the Polish capital. Arrested in the Ochota district, she was rushed to Narutowicza Square, where the Germans were making a preliminary selection of the population – many were shot. All who remained were sent deep into Germany for forced labour. Eugenia managed to escape from the train designated to take her out of Poland, and the whole event happened when the artist was already pregnant with her only child – daughter Marta (Taranczewska 2020, 151).

After the war, Eugenia Umińska settled in Kraków, and the political situation of Poland became complicated: many trips and concerts were impossible. Nevertheless – just like in occupied Warsaw – after the war, there was a need for art and Eugenia Umińska's professional career developed systematically until 1951, when she fell under the surveillance of the Security Office (Taranczewska 2020, 257–259). Marta Taranczewska reminisces:

I briefly described the beginning of the surveillance of my Mother, who became a "figurehead", a person constantly observed, photographed, wiretapped, and followed. Almost every person whom Mom came into contact with was "verified". [...] Some reports can attest to wiretapping. Mom was constantly surrounded by informers, whose activities she never discovered (Taranczewska 2020, 259).



The post-war ideology of creating in the spirit of socialist realism and Marxism, which was alien to Eugenia Umińska, was outlined as early as 1949, by order of the then vice-minister of culture and art, one of the most ardent propagators of the new trend in art. The avant-garde was cursed, and artists who did not agree with socialist realism chose to emigrate from the country or emigrate internally and abandoned their professions, lost their official contracts, and sometimes had their works destroyed (Taranczewska 2020, 288).

During these difficult times, the artist devoted herself to teaching, editing violin works, and writing notes for a future violin textbook:

Why do I keep finding different solutions to the appliqué and strings when I go through a piece I've known for years? Why (from a recent period) do the strings and fingering seem worse to me than they do now? [...] Often a change of fingering and strings is a reflection of a newly gained phrase and experience; a subconsciously noted observation [...] One should not stop in once developed violin fingering and strings... (Taranczewska 2020, 290).

Among Eugenia Umińska's many important pupils were Ewa Szubra-Jargoń, Jadwiga Kaliszewska, Zdzisław Polonek, Kaja Danczowska, Teresa Głębówna, Roman Reiner or Irena Bizoń. As a great fame on the international scene, the artist was often invited to juries of violin competitions in Prague, Helsinki, Genoa, Budapest, Lisbon or Brussels, among others. Recalling Eugenia Umińska, Krzysztof Mayer wrote:

And today, thinking about all this, I sometimes wonder if there are still such great, great artists in the world, who are so selflessly engaged in the education of young people, about whom it is not yet known whether they will meet the expectations and hopes... (Taranczewska 2020, 521).

Eugenia Umińska died on November 20, 1980 in Cracow, and was buried at the Rakowicki Cemetery.

Bibliography

- Stryjeńska, Zofia. 1995. *Chleb prawie że powszedni*. Warszawa: Gebethner i Ska.
Taranczewska, Marta. 2020. *Eugenia Umińska. Kalendarium życia, przyczynek do biografii*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Akademii Muzycznej w Krakowie.

