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## An Artist as the Conscience of Humanity. Life in Emigration and the Artistic Output of Tadeusz Zygfryd Kassern<sup>1</sup>

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Tadeusz Zygfryd Kassern (1904–1957) decided to emigrate from Poland at the end of 1948, to remain in exile until the end of his life. At the time of this decision, he was at the peak of his career in the field of law. From December 1945 he had been working for the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in New York, holding successively the following functions: a cultural attaché, a culture and education adviser (from January 1947) and consul (from August 1947). Providing assistance to musicians residing in Poland and popularising Polish music in the USA, he gained himself a reputation as the “Archangel Gabriel of Polish musicians.”<sup>2</sup> In October 1947 he became the Polish delegate for cultural affairs to the United Nations Organisation. Equally important were his achievements as a composer, which is what he had been preoccupied with since the mid 1920s. He was known as the author of, i.a., the post-impressionist *Concerto* for voice and orchestra, the folkloristic *Orawa Suite* for two solo voices and male choir, and also many neoclassical works of various types, such as *Concerto* for double bass and orchestra, *Concerto* for string orchestra, *Dies Irae* – symphonic poem for orchestra, *4 Copernicus Motets* for a cappella mixed choir and *A Triptych of Mourning* for voice and piano. Both before World War II and during the time when he

<sup>1</sup> This article is a summary of the last two chapters of the author’s book concerning the composer (2011).

<sup>2</sup> W. Lutosławski’s letter to T. Kassern of 22nd April 1948, Warsaw University Library (in Polish: “Biblioteka Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego”, hereafter referred to as BUW), K-LXXX.

worked in the Consulate, he received numerous awards for his compositions in Poland and abroad, and his music was performed in Europe and America by the best musicians, including Grzegorz Fitelberg, Ewa Bandrowska-Turska, Stanisław Szpinalski, or Ada Sari. Some of these pieces of music were performed at prestigious concerts, e.g. *Concerto* for voice and orchestra was performed at the Polish Music concert in Berlin in January 1948.

### **Ending collaboration with the Polish government**

When Kassern became consul in August 1947, he probably thought that his mandate was going to last for a considerable period of time, during which he would be able to realise his plans related to this function (Kostka 2007a: 33–35). The Consul's Card he was given in June 1948 was to expire in the following year. Nonetheless, in October 1948 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official letter to the consul, informing him that he was to report in Warsaw in relation to a new work post. This sudden decision aroused his suspicions. Since he had been in New York for the third consecutive year, he was well acquainted with the American point of view on European and Polish issues which were discussed in the press and on television. These were the times of the cold war, which mainly manifested itself in the form of anti-communist rhetoric practised by the American citizens. Apart from information about Poland obtained from the Americans, Kassern also received information from his family and acquaintances residing in Poland. He was informed of events concerning everyday life and the music circles, including the changes taking place in the Polish Composers' Union (in Polish: "Związek Kompozytorów Polskich", hereafter referred to as ZKP) with regard to its governing bodies, and changes of directors in the Music Department of the Ministry of Art and Culture. All these actions took place in an atmosphere of political arguments and discord. He also received two official letters from the ZKP: the first one was intended to "persuade" him to compose popular pieces of music (songs for solo voice or choir), and the second one was a circular letter whose purpose was to provide information

concerning the basics of the aesthetics of socialist realism adapted by a resolution of the International Congress of Music Critics and Composers held in Prague in May 1948.<sup>3</sup> Although he was not opposed to the idea of folk songs arrangements, he could not tolerate the fact that the state interferes with the sphere of art and culture. He had always disapproved of all manifestations of totalitarianism, which was best expressed in his article of 1938, entitled *Twenty years of fighting for music culture* (Kassern 1938: 4–5).

Summoned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kassern arrived in Warsaw on or around 20th November 1948 and stayed in the Bristol Hotel. His meeting at the Ministry was arranged for 2nd December. Prior to the meeting he participated in various other meetings, observing the course of political affairs in order to form his own opinion about the situation in Poland. It was the time of preparations for the Unification Convention of the Polish Socialist Party and the Polish Workers' Party, which were going to merge into the Polish United Workers' Party on 15th December 1948. It was enough to read the press to realise that the political situation in Poland had changed substantially in comparison with December 1945. On 27th November Kassern attended the previously arranged meeting with ZKP members, during which he gave a lecture on music-related issues in the USA (*Biuletyn Zarządu Głównego Związku Zawodowego Muzyków* 1948: 7). His lecture met with great interest although the issues he mentioned must have sounded unfamiliar to many of the listeners. He talked about orchestras relying on two big radio corporations for their existence; about composers' sources of income; about the American League of Composers; about conductors who, when choosing the repertoire, more frequently relied on audio presentations than on sheet music; about "the Metropolitan Museum"; about film music, and many other matters. The author of the report on the lecture, which was later printed in *Biuletyn Zarządu Głównego Związku Zawodowego Muzyków* [The Bulletin of Musicians' Association Board], drew the following conclusions from it:

It was a very sophisticated and interesting lecture, delivered in an expressive way by an excellent speaker. The listeners could be convinced that T. Kassern, having spent several years in the USA, may be considered to be one of the major experts in the area of

<sup>3</sup> Letter from S. Kołodziejczyk to T. Kassern of 5th July 1948, BUW, K-LXXX.

composing and performing music on the other hemisphere. It is always useful to know about such issues and all musicians will benefit from obtaining such information: it will give them guidance on both how to act and how not to act (Ksi[S. Kołodziejczyk] 1948: 8).

The second meeting he attended concerned his participation in an international contest for a screenplay idea about the life and artistic output of Frédéric Chopin. The contest had been organised by the *Polish Film* magazine, in conjunction with the Chopin Committee, to commemorate one hundredth death anniversary of the composer. Although there were many participants in the contest, Kassern's screenplay concept was awarded a distinction.<sup>4</sup>

When Kassern turned up in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 2nd December, he was nominated general consul for the Republic of Poland in London. He and his wife were given new passports.<sup>5</sup> On 6th December he visited the Ministry of Art and Culture which had commissioned him to write an opera. This offer of financing one of his major artistic projects was linked with a creative imperative he had so far been unable to realise. It appeared during the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto (April–May 1943), which he – a Pole of Jewish origin – was fortunate enough to witness only as an observer placed on the safe side of the wall. So immense was his empathy with the murdered Jews that he decided to commemorate them by writing an opera about Jewish issues, and the basis for this piece of music was going to be a drama by Jerzy Żuławski *End of the Messiah*, which he had read before the war. As the circumstances for realising this work of art had been unfavorable, he had only prepared a draft and decided to wait for the situation to change. He returned to this project in the autumn of 1948, when he was preparing the Polish premiere of *A Survivor from Warsaw* by Arnold Schönberg.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately the Polish authorities in Warsaw did not approve of the project he presented to them, which the composer commented in the following manner:

After the war, in Poland, I was offered a large commission to write an opera. I suggested *The Anointed* as a ghetto-uprising memorial, but I was severely rebuked and forbidden to

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.fotohistoria.pl/main.php?g2\\_itemId=200925](http://www.fotohistoria.pl/main.php?g2_itemId=200925), 16th April 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Passports and other documents of Kassern: BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

<sup>6</sup> F. Greissle's letters to A. Schönberg of 5th October and 8th November 1948, Arnold Schoenberg Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington.

write this opera because the Communist Government considered it as favoring Jewish “nationalistic” tendencies and this the Communists strongly opposed.<sup>7</sup>

Finally a compromise was reached: he was commissioned to write an opera for children. The outcome of these negotiations is described in a statement issued to the Ministry of Art and Culture, dated 6th December 1948:

In accordance with the agreement with Vice Director of the Department, Zofia Lissa, Mus. D., I hereby undertake to write a puppet opera in 3 acts, entitled *A Little Wooden Boy (Pinocchio)*. The detailed terms and conditions shall be included in the contract which shall be concluded within six months. Tadeusz Kassern, New York, 542 West 113 Street.<sup>8</sup>

Having dealt with all the formalities, Kassern took the nearest plane to New York. Once he arrived there, he immediately resigned from diplomatic service.

Basing on the opinions expressed by the composer himself, it has to be stated that he ended his collaboration with the Polish government for purely political reasons. To confirm this, three quotes shall be given of what he said to different people and at different times. The first of them comes from a letter to Roman Palester, dated 10th June 1950. Kassern wrote that in December 1948 he and his wife had been facing a choice of two paths, and they decided to live as political refugees:

This is a decision my wife and I took. After my visit in Poland in November 1948, I came to the conclusion that sovietisation of Poland was inevitable and I broke my relations with the Polish government. My concerns were only confirmed by subsequent events, such as the issue of Gauleiter Rokossowski.<sup>9</sup>

His second statement explaining the reasons why he decided to emigrate comes from a biographical note from October 1950 to the Headmaster of Third Street Music School Settlement of Julius Rudel. It reads: “[He] resigned this post [consul] in 1948 as protest against the openly progressing communization and sovietization of Poland.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, the third statement comes

<sup>7</sup> T. Kassern’s letter to J. Rudel of 22nd October 1950, BUW, K-LXXXI.

<sup>8</sup> T. Kassern’s *Official letter* to the Ministry of Art and Culture of 6th December 1948, BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

<sup>9</sup> T. Kassern’s letter to R. Palester of 10th June 1950, BUW, K-LXXXI.

<sup>10</sup> T. Kassern’s letter n to J. Rudel of 22nd October 1950, op. cit.

from an application of 12th January 1953, issued to the Guggenheim Foundation. Applying for financial assistance to help complete the operas he was working on, the composer explains his situation and states his reasons for deciding to live in the USA: "In 1948, in protest against the communization of Poland and having always been anti-communist, I decided to stay in this country."<sup>11</sup>

Apart from political reasons, Kassern's moral values might have been a major factor contributing to his decision to emigrate. He used to be a loyal citizen serving his country the best way he could, but by the end of the year 1948 his experience and knowledge of politics made him realise that if he decided to accept the post of a civil servant – the general consul in London – he would not be able to be true to himself. For him truth and honesty were the most important values in life, as he wrote in 1952 in a letter to a close person:

After all, a man should have only one rule and abide by it: to be true to himself, to do what he believes is right in an honest way. The price for this is usually very high, but no price is too high for honesty.<sup>12</sup>

After Kassern resigned from working for the Polish government, the response of Polish authorities was to "remove" him from Polish culture. The fastest reaction came from the Music Department of the Ministry of Art and Culture which already on 15th March 1949 decided to withdraw the order for the children's opera *A Little Wooden Boy*.<sup>13</sup> The Polish Music Publishers (now PWM Edition), which had been planning to publish his chamber music compositions,<sup>14</sup> broke off cooperation with him. In spring 1951 his membership in ZKP was revoked. At first the ZKP Managing Board tried to inform him about it, but the Department of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested that the matter should not become widely known to the public and therefore further attempts were abandoned.<sup>15</sup> The most

<sup>11</sup> T. Kassern's letter to H. Mol of 12th January 1953, BUW, K-LXXXI.

<sup>12</sup> T. Kassern's letter to I. Sroczyńska of 27th March 1952, BUW, K-LXXXI.

<sup>13</sup> Note on T. Kassern's application to the Ministry of Art and Culture of 6th December 1948 reads: "Rejected: 15/3. 1949", and the illegible signature may be one of Z. Lissa.

<sup>14</sup> See the archive files of the PWM Edition in Cracow.

<sup>15</sup> *Official letter* of the ZKP President, W. Rudziński, to the Department of Press and Information,

difficult to bear, however, was the decision not to perform any of his music at concerts.

### Life in emigration

Having decided to emigrate, Kassern started to live a new life which consisted mainly in struggling to support himself and his wife. Although those times have been described as years of prosperity in the United States (Hawley 1995: 33–42), they were definitely not prosperous for a political refugee. He was not financially secure in any way; there were no opportunities for him to obtain a good post and earn good wages, and his educational background as a lawyer proved completely useless. In one of his letters he wrote that he was not even allowed to copy notes officially because he was not a member of the local Musicians Association. His command of English was excellent and he knew that European musicians had an exquisite reputation in the USA, so he decided to seek employment in music schools.

In January 1949 he was employed as a teacher in the Third Street Music School Settlement.<sup>16</sup> His duties included teaching piano lessons and theoretical subjects. There is no information about the number and type of lessons he taught in the spring semester of the 1948–49 school year, but we have information concerning the lessons he taught in subsequent years: in the 1950/51 school year he taught piano lessons to approximately 30 students three times a week, and in the 1953–54 school year he taught 3 harmony groups, 2 solfège groups, an instrumentation group and he also had approximately 30 instrumentalist students. His monthly wages from October to May were 150 USD, which gave 1200 USD per annum. According to his letters, the minimum wages on which one could survive were 200 USD per month, i.e. 2400 USD per annum. This meant he had to earn an extra 1200 USD per year.<sup>17</sup>

Foreign Posts Department of 21st April 1951 and *Official Letter* of the Press and Information Department director in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, S. Mencil, to the ZKP Board, of 7th May 1951, files of the Polish Composers' Union.

<sup>16</sup> T. Kassern's letter to J. Rudel of 22nd October 1950, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> T. Kassern's letter to J. Rudel of 20th September 1950, BUW, K-LXXXI; T. Kassern's letter to H. Mol of 12th January 1953, op. cit.

This situation was not conducive to producing creative work, but Kassern did not surrender. He started to compose piano music for his students and he reconsidered his plans for the opera concerning Jewish issues, which he had been planning since 1943. He presented the general concept of the opera to the Kussevitzky Music Foundation, hoping to receive financial support. In May 1949 he obtained a grant from this foundation to realise his largest composition project.<sup>18</sup>

In order to support his home budget (his wife, Longina, was not gainfully employed), in September 1949 he took an extra post as a lecturer at New York University, in New School for Social Research. In the 1949–1950 academic year he taught the subject called *Music and Society*, and in the summer of 1950 he taught the following courses: *Music of the Renaissance* and *Origin of Opera – Survey of its Growth (1600–1950)* ([Bulletins] 1950). On 30th June 1950, he submitted the following list of projects concerning his academic activity to his superior at the university:

1. *Music and Society* – winter semester,
2. *Opera – Libretto Workshop* – winter semester,
3. *Song Text and Song Music Workshop* – spring semester,
4. *Seminar in Musical Composition* – both semesters, conducted jointly with Mr. Cowell, Maestro Raffaelli and Dr. Zipper.<sup>19</sup>

On the basis of this one may assume that he was seriously considering a career as a university lecturer. Some changes must have occurred, however, in the subsequent months, as on 25th September 1950 he resigned without explanation.

Since at the beginning of their immigration the Kasserns were convinced that their situation would be quite stable, they continued to rent their apartment in the West where they had used to live before they became immigrants. Probably at the end of 1949 they moved to Brooklyn, which was further from the city centre and therefore cheaper. Their circle of friends and acquaintances was different than the one from the times of working in the Con-

<sup>18</sup> T. Kassern's letter to R. Palester of 10th June 1950, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> T. Kassern's letter to C. Mayer of 30th June 1950, BUW, K-LXXXI.



sulate. Their contacts with Kassern's brother Stanisław and his daughters became more frequent. Both nieces, Wanda and Danuta, studied in New York: the first one stayed with their aunt and uncle in the summer of 1948, and the second one visited them to take piano lessons in subsequent years. Apart from their family, Tadeusz and Longina maintained relations with the pianist Witold Małcużyński, the conductor Franco Autori, the composer Ralph Shapey, the lawyer Francis Kuchler, and later with the composer Michał Kon-dracki and others. They attended concerts and music festivals whenever they were able to do so. In the summer of 1949 they participated in one of the most famous festivals in the USA – Tanglewood Music Festival in Berkshire, Massachusetts.<sup>20</sup>

As the first post-war political immigrant from the Polish music circles, Kassern did not know how to find his place in the new situation. At first he made an attempt to obtain a visitor's visa, about which he informed Roman Palester in the following words:

I thought [about this] in 1949, a few months after I broke my relations with the Polish government, when I turned to Arthur Rubinstein, the founder of the Chopin Foundation, with a plan to provide assistance to Polish musicians who were in all probability going to protest against the sovietization of Poland in the same manner as I did. Unfortunately Rubinstein demonstrated complete indifference to this plan. Further attempts to make him change his mind, made by his brother-in-law, Bronisław Młynarski, have so far failed. The reason might be that there have not been any other practical cases of such musicians, apart from my own case – and I did not ask for anything to be done in my case, since I decided to follow my own path. Anyway the basic rule here is that everyone should take care of himself, without assistance from others.<sup>21</sup>

It was incredibly inconvenient to have the status of stateless persons, so after some time the composer and his wife decided to apply for the status of immigrants to obtain US citizenship in future. This decision unfortunately coincided with the decision of Truman's administration to sharpen the immigration policy due to the increasingly intense "cold war" (Miscamble 1995: 5–29). The Americans started major investigations to reveal the presence of "communists". A special Congress Committee for Investigating Anti-American Activity was appointed: it investigated the loyalty of the civil

<sup>20</sup> Photograph with a description, files of K. Dymaczewska.

<sup>21</sup> R. Palester's letter to T. Kassern of 26th May 1950. Quoted after Helman (1999: 171).

servants and established a procedure for finding disloyal persons among its own ranks. The symbol of “the red scare” was Joseph McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin (Hawley 1995: 56). Moreover, repressive actions were undertaken all over the country. Although the immigration system was initially going to be made more liberal, the Truman administration’s actions yielded completely opposite results in the form of legal acts concerning state security. In June 1952, “The McCarran – Walter Act” was introduced, limiting immigration to the United States. This law made the existing regulations even stricter with regard to permits and prohibitions of entry as well as deportation of dangerous foreigners, as set forth in the Internal Security Act. At the beginning of 1950, Kassern filed his first application to allow him to reside in the United States, and this application was unfortunately rejected.<sup>22</sup> His subsequent applications also met with rejection. The reasons of the immigration commission are not officially known, but it may be assumed that since American authorities were particularly careful, they did not trust a Polish refugee who had once used to be a high state official.

In 1954 Kassern at last found a job which satisfied both his financial needs and his ambitions as a composer, at least to a certain extent. It consisted in arranging already existing pieces of music. The first commission came from the general director of New York City Opera, Joseph Rosenstock.<sup>23</sup> He was commissioned to adjust the Strauss’ *Die Frau ohne Schatten* score to the needs of NYCO. The payment for completing this work by 15th September 1954 was going to be 3000 USD, paid in three instalments. In the following year the Pole received a commission from a publishing company, G. Schirmer, “to reconstruct a lost opera score,”<sup>24</sup> and in June 1956 the director of New York City Opera, Erich Leinsdorf, commissioned him to provide “a new arrangement and orchestration of *Orpheus in the Underworld* opera of Jacob Offenbach, for a new text by Eric Bentley.”<sup>25</sup> He was going to be paid 2500 USD for the arrangement, and 50 USD for each performance. The work was to be completed by 20th September. After that, Frederic R. Mann Foundation

<sup>22</sup> Bills issued by T. Kassern for R. Horn, BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

<sup>23</sup> J. Rosenstock’s letter to T. Kassern of 10th March 1954, BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

<sup>24</sup> Biographical note on T. Kassern of 1956 or 1957, BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

<sup>25</sup> E. Leinsdorf’s letter to T. Kassern of 18th June 1956, BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

ordered a re-instrumentation of the *Piano Concerto in E Minor* of Frederic Chopin. Although the composer completed the work, he was never going to hear it performed on stage.

In 1955 Kassern began working as a teacher in Dalcroze School of Music in New York, the only authorised Dalcroze School on both American continents. According to a bulletin found among the documents related to the composer, he began this work by teaching a summer course lasting from 5th July to 15th August, where he taught composition and orchestration: subjects in which he had considerable experience ([Bulletin] 1955a). Each subject was taught once a week and the lessons lasted one and a half hours. According to another bulletin of Dalcroze School of Music for 1955–1956 school year, he taught the following subjects:

1. *Composition II*. Sonatina form, minuet with a trio, rondo, theme with variations and sonata form (2 meetings per week),
2. *Composition III*. Concerto and symphony (2 meetings per week),
3. *Orchestration*. Composing for symphony orchestra and for instrumental ensemble, application of contemporary trends in orchestration, reading sheet music, transposition, and discussion on various styles (1 1/2 hours per week ([Bulletin] 1955b).

Today there is information on the internet that Dalmazio Santini (1923–2001), a US resident of Italian origin, used to study composition under a Polish teacher.<sup>26</sup> It is quite possible that it was in the Dalcroze School of Music that he took these music lessons.

All the work Kassern was commissioned to do and the teaching in Dalcroze School of Music were undoubtedly a source of satisfaction and additional income, but his life was in no way more tranquil and stable. On the contrary: it was the time when he suffered a nervous breakdown caused by the fact that the Immigration and Naturalisation Office rejected his application for immigrant status once again. The composer received an official letter

<sup>26</sup> [www.incontridimusicasacracontemporanea.it/artisti/dalmaziosantini.htm](http://www.incontridimusicasacracontemporanea.it/artisti/dalmaziosantini.htm), 25th May 2004.

from the Office on 26th September 1955, and four days later he attempted to commit suicide. This fact was described in *The People's Voice – Polish Weekly*:

On 30th September his wife, Longina, found him unconscious in their bedroom. His life was saved thanks to a fast medical intervention. Mr. T. Kassern had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. The reason why Mr. Kassern decided to commit suicide was the letter from the Immigration and Naturalisation Office informing him that his application for USA citizenship had been rejected. Before he took the pills T. Kassern had written his wife a letter explaining his reasons for the desperate step he had decided to take: "I am not able to go through the pointless torture of the immigration procedure once again – this procedure may even take years. Maybe Mr. Francis Walter (a Congressman from Pennsylvania) and Mr. Besterman consider themselves to be stronger and wiser than the law itself... In these last moments of my life I am praying that this cruel and inhuman way of thinking is changed and that at least you are given the American citizenship" ("Po 'wybraniu wolności' wybrał śmierć" 1955: 1).

The American administration employees mentioned in his farewell letter were high government officials: Francis Walter was the co-author of the already mentioned draconian act, i.e. "The McCarran – Walter Act" and simultaneously the Chairman of the Non-American Immigration Commission, whereas Besterman was holding the function of secretary in the Immigration and Naturalisation Commission in the Congress. The fact that their surnames were mentioned in the letter might mean that the case had been considered by the highest immigration officials, and the only solution was to initiate the procedure once again.

Having recovered, Kassern returned to work. As planned before, he moved to a three-room apartment in New York City, with a beautiful view of the state of New Jersey.<sup>27</sup> After the move, his life started to be more stabilised, although not entirely devoid of problems. He wrote about this in his letter to his sister-in-law:

Of course we encounter various problems and obstacles in our everyday life, but we manage to overcome them and look forward to what will happen in future. Having moved to a new apartment, we now have better conditions to work and to live, and are very glad because of this. [...] Not having enough time to go to theatres very often, we go to the cinema instead: there are two big cinemas near our place; we also go to concerts. We listen to the radio a lot and watch a lot of television.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> T. Kassern's letter to I. Sroczyńska of 18th August 1955, files of K. Dymaczewska.

<sup>28</sup> T. Kassern's letter to his family in Poznań of 28th May 1956, BUW, K-LXXXI.

Perhaps as a result of his desperate attempt described before, or else due to the softening of immigration law, Kassern was registered as an immigrant in the United States on 26th September 1956.

### Artistic work in emigration

As already mentioned, the fact of emigrating to the USA did not diminish Kassern's ability to create, but it definitely changed its direction and focus. If before the war and during his work in the Consulate the composer mainly focused on providing concert repertoire for musicians, i.e. concertos and concertinos for different instruments, piano pieces and songs, now the opera and teaching-related compositions took priority. This change of focus was partly due to his previous interests, and partly due to the new circumstances in which he found himself. After several years he confirmed that this change of focus was a good decision: "I work a lot with music and I constantly put maximum of energy in what I do. I feel these are my best years to create the work which I feel I am best at composing."<sup>29</sup>

The first work created during the period of emigration was *The Anointed*: a 4-act opera, which had been planned in 1943, with a libretto in the English language. It was based on a play by Jerzy Żuławski, and Kassern had obtained a grant for its realisation in May 1949 from the Kussevitzky Music Foundation.<sup>30</sup> The opera presents a certain event from the history of Turkey in the 17th century: a Jewish uprising against a sultan, the aim of which was to win freedom (Kostka 2009). The uprising was led by a Jewish ascetic, Sabbatai Zwi, who is the leading hero in the performance. He is depicted as an extraordinary figure whose actions also prove fatal; the one who suffers the pain of his nation but is at the same time above it; who is unattainable perfection. Sabbatai Zwi is absolutely convinced that he is a messiah and, since he remembers about the statement coming from Jewish books that only an absolutely pure man may be a messiah, he renounces the earthly pleasures

<sup>29</sup> T. Kassern's letter to I. Sroczyńska of 10th July 1953, BUW, K-LXXXI.

<sup>30</sup> Manuscripts of score and of piano extract and typed libretto: Library of Congress, Washington and BUW, File nos.: Mus. CCXXV rps 1, Mus. CLXIX rps 1, Mus. CLXIX rps 3.

and decides to become an ascetic, and is therefore regarded as a saint by those who believe in the same cause. His mission, however, does not come to a fortunate end: the hero surrenders to temptations of love. The person behind this is his wife, Miriam, who not only forbids him to use torture and takes care of her husband's health, but also makes his psychological condition more stable and tranquil. Having lost his faith in his superhuman ability, Sabbatai admits to the sultan that it had all been a mystification and that he accepts his superiority. The Jews turn their backs on Sabbatai, but they still believe that one day they will regain their independence, which is confirmed by the last words of the opera: "the day of freedom is yet to come".

Taking his inspiration from *A Survivor from Warsaw* by Schönberg, *Wozzeck* by Berg, and the works of American composers influenced by the Vienna School, Kassern presented his own kind of expressionism with neoclassical elements in *The Anointed*. What is distinctive about this opera is its original organisation of twelve-tone material which makes use of both the emancipation of the dissonance and the euphonic harmony. The driving force behind the events are the words presented in a diversified musical form, namely as traditional singing, modern singing with large intervals and irregular phrasing, *Sprechgesang* and several intermediate kinds of singing, and all of this to be performed in one voice or in many voices. There are no permanent connections between the words and the music, but two main motif tendencies are visible and they depend on the emotions expressed. The first tendency consists in combining the words expressing such feelings and emotions as pain, fear, irritation, anger and hate with chromatic motifs, motifs including intervals larger than the major sixth, motifs built on perfect fourths and tritones, motifs based on the *Sprechgesang* technique and glissandos. The second motif tendency depends on combining the words expressing love, hope and tranquillity with motifs based on melodic triads, either complete or incomplete but supplemented by transitional and adjacent sounds. Since there are many moments of tension between various characters in the opera, the first leading tendency mentioned above definitely dominates the second one. Another feature of this composition is the diversification of timbres, which is achieved by using a considerable number of performers: ten solo singers,

a mixed choir of 4 voices, and, last but not least, a monumental and extraordinary orchestra, composed of, i.a., the maraca, the Chinese block, the xylophone, the vibraphone and the harpsichord. The constantly changing timbre is accompanied by seven leitmotifs: four Jewish ones and three Muslim ones, which, apart from their semantic function, also serve as tonal centres. Another permanent element of the composition is the multilayered texture, with the number of layers ranging from two to five. The result of the layers superimposed on one another is mainly the dissonant harmony, giving the composition its specific tone climate. The respective musical-dramatic parts of the opera are joined together either by superimposition, or by sequencing.

This large composition is not a historical opera, although it may appear as one. It is first of all marked by the category of symbol, ahistoricism, social and psychological generalisations. It opens many ways of interpretation. According to one of these interpretations, the quest for freedom of the Jewish nation, when described in the context of a specific historical situation, becomes a symbol of this nation's fight for freedom irrespective of the time and place, and moreover it is a symbol of any suppressed nation. It is a well-known fact that in 1948, i.e. before the opera was created, the actions of international powers led to the creation of the State of Israel. However, according to the above interpretation, the opera is still relevant, as the question of freedom and independence of nations and countries is still important today. There is another dimension to this opera. After the calamities of the 20th century, the Holocaust being the worst of them, the opera is something that may be regarded as a musical-historical monument. While watching Jews on stage and listening to music of Jewish origin, we are to remember that it was human beings who created such a fate for others.

Another opera by Kassern originated in his relation with Paul Aron, who was well-known in the music circles in Europe and America, especially as an steadfast promoter of modern music (Kostka 2005: 98–105). Aron lived in New York and taught in the same school as the Polish composer, and in 1952 he organised a competition for a modern chamber opera, which he was going to arrange to be performed in the New York avant-garde theatre, Provincetown Playhouse. Kassern chose the famous play *Sun-up* by Lula Vollmer, an

American playwright, as the basis for his competition entry. The fame of this play was such that it was moved to Broadway immediately after its first premiere in the Provincetown Playhouse, and it was performed on Broadway for two consecutive years; moreover, it was published four times and filmed twice. The subject of the opera of the same title, based on the third act of the play, concerns the complex relations between the inhabitants of mountain areas in North Carolina, during two frosty days in February 1918.<sup>31</sup> The heroine is Cagle, a widow who lives in a mountain house on her own. During a snow storm, a young man, lost and freezing, knocks on her door, saying that he is on his way to his mother's house. The fact that the young man remembers his mother with love touches the widow's heart. She herself misses her son, Rufe, who has been fighting in the war in Europe for several months. When a sheriff comes to her house claiming that he is looking for a young man who has deserted the army, the widow hides the young man in her house and she is even ready to use a gun in his defence. Subsequently she and her daughter-in-law, Emma, get to know the story of the young deserter. Then from a letter all of them find out that Rufe died in a battlefield in France. What follows is a sequence of memories about Rufe, and then comes the climax of the opera: the sheriff arrives again to inform the widow through her closed door that the runaway young man she is protecting is a son of her husband's killer. The first thing that comes to the widow's mind is the idea of revenge, but her son – whom she is able to hear – prevents her from putting her thoughts into action and claims that it was revenge that also caused his own death. The situation is resolved by Cagle, the widow, helping the stranger to escape, and the sheriff not executing the law on her.

Unlike *The Anointed*, this is a chamber opera written for four solo singers who also act, a 4-voice mixed choir not participating in the action and concealed from the audience and an orchestra of 27 musicians. The style of music is a mixture of radical neoclassicism and folklorism. The majority of the opera is based on a method close to interval structuralism. This method consists in repeating parallel three-note descending motifs (a minor second and

<sup>31</sup> Manuscripts of score and of piano extract and typed libretto: BUW, file nos.: Mus. Mus. CLXIX rps 4, Mus. CLXIX rps 5, Mus. CLXX rps 9.



a major second) which simultaneously create three homo-rhythmic major chords in a second relation, and in applying the intervals from this motif-harmonic structure in the remaining horizontal and vertical sound structures of the whole opera. This specific organisation of the sound material is accompanied by further assumptions made by the composer. One of them is that the motif-harmonic structure is always achieved by homogeneous instruments: three clarinets, three trumpets, three violin groups or others, thus creating a certain analogy to what the structure sounds like when it is performed by choir. Each of the two scenes ends in a folkloristic style, based on the folk song *Every Night when the Sun goes in*, still popular in America. The first arrangement of this song, *Threnody*, which makes use of the traditional text, is maintained in the F-major key and it is to be performed by a choir accompanied by three *con sordino* trumpets and a drum. While the choir is engaged in performing the song, the instruments are to perform a punctuated motif based on the major melodic chord, thus relating to the army traditions. The second arrangement, *Andante religioso*, makes use of a new text which is an integral part of the scene. It is accompanied by music in the B-major key, set for contralto with a modest accompaniment of the choir and orchestra.

The opera has many significant musical moments. The leading one is the motif-harmonic structure representing the central figure of the opera: the widow Cagle. Apart from it, there are also four different leitmotifs representing the other characters, including the absent Rufe. The mourning song of *Threnody* may be interpreted as a song performed to mourn Rufe's death, but it may also be seen as more universal: as mourning the deaths of all the soldiers who have died in battlefield. On the other hand, the *Andante religioso* closing the opera returns to the senses suggested in the earlier part. It is the same melody, and yet it is more lyrical, and, combined with the text about sun rise and sun set, it represents the message of the opera: the need to resign from revenge and feel love instead, as did the widow Cagle. The sun rise is then a metaphor of faith, hope and love.

Having written two operas on serious subjects and touching upon the war, Kassern's interests turned to comedy. In July 1953 he finished the piano ex-

tract of the *Comedy of the Dumb Wife* based on a play by Anatol France.<sup>32</sup> It seems quite likely that the source of inspiration for this piece was the opera *The Rake's Progress* by Strawiński, which was particularly famous in New York because of the recordings.<sup>33</sup> The opera's libretto is quite close to the play whose main idea comes from Rabelais himself (Kostka 2006–2007: 56–61). The leading characters are Judge Leonard and his dumb wife Catherine, whom he used to love but who is currently becoming a burden to him. When a friend of the judge's informs him that there are doctors in town who specialise in such cases, the judge calls them immediately. During the first act of the opera, Catherine does not utter a word, but the second act is filled with her voice. The judge's wife comments on her husband's every move, and brings up various stories, and in doing so she makes her husband want her to be dumb again. The doctors, however, do not know how to do it, and they only offer Leonard some medicine for deafness, which he finally takes.

Kassern's musical version of the satire on husband and wife demonstrates an important connection with classical opera; in one of his letters the composer describes it as "opera buffa in two acts."<sup>34</sup> Its transparent formal strategy, neo-tonal rules and the fact that the replicated patterns observe these constraints are the factors which make it a proper neoclassical style opera. Most vocal parts are sung in a way which is an intermediate form between classical recitation and the classical aria; however, one does notice the presence of typical arias, group singing and a folk song which appears throughout the whole opera. Contrary to his previous operas, the *Comedy* has a texture which does not go beyond simple homophony, polyphony and mixed types. In comparison with his earlier neoclassical instrumental compositions, this music is more modest and almost totally devoid of ostinati, polyrhythmic and polymetric patterns. As required by a comic opera genre, it abounds in expressive and semantic devices of comic nature. An example might be Leonard imitating the talkative Catherine by means of a falsetto, which is supported by two accompanying lines in the interval of a second. Another example is Catherine's first monologue in which she talks about one of the

<sup>32</sup> Manuscript of piano extract and typed libretto: BUW, file nos.: Mus. CLXXI rps 1, Mus. CLXXI rps 3.

<sup>33</sup> Carnegie Hall repertoire for the season 1953–1954, BUW, unclassified Kassern resources.

<sup>34</sup> T. Kassern's letter to H.A. Moll of 12th January 1953, op. cit.

biggest chatterboxes she knows, at the same time showing off her fast diction combined with various types of coloratura figures. The opera is finished with a scene of madness overwhelming all the characters, which is typical of 18th century comic operas. Despite the lack of instrumentation, *Comedy* is a fully-fledged composition, which meets the audience's expectations with regard to entertainment and educational values.

Apart from the operas described above, Kassern also prepared librettos for four chamber operas, among which three were operas for children and one, entitled *Hearts in Rucksacks*, was a serious, historical opera.<sup>35</sup> The latter presents the lives of a group of Poles from western areas of Poland in Lwów (now Lviv), between mid September and December 1939; the composer himself might have had similar experiences, since he used to live there at that time. The action of the play was going to be accompanied by the song referred to in the opera's title, which the composer described as very popular among Poles during the Second World War. Perhaps the author meant the song by Michał Zieliński of 1933. At the time of writing the above mentioned librettos, Kassern also started composing a large opera entitled *Eros and Psyche*, based on the famous play of Jerzy Żuławski.<sup>36</sup> However, Żuławski limited the play to the scope of the Greek myth and enriched it with a philosophical reflection, whereas the libretto writer /composer went much further beyond the framework of the theatrical play. He described the idea behind this opera in the following way:

Having the Greek myth of Psyche as a background, this opera depicts and glorifies the fight of mankind for freedom from enslavements by totalitarian evils. The highly dramatic action leads from the time of Arcadia to the final liberation from communism.<sup>37</sup>

According to Michał Kondracki, whose words need to be quoted here as the libretto itself is missing, Kassern rejected the ending of the Żuławski's play and added his own instead. Out of the seven scenes, he set the action of the two last scenes in the not so remote past: "the last but one act is set

<sup>35</sup> Typed librettos: BUW, *The princess marries the page* – Mus. CLXXI rps 6, *King Cole's bubbles* – Mus. CLXXI rps 7, *The loves of Lanny and Rosannah* – Mus. CLXXI rps 8, *Hearts in rucksacks* – Mus. CLXXI rps 9.

<sup>36</sup> Manuscripts of part of score and of part of piano extract: BUW, Mus. CLXXI rps 4, Mus. CLXXI rps 5.

<sup>37</sup> T. Kassern's letter to H. A. Moll of 12th January 1953, op. cit.

in Oświęcim (Auschwitz), and the last one in a capital city prison of one of the neighbouring power states" (Kondracki 1957a: 11). He made drafts in the form of the vocal parts with piano for the first five scenes (about 120 pages) and instrumental samples (several pages). By looking at the drafts one may assume that the opera was going to be for eight soloists, a choir participating in the action, and a large orchestra with a small organ in addition. The style of this opera was going to resemble the expressionist and post neoclassical *The Anointed*. Unfortunately due to lack of funds and opportunities for realising the composition, neither this ambitious opera nor the aforementioned works were ever finished.

What allowed the composer to take a break from the war-related issues mentioned in these operas was his teaching-related output.<sup>38</sup> His small-scale compositions for children and youth are very homogenous with regard to style. They are mainly in a moderate neo-classical style, where the syntax is ruled by the principles of neo-tonality and the main strategy is a programmatic character or a classical sonata form. The largest group consists of 43 piano miniatures in 4 program cycles: *Candy Music Book*, *Amusement Park Music Book*, *Blessed Music Book* and *Space Travel Music Book*. The second group comprises of 4 piano concertos for young people, called *Teen-age Concertos for Piano and Orchestra*. Although all of them were going to be for piano and orchestra, only the first one is written for orchestra, and the others are only for two pianos. Another teaching-related work which is worth mentioning due to its technical difficulty is *Piano Sonata on Stephen C. Foster Themes*. All these compositions were created to suit young people, taking into account their capabilities and psychological constraints.

Although Kassern, being an émigré composer, had considerable competition in the USA, his music was performed there. His teaching-related output enjoyed considerable popularity: it was played in schools and a radio studio, published (Schirmer, Carl Fischer) and recorded. As for the operas, only *Sun-up* was performed; yet the poorly sung vocal parts and limited number of instruments did not allow audiences to fully realise the composer's idea (Kostka 2007b: 30–32). With regard to artistic instrumental composi-

<sup>38</sup> Manuscripts of teaching-related compositions of Kassern are currently available at BUW.

tions, *Concertino* for oboe and string orchestra was performed at Chautauqua Festival in 1950, *Sonata Brevis* for piano – in Trenton in 1953 and at 16th New York Radio Music Festival in 1955, and *Adagio* from *Concerto* for string orchestra – in the famous New York Carnegie Hall in 1954.

### Last months of life

1956 marked the “political thaw” in Poland and the previously rejected compositions of Polish emigrants started to return to Polish stages. A group of musicians in Poznań arranged two concerts, on 11th and 12th January 1957, with Kassern’s *Concerto* for voice and orchestra, performed in a marvellous way by Ewa Bandrowska-Turska. Having noticed that the situation in Poland was changing, the composer started to consider initiating contact with Polish music circles. He managed to persuade Michał Kondracki to do it too. On 20th February 1957 they wrote an article together for the *Ruch Muzyczny* magazine entitled *Musical Life in the USA* (Kondracki 1957a). It was the first article of the series, and apart from other issues it focused on the idea of popularising Polish music in the United States by means of the methods available there, and in particular by making recordings – an idea already expressed by Kassern when he had worked for the Consulate:

It would be desirable to nominate a cultural representative of Polish music based in New York, who would be in charge of bringing tape recordings of Polish contemporary pieces, copying them on records and ensuring that they are broadcast as part of regular radio concerts. Orchestra conductors might then become interested in the new Polish music, which would finally become as popular in the world as is the music of other nations (Ibidem: 13–14).

Kassern might have expected to become this “cultural representative”, having been preoccupied with “arranging symphonic music records for one of the major American companies” (Kondracki 1957b: 121).

Considering all the plans he was making for the future, as suggested by the above mentioned article, it may be assumed that Tadeusz Kassern was still in very good health in February 1957. This, however, changed dramatically in the middle of the following month, when he found out he was suf-

fering from pancreatic cancer with metastases in the liver.<sup>39</sup> As the cancer was incurable and progressing very fast, he and his wife informed all their acquaintances and relatives of this fact. He was first visited by Michał Kondracki and an American composer Ralph Shapey, and on 6th and 7th April he received about 25 visitors. Michał Kondracki, who was taking care of his friend, described him in a letter to Krystyna and Błażej Sroczyński in the following manner:

We have known each other for a quarter of the century. As a musician and composer, I have always thought very highly of his artistic output. *Concerto* for orchestra is one of the major achievements in contemporary music, as are his operas, orchestra and piano compositions. We all admire him not only because he is a great artist, but also an extraordinary man with a great heart, impeccable character and elevated, beautiful soul. How tragic it is that fate wants to deprive us of such an extraordinary individual, in the moment when he could do so much for people and for Polish Music. I would like to share with you my deepest pain and sorrow which I think all of us feel. It breaks our hearts to witness him so calm and serene, knowing he will soon meet the eternity.<sup>40</sup>

Kassern died on 2nd May 1957. In his death certificate the rubric “citizenship of the deceased” reads: “POLISH”.<sup>41</sup> On the day he died, in Town Hall, his student Miriam Osler and the teacher Allen Brings from Third Street Music School Settlement performed *Teen-age Concerto No. 1* to honour their teacher and friend. On the following day *New York Times* published a large in memoriam article with his photograph (“In Memoriam. Kassern is Dead” 1957: 10). He was buried on 6th May, in St. Charles Cemetery in New York. 42 people called in a special register for his memory, i.a. Ralph Shapey – composer, Gustave Leese – director of the publishing house “Carl Fischer, Inc.”, Tad Marciniak – librarian from Metropolitan Opera.<sup>42</sup> On 8th May his wife Longina Kassern received a letter of condolence from the House of Representatives of the US Congress, signed by William B. Widnall.<sup>43</sup> Soon in memoriam notes were published by *Ruch Muzyczny* ([In Memoriam]. Tadeusz Zygfryd Kassern 1957: 8) and the *Parisian Culture* (Kondracki 1957b).

<sup>39</sup> L. Kassern’s letter to I. Sroczyńska of August 1957, files of K. Dymaczewska.

<sup>40</sup> M. Kondracki’s letter to K. and B. Sroczyński of 8th April 1957, files of K. Dymaczewska.

<sup>41</sup> *Death Certificate*, files of K. Dymaczewska.

<sup>42</sup> *A register of Friends who called in memory of Tadeusz Kassern*, files of K. Dymaczewska.

<sup>43</sup> W. B. Widnall’s letter to L. Kassern of 8th May 1957, files of K. Dymaczewska.

## **Evaluation of his activity and output in emigration**

On the basis of the documents and sources available, one may draw the conclusion that Tadeusz Kassern was a very sensitive man, who resigned from lucrative government posts in the period when totalitarianism started to rule in Poland, in order to lead a difficult but honest life. Apart from political and moral reasons, it was the state policy with regard to arts and culture which made him emigrate. He had felt the consequences of this policy long before other artists did. It is clear from his letters that his life as an emigrant was the time of constant struggle and endless work, and his major concern was his condition of a stateless man. Despite these circumstances, which were rather unfavourable, he remained a man of honour until the rest of his life. As an artist he seemed to represent ideas characteristic of expressionists, who thought that an artist is the conscience of humanity, and art is to fulfil an ethical function (Baranowski 2006: 63–64). His artistic output focused mainly on the opera, in which he tried, symbolically or directly, to come to terms with the war, the Holocaust and totalitarian systems. Another area of his activity comprised compositions for children and youth, with clearly specified teaching aims. As he was functioning in an environment where compositions from Schönberg's circle were highly valued, Kassern felt compelled to create modern music. The musical language of his last compositions is considerably varied; his operas constitute original representations of selected music styles or their blends, whereas his teaching-related output is mainly in proper neo-classical style. In the context of Polish art in the period of socialist realism, his music is part of "the hidden stream of stylistic changes", as proposed by Zofia Helman, which represents a transition from neoclassicism and folklorism to the atonality of the Viennese School and poetic expressionism of Alban Berg (Helman 1992: 217). Kassern's émigré compositions, which were unknown in Poland for a long time, are beginning to attract interest in Polish music circles. First concerts and performances already took place in the 1990s. Several premieres of his excellent compositions for children and youth were held then, and the crowning event was the National Tadeusz Kassern Competition for Young Pianists, organised in Gdańsk in 2006. In the same

year and place, with the support of the local Music Academy, *Comedy of the Dumb Wife* was staged for the first time. In 2009 in Warsaw a concert was held with musicians performing a range of stylistically varied songs for solo voice and piano, and in 2010 in Naęczów near Lublin, selected fragments of his three completed operas were performed. It is planned that in 2011 an instrumental version of the opera buffa will be staged. The other two “American” operas are still waiting to be discovered, including *The Anointed*, considered by the composer as his *opus vitae*.

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Illustrations



Figure 6.1 Kassern's diplomatic passport issued on 2nd December 1948. Warsaw University Library, unclassified Kassern resources



Figure 6.2 *Tadeusz Kassern and Franco Autori in front of a poster advertising a performance of the composer's work. New York, 2nd January 1954. Files of K. Dymaczewska*

LARGO 149 149

4/2

Cl. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Cl. b *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Fg. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Cf. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Cor. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Tbe. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Tbri. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Tuba. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Timp. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Piati. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

T. mil. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

LARGO *sf mf cresc.* *sf* *ppp*

Sabbatai *p* *pp*

Sabb raises his arms in a gesture of blessing the people. (with profound tenderness)

My children! Peace to you, my children

LARGO 149 149

V. I. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

V. II. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Vie. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p*

Vc. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p* *sw/pant* *pp*

Cb. *ff* *ff* *ff* *p* *sw/pant* *pp* *sw/pant* *pp* *sw/pant* *pp*

[24]

Figure 6.3 Opera The Anointed, Act One, scene 1, bars 147–150

96

Fl. *mf*

Cl. I, II

Cl. b

Trpt. I. *tutti senza sord.*

Trpt. II, III

Tbne

Gr. C. *(con 2 bag.)*

T. tam *ff*

Timp. *sf-f*

Piano *ff*

Em. *f* *(cries out)* *(The Stranger takes the letter from Emmy's hand)*  
*died.... Died!.... (W. Eagle stands erect and rigid but does not evidence any emotion otherwise)*

V. Cag. *Died.*

S

A

T

B

Vi. *con*

Ve. *marcato/ff*

Cb. *ff*

Figure 6.4 Opera Sun-up, scene 2, bars 556-558