

Koloman Sokol: The Life of an Artist Exile

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One of the most prominent Slovak painters and graphic artists, Koloman Sokol, died on January 13, 2003 in Tucson, Arizona, among his closest relatives, his wife Lydia and his son George, shortly after his 100th birthday. At the Cedar Rapids SVU Conference we presented numerous visual documents, including photographs of his paintings that are based on frequent personal encounters with this artist while he lived in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, between 1950 and 1996.

Sokol was immensely creative and active almost to the end of his productive life. His work expresses intense inner tensions, sometimes he intentionally deforms his figures and constantly returns to his works, adding new lines and brush strokes of paint. Hundreds of figurative paintings reminiscent of Picasso that are not at the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava or at the Koloman Sokol Gallery in Liptovsky Mikulas, his birthplace, are still in the possession of his family in the United States.

The long life of this proud giant of Slovak illustrative art was full of social and political struggles in the periodic upheavals marking the 20th century.

Born in a poor family, Sokol's father died when he was very young, and his stepfather intensively sought to Magyarize the family. Sokol's creative talent soon brought him away from his job as a butcher apprentice and he entered private art schools, studying first with Krohn in Kosice and then with Gustav Mally in Bratislava. A real breakthrough in his career occurred at the Prague Academy of Creative Arts where Max Svabinsky and Frantisek Simon recognized Sokol's talent. He fraternized with the Slovak university students at the Stefanikova kolej. Sokol acknowledged, "Prague made me realize I am a Slovak, not a Magyar". This stage of his artistic career was marked by his expressive, socially engaged graphics.

Sokol's talent gave him an opportunity to study art in Paris where he made contacts with the famous painter Frantisek Kupka and the composer Bohuslav Martinu. In Paris, in 1933, he met and married Lydia Kratina, herself a painter and the daughter of a well-known Czech-American sculptor (the author, for example, of a bust of Dwight Eisenhower). Before World War II Sokol was invited to teach in Mexico City at the Escuela de las Artes Libro, where he founded the Department of Graphic Arts. An exhibition of his work in Mexico in 1938 was appreciatively titled "Giant of Graphic Arts". This was a major accomplishment in a country with renowned graphic artists like Diego Rivera with whom Sokol had personal contact. But with Mexico sympathetic to the Nazi regime, the Czechoslovak mission was closed and Sokol and his wife moved to New York City.

After WW II the family attempted to start a new life in Bratislava. Once again, the beginnings were very difficult, and the Sokols with their young son had to spend several days at the railroad hostel in Bratislava, before the poet Ladislav Novomesky came to their aid. Sokol became a member of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. By that time, though, he had become accustomed to the world of democracy. In 1948, in the face of the impending totalitarian

communist regime, Sokol was finally given a permit to travel with his work to an exhibit in Paris at the Galerie Rouch-Henschel. He now took the final step of immigrating to the United States, and he never set foot again in his country of birth. After a very difficult start, during which he earned his living as a superintendent in a Harlem apartment building, Sokol and his family found a haven in Bryn Mawr, where Lydia taught art at Bryn Mawr College while Sokol devoted all his time to painting (and playing tennis with his wife into his late eighties).

In December 2002 Sokol's contribution to arts and culture was honored by the designation of Chancery Gallery at the Slovak Embassy in Washington, D.C. as the Koloman Sokol Gallery. In 2002 Slovak television produced a documentary entitled "Koloman Sokol: *Z labyrintu sveta do raja duse*" (*From the Labyrinth of the World into the Paradise of the Soul*).

Sokol's artistic and humanistic legacy remains to profoundly influence generations to come.

Vlado Simko, August 2003