



Professor Andrzej Strumillo,
Ex Oriente Gallery, Warsaw 2015
(photo by Krzysztof Dużyński)

I chose my own land, freedom and horses

Interview by Monika Luft
Photos by: Krzysztof Dużyński, Andrzej Strumillo home archive
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PROFESSOR ANDRZEJ STRUMIŁŁO

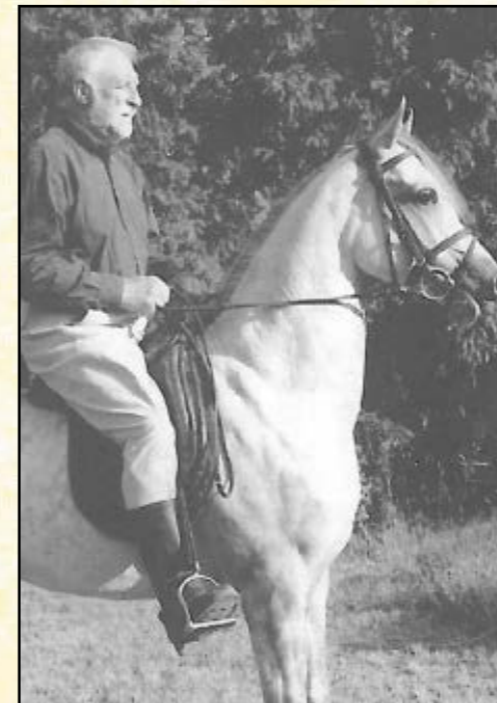
– born in 1927, an exceptional Polish artist, successful in many artistic areas:

painting, graphic art, drawing, photography, illustration, book design, art exhibitions, stage design. Author of poetry and books on nature and culture. A traveler and collector, an expert on the Orient. He was the head of the graphic studio of the United Nations General Secretariat, co-creator

of The Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw.

At his stud in eastern Poland he keeps pure bred Arabian horses.

He is an extremely colorful persona of the Polish Arabian horse community.



Archive photo



Professor Andrzej Strumillo founded an award at the 3rd PTHKA Show. On the left private breeders: Michał Bogajewicz and Joanna Grootings

Professor Andrzej Strumillo atop the stallion Perlik

Monika Luft: Is the abode that you set up in Maćkowa Ruda on the Czarna Hańcza River, where you have bred Arabians for more than 20 years, still your place on Earth?
Andrzej Strumillo: I am an amateur breeder – a chronic amateur, an enthusiast of the breed and its huge fan, but I can't call myself a specialist. My duties in Warsaw don't allow me to be present at Maćkowa Ruda the entire time. But the horses are there, my son, the groom. So that place is very much alive – but how long and in what form it will survive, that I don't know. I would still like to have some foals... I have left four broodmares that have some genetic value. Czarina, my oldest mare, who is currently twenty something years old and still in great condition, had a foal not so long ago. Czarina is a daughter of Etogram and Czara by Banat, from the line of Czapelka. Czara was sold to England, while Etogram, an El Paso son, lived to the end of his days in Janów Podlaski. Czarina's daughter, the chestnut Czadra by Perlik, a large, strong mare of a very gentle nature, also resides at Maćkowa Ruda. She is stronger than her sire, because Perlik was a pleasant, handsome horse, but of small size. I trained Czadra to drive in harness – she was even presented at Janów in front of Polish and foreign public. The next mare, whose name also begins with "Cz", is Czarina's youngest daughter, by HS Etiquette, a stallion bred by Mr. and Mrs. Watts. As a nod towards Charlie Watts she received the name Czarla. I also have a brown mare named Czasufi, who I left at the stud due to her coat color and beautiful conformation, though her head is more the French than Polish type. Her sire Epejos by Pilot, a black Janów Podlaski stallion, was sold to France and was quite

successful there on the show arena. There was a time when I had 15 horses, among them some notable ones, such as the stallion Czakamar (by Eldon), in his time one of the best racing horses at the track. "Kamar" means "moon" in Arabic, so "Czakamar" is simply a Moon out of Czarina.

M.L.: Did any of your ancestors or close relatives breed or ride horses?

A.S.: My family descends from the lands near Minsk, so my ancestors probably had something to do with horses, because at that time all people associated with land had them in that area. But my grandfather and father escaped from there during the October Revolution. My father fought against the Bolsheviks and later settled down in Vilnius. He had no land, no farm, so horses were not an option. My mother was a girl from the Sudaty village. The land of my grandfather bordered from the north on Zulfów, an estate which in the 19th century was leased by the Piłsudski family. It was here that Marshal Józef Piłsudski¹ was born.

M.L.: Despite having to flee and being forced to move as a result of the war, you became a traveler as an adult. And that was not easy in Poland in the 50s, not many people were let out of the country. Yet you managed to do it.

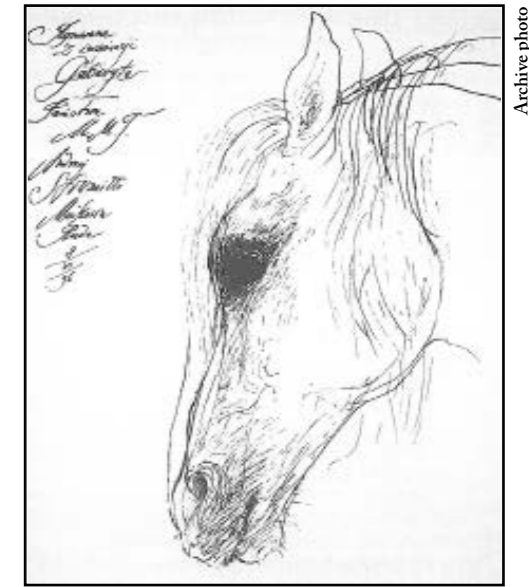
A.S.: The mechanism was very complicated. At first it was a matter of luck – somebody had to do it! My first serious foreign trip was to Beijing, in 1954, on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. A delegation from the department of culture travelled there at the time. We had the opportunity to visit all of China in



Mlecha, painted by Juliusz Kossak (1845), a gift from Professor Andrzej Strumillo to Janów Podlaski Stud



Emir Rzewuski, a work by Andrzej Strumillo



The stallion Gabaryt, a drawing by Andrzej Strumillo

Archive photo

very privileged conditions. I drew a lot during that trip, I made about 200 sketches and drawings, which were later exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Chinese Marshal Czu Teh bought 15 of my works. At the evening gala I sat next to the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama, very young boys at the time. I was young, but they were even younger! When the reporters rushed towards them, they fled on all fours under the table. But I want to emphasize that although I really wanted to travel, despite pressure I did not enlist into the party [the communist Polish United Workers' Party]. Already then I had enough political experiences. And besides, the lots of my family did not allow me to – I felt loyalty towards my father, who died in the Kolyma² region, at the age of 46, after he was arrested and sent to a forced labor colony.

M.L.: You strongly emphasize that your travels greatly influenced your views on the world and opinions about people.

A.S.: My interest in the East and its matters greatly deepened at the time, though it existed before, as my grandmother was born in Vitebsk and my grandfather came from Minsk. The East is very attractive in terms of philosophy and richness of art. Even if I only had the chance to get to know it on the surface – because it is very hard to get to know it really thoroughly, you would have to go in deeper, become one of the people of the East, leaving yourself elsewhere. It is impossible to get to know China or India, they are enormous empires both in terms of time, number of people, philosophy and space. But you can get a taste of them and that's why every

time I had a chance to travel there, I took it. Even in rather risky times. Poland had a cultural cooperation agreement with Vietnam – in a default way, like a socialist country with a socialist country. However during the time of war it was very difficult to find someone in the Ministry of Culture who would agree to go there. For one, the risk of amoeba infection, and two, no chance of selling any works, trading or establishing business contacts. It was an exotic country, wild, raw. But I wanted to see with my own eyes the lots of those people, see how it looked like not only in the paper, which was manipulated, but in reality. So I went, I saw the war, I was at the 17th parallel, on the Vietnamese-American front, the Chinese-Vietnamese front, I had an exhibition in Hanoi, I made a Vietnamese exhibition in Poland. I never regretted that decision.

M.L.: When did Arabian horses appear in your life? Supposedly it was in the States that you decided to breed Arabians. Did you have a chance to visit studs when working for the UN?

A.S.: In the 80s I was the head of the UN Graphic Presentation Unit in New York, where I hired Ewa Stanisławska, a very hard working person, who quickly mastered the newly supplied computers and who knew Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet, which was one of the conditions of getting the job, because we also worked in Russian. Her husband was a Polish businessman, he dealt in meat and also horse trade. At the time the government had a monopoly on the export of Arabians. I learned how much an Arabian horse is worth on the American market, which bloodlines are valued, what

studs are in Poland. I decided that after returning to Poland – I missed my country too much to think about remaining in America, though I had plenty of offers – I would purchase land and start breeding horses.

M.L.: In those times that was a very difficult dream to make come true for a private person.

The government had a monopoly on breeding, but there were people who luckily broke that monopoly. Anna Dębska, Wanda Jackowska, Andrzej Ou, Zygmunt Braur bred Arabian horses despite difficulties. I went to Janów Podlaski, to Director Andrzej Krzyształowicz and he told me that a certain English woman purchased a good mare and that mare gave birth in Poland, in the stud of the Duda family. The foal remained at the stud as payment for the mare's keep. And that was Czarina! I bought her and when I only finished setting up – on the ruins of a small building – an entire farmyard, together with a stable, I began breeding Arabian horses. Later came a second horse, then a third, fourth, and so on.

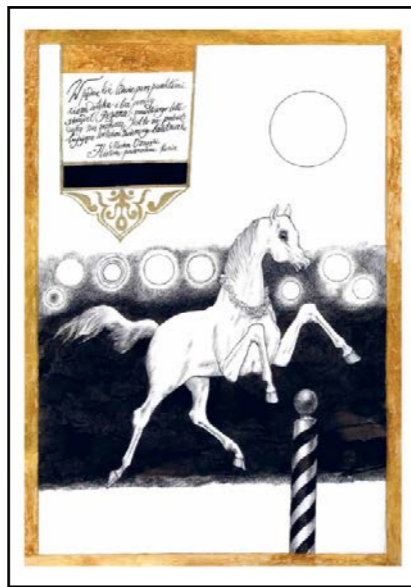
M.L.: Director Andrzej Krzyształowicz influenced your choices also later on. Acting on his advice you later took the mare Enpara (Pamir – Engara/Gwarny). How do you remember him?

A.S.: I am full of the highest recognition for his heart, full of respect for his knowledge, passion, expertise on the subject. He was an exceptional person, who knows if not epoch-making when it comes to saving the concept of Arabian horse breeding in Poland. In difficult conditions in terms of politics,

when the Arabian was not a privileged horse, he saved it, bred it. Luckily the foreign markets helped him out. He was a phenomenon of the Janów stud, he devoted his entire life to it. He had what was needed in breeding, not just knowledge, but also intuition, instinct and luck.

M.L.: Your large hearted gesture, the gifting of the watercolor of the mare Mlecha by Juliusz Kossak³ dated 1845 to Janów Podlaski Stud, was greatly talked about in the community. The watercolor hung in your home for several years, what is the story behind it? Did the gesture result from the mentioned above friendship?

A.S.: Yes. I actually felt that I owed this to Kossak himself. There is an extremely touching story behind this, proof that people are capable of beautiful acts. I was collecting material for the "Al Jawad" book – which title means "noble, generous" – about the history of the Arabian horse in Poland. I was searching for images of the first horses brought to Jarzowce by Juliusz Dzieduszycki⁴ – Mlecha, Sahara and Gazella. In Białowieża I found Joanna, a descendant of the Kossak clan. She was the one who had that watercolor. I asked for a copy to place it in the book, but the reproduction that I got was of very poor quality. I thanked her and said that I would try to work with it, though the copy is poor. Imagine that for Christmas she sent me the original! For several years the work hung in my living room in the countryside house. But I worried about its safety and also thought that it should hang where the benefactor would also be honored. I think that Janów is the best place for this work. I must also mention that there was a problem with the identification



A series of works from the bibliophile portfolio containing facsimile reproductions of illustrations by Andrzej Strumillo depicting Arabian horses (Edyta Wittchen publishing house)

of the mare on the watercolor – some sources claim that it's Mlecha, others that it's Gazella. But finally the experts and organizers of the pre-war exhibition of Juliusz Kossak in Lviv decided that it's Mlecha. This expert opinion is glued at the back. Literature is often wrong... The illustrations made in Jarczowce by Kossak, at the Dzieduszycki estate, were young, a bit primitive. Beautiful and with the charm of that era, but painted prior to his Parisian studies at Vernet's.

M.L.: Do you keep track of what currently goes on in the Arabian horse world? For example the successes of Polish breeding, the results of the World Championships in Paris?
A.S.: I don't really follow it, but I do hear something from time to time. I'm happy that Polish breeding is doing so well. State breeding has had, has and will have great successes. But private breeding is also progressing and is becoming a serious competition for the state studs. Private bred horses are receiving high marks on the show arena.

M.L.: Director Jerzy Białobok mentioned you once in an interview when speaking about private breeders. "I like the view presented by Professor Strumillo: he draws colossal pleasure from his breeding! Due to organizational issues he always leases a stallion, doesn't bring in semen to his stud and yet he has managed to breed some rather decent foals. He is deeply affected by the performances of his graduates. He has made himself comfortable in this breeding and feels no discomfort just because he is not using the most trendiest stallions of the moment", he said. Is this correct?
A.S.: Indeed so. I could not always afford the trendiest stallions, but Janów was kind enough to let me try out young, good sires. Several stallions, which later stood out in breeding – Entyk, Gabaryt, Perlik, Epejos – began their duties at my place. I have been breeding Arabians for more than 20 years. I have personally delivered tens of foals and have to say I only lost one. It was Czarina's first foal, who in her sixth month of pregnancy bumped her shoulder into a concrete electrical pole, injuring her shoulder muscle nerve. The foal, by the Bask son Biquet, imported to Poland by Joanna Grootings, was born weak and did not want to nurse. The local veterinarian gave the mare a tranquilizer shot and the foal fell asleep. It survived only one day. I wanted to have a Bask grandchild so badly! Beside this one occurrence, everything else was reared with no health issues.

M.L.: You have the Midas touch. Those horses of mine are in many places today. I want them to have a good life, to have a pasture so that they can gallop and to have a chance at a sports career. I know people that derive pleasure from my horses. Some have built small studs basing on my produce. I exported a mare and stallion to Lithuania and even one mare to Belarus.

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M.L.: You wrote that we owe a lot to the horse, that we received more from it than we could give. Do you feel you owe your horses something?

A.S.: I feel like I owe something to horses in general. The horse has played a great role in our civilization, as a work animal, a means of transport, our companion in battle and life. Horses simply deserve respect.

M.L.: But you also said: "When I am tired with the troubles of life, I go to the stable, cuddle up to the horses and I feel a lot better".

A.S.: Yes, and the horses also cuddle up to me. A horse has the same need of friendship and closeness.

M.L.: You rode horses for many years. What kind of mount is an Arabian horse in your opinion?

A.S.: Yes, I used to ride. In my opinion the Arabian makes a good mount. People are afraid of their spirited nature or restlessness. But if the human is calm, then the horse is also calm. The horse understands the human so well that – I presume – he reads his mind. Man simply thinks about turning right and the horse turns.

M.L.: You focused on performance traits of the Arabian horse in your breeding. On the other hand, as an artist, you are sensitive to beauty. Meanwhile charisma and impressive beauty are the traits of show horses.

A.S.: I praise Polish breeding very much. Polish breeding is complete, pays attention to conformation traits. That's very important to me! Beauty is the fundamental wealth of the Arabian, apart from the strictly physical traits, such as resistance, health, metabolism that guarantees stamina, adaptation to every kind of feed, to all conditions. That's why those Arabians that descend from Tersk or France, athletic, strong, fast, are not as subtle as Polish ones and don't bring me joy.

M.L.: When you observed horses out on the pasture in Mackowa Ruda did you want to immortalize them in drawing or painting?

A.S.: Not really... Although when I had Gabaryt in 1996, a wonderful horse who has since passed away, I made a portrait from nature and gave it to Marek Trela.

M.L.: You claim that the Arabian horse is a beautiful, cultural relict. And today we see an increasing interest in Arabians, which have become fashionable, especially in the Middle East.

A.S.: Those words of mine related to the past. As rich societies develop and the culture of the middle class increases, the Arabian horse ceases to be a relict, but is now a symbol of wealth, its value is reborn, it has achieved a new significance. It is the object of friendship, aesthetic satisfaction, is used for sports.

M.L.: I have a feeling that it can serve one more function – an excuse for different cultures to meet.

A.S.: We should find reasons to have more of such gatherings! Each path, each symbol that unites is valuable, each common passion draws people together. The love for the Arabian horse can unite Arabs, Israelis and other nations. There is definitely something like an “equine family”. I remember how Laheeb stood next to Gazal sons.

M.L.: The Arabian horse is also considered a symbol of freedom, space, they are called “drinkers of the wind”. Today Arabians don’t always have that wide space at their disposal, but we can still recall the words of Emir Wacław Rzewuski: “Who once has been a rider, will never be a slave”. Is that why this horse has such a warm place in your heart, because you were also very attached to freedom? You were ready to quit your job, classes, career – to only not be tied to anything.

A.S.: Sometimes I gave up very large amounts of money. After several years of work in New York I could have had a senatorial pension. But I chose my own plot of land, freedom and horses.

M.L.: Has the Arabian horse become a form of inspiration to you?

A.S.: First of all it brings me great satisfaction. To assist a mare in labor. To deliver a foal, rear it. Later break in and ride your own horses, which I often did myself. My Arabians were so easy to be broken in that I was surprised how people could have any problem with it. I just got on and rode. Perhaps I didn’t ride well, because I don’t consider myself a trainer or good rider. Working with a horse is very hard, it’s like working with a child, which you have to lead into life in a proper way.

M.L.: Once again it turns out that you have the Midas touch.

A.S.: Yes, I guess so. I am inspired by historical personas, such as Wacław Rzewuski. I have reached some sources and painted an image of Rzewuski on a horse – Emir Złotobrody [Emir Goldenbeard]. He was the exponent of the spirit of freedom. I wrote many times about him in the mentioned above “Al Jawwad”. Not only did he spend several years among the Bedouin tribes, brought from Arabia the title of Emir and 137 desert horses, but he also left valuable notes in the “On Oriental Horses and Those Descended from Eastern Breeds”, personally illustrated. And later he led the life of a free daredevil. As Słowacki⁵ wrote, “he built arbors for horses in the garden, gilded the mangers and provided crystal walls”. A unique, restless figure. Another inspiration is Juliusz Kossak, a superb expert on the horse, its conformation, movement and nature, fascinated by Arabians since childhood, which is seen even in his earliest works, painted at the threshold of his career.

M.L.: “Evil spirits don’t enter a tent with a horse” – this saying is attributed to Mahomet. Horses are the good spirits of Maćkowa Ruda?

A.S.: For now – they are. Until they are there, so is Maćkowa Ruda. But I don’t know what the future will hold. My life is quite complicated and is nearing its end. I don’t know what the final years will bring. Perhaps I will change the stud’s address, maybe I will move it closer to Warsaw. But that would also mean a lack of everyday contact. These choices are extremely hard. Sometimes I wonder whether the biological potential of my mares is not wasted. This year I don’t have any foals, for the first time in many years. It’s a bit of a pity. I can’t afford to import semen of the highest world quality, but there are very promising Polish stallions. Who knows – maybe I will still bring a new life into this world? □

¹Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), was a Polish statesman; Chief of State (1918–1922), First Marshal of Poland (from 1920), and de facto dictator (1926–1935) of the Second Polish Republic. From mid-World War I he had a major influence in Poland’s politics, and was an important figure on the European political scene.

²Kolyma – a region located in the Russian Far East. It is bounded by the East Siberian Sea and the Arctic Ocean in the north and the Sea of Okhotsk to the south. Under Joseph Stalin’s rule, Kolyma became the most notorious region for the Gulag labor camps. Described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, author of *The Gulag Archipelago*, as “pole of cold and cruelty”.

³Juliusz Kossak (1824–1899), a Polish painter specializing in battle and historical paintings. He most liked painting horses. His most important works include “Sobieski at Vienna”, “Stud of Mohort”, “Arrival of Emperor Franz Joseph to Cracow”, “A stud in the Podolia region”, “A portrait of Count Rzewuski”.

⁴Count Juliusz Dzieduszycki (1817–1885), land owner, horseman. In 1840 he set off on a famous, full of adventures expedition to Lvov to acquire the stallion Bagdad and in 1845 to Arabia, from where he brought the mares Gazella, Mlecha and Sahara. Their significance for Polish Arabian horse breeding does not need to be emphasized. This stud, similar to the others, did not survive. The only ones to survive the extermination of the World War I and the Bolshevik invasion in the years 1917–1918 were the mare Pomponia 1902 and three fillies, which sent to Janów formed the foundations of the stud (Gazella II 1914, Mlecha 1914 and Zulejma 1914). Descending from Pomponia and Zulejma was the epochal Ofir.

⁵Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), romantic poet, author (among others) of ballads referring to the Orient.