

THE FROSTY GLITTER OF A COLD LIGHT

(Revised)

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My first Literary Club paper in March, 1973 was a biography of Julian Stanczak. It was based largely on my lengthy taped interview with him in Cleveland the previous year. Several months ago, after receiving from Albert Pyle my assignment for an April 2008 paper, it occurred to me that re-reading that 1973 paper would be appropriate because of the commissioning of Julian's mural on the Fifth Third Bank façade.

I recall that on several occasions during the past thirty years, old papers had been re-read. Therefore, I called our historian, John Diehl, to confirm my memory and request his approval. When I explained the topic of my paper, John graciously agreed and approved.

I wanted to re-read the paper this fall while the Stanczak exhibit remains at the Contemporary Arts Center, and the impact is still fresh of the August 3, 2007 dedication of the spectacular mural on the Sixth Street side of the Fifth Third Bank garage. (The mural is called "Additive 6".) So, the next step was to contact Albert and obtain the names of members whose papers were scheduled for October. Dusty Anderson responded to my request and thus my April date was changed to tonight. So, with slight revisions, here goes.

I probably met Julian Stanczak during the late 1960's at one of his exhibitions at the Carl Solway Gallery. I'm certain he did not remember me since our brief conversations were limited to the trivia exchanged at art openings between admiring collector and gracious artist.

Walter Farmer, was remodeling the Celestial Restaurant in Mt. Adams. Farmer, a former president of The Literary Club, commissioned Stanczak to execute four large paintings for the restaurant. Walter telephoned me to come to the Celestial the Saturday afternoon the paintings were being installed. It provided me with the opportunity to invite Stanczak to be the first artist in a new project of the Cincinnati Print and Drawing Circle to commission a print by a major painter.

When I arrived at the Celestial, Stanczak and Walter were supervising the installation of the canvases. After congratulating Walter on the remodeling, I approached the artist.

Julian Stanczak is approximately five feet, seven inches tall and weighs no more than one hundred and twenty pounds. His body, although slight, undoubtedly because he has not enjoyed good health, exudes inner strength and dynamic vitality. In his bearded face is a radiance and mirth that mock his slender body. His useless right arm either hangs limply at his side or is cradled cross-armed across his chest.

With only one hand he creates paintings with unlimited parallel lines. Stanczak's technique is to cause an interaction of one color by interrupting visual perception with a screen or grid of precisely painted parallel lines of another color.

What is Stanczak's background that motivates him to express his creativity through delicate and meticulous geometrics requiring difficult mechanical skills with two hands, let alone one? His life story is one of fascination, determination, pathos, triumph, and certainly miracle.

Julian Stanczak was born November 5, 1928 on his grandparents' farm in the little village of Borownica in southeast Poland. It is approximately thirty-five miles from the city of Przemyśl (pronounced Shemish). His parents were simple people – his father a construction worker, his mother a seamstress. Perhaps Julian's artistic talents partially were derived from his maternal grandfather, a cabinetmaker. Other members of his family on his mother's side were very much interested in painting and music.

The large farm house where he was born was built on the slope of a hill. As an infant, Julian remembers looking down rather than up at the trees from his second story window. As a precursor of his mature art, Julian has a vivid memory of the grainy wooden floors of his room and how the boards were joined together.

Although Julian has few recollections of his early years on the farm, he teasingly enjoys relating that when their daughter was born, he said to his wife, "I remember the taste of my mother's milk." Not to be outdone by her husband, his wife, Barbara, replied that she remembers much earlier than that.

In 1932, when Julian was four, his family moved to Przemyśl, a town of sixty-five thousand with mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds. Included were Moslems, Jews, and of course, Catholics, the Stanczak's' religion and the predominant religion of Poland.

With the help of his grandparents and uncle, Julian's father built a new home on a hill. It overlooks both the city and the San, a river which divides the town in half and flows into the Wisla.

When Julian entered school at five there were Moslems and Jews in his room. Before class the students were required to stand and pray. The decision of the prayer to be used was resolved by vote. Because of the Christian majority, a Christian prayer was offered. However, the non-Christians were obliged only to stand in respect; they were not required to pray aloud.

His early schooling influenced Julian's later artistic expression. Julian remembers vividly the music lessons and classes in crafts, painting and particularly drawing. The instruction dealt with many illusionistic situations; how apparatus worked, how things were measured or perceived, how much of it was life, how much was visual and how much was mental interpretation that would make logical what appeared to be contradictory. Stanczak feels that his exposure to geometric problems represented a rigid type of discipline which had a strong influence on his life.

Julian was a withdrawn child. He preferred to compete with himself instead of against others. Mainly for his own satisfaction, rather than being competitive, he enjoyed handicrafts, carving, building, woodwork, or childlike games, such as climbing a telephone pole or throwing a rock. But he attempted to outdo his peers only in his own secrecy rather than in overt competition. Thus, the seeds were sown early for the intense precision and discipline demanded by his later mode of expression.

Life in Przemysl between 1932 and 1939 was rather uneventful for Julian. The country was content and serene, the standard of living was improving, there was prosperity throughout the land. Because of a non-aggression pact with Germany, Poland was totally unprepared when war broke out.

In August, 1939, the tranquility was abruptly shattered. One evening, while Julian was playing outside, he saw strange blinking lights on the horizon. They were, of course, flashings from the high explosives of artillery bombardment. Suddenly, German planes flew in very close to his hilltop home. The planes were shooting everything down, and bombing the railroad station and bridges across the San. To ten year old Julian, the destruction and capture of his town was fascinating as if in a puzzling, surrealistic dream.

His mother had difficulty keeping him inside the house. She forced Julian, his brother and sister to lie on the floor to avoid being hit by bullets striking their house from the shooting across the river.

Almost as quickly as it started, the shelling ceased. After only three days, German troops crossed the San and captured the city. Julian's curiosity led him into town where he saw horrible destruction of life and property. In a nearby park ants and flies were swarming over devastated corpses of people killed by the onslaught.

Shortly after the town fell, Julian ran home screaming. He had seen German troops packing people with all their belongings into a large building, slam the door, and set the building on fire. At the time, Julian did not realize the people were Jews and the building was their synagogue. On another occasion he saw box cars crowded with half-starved people.

It wasn't long, however, before the retreating Germans re-crossed the river and vacated the town. For several days, Przemyśl was a quiet no-man's-land. Then the Russians moved in. They proudly announced they had come as friends to liberate the city from the Germans.

On February 9 or 10, 1940, at the dark hour of four in the morning, someone banged on the door of the Stanczak home. Julian's father was hiding at the farm in Borownica because he had previously fought against the Russians in World War I. Accordingly, Mrs. Stanczak opened the door. Outside were several Russian soldiers with a wagon. "We're building fortifications through here and are going to conduct shooting practice. We must evacuate you for four days. Don't take anything, just bring your children and go with us," they ordered.

The Stanczaks believed the story and left with the soldiers. Instead of being escorted to a safe place, Mrs. Stanczak and her three children were taken to the railroad station and forced into a box car. Julian's mother cried, "Where are we going?" The soldiers answered, "Sorry, we lied. You are going to Siberia for five years."

"But I have nothing," pleaded Mrs. Stanczak. "I didn't take anything from the house. How am I going to feed my children?"

"That's your problem," replied the troopers.

As the soldiers started to lock the freight car, Mrs. Stanczak blocked the door. She was brutally struck on the head and knocked unconscious. Julian thought she was dead. But the others, jammed inside the car, helped her recover from the blow as the train pulled out.

For two weeks the box car packed with over eighty people rolled towards Siberia. Occasionally they were fed a bucket of snow, and sometimes watery soup mixed primarily with grease or lard.

Meanwhile back in Przemysl, Julian's father returned to find his house locked and his family gone. He was quickly captured by the MKVP, the Russian military police. When he inquired as to the whereabouts of his family, he was told they had been taken to Siberia. The MKVP gave him the choice of serving his term in Poland or in Russia. He replied that he wanted to go to Russia. "We would advise you to stay in Poland, it's much better than going to Russia," they said. "No," he replied, "I want to join my family; that would be best for me."

The Russians laughed. "You're a fool. But if you want to, we'll give you the proper papers so you can join your family." He agreed. They said, "Tomorrow we'll have another train going for you to take." "No", he said. "I won't because I'll never meet them. It's impossible. I want to be on their train." They laughed again. "All right, if you want to be on their train why don't you purchase a ticket on the express train. Your family is probably in Kiev by now."

Mr. Stanczak agreed, "Sure. I'll buy myself an express ticket."

And so he did. They gave him the necessary papers. Accompanied by two Russian soldiers who never left his side, he took an express train to Kiev where he caught up with his family in the outskirts.

"We were absolutely shocked. We were still cramped in the box car when he joined us. But the Russians promised and they did it. My father is probably the only person who ever paid his own way to Siberia," recalls Julian.

Onward went the train for another four weeks with more than eighty people squeezed into the box car.

Health conditions were horrid. The worst problem involved body waste elimination. It was resolved by breaking a hole in the floor. A blanket was wrapped around so that at least there was some privacy while one was attending to necessary physical needs.

"The spirit of the people was phenomenal," remembers Julian. "You would hear the best jokes. We were the most harmonious group – and we were so different from each other. Under normal circumstances everyone would get in the hair of each other, you know – living in the same community. But here we were faced with the same predicament, the same misery, and one never saw such human compassion for each other.

"That taught me a lesson of how much we are dependent upon each other; how much assistance we can show each other. All the discrepancies created in the process of living, such as segregation and accusations because of backgrounds are so artificial.

“Misery, I think, makes a man a man, and creates respect for others. I think this is the first time that one finds out how much one is imprisoned in one’s own self. And in a case like this, which is so painful to share, there is great respect for another contained unit next to you.”

After what seemed an interminable period, the journey finally ended. In the middle of March the train halted near Perm in the Ural Mountains of central Russia. The captives got off the train in snow six feet deep and temperature about sixty degrees centigrade below zero.

After a miserable day and night traveling through the Russian wilderness by horse and sled, the group finally arrived at a compound in the woods. The habitation consisted of crude barracks with large rooms in which a few dozen families were forced to live together.

Of course, their clothing was inadequate for the sub-zero temperature. However, it did not take long for the captives to learn how to protect themselves from the cold.

“We would take a raincoat or just rags, since many of us did not have raincoats, soak them in water, and step outside. Instantly, everything would freeze solid. This would insulate us beautifully as if we were inside an icicle. Sometimes we could not open our eyes because moisture froze them shut. We could not spit because the sputum froze in our mouth. As for urinating, well – even that was a problem.”

“But,” continued Julian, “there were advantages. Nobody caught cold or pneumonia. The sub-zero weather killed all bacteria. Even in such primitive conditions we lost very few people to disease.”

“The food, however, was inedible. Sometimes for several weeks we would get nothing because they could not deliver during war-time. When we would ask for our food for the past few weeks they would answer, ‘You lived through it didn’t you? Once you live through, why do you complain? Just look forward.’ That was their answer. It was always a tongue in cheek attitude toward us.”

The day after the prisoners arrived at their new wilderness home, they were assigned chores, primarily lumberjacking and road building. Julian was required to attend school. Mixed into one classroom were several hundred Poles and Russians, ranging from grades one to four. The books were in Russian. But, after a few weeks, as a result of both persistence and, according to Julian, “exquisite teaching,” the Polish children learned to read Russian. They were taught geometry, trigonometry, and two courses which later were to be of invaluable aid to Julian: the geography and topography of the country.

When the first summer arrived the inmates requested and were granted permission to build additional quarters in order to alleviate the oppressive overcrowding. Accordingly, the woods were cleared and more barracks were constructed. As a result only two families occupied one room. The Russians appreciated and respected the ingenuity and desire of the Poles to improve their existence.

The camp itself was not fenced. In spite of its openness, few attempted to escape. Perm was more than a day's walk through the wilderness. During the winter it was impossible to walk because of the depth of the snow, and during the summer one was quickly tracked and captured by hunting dogs.

Julian excelled in school, although he rarely studied. After a year he was awarded a large red diploma for extraordinary accomplishments. On one side was a portrait of Lenin; on the other a portrait of Stalin. Julian mischievously took Stalin's portrait, scratched out his eyes, and hung it over the latrine. The prank almost resulted in his father's execution. Through an interrogation process of bunching a few together and freezing them out by cutting off the heat, the Russians almost traced the blame to Julian. Fortunately, the incident eventually was forgotten.

Meanwhile, the Russians were engaging in a daily indoctrination program designed to integrate the camp into the Russian community. The brighter children were invited to move into town to continue their education. Julian, however, chose to remain with his family.

During the winter of 1941, tragedy struck. Julian had been assigned work as a lumberjack. Instead of chopping wood in the frigid weather, he was warming himself by the fire. He was caught and badly beaten by the Russians. As a result of the beating, he suffered nervous shock, inflammation of his brain, damage to his vertebrae and then pneumonia. He was taken to a hospital in Perm. The doctors were unable to diagnose his illness, and thus did not give him medication. To make matters worse, and unknown to the hospital attendants, other patients stole his food. As a result, he almost starved.

When he recovered, he was beginning to lose the use of his right arm. Released from the hospital, Julian returned to the camp, where he and others were subsequently granted amnesty to find jobs in the Soviet Union. The Stanczaks went to live with another Russian family on a collective farm.

In late winter of 1942, news was received that the Polish Army in exile was organizing south of Russia in Teheran, Persia. Desiring to fight against the Germans, one evening the Stanczaks secretly walked off the farm, boarded a freight train and fled to southern Russia. Once there, Julian's father left the family to search for the Polish troops.

The six-week escape south was far worse than anything they had experienced in the wilderness camp. Although the Stanczaks were no longer prisoners because of amnesty, they were unable to find food or jobs. There was nothing to eat. Dogs disappeared. Cats disappeared. Grass disappeared. The land was barren. At one time the family survived on a bag of onions Julian had stolen. Their drinking water consisted of what steam they could collect from locomotives.

Finally, in desperation, Julian placed his six year old brother in an orphanage where he would at least receive something to eat while Julian attempted to locate the Polish Army. He was unsuccessful and returned to the orphanage. He found his brother barefoot while it was still terribly cold with frost on the ground. Julian stole a pair of shoes for his brother. He also learned that the orphanage children were about to be taken across the Caspian Sea to Persia.

That night Julian illegally crept aboard the boat carrying his brother. While hiding in the engine room, Julian became sick when the lavatory spilled over causing him to walk in excrement up to his ankles. As he rushed to the deck for water and air for relief, his brother recognized him and cried out, "Julian, Julian, take me." "I had to deny I knew him because I was illegally on board."

When the boat finally docked, Julian could not find his brother. He was told he had been taken to Teheran. "I felt very sad because I could not give him some raisins I had purchased with a few Russian rubles. So right there, on the beach of the Caspian Sea, I joined the Polish Army in exile."

Julian was only twelve. "But I lied and said I was seventeen. I remember the incident well. They said, 'How old are you?' I said, 'Seventeen.' They said, 'Take your pants down.' So, I took my pants down. They said, 'Are you sure you are seventeen?' I said, 'Yes, sir. I am seventeen.' 'Pull your pants up.' That was my physical examination. It was as simple as that. It took me awhile to realize that they knew I wasn't seventeen at all."

By now Julian was very sick. He was slowly losing the use of his right arm and was suffering excruciating nerve pains. He felt that by staying in the army he would receive medical

treatment. He wanted desperately to go to the hospital, but others were dying like flies from typhoid fever, dysentery, and cholera.

An ignorant sergeant, who was practically deaf, suggested that he lie on the floor with others who were deathly ill, so that when the attendants came to remove the dying to the hospital, they also would take Julian. Stanczak lay down, although he did not know what disease the others were carrying.

“Four days later I knew what they had, because I had it too. Typhoid fever. They finally took me to a British Army Hospital. While examining me they discovered that something was wrong with my arm and put it in a plaster cast. That finished it.”

As soon as Julian recovered from typhoid he was assigned to an army outfit and issued military paraphernalia. But Julian discovered his mother, sister and brother had been reunited in a nearby civilian camp, and had different ideas. Upon leaving the hospital with his military papers, he stopped at the first telephone pole, dropped everything, smashed the cast on his arm, deserted the army and walked to the civilian camp to join his family. But Julian’s troubles were not over. He was to spend several more months in a civilian hospital recovering from pleurisy.

After his release from the hospital, the Stanczaks were faced with the decision of where next to move. They decided they could not remain in Teheran. Nor did they know where Mr. Stanczak was, although they believed he was fighting in Russia. When it was suggested they go to Africa, Julian, as the male head of the family, although only twelve years old, made the decision to depart.

So off went the family of four; first by train through the Middle East to Karachi, West Pakistan, which at that time was still British; then to Mumbasa, Africa; and finally to Muscindes, Uganda.

The steaming tropical jungle was a startling contrast to the frigid winter wilderness of Russia. Primitive huts were built out of eighteen to twenty feet tall grass among the marabouts, monkeys and birds. After a year, a camp of five thousand Polish exiles sprang up with larger houses of mud, grass and streets. Exotic flowers and shrubbery were everywhere. In a nearby lake Julian swam and chased crocodiles.

For the next six years the exiled Poles waited for the war to end. They organized a school, using mimeographed books brought from Russia. Anyone with a high school education was enlisted as a teacher. Julian found that he desperately wanted to paint and sculpt, but of

course, he had no training and no supplies. His first sketchbook consisted of a roll of toilet paper brought from Persia. Upon each precious little square, Julian would draw, paint or write. His right arm was now useless, and he was making the difficult transition from being right to left-handed.

He manufactured his own charcoal and paints from different colors in the clay. Slowly his work improved. He met a fellow exile named Frudest, who formerly had conducted art schools in Vienna and Warsaw. Frudest gave Julian several books on Picasso and taught him such artistic fundamentals as perspective and accuracy of color mixing.

While others were complaining about jungle noises, the heat, the deep-black nights and the monotonous year-round regularity of the sunrise and sunset, since they were almost directly on the equator, Julian was responding enthusiastically to his environment. During the dry season fires leveled the vegetation. The sun and the sky were obliterated by smoke and dust from everything becoming pulverized by the heat. Spring brought weeks of rain causing the trees, flowers and leaves to explode into full bloom.

The colors of sunset and sunrise were more spectacular than in the American west. "For me this was a phenomena that was absolutely fantastic; you know, performing every day for me to enjoy. First the rain would come, and then the sun after the rain. One would look at the jungle and it would turn from purple to almost red, and then back again to blue-green, or black. It was a dazzling color display.

"I was moved by all this drama, and wanted to do something visually. I wanted to record realistically what was happening in front of me. I tried to train myself to be a magic realist. I did a tremendous amount of work that way. Realism made me aware that once one is confronted with himself and what he sees, he prefers to recollect because that is the easiest. But, nobody gives a damn about your experiences in art. Art is supposed to be entirely different, more spiritual, more free, offering more.

"So, I wondered what art should be like. I observed the natives and saw their masks, their carvings. What fascinated me was basic rhythm, rhythm of music, visual rhythm of their patterns and designs. They do not call it art; they do not even have a word for art. I saw this need to create something which is not around. Something which would embrace many things into one performance, or one visual unit, and it started to intrigue me. So I was terribly torn and confused."

Through the Red Cross, Julian learned that his father was fighting with the Polish Second Corps under the British in Italy. The British offered to settle in England members of any family fighting under their command. Thus, in 1948, the four Stanczaks departed their six-year jungle home and flew to England to rejoin their long-separated father. During a two-week wait for the plane to Nairobi, Kenya, Julian met some people at the Stanley Hotel who gave him his first one-man show of his watercolors. Most of them sold. Stanczak's career as a professional painter was launched.

The Stanczaks lived in England for two years. Julian received a scholarship from the Board of Education to study for a national teachers diploma. He attended the Borough Polytechnic School where he took all the fine arts courses offered.

In May, 1950, faced with a decision of remaining in England or emigrating to America, the family sailed for New York. They arrived with \$50.00 and no jobs. Julian was twenty-one. After spending several weeks with a distant relative in Binghamton, New York, the odyssey, which began in 1940, finally terminated in Cleveland.

Securing employment was not easy for the elder Stanczaks. They were forced to obtain factory jobs in order for Julian to attend the Cleveland Art Institute. Julian's frustrations as a student were not unlike other budding artists who were opposed to stereotyped academic instruction, because they were striving to express themselves differently.

"They wanted me to paint as if art were a recollection of the past. I wanted to paint my way. We can share our joys if we do not impose our personal wants on others. The artist," says Stanczak, "should offer through his medium the right of each one to discover his own interpretation. In other words, art is similar to religion – one should not be forced to interpret it in a particular way. I started to look at things not as they are, but in a manner that could evoke another experience through itself." As a result of his individuality and because he was not painting realistically, Stanczak was not immediately awarded his degree from the Art Institute. He later received it.

Stanczak's present style had not yet developed. He was deeply aroused and interested in color and the pure energy it produced. The master of color theory was Josef Albers, who was then teaching at Yale. So Julian applied and was accepted for graduate work at New Haven.

Because of his teaching methods, studying under Albers was not easy. “Albers diminished me completely. He told me that I was an idiot, that I knew nothing. For weeks he would not even say hello or look at me or my work.”

The feeling of discouragement, coupled with the financial hardship of attending graduate school, prompted Stanczak to seriously consider quitting. He went to Albers to withdraw. But the master was too perceptive and did not permit Stanczak to speak.

Julian returned to work and later realized what Albers had done. “His purpose,” says Stanczak, “was to undermine everything you think you have or know, and make you reshape, rebuild it back again in order to become an individual, not a follower. It was beautiful teaching.” Albers and Stanczak became good friends and corresponded regularly.

Stanczak earned his masters degree from Yale, finishing second in his class. However, he was unable to secure a teaching position. He returned to Cleveland to work as a librarian at the Art Institute.

In 1957, Stanczak received his first big break. He was appointed an instructor in painting at the Art Academy in Cincinnati. The rest is history.

Stanczak spent seven happy years teaching in Cincinnati. He partially attributes his pleasant stay to the fact that Cincinnati, situated on a hill overlooking the Ohio River, reminded him of his childhood home in Przemysl high above the San River. One of his students was Barbara Meerpohl, whom he married in 1960.

In 1964, he resigned his teaching position to return to his alma mater in Cleveland where his paintings ripened to full maturity.

Miraculously, the entire Stanczak family lived in Cleveland. Julian’s parents resided directly behind their son’s home. His sister is the mother of four children, and his brother has taught Russian at Western Reserve University.

Stanczak’s works have elevated him to international status. His paintings are in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus museums and dozens of other major museums.

The Corcoran Museum in Washington honored Julian with a show in November, 1972. In the catalogue, Director Gene Baro states, “In Julian Stanczak’s work, there are no objects, no solid shapes of the mundane world. Instead, his squares, circles, columns and bands are tissues projected into space – ghosts of form that organize the frosty glitter of a cold light or the vibrancy of hue that is light anatomized.”

Stanczak once told me, “If you asked me which of my paintings I like best, I would say none. I like best the painting I have not yet done. I am excited by the secrecy, the discovery of the next painting I am about to do.”

Incidentally, my meeting at the Celestial Restaurant led to the commissioning of a serigraph for the Cincinnati Print and Drawing Circle, and a retrospective of Stanczak’s graphics at the Cincinnati Art Museum in February of 1972. Julian dedicated the commissioned print to the Print and Drawing Circle. A copy is in the Museum’s permanent collection.

This July Raphaela Platow, the newly appointed director of the Contemporary Arts Center, requested that I participate in a conversation with Stanczak to be held as part of the Center’s August 3 opening of his works. Of course I agreed.

More than being proud of being instrumental in the Print and Drawing Circle project, the Cincinnati Art Museum show in the 1970s, and the recent “conversation” at the Contemporary Arts Center, I have been enriched by the friendship that has developed with this incredible artist, whose endurance and courageous achievements over seemingly insurmountable obstacles have been capped by success.

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