
Roman Palester's "The Marsyas Conflict" as a Radical Vision of the Emigration

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Under the date of 29th January 1977, Stefan Kisielewski noted:

Poor Roman Palester lingers on in that stupid Paris living off his Radio Free Europe pension, and he still composes, but they don't want to perform it. Perhaps in the end his socialist motherland will take him in – and this will be the end of this epic tale (Kisielewski 1996: 894).

Mercilessly, as he was wont to do, Stefan Kisielewski thus summed up Roman Palester's unfinished biographical "odyssey", including his musical oeuvre's soon-to-be comeback to Poland. There is indeed much bitter truth in that brief quote, summarising 26 years of the composer's residence in the West. The second sentence of "Kisiel's" note is in fact prophetic: the 1980s were favourable to the author of the *Vistula* cantata and, in a sense, the performance of his compositions in Cracow in 1983 might suggest that the "socialist motherland" had indeed "taken him in". This might be true, but only if we keep the phrase in inverted commas – though, on the other hand, it was in the 1980s that Palester got performed most frequently.

The paradoxical and coincidental character of events had a bearing not only on Palester's personal life, but also on his music and writings. In his own life, there came true all the essential points of his excellent essay entitled "The Marsyas Conflict", printed in nos. 7–8 of the Parisian culture (1951a) following the publication of Miłosz's "No" (1951). Palester's essay presents the gist of his personal artistic programme, puts in words the idea of the painful

and phenomenal coupling of art and fatalism. In order to explain that tragic bond of necessity that determines art, Palester recalls and also transforms the mythological story of the conflict of Marsyas and Apollo. By recalling and refreshing the myth, he moves his discourse into the metaphysical regions, as for the author the act of creation is linked up with a mind-boggling mental imperative, with the hell of the self and the extreme endeavour to embody individual artistic vision in matter. The source of that crystalline vision that flows into the artist-instrument lies in the mysterious "beyond" or "above". This concerns not only the struggle with one's own material, one's *parole*, but also – putting his artistic creation into a form possibly as close to the intended one as possible. In that creative process and event, there is no room for any aesthetic or ethical compromise other than that resulting from the need to maintain a live connection with the listener's world. The myth does not leave any room for doubt also on that issue. And this is how Palester begins his story:

When the young Phrygian named Marsyas – he who of all mortals was the best at the difficult art of *aulos* playing – made up his mind to challenge Apollo himself to a contest, the envious god punished him in a painful manner which was an insult to all sense of 'justice'. Marsyas was 'tied to a trunk and flayed alive', after which act he 'passed beyond time and space with light steps'. Struck with a terrible punishment and dying in torment, he became an unimportant, indifferent 'object' and the power that took it out on him was that tragic fatalistic force that determines not only mortal life, but also that of the Olympians. [...]

"If we assume," Palester soon concludes,

that Marsyas' skill had all the beauty and the poetry that a man can put into a work of art – which one cannot doubt if the myth is to retain any sense – than we cannot doubt, either, that his conflict with Apollo was a fully conscious decision. He knew that he had to challenge Apollo, and he was aware of all the inevitable consequences. Had he not been aware of them, the tone of his double flute would surely have remained false and dead. In modern terms, his challenge was simply the matter of "artistic honesty" (1951a: 3).

It is not hard to guess that Palester refers here to the meaning of artistic duty, to the phenomenon of the specific artistic "flaw", stigma or complex, or vocation – the "series of necessities" that determines everything. This series of necessities, it should be stressed, will not become known without conflict,

and it pertains *exclusively* to those who cannot resign from “giving witness in their own radical way to the times and the people.” They are, after all, heralds of their own truth. The strength of the artist’s condition, conceived in this maximalist fashion, is “their personal, (hence) fatal vision of the world” and “the unforgivable ability to think and doubt in the most remarkable terms,” further explains the composer. Predictably, they pay the highest price for this creative maximalism, and in most cases satisfaction has at best a rather melancholy taste. The “light steps” of those who dared to challenge Apollo (the authorities) and are now walking away mean that they cannot win “here”, because life “here” is only the inside of the canvas – the knots and seams, the unattractive grey warp threads, the chaos. Only the other, “right side” is a perfect model, a model of sense and of deep meanings capable of bearing with the tragic. This is, more or less, Palester’s ultimate conclusion from the Marsyas story, but not the end of his discourse. The myth – the allegory filled with centuries-old meanings – serves him as a framework for the presentation to contemporary composers of the tension that exists between creative maximalism and conformism, between the individual and the world, and finally – between art and politics.

The fascinating story of Marsyas not so much defines as generally chalks out the lines of division between ‘true’ artists and those others – craftsmen pursuing various crafts, those working on commission or mere copyists. At the same time, the author’s narrative leads to a discussion of the meaning and character of conformism, and of its many sources – both the obvious and the individual ones. As a counterbalance, Palester introduces the categories of Grace, spontaneity, and gift.¹ This, however, is not all. The problem

¹ Palester spoke about the gift of grace, which is fundamental to his concept of artistry, in an interview conducted by Jędrzychowska (1988: 79): “I was brought up on Brzozowski and he was my main guide in my youth. His thoughts have remained the closest to my mind ever since. No wonder that when I discovered Kierkegaard in Paris, I saw him as a continuation of Brzozowski and Newman. His anti-Hegelian, anti-Cartesian stand was very close to my own. For Kierkegaard, the aim is not thinking in the Cartesian sense, but a lifetime of searching for God. Instead of the conscious cerebral act he advocates the reflex, the feeling, the act of irrational faith. This brings us only a step from Newman’s view that man’s relation with God must be spontaneous because it is a gift of Grace. One who has been equipped with the gift of putting black notes on paper or combining colours and forms so that they most magically come to life has been given precisely the same Grace that other people find in other forms and disciplines.”

is immanent: it derives from the sphere of deep convictions, from the call of truth and the strength of beliefs, or, in a nutshell – from the courage to tell one's own artistic tale, mostly – against the world. What Palester is trying to say is, essentially, that 'men of letters', 'painters', 'composers', even those who have perfectly mastered the technique, the finite matter and precision, but who do not sense the tragic Marsyas conflict behind the facade of their craft – are in effect prone to too much compromise. This sounds like a reproach, but also – like a justification. The greatness of an artist is measured by the dimensions of his tragism and heroism, which still leaves space for weakness. The essential conflict of which the mythological story tells takes place "on another planet", in the domain of metaphysics, even if the blows are imminent. The artist's exile has double nature: it is the hell of an individual's self, his inner constitution – and the cool "touch" of the world, its haste, indifference, superficiality, as well as actions taken purposely against the intractable artist.

Palester does not write exclusively about the specific situation of the artist living in Poland in the 1950s (though this context suggests itself immediately), but also about a certain timeless model situation. In "The Marsyas Conflict," Palester seems to say: it has always been like this. In the 1950s, however, the scale of the phenomenon was quite new and the artist had good reasons to be horrified. To use the mythological terms, the new situation brought the ruthlessness of the "Apollonian pressures," the terror of the sociology of reception, of the public demand, the mass character (a modern version of universality?) and, finally – the most perverted form of an obligatory declaration and decree of the conformity of reception with the product of the quasi-artistic production in socialist realism. And yet there is nothing new in the fact that the audience, or rather – the individual recipient – enters the very space of the creative act and influences its final shape. Still, there are significant differences if we compare the model of a "democratic (i.e. mediated) circulation" of a work of art with the socialist realist variant which Palester discusses in his myth.

The author brings in the institution of recipient and the tradition of "mediation" between the recipient and the artist. Gradually he uses these cat-

egories to present the contemporary version of artistic conformism, but he limits his own analysis of this attitude *exclusively* to the domain of art. He opens his presentation with this statement:

[...] the relations between the author and the consumer are based on the principle of a wise and subtle aesthetic compromise which depends on each individual taking from the work of art only what he or she requires. From the point of view of the artist, the recipient has always appeared as an unknown, nameless mass similar to the atmospheric pressure: he could not live without him, but we view his existence as something so obvious and integrated into our lives that we almost never think about him (Ibidem: 5).

Another dichotomy interestingly presented in the essay is the relation between artistic freedom and the Marsyas conflict, which leads to the question: to what extent is it possible to balance the two wings of the artistic process through mediation. On the one hand, artistic freedom with its paradoxical complex (or need) of the adequate expression of sublimation, on the other – the conscious choice of self-limitation which is also a necessity resulting from technique, material, tools, tradition, the boundaries of the selected theme, form, existing aesthetics formed the accumulated experience of one's predecessors. The realisation that, in this multitude of limitations, freedom can only find a small niche – is a foretaste and harbinger of tragedy, and the unfulfilment and shame, interspersed with moments of elevation, thrill and joy are only the framework for the peripeteia resulting inevitably in fatality. Art would only be absolutely free if it expressed nothing using boundless, infinite means, Palester claims, and this alone is already a contradiction, as art is a finite act projecting an "event," which due to aesthetic mediation takes place in the space of permanent change, in the interpretative discourse of tradition. This conclusion leads the composer into the sphere of politics and transports artistic activity into region of huge, perhaps the greatest risk. This is what interests us most in Palester's essay today, and in his time it was an urgent issue awaiting intellectual analysis and prompt decisions concerning the distinct attitudes that the authors of culture were to assume. In the essay, we read:

Hence the demand for "freedom" transferred into this realm [of politics] from the 19th century has caused a confusion of terms, destroyed the former equilibrium and resulted in an ever deepening crisis of the artist's relation with "the rest of the world." Artists

have used all the overpowering force of their talents to cry out hymns of freedom in various keys instead of speaking (not "singing") about the specific freedoms of publication, of personal freedom, and the principle of the nation's self-determination. It is naturally honourable and praiseworthy for a poet to stand up for nations fighting for political freedom, but in effect this subject has led the artists much further than into the regions of Platonic admiration of freedom. Inconspicuously, the subject has involved the artists in politics *tout court*. The Marsyas conflict has thus been transplanted – either consciously or not – into the sphere of political and sociological polemic, and the artists themselves largely contribute to the rise of that *homo politicus* so characteristic of the period of struggle for democracy.

All this happens to the obvious detriment of the purely artistic level of their works (Ibidem: 6).

The artist, then, as a man and a citizen, member of a community ought to speak out only as a member of that community, using a language that does not belong to his artistic workshop. Employing that workshop in the service of politics and using it to achieve specific political (i.e. practical life) goals via a metaphor – proves in essence that one does not understand the meaning of artistic vocation. If we take the materialist construct of human existence as a certainty, cutting off all links with metaphysics, then Marsyas' sad vicissitudes lose all sense. An unconditional acceptance of the "scientific interpretation of phenomena" must lead the artist astray and make him question both the aim and sense of all artistic creation. The Marsyas myth (an allegory of the artist) then becomes only a 'phantom' and an "extreme" model of non-conformism.

Palester's further line of argument comes close to Miłosz's conclusions from his essay "Nie," with that one difference that for the composer the moral crisis of the artist takes place on both sides of the iron curtain, though "at the moment" (i.e. in the 1950s) it is freely discussed and verbalised on "this," i.e. Western side, which does not mean that in the totalitarian system the intellectuals and artists collaborating on, or forced to support the system's machinery are not aware of that crisis (though it is not publicly discussed there).

As for conformism, Palester's argument pertains mostly to the reality of communist countries; earlier, the composer briefly recalls the fascist totalitarianism in its variant that existed on the occupied territories (the under-

ground artistic life in occupied Poland, links between artists, the joint effort and the peculiar state of concentration that was maintained in the artistic society, then threatened with annihilation). This experience paradoxically yielded positive results in the first three years of communist Poland. We follow the author as he unwaveringly treads the path of non-conformism. Palester's memories, it should be stressed, are important for the history of artistic (musical) life in Poland, as they concern the earliest postwar period, its atmosphere (influenced by the awareness of a clear rift between the pre-war times and that after the 1945 "liberation," the experience of the Warsaw Uprising, of the Yalta arrangements and their consequences for Poland) and the growing sense of isolation, as well as necessity of taking a definite standpoint in the face of the threatening new order. "After the horrid shock of Yalta, of the Warsaw Uprising, and the 'liberation'," the composer recalled,

artists began to rebuild cultural life in the same manner as all other Poles, at the same time being clearly aware of the fact that a period of harsh bondage and new struggle was about to begin (Palester 1951a: 9).

It is essential that we note Palester's words: "being clearly aware of the fact that a period of harsh bondage [...] was about to begin." This statement is important because it contradicts historical fatalism and the belief in necessary submission to history's decrees. This statement also shows that e.g. the artistic society (including musicians) was not so deeply "intoxicated" with communism at all. Palester stresses, first of all, the society's active stand (perhaps something like involved scepticism), important as a standpoint and a gesture in terms of long-term continuation of culture. "But since Poles have had many occasions to learn how to fight the invaders in an unyielding, most sophisticated way on a day-to-day basis," we read further on,

work was started at once in an admirable harmony, because we and the others also knew that we had to use that temporary gap in organisation, in state control, as well as the total lack of any supporters of the regime, in order to do as much good as could be done in that period. One could write volumes, filled with anecdotes, sometimes quite hilarious: things that would not possibly 'do' under the careful watch of the central authorities in Warsaw were done in provincial towns where animosity between local party chiefs could skilfully be used, and one cheated wherever one only could. [...] All this without any euphoria, as we soon realised that even if some minister or another dignitary thinks similarly to us – which in that initial period happened more frequently than it might

seem – still, without the decision of the secret boss of his conscience he could not see to even the simplest things. And just as soon we also realised that the hidden Soviet guardian serves mainly one goal – not to let anything positive or beneficial take place. There was no question of voluntarily choosing emigration and exile in those days, and everybody agreed in Poland that we had to stay, in order to fight the destructive impact of the invader (Palester 1951a: 10).

That natural and spontaneous atmosphere of revival and reconstruction in the shadow of totalitarianism would last, as Palester specified, more or less till 1948. After that time, however, artists were treated to the stick and the carrot in turns, and the composer also stresses that the regime had powerful weapons of corruption which could often bring the desired effects. "By such means," Palester goes on,

the warm and friendly collaboration developed under the occupation was quite soon undermined. [...] Composers could no longer take part in the organisation of musical life, as the key positions were filled with people who were most inappropriate, but politically secure for the party. At the same time, artists were offered living conditions which were excellent in comparison with the rest of the society – and provided with plenty of money. Many reacted with naive delight, but admittedly there are also others for whom the position of the privileged fans of the regime has become more than uncomfortable. Not to mention the fact that in this way the public's enmity towards this new aristocracy was shrewdly generated. It is sometimes said that in return for their privileged material situation artists have allowed themselves to be seduced more than the rest of the population by the fine promises of the regime – and this may partially be true. Still, one can hardly expect everyone to be a hero in everyday life, especially since all the changes in the life of our "satellite" country are introduced secretly and inconspicuously behind the facade of "unshakeable" principles. No artist is being forced to make an immediate "declaration." The pressure continues for years and it would be a gross simplification to suggest that an artist at one point receives a specific "order" to follow one definite line. The pressure is exerted by all indirect means, and the final loss of artistic freedom is not something that could be clearly pinpointed or dated. It takes years and so becomes more elusive, especially since the artist himself is a witness to ever changing official slogans and to the bitter fight of various cliques and tendencies within the party and the government; and the incredibly low human standard of all these actions allows him to cherish an illusion that perhaps after all he will manage to retain some degree of internal independence (Palester 1951a: 10–11).

This perhaps rather lengthy quotation seems justified, first of all by the fact that Palester's essay and his argumentation have hardly ever been considered so far in studies of the relation between art and politics, and secondly – because it presents interesting insights into the earliest days of the

new regime's intrusion into the space of both the spirit and of social reception. The composer's account of the functioning of institutions which were to support artists and shape the aesthetics of reception is of great significance to a better understanding of the first few years of communist Poland after the war. Palester clearly states that there was no specific date or moment that could be pointed as the start of the expansion of socialist realism or of a uniform social philosophy, in which art was to participate. Relative freedom did not last until some proclamation of the new dogma. Freedom had no beginning, either (because of censorship and press policies determining the numbers of copies); there was only the everyday "hacking through" to create the space of relative freedom of action and limited creative space, only possible (what a paradox!) thanks to shrewdness, deception, the acceptance of double ethics in social life. Socialist realism as a set of binding rules begins where the primitivism of the recipient's background, of his readiness for the prescribed type of art, becomes an authoritative order put into practice, so – when it becomes a social fact.

The postulate of an art from which "involvement" or direct functionality as an object is required is not new, and was not the invention of fascist or communist totalitarian ideology, even though I believe that the very fact of discussing its social rudiments might in a sense be taken as a symptom of crisis. Nevertheless, in the past critics and commentators concentrated on individual artistic objects, projecting or forecasting the future tendencies. The twentieth century reverted this process: it began to practise prospective criticism which prescribes rules without grounding them in the analysis of individual works or the tendencies they represent. This phenomenon, interesting in its novelty, contributed to a revival of arts and their environment in the two decades between the wars through avant-garde artistic manifestos questioning the existing values and undermining habits. The phenomenon functioned a bit like yeast in that period. It only began to pose a threat for art itself in the countries of socialist realism where the requirement of suiting the language of artistic expression to the needs of the society became a kind of new fetish, and detailed planning of this process – one of the most compromising inventions of the Zhdanov Doctrine.

This is the problem taken up by Palester in another essay, "Notes on Music, or 'Pasilogia' and 'the contemporary Apollo'" (1951b), which is a direct continuation of "The Marsyas Conflict." Its interest lies also in the development of the motif of artistic conformism as a factor adjusting the artist to his audience on the grounds of an honest aesthetic discourse, and non-conformism as a cause of dissonance, isolation, bitter unfulfilment and the faith in the artist's imaginary position as destroyer, unruly rebel, experimentator and the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. Either of these variants is accompanied by a sense of defeat – by Marsyas' fatalism. Giving up technical demands and the possibilities of artistic expression offered by the accumulated workmanship of generations is opposed to putting oneself at disposal, struggling with artistic technique, solving problems which accompany the development of art. These are the dilemmas and the source of intriguing interactive risk which is the ultimate expression of sublimation.

In "The Marsyas Conflict," however, which in this article is used as the basis for my discussion of Palester's model of exile, this adjustment or education of the audience in communist Poland was presented as pure nonsense. "It is clear," the composer writes,

that each artist will willingly accept anything that widens the scope of his work's reception, and that Polish musicians, keeping Moniuszko's *Household Songbooks* in fond memory, have for many years organised a large number of open, popular or youth concerts, etc., as part of their audience building campaign. It was precisely the continuation of this campaign that the authorities attempted most forcefully to thwart after the war. Even if we assume that the campaign had formerly been ill-advised, collecting even the most basic statistics with regard to musical genres and kinds that workers, peasants and the musically uneducated youth wish to listen to would help to deal seriously at least the issue of the musical education of the wide populace. But no such action was ever taken! The arbitrary imposition on all audiences – regardless of their level of intellectual development – of the worst things proves once again that the policy aims to bring culture to the lowest possible level and that the whole campaign has a fundamentally negative objective: namely, to bring the minds of men to the greatest possible confusion and exhaustion, in which state the "new culture" could most easily be planted there. The struggle naturally goes on, but for now the reformers' aim has been achieved: the Polish artist has been completely deprived of the possibility of direct contact with his audience (Palester 1951b: 12).

In the context of thus represented problem and the ruthless tactics of the "Apollonian authority," the Marsyas conflict takes on a total dimension, as

it takes place both in the individual and the general sphere and it affects everyone: craftsmen and artists, though it is deeply experienced by “creators,” that is, by those who, following Palester’s reading of the myth, are aware of their Marsyas-like predicament and accept “walking away” in its many variants, as Palester in fact accepted his own emigration.

In the rattling cogs of that terrible treadmill characters are broken² and necks are bent down... How can we expect those people to “enter the contest” with Apollo? What about the rebellion against the condition of the individual and how can we demand from artists that in those hardest conditions they keep their strength which would allow them to conceal – in the long run – their true aim and desire? Even assuming that the artist will manage to create a sincere work inside the four walls of his studio, and will wait with its publication for other, better times – what greatness and what concentration would it take to express, to bring forth from the guts all the pain, the humiliation and that tangle of misery, doubt, tragedy and hatred that is called “the lot of today’s human”? (Palester 1951b: 13).

In such an oppressive environment, the voluntary mediated conformism of the artist with his recipient or projected audience is no longer possible. Each successive step towards resigning from individuality and from the risk without which individuality (avant-garde quality) has no chance to manifest itself in the space of art, also – from one’s own style – threatens to pull the artist down into the cobweb of human, institutional and political relations. By giving way, as it were, to himself, by betraying himself, the artist enters the path of conformism, servility, of complete dependence, and his personal (spiritual) discomfort is the greater, the more aware he is in this resignation of the need to speak with his “own” voice.

² Palester refers here to the practice of the so-called auditions, whose minutes were published in music periodicals. He views these minutes as a proof of dishonour and the definite ill-will of “leading personages”, of the madness and aberration of Marxist intellectuals, as well as weakening resistance on the part of artists. “One cannot but feel pity when one reads in those minutes about a certain symphonic prelude which its author entitled ‘Epitaph in Praise of Fallen Heroes,’ and I quote: “As it turned out, the ‘Symphonic Prelude’ or else ‘Epitaph’ was in fact an overture to an ‘Oratorio for Transfiguration Day.’ Not only did the author mislead his audience, but it is only in the light of this discovery that the criticism of the piece becomes completely justified.” True enough, the cool tone of this note could bode nothing good... (and what is the **saddest** in this, **the informer must have been, in this case, someone in a close relationship with the composer...** (underscored by VWM). When some piece is sharply criticised, each of the composer’s replies begins with a stereotypical denouncement: ‘he wrote the piece a long time ago, well, a year ago (!) and today he himself does not like the piece at all!’” (1951b: 13)

How does all this influence the so-called social function of art, its value, and in this case – the sense of creating music? Palester has no illusions – the Soviet experiment leads to the utter destruction of the foundations of Western European, Mediterranean and Christian civilisation; the new civilisation is to be built on the ruins and at the expense of the old one. The dialectic verbal juggling from Stalin's and Zhdanov's speeches, and in the context of Polish music – Zofia Lissa's talk of "base" and "superstructure", of "class struggle in the musical sector" and the habitual use of expressions like "the struggle for" and "struggle against" – leave no room for doubt – the nature of the project is evident. There is no space here for make-believe, for pretending that this new cultural engineering has no future, for treating it as a curiosity or with condescension. When the author was writing these words in 1952, he was deeply convinced that the experiment has a big chance of succeeding, not because there is any real social demand for it, but because for different reasons the intellectual-artistic environment in its majority takes part in it and bestows a quite undeserved status on the project.³

"The Marsyas Conflict" and "Notes on Music" are essentially a record of their author's authentic anxiety about his contemporary world and the values that were dear to him – such as individualism, personal and creative freedom, decency and responsibility. Most of all, however, what was at stake was his own Marsyas conflict which was and would remain (as he thought) a permanent part of his creative effort. The effort, at least theoretically, could take on various shades, assume a different basis and form depending on the

³ The problem was fully articulated in this essay. Nevertheless, Palester had already attempted to interest the opinion-forming circles in the West (during his temporary residence in France) and most of all – the Polish emigrants with the problem of "finishing off" Polish culture. His sensitivity to cultural issues is obvious, as he belonged to a generation which co-created "national culture" in Poland between the wars in a debate with the Classical and Romantic past, with folk (indigenous) elements – by composing works in the spirit of Karłowicz and Szymanowski. His was the generation that was aware of the importance of culture for the inalienable (as it was seen at that time) value of the collective identity of the revived but still spiritually immature nation and state. This generation could not possibly agree with the policies of communist authorities in postwar Poland. And so Palester concluded that it was time to "begin the great cry." He also believed that émigré press underestimated the dangers of the situation, "which is arranged so exceptionally shrewdly that if it continues for a dozen years or more, there will be no need for an 'accession' to the Soviet Union as Poles in Poland will cease to 'be Polish' in the sense of any fundamental separate cultural identity." From Palester's letter to Kazimierz Wierzyński of 9th August 1950. Quoted after Wyrwa (2010: 36).

time and circumstances in which it was made. Communism and socialist realism were – for Palester’s work – that most real of all contexts that determined everything in his later life in emigration.

How different the situation at that time was from what the composer had been used to before the war may be illustrated by the following fragment of “Notes on Music.” First and foremost – the political context: “The factor that in recent years has had the greatest impact on artists’ attitude to the society,” he writes,

was the unexpected intervention of politics, which took place in the countries that went through, or are now going through, the epidemic of totalitarianism. The foundations and institutions of the totalitarian state have been so widely discussed that every person on earth now knows how the government interferes in those countries with all spheres of human activity. As far as music is concerned, everyone remembers Goebbels’s recent games and is aware of what the Soviet Russia has in store. Goebbels’s activity has finished in the meantime, so it will suffice to recall that German artists under his rule did not produce a single work of any major significance – this at least concerns those composers who stayed in Germany and enjoyed the favours and support of the short-lived regime. Hitler’s minister of propaganda was also the inventor of the first musical “proscription lists” which sentenced “to death” a great many compositions. The whole system now develops very well in Russia, the difference being that the lists of “prohibited” works are not officially published as in Goebbels’s case. And yet despite all the devastation caused by Nazism, the decline in German musical culture is not as great as it might sometimes seem, and the level of the German public’s preoccupation with music is quickly recovering.

On the other hand, the way this issue has been handled in Russia is much more dangerous [...]. The Soviet system has long gone beyond the strictly political or economic doctrine. Its basic and elementary aim is now – to destroy our civilisation. The changes that Bolshevism has brought in the sphere of human interrelations are so huge that they themselves necessitate the creation of a future, quite altered culture. The idea frequently seems quite absurd to us, especially when the authorities in the Kremlin speak loudly about the “new culture” they will build at their command in just a few years. But in fact the thing is real, and it proceeds faster than we might suppose (Palester 1951b: 16–17).

This absurd idea has its own methodology, which the composer patiently explains:

Plato in his time assigned completely different social functions to music, and the old medieval order of things was different altogether. In those bygone times, the composer’s role was to express the tendencies and thoughts of his society, since he felt, thought, experienced and reacted in the same way as, sincerely and of their own free will, did everyone in his community. In the Soviet system, however, the artist only ostensibly expresses the “tendencies” of the nation and of his contemporaries, whereas in fact he is

pushed by all kinds of means – by political pressure, bribery, flogging and caressing – to walk hand in hand with that very small ruling cast which imposes on him a standpoint full of lies and self-deception, one which no longer expresses either his own experience or the thoughts of the society around him. That fundamental lie comes to the surface on every occasion, it hits one's eyes – and the musicians' ears – whenever we are confronted with the "achievements" of "socialist realist" art. Distressed, we observe the terrible aesthetic contortions that the otherwise talented Russian composers are forced to get into, though many of them deserve a better fate, and with regret we recall the pieces written several years ago, then 'accepted' for performance, but now strictly "forbidden" and withdrawn from circulation. Apparently in the meantime the "superstructure" has been altered and perhaps even the "base" changed? Among this obvious muck that is officially protected and advocated, there is not a single major Russian work of the recent period that will stand the test of a dozen years. In the end, it always turns out that the piece is not sufficiently "class-oriented" or it "dulls our vigilance," or else "expresses contents out of step with the times;!" The reader will guess that all these terms and phrases have no reality in the realm of music, so the judgment must in each case be quite arbitrary (Palester 1951b: 18–19).

To walk away, then, in order to save and hear one's own voice – something impossible in the neverending noise of vulgar street propaganda – to carry one's own truth, one's own unfathomed creative complex – these were sufficient reasons for emigration, or, more accurately, for changing the manner of exile. For Palester, emigration is precisely this kind of attempt to stay faithful to what he considers as his first artistic duty – namely, his artistic honesty. No matter, he writes, where this duty could be fulfilled more easily – what matters is where it could be performed more accurately. When he writes about escape from the world of the absurd, he again returns to the problem of conformism. Not so dangerous at first, a moment later it becomes an inclined plane down which one unnoticeably descends into total dependence from the authority and its whims. In that gesture of "choosing freedom", of "escape," Palester does not fight for quiet sleep, for elementary legal safety or protection from infringements of personal freedom, as the regime-supporting artists are its aristocracy and need not fear the security force. The main issue is the impossibility of preserving a fresh sense of resistance, of sharp insight; one may also hardly live on in the state of permanent alert in order to adequately react to every lie, even the smallest. The danger of dulling one's critical sense, of extreme exhaustion – this is what Palester really feared. No wonder that he remembered the first few years af-

ter the war mainly as a painful experience of grappling with contradictory feelings: on the one hand – love for the country, its landscape, people and spiritual climate, the familiar melodies and all that was so well known; on the other hand – the suffocating sense of rebellion against the Bolshevik-style modernisation, against actions that destroyed that spiritual bond developed through the nearly forty years of Palester's life in the cultural framework associated with interwar Poland. The experience of the tiresome and absurd present seems so painful that it leads him to the "ultimate" choice, to the right of being silenced and of being actively in opposition.

"At the moment there are artists in Poland," Palester writes,

who have been completely seduced by the official propaganda and do for money what they are told to do. Such individuals have always been around and there is no need to dedicate more space to them. There is also a multitude of talentless literary wannabes to whom the deterioration of artistic levels in our time has opened up brilliant opportunities. There are others who pay for the right to certain elementary freedom with some individual concessions and with the services of a political informer. And there are also a few of those who have not made any concessions yet, have preserved their artistic honesty quite intact and have chosen – silence. [...] Some are destroyed sooner, and others later. There are artists who have been allowed to practise a more "formalist" art than others (as it is notoriously true that the clique spirit, connections, friendships and 'sucking up' play a much greater role there than in the criticised capitalist world, and this only contributes to the general demoralisation). Some therefore happen to have more freedom than others because they are on friendly terms with a minister or a party dignitary.

And still each and every one, good or bad, artist or hack, has to lie round the clock – lie to "stay on the surface", lie at the critics' audition [...], lie and stress at every point that what he in fact hates brings him the greatest artistic pleasure [...]. [...] At artists' assemblies, dedicated to important political problems of art, one can hear how for several days several dozen people – including some outstanding artists – lie in every word they say, as the minister chairing the meeting lies, and the representative of the working masses also lies, and each of the present artists lies in his or her turn. [...] How long can one listen to a torrent of lies without a sense of the deepest humiliation, especially as they are accompanied by the sincerest looks in the world – though all of them know that the others are lying? (Palester 1951b: 14–15).

Emigration as a "choice of freedom" was the final consequence of the fatal force; these were the "light steps of Marsyas passing beyond time and space." Artistically, exile puts one virtually back at the start of one's career, in a tragic situation without one's works, music, scores (withdrawn by the authorities from libraries and bookshops), without contact with the concert

public which potentially understands you the best, and – the most dramatic result – no one needs you for any purpose any more. Possibly the only function one might get was as an object deserving of compassion – a political object, one should add. In the context of the Marsyas conflict, it is not important whether totalitarianism will triumph eventually, and for how long. For the artist-creator, what is important is only (and as much as) "preserving the pure tone" of his lute.

It is easy to observe that Palester questions many stereotypical ideas concerning the artist's freedom, his uniqueness, the eminent or special position that he deserves in the society, and the Romantic or modernist myth of a genius and the absolute status of art in the life of the society. He also reduces the importance of fear of the communist authority as a key stimulus for artistic and intellectual circles in Poland. The original, fundamental feature of Palester's individual path is his care for workmanship of the highest standard, the purest *metier*, a certain hand and full tone, as well as "alertness" in artistic activity and in life.⁴ These individual features were noticed and praised by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński who, living on the other side of the iron curtain, did not hesitate to write:

[...] we had the chance to read the beautiful, masterfully written and wise article "The Marsyas Conflict" by Roman Palester. Perhaps the situation is still not so bad as concerns "intellectuals in people's democracies" if an eminent composer, who stayed in Poland much longer than Miłosz and then also decided to emigrate to the West, could call things by their true name with modesty, full humility and artistic honesty, without dialectic acrobatics. Serfdom for him is serfdom, freedom is freedom, and independence – the greatest treasure that an artist worthy of that name might crave for (Herling-Grudziński 1998: 242).

Several months after the composition of "Marsyas Conflict," Palester and Grudziński met in Munich in Radio Free Europe and thus began their artistic partnership and friendship which would last many years. Till the end, they showed each other mutual respect.

⁴ On the generation and artistic formation (the Szymanowski school) that Palester belonged to we can read in the very interesting essay Chylińska (1992: 197–208).

Between Ugolino and Ulysses

Marsyas' shadow did not leave the author and his compositions. His music had been cast into the abyss of wrong presence and lies at the bottom of hell between Ugolino and Ulysses, condemned, like Palester, because he had stayed away from his country for too long... But also the "conditions of his stay" outside the country played a major role in Palester's case. After the many years that separated him from that dramatic decision, he attempted to explain the reasons why he had left Poland. In his article entitled "Truth Wrongly Present," prepared for the conference *Music Wrongly Present* in Poland, Palester with some sarcasm and impatience explained the situation which he called "conscious emigration," understood as complete involvement. The artist became involved (especially in the 1950s and 60s) in the work of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), and accepted of the role of a regular commentator of cultural and political life in Poland on the air in Radio Free Europe as someone who had never mentally emigrated from Poland and spoke on its behalf nearly on a daily basis. The more frequently he appeared in RFE, the more consistently his work was being erased from Polish musical tradition. His name disappeared from all publications, editions, encyclopaedias. His music could neither be performed nor written about, his already printed works were destroyed, and library copies were confiscated. His publishing contracts were cancelled. These facts also had repercussions for the composer in the West. The lack of copyright regulations made it difficult if not impossible to play his music on the Western side of the iron curtain. These were the real, palpable consequences of the Marsyas conflict. These measures, and the reaction of the musical environment, were the subject of his article "Truth Wrongly Present," where he wrote:

As for the reaction of the musical environment, it was at first limited to depriving me – on the orders of the state authorities – of membership in the Polish Composers' Union on two completely false charges.⁵ My colleagues did not condemn me, but news could

⁵ A letter of 19th April 1951, signed by PCU President Witold Rudziński, to Palester: "The PCU Managing Board informs you that, since you submitted your resignation from Polish citizenship and because of your unethical behaviour towards PCU Managing Board, in an unanimous resolution passed on 7th April 1951, PCU Managing Board has deprived you of membership in the Polish Composers' Union. PCU Managing Board announces this resolution with great regret considering

leak through only with the greatest difficulty – do not forget that isolation from the outside world called rather awkwardly "the iron curtain" was a reality. In the first years, no letters could get through to me, so contacts consisted only in meeting artists, who also rarely had a chance to travel. From Genia Umińska and Ewa Bandrowska, from Sztompka and Drzewiecki, I knew that among those whose opinions I considered important not only was there no one to condemn me, but quite the contrary – everyone thought that I was right, and that one should speak out as much as possible and criticise the new system of relations. And this is what I did.

There were also more complex standpoint. With my best friend, Ochlewski, we fell out mortally from the moment we could correspond. He believed that I had "betrayed" and he condemned me, as possible between friends, in the most terrible words – but between the lines I could always feel a certain friendly affection and, it seemed, a peculiar type of envy – that I can speak my mind, and others can't! But in fact I was also not free because all the time I had to consider the safety of people back in Poland... [...]

In the meantime, things took such a turn that after the October thaw of 1956 I managed to get my works performed at several concerts conducted by such friends as Krenz, Wodiczko and Skrowaczewski. In the press, Bogusław Schaffer wrote beautifully on my behalf – I am deeply grateful to him for that. But soon afterwards things fell back into a dead rut, which meant: one performance every several years, if possible – without publicity and reviews.

We should also note the phenomenon of self-censure, which in Poland was something new. With years, administrative sanctions against me were becoming weaker, but the musical society was scared of having more relations with me than it was necessary. It should suffice to mention Zbinio Drzewiecki – with whom before and after the war we did lots of things together – but later he cut out of his memories any recollection of my presence. Others did the same, and in many cases this self-censure went much beyond what was necessary. Similarly with performances: what they feared was not any "ban" but the long-term reaction which could come after many months or even later, in the form of e.g. a refusal to issue a passport... That "self-censure" even had some peculiar effect abroad – mostly in West Germany. When Brandt announced a wide "opening to the West" and lively and friendly relations between Polish and West German musical world began, those of us who worked in the West became, by our very presence, an obstacle to the smooth development of those relations. [...]

When in 1963 Tadeusz Kaczyński conducted a long interview with me for the *Ruch Muzyczny* journal, the authorities demanded that Mycielski – who was then editor-in-chief – should dismiss Kaczyński from the editorial staff. Mycielski refused and offered his own resignation instead, which was not accepted. The whole affair slowly died down, but for many years Kaczyński could not obtain a passport. It was only in the latter half of the 1970s that censors lifted the ban on Panufnik and myself, but this did not result in any major improvement as far as the frequency of performances was considered. [...]

Polish musical life is regulated by tight and very strong coteries in extraordinary harmony with the official authorities. Those coteries pigeonhole composers, putting

the fact that it concerns such an eminent artist as you are." The document relegating Palester from PCU can be found in the Roman Palester Collection – Archive of 20th Century Polish Composers, University Library, Warsaw.

them in various classes and categories – and not even trying to hide this... (Palester 1989).

Admittedly, the terseness and relative self-restraint of this paper deserves the greatest admiration, especially if we realise the scope and temporal dimensions of the restrictions that affected Palester. This was most likely the result of the passage of years, of getting reconciled to his fate and the blow that the composer accepted as his Marsyas-like “duty.” It does not mean, though, that he had completely recovered from the trauma of his dramatic escape from the country, and especially his relegation from the Polish Composers’ Union under a false and particularly mean pretence (that he had renounced the Polish citizenship, which in fact he never did, even though it gave him many problems connected with his stay in the West and travelling, and that he had “behaved unethically,” which is unclear and finds no explanation in official documents). As he said, he could never completely get over that blow. Palester could now afford such admirable conciseness, despite the deeply hidden resentment (which he undoubtedly felt), especially since in the 1960s he experienced some favours. In 1961 he received the first prize in the competition of the International Society for Contemporary Music for his *Death of Don Juan*, and in 1965 – an award for his entire oeuvre from the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation in New York. His compositions written in the West were broadcast by Western radio stations. Radio Free Europe quite regularly played his music and presented broadcasts (composer profiles, interviews) dedicated to him.⁶ Could those later awards blot his bitter experiences from the time of Łagów Assembly and before – out of his memory? Is it likely that the many years of accusations of “treason” that reached his ears, of betraying his friends, leaving them in oppressive circumstances, and the particularly painful and momentous accusations that came from his own environment with which he had collaborated in 1945–47 as well as during the war and occupation, accusations that cast a shadow on his activity for many years – became the fuel of Palester’s “intervention” programmes in Radio Free Eu-

⁶ E.g. J. Michniewicz, *Roman Palester’s Profile*, a special broadcast, 25th March 1978, Radio Free Europe Archive. In: Digital Archive; P. Zaremba, *Roman Palester’s Portrait*, *Panorama* no. 3890, 23rd September 1969, Radio Free Europe Archive. In: Digital Archive.

rope?⁷ I am deeply convinced that the bitter memories never left him and they became his hell.

That hell between Ugolino and Ulysses burned him to the quick, especially in the early 1950s and during the political thaws, when it seemed that his return to Poland might become possible (and he put some hopes in the liberalisation of life). He even received some offers from his country – even though at the same time he made sceptical remarks in RFE broadcasts about the real nature of the revival of cultural life – but he was not willing to accept the "revival" on terms that did not suit him. Palester was truly a highly principled person, at times – even radical and ready to accept maximum risk. He was enviably true to himself and his work, both verbal (in the press and media) and musical. This integrity probably burnt him out, ruined his nerves, wore him out and brought returning waves of doubt in the meaning of resistance and of the gesture of disagreement – but he found an antidote also for that. The more tragic the world might seem, the more strongly he believed in its sense and in the necessity of its acceptance by submitting to eternal truths. This perspective of "eternal truths" translates into everyday practice. Here is one example. Early in 1957, Robert Satanowski and Andrzej Szwalbe addressed Palester with an offer of literary collaboration. I do not know the details of the offer, though we can make some guesses based on Palester's reply. What is important is not so much the offer itself as the atmosphere of the thaw and the transformation, whose strictly rationed, limited scope stopped Palester from accepting the job. Palester's non-conformism is evident in both his music and his statements as a journalist and writer. In reply to the proposal, Palester wrote on 24th February 1957:

Dear sirs, your letter with an offer of collaboration gave me true and unfeigned pleasure. Still, the circumstances force me to resign from the pleasant possibility of such collaboration. I owe you a few words of explanation:

By profession, I am only a composer and writing notes comes much more easily to me than writing texts. Several years ago I took up the pen, but exclusively for the purpose of fighting all that at that time oppressed musical and artistic life in Poland. Today that period seems to gradually become history and we all hope that artists will be able to express themselves more and more freely and without restrictions. That process has only just begun and is still far from complete, which I am able to glean from e.g. the fact

⁷ More information about the composer's writings in my book (2007), the chapter about Palester.

that my pieces still seem to remain blacklisted, both the new ones that I have written in exile and the older ones, removed from catalogues or perhaps plainly destroyed in the worst period of socialist realism. And still I can see – e.g. by reading the interesting programmes of the Pomeranian Philharmonic – that the bans have for the most part been lifted. I therefore assume that there must be some separate ban regarding my own works.

That sad fact makes it impossible for me, at least at the moment, to begin literary collaboration with the institution that you are the heads of. I hope you will understand and agree with me that I cannot start collaboration as a writer when at the same time, for reasons still completely incomprehensible to me, my music is still prohibited.⁸

There were then more attempts to fulfil Palester's conditions – unsuccessful, as we know that in Poland his works got performed only occasionally, and the ban on his oeuvre was only completely lifted at the end of the 1980s.

In Palester's correspondence there are many attempts to restore normal relations with the country. All of these, however, are tainted by some restrictions, even if these were not verbalised. The composer's correspondents mention possible collaboration, but in a narrow and for that quite uncertain field. For example, Ludwik Erhardt wrote on 4th September 1958:

[...] using the opportunity of my sojourn in France and the easier possibility of contact, I take the liberty, as one of the editors of *Ruch Muzyczny*, to address you with the following idea.

Our staff would like to use all their modest means to contribute to better relations between Polish composers staying abroad and the Polish musical world. We wish to inform our readers about the activities and achievements of émigré composers.

For this reason, I would like you to reply to the enclosed questions. We would like to publish your reply in our fortnightly.⁹

Palester himself used the opportunities he had to normalise his relations with friends and colleagues left behind in Poland, especially with those from his Cracow period. In this context, his proposal sent to Tadeusz Ochlewski in a letter of 15th October 1958 is symptomatic:

Let us brush aside all the stiffness hat has recently appeared between us. It should not appear between Palester and PWM Publishers. If we met, wouldn't we hug each other warmly and dismiss all our mutual grievances with a joke? Life is still hasting on; it is

⁸ R. Palester's letter of 24th February 1957 (in the Roman Palester Collection – Archive of 20th Century Polish Composers, University Library, Warsaw).

⁹ Roman Palester Collection, *ibidem*.

complex, with many knots. Those which are unwelcome and tangled ought simply to be cut.¹⁰

The last sentence betrays how important it is for him to maintain contact with people from the musical environment who were once close to him. Despite the distance, he feels that he shares with them part of the old musical bond, a bond which – as he would bitterly stress in many contexts – cannot be restored. Life is complex and time passes – after one has made a resolute and spectacular move, the consequences will last till the very end. This is in fact the principle we can easily decipher from the many knots of Palester's life. He was never interested in half-measures or even the slightest concession to fame and comfort at the cost of humiliating self-limitation in art (this is how he explains the servility of his environment). He claimed that concessions were possibly only to a higher cause, to the vital need for the preservation of inalienable values.

His work in the Munich RFE station was a compromise with himself and a kind of pact. On the one hand, he was unwilling to use up his energy and deconcentrate, as he felt he was first and foremost a composer and the language of notation and sound is the closest to him. On the other hand, though, he often furiously wrote essays whose subject was the wide borderland between culture and politics. On such occasions he knew that what he did was done from a narrow perspective and might prove to be a voice crying in the wilderness (as in Kisielewski's case), a collection of just statements which still did not change the reality. The more years he spent in front of an RFE mike presenting more or less legitimate statements, the more tired he grew of the meagre results. But paradoxically the awareness that his voice got lost in the interplanetary space, partly due to being jammed by communist services, did not influence the standard of his broadcasts. Also in this sphere, Palester did not make any allowances on himself, though naturally he treated this job rather as the technical application of skills to immediate needs. He wrote for RFE for twenty years (1952–72) plus several more as a freelancer, with less and less hope for a return to his homeland. In the early years of

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

his work there he believed, like many other émigrés, that the return would become possible much earlier. He hoped for a miracle, and though the Polish October did not leave him too hopeful for that lucky return, he still rejoiced as a man that the terror had lessened and the system became less oppressive. The years 1980–81 brought him a pleasant surprise, but this was a difficult period in his life after the death of Barbara Palester and he could not seriously think about a return. If the freedom had come earlier, much earlier than in 1989, he would have been in Poland by then. He wrote about it to his friends, saying that he did not need to stay in Paris permanently.

He often returned to his decision to remain in the West. In an interview conducted by Jagoda Jedrychowska (1988), he claimed he was always wrong in his political predictions. Paradoxically, had he been more patient and waited those few years between 1949 and the thaw of 1956, the conditions for Polish music in Poland then became much better, composing became possible and it would have been much harder to choose emigration. Then he would have needed to deal with the conformist necessity to make decisions about concessions to the authorities. He would have had the chance to test his recipe and see if it worked. After all, he always justified those concessions that were made to save more precious, more important values, but not those that justified a constant apology of the regime for the sole purpose of making a personal career.

This is also why he was so critical of the activity of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Andrzej Panufnik, and Leon Schiller (Cf. Wejs Milewska 2007).¹¹ His decision to stay in the West also left a permanent mark. We know Miłosz's émigré dilemmas rather better; Palester's are of the same standard, though his decision was not accompanied by a "storm," as was that of the poet, possibly because Giedroyc did not realise that Palester's tale of life in the country and of the moment of breaking away could also have a great propaganda value. The composer's inner conflict was more quiet, and he did not provoke as much dislike in the émigre circles as Miłosz did, but the reserve, the distance towards a man from behind the iron curtain and a potential "communist,"

¹¹ In: *Komentarze, recenzje, felietony (wybór)* [Comments, Reviews, Essays – a Selection] – the author's statements about Panufnik (pp. 553–556), Iwaszkiewicz (pp. 566–568), and Schiller (pp. 569–572).

was nearly the same. In Palester's correspondence with Jerzy Fitelberg, then staying in the USA, we find this problem of the ideological uncertainty of the West's musical world, especially in the United States – if intellectuals from America ought to send letters of recommendation to support Palester – already after he had "chosen" freedom. Fitelberg wrote on 4th January 1951: "Nobody said this openly about you, but I have the impression that people are afraid of handing in any letters of recommendation for fear of digging a hole for themselves if that guy ever had anything to do with communism. Can you understand this?"

And another example – a letter of 6th October 1950 which Zygmunt Nagórski of Free European Press Service wrote most likely to Józef Wittlin:

I got your letter about Palester quite a long time ago, but only yesterday I talked about it with a man who could offer concrete help. His name is Bill Raphael, Chief, Program Section, Radio FE [...]. He said that he'd gladly try to use Palester – for instance at the moment they are looking for a composer to write a "Song of Freedom" that could become a hymn and a call to the nations occupied by Russia. Still he had doubts if Palester, who needed five years to part with present-day Polish reality, could really understand this kind of task. I couldn't answer him, for I myself shared his doubts.¹²

Taking up a post at RFE after such comments – was Palester's gesture of siding in with one party in the political conflict of the Cold War. Perhaps he also counted, at least for some time, on getting an American visa more easily after having worked in RFE? Personally I reject this guess, as he was too well informed by Fitelberg and warned by Wierzyński (quoted after Wyrwa 2010: 33–39) about the day-to-day fate of a classical music composer in the country of triumphant American pop-culture to give up Europe for the United States. Still, he had been considering this option and asked his correspondents specific questions about it. In Radio Free Europe, his employment terms were quite satisfying, as evident from Nowak-Jeziorański's letter to Palester:

[...] I am genuinely happy to have you among my colleagues. On my part, I can assure you I will do all I can to make your work here possible, as I really appreciate its significance for Polish culture.¹³

¹² Roman Palester Collection, as above.

¹³ Letter of 28th February 1952. Roman Palester Collection, as above.

The same can be gleaned from Palester's own memories. He was a valuable acquisition for the Radio; he had already appeared on BBC with a so-called letter of appeal to artists in Poland, he had published the essays "The Marsyas Conflict" and "Notes on Music" in *Culture*, he had begun work for the Congress for Cultural Freedom and made an unequivocal public declaration as an enemy of communism. Finally, he knew the system, as it were, from inside. He was also an excellent and extremely efficient writer.

In 1996 Jan Krenz said something significant that also sheds light on Palester's situation: "A composer may be brought back to life only by playing his music" (Markowska 1996: 88). The same could be said considering his writings and broadcasts: he could be brought back to life as a commentator by having his radio work published. Both the performance of his oeuvre and publication of his writings are waiting to be satisfactorily completed. First of all, we should deal with Palester's drama in the late 1940s, his hesitation which became the backdrop for "The Marsyas Conflict" and the context for his emigration on a Nansen passport, later – his "return" with the musical works to the country, not to mention his radio presence there. Zofia Helman, Teresa Chylińska, and Jagoda Jędrychowska have done very much to elucidate Palester's motives for emigration. Especially Zofia Helman, who dedicated a monograph to the composer, presented many interesting sources shedding light on the émigré's dramatic lot. What was important for her understanding of Palester was probably also her direct contact with the composer and writer.

At this point we should return again to the time of crisis, to the breakthrough years of 1947–49 in which his choice of emigratio eventually became a fact. What is important in this context is the significance of his stay in the country for his specific type of isolation. For Palester, his exile did not start at the moment of emigration, but was experienced already much earlier – which casts a doubt on the generally accepted view that the years 1945–48 were a period of relative freedom. As it turns out, the sense of absurd and the experience of suppressing all spontaneous or civic activity had already come much earlier. At first the almost superhuman and undoubtedly exhausting effort concentrated on rebuilding the Polish cultural institutions from the

ruins in which they lay. Here, the triumphant and noisy propaganda of the Lublin regime, arousing enthusiasm for the nearly superhuman heroism on the one hand was accompanied by pessimism on the other, resulting from the knowledge of the betrayal of Poland in Jalta, of being wrapped and wronged, estimating the losses, the conviction that here an apocalypse has taken place and there is no escape from the tragic scenario (this is precisely what Miłosz, using other words, calls historical necessity). And a moment later, the feeling that intentions do not meet practice at any point. This divergence between intentions and practice was experienced as a lie, as some form of camouflage applied by the regime. For Palester, it was unacceptable. His exile was, therefore, the result of rejecting all that the artist was forced to take part in communist Poland. The everyday propaganda noise and the ceaseless demands of the authorities may have decided about his journey to the West in the autumn of 1946, where he hoped to put together his thoughts and his scores...Two years was then a sufficient time for the sense of isolation to take shape (and these were, after all, years of intensive work for the widely conceived musical environment. Zofia Helman quotes Palester's letters to Tadeusz Ochlewski which illustrate this point very well. To quote just one passage from 1947: "[...] you will understand that in this kind of atmosphere I am losing my will to live," Palester wrote,

and I would give much to break away from it all for good. I can see no possibility of undisturbed work here in Poland if the vast majority of my colleagues are to be furious with me only because I am writing music and they are not. I can count on the fingers of one hand those of them, like Wiechowicz, Lutosławski or Malawski, who have always been loyal to me.¹⁴

The temporary stay in the West related to contracts was – we can guess – a respite, time to focus on composition. It was obviously naive on Palester's part to believe that this kind of formal relation with the country, representing the state on the European forum, would continue without disruption for a long time if not for ever. We might assume that he did not yet quite realise the consequences of the referendum of 1946 and the elections of 1947; perhaps he did not think that the authorities might apply a totalitarian stance to

¹⁴ Letter to Tadeusz Ochlewski (of 17th January 1947); PWM Edition Archive in Cracow – quoted after Helman (1999: 160).

culture and introduce the tyranny of one style. But even this does not seem very probable. In fact, he wished to remain in the West and represent the country from there, and did not consider emigration in the strict sense of the word. Ochlewski, as Helman points out, took care of the composer's affairs in Poland, and in the West he himself was looking for possible allies. In a letter to Feliks Łabuński of 19th October 1947, he wrote:

The highly morbid and demoralising political atmosphere in Poland has a devastating influence both on artistic work and on people's characters. My friends are fighting most terribly among themselves, and, most significantly, they compose almost nothing. Each one is busy gaining more and more lucrative and influential positions, some have even joined the party (PPR, the communists) [...] ...both myself and my wife preferred to "change the climate," though here our financial and living conditions are much worse than what we had in Poland. [...] Naturally, we cannot afford to "break off" from the country and we visit Poland from time, mostly for financial reasons.¹⁵

Away from Poland, Palester expected honesty in letters and did not suspect serious censorship, or the self-censorship of the authors themselves. The letters that his colleagues sent were quite cautious, which possibly misled him, and certainly confounded him. The atmosphere around his person in Poland was exerting more and more influence on Palester's unstable situation in Paris. He was the state's representative delegated to the West, he got performances there (as Barbara Palester represented PWM Edition abroad), and he acted as a promoter of Polish contemporary music. He accused Ochlewski of writing in a sharp and cool tone, but he did not take into account the circumstances of work back in Poland. This was undoubtedly the main problem in his informal contacts with the musical environment. He did not come to the Congress of Peace in Wrocław, he criticised the delays in the publication of his scores in Poland, he complained of an unprofessional approach – in other words, he was impatient, demanding and high-principled. He in fact did not accept the fact that in the "new times" that were coming what was decisive was not professionalism, but balancing on the surface of new reality in communist Poland.¹⁶ Even after the Composers' Assembly in Łagów,

¹⁵ Roman Palester Collection, as above.

¹⁶ On the efforts of his friends from the musical circles, supporting Palester, see Helman (1999: 160–172).

despite all the disgust, he still did not make up his mind about the emigration. He planned an opera to a libretto by Iwaszkiewicz, though – obviously – nothing came out of it later; he seriously considered minister Włodzimierz Sokorski's proposals for artistic work; he wanted to be present in Poland with his music, and yet write it in the West, where he wished to stay for as long as possible.

This crazy and reckless plan could not work out. In Poland, Palester was getting more and more marginalised, censored, which was meant to force him to return – this was without any doubt the intention of the policy-makers. The autumn of 1949 proved decisive. In a letter to Kassern, he described his difficult and unclear situation in France:

[...] last year I went to a "conference" in Łagów and managed to return; now I would probably be stopped. Till now I have had to 'be on good terms' with them, because I live here almost exclusively off that part of my income I receive from ZAiKS Authors' Agency and Polish Film. I cannot accept any royalties on my works here, no copyright payments. I am a ZAiKS member, so they send all my money to Poland. Now I even do not have a valid passport, but the embassy apparently accept my status, though more and more coldly. [...] I cannot obtain help from any quarters, and if nothing changes in a month or two I will have to beat my breast and go back to Poland, never to be able to leave again (or even worse, as they know what I have been saying here and you know what a biting tongue I have always had!) [...] Sad is our fate, this generation and the nation at large – one would think – "forgotten" by God and people.¹⁷

The temporary residence in Paris was already a foretaste of emigration – and it also tasted bitter, though later the taste was more intense, and frustration resulted from the attitude of Polish authorities to both Palester himself and all the postwar émigrés. Equally important was the perception of the composer's situation at that time by opinion-forming elites in Western Europe. Those elites were leftist in character, not favourable to his decision of breaking contact with Poland (though this contact had been getting looser and looser from 1947), and unwilling to help. Between 1947–50 one could observe another scene in the drama of the artist's life – he could not return to Poland, but neither could he infinitely prolong his stay as a guest in the West. He was unwilling to experience the hell of final banishment, which would make a permanent rift between him and the country.

¹⁷ Palester's letter to Zygfryd Kassern of 26th May 1950 (Paris); Roman Palester Collection, as above.

When the decision was finally taken, consequences soon followed and the full-scale banishment was felt. For a short time, he was also isolated from his friends in the West, who saw him as an insecure intellectual breaking off from his progressive motherland. He was also isolated from his country, from which royalties for compositions and performances were no longer coming, and from the political emigration, for whom he was suspect as a man from communist Poland, possibly a communist himself or a crypto-communist. A truly unenviable fate, confirmed by the commentary printed in the *Polish and Soldiers' Journal* of 25th August 1950:

Roman Palester, a well known Polish composer, has been blacklisted in Poland as a "formalist" and a musician under Western influence. Called back to his country, he refused and stayed in Paris. Palester is the first eminent artist from behind the iron curtain who has chosen "freedom" (Jędrychowska 1988: 83).

A commentator of the Baden-Baden Radio reported after the première performance of the *Vistula* cantata at the 24th ISCM Festival in Brussels, without consulting the composer, that he had chosen freedom. From that moment on, Palester's professional situation back in Poland changed very quickly: he gave up his ZAiKS membership (and was deleted from the member lists); he applied to cancel his publishing contracts with PWM Edition hoping that, as he said, "one day with the greatest pleasure I will be able to renew my relations with PWM."¹⁸ Soon the news reached him about being deprived of his membership in the Polish Composers' Union. He did not manage to untie his Gordian knots in Poland in a civilised manner and secure his financial position in the West with royalties. The money that was supposed to cover the cost of his stay proved not only insufficient, but also – from the point of view of the authorities in Poland – misappropriated. He fell into disfavour with more or less everyone: with the state of course; with his composer friends, who accused him of "betraying" the interests of the musical environment in Poland and had most likely been not favourable to his decision to travel to the West (might have been hostile if they had been aware of his discreet attempts to stay there permanently). Also – with Western European artists, who put hope in the Marxist experiment, expecting some change of

¹⁸ Palester's letter to PWM Edition in Cracow, dated 25th April 1951 (PWM Edition Archive in Cracow).

their own fate and a more privileged status for art. Political refugees were not favourable, either, though they were not hostile; they accepted his decision with some reserve, waiting for further developments. We could then say that the years 1949–51 were for him the hell of a completed exile. Soon, however, a new chapter was to begin in connection with his employment in Radio Free Europe and his activities there, which left no doubt as to what he means by creative freedom and with what hope he expects a democratic breakthrough in Poland. It was this employment in RFE that doomed him to a radical censorship ban: he was no longer just a disobedient composer; he became a "reactionary" political refugee who ought to be persecuted by all available means. The most effective, and most painful, was the total ban on his musical oeuvre. Even in 1952, when he had written "The Marsyas Conflict," Palester could not know how severe the consequences of this ban would be. He knew the space of ancient tragedy, but he was not aware of its force with respect to his own life, though he expected the worst.

It was only in 1977 that Palester began to emerge from the state of absolute silence, but for a full return it was not so much too late as the circumstances (fate) were again not very favourable (I mean the period of the martial law). From 1972, he was no longer a full-time staff member in Radio Free Europe. These several years of waiting was necessary before the communist authorities agreed to lift the ban. The very fact of lifting it coincided with actions of the dissident intellectuals in Poland which created a new atmosphere of resistance and contestation of the central power, not only in the field of culture. Palester benefited from this fact in that by a happy chance 1977 was the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Association of Young Polish Musicians in Paris, of which he had been a member, which eventually made it possible to perform his *String Trio* and *Dance from Osmoloda*. Apart from a brief episode in 1957, this was the second important presentation of his work in Poland after emigration. There were more plans, like staging the *Death of Don Juan*, eventually rejected by the Ministry of Culture and Art, officially – for financial reasons (among others, the payment of royalties in hard Western currency). In 1979, the "Warsaw Autumn" presented the first performance of his *Concerto* for viola and orchestra. 1981 proved very promising: mem-

bers of the Board of the Polish Composers' Union unanimously voted to annul the decision from 1951 which had deprived him of PCU membership. From the Liaison Committee of Artistic and Academic Unions, he also received an invitation to the Congress of Polish Culture (11th–13th December 1981), which he did not attend because of poor health, but which he wholeheartedly supported, as its intentions were a fulfilment of what he had for so many years advocated in RFE broadcasts. He was then invited more as a political writer, scholar and intellectual than as an eminent composer in exile. The invitation was a gesture of appreciation for his achievements in RFE and his commentaries on the radio. Palester realised this when he wrote: "As for myself, For 30 years I have in my own humble way tried to fight with my words in defence of those principles that are also dear to you [Jan Białostocki and Klemens Szaniawski, who had sent the invitation]."¹⁹

1983 was also a good year in his artistic biography, and despite the dark atmosphere of the martial law (and the personal tragedy of his wife Barbara's death) he came to Poland, to Cracow with the help of the Pallotine Fathers in Paris, and his works were performed. Official bans could not spoil the friendly atmosphere created by the musical and musicological circles, Zofia Helman recalled. He lived to get good reviews in Poland and see how his difficult Marsyas choice was now appreciated. There were others, though, who did not forgive Palester for his "betrayal" and his work for "the enemy" in Radio FE.²⁰

Also in 1987 (the year of Palester's 80th birthday) and 1988 his music was performed in Poland, though without the composer's presence. As Zofia Helman wrote, it all happened late, one might say – too late. "Owing to external circumstances," Helman wrote in her monograph,

Palester's works are not as well known today as they would deserve to be. But the immanent value of that music, the specific qualities of its style, sound and expression, and finally – its place in the development of 20th-century Polish music – may not be omitted or annulled. [...] It is this ability to withstand the passage of time and the constant pos-

¹⁹ Palester's letter to the Liaison Committee of Artistic and Academic Unions; Paris, 30th November 1981 (Roman Palester Collection, as above).

²⁰ Reviews and interviews from 1983 confirm this, e.g.: Wierzbiński (1980; 1983); Walaciński (1983); Polony (1983). A negative review came from Bruno Rajca (1983).

sibility of interpreting the works in a new way that eventually leaves all our judgments open to the future (1999: 346).

In 1977, Stefan Kisielewski also wrote in his diary about Palester's paradoxical fate in emigration – this passage has already been quoted at the beginning of my article. We can now complement it with another excerpt from Kisielewski's diary, dated 4th October 1979:

The 23rd Warsaw Autumn is over [...] A very pretty violin concerto by Andrzej Panufnik, and Palester's viola concerto. So they are playing the "emigrants," but after how many years. Henio says that Panufnik believes they play his music now on purpose, to lure him to Poland and lock him up. What ideas may hatch in the minds of people... (1996: 936)

Admittedly, Kisielewski's remark was accurate: the "socialist motherland" had indeed "taken in" the composer's oeuvre and his works came to be played in Poland, not anywhere else. Interestingly, a year before Kisielewski made a move in the opposite direction: he began to consistently publish his essays in Giedroyc's *Kultura* in Paris, and was accepted on the forum of the emigration as a full-rights member of the "free-thinking diaspora." He also made this move with full awareness of its consequences, of the danger of being excluded or marginalised. Kisielewski and Palester had known each other well before the war; after the war, they worked together as academic lecturers, and they also met in Munich. But Kisielewski did not value avant-garde music and it is possible that his musical tastes also influenced his judgment of the author. What is also interesting, Kisielewski does not comment on Palester's radio broadcasts in his diary – did he not listen to them or perhaps he did not hear? Very unlikely. In contrast, Palester dedicated several texts to Kisiel²¹ in an attempt to appreciate the relentless "calls in the wilderness" that Kisielewski, a contributor to *Tygodnik Powszechny*, made from various places and in various press titles, in Cracow, Warsaw, London, Paris or Munich. Still, both composers belonged to the same generation of "musical Poland," and for both politics played a major role in their writings. An interesting coincidence: so different, and yet so similar to each other, for example

²¹ Cf. Wejs-Milewska (2007). In: *Komentarze, recenzje, felietony (wybór) – O Stefanie Kisielewskim*, pp. 557–579.

in their unfulfilled dreams. Palester only wanted to work with sounds, and treated work for the media and criticism as a secondary activity that distracted him. Kisielewski, on the other hand, composed and wrote about music and literature, and hoped to become a political commentator and a writer worth his salt. Both experienced the bitter taste of defeat and the tortures of unfulfilment. These parallels, which suggest themselves immediately, might lead to conclusions about the nature of that period and of the mid-20th-century generation – but this is already a topic for another fascinating study.

Let us now return for the last time to the Marsyas conflict, the artist's fundamental complex which determined all of Palester's gestures known to me. This is why was he so obstinate in treading Marsyas' path. Was it worthwhile? We cannot find a satisfying answer on "this" side. On this side, we only find the reverse, the knots and seams, marl hues, the rough and tangled texture of the canvas of life. One thing is certain: the communist authorities in Poland managed to do with Palester what Solzhenitsyn's *sledovat'el* summed up in these words: "In our country, a man was and lived yesterday, but today he is not, and he has never been, end of the matter."

Palester's music has already been performed in Poland, but his radio commentaries are still waiting to be published. As an RFE commentator, Palester took a great risk that could reduce him to ashes and destroy his lute's unique work. He took up the risk and paid the highest prize. His work for Radio Free Europe was, no doubt, a kind of substitute, as it gave him a chance to get involved in the affairs of his country and the possibility of real influence (or an illusion of influence) on that life. All that he said on the air in RFE was a consequence of his awareness of the Marsyas conflict in its extreme variant, evidence of his opposition to totalitarianism, to authoritarian power, the world of pretence, stifling compromise, concessions and servility. It seems that as he became immersed in the atmosphere of the émigré circles in RFE, his expectations from Poles back in Poland were also growing. Was it the effect of the bitter unfulfilment, lack of understanding and the aversion manifested by his musical environment, or of overestimating his own possibilities and the position he once had in his country? All this is possible.

Palester's exile deepens with time: not only his musical work, but his entire intellectual life, musical and literary-journalist, comes under siege. The awareness of being a voice crying in the wilderness probably ever left him, and yet he could not yield even an inch, because he followed his Marsyas path leading directly into the core of the myth. His *moira* was completed and even his death took on a symbolic dimension. He died on 25th August 1989 in Paris and was buried in Montmorency near Paris, close to Norwid, Mickiewicz, Niemcewicz, and Wat – émigrés, most of whom struggled with their own tragic non-conformist conflict. He eventually found his right place. He did not experience the satisfaction, or even triumph that such persons as Stefan Kisielewski certainly partook of. He could not know that 1989 would become the year of the effective breakthrough in Poland. For him, it was too late also for that.

He did not, so to speak, receive any confirmation from the outside that his relentless work divided into the time for "propaganda" in RFE and the time of composition – made sense. Again, the Marsyas myth proved right in that it shows the ultimate importance of what we ourselves deem right – in agreement with our own mysterious complex, with the driving force of our activity, and with our own internal truth of life and self-creation.

And the last question: Does Palester's tragic biography leave us with some essential thoughts? For me, as I am writing this essay, it certainly does. I only wonder if contemporary artists still know the tale of Marsyas and his struggle with the authority of Apollo? Are they aware of the consequences and willing to take similar risks?

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