

A High Falls Filmmaker Preserves Her Father's Legacy

Hudson Valley resident Hanna Sawka spreads the word about her dad's historic impact.

Published: 06/19/2018

BY JOAN MACDONALD



JAN SAWKA, RENDERING OF

Filmmaker Hanna Sawka was only two years old when her family became stateless. Her prize-winning artist and architect father, [Jan Sawka](#), was a Polish citizen exhibiting in Paris when he learned that his art, critical of the Communist government, would result in his forced return to Poland. There he would surely face imprisonment or worse.

Fortunately, a special immigration provision for artists allowed his family to travel to the U.S, where, after 12 years, they finally obtained citizenship. Accompanied by several magazine articles praising his talent, he quickly found work illustrating *The New York Times* Op Ed page. His illustrations drew criticism from and even protests by the Russian embassy.

"One of his illustrations that generated the most controversy involved the Pope, the Polish Pope," says Sawka. "It shows the Pope walking through the Berlin Wall and thousands of people following him."

Although Jan Sawka was declared an enemy of the state in Poland and records of his art were erased, he achieved success in his adopted country. He displayed his paintings, posters, and sculpture in top notch galleries on both coasts, crafted theater sets that prompted *Backstage* to name him one of the nation's most important stage designers, created a 10-story stage set for the Grateful Dead's 25th-anniversary concert tour, and worked with Garcia on a 90-minute multimedia project called *The Journey*.

Sawka, a High Falls resident, says there's much to learn from her father's successes and struggles. To protect her father's legacy, she not only arranges exhibits of his art but plans to share his story in a film.

"We actually did a [book](#) where we told our story. People really appreciated it. I'm a filmmaker so I definitely want to put this story on film."

Sawka's last documentary, [Beyond Iconic](#), focused on photographer Dennis Stock, who was best known for his insightful celebrity portraits. The film was shown at festivals throughout Europe. Sawka began conducting interviews for a film about her father shortly before he died in 2012. Despite slow progress, due to financing challenges, recent stories of displaced Syrian refugees have only strengthened her desire to film her father's story.



Hanna and her mother, Hanka Sawka. Photo by Joan MacDonald

"In the last few years the situation of people talking badly about refugees has really upset me," says Sawka. "We were political refugees. We were truly stateless people for 12 years in this country. In the situation now, I don't know what would have happened to us. We probably would have been deported."

While in the U.S., Jan Sawka also played an important role in Poland's Solidarity Campaign, the non-violent, anti-communist social movement that in the 1980s helped bring down communism.

"My dad did this Solidarity poster. When martial law cracked down in Poland my dad was really key to helping this whole campaign get off the ground here."

After the fall of communism, the family's Polish citizenship and her father's reputation as an important Polish artist were restored. Jan Sawka donated works to the National Museum and exhibited there.

"It was a huge deal, a very emotional thing. It said the Cold War has ended and our artists can return."

Sawka attended film school in Poland, where she got an MFA, produced short films, and worked on a nationally televised crime show before returning to the U.S.

She is currently arranging a 2020 exhibit of her father's work that will premiere in Los Angeles. Her mother, Hanka Sawka, is working with SUNY New Paltz Professor Frank Boyer on another book about Jan Sawka's work, which will hopefully be published in time for the exhibit. If Sawka can secure sufficient financing, the film will be shown then. Mother and daughter also hope to stage the 90-minute multimedia production that Jan Sawka created with Jerry Garcia.

Sawka is not only passionate about saving her father's legacy, she's also on a mission to see more women working in film. As president of [Upstate Women in Film and Television](#) (UPWIFT), she arranges Hudson Valley screenings and events to bring attention to films made by women.



Hanna Sawka in her father's High Falls studio. Photo by Joan MacDonald

"Every time we show a screening, we highlight the fact that only 15 percent of films are directed by women. When you're talking about high budget films, it's only one percent. Around the world, film school classes are 50 percent women. It's not that fewer American women want to be filmmakers. No, it's just that they are not given the opportunity."

The reason that film, like many art forms, is important is that it shapes opinions.

"It can be propaganda. It can create empathy, it's a very powerful thing. If you are cut off from that because you are female, that's a huge empowerment that is taken away."

It's important to not only educate people about this inequity, says Sawka, but to fight for change. Inspired by the ways her father used art to further change, she's ready to take on the challenge.

