

A Story from World War II:

How the Polish Soldier Jan Sawka Ran Away from the the Winterthur Camp to Fight on D-Day in Normandy



Otto Lüscher was a small boy in the years of World War 2 in Winterthur, a small town in the eastern Switzerland. The polish artist and teacher Jan Sawka was one of the interned polish soldiers in Winterthur, he lived in the house of the Lüscher family. Jan Sawka gave Otto Lüscher this picture for his birthday in 1942.

Dominik Landwehr, Winterthur (Switzerland)

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An almost unbelievable story: Polish architect Jan Sawka had been interned in Winterthur since in World War II in 1940. In 1944 he disappeared overnight to fight with the Allies on D-Day.

Otto Lüscher was born in 1928 and has been retired for quite some time. He worked from 1954 to 1988 as an engineer for Sulzer and was head of design in the nuclear energy department.

The Winterthur University camp for interned Polish soldiers in World War II

Winterthur was an important center for interned Polish soldiers during the Second World War. 12,500 of them had come to Switzerland in mid-1940, and they remained here throughout the war. One of three university camps was located in Winterthur. During the war years, about 500 students attended courses in various disciplines; at first, they were taught on the premises of the city, but later they were all able to go to Zurich and study at the university and ETH and obtain a diploma.

Otto's father had died before the war. Friends advised Otto's mother to send the boy to boarding school. The family was relatively well off and had room for guests at home. When, at the beginning of the war, the Red Cross was looking for housing for internees, they came forward with three rooms to offer. One of the first guests was Lieutenant Colonel Reder, who was one of the commanders of the Winterthur camp. He is said to have advised Otto's mother to send her son to high school and to not have him do an apprenticeship. This was a pivotal event in Otto's life.



Fig. 1: Lieutenant Colonel Reder, one of the Polish commandants of the Winterthur college camp set up for the interned soldiers. He, too, was housed in the Lüscher family home. Photo Winterthur winbib collection

Soon another Pole came forward. He was a teacher of architecture and taught in the college camp: Jan Sawka. After Otto Lüscher came home from boarding school, he spent a lot of a lot of time with the new houseguest. Otto Lüscher had been given a Robot camera, so it was natural to take a photo of him.



Fig. 2: Jan Sawka in the Lüscher family home in Winterthur. Otto Lüscher, who was about 13 years old at the time, took it with a Robot camera. Photo private archive Otto Lüscher.

Jan Sawka, for his part, had a talent for drawing; he drew caricatures and liked to depict the people around him. Otto Lüscher was no exception. On Christmas of 1941, Jan Sawka gave him a portrait with a touching dedication, "Laugh so heartily, dear Otti - all your life long." We arranged a photo with Otto Lüscher with the picture from 1942 and suddenly this big smile on his face is there again.



Fig. 3: Jan Sawka in the Lüscher family home in Winterthur. Otto Lüscher, who was about 13 years old at the time, took it with a Robot camera. Photo private archive Otto Lüscher.

One day in the spring of 1944, Jan Sawka was gone. No one knew anything more; the guest had not said goodbye. It was soon clear that he had joined his compatriots who were fighting with Allied forces on various fronts. This was not uncommon among interned soldiers in Winterthur and elsewhere in Switzerland. It was not an escape in the sense because no one actually prevented them from doing so. One Jewish internee, Bernhard Giberstein (1916 - 1976), had an affair with a woman from the region and fathered a child. His daughter, Madeleine Schadeegg-Rück, never had a chance to meet her father and in 2014 wrote a book about her unknown father titled "Traces. A search for a father and millions of seamless stockings".



Fig. 4: "Laugh so heartily your whole life dear Otti". Drawing by Jan Sawka from 1941. Private archive Otto Lüscher.

Otto Lüscher further reports that Jan Sawka left some of the above-mentioned caricatures in the house when he left. After the war, Sawka never contacted his host family again and so these caricatures remained in the attic until today. The notion of caricatures makes us take notice: the Winterthur Collection has a precious album of first-class photographs from those years, taken by the Polish student Leszek Bialy and given to Clary Schöllhorn, who was the wife of the Haldengut director Kurt Schöllhorn. Clary Schöllhorn was very committed to the interned Poles; in an obituary she was later called the "soldier's mother". In this collection is a photo of a caricature that was apparently painted on a wall in a soldier's room in Winterthur. In a video chat with Otto Lüscher, we compare the pictures and, indeed, there is a similarity.



Fig. 5 : The mural in a Winterthur soldier's parlor is most likely the work of Jan Sawka. Image Winterthur winbib collection.

Otto Lüscher's family recently tracked down descendants of Jan Sawka. This was relatively easy, as there is a son of the same name in the USA, who was a well-known artist and the family maintains an extensive website for him. We send the Winterthur picture to them and ask, whether it could be a work of Jan Sawka: A few days later, a Hanna Maria Sawka of New York replied with the joyful message: This is exactly the style of her grandfather Jan Sawka Sr. Her father was the son of this man and had the same name: Jan Sawka. He was born in Poland after the war in 1946 and died in the USA in 2012. Jan Sawka Jr practiced the same profession as his father - he was an artist and architect. He left an extensive oeuvre. He became famous as a designer of stage sets for theaters. In 1989, he created a 52-piece stage set for the tour of the U.S. rock group Grateful Dead, which towered 10 stories high.

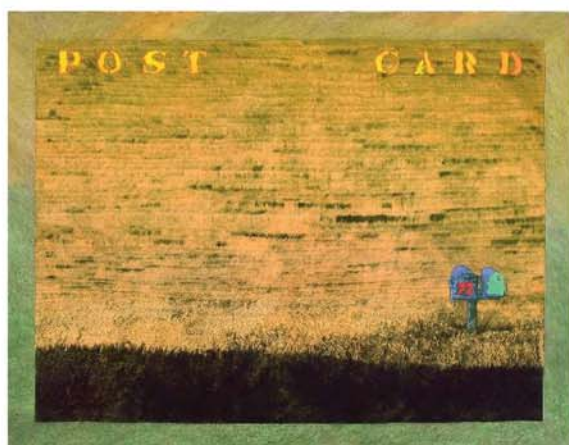
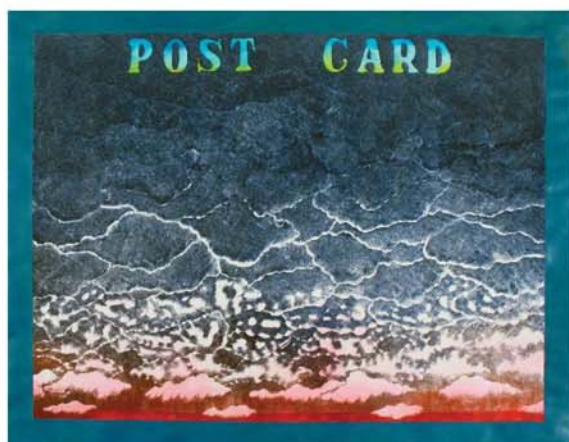


Fig. 6: Large-format prints from the series "Postcard", created by Jan Sawka Junior (1946-2012). Photo Jan Sawka Estate. Image Jan Sawka Estate.

Jan Sawka Jr often dealt with the theme of memory in his art. An example is a series of large-format prints in which he drew inspiration from postcards he found in his father's estate.



Fig. 7: This postcard was written by Jan Sawka in 1942 in Winterthur to his family in Poland. Picture Jan Sawka Estate.

In the Sawka collection there is a postcard that his father, Jan Sawka Sr, wrote in 1942 to his family in Poland. The card bears a Winterthur postmark dated November 14, 1942, and is addressed to his daughter, who was born in 1939. In it, Jan Sawka reports about the snow in Winterthur and about the fact that he had to buy new shoes. He exhorts his daughter to be good and assures her how much he misses her. In 2020, Hanna Maria Sawka co-curated an exhibition entitled "The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)" at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in New Paltz, NY. The exhibition included works by her father, which addressed precisely this theme. The exhibition catalog also contains the postcard of Jan Sawka Sr from Winterthur.



Fig. 8 Front side of the postcard written by Jan Sawka to his family in Poland.

Jan Sawka Sr, they report, was contacted in Winterthur by British intelligence. They told him about an important operation against Nazi Germany for which they were still looking for volunteers. Jan Sawka committed himself to complete secrecy and set off in the spring of 1944. He reached Gibraltar via Italy and from there sailed by ship to England, where he was assigned to the US troops and, with a US troop contingent, Sawka took part in D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944, and of all places on the hard-fought Omaha Beach. He survived as the only one in his boat; more than 30 comrades died in the assault on the beach. Later he is said to have also fought on the Rhine. Sawka was promoted to major and after the war was honored with a medal after the war.

Sawka could have gone to the USA or England, but he wanted to return to Poland and participate in the reconstruction of his homeland. A courageous decision, which he probably regretted later. Shortly after the war, the Stalinist

regime put him in prison. He was released after Stalin's death in 1953. The communist state first made him do heavy physical work such as shoveling coal - later they called on his skills as an architect in the construction of public buildings. The son of Jan Sawka made a name for himself as an artist in the 1960s and became known far beyond Poland; many of his works also had political messages. In 1976, Jan Sawka Jr was forced to emigrate with his family. A few months later father Jan Sawka Sr died in Poland.

This is the broad story we were able to reconstruct from our conversation with Hanna Maria Sawka and her mother, Hanna. But is it true? It sounds almost too good to be true. The family does not have any documents confirming the military career of Jan Sawka. However, it would be possible to start an investigation in the National Archives in Washington or London. This is apparently planned. Memory can be deceptive, especially when it is passed down through several generations. For critical appreciation, we are therefore dependent on generally accessible data about this period.

Did British agents recruit soldiers in Winterthur? That is plausible: Switzerland was a hub for many secret intelligence services during World War II. It is obvious that foreign services supported the departure of the Poles from Switzerland. According to the documents of the Federal Commissariat for Internment and Hospitalization EKI, about 2000 of the 12,500 Poles interned in Switzerland disappeared in this way.



Fig. 9 Jan Sawka Junior and his wife Hanna in the mid-1980s in the USA. In front on the right Hanna Maria Sawka. Photo Krys Krawczyk



*Abb. 1 Hanna Sawka, die Witwe von Jan Sawka Junior
Hanna Maria Sawka, die Enkelin von Jan Sawka Senior
bei einer Zoom-Konferenz mit dem Autor im März
2021. Foto Dominik Landwehr*

In total, during the Second World War, over half a million Polish soldiers fought alongside the Allied forces on various fronts. Many of them also took part in the Normandy invasion. For this operation a separate Polish formation was formed: the First Polish Armored Division. However, this armored division did not arrive in Normandy until the beginning of August 1944. Polish soldiers participated in the battle on D-Day, but were deployed with the Navy and the Air Force. It is possible that Jan Sawka was a landing craft commander. We are not sure; perhaps documents from American and British archives will help.



Fig. 11 Hanna Sawka, the widow of Jan Sawka Jr. (right) Hanna Maria Sawka, the granddaughter of Jan Sawka Senior (left). Photo Joan Vos MacDonald

Once again, is this story true? We think in broad terms, yes. Jan Sawka's stay in Winterthur is documented, as well as his return to Poland. Where and when Jan Sawka fought in the war, we do not know. All in all, it is simply an exemplary and tragic story of an artist from Eastern Europe in the turbulent 20th century. The story is not over yet. Hanna Maria Sawka, for her part, would like to have documents and pictures by her grandfather and her father exhibited in Winterthur. It would go well with the 40 photographs by Leszek Bialy on the life of the internees in Winterthur. Who knows, maybe there is an institution that would be interested.

Dominik Landwehr
Translation Jennifer Lüscher

The article was published on April 3, 2021 in the Swiss newspaper Landbote under the title „Auf den Spuren von Jan Sawka, der verschwand, um gegen die Nazis zu kämpfen“ (“In the footsteps of Jan Sawka, who disappeared to fight the Nazis”) in a slightly abridged form.

Websites

The official website of the Polish-American artist Jan Sawka (1946 -2014)

<https://www.jansawka.com/>

Literature

Hanna Maria Sawka: *The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)*. Exhibition catalog. Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, State University of New York Press. 2020. ISBN No. 978-0-578-46474-9

online at

<https://www.newpaltz.edu/media/museum/exhibitions/Sawka.Catalogue.FINAL.pdf>

About the author

Dominik Landwehr (*1958) is a cultural and media scientist living in Winterthur. He has been working with cryptography for about 20 years and graduated in Basel in 2007 with a doctorate thesis on the German cipher machine Enigma. doctorate. From 1998 to 2019, he was in charge of the digital culture department at the Migros Culture Percentage and was editor of the 2014 to 2019 Edition Digital Culture series, which was published by Christoph Merian Verlag Basel.



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ANNEX

Pictures Jan Sawka left in Winterthur in 1944
Private archive Otto Lüscher.

