

## WARSZAWA

Michael Winiarski

The temperature fell to -36° centigrade that winter – and to -22° inside the room that Ann Frössén rented. The pipes burst and being ill with a cold proved an ordeal. But when Ann stayed at home to nurse her cold she was told that she should think seriously about her future at the academy. Things were different from what she was used to: ration coupons were needed to buy toilet paper and meat – which she gave to the family she lived with – and black and white war films from the Soviet Union were shown on the television in the evenings.

What enabled her to survive was the love and consideration that she experienced, she now says. And the extraordinary quality of the Academy of Fine Arts. She has always stressed the value to her art of drawing from a live model.

Poland was very different when she was studying art in Warsaw almost twenty years ago. It was a dark time; the communist generals' state of war was still in force. That the winter of 1986-87 was the coldest for many years and perhaps made it all the more difficult to realize how close Poland was to its democratic spring.

Earlier that year the Swedish daily Dagens Nyheter had printed the following note: "Next year Ann Frössén will travel to Warsaw to study at the Academy of Fine Arts. She is the recipient of a one-year scholarship from the Swedish Institute. She has chosen Warsaw primarily because instruction is still given in the classical techniques of painting. One can learn to paint like the old masters, Rembrandt for example."

She knew almost nothing about Poland and she started to study Polish at evening classes to prepare for her stay in Warsaw. She could not imagine what awaited her: severe cold and food shortages. There was nothing edible to buy. In spite of the fact that the academy is situated on the main boulevard, the Krakowskie Przemiescie, there were only cafés to go to. "There was hot water so one could always drink tea. When I went to shop for food I had to buy whatever was available after queuing for several hours", she reminisces.

The shortages also applied to artists' materials. There was a lack of paper, of white paper. But she soon discovered that good quality rag paper was available in shops that had things to sell. It was used for wrapping purchases. Oil paints could sometimes be bought in other towns. When the rumour spread that yellow paint was available somewhere, four or five students would share a car and travel there. "At the academy they made their own paints which were only available to the students. The quality was fantastic."

The first time that she entered the school and took the stairs up to the painting room she saw that everything had a blackish brown patina and she wondered why. The answer was that this was dust from years of drawing with charcoal. The students painted every morning and drew from a model in the afternoons.

Ann had arrived at the school with Cézanne as her idol but after a number of weeks her professor remarked in English: "You are not Cézanne." There was much to stimulate reflection on what makes an artist.

The models were pensioned prostitutes, women and men, who were happy to have an income. Another world. Everything was different and unexpected.

Visiting the Hotel Europejski and eating the delicious fried eggs was a huge contrast; as was drinking poire liqueur at the Kawiarnia Telimena. Sitting in the Telimena drinking coffee, when there was some, and writing became one of her favourite activities.

She opens her diary and shows me a note from November 1986:

"I understand Polish art better, I understand the language that it uses, that it is strong as though cut in stone, a strength that comes from a careful crafting."

Underlined she has written "To work is important."

Ann Frössén had 110 drawings and paintings with her on the plane home. In February 1987 she noted in her diary: "Warsaw was bewildering, but I have never felt so happy."

"I come here every day, it is like a refuge for me", Ann Frössén remarks. The first thing I notice when I visit her spacious studio on Luntmakargatan in Stockholm is a discrete little sign with the legend "Frössén is at large." But what is most striking are the monumental canvases with their cascades of water. The largest of the paintings almost makes me feel dizzy; suddenly I am back on the rolling ferries that crossed the Baltic during my childhood. Perhaps this is not so strange when one considers what Ann Frössén has devoted herself to in the last decade. Feeling and knowledge led to her exhibiting her work in the countries around the Baltic Sea.

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