

*Helena Syrkus
through the lens of her
correspondence*

Has Helena Syrkus' typewriter
offered a **gateway to Modernism** to
Polish architecture?



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Figure 1 unknown photographer, *Helena Syrkus in the 1940's*, photograph (Warszawa, n.d.), Biblioteka Narodowa [National Library], public domain.

I. Introduction

This thesis will focus on the person of Helena Syrkus, born as Helena Eliasberg in 1900 in Warsaw. It will challenge the past and uncover the true contributions that women made in creation of modern architecture, by her example. It will explain how, as a woman architect, Helena Syrkus managed to play a significant role in the architectural scene in Poland and internationally. She managed to work her way up to the prestigious position of the vice-president of CIAM and kept correspondence with the most influential architects of the century.

Her projects, publications, and theoretical texts teem with the international experience she gathered. Helena Syrkus also worked as a professor at the Warsaw University of Technology, where she spread her knowledge to the new generation of architects.

She was a part of the Praesens group and together with the elite of Polish architects worked on rebuilding Poland after the war and in the interwar period. The members of the group later formed the Polish representation of CIAM. Helena and her husband took part in CIAM congresses (II –VII). She managed to become a member of the council and secured a position as the vice-president of CIAM. During the congresses, she put her social skills and fluent knowledge of multiple languages (English, German, French) in use to form a broad network of contacts with the most influential architects of the 20th century, with whom she regularly corresponded.

The insights from the collaboration with the avant-garde international scene of architects inspired the Syrkus couple's housing and city planning projects, publications, and theoretical texts. Helena published books such as "Towards the Concept of the Social Housing, 1925-1975"¹, and "The Social Objectives of Urbanization. Man and the Environment"², but perhaps the most valuable written pieces to understand her persona are her letters.

The authors of "CIAM Archipelago: The Letters by Helena Syrkus"³, who in their book gathered a collection of Syrkus's correspondence from different periods of her life, point out that letters are rarely considered a primary source when it comes to architectural figures. Analyzing an architect's correspondence gives a much greater insight into the person and their beliefs as just analyzing designs, sketches, and drawings. It shows the person from the social side of the architectural profession. A side of high relevance to Helena Syrkus since it was a main pillar of her career.

In a private letter to her sister, Syrkus makes it apparent that her typewriter was an integral item without which she would only depart for holidays. In any other case, a full-size or pocket typewriter would constantly be at her side. **"Let Irka [diminutive of Irena - translator's note] not be cross: the typewriter was borrowed, I have not taken my Erika with me, not even the Larousse. Rest means rest"**⁴.

Where other women wore metalized jewelry, a tomboy haircut, and printed fabric dresses to present themselves as modernist, Helena Syrkus found another way to stand out. It was through her writing and correspondence that she manifested herself as a modernist, finding her own way to stand out and become a key modernist figure.

Conversation and propagation of architectural ideas became indispensable in the modernist era. Since at the beginning the circle of modernists was quite narrow, they had to come up with ways to unite the community worldwide and sell their ideas of architecture to the world. The constant exchange about the projects between the different architects and their close relations helped to find the best solutions for the modern architecture in an efficient manner. Thanks to the regular

¹ Helena Syrkus, *Ku Idei Osiedla Społecznego 1925-1975* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1976).

² Helena Syrkus, *Społeczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984).

³ Aleksandra Kędziorek, Katarzyna Uchowicz, and Maja Wirkus, *Archipelag Ciām: Listy Heleny Syrkus = Ciām Archipelago: The Letters of Helena Syrkus* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2019).

⁴ Syrkus, Helena. Letter to her sister, Irena Wilczyńska. Warsaw: Warsaw University of Technology Archive, June 22, 1974.

exchange of publications, projects, and information with Walter Gropius and others, Helena managed to secure herself a place in the inner circle of modernists.

When the book "*Functional Warsaw*"⁵ of which her husband was a co-author was published and translated into 3 CIAM languages (German, French and English), Helena helped with its distribution by beginning a conversation about the future of urban planning in a broad international circle. She presented Poland as an exciting canvas for modernists and a place where their ideas could be tested. Thanks to her efforts, Poland filled a position of esteem on the international scene. Helena managed to involve foreign architects in solving the housing crisis after the 1st World War, and succeeded in making it a relevant international topic.

The power of Helena's correspondence, and the importance of maintaining contact between other modernists is one of her greatest contributions for both Poland and the international scene. The special power of correspondence that was prominent in Syrkus' life gave impetus to the research question: ***Has Helena Syrkus' typewriter offered a gateway to Modernism to Polish architecture?***

For the methodology the thesis will adopt a procedure of chronicling and examining an area of social history. The context of the situation of women architects in the 20th century will be particularly relevant for the thesis. The gender issues at these times made it very difficult for women architects to obtain positions of relevance in the field of architecture. The thesis focuses on Helena Syrkus, a woman architect that despite her inferior position managed to become an influential person on the international and national level. The influence that she had on bringing modernism to Poland will be the crucial theme throughout the thesis. The period that this thesis will focus on will cover Helena Syrkus's life since the 1920's till the 1960's with a special emphasis put on the interwar and the 2nd World War period and the first 10 years after the war. In these years Syrkus's international contacts were thriving and most of her architectural works were produced. The information will be sourced by an in-depth analysis of her correspondence, projects and publications. The research on Helena Syrkus will be supplemented by literature regarding the situation of women architects of the 20th century, together with the socio-political context. What is more, an interview with prof. dr hab. inż. arch. Piotr Marciniak (whose broad knowledge on Spousal Collaboration and the architecture scene, as well as Helena Syrkus and Szymon Syrkus themselves) will be conducted.

The research will be supported with a variety of literature. The main focus will be put on "CIAM Archipelago: The Letters by Helena Syrkus".⁶ This book will serve as an archival source of Helena Syrkus' letters. The book doesn't contain opinions or explanations, nor does it try to answer any specific question. Thus, it is an authentic source of information, originating directly from Helena Syrkus.

"Towards the Concept of the Social Housing, 1925-1975"⁷ together with "The Social Objectives of Urbanization. Man and the Environment"⁸ by Helena Syrkus and the book by Szymon Syrkus and J. Chmielewski "*Functional Warsaw*"⁹ will support the information found in the letters and describe in detail the Syrkus' architectural work. These 3 books introduce the urban situation in the 20th century Poland. They intend to give the answer to how the cities of the future will look. The books were created with close collaboration with the CIAM congresses.

⁵ Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus, *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, 1934).

⁶ Aleksandra Kędziorek, Katarzyna Uchowicz, and Maja Wirkus, *Archipelag Ciam: Listy Heleny Syrkus = Ciam Archipelago: The Letters of Helena Syrkus* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2019).

⁷ Helena Syrkus, *Ku Idei Osiedla Społecznego 1925-1975* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1976).

⁸ Helena Syrkus, *Społeczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984).

⁹ Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus, *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, 1934).

The broader international context is provided, by amongst others, M. Kohlrausch in "Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950".¹⁰ The book provides a complex background of the historical and political international scene of the 20th century. A more in-depth analysis of the social and professional context, which the book offers, is necessary to understand Helena Syrkus's rapid shifts in beliefs and political preferences depending on current socio-political affairs.

The thesis will be divided into six sections. The first will serve as an introduction to the research question. The second chapter will cover educational and professional life of Helena Syrkus, that preceded her participation in CIAM. It will explore how Helena from a position of secretary managed to become an active architect and co create the Praesens group. The third chapter will examine the role of CIAM in the 20th century as the most prominent and influential group of modernists around the world. It will further investigate the contribution of Helena Syrkus within CIAM and the role that Poland played as a "tabula rasa". The fourth chapter will explore the position of women in architecture during the interwar period. It will examine how despite of an inferior position as a woman, Helena managed to influence Polish architecture and become a key figure on an international level. The fifth chapter will portray Helena Syrkus and the post war period and examine how the political change in Poland influenced Helena's life. The sixth chapter will conclude and reflect on her work at CIAM, and in Poland, and confirm the crucial role that Helena and her typewriter played in bringing Modernism to Poland.

II. Educational and professional life preceding the "Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne"

Young Helena Eliasberg (pseudonym Niemirowska, later Syrkus) was not what people would call a "unidirectional person"¹¹. From an early age, she was fascinated by a variety of creative disciplines. Next to architecture and drawing, she also tried herself in painting, sculpture, and literature. Growing up, she studied several European languages at home, which was characteristic of the Polish intelligentsia at the time.¹² Her knowledge of languages like German, English, and French and her comprehensive education gave her a head start in life opening many doors for her which, as a woman, would have never opened otherwise.

Helena Syrkus has had a clear plan how to succeed in her career. In 1920's she was already skilled to do both stenography and steno-typing, skills that were quite rare at the time and highly sought after. These abilities largely improved her future job opportunities and provided financial independence, as more and more employers sought for skilled typists. But the writing skills that she possessed were only a gateway that allowed her to jump into the avant-garde world and start express herself in architecture. She decided to use the window of opportunity to establish herself as an avant-garde figure. Through correspondence and presence in the architectural circles, she got to know many influential modernists, and managed to break into their world.

Helena Eliasberg started studying architecture at Warsaw University of Technology (WUT) in 1918. Her studies were promptly interrupted by the First World War. In 1920, she resumed her studies and took a year of drawing lessons.¹³

¹⁰ Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019).

¹¹ Helena Syrkus, *Spoleczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 10.

¹² Helena Syrkus, *Spoleczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 10.

¹³ Aleksandra Kędziorek, Katarzyna Uchowicz, and Maja Wirkus, "Timeline of Helena Syrkus' Life and Work," in *Archipelag Ciam: Listy Heleny Syrkus = Ciam Archipelago: The Letters of Helena Syrkus* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2019), pp. 376-377.

The WUT, at the time of her studies underwent some ideological changes. The government politics encouraged a never seen before number of women to study at the university thanks to the gender-equality politics.¹⁴ The new generation of students believed that the new type of architecture should unite technology and social strategies to provide for everyone, especially after the destruction of the First World War.¹⁵ Consequences were the large-scale housing and neighborhood unit planning introducing new social solutions to bring the community together and increase the living standard by localizing functional and social units (schools, nurseries, meeting halls, movie theaters etc.).

She stopped studying architecture in 1922 without a degree and became a translator. It was that year that the young woman with Jewish roots started to use the pseudonym Helena Niemirowska. She not only used this pseudonym in work related situations, but also signed all official documents with the new name. She scrupulously concealed her origins, aware of the growing anti-Semitic movements.

She translated books like *"The Mystic Blood"*¹⁶ by Anatole France (1923), *"Puck of Pook's Hill"*¹⁷ by Rudyard Kipling and Franciszka Amsztajnowa (1924), and *"Beads"*¹⁸ by Anna Akhmatova (1925), she got first working experiences and refined her language skills. In 1923, she started studying philosophy and finally in 1948, she got a degree as engineer-architect from the WUT.

In 1925, Helena Syrkus seized the opportunity to work at the office of Szymon Syrkus', an architect of the Polish avant-garde. As a secretary, she was responsible for all clerical matters and keeping track of Szymon's correspondence. She expanded her architectural insights and started to gain experience in the field. In this way, she understood the value of correspondence and collaboration for the Modernists and later in life emphasized her preference of cooperation over competition. As she looked back on her life, she concluded that: **"cooperation is more fruitful than competition because it is possible, with the good will of both parties, to come to terms in elementary matters (...) even with people from opposite camps."**¹⁹

This view also manifested itself in the architectural groups and magazines she supported throughout her career. Although magazines and journals were not the 20th century invention, they gained never seen before importance during the interwar period, and became a crucial medium for the avant-garde. What differentiated them from already existing architectural magazines was the arising number of manifestoes that were published by groups like: *"De Stijl"*, *"de 8"* (which later collaborated with *"De opbouw"* and published *De 8 en opbouw*²⁰) and *"ABC"*. Secondly, from now on the magazines touched on improving the social system. In contrast the previous journals focused mainly on reproducing buildings and providing visuals and descriptive technical specifications.²¹

Some avant-garde magazines also covered a broader ground and published not only architecture, but also art. Some examples are: the Dutch *De Stijl*²² and *i l O*²³, Russian-French *Veshch Gegenstand*

¹⁴ Mary Pepchinski and Mariann Simon, "Ideological Equals: Women Architects in Socialist Europe 1945-1989," (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 1.

¹⁵ Izabela Wiśłocka, *Awangardowa Architektura Polska 1918 -1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1968), p. 108.

¹⁶ Anatole France, "The Mystic Blood," in *The Well of Saint Clare* (London: J. Lane, 1909).

¹⁷ Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1906).

¹⁸ Anna Akhmatova, *Chetki. Stikhi. [Rosary (or Beads). Poems]* (St Petersburg: Giperborei, 1914).

¹⁹ Helena Syrkus, *Spoleczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 13.

²⁰ The magazine *De 8 and Opbouw* was published by De 8 and De Opbouw in years 1932-1943

²¹ Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p.143.

²² The magazine *De Stijl: Maandblad voor de moderne beeldende vakken [en kultuur]* was published and edited by Theo van Doesburg in Delft, Leiden and Meudon in years 1917-1932 in 90 issues.

²³ The magazine *Internationale Revue i l O* was published by Arthur Lehning in Amsterdam in years 1927-1929

*Objekt*²⁴ or Polish BLOK²⁵. The international efforts to promote the cause of modernism inspired the formation of the “Praesens” group.

What is more, Szymon Syrkus observed the powerful typographic forms emerging in 1922, during his visit in Germany.²⁶ These new means heralded the beginning of a new visual language, a perfect instrument for the architects, that became a desired attribute of modernists. The presence of an element embodying the group with modernism was especially inviting to the Polish representation, whose members were already closely collaborating and corresponding with “*De Stijl*”.²⁷

The group and periodical “Praesens”²⁸ whose name Helena Syrkus helped to coin is the most prominent Polish example. “Praesens” in Latin means Present. The name Praesens therefore, emphasized the group’s will to create and follow the latest architectural trends, and personified it with the present times. Thanks to the Praesens group and periodical, the Syrkus’ managed to enter the international world of architecture and become its recognizable members. This decided about the future international interest that the Syrkus’s work gained. Thanks to these trans-border contacts Helena and Szymon Syrkus managed to get involved in the foreign modernist movements and use the correspondence to collaborate supporting the cause of modernism between countries.

Praesens was founded in 1926 by Szymon Syrkus and aimed to unite the Polish avant-garde, it not only disseminated modern ideas of its members and but also gave other architects a platform. The group showcased every novel and applicable example of the modern architectural thought. The periodical proved to be a medium fit to convey the new needs of architecture in the interwar period. Inspired by international modernist movements, it successfully propagated the new ideas in Poland, a fertile ground with many opportunities for development. As the group’s secretary, Helena Syrkus occupied a key position for conveying the idea of modernism.

After the First World War, there was an immense housing shortage in Poland with a need that exceeded 1.5 million properties.²⁹ Fast and efficient rebuilding was a key objective, but the young generation of modernists took it even further and formulated bold ideas of “socializing” architecture. Their architecture proposed, next to functional solutions, a social program combined with the new opportunities that industrial development had to offer. Its goal was to answer the needs of the people and mold itself to perfectly fit the times in which it was built.

Following Le Corbusier’s ideas, architecture merged with industry, and utilized prefabrication to maximize its abilities and answer the housing needs at the time. This vision was intended as a guideline for architects and did not attempt to take the creativity and originality away from the creator.

Unfortunately, to the dissatisfaction of Polish architects, not all parties shared their opinion. Helena Syrkus significantly opposed the lack of creative thought that was later imposed on architects by developers. **“But technology and its products, the construction industry and its products cannot, or rather should not, inherently require the compulsion of uniformity – exemplified by monotonous grey,**

²⁴ The magazine *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet: Mezhdunarodnoe obozrenie sovremennogo iskusstva / Internationale Rundschau der Kunst der Gegenwart / Revue internationale de l'art moderne* was edited by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenberg and published in Berlin in 1922 in 2 issues.

²⁵ The magazine BLOK was published by the “Blok” group and edited by Henryk Stażewski, Teresa Żamowerówna, Mieczysław Szczuka and Edmund Miller in years 1924-1926. The magazine had 11 issues.

²⁶ Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 142.

²⁷ Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 142.

²⁸ The magazine *Praesens: kwartalnik modernistów* [periodical of the modernists] was published by the Polish avant-garde group “Praesens” in years 1926-1930 in 2 issues.

²⁹ Helena Syrkus, *Spoleczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 12.

concrete houses built with the same system, by the new, large factories, as high-rise buildings, erected all over the country”³⁰

At the end of her life, in her book titled “*Towards the Concept of the Social Housing, 1925-1975*”³¹ Helena Syrkus recalls that during her whole life she fought to industrialize the construction industry. She proposed to utilize the abilities of prefabrication, that allowed them to build in an efficient and fast way, while still allowing customization to attend individual needs and preferences. In the Syrkus’ social-housing projects families were encouraged to consult the vision of their personal home with architects. In this way, people were offered a space of their own and not a space with no soul.

In 1927, an opportunity to form deeper connections with modernists in Europe presented itself through the international “Palace of the League of Nations” competition, held in Geneva.³² The competition regarded the project of the headquarters for the “League of Nations” organization, that was responsible for keeping the world peace. The inclusion of architecture in the program and formation of their headquarters in Switzerland met with an immense international interest. Since keeping the world peace is an international concern, the competition entries were made by many foreign architects.

Poland demonstrated great interest in participating. Many Polish architects prepared their entry projects. This competition afforded a unique opportunity for the Polish modernists and opened the doors to the international architectural scene for the young architects of “Praesens”.

The members of the “Praesens” group were invited by Sigfried Giedion to become a part of the newly created “Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne”, a nascent Modernist organization. This event initiated a constant stream of contact between the Polish avant-garde and the international scene, and was a key moment for the history of Polish Modern architecture. The members of the periodical from this point onwards, shared and propagated the ideas and proposals put forth by the congress.³³

III. “Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne” (CIAM)

The CIAM was a congress that brought together likeminded architects that shared a common vision of Modernism in the world. Especially in Europe, after the devastation of the First World War, there was a need for a new perspective on architecture. The first congress was held in 1928 in La Sarraz, Switzerland, without a Polish representation.

CIAM was a cooperation of architects from a diversity of nations that has never happened before on that scale. It was the most influential architectural congress at the time with leading architects like Karl Moser, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, Cornelis van Eesteren, Sigfried Giedion, and Mies van der Rohe. The above-mentioned architects formed, among others, the “Comité international pour la résolution des problèmes de l'architecture contemporaine” (CIRPAC). This was the executive body of CIAM which gathered more frequently than the actual congress.³⁴

³⁰ Helena Syrkus, *Spoleczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 20.

³¹ Helena Syrkus, *Spoleczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), p. 20.

³² Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 97.

³³ Izabela Wiśłocka, *Awangardowa Architektura Polska 1918 -1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1968), p. 117.

³⁴ Helena Syrkus, *Ku Idei Osiedla Społecznego 1925-1975* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1976), p. 13.

The routes of Poland and CIAM crossed for the first time at the League of Nations Palace Competition. Thanks to the large participation of the Polish architects and the competition entry by Szymon Syrkus and Henryk Oderfeld which caught the eye of Sigfried Giedion, Szymon Syrkus was invited to join the CIRPAC meeting in February 1929, in which he participated with his wife Helena Syrkus.

When the second CIAM took place in October 1929 in Frankfurt a. M., Germany, with the theme "Wohnung für das Existenzminimum (The Minimum Dwelling)", the Polish section has been formed and contained architects of the Praesens group including Helena Syrkus.³⁵ Since then, Helena Syrkus used every opportunity within the congress to network and gather information about the findings of the congress.

As a member of the Polish section of CIAM, Helena Syrkus started working as a translator and kept protocol of the meetings. In order to be able to do that, knowledge of at least three CIAM languages (German, English, French) was required. People like her were scarce at the time, since resources for professional translators and recordings of meetings were not available. In her position, she had the opportunity to attend the meetings and, even as part of the youth, have a voice and create connections to renowned architects.

The fourth CIAM meeting in 1933 was a milestone in her career, she co-edited the *Charte d'Athènes*, which later became one of the most important documents for modernists, and officially became a CIAM secretary.³⁶ The *Charte d'Athènes* was published by Swiss architect Le Corbusier who laid the groundwork with his book *Ville Radieuse* (Radiant City). During the fourth congress, it has been discussed and key aspects have been described to make this document an unprecedented reference for modern urban planning in the post war period.

Helena Syrkus frequently joined her husband to attend CIRPAC meetings which helped her to gain influence. In 1947, after the Second World War, she became a member of the CIAM Council and CIAM vice-president joining Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. She was often seen in their company, taking a place on the stage.

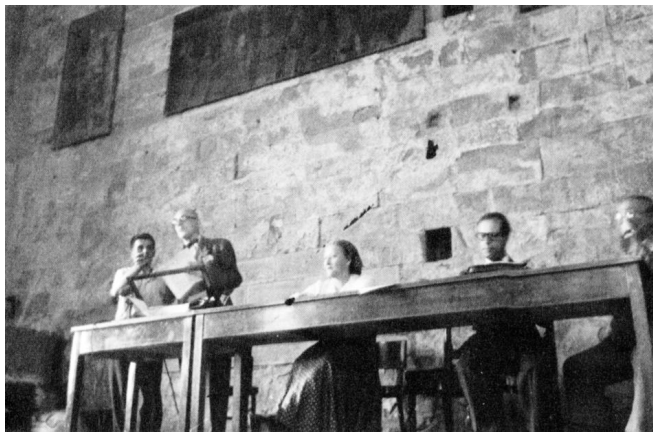


Figure 2 Helena Syrkus, Le Corbusier (Left), J. L. Sert and S. Giedion (Right) on the Stage at the CIAM VII Congress in Bergamo. Photograph. Zürich, 1949. Institut für- Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur (gta) Archiv/ ETH Zürich / CIAM Archiv.



Figure 3 Helena Syrkus on the Stage at the CIAM VII Congress in Bergamo. Photograph. Bergamo, 1949. Nino Zucchelli Archive. Dono Lina Zucchelli Valsecchi, GAMEC, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo.

³⁵ Aleksandra Kędziorek, Katarzyna Uchowicz, and Maja Wirkus, "Timeline of Helena Syrkus' Life and Work," in *Archipelag Ciam: Listy Heleny Syrkus = Ciam Archipelago: The Letters of Helena Syrkus* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2019).

³⁶ Aleksandra Kędziorek, Katarzyna Uchowicz, and Maja Wirkus, "Timeline of Helena Syrkus' Life and Work," in *Archipelag Ciam: Listy Heleny Syrkus = Ciam Archipelago: The Letters of Helena Syrkus* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Architektury i Urbanistyki, 2019).

The Polish representation had a special position in the CIAM. The country served as a testing ground for new architectural ideas on large scale as there was no need to fit into existing architecture due to the scale of destruction of the country after the First World War. Poland at the time was described as a “tabula rasa” (clean slate) an exciting ground for young modernists.³⁷

Additionally, a massive housing shortage that affected the life of millions of people, caused unprecedented architectural challenges to rebuild quickly and effectively. The focus of architecture shifted towards answering the needs of the poor and creating better living conditions.

The social aspect of architecture was particularly important to Helena Syrkus, as she sought to provide a rich mix of public amenities supporting the social housing estates designed by her and her husband. The purpose of these facilities was activation of public life and providing the lowest social classes living in small apartments an additional public place.

In light of the given circumstances, Poland’s representation contributed a lot to the congress and closely collaborated with its members through correspondence and attending the CIAM and CIRPAC meetings.

A valuable piece created by the Polish department was a book titled “Warszawa funkcjonalna” (Functional Warsaw)³⁸ written by Szymon Syrkus and Jan Chmielewski elaborating on urban planning of Warsaw and creating guidelines that were recognized and approved during the fourth congress (1933). The book became a manuscript for other countries, putting Poland as an example to follow. Because of its collective character, it was referred to as the CIAM book. It combined the achievements and findings regarding urban planning of CIAM, that were used as guidelines in the proposal for the redesigning of Warsaw. As Helena Syrkus explained in her letter to Walter Gropius, the book was not purely a result of their isolated work as **“we are all just speakers of the ideas we have developed together”**.³⁹

Helena and Szymon Syrkus were an integral part of propagating the ideas of CIAM to Poland. As Izabela Wiśłocka subsequently explained in “Polish Avant-garde Architecture”⁴⁰, the Polish representation of CIAM, namely Helena and Szymon Syrkus and the Praesens group, served as a mouthpiece of Modernism to Poland. They not only published the new ideas of the congress but also put them to test in actual projects of their own.

“In Poland, the activities of Praesens within the framework of the International CIAM Organization consisted primarily of the implementation of modern architectural ideas in the projects of Praesens members, as well as the promotion of CIAM in general, which was achieved by familiarizing the Polish community with the work of the organization through reports from Congresses, articles and lectures. We owe public information about the progress and achievements of CIAM mainly to Helena and Szymon Syrkus.”⁴¹

But the propagation did not only go one way. At the congresses, the Praesens group presented their experiences and achievements implementing the ideas of Modernism. These insights and Poland’s general participation were highly valued at CIAM with also Walter Gropius praising Poland’s example.⁴² The collaboration immensely helped in rebuilding the Polish country after the war, provided necessary discussion partners, and ensured international support.

³⁷ Martin Kohlrusch, “The Syrkus Couple and the Global Cause of Modernism,” *Journal of Modern European History* 18 (2020): pp. 494-508.

³⁸ Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus, *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, 1934).

³⁹ Syrkus, Helena. Letter to Walter Gropius & Sigfried Giedion. Walter Gropius Archive, Bauhaus-Archive: Berlin, January 24, 1939.

⁴⁰ Izabela Wiśłocka, *Awangardowa Architektura Polska 1918 -1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1968), p. 117

⁴¹ Izabela Wiśłocka, *Awangardowa Architektura Polska 1918 -1939* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1968), p. 117

⁴² Gropius, Walter. Letter to Helena Syrkus. Harvard University: Walter Gropius Papers, Houghton Library, January 24, 1939.

IV. Position of women in architecture during the inter-war period

To provide all necessary context, it is crucial to define the position of women architects in the 20th century. The level of self-containment depended largely on the country of origin. In some cases, since 1945, the socialist system of the country seemingly promoted equality of genders, and encouraged women to begin their professional education.

The gaps in the engineering and architecture sector were filled by women, as they were finally allowed to study at universities. The gender restrictions that kept them from studying at educational institutions were taken down by the government.⁴³ Many women decided to begin their education lured by a new and exciting vision of self-fulfillment that went hand in hand with the socialist vision. Just 15 years later, in the 1960's, women made up 25 percent of the workforce in Poland.⁴⁴

Although offered the same education and future prospects, only few women had succeeded in taking up higher work positions. The opportunities for women architects were significantly more limited than those of their men peers. One reason for such imbalance was the fact that women were still expected to take care of the household after work. Despite the introduction of day-care facilities for children and other social amenities, women were made responsible for maintaining the family and being available which compromised their ability to follow a prestigious career.

Nevertheless, these circumstances did not suppress the cognitive curiosity of women architects. Despite limited resources, women were striving for international contacts, travel and education. Therefore, for many women, the knowledge of several languages and their writing skills became the entry pass to a professional career. Modernist women knew the power of inter-communication and relentlessly build up their networks. Aware of these sought-after skills, Helena Syrkus since a young age perfected her language and writing skills, working as a translator. She also engaged in the Warsaw avant-garde circle, creating her social network. She combined it with studies of architecture and philosophy. This strategy helped her in securing a job and made her stand out amongst other candidates.

Women architects often started their career as secretaries, taking care of the clerical matters and correspondence. But their competences exceeded far beyond simple office tasks. Having been given the same education as men, women searched for a way to fulfill themselves professionally. For many, spousal collaboration was the only option that offered them the creative freedom that they sought. There is a fair number of architect couples who worked and signed their projects together, to name but a few, Helena and Szymon Syrkus, Barbara and Stanisław Brukalski or Charles and Ray Eames (whose prior education as a painter brought new life and color to their designs).⁴⁵ But the collaboration was not only limited to marital partnership. Also, numerous inter-gender collaborations formed in the 20th century, Lilly Reich and Mies van der Rohe as well as Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand being the prime examples.

What was a visible trend though, was that women were not keen to talk about their contribution, and tend to refer back to their husbands / collaborators. Self-praise was seen as a negative trait for a woman, and therefore was avoided by them, maybe even subconsciously.

Thanks to the extensive interest of 21st century researchers in gender inequalities, the contribution of women in forming architecture becomes apparent. For example, one can see a radical shift in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe, before and after the collaboration with Lilly Reich. The

⁴³ Mary Pepchinski and Mariann Simon, "Ideological Equals: Women Architects in Socialist Europe 1945-1989," (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 1.

⁴⁴ Piotr Marciniak, "Spousal Collaboration as a Professional Strategy for Women Architects in the Polish People's Republic," in *Ideological Equals: Women Architects in Socialist Europe 1945-1989*, ed. Mary Pepchinski and Mariann Simon (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), pp. 63-77.

⁴⁵ Beatriz Colomina, "Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999), p. 462

architecture preceding their collaboration was lacking a clear definition of space whereas the trademarks that would later define the essence of his architecture only emerged during their cooperation.⁴⁶

For Helena Syrkus, spousal collaboration had the best means to offer her the creative freedom she sought. Following the trend of the time, she did not refer to herself as a feminist and often mentioned that architecture for her meant team work. Therefore, she strained from talking about her personal achievements. The pattern of avoiding self-praise, so common for women of these times, can be observed for example in her book *“Towards the Concept of the Social Housing, 1925-1975”*⁴⁷, where she emphasized the figure of her husband, and often mentioned herself in regard to him. Her contributions to Polish and international Modernism should be seen both, together and separate of her husband's.

As partners, women often not only took care of correspondence and office matters but also contributed ideas and co-designed but were rarely given credit for it. The role of women, however great, is often seen as a sort of taboo. Although we all know that the space is created by both genders, we don't seem to emphasize the role of women enough, or even forget it. ***“It is like a dirty little secret that we-all architects-keep. Something that we all know, that we all see, but we don't bring ourselves to talk about.”***⁴⁸ As a result, we live in an illusion painted by past historians, as if the women have never existed or only took care of irrelevant household tasks and raising the family. The architects of the 20th century became powerful figures and icons of modern times, while their wives and partners are often mentioned only in a regard to their marital status.



Figure 4 Helena Syrkus and Szymon Syrkus in their apartment and office at Senatorska street in Warsaw. Photograph. Warsaw, 1927. Archiwum Instytutu Sztuki PAN

In 1925, Helena began working at Szymon Syrkus' office as a secretary, but her mileage made her quickly surpass the clerical position. Just 6 years later, Szymon and Helena Syrkus as partners began to sign their projects together.

They collectively took part in architectural congresses of CIAM and worked to propagate the modern ideas in the country through the Praesens periodical and their own designs. They worked on improving the quality of life and living conditions in the post-war Poland. Together, they designed workers housing-estates such as “Na Rakowcu” and “Na Kole” for the Warsaw Housing Co-operative (WSM) where they put a special emphasis on creating public functional spaces for the residents.

⁴⁶ Beatriz Colomina, “Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999), p. 462

⁴⁷ Helena Syrkus, *Ku Idei Osiedla Społecznego 1925-1975* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1976).

⁴⁸ Beatriz Colomina, “Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999), p. 462

But her influence reached far beyond the collaborative work. Beginning with the second CIAM congress, Helena started to gather knowledge about the organization and began to build her correspondence network. Helena Syrkus corresponded, amongst others, with Walter and Ise Gropius, Cornelis van Eesteren and his wife Frieda Fluck, Sigfried Giedion, and many others.⁴⁹ She regularly consulted her views with modernists around the world and formed friendships that survived long distances thanks to her irreplaceable typewriter and vast knowledge of languages. The collaborative aspect that she brought to the table enriched her work, as the projects were thoroughly consulted internationally.

Through her extensive work, she built up a career separate from her husband. She did not stray of conversation and was described by many as the "loudest speaker in the room".⁵⁰ She quickly climbed the professional ladder, from CIAM secretary in 1933, to the vice-president of the organization, and a member of CIAM Council in 1947. Her work on organizing the congresses was described as "indispensable"⁵¹ by Walter Gropius in a letter to Dr. Alvin Johnson written in 1940 to support Syrkus' in emigration to the USA.

Even though Helena Syrkus attended most of the international architecture congresses with her husband, she would also depart on voyages alone and plan attending congresses on her own, for example, the congress in 1939 in Liège.⁵²

Helena Syrkus did not focus solely on international matters. When the Second World War began in 1939, she collaborated in the "underground" and ran the office in absence of her husband, who was sent to Auschwitz. She took part in creating secret plans for the rebuilding of Warsaw after the war and lectured on social town planning. In 1943, she became a part of the State National Council. After the unsuccessful Warsaw uprising, Helena was sent to Pruszków camp, from where she escaped and found shelter in Cracow. In 1945, Helena was arrested and sent to a camp near Breslau (Wrocław).

V. Helena Syrkus in the post-WWII period

The after-war period began for Helena with the re-establishment of her international contacts. In a telegram to Forbát, she stressed the importance of rebuilding her network to its former glory and directly linked it with rebuilding of Warsaw.⁵³ Helena and Szymon Syrkus devoted the two years after the war almost completely to re-establishing former CIAM contacts and working on the reconstruction plan for Warsaw.

Helena Syrkus secured a spot as the general secretary of Supreme Council of Warsaw's Reconstruction and was responsible seeking international help through collaboration with foreign architects. She also became a head of the Propaganda Division, in May 1945, and seeks for international help in the rebuilding of the city.

Suddenly, the so-stressed before importance of urban and social planning of cities, manifested for example in Szymon and Jan Chmielewski's book "Functional Warsaw"⁵⁴, took on an even greater,

⁴⁹ Aleksandra Kędziołek and Katarzyna Uchowicz, "Sieciotwórcza Rola Maszyny Do Pisania," *Autoportret, Narracje Architektury Dwudziestolecia* 62, no. 3 (2018): pp. 102-109.

⁵⁰ Gropius, Walter. Letter to Catherine Bauer. Berlin: Bauhaus Archiv, February 15, 1939.

⁵¹ Gropius, Walter. Letter to dr. Alvin Johnson. Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv, October 15, 1940.

⁵² Due to the beginning of the 2nd World War, the congress has been canceled. Helena Syrkus has beforehand formalized her participation.

Syrkus, Szymon. Letter to Cornelis van Eesteren. Wrocław: Museum of Architecture in Wrocław, Szymon and Helena Syrkus' Archive, August 26, 1939.

⁵³ Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 270.

⁵⁴ Jan Chmielewski and Szymon Syrkus, *Warszawa Funkcjonalna* (Warszawa: Towarzystwo Urbanistów Polskich, 1934).

new meaning.⁵⁵ With the destruction of war in many European cities, the topic was even more internationally stressed. It helped the Polish representation to engage an even broader audience, reaching far beyond the borders of the country.

An exhibition titled "Warsaw Accuses"⁵⁶ was created with an idea to spread the knowledge about the reconstruction efforts of the capital while also showcasing the scale of destruction. Szymon Syrkus' primary plans for the new capital, seen before at the pre- Second-World-War exhibition "Warsaw of Tomorrow", were also in the spotlight.

The exposition was organized by the Warsaw's Reconstruction Board (BOS), the Polish Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Reconstruction. After a short stay in the National Museum of Warsaw, "Warsaw Accuses" departed on a journey around the world, and was shown in Tokyo, Moscow, London, Paris, New York, Chicago, Budapest, Prague, Berlin, Stockholm and Vienna.⁵⁷

The exhibition travelled together with the Syrkus couple to the United States (USA) and the United Kingdom. The role of the exhibition was to shed light on the destruction of Poland and raise funds for the reconstruction of Warsaw. The exhibition's goals aligned perfectly with the efforts of the Syrkus's to make the wider audience aware of the reconstruction and urban planning activities in Warsaw, and showcase Polish achievements in this field.

Helena's networking and the Syrkus' international experience gave them an opportunity to realize their long-awaited 6-month study and travel in the USA and reunite them once more with their long-term friends Walter and Ise Gropius, who opened the exhibition at the Congress Library in Washington.

Helena and Szymon Syrkus delivered numerous lectures across the USA concerning the reconstruction of Warsaw.⁵⁸ The exhibition was met with supreme international recognition and interest in the urging topic of reconstruction, placing Warsaw in the center of attention, not only promoting new development and reconstruction works, but also securing funds for the reconstruction of Polish cities.

In 1950, Helena became the vice-president of CIAM, and joined the CIAM Council. In Poland, Helena and Szymon Syrkus focused on designing social housing and the living unit for the classes with the lowest income rate. They jointly designed "Na Rakowcu" and "Na Kole" housing estates for the WSM.

In 1949, Helena Syrkus took part in the 7th CIAM Congress in Bergamo, where she changed her tone and spoke in favor of socialist realism. Since the members of the congress did not share her enthusiasm for the newly forming movement, Helena turned away from her old colleagues and began to negate the values of CIAM. The radical shift was also visible in her language, packed with propaganda and harsh expressions, perhaps reasoned in fear that the correspondence would fall into the wrong hands. In response to Helena Syrkus' letter from 1950 Ise Gropius wrote **"we do not want to start to speak to each other through a megaphone in the language of political treaties and clichés. But I am afraid that is exactly what you have done in your letter though you may not realize it"**.⁵⁹

The sudden shift in beliefs was caused by the new regime's attitude towards modernism, perhaps forcing Helena Syrkus to vouch against it to actively continue her work as an architect in the

⁵⁵ Martin Kohlrusch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 271.

⁵⁶ The title of the exhibition in the USA was changed by Lewis Mumford, an influential architectural critic to "Warsaw Lives"

⁵⁷ On the exhibition's reception in London: "Warsaw Exhibition", *The Guardian*, 19 March 1947 and in Switzerland the radio feature of 5 July 1946 in *Echo der Zeit*:

http://www.fonoteca.ch/cgi-bin/oecgi3.exe/inet_fnbasedetail?REC_ID=578.022&LNG_ID=ENU

⁵⁸ Helena and Szymon deliver lectures at: Graduate School of Design of the Harvard University; Cambridge University, Massachusetts; New School for Social Research in New York; Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire; New Bauhaus in Chicago

⁵⁹ Gropius, Ise. Letter to Helena Syrkus. *Historic New England: Gropius Family Papers*, November 1950.

country.⁶⁰ The relationship of Helena Syrkus and socialist realism was very complicated and multifarious. One had to consider the malady of the war that gave Szymon Syrkus, after he came from Auschwitz, many health and possible mental problems as described in his medical documentation.

Their Jewish roots that many times blocked the chance for them to secure a workplace also played an immense role. Szymon Syrkus himself said that architecture, was the very thing that kept him alive in Auschwitz. With regard to their situation and their passion for freedom of architectural creation, it is very hard to judge their morality without understanding the complexity of their situation.

In 1950, out of passion for spreading knowledge, Helena Syrkus began to teach at the WAPW as an assistant professor and devoted herself to educational work. She also became the chief designer of the Central Union of Residential Design Studios and Central office of Architectural and Construction Designs as well as a member of the Society of Polish Town Planners.

She continued her educational work, and was promoted to a deputy professor at WAPW in 1952, associate professor in 1954, and a full professor in 1966. In the 1970's she continued designing schools and housing estates in Poland.

At the end of her career she published her book "Towards the Concept of the Social Housing, 1925-1975"⁶¹ where she documented the achievements and ideas of CIAM and reflected on the many years of working in the organization. Helena Syrkus died in 1982 in Warsaw. After her death her second book "The Social Objectives of Urbanization. Man, and the Environment"⁶² was published.

VI. Helena and Szymon Syrkus' Jewish roots

The shifting political scene in Poland during the inter-war period and the Syrkus's Jewish origin and strong leftist views caused many professional and personal difficulties for the couple. The modernist movement has been presented by the arising nationalist and right-wing parties as a part of the communist leftist ideology. This situation caused personal consequences for opposing people costing many their work position.

With that in mind, Helena Syrkus has been hiding her real surname and origin of her parents since becoming a student at the university. She signed all documents as Helena Niemirowska - instead of Eliasberg - and changed her parents' names accordingly - from Izaak Eliasberg and Stella Berenstein to Ignacy Niemirowski and Elżbieta Borudzka. These radical measures that Helena Syrkus took shed light on the socio-political mood prevailing at that time.

In the late 1930's, the correspondence between the Syrkus's and foreign CIAM members served as good illustration of the changing situation in the country and pointed out the influence that it had on their career and life. In the letter to Sigfried Giedion from 1937, Szymon Syrkus outlines the situation in Poland and the position of CIAM in the Eastern Europe. He informs Giedion about the loss of the position as the vice-president of The Association of Polish Architects (SARP) due to his Jewish roots.⁶³ He explains that the recent elections in 1937 turned the political scene around resulting in the triumph of the right-wing party. The National Radical Camp (ONR)-movements have overthrown the democratic SARP authorities spreading the nationalist views

⁶⁰ Aleksandra Kędziorek and Katarzyna Uchowicz, "Sieciotwórcza Rola Maszyny Do Pisania," *Autoportret, Narracje Architektury Dwudziestolecia* 62, no. 3 (2018): pp. 102-109.

⁶¹ Helena Syrkus, *Ku Idei Osiedla Społecznego 1925-1975* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1976).

⁶² Helena Syrkus, *Społeczne Cele Urbanizacji Człowiek i Środowisko* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984).

⁶³ Syrkus, Szymon. Letter to Sigfried Giedion. Zurich: gta Archiv / ETH Zurich, CIAM, 42-K-1937, June 22, 1937.

within to the architectural society.⁶⁴ Since then, the political left has been presented by the SARP as “alien Jewish Communism”.⁶⁵

By 1938, circa 60 architects were forced to leave SARP and by 1939, all Jewish members of SARP were crossed out from the list of members.⁶⁶ Thanks to the collaboration with the government the rightist architects could gain more influence and oust the leftist architects.

With the new challenges, Helena and Szymon Syrkus focused even more on the international architecture circle of CIAM, but very quickly it became apparent that no project supporting the CIAM values could be realized in Poland.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the couple could only count on private investors since public funds were no longer obtainable for them.⁶⁸

In 1938, Helena Syrkus emphasized the difficulties that they were facing and said in the letter to Hans Schmidt that **“we are going through a difficult period and we seriously have to consider our future”**.⁶⁹ Their concerns came true in 1939, when the couple decided that they must leave Poland. Since then, the correspondence with the CIAM members turned into a search for an escape-way. Unfortunately, despite the engagement of numerous foreign friends in finding a way out for the couple, the Syrkus's did not manage to flee the country before the beginning of the war in September 1939.

At the beginning of the 2nd World War, Helena and Szymon Syrkus collaborated in the “underground” and worked together in a secret Architectural and Town Planning Studio (PAU). Unfortunately, Szymon Syrkus was arrested in 1942 and sentenced to work in the concentration camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

During that time, Helena fully mobilized her network of contacts and tried to get her husband out of the camp at all costs. She contacted, among others, Walter Gropius whom she asked for help in finding the missing Szymon Syrkus. Walter Gropius contacted, among others, James F. Byrnes from the State Department, Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society and even the Pope.

Szymon Syrkus survived the war and was freed after 33 months in various German concentration camps (including Auschwitz) in 1945. In his letter to Sigfried Giedion, Werner Max Moser, Alfred Roth, Rudolf Steiger and Hans Schmidt he explained how his profession saved his life: **“It was my job as an architect that saved my life. I saved my health but I am completely exhausted”**.⁷⁰

Germans at the time had a shortage of architects⁷¹ and therefore Szymon Syrkus architectural experience granted him a lifesaving opportunity to work as draftsman in the central building division of the Waffen-SS at Auschwitz.⁷²

After the war, Helena and Szymon Syrkus threw themselves into work and devoted all their time to plan the reconstruction of Warsaw.

Despite the tragedy of war, anti-Semitic events did not end in Poland. In 1967, the Polish communistic government of Władysław Gomułka began an anti-Jewish hate campaign connected

⁶⁴ Helena Syrkus, *Ku Idei Osiedla Społecznego 1925-1975* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1976), p. 201.

⁶⁵ Tadeusz Borudzki and Władysław Czerny, “Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich,” in *Fragmety Stuletniej Historii. 1899-1999* (Warszawa: Oddz. Warszawski SARP, 2000), pp. 35-36.

⁶⁶ Tadeusz Barucki and Roman Piotrowski, “Lata Trzydzieste w Stowarzyszeniu Architektów Polskich,” in *Fragmety Stuletniej Historii. 1899-1999* (Warszawa: Oddz. Warszawski SARP, 2000), p. 70.

⁶⁷ Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity: East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910-1950* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), p. 242.

⁶⁸ Syrkus, Helena. Letter to Hans Schmidt. MA SP, September 9, 1938.

⁶⁹ Syrkus, Helena. Letter to Hans Schmidt. MA SP, October 19, 1938.

⁷⁰ Syrkus, Szymon. Letter to to Sigfried Giedion, Werner Max Moser, Alfred Roth, Rudolf Steiger and Hans Schmidt. Wrocław: Helena and Szymon Syrkus Archive, Museum of Architecture in Wrocław, MAT IIIB 578/27, June 12, 1945.

⁷¹ Werner Durth, *Deutsche Architekten: Biografische Verflechtungen 1900-1970* (Stuttgart: Kraemer, 2001), p. 158

⁷² Niels Gutschow and Barbara Klain, *Vernichtung Und Utopie: Stadtplanung Warschau, 1939-1945* (Hamburg: Junius, 1994), p. 173

to the victory of Jews in Israel in the six-days war against the Arabic states backed by the Soviet bloc. This campaign was followed by mass purges in the state and party department as well as the army.

In 1968, many students protested against censorship and the ban of freedom of speech under the slogan: **"independence without censorship"**. Consequently, two students leading this protest were expelled from the WUT. In response to the unjustified expulsion, a protest at the courtyard of the WUT was organized.

It was a spark that ignited student protests all over Poland and resulted in massive repressions: **"2700 people were detained, 700 punished by the colleges for petty offenses, 60 brought to trial, thousands of students expelled from universities and dozens of dismissed academic staff"**⁷³

The government continued its anti-Semitic campaign calling the protestors "Zionists", politically "bankrupt" Jewish communists, and former Stalinists.⁷⁴ The final result of the campaign was a mass emigration of approximately 13,000 Jews in 1968.⁷⁵ The emigrating Jews were deprived of the Polish citizenship.⁷⁶

VII. Conclusion

When looking back on the life of Helena Syrkus, one can have the impression that she knew what she was aiming at when she walked to the office of Szymon Syrkus. By then, she had already mastered the later announced three CIAM languages, French, English, and German. To add to that, she was not only comprehensively educated in architecture, drawing, and philosophy but also had become a skillful typist. She had been working as a translator and managed to establish herself in the avant-garde social circle in Warsaw.

Aware of the arising anti-Semitic movements, Helena Syrkus (born Eliasberg) concealed her Jewish origins and signed documents as Niemirowska.

At the time, the encouraging socio-political situation in Poland has opened the doors of universities and work places for women. With her qualifications, it was a logical step for her to pursue a career in architecture which led her to the office of the young prospering architect Szymon Syrkus, who later became her husband. It was then, that her journey with modernism had really begun.

The Praesens group was formed and manifested itself in their periodical, a common medium for modernists, where Helena Syrkus has for the first time published bold reviews and examples of Polish and international modern architecture. Through its periodical, the Praesens group gained international recognition. Its members were offered to join the newly formed CIAM, where Helena Syrkus began building her international network which shaped her future as an architect substantially.

⁷³ "Marzec '68. Informacje Historyczne," Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN w Warszawie [POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw], accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.polin.pl/pl/marzec-68-informacje-historyczne#:~:text=Zmasowana%20kampania%20antysemicka%20uderzy%C5%82a%20w,zorganizowanego%20%C5%BCycia%20%C5%BCydowskiego%20w%20Polsce..>

⁷⁴ "Marzec '68. Informacje Historyczne," Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN w Warszawie [POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw], accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.polin.pl/pl/marzec-68-informacje-historyczne#:~:text=Zmasowana%20kampania%20antysemicka%20uderzy%C5%82a%20w,zorganizowanego%20%C5%BCycia%20%C5%BCydowskiego%20w%20Polsce..>

⁷⁵ Dariusz Stoła, *Kampania Antyżydowska w Polsce 1967 - 1968 [The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland 1967-1968]* (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000).

⁷⁶ "Marzec '68. Informacje Historyczne," Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN w Warszawie [POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw], accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.polin.pl/pl/marzec-68-informacje-historyczne#:~:text=Zmasowana%20kampania%20antysemicka%20uderzy%C5%82a%20w,zorganizowanego%20%C5%BCycia%20%C5%BCydowskiego%20w%20Polsce..>

She skillfully used the congresses and CIRPAC meetings to engage in the international architectural scene. Together with her husband, she familiarized the Polish architectural scene with ideas of CIAM and realized, among others, social housing and urban planning projects in accordance with its principles.

Unfortunately, their Jewish origin and the arising nationalist movements in Poland after the elections in 1937 precluded them from pursuing their professional careers. The resulting purges at SARP led to Szymon Syrkus having to leave the organization. The situation left the couple with no possibilities to continue designing in the public sector which was the only way to push forward large projects. They had only few possibilities left of earning a living which made it impossible to continue spreading the ideas of CIAM.

When the 2nd World War started, they did not stray from working in the underground on plans of rebuilding of the capital, despite the possible lethal consequences. It was her and her husband's profession that has kept them both alive and hopeful throughout the war.

After the malady of the war, Helena Syrkus and her husband, who had just returned from Auschwitz, buried the distressing war experiences below a pile of projects. They got straight to work on rebuilding Warsaw and immediately renewed their contact with the international modernist circle.

When the new socio-political situation emerged, Helena Syrkus denounced her previous advocacy for modernism and spoke in favor of social realism. This rapid shift in beliefs was surprising for Helena Syrkus who was a passionate supporter of CIAM and all that it stood for. Considering the burden of the war and the uncertainties about continuing her professional practice caused by her Jewish origin and the rapid shifts in the political sphere, she might have had no choice but to support the new ideology in order to be able to realize herself professionally in her country.

At the end of her life, Helena Syrkus returned back to modernism and proudly summarized the achievements of herself, her husband, and the CIAM, which she manifested in two books.

Even though Helena did not declare herself as a feminist, she managed to play a leading role on the international and Polish modernist stage and turned into a role model. Against the odds of gender inequalities and with a Jewish background, she established herself as a member of the leading avant-garde group in Poland and spread the ideas of modernism through her design projects and involvement in the public scene in Poland as well as articles in the Praesens periodical and theoretical works.

Through her hard work, she became one of the most influential architects of modernism in her country. Even internationally, she managed to build a reputation and created a network with the leading architects of modernism.

Thanks to her advocacy, key issues for Poland, such as the reconstruction of Warsaw, urban planning, and social housing, became the main topics of multiple CIAM congresses. She was often referred to as the loudest speaker in the room and managed to climb the ladder to become the vice-president of CIAM. She took place at the stage next to the most influential architects of modernity.

Because of her engagement both internationally and in Poland, there is no doubt that Helena Syrkus has indeed brought modernism to Poland with the use of her typewriter. Despite her troublesome Jewish origin and coping with the realities and difficulties of life as a woman in the 20th century, she became a leading avant-garde persona.

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Figures:

Unknown photographer. *Helena Syrkus in the 1940's*. Photograph. Warszawa, n.d. Biblioteka Narodowa [National Library], public domain.

Helena Syrkus on the Stage at the CIAM VII Congress in Bergamo. Photograph. Bergamo, 1949. Archivio Nino Zucchelli. Dono Lina Zucchelli Valsecchi, GAMeC, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo.

Helena Syrkus, Le Corbusier (Left), J. L. Sert and S. Giedion (Right) on the Stage at the CIAM VII Congress in Bergamo. Photograph. Zürich, 1949. Institut für- Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur (gta) Archiv/ ETH Zürich / CIAM Archiv.

Helena Syrkus and Szymon Syrkus in their apartment and office at Senatorska street in Warsaw. Photograph. Warsaw, 1927. Archiwum Instytutu Sztuki PAN

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