

Dávid Bíró:

Ilka Gedő–The Painter and Her Work
(A Background Report)

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About the author:

Dávid Bíró is the younger son of the artist. Born and raised in Budapest, he is now a translator and a secondary-school language teacher of English. He received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in English and German from ELTE University of Budapest in 1976. He also has an M.A. degree in sociology. He has several widely recognised publications on the sociology of the family and youth. Later on his interests turned to the sociological issues of environmental protection. His articles (many of them very well-received) as well as book reviews have appeared in several Hungarian journals and weeklies. His books include *Ellenkultúra Amerikában (Tények–szociológiai értékelések)* [Counter Culture in America / Facts and Sociological Interpretations/] (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1985) and *A globális felmelegedés politikatörténete*, [The Political History of Global Warming] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2003). In the period from 2009 to 2014 he has translated five books written by Lester R. Brown, and these books are available for download on the website of the Earth Policy Institute in Hungarian.

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1. *The Family*

The name of Ilka Gedő's mother was Erzsébet Weizskopf. (In the earliest documents the family name was still written as Weisskopf.) Elza (1890-1954) had two sisters: Aranka (1888-1921) and Lenke (1892-1984). The maiden name of the mother of these three girls was Ilka Friedman, and the father's name was Jakab Weizskopf. In the box of family photographs a very old one can be found made back in 1898 that shows the grandmother of Ilka Gedő with her three daughters. In the middle a charmingly beautiful lady is standing: she is Mrs. Jakab Weizskopf, née Ilka Friedman, who looks lovingly at her three daughters. Aranka, the eldest of the three sisters cares for her two younger sisters, while the youngest girl leans on the table, and her arm rests on a book. These three sisters dreamt of acquiring a refined education. Their parents had the means to give their children an excellent education. These children did not know what history held in store for them: „The hand of fate shall also seize Hungarian Jewry. And the later it occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and harder shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape”¹

The first daughter of the Weizkopfs, Aranka was born on 10 May 1888, became an Art Nouveau graphic artist and studied art in Budapest. Some of her Art Nouveau works have been preserved in the estate of Ilka Gedő. She died of cancer very young, in the early 1920's. According to family legend, she died on the very same day as Ilka Gedő, my mother was born, which is not true since postcards designed by her have been preserved on which greetings addressed to the newly born Ilka Gedő can be read. The date on these cards is 6 September 1921, and Ilka Gedő was born on 26 May 1921. On one of these cards, showing a bearded Jewish man, the following lines in Aranka's handwriting can be read: "This card was printed prior to the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914." The other depicts a very corpulent, moustached and tall police officer wearing an overcoat and having a long sword dangling from his side. Aranka adopted the Hungarian family name Győri, meaning coming from the city of Győr, thus referring to her mother's place of birth.

¹ Theodor Herzl in a letter dated 10 March 1903. Quoted by: Randolph Braham (ed.), *The Holocaust in Hungary (Forty Years After)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 186.

From her school certificate originating from 1903-1904 we know her exact birth date: 10 May 1888. In one of the literature notebooks preserved from 1903 she wrote on 10 May: “Autumn in the capital. / It is autumn now and nature is silent and you cannot hear the singing of birds. The trees shed their magnificent green robes, and the yellow and reddish brown leaves are falling slowly to the ground. In vain is the sun shining from the clear sky; it is no longer capable of giving us warmth that sustains life. And as it sets behind the hills as a huge fire ball, a delicate fog comes down over the scenery, and a chilly evening, the surest sign of autumn, descends. (...) Autumn is interesting in the capital. We meet people everywhere rushing after their business. But there are many poor people in the capital who are scared of winter, who have nothing to heat with and no money to support their family shivering with cold and going hungry all the time. I wish there were a lot of noble-hearted people who when thinking of their own welfare do not forget those inhabitants of the capital who live in dire poverty.”

Notes from another notebook. 1 March 1904: „The embankment of the Danube / Last spring I had the opportunity to show the beautiful capital of my fatherland to a foreign girlfriend. When taking a longer walk, we got to the Danube Promenade extending from Erzsébet Bridge to the Chain Bridge. My guest was so much fascinated by the view that opened up in front of her that I myself recognised the beauty of this scenery only then. An entry from 16 March 1904: “The yard of our school. / A gentle spring breeze rustles the trees; buds are opening and the trees are starting to green. / The yard is beautiful: it is a worthy extension of the huge school building. It is big and of rectangular shape lined on three sides by nicely pruned bushes and rose buds while the fourth side is occupied by a spacious gymnasium.”

(Notes from Aranka Győri’s 1913 calendar diary: “21 March 1913, Friday: movie in Gyöngyös (Jakab Weizskopf was born in Gyöngyös); 30 April 1913, Sunday: the Zoo; 10 May 1913, Saturday: Aranka 25th birthday; 1-2 June 1913 Sunday and Monday; summer is fantastic but I am... 26 August Tuesday: I have a day off, I roam the city; 26 September, Friday: the school buys a drawing; 26 October Sunday: excursion to Dobogókő; 11 November 1913, Tuesday: a letter from London; 20 December, Saturday: in the afternoon Margit Kaffka, Béla Balázs; 21-24 December 1913 Sunday till Wednesday: a lot of suffering and dejection.”)

The attendance register certificate of Aranka Győri, showing that on 14 February 1913, the young artist “gained admission as a guest student to the full-time faculty of the National

Hungarian Royal College of Industrial Art” and pursued her studies up until the end of the second term and studied graphic art, has been preserved in the estate of Ilka Gedő. A few cards in German sent to Aranka by Robert Alexander (corporal), a cousin of the Weisskopf girls: "Vukovar. May 6, 1916/ Dear Aranka, Hopefully, you will get this card before May 10 which is your birthday. I wish you happiness and health, which is the most precious asset in these times. I also wish that you should always be as happy and beautiful as you are now. You should always find satisfaction in your art. On your birthday please think of the soldier in Vukovar who, on that day, would rather be with you."

The father of the Weisskopf girls was Jakab Weisskopf who was a broker at the Budapest commodity exchange. As shown by various greeting cards, he was born on 16 May 1855. Elza and Lenke write on 16 May 1901: "Dear Father! / On the occasion of your birthday that you celebrate today we send you our greetings inspired by our heart. What should we wish? Nothing else that you, together with Mom and our sister, have many happy returns of this day in good health. Your loving daughters, Elsa and Lenke/ Budapest. 16 June 1901." On 5 July the three sisters, Aranka, Elza and Lenke write: "Dear Parents! This great day fills our heart with the happy thought of being able, once again, to wish you, our dear Parents something that may once again express our gratitude."

On 16 May 1905, Aranka greets her father on the occasion of his 50th birthday with a letter: "Let us be grateful to God who allowed you to reach the age of fifty. My heart is overflowing with unutterable happiness because I can write this letter to you. It is the most affectionate desire of my heart to see you reach the highest age along with all those who love you in happiness, affluence and good health so that I can return to you all the affectionate love and tenderness with which you lead me on the road of life."

I have several greetings written by the Weisskopf girls (Aranka, Elsa and Lenke) to their parents. This is the greeting they wrote at the end of 1897: "Dear Good Parents! Please accept our warmest thanks for all the things that we received from you during the year. We promise to be diligent next year, so that your heart may rejoice. Wishing you a happy New Year, your grateful little girls, Aranka, Elsa and Lenke." And this is the greeting Elsa wrote on New Year's Day 1899: "Dear Parents!/ Today, on New Year's day, I reveal to you the emotions of my heart."

I am so grateful to you for your benevolence and love that words cannot express this. Therefore, may the Lord give you a long life./Your loving daughter: Elsa."

Mrs. Weisskopf, née Ilka Friedmann was born and raised in Győr (the German name is Raab), in a town that is situated in the Western part of Hungary close to the Austrian border. Her father, Bernát Friedmann was a jeweller. ("*Bernát Friedmann, Silber- und Goldbearbeiter*" is listed among the registered companies of Raab in the company register *Lexicon sämtlicher gerichtlich protocollierten Firmen der h. Stephankrone gehörenden Länder*). Ilka Friedmann had an elder sister named Cäcilie who, according to a wedding card, married Leopold Alexander on 14 August 1870.² The card is signed by "B. Friedmann and wife." Ilka Friedmann was a charming and beautiful woman whose mother tongue was German. Her beautiful love letters addressed to Jakab Weisskopf in German have been preserved. The German handwriting is monumental, and the external look of these letters is beautiful. Jakab (referred to in the German letters as Jacques) married Ilka Friedmann on 5 July 1887. Jakab Weisskopf's parents lived in Gyöngyös.

Jakab Weisskopf's parents lived in Gyöngyös. Erik Steiner, Ilka Gedő's cousin, writes as follows to the husband of the artist, Endre Bíró: "Jakab Weisskopf had many brothers and sisters. Juli and I visited Gyöngyös, our grandfather's native town as children. Then, one of grandfather's sisters, Aunt Borcsa was still living. Her wicked remarks and impatience were proverbial in the family. (...) We did not know Jakab Weisskopf, but we heard a lot about him from our mother, Lenke."

The cousins of the Weisskopf girls married very famous and rich men. The husband of Mrs. Vilmos Detre was one of the founders of the Weisz Manfréd works. Another cousin was Mrs Aladár Kaszab. The Kaszabs were a very rich family. Erik Steiner remembers: „The Kaszab family were rather wealthy people, and Aladár Kaszab, once also the president of the Budapest Neologe Jewish Community, as he was childless throughout his life, bequeathed his fortune, in a very admirable way, to the Hungarian National Academy. The Kaszabs had a fabulous

2 "Raab, im August 1870 (Zu der am 14 d. M. Nachmittags um 4 Uhr im Cultus-Tempel stattfindenden TRAUNG unserer Tochter Cäcilie mit Herrn Leopold Alexander beehren wir uns hiermit Sie freundlichst einzuladen. (B. Friedmann u. Frau)" (August 1870, Győr. The wedding of our daughter Cäcilie with Leopold Alexander will take place on the 14th of the month at 4 p.m. in the Cultus Temple and we are honoured to invite you.)

mansion on the slopes of *Sváb hegy* on *Óra út*, with a vast jungle like garden with fruit trees; and I still remember that, in the 1930's, Ilka and also we were invited there several times on Sundays.”

The Weisskopf family rented postal rights in *Gyöngyös*, a town in the Northern region of Hungary. Jakab and his brothers were rumoured to have had an inclination to kick packages with the inscription "Attention fragile!" into to the transport cart. Jakab Weisskopf had a sister named Margit who married Marcell Grósz.

The Weisskopf girls wrote wish-you-well cards to their parents, and many of these cards are in French. The Weisskopf family probably had a French governess. In a letter dated 23 April 1895, Aranka writes as follows: "In spite of the very changeable weather, the three of us, accompanied by the mademoiselle, who is untiring also in this respect, go for a stroll almost every day. She takes along also her pupils, and we walk down along *Stefánia út* as a flock. During these walks we cause some astonishment through our conduct, since we are in a good mood and do not mind very much whether it is good manners to do something or not. But why did I say we? I walk by the side of the mademoiselle and I am the embodiment of good manners. Only seldom do I shout, but that is not a problem. I do not give a damn if people think I am a mad French woman, but they should not think I am a Hungarian woman with bad manners! (...)Today I went to an exhibition with Ili. There are lots of beautiful pictures, but there are just as many bad ones. (...) Best wishes from Aranka who will be seventeen years old within two weeks and three days."

There are lots of clues indicating that the marriage of Ilka Friedmann and Jakab Weisskopf was a happy one. In a letter dated 10 March 1965, Lenke, the youngest of the Weisskopf girls remembers: "During the years the marriage anniversary of our parents was always celebrated by the family. Aranka made the arrangements for these events with lots of flowers. The three of us sang a song and mother and her three girls always started to cry for happiness, saying how wonderful life was. But this should come as no surprise, since then life really was happy."

The Weisskopf family might have been a family in which the role distribution of the spouses was similar to what was recommended in a family book in 1911. This is how the woman's roles are described there: "A woman does her job in the best way when she can subordinate her will

to her husband's proper will. She should understand that she has to subdue herself to the man who is her husband even though all the other men in the world pay homage to her. Without getting to know her husband's nature and without adapting to it, there is no happiness, no peace in this world... Proper child-rearing, keeping the house tidy and clean and creating a comfortable home for the husband are to be regarded as work if all this is done conscientiously. This is a woman's vocation and duty. This is no small task even if one gets help for performing it." According to the book, "a man should be brave and undaunted, aware of his rights and duties. He should possess an iron will, and should not be diverted from the most appropriate road. However, he should listen to the advice motivated by the love of his wife, and he should not retreat into the castle of his worries and concerns."³

This is what the Weisskopf girls wrote to their parents on one of their wedding anniversaries (5 July 1902): "My dear parents!/ This great day inspires my heart with happiness because I can wish you something which may express my gratitude. (...) I wish you, therefore, and the same wish comes from my younger sisters, that the mighty Lord may give you all his blessings and give you strength and health, so that you may stand in front of us as paragons to be followed. And we will do our utmost to make you happy. Your loving daughters: Aranka, Elsa and Lenke."

Then Weisskopf family's places of residence indicate the family's rising social status and beyond the zenith also a decline. Erik Steiner, a cousin of Ilka Gedő remembers: "I remember three or four places of residence in various phases of their lives: they lived in the *Nagy János utca*, a street later called *Benczúr utca* that connected *Felső Erdősor* with the City Park. If I remember correctly, they lived later at *Liszt Ferenc tér...* and, later on, they moved out of town to *Farkasrét*. This was a house with a garden in the vicinity of the Jewish cemetery where our Weisskopf grandparents and also their daughter Aranka are buried. Still later they lived at *Soroksári út*, and this is where Jakab Weisskopf, who had become a widower two years before, died. This is what I know about the circumstances of his death. He had already had a history of heart disease. A water main or a main gas-pipe had to be shut off, and he went to the ground floor and tried to lift a heavy-cast iron lid on the pavement and he overstretched himself so

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Ármin Bexheft, *A magyar család aranykönyve* [The Golden Book of the Hungarian Family] (Budapest: 1911), p. 4.

much that he suffered a heart attack that led to his sudden death. Mother Lenke swore that it happened this way: the minute he died, his gold watch stopped. This is the watch that Erwin Steiner «handed over» with tears in his eyes in 1944.”⁴

Elsa Weisskopf married my grandfather, Simon Gedő in 1919. Her sister Lenke Weisskopf married Erwin Steiner who was a trader and had a small margarine factory in Budapest. Erwin died on Christmas eve in 1944. He had permission to leave the ghetto to go to his small factory. On Christmas Eve everybody asked him not to leave the ghetto. He went nevertheless, and was never seen again. The slaughter of Jews had already been going on for days then, and on Christmas day the killing became very intensive. It is almost certain that Erwin became the victim of one of these slaughters.

Erwin had two children: Erik and Júlia. Julia was sentenced to a prison term on the basis of faked charges, and she spent three years in prison. In the years after the Communists take-over in 1949, she worked for the Israeli embassy as a switch-board operator.⁵ She was arrested on 30 January 1953 by the secret police and this is how she remembers: “As regards me, I spent 32 months in prison including an 11-month-period during which I was barred from all contacts with the outside world. When I was transferred from the secret police to the Markó prison, I got someone else’s correspondence rights, and making use of them I wrote to my mother under a false name but in my own handwriting, but this was nine and a half months after my arrest in October. I was arrested on 30 January and I was in prison until 30 September 1955. (I was born in 1930.) It was due to this secret letter, that Mother and Ilka came to the court on 12 December 1953, the very same day that court proceedings took place. I was able to see them from the distance as people standing there accidentally in front of another court room.”

Lenke Steiner and her younger child Júlia Steiner immigrated to Israel in 1957 with an immigration passport. Incidentally, Júlia was arrested with a method that was totally in vogue at the time. This was a period when the Soviet Union had already branded Yugoslavia an arch

4 The letter is preserved in the artist’s estate.

5 Historical Archives of the State Security Services: K-703/T According to the file on Júlia Steiner, „The named person came to be employed by the Israeli Embassy with the help of Mr. Benczur, where she worked for 800 Ft month as of 1 September 1950 as a switchboard operator.” Júlia Steiner’s letter is preserved in the manuscript estate of Gedő.

enemy, and Hungary's communist party chief, Mátyás Rákosi immediately followed the Soviet line, and Hungarian press was replete with attacks against and rumours about the Yugoslav imperialists carrying out broad daylight kidnaps on the streets of Budapest. As she was walking home from work, a huge black and curtained car of the secret police suddenly stopped by her and the elegantly dressed driver accosted her, "Miss would you mind getting into our car?" Miss started to scream, "Help! Help! Yugoslav kidnappers want to kidnap me! Help!" However much she resisted, the men from the secret police hustled her into the car, and took her to the nearest police station where she got an "extra portion" of beating for her misdemeanour and impudence. Júlia's brother, Erik left Hungary in 1949.

The father of Ilka Gedő, Simon Gedő was born on 3 September 1880 and died on 11 September 1956. My grandfather's father was Alexander Goldenberg, a very famous cantor. But he allegedly drank too much alcohol, and one could hear this from his voice. The cantor got assignments in smaller and smaller communities and the family gradually sank into poverty. Sometimes family suppers consisted only of a handful of walnuts and a slice of bread. Leaving several brothers and sisters and her mother behind, Alexander migrated from a town named Tukum located some thirty kilometres from Riga in Latvia (then a part of the Russian Empire) to Brassó. He married Katalin Künnelheim and had nine children. The oldest of them was Simon Gedő, my grandfather. I still have the copy of a letter written in flawless German dated April 14, 1914 addressed by my grandfather to his uncle informing this uncle, probably living somewhere in Russia, of his brother's death. The letter is written on the stationary of Manó Gedő who was a photographer having his shop under *Ráday utca 54* in Budapest. (The text of the printed letter head: Manó Gedő's Photographic Studio/ We prepare: architectural photos and interior design photos. Specialist in making machine and machinery photos. Technical drawing and duplicates. Budapest, IX., *Ráday utca 54*.) "Dear Uncle! On behalf of my mother and my sisters and brothers I inform you that your brother Alexander died on April 9. It has been more than forty years, since our father, his parents, and his brothers and sisters left Tuckum and migrated to Hungary. As you know, our father helped his mother for many years and finally he had his mother come to Hungary, where she died shortly after her arrival. More than ten years ago we received your photograph showing you with your son. However, we have not heard anything from you since then./Our father had been strong and healthy until most recently. He was suffering from disease only in the past few months. He was doing his job even on the last day of his life. He did not suffer a lot; he died after brief agony. His whole

life was a tough struggle for the daily bread, and he devoted all his energies to raising his children. You know he was a good son of his mother, he was a good brother and he was a good father to his children. All his friends loved and appreciated him as a pious, honest and good man. He was loved in all the communities where he worked as a cantor. / For many-many years we have not heard anything from the relatives of our deceased father. Now that we mourn for our father we could get solace from hearing from you. For this reason, you are asked to confirm the receipt of this letter. / As regards our family, I inform you that from the nine children of our departed father three sons and one daughter are married. With the exception of the married daughter, living in the province and married to a watchmaker and having three children, all the other sisters and brothers live here in Budapest. The married sons are tradesmen. One of the sons is a photographer. Two sons are lawyer candidates and one son is secondary-school teacher. The youngest daughter, aged 22, is a clerk. / Hoping that I will get a reply to this letter, I greet you on behalf of my mother and my sisters and brothers and sign as Dr. Simon Gedő. Professor, Hungary. Budapest, VIth district, *Nagymező utca* 35. III. 19.)”⁶

6 „Lieber Herr Onkel! / Im Namen meiner Mutter und meiner Geschwister teile ich Ihnen mit, daß Ihr Bruder Alexander am 9. April gestorben ist. Es sind mehr als 40 Jahre her, daß unser Vater seine Eltern und Geschwistern in Tuckum verlassen hat und nach Ungarn gewandert ist. Wie Sie wissen hat unser Vater seiner Mutter viele Jahre hindurch beigestanden, und hat sie vor mehr als 20 Jahren aus Tuckum nach Ungarn kommen lassen, wo sie kurz nach ihrer Ankunft gestorben ist. Wir haben vor mehr als zehn Jahren Ihre Photographie, wo Sie mit Ihrem Sohne abgebildet sind, erhalten, jedoch in diesen Jahren kaum etwas von Ihnen gehört. / Unser Vater war bis zur letzten Zeit gesund und kräftig. Erst seit einigen Monaten war er kränklich und ist noch am letzten Tage seines Lebens seiner Arbeit nachgegangen. Er hat nicht viel gelitten und ist nach einem leichten Todeskampfe gestorben. Sein ganzes Leben was ein harter Kampf um das tägliche Brot, und er hat all seine Kräfte geopfert, um seine Kinder zu erziehen. Sie wissen, daß er seiner Mutter ein guter Sohn, seinen Brüdern ein guter Bruder und seinen Kindern ein guter Vater war. Alle seine Freunde und Bekannte haben ihn als einen frommen, ehrenvollen guten Menschen hochgeachtet. In den Gemeinden, wo er wirkte, wurde er von allen geliebt. / Wir haben seit vielen Jahren sehr wenig von den nächsten Blutsverwandten unseres verewigten Vaters gehört. Jetzt da wir unseren Vater betrauen, soll es uns ein Trost sein von seinen Brüdern und deren Familie Nachrichten zu erhalten. Darum bitte ich Sie, uns zu benachrichtigen, ob Sie diese Zeilen erhalten haben. / Was unsere Familie betrifft, teile ich Ihnen mit, daß von den lebenden 9 Kindern des Verewigten drei Söhne und eine Tochter verheiratet sind. Mit Ausnahme der verheirateten Tochter die als Gattin eines Uhrmachers auf der Provinz lebt, und drei Kinder hat, leben alle Geschwister in Budapest, der Hauptstadt Ungarns. Die drei verheirateten Söhne sind Kaufleute. Ein Sohn ist Photograph. Zwei Söhne sind Advokatskandidaten und ein Sohn ist Professor. Das jüngste Kind, eine Tochter, jetzt 21 Jahre alt, ist Beamtin. / In der Hoffnung, daß wir bald eine Antwort auf dieses Schreiben erhalten werden, begrüße ich Sie im Namen meiner Mutter, und Geschwister und zeichne als Ihr Neffe / dr. Simon Gedő, Professor, Budapest, Ungarn, VI. Nagymező utca 35. III.19.

The family name Gedő has nothing to do with Lipót Gedő, an artist who had some international reputation. Endre Bíró, the husband of the artist writes that we can be sure that there is no relationship between the two Gedő families, between Ilka Gedő and Lipót Gedő. An enumeration of a few of the names of Ilka Gedő's uncles and aunts: Adolf, Béla, Judit, Árpád and András. Simon Gedő was a secondary-school teacher of German language and Hungarian literature at the Jewish Grammar School of Budapest. He went to university around the turn of the century and one of his colleagues there was Gyula Juhász, the famous Hungarian poet with whom Simon Gedő had an expensive correspondence.⁷ In his letter of 9 April 1906 Gyula Juhász writes as follows: "Casting aside sorrow, I seek solace in your theory of tragedy." This may have been the thesis of Simon Gedő. In another letter, originating from April 1906, he writes among others: "Our friendship is too much one-sided. You keep telling me beautiful, great and insightful things in conversations that we have during our walks or at the café. I always said yes during our Platonesque dialogues, I took the (easy or difficult) role of the silent listener: my eyes glistened with understanding and stupidity. Secretly, however, I was fully aware of how much I was learning. / I remain, regrettably, what I am: Gyula Juhász. On 16 August 1906 Gyula Juhász writes to Gedő among others: "I am translating *Also sprach Zarathustra* now. I have already finished five chapters, and I have a strange but good idea. Should Ernő Zalai, Mihály Babits and I join forces in this matter? Although I am nervous and capricious, but what I have translated, has really been done well. / My friend Bauer⁸ left me here, and went on hiking tour via Debrecen to Nagyvárad. He is a wonderful man: he really believes that life is a hiking tour and a pilgrimage. He starts his travels at the spur of the moment, he wanders spontaneously, while I am pushed around by life. Right now, where I am being pushed? I don't mind being pushed unless I move forward. Forward! I need not go upwards! For that I would have to have wings. See you later, and until then I send my regards with the sadness of János Arany: Gyula Juhász."

In a letter dated 6 April 1907, Gyula Juhász writes as follows about Simon Gedő: "Simon Gedő visited me during the holidays in Debrecen. He is a sad man who laughed a lot at himself and

7 Juhász Gyula *Összes Művei, Levelezés 1900-1922* [Complete Works, Correspondence 1900-1922] (Akadémiai Kiadó: Budapest, 1981), pp. 91-94, p. 101, p. 106, pp. 124-125, pp. 139-140.

8 The person referred to is Béla Balázs.

criticized the wicked world. I showed him the library of the old college that had been visited by Széchenyi, Arany, Petőfi, Tompa Csokonai and by Franz Joseph I, and left the traces of their foot prints behind. He is an interesting chap (this sad man), that is, his soul is so healthy but his body is so sick. In vain does one look here for the wisdom of the Latin saying “mens sana in corpore sano”. I know from him that one of your poems was included in a German anthology of poetry.” In response to Gábor Oláh’s remark Gyula Juhász mentions the father of Ilka Gedő: “Simon G. is a great soul, a noble heart and a man with a sad fate.” In his youth he contracted tuberculosis and although he fully recovered from it, he suffered a trauma that he could hardly cope with, a trauma the effect of which he felt till the end of his life.

Simon Gedő earned a Ph.D. degree by writing a dissertation titled *Madách Imre mint lyrikus* (Imre Madách as a poet). In spite of his vast knowledge, he did not make a career. He became a grammar school teacher of German as a second language and Hungarian literature. Simon had a huge library much of which has been preserved by Ilka Gedő and Endre Biró. Most of the preserved books are in German including the complete works of the great classic German writers and philosophers. The library includes the first edition of Franz Kafka’s *Das Urteil, eine Geschichte* published by the Kurt Wolff Verlag in 1916 as a volume of the series *Der Jüngste Tag*. Apart from teaching, Simon Gedő studied the classics of German literature. He wrote several studies on Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Among his papers I found an essay titled *Mire tanítja Goethe az ifjúságot?* (Goethe’s Teachings for Youth) which was written for a memorial celebration of the 100th anniversary of Goethe’s death. Another of his studies, preserved in his handwriting on crumbling paper, is entitled *A bibliai őstörténet Goethe megvilágításában* (Goethe’s Interpretation of the Ancient Bible Stories). Simon Gedő’s translation of Goethe’s *Maximen und Reflexionen* was published. He also translated the Hassidic tales of Martin Buber into Hungarian. I still have a letter written by grandfather to Martin Buber inquiring about the terms and conditions under which a selection of Buber’s collection of Hassidic tales could be published.⁹

⁹ The reply, dated 2 August 1939, sent by Martin Buber to Simon Gedő: “Grundsätzlich bin ich sehr bereit, die gewünschte Autorisation zu erteilen. Ich möchte aber noch genauere Auskunft über die geplanten Bände erhalten. (...) Ferner wüßte ich gern, in welcher Auflagenhöhe und zu welchem Ladenpreis die Bücher ausgegeben werden sollen. Ich pflege es in solchen Fällen so zu halten, dass ich von den ersten 1000 Exemplaren nichts beanspruche, von weiteren 5% vom Ladenpreis der verkauften Exemplaren.”

Towards the end of his life, Simon’s friends deserted him. He was a lonely man. He did not like his colleagues at school. He thought they were haughty hypocrites. Probably he was right. My grandfather had a dignified and somewhat ceremonious manner, and he was not really good at disciplining his naughty pupils. According to father’s recollections, when he came to know the Gedő family, he had the feeling that Simon was somewhat of an outcast in the family. My grandmother, Elsa Weisskopf became alienated from her husband. Mother writes in a rather bitter tone about her parents’ marriage: *“Let us take, for example, a woman who does not become aware of her femininity. Her father is to be blamed for this, because, from early childhood on, what she hears and sees when her mother talks to her father clearly indicates that her mother does not love her father. Her father is not the respected head of the family, but a psychopathic invalid. Mother has never shown the emotions and words of a woman who is in love with her husband. Mother was living with me, instead of father. Did I play the role of a boy or that of a girl in this collusion?”*¹⁰

2. *The Childhood and Youth of Ilka Gedő and the World of the Juvenilies*

Ilka Gedő (1921-1985) was born from the marriage of Simon Gedő and Elza Weiszkop on 26 May 1921. She did not tell her sons anything about her life, and this can only be partly attributed to the circumstance that she spent the last days of the war “in a yellow-star house”, a house designated for Jews and located close to the borders of the ghetto. The other reason for keeping absolutely silent about the past might have been her intention to avoid confronting the past, and she must have thought that her children should not have anything to do with the past. Ilka Gedő did not become aware of the fact that keeping totally silent about the past, including all its aspects, generates anxiety and tension in her children.

Ilka Gedő was raised in a family, where she had every opportunity to become an educated and sensitive artist. Her father was teacher of Hungarian literature and German at a secondary grammar school, while her mother was an office clerk with unfulfilled literary ambitions. In 1933, at the age of 12, Ilka Gedő spent some weeks in Vienna at a distant relative of the family whose mother tongue was German. This is what she writes about her Vienna experiences:

10 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 250. /Recollections/)

“Vienna, 3 July 1933 / Dear Mother! / Everything is beautiful and good here, the only trouble is that Aunt Éva is too much worried about me. But this is not a problem. Last night we had an absolutely wonderful time. We were at the Vienna Opera House and saw Turandot. It was fantastic. Aunt Éva slept through the whole first act, but the only reason for this was that she had already seen this opera. We sat in the box on the second balcony. Before taking our seats I was shown around on the huge gallery and the corridors. The Vienna Opera House is larger than ours. The interior of the auditorium is also huge. From the box you could see the whole auditorium and also the orchestra. I had excellent binoculars to examine the faces with. Mária Németh sang one of the star roles absolutely beautifully. There were huge applause before and after the acts and even during them. The first act was so sinister and weird. There were executioners lit by red light while they were clinking and sharpening their swords. There was also an execution. Anyway, this is not so much important. The mandarins, wearing their long hair plaited and beautifully dressed, the emperor, the people and the princess were all excellent. A huge number of lampions could be seen. By 11 we had got home, and went to bed immediately. Yesterday morning I worked in the garden. Today together with Clara, that’s the name of Aunt Éva’s daughter, we were shelling green peas from their pod, we tidied the rooms and did the beds. I have just had a snack and now I am writing to you. I was glad to receive your letter. I have already finished the first volume of „Magyar Nábob” and I do ask you to get Szandi to send me also the second volume. I would very much like to know what is the second volume. You can also send me „Kárpáthy Zoltánt”. How is life at home? (...) /Ili.”

Already as a young girl, Ilka Gedő learnt German very well. This meant that, as she had a large vocabulary, she could read German novels and newspapers easily, and she was quite fluent in speaking the language. She went to a very expensive private school, where in addition to German and English, she also learnt French. Latin, however, was not part of the curriculum. Ilka Gedő’s mother, Elza Weiskopf may have been a lonely and romantic soul. She originated from the well-to-do middle-class, and she learnt German from her mother whose mother tongue was German. She also knew French and English very well. Her love of literature and poetry was so intense that she also tried writing. She translated two tales by E.T.A Hoffmann and Goethe into Hungarian. She wrote tales for a children’s magazine. On 10 June 1928 one of her tales titled *Óring, Különös történet egy óriásbabáról* (Óring, a strange story on a giant doll) was published in *Cimbora*. Other issues of *Cimbora* (June 10 1928, 19 and 26 May and June 9-14 1929). The famous Hungarian writer Milán Füst, a friend of the Gedő family, wrote

as follows to Ilka Gedő: „Dear Ilka, / I apologise for the delay in answering the letter. I am drifting between illness and work. / To sum up: these are the works of a charming and good soul not exempt from talent. The writings are not without any talent, but they are just what one calls amateurish. / I regret not to be able to say more. / Please write to me again. / Hugs / Milán Füst.”

Ilka Gedő went to a secondary school bearing the name *Új Iskola* (New School), founded by Emma Löllbach, and adopting the modern pedagogical methods of group work and project-based teaching. The founder of this school pointed out the importance of building up a world in the pupils’ minds in which a sense of morality prevails. She believed that the cool and detached transfer of knowledge is not enough and that tuition must also affect the deeper layers of the soul.

Ilka Gedő started drawing on her own without the help of a teacher and by the time of late adolescence she had become a graphic artist with routine and capable of expressing her talent. She had been drawing from her early childhood on recording her experiences continuously as if she were keeping a diary. Her sketchbooks have been nearly completely preserved. *“I had been continuously drawing from early childhood on up until the time of the final examinations of the secondary school. Memory flashes from the past. She is ten years old and while on holiday in Tirol she walks around alone, in a village totally unknown to her, with her sketchbook looking for motives. She is eleven years old, but she is drawing on the shore of lake Balaton with a deadly seriousness. Aged 13-14-15 she is standing there in Városmajor, with the unmitigated wrath of any angry ascetic, drawing the elderly men playing chess and the old women sitting on the benches, straining her nerves to a breaking point so that the drawings resemble the depicted reality, so that it looks the same as reality. In the hustle and bustle of Saturday markets she tries out the impossible, she tries to capture the fleeing moment, and if someone casts a glance at the drawing in the sketchbook, her face goes red with anger despite her shame and disgust of causing a stir.”*¹¹

11 Ibid.

A series of sketchbooks has been preserved that contains beautiful drawings of sceneries made in colour pencil. The composition of the drawing is striking and the drawings display a strange sense of beauty. Sketchbook No. 1 shows the scenes and sceneries of a summer vacation from 1932 in a manner as if it were a report series. Given the fact that the scenery pictures were drawn by a child aged eleven, the viewer is really surprised how mature the composition is, and how these drawings done in colour pencil already have an atmosphere of their own. One of these drawings (shows a garden with the garden gate.

Sketchbook No. 1 Image 13



On one side of the gate there is a long pole topped by a wind-cock which is in fact a soldier made of clay, dressed in red trousers and a blue shirt and holding swords in both arms. The title of the drawing can be found on the right-hand bottom corner *The soldier defends the fatherland with two swords.*

A reading of the artist's recollections already quoted above, reveals that for the child artist drawing is both the most adored activity and also an escape from reality: *"At the age of 15 I stayed in a vacation camp with the Szélpáls located on the side of the river Danube, and while the other girls were doing gymnastics and dancing, I, not being a disciple of Szélpál, was drawing the whole day in the garden or on the Danube bank, and Rabinovszky¹² suddenly started to criticize me pointing out that I am alone not for being able to draw, but I am drawing so that I can have an excuse for being alone."* This episode is confirmed by a letter that the artist wrote to her aunt from the summer camp: *"The only child I have made friends with is Márta Rabinovszky. (...) She wrote a letter to me encouraging me to participate in the joint activities. She asked me whether I was waiting to be invited. No one can understand that I can't possibly be playing, laughing and drawing at the same time. If I withdraw from my campmates, there is a reason for that: I want to draw. I think it is easy to understand this. But no one is*

12 Máriausz Rabinovszky (1895-1953) was an art historian and an art critic. His home was a meeting point for leftist intellectuals in the time between the two wars.

willing to understand this.” It is already here that the painful conflict between the artist, no matter how successful he or she is, and an every-day person (bourgeois life) starts. This is how she remembers in her recollections: *“You have been having a bad conscience since you were a child, and this is because you are an artist. This was true in as much as that I looked around in the world with a great deal of sensitivity and passion. Later on, I really recognised that other women were different from me, but I did not think they were other women or the real women, I merely believed they were less sensitive than me.”*

In 1931 she spent the summer holidays in *Zebegény* (Addenda / Image 8), in 1934 in *Római-part*, a summer resort on the outskirts of Budapest on the banks of the river Danube (Sketchbook No. 2). (References are to the website www.ilkagedo.hu)

From Addenda (No. 8)



In 1936 she went to *Visegrád*.

Sketchbook No. 3 Image 41



On 2 August she wrote the following letter to her parents: *“Dear Mom and Dad / I have arrived. I do not have anything yet to write about. The kids? We have Mária, three American kids, Jinny and Alice and Hanna who is the least friendly. There are two grown-up children, Ilonka and another child whose name I have forgotten. (...) The ship journey was excellent and enjoyable, the sun was shining in the deep blue sky. I was drawing and I was alive. Anyuli, write me a long letter, please. Hugs Ili.”* (Visegrád 2 August 1936. And a few days later she wrote: *“Dear Mom / I hope you no longer worry about me and that you are no longer angry with me. It really goes too far that Lenkice phoned me up. I draw the scenery, and the longer I am here, the better I like it. I like Aunt Olga very much. I wrote a five-page letter to Sziszi (if I do write, why should not it be a long letter). I am good at gymnastics.”* Another letter from this vacation camp: *“Dear Mom / Yesterday we went out to the shore of the Danube, and we*

sat on top of the timber pile and watched the water. Ships were slowly passing by and it was all completely silent. Máriusz was also with us. He is always here and he cheers us up all the time and helps in everything we do. I got a letter from Sziszi. The day before yesterday we climbed the hill to watch the full moon rise over the horizon. I would not have believed how beautiful it is here at the top. The narrow path leading to the top and winding through the forest and the trees is also nice. As you walk along the path, you can see the Danube on the one side (Mádi said it looked like a mountain lake and it really is like that), while on the other side you can see the mountains as if they had been strewn upon each other and behind one of the mountains you can see the moon rise amongst millions of stars throwing light on the Danube and the mountains. On the way back the trees looked as if snow had fallen on them. Jinny believes this is due to the white moonlight.”

At the age of 17, she travelled to a mountain village called *Bakonybél*. She spent a few weeks at the house of the elementary school teacher of the local school. On 2 July 1938 she wrote to her mother: *“My dear Mother / I am here, and thanks God I can say that we have a really wonderful and simple life here. It is a pleasure for me to watch this life, but I can also do what I want to. Yesterday afternoon was spent with packing and looking around, and, like the first afternoon, it was long. I and my very young and lovely roommates slept well at night. There is a five-year-old boy with his seven-year-old sister and an eleven-year old girl with her sister aged 8. I had breakfast very early at five thirty and then I walked into the village. The village has broad streets and clean houses and all around you can see the sloping fields at whose edge already the «jungle» starts. I could see the trees of the abbey park only behind the park fence, and the large-sized croft with huge stalls is also behind the fence. Two girl children led me to the potato field in the vicinity, where I drew a woman hoeing weeds. I came home with her; she spoke about the owls of which there are very many here. (She has lived in a manor for 18 years, and whole groups of owls are attracted by light.) I’m writing this letter in the afternoon: this is the time of rest and I’m writing, while I’m sitting on my «nice» white bed. My things are in my suitcase under the bed and there was ample room in the wardrobe for the other things. I have already been to the open-air swimming pool; and never in my life have I enjoyed water so much as today. Our host, Márk Bakonyvári is a nice young chap of marriageable age and I am afraid he seems to me half educated. But he is good-willed to people. Our house is at the very end of the village. The final part of the voyage was very beautiful. The other parts were insignificant, the only exception being the town of*

Székesfehérvár. The part around the church is quite old and you can see quite a lot of beautiful horse-drawn carriages and peasants with a swaggering walk. Aunt Vali asked me to tell her how long I would stay, because there is someone to replace me if I wanted to leave and she would have to inform her. I replied that I would definitely stay for another two weeks. To be sure, that does not necessarily mean that another four weeks could also be possible.”

She prepares a large number of drawings (Folder 40) and she writes to her parents almost on a daily basis. On 4 July 1938 she writes: *“I already know a lot more about things here than yesterday. Behind the house and beyond the bridge there are meadows and a lot of things to draw, you do not have to walk far to draw. The wheat harvest will start in two weeks. Then I will really have a lot to draw. But even until then I can find people hoeing the weeds or peasant kids. If you walk through the village at about three o’clock, it is completely deserted. At half past six, however, the hay carts are coming through the streets and perched on them you can really see very good drawing models. I have never seen a peasant in the streets during the day. Everybody is working. They say there is so much work that everyone who is not lazy can make a living. There is also some charcoal making going on and lime burning deep down in the middle of the forest. People say that at night you can see the smoke above the forest and, in the case of lime burning, the flame. I’ve only brought two aquarelle papers, you could send some of them along with the apron and the strong drawing pins that Lenke is going to send anyway. (Granulated drawing paper: 4 fillérs. It is surely available everywhere.)”*

Bakonybél, 3 July 1938: *“I am sitting here on the top of small hillock and in the vicinity of our house. Opposite me there are long strips of agricultural land (Folder 40 Images 6, 10, 75, 76 and 80; Glasgow Exhibition / Images 1-4), and the church spire, is thirty yards from me.*

From Folder 40 (Nos. 6, 10, 75-76 and 80)



From the Glasgow Exhibition (Nos. 1-4)



As I have just been told by the cowherd children coming this way that an elderly man (I've forgotten his name) is burning lime. Deep within the forest there is also a stone quarry. I will go to the village to post this card and then I will go home, where everything is fine. Last night I talked with Mr. Péczely, he is a nice and good-willed and kind man. Aunt Vali is also kind and clever. There are two other aunts. One of them is Austrian, but she has already corrected me saying that she was «reichsdeutsche». After the children had gone to bed, I was also sitting with Marianna on the terrace. She kept telling me about the place she came from (Mürzenschlag) and the forests, etc. that are there.”

Bakonybél, 7 July 1938: *“Dear Mother / I am sending you a card and a letter at the same time. It is Wednesday evening now. I have just come back from a fantastic walk in the forest, a walk that surpassed everything you can imagine in every respect. There are lots of blackberries in the forest and a strange magic feeling overcomes you if you are there. You can find such tall beech trees there that I have never seen in my life. We were at the hunting castle (an edifice made from wood inside/outside, the rooms smell of wood and in one of them there is a huge white stove) and there are two smaller castles by the side of the hunting castle. I was*

continuously telling myself Goethe's poem Rastlose Liebe and I had the feeling that „Lieber durch Leiden /Wollt ich mich schlagen / Als so vie Freuden / Des Lebens ertragen.”¹³ The word „Freude” refers here to beauty about which we have already pointed out once that it is yearning for happiness. (...) Thanks for your card. So strange that aunt Lenke has not visited us for ages. I started to read the short story by Keller. Please write to me. Hugs for everyone. Your faithful daughter.”

On 8 July 1938 she writes to her parents: *“In the jungle that is five minutes' walk from our house you can pick a lot wild strawberries. And you can also find here huge blood-red blackberries under the huge beech trees. This village, along with its in many respects «old» abbey, was built around 1792 with its water mill and its church. I have already got used to village life, to the smell of fresh hay, cows and grass and the «sad sound of cowbells», as Skylark¹⁴ writes back from the manor farm. I had finished this book the day before yesterday, because there is time also for reading, after lunch, when it is so hot and the kids take a rest. I work a lot. I talk to the village folk, the fork makers because it is on our street that forks needed for the harvest of this whole region are carved out. The days go by with incredible speed, which is quite painful but which proves beyond doubt that I don't get bored here!”*

On 9 July 1938 she sends the following report to her parents: *“In the morning I visited the fork makers once again. (...) They do the carving while sitting on a strange chair, and then the fork is assembled out of its parts. Uncle János, one of the fork makers, said that I spoke Hungarian in a strange way, with a German accent. To me the peasants' dialect is not strange, because I heard it from Annus.”*

Towards the end of the vacation, on 13 July 1938 she wrote: *“Dear Mom / Thanks for your letter and the lot of papers that you sent to me. I do not know yet whether I stay next week for the fourth week. The first three weeks went by like three days, and the fourth week won't seem more than just one hour, during which you can't really benefit more, but it nevertheless costs 32 pengős, or to be more exact just let's take half of this amount, which is the extra cost of*

13 I would rather through suffering /Fight myself /Than so many joys /Of life endure.

14 The artist refers to Dezső Kosztolányi's novel *A pacsírta* [Skylark]. This novel is now available in English (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).

staying here, and this amount would be lavishly enough to pay model fees, and I would want to have this amount. Travelling around in the region would cost a lot of money. (Anyhow, I want to see Zirc by all means!) But I have a problem: I have completely run out of the pocket money, but this is because I had my brown shoes heeled: two heels and two soles cost me 3 pengős 20. I will write to you on Wednesday and let you know whether I go home on Friday or not. But if I do come on Monday I would need, in the same manner as on the way here, the travel costs of about 6-7 pengős. It is not a good idea to ask Vali for this amount, and to go home with leaving behind a debt. This is why it would be good to get 10 pengős from you right away. (If the money is not spent, the better it is.) If you get my Wednesday message on Thursday, and if I decide to stay, Vali will get her money either on Friday or on Saturday. If I go home now, I suppose I can lengthen my summer, and I can even enjoy a part of July at home. I want to get the money immediately so that I can have time to go to Zirc. I hope I will get a reply also from aunt Máli by Wednesday. It is a pity I can't see the village fair of Zirc."

On 20 July 1938 she writes: *"The peasant swears. He looks at the field to see how much he has already harvested. To hell with everything, to hell with the pig, to hell with the blunt scythe and to hell with the late wife."*

This is how the artist remembers the end of this vacation and her return home in her recollections: *"She was 17 years old when she was alone in a Bakony mountain village on the deserted slopes, and she was drawing from morning till night, following the cutter in the summer heat step by step on the slopes, always waiting for the same particular movement. (Folder 40 Images 4, 24, 25, 30 and 36).*

From Folder 40 (Nos. 4, 24-25, 30 and 36)



She turned up unexpectedly at strange farmsteads to be received by children. Why did she not try to draw the peasant women walking with a rolling gait? Where were the Sunday couples? Why did not she have any interest in them? Fatigued, she slept like a day labourer. Weeks later she got home and she put all the drawings of the harvest on the sofa showing them to her

mother. With what a boyish gesture! The artist's mother replied: *"Promised a bag of gold to your mother/ and look where you are slumped now."*¹⁵

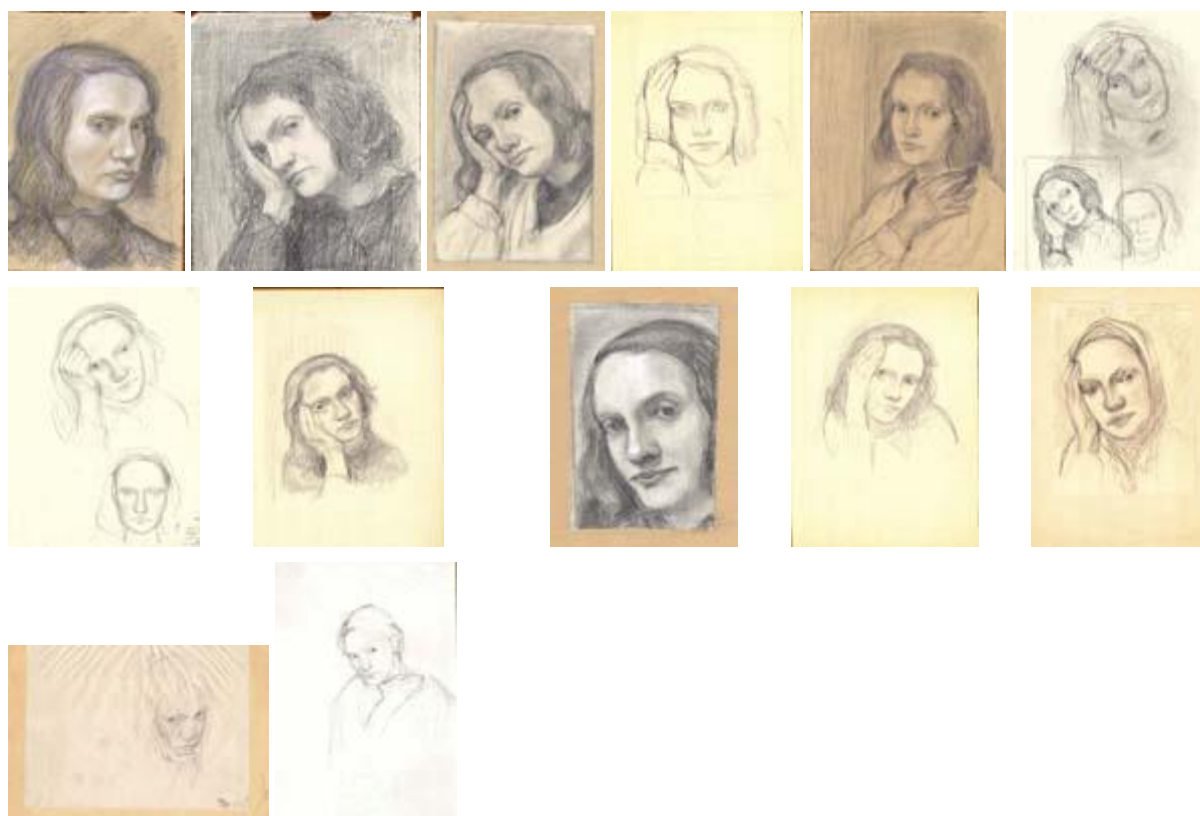
Ilka Gedő received letter from Anna Lesznai in the year of secondary-school examinations: "Dear little girl / I answer your letter with delay but there were many problems with the post and there were many obstacles to correspondence. I found great joy in your letter: you are a humane, lovely and intelligent girl, and this is one of the reasons why you can become a genuine artist. In addition to acquiring the technique of the profession, drawing and painting a lot, you should strive to develop in yourself genuine humanity, understanding, forgiveness and patient discipline, because these are the traits that may also best serve your art. /If these were normal times, I would be happy to invite you for a few weeks into my house. However, we live on occupied territory, I am unable to invite you this year, and neither would I assume the responsibility of inviting you. / Unfortunately, I only know the northern part of Hungary. I tried to think hard, but I could not remember the right family. / But during the Easter holidays I spent two days on the southern shores of Lake Balaton. This is a region of unparalleled beauty, and I lived in a fantastic peasant house. It has an incomparable beauty. / Enclosed with this letter, I am sending you the address of my acquaintance. (He lives at a small town, and is a hotel owner. He is an interesting and educated man who publishes his writings and he deals with folklore. You could learn a lot from him, as he is a great friend and advisor of the peasantry.) Maybe he can find some good accommodation for you. His hotel is not at a summer resort but in a small town. / Zala county is a fantastic mountainous area replete with the traces of an ancient civilisation. Like all the parts of Transdanubia, this region has a warm climate. You should send your drawings to him and let him know how much you can afford to spend. / I hope, God will help us, and I will be able to see you next winter. Do write to my summer address sometimes. Obviously you should be aware of the fact that letters are being censored at the border. To sum it up, you should never write about anything that is or can be regarded to be political news. / Here is my summer address: Amália Jászi or Amália Lesznai, but it is better to write Amália Jászi. There in the village I am mostly known by this latter name. / Work

15 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 250. /Recollections/)The reply is, in fact, a quote from Attila József's poem *Karóval jöttél* (You Brought a Stake). Notebook No. 250 shows that Ilka Gedő was very fond of Attila József's poems. The artist identified herself with the poet so much that phrases quoted from Attila József are not put in inverted commas in the text. The quote itself is from Attila József's poem *You brought a stake* (Attila József, *Winter Night* (Budapest: Corvina, 1997), p. 125 / The line is taken from strophe: "You brought a sharp stake, not a flower/ you argued, in this world, with the other/ promised a bag of gold to your mother/ and look where you are slumped now."

a lot and remain as smart and honest as I believe, you are now. /Hugs Anna Lesznai / Your Aunt Máli.”¹⁶

The drawings of Folder 20 were made in 1938. The first four pictures are self-portraits, while the rest of the pictures show the parents of Ilka Gedő. Folder 37 contains self-portraits originating from 1938 and 1939 (Images 1-13; 15-16; 18, 39-41 and 45-46). These drawings, while being reports of physical reality, display a nearly infinite sensitivity.

From Folder 37 (Nos. 1-13)



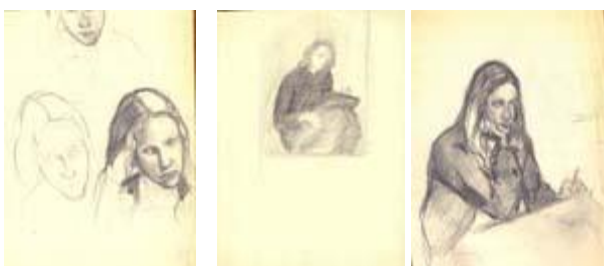
From Folder 37 (Nos. 15-16)



From Folder 37 (No. 18)



From Folder 37 (Nos. 39-41)



From Folder 37 (Nos. 45-46)



In 1939 she passed the final examinations of grammar-school, and she seriously considered starting her artistic studies in Paris. She obtains a letter of recommendation: “I hereby certify that I have been guiding Ilka Gedő in her artistic studies for two years, and I regard her an art student with promising potentials, talent and a fine taste: I think the unfolding of her excellent talent would be largely helped, if she had the opportunity to continue her studies at the Paris School of Fine Arts. / Budapest / 19 August 1939 / Gustáv Végh, painter, art teacher and the president of Hungarian Society of Book and Advertisement Artists.” But the war was coming, and the artist’s plan to study abroad was becoming less and less likely.

The artist must have asked for useful advice, because it was during this period that she received a somewhat condescending, mildly mocking and at some places even ironic letter from Róbert

Berény¹⁷ (12 June 1939): „For a talented person all teachers are good. In fact, it is more correct to say that to receive instruction from a teacher who is not excellent is a waste of time. And it also true that a talented student can learn from a talented master more easily and more quickly, and this is true even then when the master is not the best teacher. Initially, it is important to acquire a reliable and good basic knowledge and to develop taste in the good direction so that the artist identifies with important requirements. These are the right principles, but they do not help you choose the right school based on the prospectuses. And I who do not know all these schools cannot give you advice. / What speaks for Paris is the fact that since the beginning of the 18th century the best pictures have been painted there, and this town is the home of first-rate painterly taste. I think the Ecole des Beaux Arts or the École des Arts Metiers (applied arts) are conservative institutions «handing out degrees» and most probably they are excellently managed. Anyway, those who want to become painters, mostly visit the free schools. (I myself used to visit the Academy Julian for a few months, and at that time the best master, J.P. Laurens was still living. He was not a good painter, but he was an ideal teacher, who often promoted ideas that were in contrast with his own painterly work!) / As for England, all I know about this country is that the prime minister is Chamberlain, and that it is very foggy. (But maybe if everything comes off as I planned, maybe I will go there myself this autumn. Therefore, I haven't got the slightest idea as regards your questions on England. / Concerning your question on whether I would aim to acquire miscellaneous techniques, and on top of all this, to visit an illustrator training course—to these questions I would reply: an artist must be familiar with and possibly use the techniques, while the illustrator must first love the art of illustration and then he can do it well. However, this conclusion must be brought in harmony with the expectations that one has towards himself. / I am glad that you have passed the school-leaving examinations. Should you have made drawings, bring them to me because I would like to see them. I stay another two weeks in Budapest. / See you later: Berény”

As Ilka Gedő was considering the possibility of learning art in Paris, she got letters from Kovács-Olga Székely, a Hungarian painter living in Paris who, on 7 February 1939, wrote as follows: “My dear Ili / Don't be angry with me, because I answer both of your lovely letters now. I have absolutely no excuse, as I do hardly any work. Somehow my interest in anything

17 Róbert Berény (1885-1953) was a member of the "Group of Eight". His art, built on the traditions of Nagybánya, was strongly influenced by expressionism and cubism. He emigrated in 1919 but he returned to Hungary at the end of the twenties.

has waned. / I was glad about your letter, and I think what you said to Robert (Berény) is perfectly OK, because, if someone asked me what my «goal» is, I myself would immediately reply the same. Well, I have grown quite old, but I myself have not found any reason for doing something than love. And, practically I do not believe there is any other reason. This, incidentally, was always the subject of debate between me and Robert. He asked me, «Why have you painted this?» I told him the reason was that I loved it to which he replied, «Who the hell is interested in what you love?» But this is what I can learn by creating the picture. If I am capable of loving with a sufficient energy, then, maybe, the whole world will be interested if not may be no one will be interested. / The reason why I have written such a long letter is to encourage you to be what you are courageously and honestly, and to paint and to draw what you love, and then we will see whether you can really love. To be sure, as regards the work method, you have to be very careful. I am afraid I have already told you this so often that you will get bored by it. The image that you bring to canvas or paper must really be composed so that what you love and have chosen to be your subject should be as suggestive as possible, so that we, the viewers, can feel what you were moved by or what you were so much glad about. / And you only need this discipline. You should whole-heartedly follow your fantasy and you should leave out everything that disturbs or does not belong there. You should carefully choose the material and the medium through which you wish to give expression to your message. / Well, that's all. I would be willing to teach you and help you, but right now this is impossible. What you are writing about taking a job is nearly impossible, because right now France does not issue any work permits. You could only come here as a student, and I do not know whether the National Bank really issues the required licence. Anyhow, if I were you I would try to mobilise some good contacts. / You are absolutely right. Do not allow your spirits to fail you. You have no reason to be sad, especially if you can see things that you do not forget, because they have moved you or made you happy.” In the summer of 1939 (the war will start within weeks), Olga Székely not suspecting anything or disregarding the actual situation of the world writes as follows: “My dear daughter / I am not at all angry. I just inquired what you could do. You can enrol yourself in Beaux Arts for next year. There are no summer courses. The administration fee is 150 francs; and the teacher's fee is 100 francs. You have to submit your drawings based upon which you are admitted. If I go there, I myself will enquire what they really offer. (...) I invariably recommend a summer course in French, where you learn French and only then you should come to Paris.”

By age 19, Ilka Gedő who remained focused on figuration in her drawings and who was regarded a drawing child prodigy, had become an artist with a refined mastery of graphic art.

3. *The Years of the War (1939-1945)*

Finally, she does not get to Paris, and—among others due to the Jewish laws—she cannot visit the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts. Recollecting these years in 1949, she writes: *“Extremely talented, the old guys, some of them nice chaps, said. «Do not learn at the academy, they will only spoil you!» Pressured by my mother, I visited them. Sometimes I got on a tram with a drawing folder, and within 1-2 hours I came back, got off the tram at the stop walked up Garas utca, and I told mother that the person that I visited liked my drawings very much indeed. Sometimes I even showed her the particular drawings that were liked. I even visited Pál Pátzay twice. The first time I went there it was with my mother. This was when mother would have wanted to send me to England, and she was busy collecting the catalogues of various schools. This bastard Pátzay told me whichever school I went to I would be the star of that school. A few years later I visited him alone. That time he was worried about me: there is nothing more terrible than an unfinished artist. (He was right.) It was probably at this time that he tried to persuade me to go to Paris. I myself did not want to go, I was absolutely passive, I did not think much, I did not plan ahead, and I did not make a decision to become a painter, I didn’t say to myself I will show what a woman can do as a painter. I was not aware of the problem of being a woman painter, but even though I was not aware of this problem there might have been in me a sense of vocation. I should have been aware of the future, of the difficulties and of the benefits of studying in Paris, living among artists. No there was no awareness. I kept on drawing with unthinkable fervour, and I visited the Museum of Fine Arts and a number of exhibitions.”*

Ilka Gedő stays in Hungary and starts to visit the drawing school of Tibor Gallé¹⁸ (Glasgow exhibition: Images 5 and 10).

From the Glasgow Exhibition (Nos. 5, 10)

18 Nóra Aradi (ed.), *Magyar Művészet (1919-1945)*, I. kötet [Hungarian Art (1919-1945), Volume I] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985), p. 47: "Tibor Gallé ran a painting school preparing its students for the entrance examinations of the Academy of Arts. The following courses were provided: figure drawing and painting; scenery painting, painting techniques and painting materials, designing advertisements, history of art."



In her autobiographical recollections originating from 1949 she mentions that at this time her art suffered a slight setback: *“Even if we disregard falling in love, was there any connection between this school and its atmosphere and the self-sacrifice and devotion that drove me at the age of 17, during that summer spent at Bakonybél, when I was hunting for motifs from morning till night. (...) My drawings overflowed with energy and dynamism and their sheer quantity somehow prompted some people to say I should not learn at an academy. It may be safely assumed that good old Viktor Erdei¹⁹ was absolutely well intentioned when he said: « Do not go to the Academy! Do you want to learn from them? The teachers there could learn from your drawings.»”* Maybe this view was also motivated by his opinion on the members of the faculty. *I was 19 years old scribbling something at the private school of Tibor Gallé, where in winter and spring evenings Mediocrity Preparing for the Academy Entrance Examination was drawing a nude in some horrid coal in the nauseating fixture spray smell of a good-for-nothing studio in a school building located at the corner of Bulyovszky utca-Andrássy utca.”*

She started a love affair with the master and looking back from the distance of years upon the past, she recognises how absurdly she behaved: *“In the autumn that followed the school-leaving examinations of secondary school she started to go to the private school of Tibor Gallé, she fell in love with the master (who was married) 45 years old and had two children. She wrote to him a mad, exalted and lyric letter and humiliated herself in front of the master. She started to smoke, she phoned him half-fainting. She humiliated herself in front of the people and started to smoke, ran in the street, because she did not want to be late for the date. She started to lie to mom even though she slept in the same room as her mom did, and she read and even worked together with mom. After a month she decided to become her master’s lover: she was rejected, but she tried and tried over again until she got him, this citizen. All in a hurry because he was invited together with his wife. Then a love, and then a sort of repetition of the*

19 Viktor Erdei (1897 - 1945): Painter, sculptor, graphic artist. In 1924 he lived among Jewish peasants in the north-east of Hungary. In 1934 he showed his drawings depicting the life of these communities in a remarkable exposition.

first story with someone else. I told Lucy²⁰ my stories and she said I did not behave like a woman.”

A Hungarian historian of art tried to find out whether juvenilia of the students of this school have been preserved or not. “The result is very poor. As this school functioned as an institution preparing its students for the entrance examination of the Academy of Fine Arts, studies that were prepared for this purpose were generally not preserved. It was only in the estate of Ilka Gedő that we found nudes originating from the Gallé school with a date of 1939. (...) Relying on his connections, Tibor Gallé was involved in organising the escape of Jewish disciples, and the German Embassy sent him a threatening letter. Tibor Gallé was forced into hiding and went to Ráckeve and stayed on a river boat for 2-3 days. He came home on 1 May very ill, and in the meantime his wife replaced him at the school. Tibor Gallé died a few days later on 15 May 1944, and the school’s operation was terminated.”²¹

János Frank, the much-respected Hungarian art historian and art critic, in his review of a book on Ilka Gedő remembers: “In 1940 a woman painter, her name was Tott (Totó), accepted two adolescents as her disciples, Ilka Gedő and me. We went to her studio that was in *Fillér utca* not far from where Gedő lived. In addition to drawing a lot, the personality and painting of our mentor were very attractive. This suggestive and ironic young painter studied at an arts academy in the Germany of the Weimar Republic, and brought along with herself the free and unimpeded style and urban folklore of the Berlin of the late 1920’s. In contrast to my drawings, Ilka Gedő’s work reflected an overflow of talent, that additional something that cannot be described in words. Then at the age of 20, I tore up my drawings and I didn’t much regret having done so. The only thing I do regret, however, is a drawing made in red chalk depicting Ilka Gedő with her red hair that hung to her shoulder. Maybe that drawing could have been more than just a document.”²²

20 Dr. Lucy Liebermann was the wife of Pál Pátzay and a close associate of Pál Kiss Gegesi who was the founder of the European School. (Cf. István Hajdu, “Half Image, Half Veil – The Art of Ilka Gedő” In: István Hajdu–Dávid Bíró, *The Art of Ilka Gedő*. (Budapest: Gondolat, 2003), p. 18.

21 Köves Szilvia, “Gallé Tibor festőiskolája” [The Painting School of Tibor Gallé] In: Szilvia Köves (ed.), *Reform, alternatív és progresszív műhelyiskolák (1896-1944)*. [Reform, Alternative and Progressive Workshop Schools (1896-1944)] (Budapest: Magyar Iparművészeti Egyetem, 2003), p. 62.

22 János Frank mentions in an interview published in the literary weekly *Élet és Irodalom* on 1 August 1998: “I knew a woman painter, Márta Jeremiás very well from home. I learnt drawing from her in 1939-1941. She studied at an academy in the Germany of the Weimar Republic. In addition to me, she had

There is a draft letter (or maybe a letter that she did post) dated 31 May 1943 in the artist's estate. The manuscript does not reveal the addressee of the letter, and neither do we know for sure whether the letter has been actually sent or not: *“Dear Master / I was glad to receive your letter showing so much interest in me. This letter was forwarded to me directly before I was drafted into labour service, and this is the reason why my reply is delayed. In the meantime I had come through exciting events as a result of which I am going to be free for a few months. / As regards my artistic work completeness is out of the question, as problems of livelihood distract my attention from really dedicated work. I can say though that in my free time I work hard and for my own pleasure / While I am sculpting, I sometimes also paint, because one wants to find pleasure in colour, which one does want to express. / Most recently I have been making painted clay objects. / After having been drafted into the army, I gave up my studio flat, and since then I have been living at my aunt. / As regards the future, I do not have clear plans. During the summer months I certainly would like to go somewhere. My body and my mind would badly need a break now. / However, life does not allow me to have a rest, it is very likely that I will be forced to entrust to history whether my desire for calm and tranquillity is ever fulfilled. / Dear master / I was very sad to be informed that you were ill again. I am going to go to Pest in the near future and I want to go and see you. Even until then, I look forward to hearing from you.”*

A letter from the writer Milán Füst, dated 28 May 1943, indicates that the artist was considering getting married. (The cut-up fragments of what used to be five oil paintings, depicting a handsome young man, are preserved from the period preceding 1945.) It does not turn out from the letter who that young man was, but the writer's lines are clear: *“Dear Ilka / Thank you for your beautiful and clever letter. I appreciate the trust you put in me. / My reply: just think it over; you are going through something that everybody must go through who has a heart. Just one more question: do you really believe it is such a good thing to be married. / The short reply is that it is all suffering and this is what you have to get prepared for. / And this is why I oppose the idea of a woman giving birth to a child. But all women have a child, which means I am an*

only one other disciple, Ilka Gedő.” (I. Nagy – L. Beke (eds.), *Hatvanas évek – Új törekvések a magyar képzőművészetben – Kiállítás a Magyar Nemzeti Galériában*, 1991. március 14–június 30. [The Sixties: New Trends in Hungarian Visual Arts—An Exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery, 14 March to 30 June 1991] (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, Ludwig Múzeum), p.75.

enemy of all women. / In other words, you have to put up with life as it is. Don't expect life to become like you would like it to be, because it won't be like that. In other words, «break or bend» as the Germans say. You must accept conditions as they are; this is how things happen here. / Your poems do not sound bad, and this is already something very good. At some place they are not exempt from talent but they are not succinct enough: they are beautiful but somewhat weird. Beauty must have a more intense glow. / I am very glad that your mother has a good opinion about me, but it would also be a great thing if she could benefit from my persevering and heartily felt emotions of benevolence towards her and from my knowledge and experience. / Hugs M. F.”

During the war Ilka Gedő went to Szentendre a small town on the banks of the river Danube in the vicinity of Budapest. A monograph on the painters of Szentendre mentions the artist: “From the summer of 1936 some young, mostly starting artists occasionally went to Szentendre: they were partly members of the Group of Socialist Artists, an organisation that was temporarily disbanded in the wake of the reorganisation of the Hungarian Party of Communists and partly their circle of friends... This circle of friends included, e.g. Pál B. (Berger) Juhász, Ernő Berda, György Kádár, Éva Törzs, József Fehér, Félix Kassakovitz, Éva Barta, Ilka Gedő, György Nemes.”²³ It can be assumed that the author of this monograph did not know the Szentendre landscape series of Ilka Gedő. This series including at least a hundred works on paper in pencil and pastel is remarkable because of its strong colour world (Folders 25 and 31 and Images 13-38 of the second Glasgow exhibition of 1989-1990 at Glasgow's Third Eye Center on Sauchiehall Street). The viewer notices the artistic execution and the wild, French-style colours. (The then still very young artist borrows Paul Signac's book from her master Viktor Erdei.) About 100 of these drawings have been preserved in the estate. On some of the landscapes drawn in pastel you can see a whirlwind of strong purples and yellows and emotional blues, as if we saw a gathering storm (Glasgow exhibition: pictures 12, 16, 20 and 21).

From the Glasgow Exhibition (Nos. 12, 16, 20, 21)

23 Lenke Haulisch, *Szentendrei festészet, kialakulása, története és stílusa 1945-ig* [The Making, History and Style of the Painting of Szentendre Until 1945] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977), p. 51.



Some of the landscapes of Szentendre were made after the war, and these pictures were complemented by oil paintings depicting the town.

Ilka Gedő probably sent a letter to Lenke Haulisch the author of the monograph quoted above, because the manuscript of a draft letter has been preserved in the artist's estate: *“I am the painter Ilka Gedő. It maybe strange that I write to you without knowing you. Two of my pictures were shown in November 1969 at the Székesfehérvár exhibition dedicated to the Szentendre school, but these two works were left out of the catalogue due to an error. / Encouraged by the wonderful Lajos Vajda²⁴ exhibition that you curated and by your monograph A Szentendrei festészet (Painters of Szentendre) that I have read recently, I had the idea of inviting you to view my pictures. I think my work could benefit a great deal from such a visit. I resumed artistic work after a long break of approximately 10 years in an isolation that is perhaps too big and too detrimental for my work.”*²⁵

In her curriculum vitae the artist writes about this period as follows: *“The first period of my artistic activities are connected with Szentendre. Prior to being admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts I worked there under the leadership of Erdei Viktor. Before and during the war I prepared several hundred works on paper drawn in pencil and pastel on the streets, yards and market places, etc. of Szentendre.”* In her autobiographical recollections written before the war, she describes the unpleasant memories of such a study trip to Szentendre: *“Still walking in the street a few minutes ago: I could suddenly recollect a picture from the summer of 1943, the summer before the arrow cross party came to power or from earlier. I was walking in the vicinity of the railway station in the early afternoon hours carrying a drawing folder. Two or three women of my age were standing at a fence or gate, and they jeered at me and were laughing at me. It was terrible.”*²⁶ The Hungarian painter Endre Bálint²⁷ remembers Ilka Gedő

24 Lajos Vajda (1908-1941) was a painter and graphic artist. His art is justly regarded as the most outstanding achievement of Hungarian avant-garde art. In his works a surrealist vision is blended with a rational composition. From 1930 to 1934 he lived in Paris, where he was a close friend of Lajos Szabó. The French surrealists and the Russian avant-garde film had a decisive impact on his art. In the summer of 1935 and 1936 he stayed in Szentendre. In the autumn of 1940 he was called up for labour service, and died of tuberculosis on 7 September 1941.

25 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő.

26 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 250. /Recollections/)

27 Endre Bálint's (1914-1986) father, Aladár Bálint was a well-known art critic. Endre Bálint pursued studies at the Department of Graphics at School of Applied Arts. In 1934 he went to Paris. Having returned from Paris, he met Lajos Vajda, whose wonderful drawings filled him with admiration. In the summer

as follows: “Ilka Gedő, like so many others, started to come Szentendre in the mid-1930s, and with her wild red hair even her appearance was something unique in this town. Her master, if that is the good phrase, was Viktor Erdei, whose works on paper reflected the magic influence of Rembrandt, and this influence could also be felt in Ilka Gedő’s works reflecting also a feminine emotionality. Ilka Gedő drew excellently. Her works on paper were perfect not only in an academic sense, but she could express both the form and emotion in her drawings to such an extent that one could hardly believe her maturity, awareness and creative shaping potential.”

28

The letters preserved in the artist’s manuscript estate, indicate that in the summer of 1941 Ilka Gedő spent the summer vacations in Szentendre. (her address was 16 *Fő tér* (c/o Perlusz Gyuláné). It can also be assumed that also in the summer of 1943 she was staying at Szentendre. A card from Jenő Barcsay dated 31 July 1943: “The Painter Miss Ilka Gedő. Szentendre, Fő tér 16. (c/o Perlusz Gyuláné) Dear Ilka / On Sunday I am at home. You are invited to come to the Artists’ Colony in the morning hours till 12.” On 17 June 1943 the artist wrote to her mother: “*Food is still excellent. I solve dinner at Huzsvik by buying a bottle of beer and for 60 fillér you can also buy a big piece of sheep cheese.*” In a letter that the artist wrote together with her husband to Miklós Szentkuthy on 21 August 1984, she remembers the time spent at Szentendre as follows: “*I have never been a member of the European School. And even if I had wanted to be, I could never have been. When I started to draw in Szentendre as a school-girl aged 13-14, then Júlia Vajda, Margit Anna, etc., etc. were all by more than ten years older than me, and they did not talk to me. They were young revolting artists. And I was a young child who was very good at drawing. This feature of the connection has remained unchanged for a ridiculously long period. These young artists never ever considered accepting a young Benjamin (ova) as their colleague.*”²⁹

of 1937, 1939 and 1940 he stayed in Szentendre, where he was in close contact with Lajos Vajda. He became a founding member of Európai Iskola (the European School) of painting. Between 1957-1962 he lived in Paris. From the time of his return, he had been taking part in Hungarian arts life. Until his death in 1986, he had more than forty exhibitions in Hungary. Bálint is a surrealist painter obsessed with memories and dreams. Some motifs recur on his paintings, and the colours project both sensual poetry and a great deal of anxiety.

28 Endre Bálint, *Életrajzi törmelékek* [Biographical Fragments] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1984), p. 148.

29 Draft letter in the artist’s estate.

Ilka Gedő often met Viktor Erdei and his wife Ada Karinthy³⁰. In a letter written to her mother dated 21 June 1943 she wrote: *“Just as I was finishing my lunch at H, Ada and Viktor entered. While eating they had a debate, and I waited for them to finish their meal, and went with them to Teri. Then Viktor and I went for a walk. We had dinner at Teri and then I took Viktor to the ship station and saw him off. He promised to bring me a marvellous book by the painter Signac. I will write about it later, and he will bring the book the next time.”*

On 22 June 1943 she wrote to her mother: *“Right now I am sitting at the table of the ship station...I was already here at ten in the morning at the Borpince uta, at a small rundown house. Now I found a motif on the shore and I am hurrying there. I am, of course, in continuous contact with Ada. The Singers visited Ada and tonight I am going to see the Singers with Ada. I see them every day. I have already seen Kmetty and Barcsay. Perlrott is also out here, but I have not met him yet, and neither do I want to meet him. A letter dated 23 June she wrote: “I had a good lunch, and now I am taking a short break and then I celebrate the long afternoon that may even last until 9 o’clock. When you left, I was still staying with Ada who invited me to dinner, and on arriving home, I had dinner once again. Viktor Erdei is going to come out to Szentendre either on the 28th or 29th. I am sure he will bring me the book by Signac.”*

In the artist’s manuscript estate there is letter from the Buda Jewish Community informing the artist that in 1942 she got a reward of 50 pengős as recognition of her artistic work. However, another letter, dated 16 November 1943, originating from this period contains the following lines: *“Regarding the exhibition you inquired about, I regret to inform you that it is organised by the Association of Hungarian Graphic Artists, and only members of the Association may participate in it. Should you want to become a member of the association, please inform me and then I will recommend your membership. However, we have missed this exhibition.”*

In 1942 the artist participated in the exhibition, organized by the Group of Socialist Artists and titled Freedom and the People, that took place at the Centre of the Metal Workers' Union. The exhibition was forcibly closed in two days. A bulky monograph dealing with the history of Hungarian art in the period from 1919 to 1945 mentions that *“on the occasion of this exhibition that was organised in March 1942 at the headquarters of the Metal Workers' Union a huge and*

30

Viktor Erdei's wife, Ada Karinthy was the younger sister of one of the greatest writers of 20th-century Hungarian literature, Frigyes Karinthy.

never-seen-before number of artists took place, meaning, that in addition to the Group of Socialist Artist, István Szőnyi, Aurél Bernáth, Róbert Berény and Pál Pátzay, also the masters of the progressive Gresham circle took part.”³¹ It can be safely be assumed that Ilka Gedő took part because, as shown by several manuscripts preserved in the artist’s estate, she knew Pál Pátzay and Róbert Berény. In his recollections dealing with exhibition, György Vértés mentions the people’s front character of the exhibition and includes Ilka Gedő in the long list of artists who took part even though they “were not the honorary or founding members of the Group of Socialist Artists”³². From a newspaper report it turns out that Ilka Gedő took part with one work on paper (*Sitting Old Man*).³³

Between 1942 and 1944 Ilka Gedő went to the free school of István Örkényi-Strasser. In a volume that was compiled by the artist’s master, he introduces Ilka Gedő with the following words: “She was born in 1921 in Budapest. After finishing her secondary-school studies, she visited a painting school for a few months. Apart from this training, she has been developing her knowledge as a self-taught artist since her childhood. Her first models are family members. Later on she started to draw street scenes. We publish some of her drawings that are rare examples of artistic immersion. In these drawings the depicted human figures never display the false and deceptive traits of showiness, but they give us a sincere reflection of reality.”³⁴ The artist participated in the exhibition of OMIKE (Hungarian National Cultural Society of Jews) that took place in 1943 between 24 September and 17 October in the exhibition halls of the National Hungarian Jewish Museum. (Here she exhibited her drawings titled *Blacksmiths, Old Women, Village End* and *In the Garden* and in the 1944 exhibition of OMIKE she exhibited the pastel drawings *Embankment* and *Village Houses*).³⁵

31 Nóra Aradi (ed.), *Magyar Művészet (1919-1945), I. kötet [Hungarian Art (1919-1945), Volume I]* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985), p. 543.

32 Vértés György: *Művészek a szabadságért (A „Szabadság és Nép” kiállítás 1942-ben)* In: Nóra Aradi (ed.), *„Szabadság és a Nép” (A Szocialista Képzőművészek Csoportjának dokumentumai). [„Freedom and the People”–Documents of the Group of Socialist Artists]* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó:1981), p. 318.

33 *Ibid.*: p. 287.

34 Katalin S. Nagy, *Emlékkavicsok /Holocaust a magyar képzőművészetben 1938-1945 [Memorial GraveI Stones / The Holocaust in Hungarian Visual Arts 1938-1945]* (Budapest: Glória Kiadó, 2006), p. 272. and pp. 48-64. on the exhibitions of OMIKE (Hungarian National Cultural Society of Jews)

35 *Ibid.*: p. 272.

According to the recollection of the artist's cousin, Ilka Gedő made a living from the sale burnt ceramics. Here is a letter, dated 16 February 1944, sent to her from Hódmezővásárhely: "Dear Ilka / I am replying to both of your letters now: the one that you sent to Pest and also the one that you sent to Tildy. We discussed your letter with Tildy and we agreed on the following: we ask you to do the same as we did also when we met in person. Please indicate both your wholesale and retail list prices. We are willing to take delivery of a larger quantity. In this case, however, we would expect you to charge a more advantageous price."³⁶

On March 19, 1944 the German army occupied Hungary. The Regent of Hungary, Miklós Horthy promised the Germans to deliver a few hundred thousand Jews for "employment" in Germany. On March 24, 1944 a government decree ordered Jews to wear a yellow star. With the exception of Budapest Jews, by May 15 the concentration of Jews living in the countryside had been completed and their mass deportation to death camps got underway. On June 9, the Ministry of the Interior decided that 30,000 of the 60,000 Budapest homes occupied by Jews had to be vacated, and the families involved were forced to relocate into yellow star houses.

A series of decrees was issued restricting the movement of Jews with the purpose of humiliating them. Jews were allowed to leave their designated buildings only between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. By July 6, 1944, the deportation and destruction of Hungarian Jewry living outside Budapest had been finished. More than 500,000 Hungarian Jews were killed in German concentration camps. "The drive against Hungarian Jewry took place on the very eve of Allied Victory, when the grisly details of the Final Solution were already known to the leaders of the world including those of Hungarian and World Jewry."³⁷

The deportation of Hungarian Jewry caused an outrage in international politics, and Miklós Horthy received threats from the Allied powers saying if he failed to intervene and save the rest of Hungarian Jewry he would be regarded a war criminal and treated accordingly. (This, by implication, meant that he was acquitted of all the crimes he committed before!) On July 6, 1944 (a month after D-Day in Normandy) Miklós Horthy, the Regent of Hungary ordered the

36 Letter in the artist's estate.

37 Randolph Braham, (ed.), op. cit., p.186.

deportations to be stopped. "The success of Horthy's belated action is another piece of evidence already demonstrating that the German demands for the Final Solution could have been refused or sabotaged even after the German occupation."³⁸ No time had been left for mass deportations from Budapest, since Soviet troops were closing in fast on the city.

In the summer of 1944 Ilka Gedő was forced to move to a yellow-star house at 26 *Erzsébet körút* (a house very close to where the ghetto was located) and this is where she stayed until January 18, 1945 when the Pest side of Budapest was liberated by the Red Army. At first, this building was part of the emergency ghetto hospital located at 44 *Wesselényi utca*, which later became a shelter for abandoned children. These orphaned or deserted children appear in Ilka Gedő's ghetto drawings.

After 15 October 1944, the situation of the Jews living in Budapest got worse. All Jewish men aged 16-60 and all Jewish women aged 18-40 were mobilised. According to estimates 25,000 men and 10,000 women were deported. On November 3 a decree was issued drafting all Jewish women who could sew. On November 3 a decree ordered the registration of all Jewish women aged 16-40 for doing service in connection with "national defence". It cannot be reconstructed exactly how the artist had survived these mobilisations. There is a short reference to this in the recollections of the artist's husband: "Ilka was in great danger twice. Once she and her girlfriend had to go to a railway station. They escaped deportation because there were not enough railway carriages. They were told to go home and come again the following day. (...) Ilka went home and thought to herself: I would be a fool if I went there again, and she did not go there any more. (...) The other: once there was a police raid and she hid under the eiderdown, and when Ilka's name was called, an old rabbi, with a thin female voice, shouted «present». The police searched through the flats, and did not find Ilka."³⁹ The Budapest ghetto was set up 29 November 1944, and *Erzsébet körút* 26, the place where the artist lived, was in the direct vicinity of the ghetto border. Conditions in the ghetto and the yellow star houses were horrible during the siege of Budapest, and the dead could no longer be buried in the cemetery during

38 Loc. cit.

39 Biographical interview.

the last days of the siege. They were placed at the end of the yard of the huge tenement house and they were covered with cardboard.

As mentioned already, wherever she went or stayed Ilka Gedő has been continuously drawing since her childhood. The series of juvenilias can be put into chronological order, and thus one is confronted with a visual diary. This report, relying on the language of graphic art, was not interrupted during the terrible weeks spent in the ghetto or, more exactly, in the yellow-star house. Indeed, even in this atmosphere of mute horror, drawings were made continuously, since Ilka Gedő spent most of her time with drawing or reading. In connection with these works it can be said: “The frightened, widely opened eyes of the children wearing the yellow star and their sadness reveal an even greater hopelessness, a lack of future and the closeness to death than the helplessness of the gaunt, shabbily-dressed adults. Children, while they try to get used to the present and to circumstances, accept the unacceptable as natural and they try to regard the intolerable as tolerable. (...) Ilka Gedő catches those moments when her models lose touch with the surrounding reality.”⁴⁰

Boy with the Star of David, the Budapest Ghetto, 1944, (Yad Vashem Art Museum, Image 42)

40 Katalin S. Nagy, op. cit., p. 274.



Portrait of a Girl With Bow, the Budapest Ghetto, 1944, (Yad Vashem Art Museum, Image 64)



All the prisoners of the ghetto and of the yellow-star houses knew that it was just a question of time, and the Russians would liberate the city, but none of them could be sure that in the hour of liberation they would be still alive. (Approximately 130 of Ilka Gedó's ghetto drawings are in the collection of the Yad Vashem Art Museum.)

„Ilka Gedő’s series drawn in the ghetto is unique in Hungarian art history. They are invaluable as documents, and much more than that: they go beyond the *Lagerkunst* that is morally valuable but aesthetically of secondary importance. These drawings are not simply reports on the infernal season: they have grown into allegories of human humiliation and defencelessness.”⁴¹ Another art historian emphasises that „paradoxically, the nearly lyrically silent pencil drawings of exhausted and sleeping women and children have the effect of having been made in an artistic studio.”⁴²

Four self-portraits were made in the ghetto. On the self-portrait drawing that is preserved at Yad Vashem Art Museum the artist is still 23 years old, but an ageless person looks back on us or rather a person who has grown old. The eyes reveal that her spirit has already been broken, but the compressed lips and the line descending from the curve of the lips show that the artist still has the strength to fight for her life.

Self-Portrait in the Budapest Ghetto, 1944 (Yad Vashem Art Museum)

41 Péter György– Gábor Pataki, "Egy művészi felfogásparadoxona".[The Paradoxon of an Artistic Approach] In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, *Gedő Ilka művészete (1921-1985) /The Art of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985)* (Budapest: Új Művészet Kiadó, 1997), p. 27.

42 István Wagner, "Raiffeisen Galerie zeigt die Werke von Ilka Gedő" *Budapester Zeitung*. 15 December 2003



On the self-portrait that is to be found in the Hungarian Jewish Museum we see the artist from a three-quarter profile, that is so common on Ilka Gedő's self-portraits. The artist depicts herself sitting in front of a drawing board, and she emphasises her dignity.

Self-Portrait in the Budapest Ghetto, 1944 (Hungarian Jewish Museum, Budapest)



On drawing 31 from Folder 10 she depicts herself leaning on her elbow: from a head resting on the artist's palm an old woman is looking back straight into the eyes of the viewer.

Self-Portrait in the Budapest Ghetto, 1944 (From Folder 10 No. 31)



On drawing 64 from the Addenda folder the artist's head is propped up on her elbow and the eyes, so it seems, stare into nothingness. The ego looks for support in her own self.

Self-Portrait in the Budapest Ghetto, 1944 (Addenda No. 64)



4. *The Period From 1945 to 1949*

Endre Biró and Ilka Gedő got to know each other on New Year's Eve in a villa of *Ady Endre út* at a party of the artists of the European School. This was a huge villa that the owners had deserted and, initially, the young artists moved into the building as squatters, and later on they had become legal tenants. However, some years later a bigwig of the communist party fell in love with the house and had the former tenants kicked out of it. Endre Biró was invited to this party by Júlia Vajda. Ilka Gedő and Endre Biró got married on 19 August 1949, and they started their married life in the flat that had been the home of the Gedő family until 1944.

Due to the measures adopted against the Jews of Budapest, the Gedő family was forced out of its home under *Fillér utca 30* and moved to *Erzsébet körút 26*, where the relatives, including Ilka Gedő's aunt and her husband, Ignác Steiner and their children Erik and Julia, were crowded together in the huge flat of aunt Risa. Ilka Gedő lived in that house until 18 January 1945. After the siege of Budapest, the family could not immediately move back to its old home,

but it moved to the flat of the Steiner family (*Alsó-Erdősor 18*). At this point a strange thing happened. When the Gedő family finally got back its old home, only Ilka Gedő and her mother moved back, and they left behind Simon Gedő in *Alsó-Erdősor 18*. It can only be guessed what actually happened after this, but at the end of the day Simon Gedő and his wife lost their home. In 1953 the Gedő-Bíró family exchanged their flat for a larger three-room flat. And this is when the artist's mother, Elza who lived as a subtenant and who was deprived of her financial reserves asked her daughter for a key so that she could come more easily to baby-sit. The Gedő-Bíró family rejected this request, and a bitter argument ensued. Not much later, on 7 February 1954, Elza died. Endre Bíró recalls with cruel detachment: "I also have to tell something about Elza's death. She had an ugly death and she died deserted. There was an influenza epidemic, and she had to be hospitalized. She died the following day on February 7, 1954. Her heart was in a terrible condition. That is the reason why she died of a flue (father's written recollections)."⁴³ After this Simon Gedő left the sub tenancy of *Erzsébet fasor* and moved into the flat of her sister-in-law. He was 74 years old then. He did not stay there for long, because, as Endre Bíró mentions in his recollections: "It did not make sense for him to live with his sister-in-law for a longer time, so later he moved to us." (This happened in May 1954.) Ilka Gedő was so much irritated by the presence of her father, that she was sent to a sub-tenancy flat, where in addition to a small flat, he, for a no small amount of money, was also given sustenance. Endre Bíró remembers: "Simon had a very beautiful room; it was a very civilized place, but he got into the company of ridiculous and petty-bourgeois people, which is a rather strange thing." Simon Gedő died on September 11, 1956. (According to his death certificate, his last place of residence was located at 24 *Október 6. utca* in the Vth district of Budapest. On the back of the death certificate the following note is to be read: "The funeral relief has been disbursed.")

Endre Bíró recollects: "When the war came, Elza bought golden coins (twelve or twenty-two napoleon gold coins). When the Gedős were forced to vacate their flat, and had to move into a yellow-star house, Elza was fully overpowered by apathy, and she did not want to try to save anything. In contrast to this resignation, Ilka put each of the golden coins into a canvas holder, and then put them behind the spine of a huge dictionary. She gave these dictionaries (along with a number of cheap books) into the custody of a grocery-shop owner whom she knew well.

43

Biographical interview.

This grocer had a shop that was located at the start of *Fillér utca* at what is now a market. When, after the siege, Ilka and her mother inspected the neighbourhood, they entered the shop that, unsurprisingly, was broken up, and it was in a terrible condition because the soldiers used it as a toilet. Although the pages of the dictionaries were torn out, to the triumph of Ilka, the gold coins hidden under the spine had all been recovered in a flawless condition.”⁴⁴

The report goes on: “At that time Erik was about 17 years old, and he took over the management of the margarine production workshop of his father who disappeared during the siege of Budapest. But a huge amount of overdue taxes had to be paid. Erik was threatened by prison unless he paid a sizeable amount of money. Lenke told Elza what the problem was, and Elza handed over the gold coins without any hesitation. This was enough to pay back the debt of the Steiner company, which put Erik at risk of being imprisoned. They did not sell the golden coins, they just deposited them as a loan security on which an exorbitant interest rate was charged. When they wanted to repay the debt, the lender simply claimed he had never got the coins as a loan security. It was not possible to write a document on the transfer of the loan security. He was a «confidant» anyway, who then denied ever having received the golden coins. (...) It was at this time that the old Gedős handed over the *Fillér utca* flat to us. For a while (I don’t know exactly for how long) they stayed with the Steiners. (...) At the time of Dani’s birth (26 September 1947) they were already living in a house that stood at the corner of *Városmajor (10 Szilágyi Erzsébet fasor)*. (...) They lived there in a small flat, which also had the advantage of their being able to come over to us and baby-sit, and we could also take Dani there; they lived close to us. (...) There was a very complicated settlement between the sisters. Lenke handed over silver objects to Elza, and things like that, and they somehow offset the cost of the Gedős livelihood at Alsóerdősor, because the Gedős lived there for a long time after the siege of Budapest was over. However, later on, Ilka, when we were under pressure to find a solution to the housing problems of our children brought up this issue once again in her correspondence with Júlia, even though I very much objected to it. As a matter of fact, I do not know to what extent she was right. I very much objected to bringing up this problem after such a long time.” Júlia Steiner’s brother, Erik Steiner most probably immigrated to Israel

in 1950⁴⁵, because in letter dated 1 March 1955 he wrote that, at that time, he had already been living in Israel for five years. “I have been living here for five years now, and it is mean of me not to have written more regularly over this time. Ilka could also have written to me. To tell you the truth, a letter sent from Jerusalem is delivered in the same way as one sent from Budapest to Jerusalem. Never mind, if Ilka believes that she has nothing to write me about, then she should keep on not writing. (...) To tell you the truth, it makes me glad to think that Mother visits you and sometimes you take the kids to the Alsóerdősor. (Isn’t it an ugly place?) I would be curious to know whether you still go and see Béla Tábor. I hope Dani’s hand is improving and that it will still improve, and I think Dani with his healthy spirits will overcome the problems. I would be glad to know something also about Simon, but Mother keeps silent about him obstinately.” Erik, who was under the threat of being imprisoned due to some overdue debts, repaid his debts and, immediately after that, he left for Israel. However, most regrettably, another interpretation of the events is also possible: Erik, after having plundered the old Gedős, who gave away their last reserves, emigrated to Israel. This assumption is not groundless, because, Júlia Steiner, the cousin of Ilka Gedő, in her letter dated 9 December writes as follows: “You might have concluded from my letter, that I wrote in reply to your letter about two weeks ago, that I try to exonerate Erik or reject this fact of plunder or that I try to gloss over it with the slogan «Lenke was helping the old Gedős». This debt does exist, and, at the best, it exists not fully. I would like to know how much of the debt still exists, and I, on my part, will do my utmost to forward you the money with which Elza helped us at that time.” Júlia Steiner’s letter written to Ilka Gedő reveals: “Back at that time Elza gave emergency aid that was meant to alleviate the financial burden originating from the still outstanding liabilities of the liquidated factory. The wage and the severance pay of the dismissed workers had to be paid. Erik raised a loan and the help received from Elza was collateral and the redemption was also agreed on. This man, however, did not abide by the terms of the agreement and this meant a criminal fraud.”

45 According to the folder (K-703/T) held by the Historical Archives of the State Security Services on Júlia Steiner: “Erik Steiner studied at school before the liberation. After the liberation he managed the margarine factory, whose operation he stopped due to raw material shortages and he sold the machines. After this he enrolled at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He had studied there until 1950. On 12 May he left for Palestine on a study tour, but he did not return. According to intelligence from our data providers, he resumed his studies in Jerusalem. He not only corresponds with his family members, but he also asked his mother and sister several times to follow him to Jerusalem.”

Erik had overdue liabilities that he could not pay. He pawned the gold coins, and he got the money from which he could pay the liabilities. The question arises: when and how could Erik have obtained an amount of money that would have allowed him to redeem the pawn? But the explanation, sent in the second letter, goes on: “Erik's «stupidity» meant that he blindly trusted the above-mentioned person who has been dead for ten years now. Everything had been agreed on just verbally, and, when the debtor wanted to repay the loan, the lender said everything had disappeared, and the jewels were no longer accessible. That's it. (...) At the same time and in the same manner (...) Mother's gold bracelet, Ignác Steiner's gold pocket clock chain and some earrings, presents from Mr. Ignác Steiner, also disappeared. It's all over. . (This is it. No other jewels were left.) When it turned out that it was impossible to recover these objects, Lenke gave Elsa a valuable Persian carpet of purple colour sized 2.5 square meters, plus another carpet. When Lenke left Hungary, she gave two silver candlesticks and a set of cutlery as a partial compensation to Elsa. «Lenke helped the old Gedő's». Yes, this was assistance falling under the category of debt repayment. To be sure, no one knew and no one could have known that these donations were more than legitimate. Even at the time, when Uncle Simon during the last months of his life lived in *Baross utca*, mother knowingly shouldered some of the costs. I am fully aware that this is not a complete repayment. " In a letter sent on 28 June 1981 she wrote: “The debt does exist, and I would rather shoulder all moral and other responsibility than to negotiate with Erik about this.” There is also a physical trace of what Ilka Gedő might have felt in connection with Erik. A letter written by Erik on 22 February 1975 is burnt on both sides. This letter gives account of the brutality with which Imi Endrey, the son of aunt Riza destroyed all the letters that had been preserved. (In 1944, at the time the Budapest Jews were relocated, the Gedő family moved to the Endrey family.) “Ilka, I hope you have managed to save some items emotionally close to you from Imi's terrible destruction. Imi mentioned something about old photos of Elsa and letters that had been preserved by Riza. Imi mentioned that he had burned some of them and some had been handed over to you. To be sure, what is the purpose of talking too much about this? These are really olden times. If I take a closer look at the calendar, within a few days it will have been 25 years since I left Budapest. Maybe it is not even true that I lived there once, and neither is it true that since then I have been there on a visit once for three days." Around 1987 Júlia started to remember the story completely differently: "My modification concerning the flat and the gold coins is the following. One day Elza told mother that she would give the *Fillér utca* flat to Ilka and she would move to us together with Simon. Under conditions of a relentlessly galloping inflation, she did not dare to

be left without any reserves. The gold coins were handed over only much later approximately at the time when they were already living in the *Malinowsky fasor* (*Erzsébet fasor*), that is at the earliest in 1948, or maybe at the beginning of 1949. Mother had serious pangs of remorse concerning repayment, although it was still in Elza's life that she sold a valuable and less valuable carpet and she handed over some old-fashioned silver-ware or she sold them and handed over just the money to Elza and Ilka. As part of the settlement an old typewriter was handed over that should rather have been thrown out. Mother was fully aware that she had remained the debtor of Elza, and she was very sorry about the fact that their relationship had suffered a setback, and that Elza's resource (this was the word that she used most often in connection with the money) was gone. When Ilka at the end of the 1970's (or even later?) brought up the matter again, mother was so old that she could not have grasped this so I could not involve her. I sent money on two, or maybe, on three occasions. The last time when Ilka was terminally ill."

The debt has never been repaid. The method of glossing over the facts worked. When Ilka Gedő died, cousin Erik sent 10,000 forints. This was the funeral aid sent to the poor relatives, which showed that Erik looked down with condescension upon his deceased cousin and her family.

In the autumn of 1945 Ilka Gedő enrolls as a full-time student in the Academy of Fine Arts. In the artist's estate an A/4-sized folder is preserved on top of which we can read in the artist's handwriting: "*Academy, croquis drawings at Gyula Pap*". This folder represents a setback: the drawings show an artist who has lost her self-confidence, who hesitates. The artist must have received so much instruction⁴⁶, at the Academy and/or Gyula Pap that she had nearly lost her creative spontaneity. (It should be mentioned here that Ilka Gedő visited the free school organised at the studio of Gyula Pap also before the world war. ⁴⁷)

46 Ideas on this phenomenon: „Der junge Mann – noch häufiger die junge Dame – sobald sie sich ernstlich dem Studium der Malerei widmen, machen es nicht nur besser als früher, sondern im Gegenteil viel schlechter, d. h. die Phantasie, die früher naiv den Eindruck der Natur wiederzugeben betreibt war, wird allmählich von dem Suchen nach Korrektheit verdrängt. Aus der phantasievollen, aber unkorrekten wird die phantasielose aber korrekte Zeichnung. Mit anderen Worten: der Buchstabe tötet den Geist, und nur die Tatenvollsten können ungestraft an ihrer Phantasie den akademischen Drill überstehen. (...) Die Phantasietätigkeit des Malers, die darin besteht für das, was er — und zwar nur er — in der Natur oder im Geist sieht, den adäquaten Ausdruck zu finden. Natürlich vollzieht sich diese Phantasietätigkeit völlig unbewußt im Künstler, denn Kunstwerke entstehen: sie werden nicht gemacht, und das sicherste Mittel kein Kunstwerk hervorzubringen ist die Absicht, eins zu machen." Liebermann Max, *Die Phantasie in der Malerei* (Berlin: Bruni Cassierer, 1916), pp. 4-5

47 Nóra Aradi (ed.), *Magyar Művészet (1919-1945), I. kötet [Hungarian Art (1919-1945), Volume I]* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985), p. 398: „Gyula Pap became actively involved in artistic life, even though he secured his livelihood by taking a job as textile designer in the Goldberger textile factory.

One of Ilka Gedő's Hungarian exhibition catalogues mentions that the artist left the Academy due to problems in her private life. One can only guess what this problem could have been, but perhaps the most probable reason could have been the marriage of the artist that, to say the least, had a very stormy start. If the success of a marriage is determined on the basis of whether it ended in divorce or not, then we could say that it was successful since it did not end in divorce. But this marriage did not have a smooth start. From the sporadic remarks of Ilka Gedő it can be seen that the young couple argued a lot.

The artist took part in artistic life. In the autumn of 1945 some of her works were shown in the Ernst Museum (an exhibition of the artists of the Social Democrats and artists invited by them). In the Municipal Picture Gallery, then located in the Károlyi Palace, the Trade Union of Hungarian Artists organised its Second Open National Exhibition in which Ilka Gedő participated. The introduction to the exhibition catalogue was written by Máriusz Rabinovszky.

On 26 September 1947 Gedő's first child, Dániel Bíró was born, then in 1953 her second child, Dávid was born. The young mother is tormented by the complexities and difficulties of family life. Her autobiographical recollections written around 1949 bear testimony to the fact that she sincerely felt that she was confronted with the issue whether a woman can be an artist and whether being an artist is compatible with having a family and child-rearing. In connection with the psychologist she consulted, she remarks, "*Do you see? Now I'm trying to find an explanation that makes it comprehensible even to a psychoanalyst and doctor what I say: there is unbridgeable contradiction between artistic work and femininity. Lucy replied to this: this is simply not true.*"⁴⁸ It is obvious that the doctor is trying to convince Ilka Gedő that she can both be a mother and a wife as well as an artist. The artist however knows well, and she is right, that the conflict is unbridgeable. She has no illusions: „*Van Gogh wrote at the start of his career: «I have two choices: I become either a bad painter or a good one. I chose the second possibility.» I either become a good painter or a punched paper for some body exercise.*

In his studio, located on Lehel út, he gave training courses. From among the members of the group around Lajos Kassák Lajos Lengyel learnt here, and later on several artists, including Aranka Kasznár, László Kontraszty, Ilka Gedő and Gergely Vince, got acquainted with the basics of visual arts in the studio of Gyula Pap." (Gyula Pap was a disciple of Johannes Itten.)

Which of these two options should I choose? The answer is very simple: you should be both a good painter and a good Berceuse (nurse). You cannot be good at one without the other. This is what wise people usually say.”⁴⁹

The artist’s self-tormenting ideas cannot transcend the conflict between artistic and bourgeois values, which, in the case of a woman, is stronger than in the case of a man. *“Since early childhood you have been having a bad conscience due to the fact that you are an artist. This is true in so much as that I looked around in the world with sensitivity and I experienced and I suffered a lot when I looked around in the world. Later, I did perceive the other girls to be different from me, but I did not believe them to be different or true women, I just thought they were less sensitive and more cheerful and easy-going. This was a covert and semi-conscious suffering, exempt from anger and suspicion and motivated by a silently felt envy for the normal, in a manner Tonio Kröger felt it.”* Then, she presents further support for his view according to which the conflict between art and bourgeois life cannot be bridged and that this conflict is true of a woman artist: *“Paula Modersohn-Becker was a talented painter. (She is the exception that proves the rule.) She died at the age of thirty right after giving birth to her child. And this was very clever of her. She left behind a beautiful oeuvre. But just considering the issue of women artists with a detached scientific attitude, what is the reason for the fact that the monks of the Middle Age created paintings, but the nuns didn’t. Why is not there a single woman in the whole of Japanese and Chinese painting? (...)*

She feels sad about not being able to study at Academy in the years after 1939, but she is not absolutely sure whether she is right or not, because she knows that the Academy could have been the place where her talent could have easily been destroyed: *“Is it possible to paint together? These lonesome beasts expelled from society, these painters, these are the really good ones. Bandi⁵⁰ said that the modern age does not have a painting, it just has great painters. Cézanne, Van Gogh—what sort of academy did they go to? (...) Yes, but would it have been reasonable to become aware of what is obvious for everyone, would it have been good to destroy that «self-sacrificing» dynamism? But maybe I am wrong. Maybe, despite all this, it*

49 Notebook No. 250 preserved in the artist’s estate.

50 A reference to Endre Bálint.

would have been good for me to study three years at the Academy and another three in Paris, in the same way as Lajos Vajda did, and to gain skills, knowledge and experience. Such a six-year study is something all the same, but so was a four-year study at 30 Fillér utca even with thoughts of disgusting uncertainty. Perhaps it would have been better if Lajos Vajda had died a few years later. Then she could have shown me around the streets of Ferencváros and shown me the motifs just as he did much earlier for Endre Bálint.”

These dilemmas, the onset of communist terror as well as the isolation of the artist within the circle of Lajos Szabó finally forced her to stop artistic work. Although Ilka Gedő superficially knew Júlia Vajda and Endre Bálint and Lajos Vajda cursorily, she met the circle around the philosopher Lajos Szabó only after she had come to know Endre Bíró. One study on Ilka Gedő emphasises that the circle “chose the left-wing radical solution of assimilation, just as several German-Jewish philosophers did. Through this, they were able to break away from the sense of being Jewish, which had predestined their position in society, and also from the middle-class nationalistic traditions which, they felt, were too confining”⁵¹ In the recollections of Endre Bíró the circle around Lajos Szabó is described as a counter cultural grouping of intellectuals: “this circle was a subculture, indeed I am often inclined to name it a sect. But maybe this is an exaggeration...Anyhow, the really talented intellectuals found the means for getting rid of the shackles of bourgeois morality without creating a sub cultural community.”⁵²

The artists of the Lajos Szabó circle were committed representatives of avant-garde art, and they rejected the graphic art of Ilka Gedő as emotional realism. In a letter of 21 August 1984 (written together by the artist and Endre Bíró) to the Hungarian writer, Miklós Szentkuthy there is an interesting remark: “*When after the war I went to the Ganz factory to make drawings, and shame of shames I was drawing after nature, and I showed my work to one member of the European School*⁵³, he said: «*Alas, you are not my fellow sufferer!*» I was by

51 Péter György– Gábor Pataki, "Egy művészi felfogás paradoxona".[The Paradoxon of an Artistic Approach] In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op.cit., p. 22.

52 Biographical interview.

53 The European School is a group of artists founded in 1945 by Imre Pán, Pál Gegesi Kiss, Ernő Kállai and Árpád Mezei and it existed only for four years, because it fell victim to communist repression. The members worked on the creation of a new art life and they aimed to create an art that would be in harmony with the European art trends. They advocated avantgarde trends especially surrealism.

no means doing the then obligatory depiction of the workers, but SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT, even though it was «figuration». My greatest regret has always been that Ernő Kállai has never seen my works. He would have explained this to them (and here I refer to the words above in capital letters). But they never even allowed me to get close to him. We have known each other only superficially. I wrote a letter to him that was full of despairing questions. He answered my letter. His letter gave me strength to follow my own way. / Young art historians make some vague attempts to identify me as belonging to the European School. They think I must have been a member of this group, even though not a single exhibition catalogue reveals any such information. From their vantage point it does not matter if one is 60, 70 or 80. (But for me ... You can easily imagine!)”⁵⁴

The artist’s husband mentions in his recollections: “These people interpreted modernity in quite a blurred way in terms of the contrast between figurative and abstract art. Very often it depended very much on personal likes and dislikes who was «forgiven» for making figurative paintings.”⁵⁵

Self-Portrait Series (1945-1949)

The drawings of the Fillér utca self-portrait series have an impact on the viewer due to their cruel honesty and authentic artistic power. For the artist creating self-portraits, there is not a more co-operative model than his or her own portrait looking back on the drawing artist from the mirror. The image of the artist as reflected by a mirror is always at hand. But for the woman artist it is also true that „one must attempt to seduce the mirror, since failing to do so results in seeing one’s malevolent double suddenly emerge from it, a grimacing devil, the fantastic projection of the inner demons. The authority of the reflection is imposed primarily on women who, at least at a certain stage of cultural development, construct themselves under the gaze of the other. Civilization can now offer women means of fulfilment outside the beauty-seduction-love paradigm, but the mirror still remains this privileged and vulnerable site of femininity. A

54 Letter in the artist’s estate.

55 Biographical interview given to the Oral History Archive whose tapescript is also preserved in the artist’s estate.

tribunal without pity, each morning it summons her to take account of her charms until it is said one day that she is no longer the fairest of them all.”⁵⁶

Artists, sitting in front of the mirror, take up a pose even if, while creating the self-portrait, they have to lean forward to the canvas or the paper sheet. Creators of self-portraits are artists and models at the same time. They are the a creators and the subjects of creation, the viewers and also a critics. Artists do not only depict the visual image. They necessarily reflect something from the personality, because they also know the person that lives behind the eyes and in the body. In the self-portrait the artists confront their own self. To prepare an image of ourselves is often a painful process, but it also involves the expansion of the self. Artists who create their self-portraits also make their internal forces visible. Artists challenge their own self, they construct and deconstruct their own self. “There are hardly any self-portraits from mediaeval art. However, self-conscious artists, who were no longer craftsmen, and who regarded themselves of equal rank with the philosophers, writers and scientists of their times, have, since the time of the renaissance, created a monument for their own self. In addition to confronting their own physiognomy as a ubiquitous and cheap model, self-portraits bear witness to the artists’ internal confrontation with their owns minds, with their changing moods and with their own mortality.”⁵⁷

The self-portraits of the artist, so it seems, can be grouped into several categories. One such category could be those works on paper that express the pride of a found identity (Image 3 in Folder 38) also redone in 1984 as an oil painting. Painting 143 of the Album⁵⁸, Images 3, 5, 7 and 8 of Folder 45, Image 13 of Folder 54 and Image 1 of Folder 58.)

Folder 38 (No. 3)

56 Sabibe Melchiro-Bonnet, *The Mirror (A History)* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 271-272.

57 <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selbstbildnis>

58 The “Album” is István Hajdu - Dávid Biró, *The Art of Ilka Gedő*. (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó 2003). This album was also published in Hungarian: István Hajdu – Dávid Biró, *Gedő Ilka művészete [The Art of Ilka Gedő]* (Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó 2003)



Painting No. 143 in the Album



Folder 45 (Nos. 3, 5, 7 and 8)



Folder 54 (No. 13)



Folder 58 (No. 1)



The artist is sitting in front of a drawing board (Image 33 of the Album). Although the artist is still 26 years old, she makes us believe that she is forty or she prompts us to believe that she is ageless. She strongly concentrates on the drawing board, while she stiffly compresses her lips.

Several self-portraits show the artist sitting in front of her drawing board (Images 39 and 40 of the Album, Image 10 of Folder 23).

Images 39 and 40 of the Album (Hungarian National Gallery)



Folder 23 (Image 10)



In the first picture the artist looks at herself in self-examination, and she casts an interrogative look at herself, i.e., the person who is just examining the drawing. In the second picture she is just leaning back so that she can decide what to correct on the work in progress, most probably her own self-portrait. Another self-portrait showing the artist sitting in front of a drawing board (Image 35 of the Album) displays softer and more feminine lines.

Image 35 of the Album (Hungarian National Gallery)



The theme is once again, concentrating on creation. Images 18 and 19 of Folder 45 and Images 4 and 5 of Folder 51 show the artist in torment while a work of art is being created.

Folder 45 (Nos. 18-19)

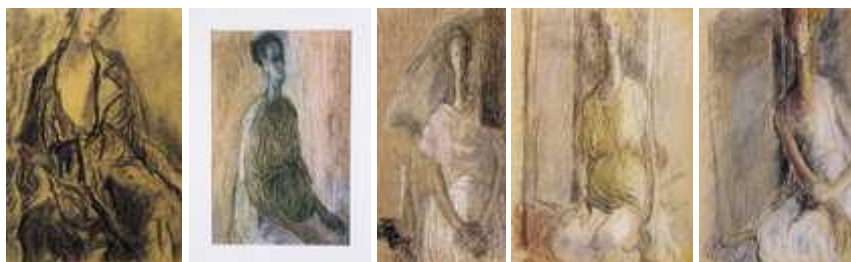


Folder 51 (Nos. 4-5) (Albertina, Vienna)



In another series of self-portraits she draws herself in pregnancy (Images 41, 44, 45-46 and 47 of the Album and the pastel series of Folder 51).

Image 41 of the Album (Hungarian National Gallery), Image 44 of the Album (The Israel Museum), Images 45-46 and 47 of the Album (Hungarian National Gallery)



In the last drawing of the series (Image 44 of the Album, the second image from the left above) she depicts herself in a sculptural way. Where the eyes are we see just hatched lines, the eyes look blindly into the world. This drawing is not an expression of the conflict between the artistic profession and maternity, but it rather expresses the anxiety over the fate of the child that is to be born.⁵⁹

Pensive Self-Portrait I (Image 42 of the Album) and *Pensive Self-Portrait II* (Image 43 of the Album) were made directly before stopping artistic activities. Both drawings record the same moment.

59 Júlia Szabó, "Ilka Gedő's Paintings" The New Hungarian Quarterly no. IV. (1987)

Image of 42 of the Album (Hungarian National Gallery) and Image 43 of the Album (New York, Private Collection)



The artist props up her arm onto her knee and places her chin into her hand. It is immediately conspicuous that the skirt displays charcoal swirls very similar to those that can be seen in the last drawings of Lajos Vajda. In connection with these two drawings, the artist's husband recollects: "Ilka must not have been working for a worrying length of time and we were talking about it. The shape of the skirt was somewhat similar to the great charcoal-whirls of Vajda's last period. *«But if these Vajdas, that represent nothing in themselves, are works of art, then why does complying with the demands of depicting a model on paper require such a brain-racking concentration and effort? And why did I draw the skirt in exactly this way? Why did I not use points... or any of the countless other ways?»* In other words, the terrible conflict springing from outgrowing the child prodigy in fact occurred at a deeper level. It was not rooted in the uncomprehending reception, nor in the atmosphere in our circle".⁶⁰

Both drawings show sculptural features and both seem to aim at monumentality. These drawings show the creator and the created and the mystery. How can this be possible? In his letter sent to Wassily Kandinsky Arnold Schönberg points out, "We must recognise that we are surrounded by mystery, and we must be brave enough to confront these mysteries without cowardly searching for the «solution». It is important that our souls should not try to solve these mysteries but to disentangle them. In the course of this process, not a solution must be born, but a new code and a method for code-breaking. This method is in itself without any value, yet it provides material for the creation of new mysteries. Namely, mystery is nothing else but the mirror image of the inexplicable. However, once we regard the inexplicable possible, then we approach God, because then we no longer demand to understand God. In this

60

Endre Biró, Recollections of the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit., p. 249.

case, we no longer interpret God with our intellect, we no longer censure or reject God, because we are no longer capable of merging God with the human error that is our lucidity."⁶¹

There are also self-portraits that reflect the trauma suffered during the war (Images 3, 4, 5 Folder 20).

Folder 20 (Nos. 3, 4 and 5)

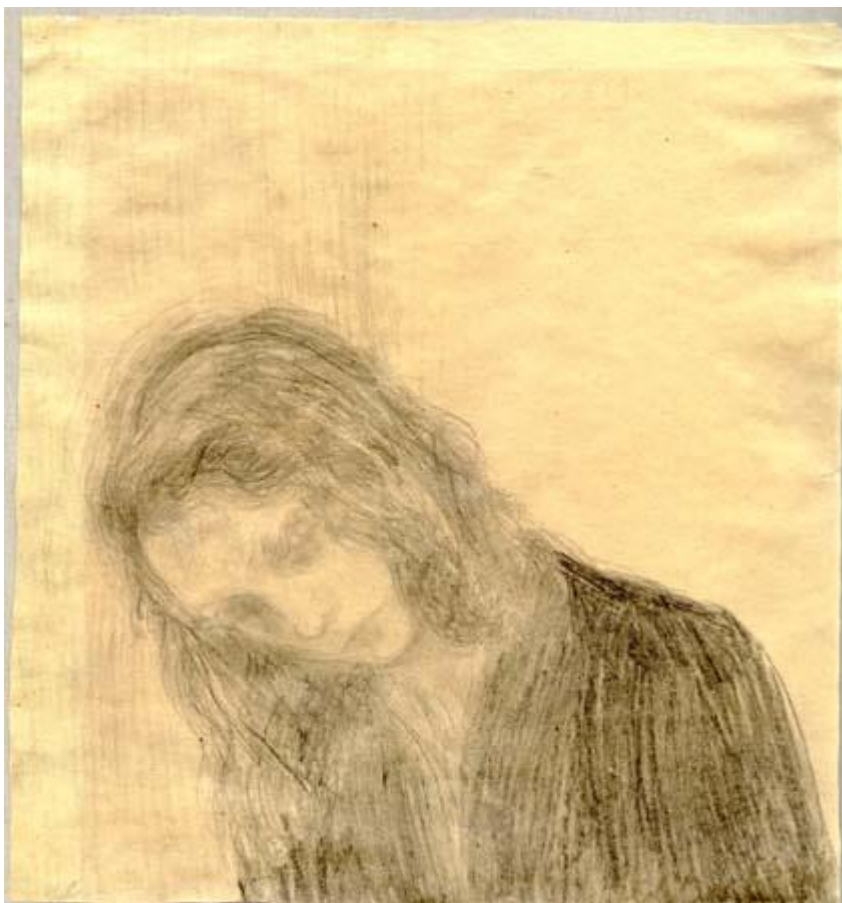


The sadness, the sensitively lyric lines and their lyric fall do express the drama, the humiliation and the persecution suffered and maybe also the fact that the suffering is not yet over and can never be fully overcome and forgotten (Images 31 and 38 of the Album).

61 Jelena Kahl-Koch (ed.), Arnold Schönberg – Wassily Kandinsky, Briefe, Bilder und Dokumente einer außergewöhnlichen Beziehung (Berlin: DTBV, 1983), p. 69. Quoted by: Milly Heyd: Selbstporträts: zur Frage der jüdischen Identität In: Hans Günter Golinski and Sepp-Hieckisch Pickard (eds.), Das Recht des Bildes (Bochum: Edition Braus, 2003), p. 90.

Images 31 and 38 of the Album





These drawings bear witness to the crisis of identity, but they also reflect the desire to strengthen the self. It can be assumed that the reason for the huge number of self-portraits is that the artist often asked herself the tough question concerning her identity. Although a drawing in itself could not possibly have given an answer, the self-portraits as a group of drawings already offered the possibility of certainty, the certainty of having created works of art that will be preserved.

An identity researching her own nature gets also to the drawings of infinite sadness. These drawings reveal such an intense suffering and pain that one is inclined to say: had the artist not been able to make these drawings, she could easily have suffered a mental breakdown. (Image 2 Folder 9, Images 1,5, 7 and 24 Folder 12, Images 85, 90 and 102 of Folder 15, Images 1 and 5 of Folder 19, Image 46 of Folder 23, Image 5 of Folder 33, Image 14 Folder 35, Images 2, 4 and 6 of Folder 38, Image 12 of Folder 42). We could say in connection with the self-portrait series that these drawings are “narrative in terms of recording those of the artist’s impressions

that she, at those times, had obtained in terms of the various role definitions that she had largely not expressed in words.”⁶²

Some art historians compared these drawings with the works of Alberto Giacometti. However, one must see that one of the reasons why these “self-probing, self-tormenting and self-questioning self-portrait series of the 1940’s” cannot be “alleged to be connected with Giacometti’s drawings” is that Ilka Gedő could not have known them back in the 1940’s, while the other is that Ilka Gedő’s drawings “are to a larger degree existentialist, if this term has any meaning in this context”. Furthermore, “in order to avoid shrugging off the significance of these drawings with comparing them to Giacometti’s works, we must simply view these graphic self-portraits with the awareness of their huge number and the fact that they are a heart-rending series of self-torment.”⁶³

It is much more instructive to compare Ilka Gedő’s drawings with those of Egon Schiele, because one of the ways of interpretation in the case of both artists is that the self-portraits can be interpreted also as a role play. (According to Kirk Varnedoe, on his self-portraits Schiele “invented a surrogate self housed in his own body, a self as a poseur in both literal and positive senses, to play out an identity acknowledged to be acted as much as experienced. What seems most tellingly modern about these works is not the directness of communication, but its obliqueness, not the sense of revelation, but the sense of performance.”⁶⁴)

It was in 1948 that the brother in law of the artist recommended her to visit a course in technical drawing. The artist rejected the advice, and also asked her brother-in-law while he was “ruining his life” by doing the boring job of being an accountant. Ilka Gedő was simply not capable of imagining that, in addition to artists, there are also people who take a job. A terrible argument

62 István Hajdu, "Half Image, Half Veil – The Art of Ilka Gedő"
In: István Hajdu–Dávid Bíró, op. cit., p.15.

63 Gyula Rózsa, “Az életmű ára” [The Price Paid for the Oeuvre]
Népszabadság (29 January 2005)

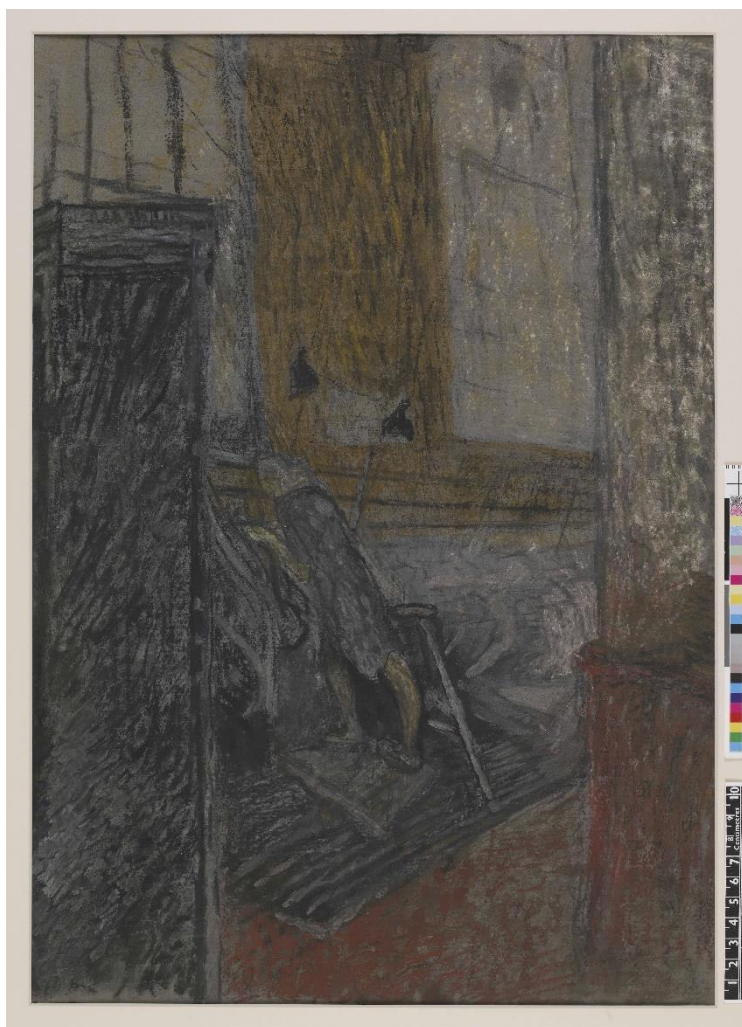
64 Kirk Varnedoe, Vienna 1900 (Art, Architecture and Design) (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1987), p. 174.

started, the artist's mother in law called her “a parasite that is not helping her husband in the hard struggle of life.”⁶⁵

The Drawings on the Ganz factory and the Table Series

In 1947 and 1948 Ilka obtained a permit to enter the premises of the Ganz factory, located on *Margit körút* close to her place of residence. The Ganz factory, situated on *Margit körút* in Budapest, was a large enterprise, producing elements for electrical engineering in one plant, and metal parts for machines and tools in another plant. In the late 1940's after the war, it offered an educational program organized by a liberally-minded engineer. The series of drawings prepared here is not the glorification of industrial work and the physical worker expected by socialist ideology.

Image 56 of the Album (The British Museum)



For the acquaintances of Ilka Gedő this factory topic appeared suspicious right from the outset, and many believed that the artist started to follow the official political line, although for the artist the factory just served to mitigate her hunger for models and topics.

Ilka Gedő is a representative of expressionism. We must think here of Kasimir Edschmid's words according to which in expressionism "everything gets connected with eternity. A patient is not just a crippled person who is suffering, but his body becomes the embodiment of the suffering of every created creature and it takes compassion from the hand of the creator. A house is not just an object, it is not just the stones, it not just the vision, it is not just a rectangle with the features of beauty or ugliness. The house transcends all these. The artist searches for its true essence so long as its genuine form manifests itself and the house is liberated from the vaguely felt coercion of phoney reality..." Or: "The whole space of the expressionist artist becomes a vision. The artist does not look, but he sees. He does not look, he sees. He does not

depict but he experiences. He does not reflect, but he shapes. The chain of facts no longer exists: houses, diseases prostitutes, howls or hunger. Only their vision exists."⁶⁶

These works on paper that were shown at the Shepherd's Gallery in 1995 in New York are as if they had been made at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in its most horrible years. It is not by chance that English viewers are especially attracted by the drawings made in the Ganz factory. You see towering machines that look very much like monsters, while in the shadow of these machines you recognize people that are shown in their fragility. In a workshop workers are scrubbing off the rust from giant-sized metal plates, while hardly any light shimmers through the narrow windows. The light shown on these drawings nevertheless creates such a mysterious and solemn atmosphere that the viewers of these drawings are led to believe that they see a cathedral rather than a factory. One series of the drawings from the Ganz factory of which eight works are now in the collection of the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum were made in pastel.

The subject of another series of drawings are Thonet side-tables.

Image 64 of the Album (British Museum)



In a letter addressed to the artist the well-known Hungarian art historian writes: “Now I return to the drawings. Júlia Szabó is perfectly right to compare them to the works of Giacometti. Any collection of drawings should be glad to have the opportunity to acquire these works on paper. They are self-tormenting and mysterious and they only suggest the physiognomy, and the obvious reason for this is that in the self-portraits the system of lines becomes increasingly independent and thousand times more important than the physiognomy itself. Had the lines been used for depicting the psyche based on drawing the facial expression, they would not have been able to express emotions with such intensity. It is quite likely that the grids and lines of the later-created paintings originated from these line bundles. However, the most beautiful works on paper are the table drawings. I still remember them from the studio exhibition of 1965. And if I had been Júlia Szabó, I would have had much more of them on display. (Allegedly there are still quite a few of them.) These drawings are beautiful, subtle, tormenting, clumsy, pitiable, and fearful. The lines start out from the object and wither away in themselves. Although the table tops seem to be heavy, they nevertheless seem to be floating in space. (I

apologise for the banality, but these tables exist in such a pitiful and vulnerable manner, «as people float about in the void»).'’⁶⁷

5. *The Period of Dictatorship, 1956 and the Period after the Revolution Until 1969*

In the autumn of 1949 Ilka Gedő’s hand became uncertain, and no more drawings were added to the huge number of works on paper created. According to Endre Biró, Ilka Gedő had been drawing with the naturalness of breathing until then. However, suddenly the artistic push and the naïve spontaneity were gone.

An art critic⁶⁸ wrote a review about the artist’s oeuvre exhibition held at the Hungarian National Gallery at the turn of 2004-2005. In connection with the fact that Ilka Gedő fell silent in 1949 only to resume artistic work, not a «quarter of century» as another author⁶⁹ erroneously alleges, but 16 years later, he wrote: “anyone who believes that Ilka Gedő, similarly to the best figures of the European School and of other modern trends, had to stop artistic work due to the well-known and ugly turn of historical events, the deterioration of circumstances, the dictatorial traits of arts policies, will be disappointed by the studies on Ilka Gedő. The artist was paralysed for two decades by doctrinarism of completely opposite nature that, as indicated by the course of events, was at least as intransigent as its institutionalised and state-sponsored counterpart. Obviously it would not be hard to point out the interrelationship and the cause-effect connection between dictatorial communist arts policies and the sect spirit of that circle of friends that had such a fatal effect on Ilka Gedő. And this latter factor had the real influence on the artist. The “circle”, this is how the literature on Ilka Gedő calls this society and this is how this circle, organised from artists, theoreticians and other intellectuals called itself, became an elitist and underground community of intellectuals after the mid-1940’s, irrespective of its views and intentions. According to Ilka Gedő’s own perception and several studies on the artist’s career path, the circle caused a long a crisis in Ilka Gedő’s life. As shown by documents, the painter by that time had been experiencing a deep conflict between the

67 Letter in the artist’s estate.

68 Gyula Rózsa, op. cit.

69 Ágnes Horváth, “Az életmű mint ürügy”[The Oeuvre as an Excuse] *Élet és Irodalom* (15 April 2005)

allegedly mandatory requirements of modernity and her conviction, and, having seen that among the artists regarded by her as really significant only the persecuted and outlawed abstract art is held in esteem, she quit.”

In the 15 April 2005 issue of *Élet és Irodalom* Ágnes Horváth takes issue with Gyula Rózsa: “Most of the article written by Gyula Rózsa is devoted to the artist’s actually «late recognition». The author is apparently satisfied with the fact that he can, at last, blame something other than the communist cultural policies, that he himself served for decades, for the quarter-century long «suppression» of Ilka Gedő, an artist who belonged to the circle of friends and intellectuals around the European School. Indeed, he finds the scapegoat in a society of «completely opposite nature» «consisting of artists, theoreticians and other intellectuals» who were the staunchest and most intransigent opponents of these communist cultural policies. According to Gyula Rózsa, this «circle»—Lajos Szabó, Béla Tábor, Béla Hamvas, Katalin Kemény, Stefánia Mándy⁷⁰, Júlia Vajda, Endre Bálint, József Jakovits, Attila Kotányi, Endre Bíró⁷¹ and others—expelled Ilka Gedő «because she was not an abstract artist», which meant that it was the «doctrinarism» of the circle that «silenced» the young painter who started her career during and after the war with beautiful figurative works and portraits. It is not primarily the author of this article who is responsible for this vilifying mystification. He merely amplifies the conspiracy theory of the «literature on Gedő» that relies on a one-sided source. Although István Hajdu mentions this conspiracy theory only cautiously in the Ilka Gedő album, he is prone to emphasize it much more poignantly in his interviews. Ágnes Horváth points out that this happens irrespective of the fact that “in his study written for the album on Ilka Gedő István Hajdu still quotes the artist’s husband according to which «the terrible conflict springing from outgrowing the child prodigy in fact occurred at a deeper level. It was not rooted in the uncomprehending reception, nor in the atmosphere in our circle.»”

According to Ágnes Horváth the collision between Ilka Gedő and the circle is a „*vilifying mystification*”, in other words, not a single word of this story is true. However, when one reads

70 Stefánia Mándy (1918 - 2001) was a poet and translator and a writer on visual arts. She wrote a voluminous work on Lajos Vada (Budapest: Corvina, 1984).

71 It is astonishing but reveals quite a lot of the author’s intentions that Endre Bíró is mentioned as belonging to the “circle”.

the recollections of Endre Bíró on Ilka Gedő's artistic career, one can immediately notice that this talk of a conflict between Ilka Gedő and the circle is not lie.

Endre Bíró writes about the : „... realisation that, among the main reasons for the long break in her work, the conflict between this self-absorbed frenzy of following reality/an image and the post-war 'hard-line', avant-garde exertions of our friends played important roles. This conflict between the sketching child prodigy's attitude and the existence of modern art would obviously have arisen in some other sphere as well, sooner or later. For the moment it is sufficient to document this with the exchange of letters between Ilka and Ernő Kállai, published in the Catalogue of the István Király Múzeum Exhibition. The circle, including myself, let us call it Lajos Szabó's circle, which Ilka became a part of with our marriage, looked at everything that was 'figurative' representation with a misty and uncomprehending suspicion. It was not an absolute refusal, for example Vajda, who was viewed as an authority, left mostly figurative works behind, neither had Endre Bálint ever done 'total' abstraction. Still, the members did not know what to do with Ilka's drawings during and following the war.” The artists taking part in Lajos Szabó's circle were passionate advocates of avant-garde art and they rejected the drawings of Ilka Gedő as expressions of emotional realism, although, as the artist explains in her letter of 21 August 1984 written to Miklós Szentkuthy, the drawings made at the Ganz factory did not represent traditional figuration.

Obviously there were also other reasons for stopping artistic work than the lack of understanding and recognition⁷² of Ilka Gedő's art. As Endre Bíró points out, «the terrible conflict springing from outgrowing the role of child prodigy in fact occurred at a deeper level. It was not rooted in the uncomprehending reception, nor in the atmosphere in our circle against

72 Endre Bíró also writes about a by no means insignificant element of this conflict: „The most serious 'impediment' for Ilka was Lajos Szabó's (real or misinterpreted) teaching on "women's place in the intellectual world". Dialectic lectures were delivered, essentially following Jewish tradition (which in ancient times totally excluded women from the cult). Thus, women's relation to the intellect would be different in its essence and, as such, secondary to that of men's. Lajos Szabó viewed the entire European intellectual tradition as one organic and inter-linked whole. He tried to demonstrate to us the main trends, structure and anatomy of this living process. Accordingly, he also spoke about the ultra-radicalists in this men-women-intellect issue, namely about Otto Weininger (*Geschlecht und Charakter*). However, by no means did he present it as somebody whose views he would share. Ilka launched herself on the topic. With characteristic precision, she read Otto Weininger in almost hair-splitting detail, took notes, and filled a big notebook with questions and ponderings directly addressed to Lajos Szabó. All this was just after discontinuing work, perhaps parallel with reading Goethe's colour theory or directly afterwards.” Endre Bíró, *Recollections of the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő* In: István Hajdu–Dávid Bíró, op. cit., p. 245. (Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* has been preserved in the artist's estate. The volume contains notes and remarks written on the margin of the page.)

which she tried to appeal to Ernő Kállai in that particular letter. In actual fact, Ilka was too independent to be hindered by such things. »⁷³

In sum we could say that there were three reasons for stopping artistic work. The first one was the onset of Communist dictatorship, the second the lack of recognition accorded to Ilka Gedő's art by the members of the Lajos Szabó circle and the third one is something that was mentioned just above when quoting Endre Bíró. The renowned theorist and art historian Géza Perneczky also writes about this third likely reason : „As to the stilling of her activity, I shall later venture an explanation that perhaps assigns less weight to the incomprehension of the friends around her. (...) The recognition that the path that until then had been regarded as negotiable (to put it another way, the further pursuit of classical modernism) could only lead towards a cramping-up, or merely add to the sterile waste-tip of epigonism. Ilka Gedő too was one of those for whom a glimpse of this cul-de-sac signalled an order to halt. To be sure, it would not have been as dramatic, or as radical, as this suggests; equally, there may well have been other reasons, personal or family considerations, for instance-for falling silent. Yet looking back from a perspective of half a century, one cannot help feeling that it was some major ethical impulse that led her to lay down her pencil. (...) Which brings me to my conclusion. I feel that Ilka Gedő's withdrawal was an act that was made within the artistic arena. On reaching a point beyond which the sole paths open to her lay in the direction of sterile planning or the proliferation of copycats, she turned away and fell silent, because that was the only way she could remain true to herself and to the world of her earlier drawings. (...) I am aware of just one other gesture in Hungarian art of those years that is comparable to her «stepping aside»: that was the pit Béla Veszelszky dug in the garden of his house on Budapest's Rose Hill and into which he withdrew with a humility comparable to Ilka Gedő's resignation. Veszelszky's «observatory» was a funnel-shaped hole that pointed towards the heavens like a telescope.»⁷⁴

Ágnes Horváth is right in saying that, in contrast to Gyula Rózsa, the members of the circle “started to advocate Ilka Gedő's art not in 2005, twenty years after her death”. However she is

73 Endre Bíró, *Recollections of the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő* In: István Hajdu–Dávid Bíró, op. cit., p. 249.

74 Géza Perneczky, “Színes könyv Gedő Ilkának” [A Colour Album for Ilka Gedő] *Holmi*, no. 12 (2002)

wrong when she points out that Gyula Rózsa uses the recognition of the greatness of Ilka Gedő's art “as a pretext for bringing to the same denominator one of the worst political systems of the 20th century with artists and theoreticians that were the enemies of the state's power, thus creating an equality between the persecutor and the persecuted.”

The wording of Ágnes Horváth's article suggests that Ilka Gedő was accorded the same treatment as the other members of the group, because, similarly to the other members, she, too, was under recognised by the communist system. The author of this study, a close witness to some substantial sections of the artist's career path, believes that what was true for the whole of the group during the Stalinist, completely totalitarian stage of the dictatorship was, from the beginning of 1960's, no longer valid for every member of the group (Ágnes Horváth: “the best figures of the European School and of other modern trends”) Several members of the group made a career during the period of “suave” dictatorship, while Ilka Gedő was still an under recognised artist. If Ágnes Horváth were right, then Endre Bálint, who had forty-two⁷⁵ exhibitions between his return home 1962 and 1984 and whose work was recognised with the Kossuth prize would fall into the same category as Ilka Gedő who was fifty years old at the time of her first official exhibition. As regards being an “advocate” of Ilka Gedő, it must be said that this is a rather vague notion as her art would not just have called for advocacy but it would also have required a recognition commensurate with its artistic value. The drawings of Ilka Gedő created between 1945 and 1949 belong to the best drawings of 20th-century European graphic art.

Although Ilka Gedő stopped creating works of art (and she would not even draw when playing with her own children), this did not mean that her interest in art stopped. She pursued extensive studies in art history and the theory of art. This was actually research work as shown by a huge number of notebooks preserved in the artist's estate. In addition to the title of the work, the cover of each notebook also shows the date. In September 1949 the artist read Gino Severini's work on the theory of painting. She liked to go back to original texts written by the artists. She thoroughly studied Uhde-Bernay's two-volume selection of letters written by artists, and she prepared very thorough notes of the anthology titled *Artists on Art*⁷⁶ writing down her notes in

75 Source: Bálint Endre kiállítása [The Exhibition of Endre Bálint] (Budapest: Műcsarnok, 1984), p. 4. (List of solo exhibitions)

76 R. Goldwater and M. Treves (eds.), *Artists on Art* (From the VIth to the XXth century). (London: Keagan and Paul, 1947).

English and translating the most important ones into Hungarian. She got acquainted with the writings of the most famous figures of the avantgarde and modernism on art. (Especially detailed notes were made from the texts by Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Ferdinand Hodler, Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh.)

It was during this period that, in six notebooks, a nearly complete translation of Ferdinand Ebner's *Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten* was prepared. In the worst years of Stalinist dictatorship, the artist studied—among others—the works of Martin Buber. The notes from books published in foreign languages were noted down in the original language, but if the artist regarded something very important she also translated the quote into Hungarian.

Ilka Gedő translated long passages from Goethe's theory of colours, and she redrew the charts of this work in her own notes. The translations include, among others, the nearly complete text titled the *Sensual and moral effect of colour* from the sixth book of the theory of colours.

The artist regarded this part so important that she also wrote down her thoughts and ideas titled “Subjective-formalist speculations of mystique of the colour hexagon”.⁷⁷ The otherwise usual note-taking of texts in Hungarian translation is left out here, and, she writes down the following sentence in the original: “When I first notice the increasing distance between yellow and blue, and then the process of their becoming red, whereby these two opposing colours are reconciled and united in a third item, I always come to that strange and mysterious attitude in which the separated and contradictory characters of these two colours' spiritual meaning becomes manifested. And when we see how these two colours revive downwards the green and upwards the red, we must necessarily think of Elohim's terrestrial and celestial beings.”⁷⁸

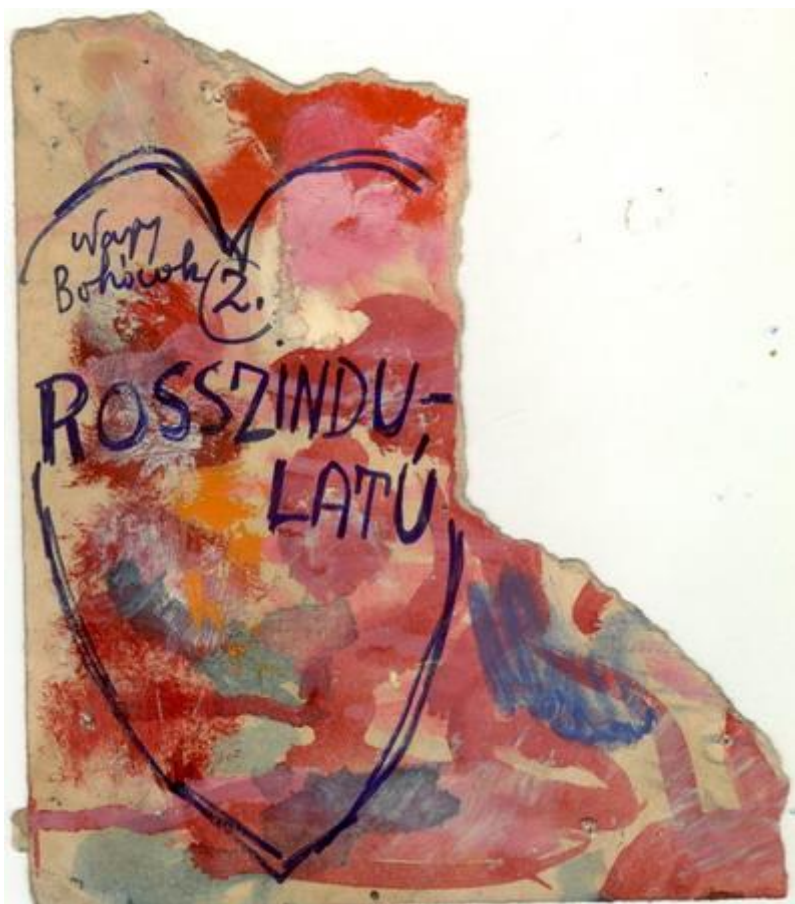
77 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 136.)

78 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Color Theory* (New York:Van Nostrand Rheinhold Company, 1971), p. 190.

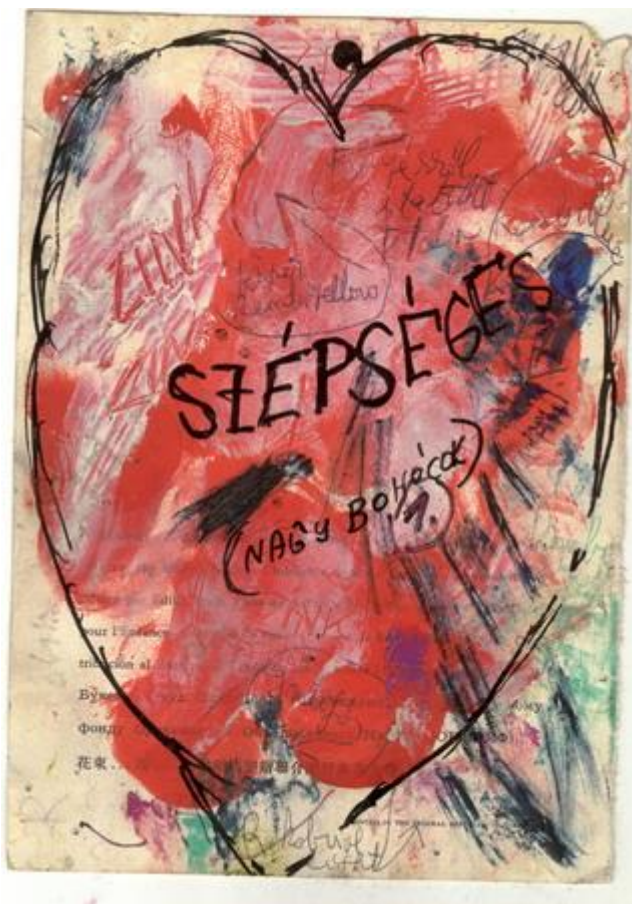
The original text: "Wenn man erst das Auseinandergehen des Gelben und Blauen wird recht gefaßt, besonders aber die Steigerung ins Rote genugsam betrachtet haben, wodurch das Entgegengesetzte sich gegeneinander neigt, und sich in einem Dritten vereinigt, dann wird gewiß eine besondere geheimnisvolle Anschauung eintreten, daß man diesen beiden getrennten, einander entgegengesetzten Wesen eine geistige Bedeutung unterlegen könne, und man wird sich kaum enthalten, wenn man sie unterwärts das Grün und oberwärts das Rot hervorbringen sieht, dort an die irdischen, hier an die himmlischen Ausgeburten der Elohim zu gedenken."

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften I* (Goethes Werke Band XIII). (München: Verlag C. H. Beck 2002), p. 521.

Colour Pattern No. 276



Colour Pattern No. 296



As shown by her notes on colour theory, the artist took a keen interest in the colour theories of Philipp Otto Runge and Schopenhauer. Based on Notebook No. 176, we know that, based on a German translation, she read Michel-Eugène Chevreul's *The Law of Simultaneous Colour Contrast*. Notebook No. 281 contains Ferdinand Hodler's ideas on colours. The artist must in all probability have come across the idea that colours have an allegorical, symbolic and even mystical meaning already in Goethe's writings: "The colour characterises and differentiates the objects; it enhances and emphasizes and it contributes to the decorative effect with an extraordinary force. (...) Colours have an impact on morality. They are one component of joy and gladness. It is especially light colours along with light that create such an impression. However, dark colours give birth to melancholy and dismay./ To white we attribute the meaning of virtue, whereas black depicts evil and pain. Vivid red has the impact of hardness and passion, whereas light blue evokes soft feelings and violet sadness. The values of colours, as matching ornaments, are enhanced, harmonised or they accompany one another through

their combination or they create contradictions. / The stimuli of colours originate primarily from colour accords and in the knowledge of the various hues of the same colour. Mild harmonies, so it seems, penetrate the soul more easily and they really seem to be the favourite colour accords of the heart. But contrasts, disharmonies surprise us and provoke us; they seem to perpetrate violence on the nervous system. But transitions from soft colour accords to hard ones that constitute a contrast are frequent emotions in life. / And all the richness of colours, these light and dark hues, these contrasts and the steadily changing accords of colours with their vibrant hues are all the gifts of light.”⁷⁹

In the mid-1960's the artist put nearly all the drawings of the preceding period in passepartouts and she also selected them into folders according to topics. This activity lasted for many years. The artist was always fascinated by the visual world and she wanted to follow her own path and she did not want to become a follower of any of the trendy styles. She followed her own way, and was lucky enough to have a way of her own. Never in her life had she been forced by circumstances to sell her works, which meant that she could try out what freedom meant. However much positive impetus freedom gives, it can also be very frightening. Even among artists we can observe the happiness that is derived from the lack of freedom. In other words, the individual finds a pleasure in being not free. If I am not the one who decides and if I am the servant of others, I am exempted from confronting the lure and dizzying vortex of liberty, because someone else decides instead of me. The artist was absolutely sincere when asking her questions. On 10 August 1949 she wrote a letter to the famous art critic, Ernő Kállai: *“I often look at the catalogue of the Vajda exhibition that took place many years ago in the Alkotás Gallery. In the midst of what sometimes seems like hopeless torment and brooding these few pictures refresh me like mountain air. / A few days ago in the Foreword to the catalogue my attention was caught by a reference to Vajda's fascination (before his death) with a picture in a certain 'Post-Impressionist' style, depicting a loving couple. He couldn't admire enough how the shape of the couple had been transformed into the essence of expressive ornamentation and thought-inspiring form. I experienced a personal absolution through his fascination and from the statement: “The astonishing power of pictorial depiction conjured up in the guise of reality the eternal ecstasy of love...” IN THE GUISE OF REALITY.. These words between the lines recall the agony of years of contemplation, and they now ease the torment of those years.*

The poem of Attila József comes to mind: "Destiny, loosen the knot." I am amazed that Vajda should choose, just before his death, to talk of this picture with such love, and the knowledge that Vajda could be so fond of such a picture came as a relief. / This is why I mention the merciful easing of torment. I could have written of freedom. I felt the choice of love, the choice of light in Vajda seeing (in a Post-Impressionist picture!) the transformation of form into expressive ornament. I loved him for that and felt as though I wanted to talk to him immediately. That is why I am writing this letter now. Something else reinforced my need to write to you--the discovery, two days later, of the following sentence in an old issue of the magazine Szép Szó (Beautiful Word): «The history of art proves that all art with a universal perspective is an ornamental and symbolic art. This applies to the vision of medieval painting and sculpture in addition to all the objective representation they contain. There is a significant justification for the fact that modern symbolic art almost totally excludes representation. However, I cannot expand on this within the scope of the present article.» My immediate reaction was to ask why does modern art exclude representation? That is how I got to this letter. Is it possible not to exclude objective representation? Could it be in the guise of reality? This question has been tormenting me for years. I know, of course, it is possible, but is it possible for us today, for me? I read in one of Van Gogh's letters: "I have a terrible fear of losing the reality of form." What was he afraid of losing: Roulin's real 'true' face, the man wearing his coat, the buttons on his coat acting as a focal point, a storehouse of symbols? Is reality for him a pretext through which he expresses his symbols? Or is the cypress tree the reality, the symbol itself, in front of which he bows his head and follows? Certainly something makes me adopt this view. And this is not cowardice, is it? Once I dare go forward on this road even one step, bang, one of my fellow debaters hits me on the head, claiming we artists moved beyond these realist and impressionist styles a long time ago. Or I am told: "You are still at Van Gogh, but we are at Picasso." Therefore, according to these people, I belong to those whom the Vajda catalogue describes as weak, cowardly and lazy for existing on such a level of intellectual tension, as is called, for want of a better word, abstract art. I often hear the remark, «You are not my fellow sufferer.» However, I don't belong to those who are mentioned in the Haggadah as being incapable of asking pertinent questions. Why does modern symbolic art exclude representation?" / No amount of work seems too much for me to learn about these matters. Not only am I willing to plane the wood but I am prepared to cut down the tree. I only wait for someone to tell me: «Go, there is the forest!» / Dear Master Kállai, don't be offended by this letter, I am not good at fancy speeches but this is a stammering (although not a cry) for

help! I am looking for a spring to quench my thirst or to be more prosaic, I am looking for sources from which I can learn something. Time is rushing by. Once again, please forgive me troubling you! /Kind regards,/Ilka Gedő.”⁸⁰ Ilka Gedő lends a greater emphasis to her letter by not even mentioning that the author of the article published in *Szép Szó* is Ernő Kállai himself.

Ernő Kállai recognizes the bitterness expressed in the artist’s letter, and he sends a wise reply: “Please excuse my pencil-written reply. Thank you for the very interesting and captivating letter, and also for the trust in me. I am willing to try and help you find your way out of your mental torment with art. For this it is necessary for us occasionally to have searching discussions about these things. I presume you are a painter, so it would be sensible if I could look at your pictures first and our discussions would start from there. At the moment, I am very busy, but I shall do my best to visit you soon. Please write and tell me if you are usually at home at six o’clock in the evening, and whether that would be a convenient time for you. For my part I will announce my visit a day or two beforehand. / Until then, I would advise you to use your eyes and follow your heart. What I say is a bit banal, but wise. Don’t take any notice of the clever know-all and snobs to whom Van Gogh is an «outworn concept» and according to whom you have to go by Picasso’s abstract art. All aesthetic dogma and direct programs of development are a lot of hot air. There is no set way to salvation in art where every road leads to Rome and where there are many kinds of green forests. Think of old Bonnard: even today his Post-Impressionism is alive and vigorously beautiful. But we’ll be talking about all this and the various motivations of abstract art, personally. / Kind regards,/Ernő Kállai”⁸¹

From 1950 Ilka Gedő did not seek employment, but pursued extensive art historical, colour theory studies. She read theoretical literature in Hungarian, German, English and French making extensive notes about her readings and this way she acquired an extensive body of knowledge without which she would not have been able to create the works of the second artistic period. Among the members of the circle of Lajos Szabó the word “research” had a meaning that is different from the accepted sense of the word. By “research” the members did not only mean scientific or scholarly research, but they held the view that research „includes

80 The manuscript of the letter is held by the archives of the Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

81 The manuscript of the letter is held by the archives of the Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

all types of art and all human acts that indeed bring something new into the world, evidently not out of thin air, but from cultural, linguistic and philosophical traditions and from their expansion. (...) However, as I see it, this expansive and broad interpretation of research and creative work among the membership was a great aid in the period when she undertook no actual creative work and instead concentrated on her studies. She replaced drawing and painting with reading professional literature and taking notes.⁸²

In the circle of Lajos Szabó the art of the Hungarian painter Lajos Vajda was appreciated very much indeed. Ilka Gedő saw the memorial exhibition of Lajos Vajda that took place in 1943 in the *Alkotás Művészetek Háza*. In her letter written to Ernő Kállai she also quotes from the text of the exhibition catalogue⁸³, a text that was written by Ernő Kállai. Some members of the circle of Lajos Szabó held Lajos Vajda in such a high esteem that the whole of his oeuvre was regarded by them as being separate from 20th-century Hungarian art, and they even declared that Lajos Vajda is the saint in whose art there are genuine manifestations of religious sentiment, whereas about the other great figures of 20th century European art it cannot be said that they had reached the same lofty heights as Lajos Vajda did. Ilka Gedő loved and appreciated the art of Lajos Vajda but (in response to Stefánia Mándy's writing) she wrote an essay on Lajos Vajda, because she really did not like the idea of some Budapest intellectuals setting up a rank-order of artists in terms of the intensity of their religiousness. This study is important not only because it deals with the issue of figurative and abstract art, but also because it anticipates the questions and problems and even the working method of Ilka Gedő's second artistic period. A digression in the study of Mándy Stefánia attacks Endre Bálint who, while fleeing into the world of instincts, fails to address the Thou, the second person. (Reference to the Austrian philosopher Ferdinand Ebner or possibly to the "Thou" of the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.) Endre Bálint wrote a response to Stefánia Mándy's ideas: the response to the attack was a counter-attack. A draft letter dated 4 March 1983 has been preserved in the manuscript estate of Ilka Gedő, and it cannot be said with absolute certainty whether it was sent or was not sent to the addressee, Júlia Szabó one of the best Hungarian art historians of the 20th century. *"Endre Bálint also wrote an answer to this essay before I wrote*

82 Endre Biró, *Recollections of the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő* In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit., 248.

83 Vajda Lajos festőművész emlékkiállítás, [Memorial Exhibition of Ilka Gedő] (Budapest: Alkotás Művészház, 1943), p. 1.

my own response, which meant that I wrote my study after having read theirs, and while I was progressing I forgot more and more about the polemics. In Endre Bálint's study it was all different, he countered the attack with a counter attack. (I quote a sentence that has stuck in my memory: « From your seven-league boots with which you want to approach reality the sack of memories is missing.») A public debate was planned on the exchange of letters between Mándy and Bálint. I wrote my contribution as a preparation for the debating session. I was waiting, waiting for a long time! Finally, Béla Tábor and Lajos Szabó suddenly blurted out that my essay tainted the atmosphere...From that time on, not a single remark or conversation has taken place about these three essays. (Later on, Stefánia Mándy asked me whether I wanted to publish it, even though they knew that this essay of mine had been meant for the debating session.) A long time had to go by before I understood: no principles, no ideas, no issues of art history or of religious morality were at stake. They understood well that I did not aim to get praise from them for my enthusiastic views. I rather aimed at stimulating a joint discussion! And I also wanted to get a reply to my burning questions! Oh yes, in my case it took quite a while for the penny to drop. Now I see clearly that this was a sordid power struggle during which the opponents tried to manipulate and psychologically intimidate one another. To mention just one thing. One or two years before this essay of mine was born Lajos Szabó started to draw calligraphies. / Lajos Szabó and Béla Tábor enjoyed a great deal of respect among the members of the circle, which should not be forgotten. And I was about more than 20 years younger than them. / In my essay, apart from my instinctive rejection of this dogmatic and narrow-minded tone, I refused to accept an absolute separation of Lajos Vajda from Klee and other figures of modern art that were alleged to have done the same as Endre Bálint. This separation took place in the same way referring to values metaphysics and religious morality that you could only understand if you had the opportunity to read the study of Stefánia Mándy. / The reason for this separation was not of a nature that it could have been discussed or talked about and this is why my essay tainted the atmosphere. This problem ceases to exist the very moment when they decide that it is worth betting on a different horse. / In other words, it is completely understandable that both Endre Bálint and Béla Tábor wanted these writings to fall into oblivion. Endre Bálint wanted to forget this because it is not really something to boast about that one is in the closest friendship with those who used to condemn him by invoking principles of metaphysics and the holiest things. Béla Tábor wanted to forget this debate because he might have thought it inappropriate to make such a turn about without «having

exercised any self-criticism». ”⁸⁴ Stefánia Mándy remembers the very same story differently: „In the autumn of 1954 after visiting a studio that was at that time characteristic, but where no particularly good works could be seen, I wrote down the text of this essay that was originally written for my own use. A short time afterwards I happened to see the works of Lajos Vajda kept in a folder of the „studio flat” of *Rottenbiller utca*. This induced me to read my essay there. I never thought that it would have any special reverberations. After some letters have been exchanged, this debate that started as an intense one came to a sudden halt.”⁸⁵

Endre Biró remembers this debate that took place in 1955 differently. In a diary entry⁸⁶ dated 31 May 1955 he wrote: "The thing of Lajos Szabó, Ilka and the essay about Lajos Vajda. /A sleepless night./ Great financial misery./ Intense indignation. / "Nasty folks! Get away from here! / Should I stop interpreting the debating parties' views. / But why is this a non-starter? Should I adopt a neutral attitude towards everyone? Why is this impossible? Or should I nevertheless try to be neutral? Why will this mop up my energies? / I do not want to return to neutrality and nor is this possible now. The only possibility is to take a stand. But, under these circumstances, how is it possible to have a final refuge without which you cannot exist?/ The last junction is, of course, Ilka. / The dense web of contradictions is around Ilka. And this must be approached in much more concrete terms than as a black and white play, it cannot be talked away in a Romantic manner. / It is no longer possible to politely exercise self-criticism by invoking the slogan «everybody has their own mistakes». It is impossible to distribute the blame and then mutually forgive each other. This view is justified. Why? / It is impossible because Ilka has never forgiven anything to anyone. She has never recognised her own faults. And I don't see how I could have done anything differently, although I am willing to accept that I made faults in good faith. From a psychological aspect, Ilka could not have responded differently to my faults. / But the whole thing is not a psychological issue. / Do I believe Ilka's conduct to be tyrannical? Yes, I do. Her conduct represents a perverse use of her intellectual skills. / And what should I believe about Lajos Szabó? To be sure, I can't think that Lajos tricked Ilka in a childish and unjustified way. But the fact of the matter is that he did «play a

84 The letter is preserved in the artist's estate.

85 Stefánia Mándy, "Gedő Ilka esszéjének előtörténetéhez" [On the Antecedents of Ilka Gedő's Essay] *Holmi* no. 12 (1990)

86 Note fragment in the manuscript estate of Endre Biró.

trick on her». / Lajos Szabó is fully convinced that he should not allow anyone to state anything on a subject matter that he is also dealing with if the person concerned does not follow his views. But it is also true that if a person tried to follow the footsteps of Lajos Szabó, then the result was not at all convincing for me (cf. the essay written by Stefánia Mándy). / To identify myself with Stefánia Mándy's views would have meant even for me a rejection of my inner self. / Especially in the eyes of Ilka. It would have been a sinful lie to have kept silent about this. / Lajos believes he can easily take the responsibility for identifying himself with Stefánia Mándy's views. This, however, is not convincing for me. / Only one suspicion lingers in me: in the second half of Ilka's essay the problem of those artists who have not experienced salvation is described in such a genial manner, that Lajos Szabó responded to this with an irritation and exaggeration that he cannot correct this criticism in any form. / He could, for example, mitigate the harshness of his criticism of Ilka's essay by criticising it in parts. For example, by accepting one statement in the second part of the essay as correct and by dismissing the rest. By saying, this statement is up to the mark, and try to clarify the rest of your ideas. / I know from my own experience that it might prove to be life-threatening to enter a debate with certain views. But as far as Lajos Vajda is concerned, Ilka has done her utmost to ease the tensions.”

The essay of Ilka Gedő asks completely justified questions: *“Surely, we cannot possibly consider ourselves more sensitive, more righteous than Klee, Picasso or Miro, or if you will, saying that we have ties to the certain «second person» whereas they did not. However much ridiculous it might sound, I am so much sure of this as if I myself were both persons that Klee was not a trace more indecent than Van Gogh. I do not use the word indecent because I joke, because that is what it finally comes down to; whether they see that which they confess, or whether they are lying. (...) Artists, painters are not Christ who redeems the world. (...) The artist, the painter, is not Christ who redeems the world, at best he is a Grünewald (his Golgotha!), but at the very most he creates only to his own highest level. The «negative style» does the same. Without wanting to, I must believe the greater and lesser artists of the negative style when they reveal that nowadays suffering is like that. (I, for example, have protested against such suffering and thus against its depiction as well.) I specifically believe this mutual suffering to be extremely «catacombic», as I do this common depiction that bears the marks of the negative style. This art can reject ‘nothingness’ with tremendous force if you formulate it this way: it does not reject the ‘no’. But then, do we have the right to demand this rejection (a*

rejection which is proclaimed by the whole of history right up to the present ongoing moment, and this rejection is contained in every style waiting with eternal patience to take its place within the whole.) Precisely for this reason, the mood of your essay is such that it brings to mind such comparisons as the previous reference to Christ.”

In the second half of her essay, the artist confronts the very same issues that she had already raised in her letter written to Ernő Kállai, while criticising these self-appointed geniuses who acted on the principle “*We do not depict but create*”. The quotes, taken from the anthology *Artists on Art*⁸⁷ published in 1947, of Ilka Gedő’s essay are interesting: “*Those manifestos that say «We do not depict but create, » etc. sound more like speeches by futurists and camp-followers. In contrast to this, Picasso in 1923 wrote the following, “Cubism is not different from any other school of painting. The same principles and the same elements are common to all.” And in 1935, “There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterwards you can remove all traces of reality.” And also here: “Nor is there any ‘figurative’ and ‘non-figurative’ art. Everything appears to us in the guise of a ‘figure’. Even in metaphysics ideas are expressed by means of symbolic ‘figures’... See how ridiculous it is, then, to think of painting without ‘figuration’.*” *Léger (1935)*, “They are not ‘abstract’, since they are composed of real values: colours and geometric forms. There is no abstraction.” *Mondrian (1937)*, “[Non-figurative art shows that] ‘art’ is not the expression of the appearance of reality such as we see it, nor of the life which we live, but that it is the expression of true reality and true life... indefinable but realisable” in art. Could it be that what this is all about is nothing more than that this “true reality and true life” once coincided with the reality we see and in which we live?”⁸⁸

The question itself seems to suggest the answer, and it can be said that Ilka Gedő had come to an honest answer in connection with the problem of figuration versus abstraction. Then she also quotes from Klee’s letter written in 1902: “I want to be as though new-born, knowing nothing, absolutely nothing about Europe; ignoring poets and fashions, to be almost primitive.

87 Ilka Gedő takes the quotes from R. Goldwater and M. Treves (eds.), *Artists on Art (From the VIVth to the XXth Century)* (London: Keagan and Paul, 1947), Picasso: p. 417. & p. 420; Léger: p.424; Mondrian: p. 428.

88 The complete text of this study can be found in István Hajdu–Dávid Bíró, op. cit. pp. 220-231. The study was also published in *Holmi* no. 12 (1990)

Then I want to do something very modest; to work out by myself a tiny motive, one that my pencil will be able to hold without any technique. One favourable moment is enough. The little thing is easily and concisely set down. It's already done! It was a tiny but real affair, and someday, through the repetition of such small but original deeds, there will come one work upon which I can really build."⁸⁹

After the revolution of 1956 nearly all the members of the circle Lajos Szabó emigrated to the West. The Gedő-Bíró family also wanted to go but their attempt to escape Hungary failed. In December 1956 Ilka Gedő travelled to Vienna with her elder son, and according to plans her husband and her younger son would walk across the border, at that time left without border police, to the West and the family would meet in Vienna. Endre Bíró and the younger son were caught and forcibly brought back to the capital and a second attempt to flee the country was not made. Ilka Gedő and her elder son soon returned to Hungary.

The Bíró-Gedő couple maintained contacts with the emigrated members of the circle by letter. One of the letters written by Lajos Szabó to Endre Bíró mentions that, “I realised just today what, half-secretly, my nostalgia, is for: it is for the clouds of Budapest. I have never seen clouds that are like those of Budapest here, even though this is not the first time that I am in Vienna. Compared with the complexity and the excitement of the Budapest clouds, the clouds of Vienna are simple, serene and comfortable.”⁹⁰

In 1962, on the occasion of exhibition commemorating the 1942 exhibition of socialist artists the National Gallery bought three drawings of Ilka Gedő. In his biographical interview Endre Bíró remembers: “one day Endre Bálint visited us just when Ilka Gedő was making passepartout for her drawings. He had never seen the drawings and he was simply fascinated by them.”⁹¹ It may have been true that this was the first time that he saw the drawings that were

89 Paul Klee's diary entry dated 22 June 1902. In: Felix Klee (ed.), *Tagebücher von Paul Klee 1898-1918* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1957), p. 132. Ilka Gedő quotes from R. Goldwater and M. Treves (eds.), *Artists on Art (From the XIth to the XXth century)* (London: Keagan and Paul, 1947), pp. 442-443

90 Letter in the manuscript estate of Endre Bíró.

91 Biographical interview.

made after the war, but this recollection is somewhat contradicted by Endre Bálint's memories.⁹²

The first solo exhibition of the artist was a studio exhibition opened on 15 May 1965 that showed a selection of drawings that were made between 1945 and 1948. At that time a great deal of courage was needed to organise a private exhibition without any official permit, but to my greatest surprise there were no official measures taken against this event.

The exhibition was organised by Endre Bálint. It is quite probable that then he really wanted to help, but later on, by relying on his good personal contacts with the higher echelons of the party he caused a lot of harm to the appreciation of Ilka Gedő's art. (Endre Bálint and György Aczél, the all-powerful cultural commissar of the system, were good friends because they were in the same orphanage as children.) Endre Bálint could sometimes pose as the victim of the regime, and then he was good at using his good connections for his own benefit. Nevertheless, it was thanks to Ilka Gedő's 1965 exhibition that the artist got an impetus that allowed her to resume artistic activities. Ilka Gedő was convinced that there is only a seeming contradiction between the help received in 1965 from Bálint and his immoral attacks against the artist taking place in the 1980's. Ilka Gedő explained to her husband that the exhibition was also about showing that Ilka had finished her artistic career, illustrating with the exhibition that this career had come to an end and it was already a history of the past. After the exhibition the artist got a decrepit but huge desk, and she started to select her drawings by topics and put them in passepartout. This was an effort involving years of diligent work as a result of which most of the drawings had been put into passepartouts.

6. Second Artistic Period: the Oil Paintings

The paintings of the second artistic period were made with the so-called two-stage method: first a small drawing that can also be interpreted as the visual reflection of a sudden flash of idea was born under the spur of the moment. This became the starting point of the painting, because the blown-up copy of this drawing was transferred to the canvas with the help of a grid drawn on the canvas. The artist was working simultaneously on several pictures, and this

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Endre Bálint, op. cit., pp. 148-149.

could have been the reason why the making of each painting is registered in a separate diary dedicated to the given picture. The diary entries register all the artist's speculations in connection with the making of the painting. When she put a picture aside she put away the relevant diary and continued to work on another picture. Before resuming work on a picture she always read her earlier diary notes. Ilka Gedő was very familiar with the effect of colours and colour effects. The mixing of colours did not occur in a random manner, but by looking for a given colour and/or colour hue that in the artist's mind was required at the given moment. The colour hues and colour variations of a given basic colour were selected by basic colours and put into separate boxes. By colour patterns (the artist's expression) the artist meant small pieces of scrap or cardboard, not seldom pieces of canvas, that served as a trial for various colour combinations. "The colour plates are big pieces of corrugated cardboard on which colour patterns chosen or prepared for a picture, were pinned with a drawing pin. The artist collected the colour patterns in big corrugated cardboard boxes, categorising them by the dominant colour. From these boxes, the artist selected the colour patterns for the colour plate of the picture in progress, often over days."⁹³

The painter paid very careful attention to the oil paints that she used. " During our stay in Paris, Ilka bought a vast paint collection. After 1970, she exclusively used this oil collection and there was a constant worry about a possible need for a new supply. At the same time several consciously and purposefully put together colour patterns were prepared on pieces of paper and primed canvas pieces of the most varied kind. These usually show the colours, taken from the tube or thinned down to various extents, alongside the combinations largely created by painting over layers (another colour painted over dry paint) or less often by mixing colours. The names of each component and the manufacturer were carefully written on them. She often showed me the fine differences between colours of the same name produced by different factories. She filed these colour patterns by their hundreds, the results of conscious experiments, as well as by chance, in huge cardboard boxes categorised according to their dominant colour. Labels painted with thick brush or Indian ink help us to orient ourselves among them: BLUE—GREEN—BLACK—GREY—VIOL, etc. I am not sure whether she could ever have found the actual tube necessary for recreating an accidental colour pattern without a label, as she could for those with labels. I suspect she only found the 'conscious'

patterns labelled after the tubes. Similarly to the titles and texts of her workbooks, the labels of these colour plates also carry a very intimate, solitary and poetic content, as if they were the aura of the pictures in preparation. The pinned-up colourful scraps have names written with a thick brush or Indian ink and expressing a certain mood. As a taster for those expressing an inner state of mind: Languid; Pensive; Calm Before a Storm; Ruffled; Sorrow; Protestation; Omen; Insidious Gentleness; Attack; Forced Delight; Stubborn; Wild; Closed, etc. I would be dishonest if I were to say that I could see the connection between the 'colour-atmosphere' and the titles of the actual scraps, yet Ilka must have given these names through some sort of empathy. It is impossible for me not to believe that, back then, when Ilka was reading Goethe's colour theory, that we would not have talked a lot about the chapter "*Sinnlich-sittliche Wirkung der Farbe*" [The Sensual-Moral Effect of Colour]."⁹⁴

The creation of a painting would be an intellectual chess play that often took years. The artist made notes step by step on her ideas and speculations as she proceeded with the painting. These speculations mostly centered on the mutual effects of colours, on contrasting or balancing cold and warm colours. The artist used very thin brushes, and the diaries that accompanied the making of the oil pictures proved to be quite useful, because Gedő put aside her paintings to allow them to dry, and when she resumed work on a painting she could recollect all her chess-play-like thoughts that had accompanied the creation of the painting until then. In the diary made for the painting titled *Equilibrists* (Album/ Oil Painting 104) we find, among others, the following passage: "*The left side of the next part (its colour I don't yet know!) is determined by the point where the leg intersects with the picked up knee that leads to the other leg (from this point I dropp-pped a ver-ti-cle).I put on the two blues! They are livelier than the patterns on the off-white paper. Because they are on a white paper. (...)But, you can get down to listing the Benefits? Mate.*"⁹⁵ *This will be a viol. - a gloomy, dark viol. to the extreme. Which 1. Is a ceaseless intensity of the viol. Kupola. 2. A perverted intensity, here blue-ish red, there cooled to a cold ghost red, here 'body red' warmed to ochre. 'Flesh ochre 3. This, too, intensifies the yellowness of the yellow background in the L.C. [Little Clown], moreover, this fully intensifies it, this warm 'viol'. 4. With its immeasurable darkness it intensifies the immeasurable lightness*

94 Ibid.

95 The majority of the notes enumerate the 'benefits' of selecting a colour (i.e. its significant relationship, harmony, counterpoints and connections with the other parts of the picture). Their retrospective rationalisations and justifications are decisions about a choice of colour.

of the same [here there is an assured arrow from the encircled word "same" to the above "background" under point 3]5. It makes the body of B.C. [Big Clown] light. 6. It enters into connection with the viol. on the globe, this fact still hides unexpected motifs (because the yellows are not yet put on here) [from "here" there is an arrow to "globe"]].⁹⁶

Oil Painting No. 104 of the Album



Equilibrists, Circus, 1977, oil on canvas, 64 x 42 cm

The colour world of Ilka Gedő's paintings is fascinating with its translucent colour surfaces. Ágnes Gyetvai's analysis preserved in a manuscript form points out, "however much Ilka Gedő was averse to abstract painting, the basic plane of her paintings, the par excellence painterly field, was constructed according to the rules of abstract painting. (...) In the case of each painting, a great deal of time was devoted to planning, experimenting and making notes. There are eighty-eight⁹⁷ such note-books full of such notes. The artist did not mix the colours but she overlaid them layer by layer. This is how an optical colour mixing emerges. As a result, the basic structure had become thick as an object and it accords the background an atmospheric and psychic emanating force so that one is reminded of the effects of colour field painting. In addition to this, the colour world of the paintings is always closely connected with the poetic symbolism of colours that in the case of each painting is justified and elaborated in writing. / The second layer of the painting structure is that of figuration. We often see in the picture the perforated edge of a torn-out notebook page, which reminds one of Ilka Gedő's method. The paintings were made on the basis of sketches, and small-sized drawings and on the painting the notebook page itself often appears. The basic painterly plane is surrounded by a visual internal frame thus indicating that it is a «living material reality», it is fertile soil, it is a placenta-like organic formation from which the meaningful forms, flowers, creatures and figures are born in «a biological sense». Most often this figurative plane is written onto the

⁹⁶ Endre Biró, *Recollections of the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő* In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit., p. 257.

⁹⁷ The author is wrong. There are 128 such notebooks. A detailed list of these notebooks: (Hajdu István - Biró Dávid, op. cit., pp. 214-215.).

basic painterly field like a drawing or etching or often as a photo negative (with light forms against a dark background), and thus it is in contrast with the painterly character of the basic plane.”⁹⁸ Although the colours have been put on the painting layer by layer, this cannot be called an optical colour mixing, because this means that the “colours broken down to its components make up a form or the illusion of a form only when viewed from a given distance on the viewer’s retina membrane.”⁹⁹ Ilka Gedő’s paintings are beautiful when viewed from the distance, but primarily in the case of the most refined paintings, they can be viewed also from a close distance (or even with a magnifying glass) and then a completely new world opens up, an organic colour texture as if we were viewing freshly cut-up meat or an organic cell structure under a magnifying glass. Any part of the painting, however small it is, could be an independent self-contained image.

Ilka Gedő’s paintings are unique and they are not similar to those of any other artists and this is a significant value in modern art: „Ilka Gedő is one of the solitary masters of Hungarian art. She is bound to neither the avant-garde nor the traditional trends. Her unique creative method makes it impossible to compare her lifework even to the formally similar examples in art history.”¹⁰⁰ A letter preserved in the manuscript estate of the artist written by the well-known Hungarian art historian, László Beke in 1980 evaluates this art rightly: “I believe it is utterly pointless to draw any parallels between your art and the «contemporary» trends, because your art could have been born any time between 1860 and 2000. It draws its inspirations not from the «outside», but from the «inside», and its coherence and authenticity are derived from the relationship this art has with its creator—and this cannot possibly escape the attention of any of the viewers of these works.”¹⁰¹ Another art historian also highlights uniqueness: „An art historian trying to find the spiritual followers of Ilka Gedő would, justifiably, be embarrassed. He would not be able to find any. (...) I witnessed a 17-year-old Ilka Gedő drawing pictures in an ad hoc drawing school. Even then, her art reflected the work of a fully developed artist.

98 The analysis can be found in the C3 Data Archive.

99 Lajos Németh, *Seurat (1859-1891)* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1966), p. 15.

100 Péter György–Gábor Pataki, "Egy művészi felfogás paradoxona".[The Paradoxon of an Artistic Approach] In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op. cit., p. 19.

101 The letter is preserved in the estate of Ilka Gedő.

(...) Gedő made «two-step» paintings in her final stylistic period. She first drew a sketch of her composition, prepared a mock-up, and wrote the names of the appropriate colours in the various fields, just as a fresco painter or tapestry weaver would. She prepared a collection of sample colours in advance. (...) She never improvised on her paintings, instead she enlarged the original plan with precision. In some of her pictures she painted the page torn out of her spiral-bound book as an internal frame, with the perforated holes on the left. After that, she copied in handwriting the texts shown on the mock-up to the painting, thus revealing her work method to the public. The artist achieved the effect of abstract surrealism. Her protagonists were the creatures of her personal mythology. Her square or zone shaped colour spots are restrained, yet intense. Moreover the strength of the cold and warm colours appears to be equal. The disorder of two-dimensional paintings is thoroughly constructed.”¹⁰² And true enough these paintings, the paintings of Ilka Gedő made after 1965 cannot be regarded as abstract expressionism, action painting, analytic painting, colour field painting, combine painting, drip painting, action painting, hyperrealism, pop art etc. These paintings are outside any style, but they are nevertheless fully authentic.

I do not believe, however, that “the artist’s paintings cannot be associated with periods in the artist’s life “and neither do I believe that „these paintings have a special relationship with time. There is no «development» in the chronological sequence of works.”¹⁰³ I try to divide this relatively small oeuvre of oil paintings, consisting of 152 oil paintings, into groups.

The most important groups:

1. Oil paintings from 1945 to 1948
2. Portraits Made Both in Pastel and Also in Oil After the 1965 Resumption of Artistic Activities
3. Artificial Flower Series
4. Rose garden Series
5. Circus and Other Auto-Mythological Scenes

102 János Frank, „Ilka Gedő” In Anita Semjén (ed.) *Áldozatok és gyilkosok / Victims and Perpetrators* (Budapest: Cultural Exchange Foundation, 1996), p. 13.

103 István Hajdu, "Half Image, Half Veil – The Art of Ilka Gedő" In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit., p. 25.

6. Self-Portraits Prepared on the Basis of Self-Portrait Drawings From the Year 1947 and 1948

Oil Paintings From 1945 to 1948

The first group of oil paintings includes pictures made between 1945 and 1948 (Album/Oil Paintings 1-8).

Oil Paintings Nos. 1-8 of the Album



Crosses on Graves, 1947, oil on paper, 32 x 25 cm



Garden, 1947, oil on paper, 47 x 39 cm



Gravestones, 1947, oil on paper, 35 x 41.5 cm



House Beside the Graveyard, 1947, oil on paper, 32 x 48 cm



Houses in Szentendre, 1947, oil on paper, 53.5 x 38 cm



Old Gravestones, 1947, oil on paper, 50 x 31.5 cm



Two Gravestones, 1947, oil on paper, 49 x 32 cm



Self-Portrait with Hat, 1948, oil on paper, 49 x 32 cm

These scenery pictures of Szentendre are a continuation of the Szentendre pastel series made during the war. The ferocity and vividness of colours are conspicuous. Picture 8 is a self-portrait painted in thick brush strokes. Reminding the viewer of Dürer's famous self-portrait from 1500, the viewer notices the artist's right hand held in front of her chest. The painter is ageless, the eyes are closed as if she were dreaming awake.

Portraits Made in Pastel and Also in Oil After the 1965 Resumption of Artistic Activities

Oil paintings 9, 17, 18, 22, 25, 26, 27, 33, 40, 50, 62 and 63 of the Album are pictures the original versions of which were done in pastel in the period that followed the start of Gedő's second artistic period.

Oil Paintings Nos. 9, 17-18, 22, 25, 26, 27, 33, 40, 50, 62-63 of the Album



Judit I, 1965, oil on wooden board, 54 x 19.5 cm



Dávid, 1968, oil on paper, 29 x 16 cm



Married Couple, 1968, oil on canvas, 40 x 51.5 cm



Portrait of Endre Biró 1969, oil on wooden board, 51 x 19.5 cm



Aunt Boriska, 1965-1970, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 60 x 51 cm



David, 1965-1970, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 57 x 45.5 cm



Portrait of Béla Tábor, 1969, oil on wooden board, 37 x 23 cm



Judit (Sketch) 1970, oil on canvas, 34.5 x 13 cm



Vera, 1965-1971, oil on cardboard laid down on canvas, 47.5 x 34.5 cm



Esther II, 1971, oil on layered cardboard, 32 x 28 cm



Portrait of Klári Horváth I, 1971-72, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 60 x 48 cm



Portrait of Klári Horváth II, 1971-72, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 61.5 x 47 cm

The first portrait done in pastel was made about Béla Veszelszky: “As I arrived home once in the autumn of 1964 or 1965, Ilka told me that she had drawn a caricature of our painter friend Béla Veszelszky. It still survives somewhere: a small drawing in ink, with a little hint of pastel or coloured chalk. It shows Béla Veszelszky's typically tall, lean, straight figure, elegant even in rags, in a standing pose depicted in a very characteristic way. (...) While making these small sketches she thought intensely of the person concerned, but at the same time she made no attempt to draw them from memory.”¹⁰⁴

One should not ignore that Gedő knew Lajos Fülep's essay on the role of memory in art, and, in fact, she regarded it so important that she copied nearly the whole text into a notebook¹⁰⁵:

104 Endre Biró, Recollections of the Artistic Career of Ilka Gedő In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit., 251.

105 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 241.)

“Let us assume that the artist is standing in front of his model. He sees him when he looks at him and he also sees him when he closes his eyes. Let us also assume that both images—the one seen with open and the one seen with closed eyes—is the creation of the spirit, and there is no category difference. But the contrast in terms of quality is all the bigger. (...) Which of the two images, which of the intuitions is the artist going to reflect? If he depicts the image seen with open eyes, this equals to an embarrassing naturalism. (...) Another artist simply ignores the physical, external model that can also be seen with open eyes and views what he can see with closed eyes. (...) The longer he observes the internal picture that can be seen only with closed eyes, the further away he gets from the other image, he separates himself from it. (...) The question is whether the artist, once he has given up on the physical model, will run after these internal images and will reproduce them or whether he will choose one of these internal images, and if he does so, which will be the criterion of his choice? Will this choice be an arbitrary one or a justified, correct and reliable one? From the changes that an internal image is subject to a single image arises which is different from both the real one and all the other internal images that preceded it. This difference is not a qualitative one, and it manifests itself through the fact that it does not want to change anymore and it resists the stream of consciousness. (...) What convinces the artist about the finality of this picture and about the fact that this image is the synthesis of all the previous and possible future images? It is the vague feeling or the clear consciousness of the fact that, in the course of changes, the image has assumed the very form in which he would remember it, if his eyes would never again see the physical model. In other words, the artist does the very same thing to the model as memory does in connection with the past: this is the process of contraction and supplementation. (...) We remember not what we see, but we see what we remember or would remember.”¹⁰⁶

Within this group of paintings *Portrait of Klára Horváth I and II* (Album/ Oil Paintings 62 and 63) are the most beautiful and mature, and these two paintings have several preliminary sketches done both in pastel and oil.

Artificial Flower Series

106 This study was published in a separate volume in 1911. The exact and edited text: Lajos Fülep, Egybegyűjtött írások I, Cikkek tanulmányok, 1909-1916. [Collected Writings I, Articles and Studies, 1909-1916] (Budapest: MTA Művészettörténeti Kutató Csoport, 1995), pp. 131-133. and p. 135.

In connection with the artificial flower series, one should note that Ilka Gedő was very much interested in the art of the Far East. In her extensive notes there is a notebook that contains the following ideas: “There is a radical difference between the Eastern and European concepts of what a picture is: the European artist also creates but what he creates is not his own self, but something else. The second difference is that although the European artist also has a relation with the public, he presents the work of art to the public as a finished and completed object. (...) In contrast to this, the artist of the East creates a framework that is finished by the viewer and the viewer creates the picture anew. The European artist does not create himself and does not provide the viewer of the picture with an instrument in a conscious manner. The European artist is Prometheus, the rival of the creator, who—although he stole the fire—could not happily become one with it. The European artist is the person obsessed with power. He wants to create like a demiurge. He aims to create the other and the whole universe. For this person possessed with power, who cannot flee from this duality, the deity remains an alien, an enemy. The artist in Europe, just like the priest or the soldier, wants to defeat God, wants to unravel and imitate him. When he is creating, he is creating the other. His work is the result of an audacious enterprise and in his own eyes it is a worthless wonder. / The professional jargon of psychology would say that Prometheus, the first European man, suffered from an inferiority complex. He no longer took it for granted that, as concerns his origins, he is one with God, and that explains why he wanted to retake and usurp God’s place. In ancient human tradition and, in its wake, in the art of the East it is not an ambition and madness if man identifies with God, becomes God and bears the unnameable name of the Almighty. The aim of art is to help this unification, and life itself is such an «art» or work of art. In the East it is not a blasphemy to become one with God, it is not madness but the only natural goal: «He who adores Vishnu without himself becoming Vishnu adores Vishnu in vain.» To follow this aspiration is an excess for us.”¹⁰⁷

Gedő has different series of oil paintings: the artificial flower series, the rose garden series and the series of circus scenes. Analysing the artificial flower series, Júlia Szabó points out: “Like the great painters of the 19th century, Ilka Gedő paid much attention to the painting practice and compositional methods of the Far East. (...) When Ilka Gedő started to work again, she concentrated on landscapes as interpreted by painters of the Far East: plants are not ornaments

107 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 254.) Notes from the first edition of Béla Hamvas - Katalin Kemény, *Forradalom a művészetben: Absztrakció és szürrealizmus Magyarországon* [Revolution in Art: Abstraction and Surrealism in Hungary] (Budapest: Misztótfalusi, 1947)

or patches of colour, they are living beings, and pictures are not living nature only its essence or counterfeit. Hence she called her series of oil paintings and pastels of the 1960s and 70s artificial flowers.”¹⁰⁸

During the “creative intermission” that followed 1949, Gedő pursued an extensive study of art history and art theory and he prepared detailed notes about the books she read. The card for the library of the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts has been preserved in the estate¹⁰⁹, and Gedő mentions the library in her notes several times. A note in Notebook No. 280 points out that it was Lajos Szabó who called her attention to Curt Glaser’s work¹¹⁰. Gedő prepares detailed notes of the book and as the quotes copied out of the book in the original German show, she writes down sentences like these: “Only landscapes give you a joy that never lets you down. Hence, the educated man who paints turns primarily to the scenery.”¹¹¹ Or: “For the artist plants are not ornaments or patches of colour. They are living beings, and the artist takes as keen an interest in the inherent laws of the structure of a flower as it does in those of the cliffs, animals or man.”¹¹²

She prepares detailed notes about the art of East Asia, and, in fact, she starts collecting materials for an extensive study, and she decides that she would read a number of books on the topic (H. Bowie: *On the Laws of Japanese Painting*; Fr. Hirt: *Über die Ursprungslegenden der Malerei in China*). Notebook No. 227 contains notes detailed notes of Kakuzo Okakura’s *The Book of Tea*. She copies out full passages if she likes the ideas: “In such instances we see the full significance of the Flower Sacrifice. Perhaps the flowers appreciate the full significance of it. They are not cowards, like men. Some flowers glory in death--certainly the Japanese

108 Júlia Szabó, "Ilka Gedő's Paintings (A Retrospective)" *The New Hungarian Quarterly* no. 4 (1987): 189.

109 The date of enrollment is 14 July 1951.

110 Curt Glaser, *Die Kunst Ostasiens, der Umkreis ihres Denkens und Gestaltens* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1913)

111 *Ibid.*, p. 94. The original: „Nur in der Landschaft findet man Tiefe und Genüsse, die nimmer versagen. Darum wendet sich der gebildete Mann, der malt, vor allem der Landschaft zu.”

112 *Ibid.* p. 125. The original: “Die Pflanze ist dem Künstler nicht ein ornamentales Formgebilde, nicht ein bunter Farbfleck. Sie ist ein lebendes Wesen, und der Künstler hat das gleiche Interesse an dem Bildungsgesetz, das dem Bau einer Blume immanent ist, wie an Formen des Gesteins oder der Berge, der Tiere oder der Menschen.”

cherry blossoms do, as they freely surrender themselves to the winds. (...) In religion the Future is behind us. In art the present is the eternal. The tea-masters held that real appreciation of art is only possible to those who make of it a living influence. (...) Thus the tea-master strove to be something more than the artist.(...) He only who has lived with the beautiful can die beautifully. The last moments of the great tea-masters were as full of exquisite refinement as had been their lives. Seeking always to be in harmony with the great rhythm of the universe, they were ever prepared to enter the unknown.”¹¹³

I do not believe it is true that Gedő, in her second artistic period, lost “her faith in the metaphysical value of art”, or, to use an anachronistic 19th-century term, her faith in the sanctity of art vanished. As reflected by the aforementioned debate on Lajos Vajda between Ilka Gedő, Endre Bálint, and Stefánia Mándy, she regarded art, or rather painting, as specifically formed an universally valid form of theological communication. Ten years later she was inclined to regard painting as merely the most important objective and means of her internal role-playing and self-mythologizing discourse.”¹¹⁴ We have to see that in her 1954 study quoted above she reasons: “(...) *The artist, the painter, is not Christ who redeems the world, at best he is a Grünewald (his Golgotha!), but at the very most he creates only to his own highest level.*” It can be assumed that Ilka Gedő never believed in the sanctity of art and, therefore, she could not have had any religious belief in art that she had lost. The fact that in her second artistic period she regarded her oil paintings to be “a playful auto mythological dialogue stream” can be explained by the circumstance that she, too, could not make herself independent of the spirit of the 1970’s. This *Zeitgeist* indicated the final exhaustion of the avant-garde and of counter culture together with all the obvious consequences that this involved. Lóránd Hegyi wrote the following at the beginning of the 1980s: “Art «retreats» into itself and it abandons the open fields of expansion (...) It becomes fully the expression of the internal world, philosophy, attitudes and of the fictitious created world of the modern personality at the end of the 20th century. It does not want to be anything else but «just art». However, this «just» refers to

113 Manuscript in the estate of Ilka Gedő. (Notebook No. 227.) The English translation is from www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tea.htm

114 István Hajdu, "Half Image, Half Veil – The Art of Ilka Gedő" In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit., p. 25.

artistic totality, and the intimate completeness of art. In other words, art leaves the terrain of practical actions so that it can concentrate fully on itself."¹¹⁵

One can fully agree with the idea that these paintings show "a world already fallen to pieces" and that "Ilka Gedő treats the spaces in her paintings as found objects; she sort of borrows them (generally from her earlier drawings and often from other children's drawings) so that she can spin them through and cover them with her own colours. By contrast, in the world created by Klee the warm glittering colours and their transparency coming from the deep have a ubiquitous radiance. Ilka Gedő covers a world already fallen to pieces with her nostalgically painful veil of colours in which the contrast between dark and warm colours always strives for some nameless anxiety."¹¹⁶

Let us take a look at Artificial Flower with a Grey Background (Album / Oil Painting 132)!

Oil Painting No. 132 from the Album

115 Loránt Hegyi, Új szenzibilitás (Egy művészeti szemléletváltás körvonalai). [New Sensibility (The Outlines of a Change in the Artistic Approach)] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1982), pp. 215-216.

116 Mészáros F. István, "Hold-maszkok, tündöklő háromszögek". [Moon Masks and Glittering Triangles] In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op. cit., p. 78.



Artificial Flower with a Grey Background, 1980-81, oil on canvas, 47 x 57 cm

The cold colours are located in fine-textured parcelled fields that are located side by side. These fields, located side by side and one above the other, conjure up a sense of time in the viewer.¹¹⁷ From the flowers that intersect the surface of the picture two are yellow, and these two yellow spots are in equilibrium with the bluish and greyish fields. Against a background of darker hue, the yellow seems to step forward and thus a mysterious sense of space arises that is further enhanced by a black spot that appears as a threatening depth. This is the world of inexplicable beauty and anxiety. Among the fractured fields with cold colours the two yellow flower petals (both having a brick red hue) appear as shining planets and their glimmer is in equilibrium with the surrounding greyish light blue and light green fields. The two yellow petals (and especially the lower one) are in a quantitative contrast with the fractured bluish grey and grey fields of the painting that suggest the passing of time: “The minority colour, in distress, as it were, reacts defensively to seem relatively more vivid than if it were present in a harmonious amount. A similar law of compensation is seen to operate in biology. In plants or animals, under adverse conditions of life, there is a mobilization of powers and resistance, expressing itself in heightened performance, given the opportunity. If a colour present in minute amount

117 István Hajdu, "Half Image, Half Veil – The Art of Ilka Gedő" In: István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, op. cit.

is given opportunity, by protracted contemplation, to assert itself in the eye, it is found to become increasingly concentrated and provocative.”¹¹⁸ The yellow spot (flower petal) in the upper part of the picture is much bigger than the somewhat darker other yellow spot: "A yellow area that is to hold its place among light tints must be of a different size than an area of the same yellow against dark shades. The tints call for a large yellow area; among shades, a small yellow area is enough to allow the brilliance of the hue to operate.”¹¹⁹

Gedő's paintings were prepared in the following manner. The painter had a sudden visual idea that she drew on a smaller piece of paper. Thus the initial sketch was born. Gedő called it “the ancient drawing” that was „a name for a visual idea”. If you like it, it is a reminder that is capable of conjuring up the fleeting and flashing vision originally seen by the artist. (...) As the artist progressed from the ancient drawing to the final version of the painting, she practically worked out the implications of a short-lived revelation. In this process everything depended on the materials used in the paintings and on the colours and their tones.¹²⁰ The visual idea was hovering in her mind and that may have been the reason why the title of one of the most beautiful rose gardens (Oil Painting 67) was *Rosegarden with Closed Eyes*.

Oil Painting No. 67 of the Album

118 Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color (The Subjective Experience and the Objective Rational of Colour)* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973), p. 106. The quote in the German original: „Die in die Minderheit versetzte Farbe, die sozusagen in Not geraten ist, wehrt sich und wirkt leuchtender, als wenn sie in harmonischer Menge vorhanden ist. Diese Tatsache kennt auch der Biologe und Pflanzenzüchter. Wenn eine Pflanze, ein Tier oder Mensch durch schwierige Verhältnisse in den Lebensumständen in Not gerät, dann mobilisieren sich in den Pflanzen, Tieren und Menschen Widerstandskräfte, die sich in vergrößerter Leistung manifestieren, wenn sie Gelegenheit dazu erhalten. Wenn man durch längere Betrachtung einer in der Minderheit vorhandenen Farbe die Möglichkeit gibt, ihre Farbwirkung im Auge kund zu tun, so wird man bemerken, daß sie immer intensiver und erregender wird.” (Johannes Itten, *Kunst der Farbe--Subjektives Erleben und objektives Erkennen als Wege zur Kunst – Studienausgabe*, (Ravensburg: Ravensburger Verlag, 1970), p. 62.)

119 Ibid. p. 107. The quote in the German original: „Will sich ein gelber Fleck zwischen hellen Farbtönen behaupten, so muß er eine größere Ausdehnung haben, als wenn dasselbe Geld vor dunklen Tönen stehen würde. Zu den dunklen Farben muß ein kleiner gelber Fleck gegeben werden, weil seine Helligkeit hier stark zur Wirkung kommen kann.” (Loc. cit.: p. 63.)

120 F. István Mészáros, "Hold-maszkok, tündöklő háromszögek". [Moon Masks and Glittering Triangles] In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op. cit., pp. 77-78.



Rose Garden with Closed Eyes, 1972, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 60 x 48 cm

Artificial flowers with a simpler structure are Oil Paintings 21, 23, 35, 43, 52, 54, 58, 68, 89, 70, 82, 107, 108 and 134 of the Album.

Artificial flowers of a more sophisticated structure and with an extremely refined colour world are Oil Paintings 29, 65, 122 and 132.

Rose Garden Series

Rose gardens with relatively simple structure are Oil Paintings 31, 32, 36, 44, 46, 47, 60, 75, 79, 80, 83, 89, 96, 105 and 120. “Ilka Gedő, as is shown by the Rose Garden series, found great delight in observing the life of the plants, like the great painters of Romanticism had. She read and made extensive notes of his writings. The sense of nostalgia, which caused him to turn towards plant, may also be compared to the plant cult of Art Nouveau artists. During her stay in Paris in 1969-1970, she spent most of her time in the Jardin des Plantes and in the Luxembourg garden. The perfect harmony of natural and man-made environments in the French capital might have played an important role in her artistic renewal. Her plant series bears witness to her sensitive observations of certain flowers’ tall slender stems, multi-coloured flower bodies and leaves and petals that constantly changed in the wind. Her Rose Garden paintings represent a multitude of colours and endless variations of organic forms. In one of those paintings, besides the flower that is drawn on a planar background, the colours are also

written in with words. This was an open confession of her working method. Everything is moving, changing, intermingling and intertwining in these paintings of which the most monumental is *Rose Garden in the Wind*¹²¹

Oil Painting No. 72 of the Album



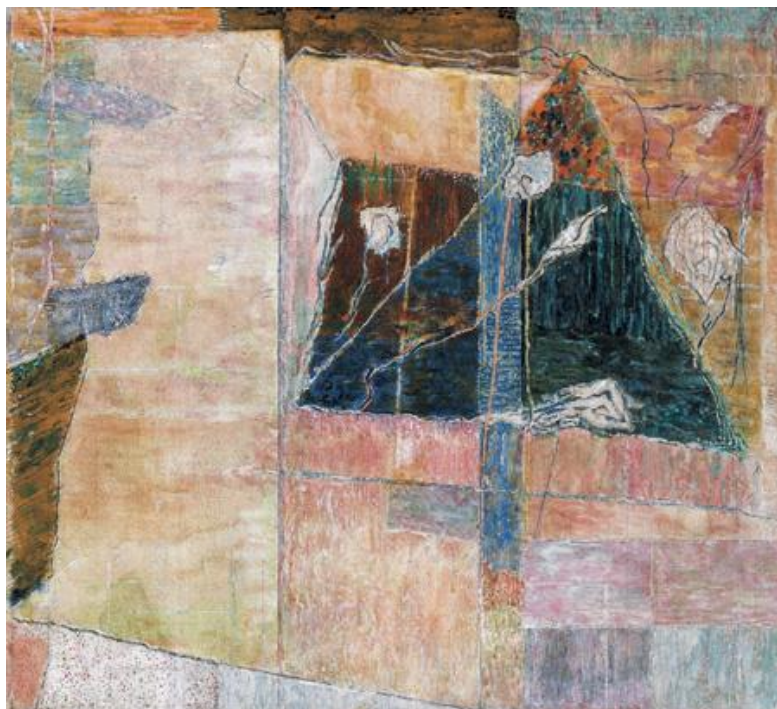
Rose Garden in the Wind, 1972-73, oil on cardboard, 1972-73, 52.8 x 63 cm

The Gedő-Biró couple spent a year in Paris in 1969-1970, but they were not allowed to take along their children. Ilka Gedő took part in the collective exhibition of the Paris Galerie Lambert. Endre Biró, a biochemist went abroad with a one-year scholarship, but his official scholarship was supplemented by another one that involved a much higher amount. They rented a small penthouse flat in the direct vicinity of the Boulevard St. Michel quite close to the Jardin des Plantes.

Within the rose garden series paintings of a more complex structure are Oil Paintings 37, 38, 59, 61, 67, 76, 86, 89, 109, 116, 118, 127. *Rose Garden with a Triangular Window* (Oil Painting 118), in the collection of the Hungarian National Gallery, is special because it combines a constructivist picture plane structure, which in itself is very beautiful, with a refined and sophisticated colour poetry. Behind the geometric window structure the rose garden replete with cold colours comes to view whose dark colour hues are intersected by white plant tendrils. The closeness of the colour planes of the wall that surrounds the triangular window is enhanced by the light colour, whereas the garden seems to lose its contours in the distance.

Oil Painting No. 118 of the Album

121 Júlia Szabó, "Gedő Ilka művészete" [The Artistic Work of Ilka Gedő]. In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op. cit., pp. 59-60.



Rose Garden with a Triangular Window, 1979-80, oil on canvas, 1979-80, 50 x 55 cm

The viewer of *Jardin des Plantes* (Oil Painting 119) is fascinated by the picture. He got into a world of mysterious beauty and he feels that the bluish field at the bottom of the painting seems to be closer, while the yellow field above it seems to be further away and the whitish yellow field even further away. These last two fields are intersected by tendrils of flowers and plants.

Oil Painting No. 122 of the Album



Jardin des Plantes, Paris, 1980 oil on canvas, 57.5 x 46 cm

Circus and Other Auto-Mythological Scenes

Autho-mythological pictures of simpler structure are Oil Paintings 34, 49, 51, 56, 104, 124, 128, 129, 130, 131, 135, 139, 147 and 148. Oil Paintings with a more sophisticated structure and a magical colour world are 72, 73, 136, 138, 145, 146, 149 and 151. (Sometimes also the titles are quite revealing. Oil Painting 119 is titled *Dejected Angel*. We seem to be living in times when even the angels are dejected and nearly give up.)

Oil Painting No. 119 of the Album



Dejected Angel, 1979, oil on cardboard, 46 x 49.5 cm

In the picture titled *Monster and Boy* "we see the outlines of a monster, scary and funny at the same time. Although lacking in a uniformly constructed space, this picture, with its different colour consonants, in some spaces suggest spatial depth. The figures are, once again, « given » here, and therefore no symbolic meaning should be attributed to them. Gedő does not simply copy the two figures, but blows up the original piece of paper. She thinks that the faithful reconstruction of the perforation on the edge of the torn out piece of paper is just as important as the portrayal of the figures. There is no major or minor theme here, since each point on the sheet is blown up with the help of a grid technique has the same importance for her: she paints them the same way, with the same devotion."¹²²

Oil Painting No. 128 of the Album



Monster and Boy, 1981, oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm

Self-Portraits Prepared on the Basis of Self-Portrait Drawings From the Year 1947 and 1948

122 Péter György– Gábor Pataki, "Egy művészi felfogás paradoxona".[The Paradoxon of an Artistic Approach] In: Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op. cit., p. 26.

This series includes Oil Paintings 137, 141, 142, 143, 150 and 152. With the exception of Oil Painting 142, all these works were prepared on the basis of self-portrait drawings from 1947 and 1948 by magnifying them with the help of a photo mechanic process. After this photographic paper was laid down on the canvas and then painted over.

A *Self-Portrait with Hat* (Album/ Oil Painting 137), originating from 1983, has a sad atmosphere, but the line of the lips suggests an internal strength and readiness to confront the world. The colour world of the picture brings tension into sadness. The reddish orange field with a dark hue in the right-hand upper corner of the picture is balanced by a bluish strip on the left of the face, and this bluish strip contrasts with the white and yellow-grey field. Behind the colours of the picture the contrasts between light and shadow prevail well.

Oil Painting No. 137 of the Album



Self-Portrait with a Hat, 1983, oil on photographic paper laid down on canvas, 60 x 48 cm

Pink Self-Portrait (Album/ Oil Painting 141) is the strictly exact, cruel portrayal of a complete collapse and spiritual breakdown, a depiction that verges on self-torment. The forehead and the upper part of the face have a dark tone of red and pink. The eyes are not visible we can only guess their location with the help of two whitish fields, and the mouth and the nose disappeared from the face as a result of which the face is that of a skeleton. The viewer could think that the painter put on a reddish mask. The left-hand side of the picture is divided by two grey and one dark stripes. The yellow of the topmost stripe is broken by a puddle-grey colour as a result of which it becomes "sickly and insidiously poisonous".¹²³ "Just as there is but one truth, so there is only one yellow. Adulterated truth is vitiated truth, untruth. So the expressions of diluted yellow are envy, betrayal, falseness, doubt, distrust and unreason."¹²⁴ The greyish colour of the stripes found below the muddled yellow are in contrast with the more potent colour of the upper part of the face, which could in theory have a pleasant effect. This, however, is not the case, since the face and its red colour reflect madness and a spiritual breakdown.

Oil Painting No. 141 of the Album

123 Johannes Itten, op.cit., p. 96. (English edition) The quote in the German original: „etwas Krankes, heimtückisch Giftiges.“ (Johannes Itten, op cit. p. 55.)

124 Johannes Itten, op.cit., p. 132. (English edition) The quote in the German original: „Wie es nur eine Wahrheit gibt, so gibt es nur ein Gelb. Getrübt Wahrheit ist kranke Wahrheit, ist Unwahrheit. So ist der Ausdruck des getrübt Gelb Neid, Verrat, Falschheit, Zweifel, Misstrauen und Irresein.“ (Johannes Itten, op cit. p. 85.)

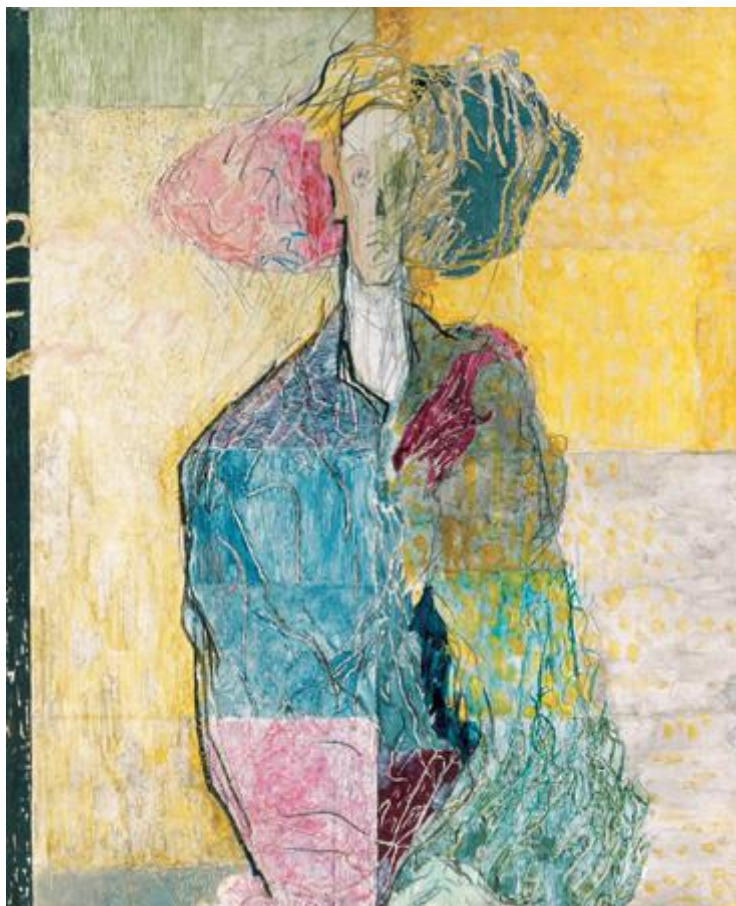
In that chapter of the book that deals with quality contrast, i.e., with the contrast between saturated, luminous colours as opposed to blunt, contaminated and broken colours, Johannes Itten explains: "A color may be diluted with black. This admixture deprives yellow of its brilliant character, turning it into something rather sickly or insidiously poisonous. Its splendor is gone." (Johannes Itten, Ibid., p. 96) The quote in the German original: „Eine Farbe kann mit Schwarz gebrochen werden. Gelb verliert dabei seinen strahlend hellen Ausdruckscharakter und bekommt etwas Krankes, heimtückisch Giftiges. Es büßt sofort seine Strahlkraft ein.“ (Johannes Itten, op. cit. p.55.)



Pink Self-Portrait, 1984, oil on photographic paper laid down on canvas, 59 x 49 cm

Self-Portrait With a Straw Hat (Album / Oil Painting 143) is a monument for her own self. The pleasant yellow of the right-hand upper corner contrasts with the blue on the left-hand part of the coat under the shoulder. The greyish blue of the right-hand side of the huge rimmed hat contrasts with the yellow field behind it. The lighter colours of the background are in equilibrium with the black stripe at left side of the painting. The contrast of cold and warm colours can be seen not only between the major fields of the painting but, creating lyric colour poetry, also within the individual fields.

Oil Painting No. 143 of the Album



Self-Portrait With a Straw Hat, 1984, oil on photographic paper laid down on canvas, 60 x 48.5 cm

In addition to Oil Painting 137, there is another painting (Album/ Oil Painting 153) titled *Self-Portrait with a Hat*, originating from 1985, that is based on a drawing in china ink. The slightly tilted image that is based on the original drawing looks like a photo stuck in an album. The colour world of this tilted image is dominated by cold colours and this contrasts with the lighter colours of the background framing. The painting is based on a drawing made in 1948, and the representation of the original china ink drawing also conjures up the contrast of light and shadow. The background suggesting distance and sadness is dominated by blue which is broken by black, greenish grey and greyish white colours. Blue is the colour of sadness (see the phrases "to have the blues" or "to feel blue"), but we might also remember Johannes Itten's words: "When blue is dimmed, it falls into superstition, fear, grief and perdition, but it always points to the realm of the transcendental."¹²⁵ Viewing the contrast of blue and black we

¹²⁵ Johannes Itten, op. cit. p. 136. The quote in the German original: „...trüb wird, sinkt es in Aberglauben, Furcht, Verlorenheit und Trauer, immer aber weist es in das Reich des Übersinnlich-Seelischen, des Transzendenten.“ (Johannes Itten, op. cit. p. 88.)

remember Johannes Itten again: "Blue on black gleams in bright, pure strength. Where black ignorance holds the sway, the blue pure faith shines like a distant light."¹²⁶ On the canvas that follows the lines of the original china ink drawing the black swirling lines express sorrow and death wish. The slightly tilted head suggests sadness, a presentiment of death and the acceptance of its unavailability. It is not surprising that for the painter a drawing that she made in her youth is just a memory, but the infinite sadness of recollection shows the feeling of the closeness of death.

Oil Painting No. 150 from the Album



Self-Portrait with a Hat, 1985, oil, mixed technique on paper laid down on canvas, 60 x 48.5 cm

Double Self-Portrait (Album/ Oil Painting 152) originating from 1985 shows two heads. On one of the portraits the artist's face can be clearly recognised, while the other tilted head only

126 Ibid. p.136. The quote in the German original: „Steht Blau auf Schwarz, so leuchtet Blau in heller, reiner Kraft. Wo Unwissenheit, Schwarz, herrscht, da leuchtet das Blau des reinen Glaubens wie ein fernes Licht.“ (Johannes Itten, op. cit. p. 88.)

suggests the location of the eyes and the mouth. The two portraits conjure up the passing of time, and a profound and resigned sadness over the passing of life. The artist recollects two egos from her youth: the first ego is the self-conscious one relating to the world, the other one is an ego that accepts her loneliness resignedly.

Oil Painting No. 152 from the Album



Double Self-Portrait, oil on photographic paper laid down on canvas, 58 x 42 cm

7. *Suffering and Early Death*

In 1972 the state loosened somewhat the suffocating grip it had on Hungary's cultural life. The until then officially glorified "socialist realism" was allowed to include much more than the copying of 19th century academism imbued with communist ideology. This was the time when the ideologues of the regime vaguely realised that most modern western artists despised and refused the values of bourgeois society, whereas it was just "socialist" realism that bogged down with bourgeois kitsch by sticking, in a hypocritical way, to the visual world of 19th

century academic painting. “It must not be forgotten that whereas in Western Europe the debates centred on the issues of existing art, in Hungary decades have been spent with futile debates on what art should be like.”¹²⁷ By relying on the administrative staff of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Central Committee of the Communist Party directed cultural life. The Arts Lectorate was under the direction of the ministry, and it was the *only* organization in Hungary that had the power to authorize exhibitions. Good recognition was accorded only to those who maintained good contacts with the leading functionaries of the regime. Endre Bálint was more equal among the artists than other artists. When I visited West Germany in 1973, Lyubomir Szabó a member of the circle of Lajos Szabó living in Germany told me angrily in Düsseldorf that Endre Bálint is alleged to have arrived in the West and contacted the members of the circle of Lajos Szabó living in the West as a “deputy” of the Hungarian authorities. It can easily be imagined that this *was* the truth but it is also possible that this *was not* the case!¹²⁸ But this can no longer turn out because the agents of the fallen communist regime “sifted through” these papers for information, and many documents were wilfully destroyed, many documents are classified up to this very date irrespective of what would be required: the papers of a regime that had no democratic legitimacy should be accessible to everyone.

The political class of Hungary seems to have made a strategic decision: it will obey the secret services of the former regime and it will not clarify the past of the country. It is beyond the scope of this report to give a detailed analysis of the tragic consequences that this policy has so far resulted in. This strategy can, at the most, only produce a phoney language that shows the failure of common sense and the collapse of all moral values: "Only for a temporary period had the political changes of 1989 and 1990 led to a sense of togetherness. Due to a political

127 Péter György-Gábor Pataki, *Official Arts Policies in Hungary (1945-1985)* /MS/

128 According to documents held by the Historical Archives of the State Security Services, Endre Bálint was not an agent, but his very good relationship with leading functionaries of the regime is unequivocally documented. According to folder No. 0/16/853, “Endre Bálint left the country legally on 17 April 1957. He travelled to France to organise an exhibition showing graphic works, but he did not return.” He returned home on 6 June 1962 with the permit of the Hungarian Embassy in Paris. In the minutes of the interrogation we can read the following: “The named person referred to such leading personalities of the party and government as comrades Ferenc Münnich, György Aczél asking them to help solve his housing problem. He told us that György Aczél visited him in his home in person so that he can examine their housing conditions.” In his deposition he said: “I kept a safe distance from the Hungarians who emigrated from Hungary in 1956, and I did not feel any need for getting into touch with persons who were involved in politics.” In response to the question whether he knew any persons who were involved in activities “hostile” to the “People’s Republic of Hungary” he replied: “I know a writer whose name is Ferenc Fejtő who is a friend of dr. Pál Citrom, my last host in France. (...) Ferenc Fejtő has been living in the West for about twenty years, and is an unconditional advocate of the pro-Western line, although he regards himself as a leftist intellectual.”

disenchantment exacerbated by the media's push for sensation and due to the fact that it turned out that a lot of persons have skeletons from the former regime in the cupboard, the public mood turned sour. Increasingly tough competition for newly discovered opportunities and the appearance of the robber knights of new capitalism as well as an atmosphere of suspicion spawned by the snitch society of the previous decades had destroyed social confidence."¹²⁹ Failure to clarify the past results in a loss of national memory that is going to cost Hungary a lot. However, the impact of this memory loss can already be felt: "Budapest is not an intellectual scene anymore and this is true even in the negative sense; it simply does not have an intellectual atmosphere. Budapest is a town without memory, where, instead of self-examination and instead of a vibrant and excited commitment to come to insights, only legends and false nostalgias are born."¹³⁰

The favourite topic for conversation for the members of the Gedő-Bíró family was how much and why they hated regime. When recollecting the conversation topics, it seems to me that this was the only thing they talked about. Never for a moment did they doubt that this regime has to fall. When? In 100 years? In fifty years? Tomorrow? No one knew. My parents brought back an interesting bestseller from their one-year study tour in Paris. It was the French translation of *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* by Andrei Amalrik. The author was forced into exile because he had to fear for his life and because he was threatened with arrest. Endre Bíró often asked the question, "Will Mr. Amalrik Survive until 1984?" Amalrik died in a car accident under mysterious circumstances in Spain.

Ilka Gedő was a black-listed artist. She was 59 years old at the time of her first official exhibition. The artist nearly had an exhibition in 1982 at the Hungarian National Gallery. Based on documents and notes available to me, it is highly probable that the exhibition was called off because Endre Bálint, by relying on his extensive connections, prevented it. Endre Bíró made notes on the series of events that led to the cancellation of the exhibition. In

129 Quoted by Péter Niedermüller in a book review in No. 30 (2005) of the literary weekly *Élet és Irodalom*. The book reviewed is Margit Ács (et. al.), *Szent István-terv: gondolatok a magyar nemzet felemelkedéséről* [Saint Stephen Plan: Ideas on the Rise of the Magyar Nation] (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Alapítvány, 2005)

130 Imre Kertész, "Budapest – Egy fölösleges vallomás" [Budapest—a Superfluous Confession] In: Imre Kertész, *A száműzött nyelv* [Exiled Language] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2001), p. 123.

December 1978, the art historian Lenke Haulisch informed the artist about the National Gallery's intention to organise an exhibition. In January 1979 Endre Bálint told Endre Bíró that he was going to have an exhibition at the National Gallery in the framework of the workshop series. A week later Mária Anka informed the Bíró-Gedő couple that she had most recently visited Endre Bálint who praised Ilka Gedő. Mária Anka indicated that Endre Bálint would "help" in the selection of the exhibition material. On 27 April 1979 Mária Anka and another colleague, Mária Vajna selected the drawings. On leaving, Mária Vajna accidentally blurted out that Endre Bálint asked her to call him up and to inform him about the exhibition preparations. The notes Endre Bíró show¹³¹ that Endre Bálint called him on 29 May 1979. Bíró asked Bálint if he knew about the exhibition. "Yes, I know about the planned exhibition," replied Bálint. "Mária Vajna visited me in my studio. And to tell you the truth, she is now hesitating. This work is a little bit in Art Nouveau style. To organise an exhibition from this material, means going too far." According to the notes Endre Bíró, preserved in the artist's estate, Bálint went on to explain that Gedő should rather have exhibitions in houses of culture and the National Gallery would help her a lot in doing so. Endre Bíró replied that houses of culture would have been good exhibition venues only at the beginning of the sixties. Bálint replied, "If you together with Mária Vajna find some good connections, maybe you can succeed in having this exhibition." Although there is a letter¹³², dated 4 March 1982, from Zsuzsa Jobbágyi, another staff member of the National Gallery, in Gedő's estate which includes the line ("The National Gallery has taken up your exhibition to be organised in the workshop series into its annual plan."), this exhibition was cancelled from the Gallery's programme schedule. It could be true that Endre Bíró's remark made in his biographical interview is too even-handed: "Bálint could have helped Ilka a lot more, and it could have been absolutely for possible him to cause her less harm."¹³³

Ilka Gedő and Endre Bíró conducted an intensive correspondence with their friend who fled Hungary in 1956. On 24 September 1978 Endre Bíró wrote the following to Magda Kotányi¹³⁴:

131 This note is preserved in the artist's manuscript estate.

132 The letter is preserved in the artist's manuscript estate.

133 Biographical interview with Endre Bíró.

134 Magda Kotányi, the first wife of Attila Kotányi wrote an obituary on her late husband: "In December 1956 we left Hungary with Lajos Szabó, Lyubomir Szabó and our children. We ended up in Brussels where in 1958 the pictures of Lajos Vajda, Lajos Szabó, Endre Bálint, Attila Kotányi and of Lyubomir

“A cause cannot possibly have a bigger success than getting appreciation and recognition for the art of Lajos Vajda. The opening speech of Gábor Karátsony was published in the weekly magazine *Új Tükör*. This painter and art theoretician absolutely fascinated with Lajos Vajda just skips the time between the beginnings of the renaissance and Lajos Vajda, because he believes Lajos Vajda is alleged to be the only artist who had found the FORM. Endre Bálint does not see any problem in saying in the catholic monthly, *Vigilia* that Lajos Vajda is more important than Klee. Ilka responded to this ironically by remarking that this actually means that Endre Bálint, the best-verified disciple of Lajos Vajda is greater than than or, at the minimum, equal to Klee. / The world is not as uniform that there is a well developed mafia behind everything, as Ilka believes. The world is much less formless, it is like amoeba. There is a vague mafia motivated by snobbery, convenience, laziness and also vested interests. The whole process runs on its own. By the process I mean that an artist should have no recognition among the teeming crowds of the epigones. (...) Endre Bálint is a major power here. He is not the master of the broad masses but *the* master, surrounded with a large court of «high-brow» art lovers. (...) He could do something, he could help us, but he is all too much preoccupied with his mortal diseases and in the meantime with his new exhibitions.” Magda Kotányi, in her reply dated 18 October 1978, wrote: “I’ve just talked with the editor-in-chief over the phone. He has never heard about Lajos Vajda. And this is not the magazine’s fault. And now I got to the cause of my stifled anger. It is not by chance that they succeeded in making Lajos Vajda a local hyper provincial super star, because this was the only way that Endre Bálint could also become a local hyper provincial star. Endre Bálint, after having spent a few years here in the

Szabó were exhibited at the largest gallery of the town. Attila Kotányi became a member of the Paris-based Internationale Situationniste and also an editor of their journal. However, he called the attention of the Members of the movement to the traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. He was expelled from the movement of Internationale Situationniste which soon stopped its activities, but its ideas had an impact on the Paris student revolts of 1968. In 1964 Attila Kotányi followed Lajos Szabó and started to live in Düsseldorf with his companion Jenny who looked after him in the last two years of his life when he was seriously ill. As the teacher of the famous Düsseldorf Kunstakademie he held seminars under the title Counter Architecture. (...) Although he attended a cadet school in his youth, he rejected the values of the army and he also rejected the values of bourgeois society. He was not a careerist and he did not care for money, he was motivated by a commitment to tradition and the avantgarde. He fully understood the spirit of the age, and he was a keen observer and a sharp critic of his age in the noblest sense of the word. (...) Though he suffered from two diseases that paralysed him, his spirit remained undaunted. As concerns courage, he remained faithful to his ancestors who served in the army.” Magda Huszár, “Bücsú Kotányi Attilától” [Obituary on Attila Kotányi] *Élet és Irodalom*, No. 44 (2003). The Historical Archives of the State Security Services holds a “research material” on Attila Kotányi (K-673/T). In one of the reports an agent cover-named “Szabó” reports on Attila Kotányi and his friends: “From among his contacts in Hungary, we know about Endre Biró, a university professor who teaches at the University of Veterinary Science. In the summer of 1958, Biró went to Brussels and stayed in Kotányi’s flat for several days. He, presumably, smuggled out a number of manuscripts to Brussels.” Sub Division II/3 B of the Ministry of the Interior recommended that the “research material” on Attila Kotányi be placed into the archives. (Page 36 of Folder K-673/T: “Our department started to deal with the matter in May 1958 as a possibility that could allow us access to Anna Kéthly. On the occasion of the Brussels World Fair, our agent cover-named «Szabó», who stayed in Brussels because of the World Fair, dealt with Kotányi, but since then no progress has been made.” The folder was placed into the archives and the matter was closed down.

West, had irrevocably realised that there is no likelihood that his handsome and less handsome works will be noticed as a universally significant art. For his art to be noticed he needed the atmosphere of sweet home. / To tell you the truth, I laughed when I read about how happy you are that Júlia Vajda finally had the drawings of Lajos Vajda restored without any consideration for the costs involved. / You will hardly believe it, but it is true that the restoration of the drawings could have occurred without any costs and efforts back in February 1958. Then, in the wake of the huge success of the group exhibition of Lajos Vajda, Lajos Szabó, Attila Kotányi, Lyubomir Szabó and, last but not least, of Endre Bálint, Robert Giron, the director of the Brussels Musée des Beaux Arts offered to have the large-sized drawings of Lajos Vajda restored for free, because he was astonished that such magnificent works of art are in such an awful condition and that Endre Bálint carried them about rolled up in a paper tube. / Mr. Giron also offered to introduce Lajos Vajda to a world audience without charging for it. / Endre Bálint quickly disappeared with the drawings and put them under the bed of his attic room. / This does not require any commentary, and the witnesses who all saw this are still living. / This is not really interesting. I mention it just for the sake of historical accuracy. All these machinations will pass away, and nothing will be left of them but a little dust and ash and, for a short time, some blue smoke. / And the works of Lajos Vajda and those of Lajos Szabó and those Dezső Korniss will once be shown to the world and Endre Bálint will remain, for some time, a local celebrity. / The documents of the debate between Lajos Szabó, Endre Bálint and Stefánia Mándy on Lajos Vajda have been probably preserved by Stefánia Mándy who will probably realise that she would benefit more from the publication of these studies than from their concealment.”

A letter of Magda Kotányi written on 30 June 1977 to Ilka Gedő and Endre Bíró contains the following solacing words: „This is how I see your current position in the mafia. Right now you are the virtual guards of Lajos Szabó in terms of what Endre called the preservation of the «creative atmosphere of our youth». And it is understandable that a buffoon who has been wasting his talent should be angry. As regards Ilka’s diagnosis, I fully agree with it, but I also agree with Endre that, apart from diagnosing the phenomenon, one must not pay too much attention to these stupid attacks on Ilka. (...) The reason why they want to bury us away by a conspiracy of silence and oblivion (and they did the same with Lajos Szabó) is not that we are worthless, but rather that they know full well our worth and are afraid that their unworthiness might be revealed. (...) Ilka must exhibit in Paris, and then she will also have an exhibition at

home. An exhibition must be organised there without Endre Bálint knowing about it. If he realises that he does not control all the possibilities, he will willingly help.” An earlier letter by Magdi Kotányi dated 14 October 1976 mentions Endre Bálint negatively: “As regards Endre Bálint, I only wrote about his relationship with Lajos Szabó and also about the statement in one of his books where he mentions Lajos Vajda and remarks that it was he who exhibited Lajos Vajda and Lajos Szabó in Brussels, which is such a big lie that no one of my children should ever talk to him until he retracts this statement. I told him this several times so that he can repeat this to whomever he wants to. / Telling lies, the policy of «saying this – not saying that», has become his second nature.”

A pharmacist, Botond Kocsis, a devout art lover and pardonably snobbish admirer of many artists once caught sight of a drawing by Ilka Gedő in the studio of Endre Bálint. He was so much fascinated by this single drawing that he contacted the Bíró-Gedő couple. Later on he called a famous art historian’s attention to the artist. Júlia Szabó was a much respected art historian and it was thanks to her that the King St. Stephen’s Museum of Székesfehérvár, Hungary organised a retrospective exhibition from Gedő’s works in 1980. The artist was 59 years old then. Although this exhibition was a big success, one cannot avoid describing what a bad psychological condition the artist was in after it.

Before the exhibition she worked as a lonely under-recognized artist, and although she was far from being satisfied with the recognition accorded to her work, she was in a psychological equilibrium. However, after the Székesfehérvár exhibition that mental harmony was gone. The artist guessed what she could be able to get, if her art would be better recognized. The victim who provided an odd thirty of her notebooks with the title “exile”, and distinguished the notebooks having the same title with the help of numbers, suddenly realized what she should get in terms of recognition. Seeing that this kind of recognition was no longer possible she had lost her mental peace. Suppression extending to all the aspects of a person’s life are, due to its unequivocal nature, is in a certain sense more bearable than the granting of some semblance recognition. Although the last 4-5 years of the artist’s life were spent with very intensive work, the artist could no longer overcome her bitterness over the lack recognition for her artistic achievements and the blatant disregard for her work.

She understood that she created a huge body of works without having earned any money with it. It was in this mood that the artist wrote a long and detailed letter¹³⁵ to Péter Surányi, one of the cousins of her husband: *„I thought I would try to write the strange story of the poor Birós. Maybe you can help me. / In September 1964 Endre said all of a sudden: I am curious to know how much revenue we had this year. Ilka was surprised to see that Endre wanted to deal with this now, and she was quite stunned as Endre energetically scooped from the depth of his desk a box containing receipts, reached for his pen and started to write out the numbers. Did I really have so much in extra revenues and fees! / Ilka found that she could not even utter a word. For ages she has only heard that Endre’s salary is simply not enough to make both ends meet. Endre told me how lucky we were that we had extra revenues that allowed us to repay our debts. I was so much stunned and, somewhat later, so much surprised that I could not utter a sound when Endre added up the extra outlays of the family and when it turned out that, compared with the extra outlays, the sum of extra expenses is ridiculously low and it is hopelessly far away from the extra revenues. (...) In the months and, indeed, in the years that followed Ilka, who has a curious nature, attempted over and over again to get to know where the money was going and when and with what sort of methods Endre has been feeding the Unknown and Insatiable Stomach (U.I.S.), with one word Ilka was inquisitive and curious. But this curiosity was not a ceaseless one. Ilka’s curiosity plummeted when she discovered and understood a method whereby the money was made to disappear. (...) Once when Endre was crouching over his desk and studying his financial notes, Ilka pointed out that it was pointless to write down all the expenses and recommended to make records only of the extra expenses and extra costs. My proposal was optimistic and detached, it was devoid of any hostile intentions, which could hardly be explained with anything else that Ilka had simply got so much fed up with this nightmarish horror that at the time of making this proposal she felt only satisfaction over a wise proposal. Endre’s exclamation was like a sudden slap in the face: “In no case. I should be a fool to do that. Then you will ask me where all that money has gone!* The letter goes on to describe the events of 1970-1971, the time of the Paris stay and comes to the conclusion that Endre Biró was probably forced to make regular payments to a close relative: *“One day I said. The same goes on here in Paris as at home, where you recorded an amount lower than your actual salary, and in the week before we left for Paris you suddenly needed 2,000 forints and you said that that the money had mysteriously disappeared. Anyhow,*

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Notebook preserved in the manuscript estate of the artist.

I could still have a lot to say. Endre did not even bother to ask what I wanted to say. Overcoming his disgust over having to be confronted with such slander, he said courteously: this problem with the missing salary is some misunderstanding. The money that was gone missing before we went to Paris, seems to have been taken away by you. I will never talk to you. (...) I am not willing to add up the amounts that went missing after our return from Paris. (...) To be sure, I feel more desperation when on the sheet of a «large settlement» I discover that 12,000 forints are missing than when realising that 500 forints are missing. And when you count, you would like to count exactly, but for good reasons the fate of a large part of the gone sums will never be revealed. So in my imagination I build two holiday cottages at Lake Balaton a beautiful one out of money that surely evaporated and an even more beautiful one from all the amounts that evaporated. And before I finish, I would like to mention that on the way home from Paris during our stopover in Vienna at aunt Vica, Endre, using the opportunity, when aunt Vica left the room, asked me not to say a word to anyone at home about the fact that his U.S. scholarship was raised from 8,000 to 11,000 dollars. Ilka promised to do so, and from then on Endre was so happy like a kid. Now that I have broken my promise, I apologise that it took me 31 pages to do so.”

In 1982 the artist had a chamber exhibition at the Budapest Gallery of Dorottya utca that back then was an institution belonging to Műcsarnok, the largest state-owned temporary exhibition hall of Hungary. In 1983 the National Gallery bought two of the artist's paintings. The St. Stephen's Museum of Székesfehérvár, Hungary was making preparatory plans for its permanent collection when two UK art historians, Jekaterina (Katya) Young, originally born in Carpatho-Ukraine and speaking also Russian and Hungarian, and Chris Carrel were just visiting the museum and caught sight of two of Ilka Gedő's drawings. They wanted to visit the artist, but a comrade from the Ministry of Culture, who wanted to prevent this meeting from taking place at all costs, told them that the artist was not staying in Budapest and she would not return *home for several months*. The painter Ilona Keserű knew that this was a lie and gave the phone number of Ilka Gedő to the visitors. This way, the UK art historians were able to contact the artist and see her works.

In April 1985 Ilka Gedő was hospitalized for high blood pressure. During a medical check-up she was diagnosed with lung cancer. By May 1985 the artist's condition had deteriorated so much that everybody could see she was ill and she was dying. Both the family and the closer

circle of relatives knew that she had only weeks to live. At the end of May 1985, three weeks before her death, the artist got a “solacing” letter from Júlia Szabó: “Ilka, please recover. During my study trips abroad, I have visited several museums and I remembered your drawings and paintings. You are a great master of European painting. When the construction works of the Székesfehérvár Museum are finished, everybody can go there and see for themselves your works and everybody can ascertain this fact. I also have other plans. It would be such a good thing if Budapest had a Museum of Modern Hungarian Art¹³⁶. I have a simple, but well-lit building in mind with white walls and wall-to-wall carpets with air conditioning and with so much exhibition space that practically nothing must be kept in the museum’s store rooms. I have several museums like that in Germany. I wish that a museum like that would be moved to Budapest through some magic. This is what I am dreaming about and maybe some day my plan will resonate with the intentions of other art historians.” What a pity that this letter arrived so late, that it was only written at the time when it was written.

During the last days of May 1985, the artist experienced a total physical collapse, and a frightening deterioration of her condition occurred. It was during these weeks that she received official notification that the Artists’ Fund of Hungary granted her permission to use one of the cottages of the Szentendre Arts Colony. When the well-connected enemies of the artist learned that the artist was dying then as annoyance and also as a finishing stroke they fulfilled the artist’s request.

It was at mid-May that the terminally ill artist was transferred to the sanatorium of Budakeszi, and during these days Chris Carrell and Katya Young were viewing the artist’s works, and this activity lasted for at least four days. Chris Carrell reports: “Ilka Gedő at the Compass Gallery provides the smallest, quietest, most moving works brought from Hungary to Glasgow. Her gentle drawings, made as a young woman, record the hopelessness of wartime ghetto life. Her thin, spare, spidery pencil twists of painful, nervous intensity capture hungry, hollow-eyed children or exhausted figures asleep on a makeshift bed; the fear and angst-ridden era of Schiele's Vienna lurks in the huddled, frightened families. In 1946 she applied this same searing honesty to drawings of the old Ganz engineering factory, where labour was hard, not heroic: a bitter task the State did not want

136 Instead of it the Ludwig Museum Budapest–Museum of Contemporary Art (LUMÚ) was built.

recorded. This time her nostalgic and symbolic abstracted rose gardens in soft, transparent colours hint at Jugendstil, Klee and Munch. Ilka Gedő's female artistic sensibility produced mountains of work in the paper-strewn corner of her tiny bedroom. As Carrell says. «I went for an hour, was completely bowled over by what I saw in her piles of portfolios and spent days there.» Sadly she died just after his last visit. Carrell is to do a major touring memorial and a book on Gedő in two years' time.¹³⁷

The artist's condition got worse and on 15 June she got into a coma. She died on 19 June. She was buried on 25 June. In his funeral speech the rabbi quoted from the book of Job conjuring up, as it were, Ilka Gedő's personality and work: "Can the wing of the ostrich be compared/ with the plumage of the stork or falcon?/ She leaves her eggs on the ground, with only earth to warm them;/ Forgetting that a foot may tread on them/or a wild beast may crush them." This passage continues: "Yet if she bestirs herself to use her height, she can make fools of a horse and rider too."

In the opening speech to Gedő's exhibition opened just a few days after her death in the gallery of the Szentendre Art Colony, the art historian, Ibolya Ury recognized the artist with the following words: "This exhibition in Szentendre undoubtedly shows the work of an artist who does not rely on anything or anyone other than her own internal force and talent. It is her painterly vision and perspective that make this artist so distinctively unique, it is this perspective that distinguishes her from all other artists, so her work cannot be confused with that of anyone else."¹³⁸

8. *Reception of Ilka Gedő*

In the framework of the Glasgow Hungarian Season in October 1985 a solo exhibition was organized from the drawings and paintings of Ilka Gedő. All the significant British papers (*The Glasgow Herald, The Scotsman, The Financial Times, The Times, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Observer*) dealt with the Hungarian Season and all of them highlighted and praised the art

137 Clare Henry, *Studio International*, Vol 199. Nos. 10-12 (1986), p. 59.

138 The text of the opening speech is preserved in the estate of Ilka Gedő.

of Ilka Gedő. (Chris Carrell and Jekaterina (Katya) Young came to like so much the works of the artist that, in contrast to the other participants, Ilka Gedő was the only artist whose work was shown at a separate exhibition at Compass Gallery (178 West Regent Street). In the 29 October issue of the *Times* John Russel Taylor reported: „But the most memorable and distinctive of all is Ilka Gedő at the Compass Gallery. / Sadly she died in June, when the season was already in preparation: sadly also, she is apparently quite unknown in Hungary. The show includes some of her remarkable ghetto drawings from the Second World War, as well as some of the highly idiosyncratic flower and garden paintings of her last nine years, wayward yet tense scribbles, richly and delicately coloured, which oddly recall Mondrian’s dying chrysanthemum. Fluttering on the edge of the naïve, these fragile works still cast their spell, and one imagines that their Glasgow reputation (a major retrospective is planned) will soon ensure this prophet at least posthumous honour in her own country.”¹³⁹

In the spring of 1987 (16 April to 17 May) a retrospective exhibition was organized from Ilka Gedő’s works at the *Műcsarnok*, the largest exhibition hall of Budapest. From 3 February to 15 March 1989 the artist’s drawings were shown at the Municipal Gallery of Szombathely, Hungary. Gedő’s second Glasgow exhibition took place between 9 December and 12 January 1990 at the Third Eye Centre (346-354 Sauchiehall Street). The catalogue planned for the event could not be published due to lack of sufficient funds, but the exhibition was a great success. During its first days the students of the nearby Academy of Arts came to visit the event in groups, and, to my surprise, many of them started to copy the drawings. Someone explained to me that there is nothing to be surprised about because if the students think something is good and interesting they often start copying the exhibited works of art.

This retrospective exhibition, the largest one so far, gave a comprehensive review of Gedő’s complete oeuvre and it was quite interesting for me that it followed the artist’s work from 1934 on, thus including also the juvenilias. In his article titled *Glasgow Tribute to Artist of Extraordinary Gifts* and published at the time of the second Glasgow exhibition that took place in Glasgow’s Third Eye Centre in the Scotsman, Murdo Macdonald pointed out: „Gedő’s work

139 John Russel Taylor, “Brilliant Exponent of an Outdated Style” *The Times*, 29 October 1985

displays deep introversion but in a very positive sense. A typical subject of her drawing is a woman reading, head propped on her hand, and very often those she portrays seem to be enclosed in a world of their own thoughts. They are drawn in pencil in a way that, as many of Van Gogh's drawings, evokes straightforward physical reality and emotional sensitivity at the same time.¹⁴⁰

In 1991 a group exhibition was organized at the Hungarian National Gallery titled *The Sixties / Emerging Trends in Hungarian Visual Arts* at which Ilka Gedő was represented by one painting (Album /Oil Painting 29 titled *Artificial Flower with Falling Leaves*) held by the permanent collection of St Stephen's Museum of Székesfehérvár, Hungary. One of the critics of the exhibition wrote: "For example, there is absolutely no justification for not showing Béla Fekete Nagy and for the astonishingly reduced presentation of the oeuvre of Ilka Gedő and Erzsébet Vaszkó. Each of the latter two artists are represented only by one work at the exhibition."¹⁴¹ Later on in the same essay, the critic notes: "A sincere examination of the past should have involved the presentation, side by side, of those works that the official arts policies of the 1960's regarded as great art and those works of art that the outstanding representatives of Hungarian art history, following their common sense, regard as significant art today. The exhibition should have shown what the National Gallery was collecting back in the 1960's and also what it was collecting in 1980's. (...) In that case the metaphysical depth emanating from the dark pastels of Erzsébet Vaszkó would have become clear to the visitors and it would have turned out how fascinating a painterly intensity the works of Ilka Gedő have."¹⁴²

In the spring of 1994 Janos Gat Gallery in New York City organized an exhibition from the paintings and drawings of Gedő. Born in Hungary, Janos Gat fled to Israel through Yugoslavia. Later on he went to Paris, where he joined the *Squat Theatre*, a Hungarian, counter cultural amateur theatre group, founded by Péter Halász, that emigrated to America at the mid-1970's. He opened his gallery with the help of a prosperous New York factory owner, Ruby Azrak. In

140 Murdo Macdonald, "Glasgow Tribute to Artist of Extraordinary Gifts" *The Scotsman*

141 Péter György, "Mostantól fogva ez lesz a múlt (Hatvanas évek)" [From Now On This Shall Be the Past (The Sixties)] In: Péter György, *Elsüllyedt sziget [A Sunk Island]* (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1992), p. 98.

142 *Ibid.*: p. 111. and p. 112.

the initial years it was on the sixth floor of a tenement building located on Fifth Avenue, a stone-throw away from the district of diamond dealers. Gedő's exhibition was open from 1 March to 15 April 1994. The Forward, America's largest Jewish weekly, carried an article on the Gallery: "The Ilka Gedő retrospective is just the latest in Mr. Gat's efforts to bring to light a number of Hungary's avant-garde artists (both living and deceased), many of whom, owing to their Jewishness and their positions as political dissenters under the Communist regime, were never accorded formal acclaim."¹⁴³ From April 1995 four of Ilka Gedő's drawings were shown at the exhibition titled *Culture and Continuity: the Jewish Journey* of the New York Jewish Museum, then these drawings were acquired by the museum.

Anita Semjén got to know the art of Gedő at the exhibition of the Janos Gat Gallery, and from the drawings of György Román made during the trial of Hungarian war criminals and Ilka Gedő's drawings made in 1944 in the Budapest ghetto she organized an exhibition at the Budapest Jewish Museum titled *Victims and Perpetrators*. This exhibition, extended by three paintings of both artists, was shown one year later at the Yad Vashem Art Museum in Jerusalem. The best drawings of Gedő's ghetto series were acquired by the Yad Vashem Art Museum.

The Shepherd Gallery in New York City organized an exhibition¹⁴⁴ from Gedő's drawings including the table series, the self-portraits and the Ganz factory drawings from 21 November to 19 December 1995.

In November 1997 a book¹⁴⁵, including studies on Gedő by the Hungarian art historians, Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, both in Hungarian and in English, was published. The story of this book, which was originally intended to be the catalogue of the 1989 Glasgow exhibition, is rather complicated. Early in 1995 the editor of the Új Művészet Publishing House, Gábor Pataki received the Hungarian and English manuscript, extended by

143 Douglas Century, "100 Years in the Avant-Garde (Liberated from the Basements of Budapest, Hungarian Jewish Artists Arrive in Budapest)" The Forward, 1 April 1994. Another review titled "Hungarian Masterworks' First Showing in New York" was published by Madeline A. Visbasius in the 16 March 1994 issue of the New York Cover Magazine.

144 Ekizabeh Kashey (ed.), Ilka Gedő (1921–1985) Drawings and Pastels (New York: Shepherd Gallery, 21 East 84th Street)

145 Péter György, Gábor Pataki, Júlia Szabó and F. István Mészáros, op. cit.

a detailed bibliography, chronological review and the listing of the artist's group and solo exhibitions. Gábor Pataki apparently sent the manuscript to press without editing it. The intention might have been to print an English book that was literally teeming with errors, and thus create a bad impression. With the text printed I had to commission a native speaker with correcting the English translation. The manager of the Új Művészet Publishing House changed the text without my knowledge so as to create a *fait accompli* by the time of publication and so as to conceal the fact that drawings of Gedő were acquired by famous public collections. Thus, for example, The Jewish Museum of New York was deleted from the list of public collections where Gedő's works are preserved and the Jerusalem Israel Museum was renamed into Jewish Museum.

The book was not distributed and for years it could not be seen in any of the bookshops and it is highly probable that the printed copies were destroyed. I had to donate three copies of the book to the National Széchényi Library, a national reference library, several years after publication. This became necessary because this library got only one copy of the book as a result of which it could not be made available to readers.

In 1998 the sons of the artist donated a total of fifteen drawings to the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum, and this was followed by another donation of six drawings for the Jerusalem Museum.

In 2003 a beautiful album¹⁴⁶ was published both in Hungarian and in English on Ilka Gedő. Marianna Kolozsváry helped a lot in the realization of this project. The expressions “she helped a lot”, she “helped a great deal” are both accurate and inaccurate. She really helped a great deal, but on top of this, she gave some advice without which the whole project aimed at publishing this album would have collapsed. The artist's sons donated a total of twenty-three drawings and three paintings to the National Gallery and this way the financial assistance could be secured for the publication of this album in a Hungarian and an English language version. This album, in addition to the reproduction of several documents and a large number of drawings, also includes colour plates about each of the paintings.

146 István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, *The Art of Ilka Gedő*. (Budapest: Gondolat, 2003) István Hajdu–Dávid Biró, *Gedő Ilka művészete*. [The Art of Ilka Gedő] (Budapest: Gondolat, 2003)

Curated by Mariann Kolozsváry and Zsuzsa Jobbágyi, a beautiful oeuvre exhibition of Gedő's works was organized, but this, unfortunately, did not prevent other national Gallery staff from trying to cause harm to this exhibition. The October-December special museum issue of the largest programme weekly of Budapest, *Pesti Műsor* did not even mention this exhibition and on asking the responsible staff member of the National Gallery I was told that she was not sure about the opening date of the exhibition, which was quite ridiculous because it had already been agreed on six months before. The reason why *Pesti Műsor* failed to inform about this exhibition was the intention to conceal this event. This same staff member, although she did invite me to the press briefing of Budapest museums where I could show the journalists the newly published album, did not even bother to bring the exhibition catalogue of Ilka Gedő, a catalogue published by her own museum! She only prepared a few bad-quality copies of the first page of the catalogue that she distributed among the journalists with the obvious intention to conceal the significance of this event. Following this she assured me that the National Gallery would sometime and at the latest before March advertise Gedő's exhibition. This was followed by a complicated lecture on how difficult it is to order the publication of an advertisement. This may take even months. I had to listen to these cheeky lies without showing what I felt. I told this staff member how disadvantageous it was that in the huge entrance hall of the National Gallery only a A/4-sized notice advertises the exhibition located on the third floor. (Most of the exhibition reviews mentioned, quite correctly, how difficult it was to find the exhibition in the huge building of the National Gallery.) The staff member promised they would place a big-sized poster on an easel in the entrance hall. This promise was not kept. The Gallery did not print a poster for the exhibition with the intention to prevent this event from being publicized too much. Towards the end of January the staff member of the Gallery who I talked with back in December suddenly blurted out that the administration of advertisement is not her but her boss's task. Finally the editor-in-chief of *Élet és Irodalom*, Hungary's best literary weekly ensured that the exhibition is advertised in his paper. Another four advertisements were promised by the National Gallery out of which only two could be published.

Staff members of the National Gallery had been informing me for months about a co-operation agreement between *Élet és Irodalom* and the National Gallery on the publication of an issue of the weekly illustrated by works on paper by Gedő. Early in January, at that time the exhibition

had already been open for two months, the responsible staff member explained to me that it was her job to do the administrative tasks in connection with the planned issue. It turned out immediately that she had not even heard about the scanned images that I handed over to the Gallery two months before. Before loaning them to the National Gallery I had scanned all the works on paper and I also scanned the ones that were later on acquired by the National Gallery. I did not know what the responsible staff member was able to arrange without having the scannings. I remember having conducted a long conversation with the head of the Gallery's marketing department on who should write a commentary to the published drawings. I can clearly remember that I mentioned Ágnes Gyetvai's short study on Gedő, but I did emphasize that I really do not want to interfere with his decision. In response, the head of marketing promised to me in a phone conversation to hand over the scannings needed for the Gedő issue to the editorial office of *Élet és Irodalom*. Later on, however, the editor of *Élet és Irodalom* informed me that there was not any co-operation agreement between the National Gallery and the weekly on an issue illustrated by Gedő's works on paper. When I mentioned this to the marketing director, I got a letter with vague threats: "I have never told you that there would be this issue, I only contacted the art editor of the weekly asking him about the possibility of such an issue. The art editor told me that they publish images only from thematic exhibitions and one-person exhibitions are not accepted. They publish only the works of contemporary artists. So *Élet és Irodalom* has never ever promised us anything. We had the intention to publish the images in the weekly. I would be very glad if you stopped trying to go your own ways, pretending that you act on our behalf and it would also be good if you did not arrange things behind my back."

I made available the scannings of approximately 200 works on paper by Gedő so that visitors can also view them on screens in the exhibition area. Some of the scannings were finally shown without the signing of an agreement on the terms of use. The fate of the scanned images is uncertain, although I do hope they have been deleted from computers of the National Gallery. Gedő's exhibition was underway but the museum bookshop did not even bother to place the albums in a place that the visitors could see them, and when they did put out the album, they only put the Hungarian language version on display, even though more than half of the visitors of the Gallery are foreigners. In the final weeks of the exhibition I managed to convince the staff of the bookshop to display both versions of the album in a glass showcase.

The last week of the exhibition that overlapped with the first week of the Mihály Munkácsy exhibition arrived. Gallery staff members thought it was too much to have on one side of the entrance the poster of Gedő's exhibition and on the other that of the Munkácsy exhibition, so they removed Gedő's poster and the other A/4-sized "poster" in the entrance hall of the National Gallery was also gone.

In the autumn of 2003 I handed over a detailed documentation of Gedő to the archives of the National Gallery. In the summer of 2005 I got a letter from the director informing me that the Gedő documentation had been taken up into the archives. But just a day before the receipt of the letter I saw something strange in the Archives, where I went to hand over the Hungarian press coverage of Gedő's exhibition. The material was not catalogued. The librarian on duty, who could not hide her embarrassment, took the two blue folders, containing the documentation, out of her boss's cabinet. She also had a copy of the director's letter informing about the cataloguing. The archivist wrote the identification number on the two folders and when I asked her when the other materials would be catalogued, I did not get a clear reply, because the archivist suddenly realized that she was busy doing something else. I was also astonished to see that the card catalogue system of the Archives of the National Gallery does not even contain the catalogue of Gedő's exhibition, i.e. the catalogue of an exhibition, published by the Hungarian National Gallery, although the National Gallery itself organized this exhibition in the same building. No wonder that I cannot be absolutely sure that the material on Ilka Gedő will really be preserved by the Archives and made available to researchers on request.

The Institute of Art History also has a documentation on Gedő, but it is not catalogued either. This is a quote from my letter written in 2005: "Dear Mr. Pataki/ Thanks for displaying, from 18 January, the fond number of the Gedő fond on the website of the Institute. This is really good news as the oeuvre exhibition of Gedő at the National Gallery is still underway. You can now view a large number of the works on paper on a screen placed at the entrance of the exhibition. A fond, whose items have not been provided with inventory numbers, will be exposed to the risk of items being lost. Let us assume that someone who finds a letter from Yad Vashem Art Museum (along with the scans and the inventory numbers of the drawings) confirming that they have 135 ghetto drawings in their collection, throws this letter away. Another researcher could, out of neglect, misplace some items. Your view means that these

documents (confirmation with inventory numbers of the ghetto drawings) is not so important as to have a separate inventory number within the fond./ I cannot agree with this. Is this what these children, victims of the Hungarian holocaust, deserve? They have become part of a staple of papers without identification numbers./ Gedő's exhibitions in Hungary and abroad make a detailed inventory of the fond necessary, because, this way, the contents of this fond could be better preserved for the future. Back in 1995 (that is ten years ago) you promised to me in your letter (letter no. 177/1995) the fond would be processed, and now that ten years have elapsed (letter no 19/2005), you say that it is not useful to have a detailed inventory of the fond. «Similarly to other fonds, we are unfortunately not in the position to prepare a more detailed inventory.» However, a large number of the fonds are inventoried in the Institute's Archives, and I find little solace in the fact that there are also some that, similarly to Gedő's fond, are not inventoried. / Last year I prepared a detailed list of items in the fond I handed it over to Mrs. Levente Nagy. Maybe you still have it. / Now I have sent this list again in the hope that my request concerning the fond of Gedő can be fulfilled, all the more so as the list of items in the inventory has been prepared. / Considering the above, I request you to ensure that the inventory list of the fond on Gedő be prepared." In vain did I write this letter. My request was rejected and I was even reprimanded for my poor judgement and a detailed inventory of the fond has not been made.

FINIS

9. Chronology

- 1921 Ilka Gedő was born on 26 May 1921 in Budapest. Her father was a teacher at the Budapest Jewish Grammar School. The mother, Elsa Weiskopf, was a clerk.
- 1939 In autumn Ilka Gedő visits the free school of Tibor Gallé.
- 1940 She participates in the second exhibition of OMIKE (Hungarian National Cultural Society of Jews).
- 1939-42 Due to family connections, she receives training from Viktor Erdei.
- 1942 She takes part in the exhibition organised by the Group of Socialist Painters that takes place at the Centre of the Metal Workers' Union.
- 1942-43 She attends the free school of István Örkényi-Strasser.
- 1943 Gedő participates in the fifth exhibition of OMIKE in the exhibition halls of the Hungarian Jewish Museum.
- 1944 In the Budapest ghetto a huge series of drawings is born.
- 1945 In the autumn of 1945 Ilka Gedő enrolls as a full-time student in the Academy of Fine Arts. However, she leaves the academy after six months due to family reasons. She draws at the school of Gyula Pap, a former member of Bauhaus.
- 1946 She marries the biochemist Endre Bíró.
- 1947 She takes part in the Second Open National Exhibition of the Trade Union of Hungarian Artists. Birth of her first son.
- 1949 She stops her artistic activities only to resume them in 1965.
- 1950 From 1950 on she does not take part in art life. Her interests turn to the philosophy of art and art history. She translates extensive passages from Goethe's theory of colour.
- 1953 Birth of her second son.
- 1962 The Hungarian National Gallery buys three drawings of the artist.
- 1965 Gedő shows a selection of her drawings from the years 1945-1949 in a studio exhibition. She resumes her artistic activities.
- 1969-1970 Spends a year in Paris. She participates in a group museum exhibition of the Galerie Lambert.
- 1974 She gains admission to the Association of Visual Artists.
- 1980 Retrospective exhibition in the St. Stephen's Museum of Székesfehérvár, Hungary.
- 1982 Exhibition at the Dorottya Gallery of Budapest. The National Gallery of Hungary buys two of the artist's paintings.
- 1985 Gedő dies on 19 June in Budapest. A solo exhibition of the artist is opened in the Gallery of the Szentendre Art Colony. A solo exhibition of Gedő is organized in the framework of the Hungarian Season in Glasgow. Gedő's art is praised by the art critics of the *Glasgow Herald*, *The Scotsman*, *Financial Times*, *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian*
- 1987 Gedő's largest Hungarian exhibition takes place in the Budapest exhibition venue, *Műcsarnok*.
- 1989 Exhibition at the Municipal Art Gallery of Szombathely, Hungary.

- 1989-1990 Gedő's second Glasgow exhibition takes place between 9 December 1989 and 12 January 1990 at the Third Eye Centre (346-354 Sauchiehall Street).
- 1994 Solo exhibition at New York's Janos Gat Gallery.
- 1995 An exhibition titled *Victims and Perpetrators* from the drawings of György Román made during the trial of Hungarian war criminals and Gedő's drawings made in 1944 in the Budapest ghetto takes place at the Budapest Jewish Museum. From April 1995 four of Ilka Gedő's drawings are shown at the exhibition titled *Culture and Continuity: the Jewish Journey* of the New York Jewish Museum for a period of six months. The Shepherd Gallery in New York City organizes an exhibition from Gedő's drawings including the table series, the self-portraits and the Ganz factory drawings from 21 November to 19 December 1995.
- 1996 Supplemented by three oil paintings of both Gedő and Román, *Victims and Perpetrators* is shown at the Art Museum of Yad Vashem.
- 1997 Solo exhibition at the Janos Gat Gallery in New York City.
- 1998 The Department of Prints and Drawings of the The British Museum acquires 15 and The Israel Museum acquires six drawings by Ilka Gedő.
- 1999 Participation in the collective exhibition titled *Voices From Here and There (New Acquisitions in the Department of Prints and Drawings) of the Israel Museum*. The Düsseldorf Museum Museums Kunst Palast acquires ten drawings of the Artist.
- 2001 Chamber exhibition of Gedő's drawings at the Budapest Municipal Picture Gallery and Kiscelli Museum. The National Gallery buys three of Gedő's paintings.
- 2002 Two of Gedő's painting become a part of the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery.
- 2003 *Gondolat Kiadó*, a Budapest publishing house publishes in English and Hungarian an album titled *The Art of Ilka Gedő (1921-1985) / Oeuvre Catalogue and Documents*. The sons of the artist donate twenty-three drawings and three paintings of Gedő to the Hungarian National Gallery.
- 2004 Oeuvre exhibition in the National Gallery of Hungary from 18 November 2004 to 3 April 2005.
- 2006 Exhibition of Ilka Gedő takes place at the Berlin Collegicum Hungaricum from 9 March to 10 May. A representative selection of the artist's drawings and paintings is shown from the permanent collections of the Hungarian National Gallery and the Düsseldorf Museum Kunst Palast.
- 2011 The Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings, Berlin) acquires eight drawings of Ilka Gedő.
- 2013 The Albertina acquires twelve drawings of Ilka Gedő.
- 2013 Chamber Exhibition of Ilka Gedő at the National Theatre of Hungary from 22 March to 23 April 2013.

2014 The joint exhibition of the National Gallery of Hungary and the Israel Museum titled *Dada and Surrealism. Magritte, Duchamp, Man Ray, Miró, Dalí--Rearranged Reality. Creative Strategies in Hungarian Art under the Spell of Dada and Surrealism* (July – 5 October 2014) features three drawings and three oil paintings by Ilka Gedő.