

KIRA BANASIŃSKA –
SEVENTY YEARS IN INDIA.
From Diplomacy to Kaybee

In Polish-Indian diplomatic relations, Kira Banasińska, the wife of the first Polish consul during the years 1933–1944, played a role that cannot be overstated.

The complicated and dramatic historical events which had such an impact on the fate of Poles living in the East were reflected in her long – encompassing the entire 20th century – life. Banasińska died in 2002, at the age of 103. She spent almost all of her long life as an emigrant – mainly in Asia, spending 70 years of that time in India, where she remained very active and highly respected until the end of her life. She was an independent, resourceful, emancipated woman, active in many different fields.

Kira Banasińska's life can be divided into several interesting stages. In the interwar period, she was an artist, working in the tradition of Japanese art, and she popularised Polish culture abroad as well as the cultures of the countries where she was currently residing – in her native Poland. However, she performed her greatest service for Poland during World War II when she organised aid in India for thousands of refugees, particularly children, rescued from Soviet labour camps.

After the war, Banasińska became a resourceful businesswoman in India, who found the meaning of her life in improving teaching methodology for children.

Kira, née Ćwirko-Godycka was born in 1899 in Vitebsk in Belarus. She spent her childhood, however, in Sretensk in Trans-Baikal, where her father, an engineer in the service of the Tsar, worked on the construction of a rail-

way network in Siberia. It was not far from the borders with China and Mongolia.

Another haven of her childhood was Tyumen in western Siberia. When Tsarist Russia was shaken by the dramatic events of World War I and the revolution, Kira was only 20 years old. However, after the Bolsheviks' invasion of those territories, the civilian population had to flee as far east as possible. Kira and her mother miraculously reached – by the Trans-Siberian railway – Harbin in Manchuria – the main concentration of Poles and supporters of the Whites in the Far East.

Paradoxically, the revolutionary ferment in Russia triggered an independence movement among Poles in the Russian army and the Austrian army prisoners exiled to Siberia. As a delegate, sent to Harbin in 1919, Eugeniusz Banasiński was connected with the Polish Legion and with Vladislav Racziewicz's Military Committee in Tomsk and Omsk.

Before the war, Banasiński had studied physics in Freiburg in Switzerland. He defended his doctorate and received the position of a full-time assistant at the university in 1912. His budding scientific career was interrupted by the outbreak of the war and his return to his native country, Poland. During the war and revolution he lived in Siberia. In Harbin, Banasiński was active in the Polish community there – he founded the secondary school, where he taught mathematics and natural science. He met Kira at the theatre group which performed at the Polish emigrants' society, called the 'Polish Tavern', and married her in 1920. It was there that their only daughter, Lygia, was born.

In 1924 Eugeniusz Banasiński was employed in the diplomatic service in Japan by the Polish authorities. In Poland, he had already been regarded as an expert in the politics and economy of the Far East. The Banasiński couple were fascinated by the rich history and culture of Japan. Kira was impressed by Japanese aesthetics and decided to learn its secrets in practice as well. She learnt Japanese in a very short time, and was taught the principles of Japanese art by the painter Seiko Yoshimura. She also taught her traditional techniques such as ikebana, playing the koto, folding kimonos, dyeing and decorating fabrics as well as the basic principles of painting. Kira continued her study of traditional painting under the guidance of master Mitsu Shigoumi, known as the 'modern Hokusai'¹⁾, for two more years. Then she studied under the famous painter Senrin Kirigaya. At the same time, Kira took Japanese dance

¹⁾ Polska paleta (1930: 3).

lessons. However, it was painting that became the main domain of her artistic activity²⁾.

In her quest to understand the essence of Japanese art, Kira learnt how to synthetically represent reality with the help of simple forms, subtle colour schemes and harmonious composition using empty space. She painted with an awareness of the meaning of symbols. Using the ink technique required great concentration and a steady hand while rapidly manipulating the brush. Her kakemono *Fisherman*, donated to a Buddhist temple³⁾, was highly acclaimed in Japan. The culmination of her artistic work, at the end of her six-year stay in Japan, was a series of solo exhibitions that played a significant role in strengthening Polish-Japanese diplomatic relations.

The first exhibition of Banasińska's works was held in March 1930 at the Polish diplomatic mission in Tokyo. On the way to Poland, Kira held an exhibition in Harbin. In 1930 she was in Poland for the first time. Her works were first shown in Japan's diplomatic mission in Warsaw to celebrate the official visit of Prince Takamatsu Nobuhito⁴⁾, the Emperor's brother, whilst her solo exhibition, which opened at Zachęta in October 1930, was an artistic event of a much greater scale⁵⁾. In the catalogue, it was emphasised that 'the exhibition of our fellow countrywoman is a truly exotic novelty'⁶⁾. The press widely advertised Kira's debut⁷⁾. Kira showed 46 'Japanese' works at Zachęta⁸⁾. They were painted with Chinese ink and watercolours on silk: *kakemono*, *makimono*, *tanzaku*, and *shikishi*. She depicted traditional motifs – animals, plants, landscapes, scenes from Japanese myths and beliefs⁹⁾. Banasińska held her next exhibition in Lwów (Lviv) in the Society for Fine Arts in March 1931¹⁰⁾. Władysław Kozicki, without denying Kira's works subtlety and originality, considered them as a kind of 'artistic experiment' on Polish soil, but devoid of individual character. He compared them with the positive example of the works of Japanese artist, Foujita, from *Ecole de Paris*.

²⁾ Bartnicka-Górska (1971: 81–82).

³⁾ Banasińska (1997: 63).

⁴⁾ Wystawa japońskich obrazów (1930: 2).

⁵⁾ Malinowski (2009: 225–234).

⁶⁾ Popowski (1930: 8).

⁷⁾ Wystawa japońskich obrazów (1930:4).

⁸⁾ Sztuki Piękne (1930: 369).

⁹⁾ Astra (1931: 4).

¹⁰⁾ Wystawa p. Kiry Banasińskiej (1931: 3); Sztuki Piękne (1931: 104).

After the exhibition in Lwów (Lviv), further exhibitions were organised in Tarnopol, Brzeżany and Złoczów. Kira also organised some so-called ‘Japanese Evenings’, when she would give lectures about art, demonstrate painting techniques, play the koto and perform Japanese dances at the Eastern Institute in Warsaw. She also popularised Japanese culture on the radio or by giving interviews in the press. In August 1931 she had another exhibition at Zachęta, at the Salon¹¹.

The next stage of their lives shifted to India in 1931. Banasiński was entrusted with the responsible mission of establishing the first Polish consulate in the region of South and South-Eastern Asia, including: India, Malaya, and Singapore. As a valued expert in Far Eastern affairs and the author of several treatises devoted to the economic issues of Asia (especially, Japan and Manchuria) as well as numerous articles on Korea and India, he was given the task of organising trade between Poland and India. The Banasiński came to Bombay in November 1933. They began by arranging the interior of the consulate in a rented villa in the Moorish style on Nepean Sea Road. India henceforth became a new passion for Kira – an independent woman, full of fantasy, creativity, and not one to shy away from steamy love affairs.

The Banasińskis led a lively social life among the local English, Indian high society as well as international diplomacy, and also entertained visitors from Poland. Kira herself was very active socially. She was also engaged in the mission of promoting Polish culture in a series of readings, some of which were broadcast by the local radio. In the ‘Club for American Women’ she spoke about Polish music, dance, and literature. Eugeniusz had a penchant for collecting antique bronze and terracotta sculptures and coins¹². As for Kira, her new fascination was photography and filming with a 16-mm camera. While travelling in India, she recorded numerous exotic attractions with a reporter’s passion: monuments, visits to maharajas’ banquets, hunting scenes as well as local customs and daily life. She would absorb the surroundings – full of contrasts along with the rich culture and wisdom of the East. In the colonial world of India, tradition mingled with modernity. In 1938, during her second stay in Warsaw (and, as it turned out, her last) she spoke at the Oriental Institute about the philosophy of Hinduism, the caste society and Indian customs. She illustrated the lectures with her own film *Five Years in India*, in which – in addition to picturesque sites – she showed drastic images of

¹¹) Wojciechowski (1974: 229, 252).

¹²) Sternbach (1941).

poverty. The film attracted considerable interest, received good press and Kira received invitations from several other places in Poland¹³. In 1939, Eugeniusz was appointed Consul-General, with an extended range of responsibilities for the area of Ceylon and Burma. He was in charge of new missions – in Kolkata and Colombo. He could regard as his own success the almost fourfold increase in trade between Poland and India from 1933 to 1939 – from \$ 1.5 million per year to \$ 5.8 million¹⁴.

Prospects for the further development of the diplomatic mission and the fate of the people who were connected with it were shaken by the outbreak of the war. For the Banasiński couple came their busiest years in terms of providing aid to their compatriots. Kira played a very special role. Despite the disarray of the Polish diplomatic service, the British authorities in India agreed that the Polish consulate in Bombay continue functioning.

Since 1941, when the Sikorski-Maisky Agreement was drafted, India offered significant support for the newly-formed army of General Anders as well as a safe haven for more than 5,000 Polish children evacuated from Soviet labour camps. With great devotion, consul Eugeniusz Banasiński and his wife Kira oversaw this undertaking – the Polish consulate in Bombay almost turned into a Red Cross station. They mediated in difficult negotiations between the Polish government in London and the British authorities in India on the establishment of evacuation centres for the huge number of Poles. This task was undertaken – with great commitment and determination – by Kira personally.

Already in October 1939 the Banasiński couple founded the Committee for Aid to Refugees, headed by the Archbishop of Bombay T.D. Roberts; and the Polish consul became vice-president of the Committee. They were supported by many influential English and Indian personalities. Kira chaired the committee of women – ‘Ladies Auxiliary Committee’. An appeal was launched to the local elite to raise money and collect some basic necessities; parcels were sent by the Red Cross to the Poles. After the formation of the structures of social welfare by the Polish government in London (at the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare), Kira was appointed first as a delegate, and then as an alternate delegate and also took up the chair of the Polish Red Cross in India. Both Eugeniusz and Kira, using their extensive social contacts, gave talks about the situation in Poland, and sought help from the local authorities.

¹³) Banasińska (1997: 83).

¹⁴) Łupińska (2008: 123).

Eugeniusz focused primarily on consular matters, while Kira – on practical action.

Many Poles, having travelled from Russia to Iran or Iraq, tried to reach Bombay, hoping that they would be able to continue their journey further – beyond India. A growing colony of refugees formed the ‘Union of Poles in India’, which undertook various activities, including patriotic events with the participation of famous actresses: Hanka Ordonówna and Lena Żelichowska, and supported Stephen Norblin’s exhibition opened in Bombay in 1944 in the gallery Cowasji Sir Jehangir Hall by the Polish consul Eugeniusz Banasiński. With the support of the consul, the publishing house ‘Polish-Indian Library’ and the weekly magazine ‘The Pole in India’ were established.

However, the biggest challenge was the evacuation of Polish children, who on Stalin’s orders were deported en masse from Poland’s Eastern Borderlands to Soviet labour camps into the interior of Russia. Their number was estimated at 180,000, including 30,000 orphans¹⁵⁾. After the ‘amnesty’ announced by the Soviet Union, as a result of the Sikorski-Maisky Agreement in July 1941, Banasiński immediately took the initiative to organise help. Obtaining the approval of the Indian Government to adopt children and refugees was preceded by tough diplomatic negotiations between the Polish government in London, the Government of India, the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the military authorities in Iran and Iraq as well as the embassies in Moscow, Kuibyshev and Tehran.

To obtain approval from the India Office, the Polish side had to ensure that life in the camps would be well-organised and subsistence provided. A special fund to finance the cost of the children’s residence set up by the Viceroy of India proved to be extremely helpful. Many rajas, maharajas and the Indian Red Cross supported the fund by donations. The maharajas of Damnagar and Patiala offered sites for the construction of the camps. Kira’s task on behalf of the Red Cross was to organise transport and essential supplies – food, medicine, clothing for refugees grouped at the southern border of the Soviet Union and in Iran, where the Polish army under the command of General Anders was forming. In this respect, she showed great enterprise and dedication.

In 1942, she was obliged to organise the transport of Polish children from Ashgabat in Turkmenistan to Bombay. The journey over long distances (5500 km) was made under very difficult and dangerous conditions, across the

¹⁵⁾ Gerlach (2000: 2).

Iranian mountains and Afghan desert – Quetta in Pakistan. In July 1942, a permanent centre was opened in Balachadi near Damnagar, on the peninsula of Kathiawar (Gujarat state) for about 600 children – including a school, a hospital and professional care. The site for a settlement, consisting of 60 buildings, was provided by the ruler of the principality of Nawanagar, Maharaja Jam Shah, near the Maharaja's summer residence. In total, under the care of the Delegation (Delegatura), led by Kira, there were five large refugee centres in: Karachi (a temporary camp, under tents), Malir (for about 2400 people), the resort of Panchgani, Valivade (for 5000 refugees) and Balachadi. It was estimated that the number of Poles who stayed in these camps was more than 21,000¹⁶⁾. Throughout, Kira received new transports, visited the camps and negotiated with the authorities for further assistance. Her last big success was to have a Polish Red Cross hospital opened in Bombay¹⁷⁾. In less than five years of activity she showed boundless energy and devotion to the Polish cause, providing care for 50,000 refugees, mostly women and children. But organising help for refugees was becoming more and more formalised in terms of structure and was, unfortunately, subject to a lot of political pressure from various polarised Polish exile groups. In addition, the work of the consul and his wife was made more difficult by the restrictions imposed by the Polish authorities in London and by the thickening atmosphere of conflict. In this situation, Kira first gave up on the activities of the Delegation, and then Eugeniusz stepped down as consul in mid-1944.

After 11 years of service in India, they went to London, where Banasiński worked in the section for Eastern Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for several months. The war, which would so radically change the balance of political forces against Poland, was coming to an end. After the government-in-exile became delegalised, the life situation of the Banasiński couple became unexpectedly difficult in every respect. Therefore, after a year, they decided to return to India. Kira, who was the first to arrive in Bombay in 1946, at the age of 46, was someone without a defined social status, passport or a plan of what to live on. Their new source of income was to start an export company which, however, soon went bankrupt. As Eugene did not have any practical sense, Kira took the initiative. From then on, for the next 45 years, she was a resourceful businesswoman.

¹⁶⁾ Maresch (2002: 47).

¹⁷⁾ Maresch (2002: 56).

In 1950, she came up with the idea of producing wooden toys and educational aids for kindergartens and schools. To learn the craft of woodworking, she took a job at a carpenter's workshop. She set up the company under the name of Kaybee School Equipment (from the initials of her first name and surname), with a modest capital base. Her priority was to manufacture high quality products, which were very slowly becoming a normal element of Indian school equipment. Only in 1953 did she become the only licensed manufacturer of Montessori learning equipment for India and Asia. The education system of the Italian educational reformer Maria Montessori, involving the free and harmonious development of the child has been known in India since the 1920s. Montessori herself spent the war in India, where she disseminated her idea, creating a new program of 'cosmic education' based on theosophical thought. Together with the poet Rabindranath Tagore, they founded schools for children from poor families, giving them a chance to make up for educational disparities. The teaching aids produced by the Kaybee company were to teach children to distinguish between shapes, colours, letters, and numbers. They not only made aids according to the patterns of the International Montessori Association in Amsterdam, but also those based on Kira's own ideas. She designed aids for children with disabilities (mostly blind) as well as furniture for schools and kindergartens. Her artistic experience gained in Japan proved to be helpful – using simple, functional forms. The Kaybee company exported its products to many countries.

At the same time, since the 60s Kira collaborated with Radio Free Europe, for which, under the name of Barbara Kluczyńska, she prepared essays on political events and Indian culture. Despite her growing financial problems – the fire at her plant, her husband's death in 1964 and strikes – she fought with great determination to keep the factory open. In 1967, in order to reduce costs, she moved to distant Hyderabad. This did not, however, help to prevent the sale of the company. Yet, she kept her position as manager, and – after four years – she regained ownership of the company. Deeply convinced of the beneficial effects of Montessori methods on the development of children, she decided, at the age of 80 years, to set up a training and research facility for teachers and students from all over Asia. She brought her idea to fruition when she was 93 years old. In 1993, the Kaybee School Equipment Manufacturing Company was founded. This was made possible thanks to the financial support of the great leader of Indian industry, Jaha R.D. Tata – who had been a friend of the Banasińskis for years before the outbreak of the war and who held Kira's engagement in so many different fields in great esteem.

Kira was active until a ripe old age. Despite increasing health problems, she continued to consult on projects, read and write.

She lived to 103 years in Hyderabad, where she died in 2002. In India, she spent a total of seventy years leading a highly active life. Banasińska was one of the most interesting and distinguished people of Polish origin in India, side by side with the well-known devotees of Hinduism and close associates of Mahatma Gandhi: Wanda Dynowska and Maurycy Frydman¹⁸⁾.

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¹⁸⁾ Wanda Dynowska (1888–1971) – writer and translator; and engineer Maurycy Frydman (1901–1977) highly contributed to popularising Indian culture as co-founders of Polish-Indian Library. They were also engaged in providing aid for Polish refugees in India. Dynowska was Eugeniusz Banasiński's secretary at the Polish consulate during the war.

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Fig. 1. Kira Banasińska ca. 1930



Fig. 2. Kira Banasińska with her teacher Mitsu Shigoumi in Tokyo, ca. 1928. Photo: Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites



The Consul for the Republic of Poland
requests the pleasure of the company of

at the reception to celebrate
 "The Inauguration of the Polish Consulate in Bombay"
on Saturday the 2nd of December 1933, at 5-30 p. m.
at "Carwa Castle", No. 77, Walkeshwar Road.

R. J. V. P.

The Secretary,
 Consulate of Poland,
 Whiteway Bldg. Hornby Road.



Fig. 3. The Banasińskis with Prof. Helena Willman in Bombay in 1937. Photo: Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites



Fig. 4. Polish Red Cross Hospital in Bombay in 1943. Photo: Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites



Fig. 5. Kira Banasińska giving a speech in Bombay, as a delegate of the Polish Red Cross. Photo: Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites



Fig. 6. Kira Banasińska at ninety-four years of age in the Kaybee School Equipment Mfg. Co. in Hyderabad, 1993. Photo: Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites