

Jewish Art in Kiev and Petrograd (1918–1920)¹

When I visited Kiev in 1918 in summer, two phenomena of the Jewish aspect of this city captivated me: the painter Rybak and the old cemetery. I was made aware of these two through the tireless enthusiast Mr. G. E. Gurewitsch. Without his help, I would probably not have been able to see the studio of the only too modest artist. Rybak is an avid disciple of our fine art, although he has little to say about it. All of them, including Chagall and Altmann, the head of the school—for they seem to have created a school—are neither archaeologists nor art-historians. However, the seeds which were sown by the teachers and publishers over the past decade have borne fruit. Rybak immerses himself in his study of old paragons; he demonstrates considerable empathy. An assiduous copyist would never have succeeded in reproducing the wall paintings in Mogilev Synagogue. Their dirty-brown coloration would have no timbre, no vibration. Rybak's painterly eye discovered the different shades within; reddish-black in the depths and cooler, uncovered areas. He—the modern analyst—disassembled the delightful “mosaic” (the Mogilev wall decoration comprises a geometrical convolution of tendrils, hieratic lions and griffins, stylised ships—a colorful mosaic, in fact) into its original, elementary, rectangular interconnecting lines. He lets one sense the framework behind this playful fresco; he deepens and multiplies the admirer's pleasure by suggesting emotions behind movements that the original perhaps does not elicit. I had to tell myself that several times when tracing the one or other effect on his paintings from the Mogilev cycle. Rybak is a seer, an improviser. Through his stay in Mogilev on the Dnieper and his contact with the small Jewish town he picked up several independent themes. His frieze “Der Rebbe kirnt” was created in this fashion. It is no merely ceremonial synagogal wall decoration, but more a humorous genre picture while not pure nature alone. Certainly, the cheering, dancing crowd which greets the arrival of the rabbi is genuine, unadulterated; inimitably genuine, unadulterated Jewish-looking are the whimsical, playful little horses. And yet the whole is stylised, an exaggeration. These curly, shaggy-like, convoluted lines are somehow—without really knowing how—an expression of the little Jewish town's habitus. It is a lasting testimony to an era, its apotheosis. Rybak is, of course, a keen collector. He removed a few beautiful tombstones from an extremely neglected Jewish cemetery and carefully looks after them. In 1918 he dreamed of an exhibition of cycles of Jewish painting. Whatever became of that? I only heard that, together with some other painters, Rybak was later invited by a patron to spend the summer months in his house; I think it was supposed to be in the Crimea. There, the artists were given the opportunity to live out their art to the full.

On my journey to the north of Russia, I took a few details with me about his date of birth and years studying, which Rybak admitted fleetingly and somewhat reluctantly. These have since been lost. What I can remember is that Rybak came from one of the many little Jewish towns in the Ukraine. He studied at the school of art in Odessa and then went to Petrograd where he met Chagall and the others. We shall certainly be hearing more of him and will find out more about him.

We visited the Jewish cemetery on the Lukyancvka under the expert guidance of Mr. G. Gurewitsch, shortly before the terrible explosion that caused the loss of many lives in a suburb and destroyed many valuable tombstones in the cemetery.

1 Wischnitzer-Bernstein, Rachel: Jüdische Kunst in Kiew und Petrograd, in: Der Jude. Eine Monatsschrift, vol. 5 (1920–21), pp. 353–356.

We admired many a tombstone with geometrical arabesques and lion shields that Rybak intended to copy at some time. In such small Jewish cemeteries in Russia, upright tombstones, especially those built of fired bricks, were conspicuous. They are akin to a style found in civil architecture in Russia and take on the shape of a small portal with little turrets on the ledges and gables. A very primitive type of sarcophagus—compared to the magnificent tombs in Prague and Vienna from the Renaissance and Baroque period—is still to be found in the cemetery in Kiev. These are of a later date and stand out all the more due to their simplicity.

Constituting a random conglomeration, these sarcophagi are in the shape of a donkey's back; their neck-like extensions each supporting an upright commemorative plaque. I don't want to dwell too long here on the Hellenizing in architecture which embellishes the tombs of the Brodski family. These were unfortunately an only too lively reminder of the dull Camposanto in Genoa.

The art exhibition in the Winter Palace in Petrograd in spring 1919 provided an opportunity to become more familiar with the work of Altman and Chagall. Altman had already held an exhibition before the war and was well received in close circles. Chagall was one of Benois's later discoveries. It says a lot about the Russian art critic's comprehensive knowledge that he was able to understand the Jew Chagall. Chagall is a painter from the Jewish province. Other artists such as Dobuzhinsky and Lukomski painted little Jewish towns, crooked alleyways, boring brown fences, simple prayer houses. But these were not Jews and they turned these into romantic landscapes. Chagall sees all this through different eyes. One really must have seen his eyes and the whole person for that. They are laughing, blue eyes full of life. And a lot of cynicism. Chagall's complete and utter unscrupulousness comes as a surprise. Imagine a meeting in Petrograd; the overall bond: The northern communes and the movement within them is stylized. (Think of the lofty style of the Paris Revolution). Chagall is unattached. I hear he lives in Vitebsk where he is the head of an art school. Do such cities as Vitebsk already have such liberal characters? I asked Chagall whether he had always lived in Vitebsk. No; he has also lived in Paris. That was the explanation.

In Chagall's Jewish towns there is a distinctly cheerful, one could almost say Flemish trait. It is as if someone were giggling away behind the canvas which one was intending to admire in all honesty. And, to complete everything, the painter becomes totally overconfident and adds floating figures to the sky in his provincial scenes—perhaps even himself and his lover, too. Both are laughing; an abandoned, roaring laugh that finds no end and turns into grinning grimaces. The heads of Chagall's old Jews have little to do with the venerable old people that Struck would have painted. He exhibited a "Green" and, I think, a "Yellow Jew." And then there were his pictures of lovers (illustrated in Efros's monograph on the artist).² They should not be seen as a challenge to one's sense of reality. A whirlwind seems to have caught hold of Chagall's figures: the lovers float around the room; the girl is cricking her neck in a dizzying embrace. Altman only exhibited two works: decorative patterns. He titled them "Jewish Ornament." Black and gold. A combination of cartouche motifs and Jewish letters. No delicate, carefully drawn book ornamentation; no linear elegance such as that of lilies or in the style of a roughly hatched woodcut. The Cubists—Altman is one of them—have changed the notion of the properties of the line. The feeling for delicate composition, for an interplay in the drawing style

2 A German edition of this monograph is due to be published by the Verlag Gustav Kiepenheuer (Ed.).

has been lost. What Altman is seeking is more a kind of fresco painting; improvised and awkward. The inclusion of individual assymmetrically distributed letters within the ornamentation is no arbitrary gimmick; the motif is frequently found in old Jewish decoration.

There is little to report at the moment about Painter Brodski who lives in Petrograd and whose career gained momentum some eight years ago. The sale of his pictures, which are highly esteemed, has been successful. His sensitive landscapes (a Corot, only more ornamental), which have secured his place in Russian painting, cannot be imitated. Brodski has become gray and sober (the painter, not the person).

Lakhovsky has always been the proficient, much-admired landscape painter with a routine West European style. Gurwitsch, however, is a complete unknown with his compositions in charcoal and Italian pen; visionary, architecturally structured figures which seem to be striking up an ancient choral piece. (Biblical characters are also among these).

Of the sculptors, Bloch with his commissions from the government is of fastidious mediocrity and Sinayski a gifted talent.

Ilya Ginzburg has dedicated himself more to pedagogical activities. He heads the Jewish Society for the Promotion of the Arts where I had the pleasure of working together with him. The society has set out to examine Jewish art treasures in Petrograd which are virtually unknown to the general public. The ethnography department in the Russian Museum in Petrograd (formerly the Museum of Alexander III), for example, owns a respectable collection of Jewish arts and crafts from Western Russia—the traditional costumes of Caucasian and Bukharan Jews (only part of which can be seen; the rest still being packed in boxes) and photographic pictures of Jewish tombstones from Lithuania and Poland. The collection owes its existence to the untiring efforts of the museum conservator, Mr. Milier. The Museum of Asian Art in Petrograd holds several Jewish treasures. Among unica in the Friedland Library that is part of the museum, a handwritten *machzor* from the 18th century is noteworthy. As shown on the title page it was written and illuminated by a Jew in Tunis. The idiosyncratic ornamentation—a mixture of French Baroque and Rococo motifs and oriental influences—is worthy of a special place in Jewish miniature painting. The Dutch, Italian, and German *haggadot*, with richly decorated woodcuts, reveal what a Jewish book looked like in the 17th and 18th centuries. Unfortunately, access to these treasures is restricted to just a few specialists.

It would seem that the valuable collection of Jewish art which Anski assembled during his expedition to Volhynia and Galicia (having visited the latter during the Russian Occupation around 1914–15), is no longer in Petrograd.

The Society for the Promotion of the Arts has made it one of its most urgent tasks to present the material held in the Russian State Collections to all social classes through duplication. I and the architect Smorgonski set about copying miniatures in old illuminated manuscripts. I picked out the most characteristic sheets in the illustrated *haggadot* which were then handed to the photographer. Moreover, the material sighted was cataloged, literary works with striking names etc. in the field of interest to us being added on special slips of paper; the society gradually amassing a collection of clichés (negatives and transparencies) and albums of drawings and photographs.

Another of the society's tasks was to acquire illustrated plates for Jewish schoolchildren. Competitions were launched with a wide range of Jewish artists participating: Chagall, Sinayski, Lakhovsky, Solomonov, Lisitzki, with pictures such as "The Tailor," "At the Seder Table," and many others soon decorating the society's exhibition room.

It must be mentioned here that the society made several changes in its organisation of competitions when confronted with an enormous rise in costs brought about by the new circumstances.

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At the moment no artist in Russia can be expected to take part in a prize competition faced with the risk of being left empty handed. Every candidate who participates in a competition organised by the Jewish Society for the Promotion of the Arts receives a certain minimum remuneration. In turn, the society reserves the right to select participants itself and to limit their number as it likes. The competition is otherwise open within this framework. The winner is given an award in addition to the minimum fee. In this way the society has given several private and state commissions among its members through the competitions it has held.

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(Translation: Christopher Wynne)