

CHAGALL IN AMERICA

Michael Nevins

On a sunny day in August 2018 I drove up to the Catskills to seek evidence of Marc Chagall's more than two year sojourn in the town of High Falls immediately after the end of World War II. I suspected that a good place to visit would be the Wired Gallery where I might find someone to speak to who might have information. When I arrived a sign said that it was closed, but I was in luck. The front door opened, a man came out and asked "Can I help you?" He was Sevan Melikyan, an artist who owns the gallery, and he graciously invited me in. I suspect that this small gallery in an obscure village doesn't attract much traffic but he was a willing guide to what was stored in a back room - remnants of a 2011 exhibition that documented Chagall's time in High Falls. What follows next is what I learned during and after that visit and the narrative will conform to the stories of three women who shared his life: Bella, Virginia and Vava.

About ten miles west of New Paltz, up and over a windy mountain road is the tiny hamlet of High Falls NY, population 627. From April 1946 to August 1948, Marc Chagall lived there with his lover Virginia, her young daughter Jean and their infant son David. Chagall always craved living and working somewhere in nature and this two year interlude in rural High Falls, isolated from the bustle of Manhattan, seems to have been one of his happiest and most productive periods where he produced nearly one hundred paintings, drawings and lithographs. But the strange Russian who spoke no English was not popular with the locals who called him the "chicken painter." When he tried to barter one of his works to a doctor, the response was that he preferred to receive his \$15 fee in cash.

BELLA

Marc (1887-1985) and Bella Chagall (c.1888-1944) arrived in New York City on June 22, 1941, the same day that the Germans invaded the USSR. He came reluctantly but the Vichy government had stripped him of his French citizenship and as life was becoming increasingly dangerous, he yielded to entreaties of family and friends. The Chagalls were among more than two thousand Jews

whose escape from occupied Europe was facilitated by Varian Fry the American journalist who headed the Emergency Rescue Committee in Marseilles. He was credited with saving more than 2,000 intellectuals, scientists, writers and artists and when the Chagalls were arrested by the authorities, Fry threatened to cause an international scandal by notifying the *New York Times* and the Vichy government relented. Chagall was exasperating to his benefactor who described the 54 year old artist as a “nice child, vain and simple” who repeatedly asked whether there were cows in America? Fry assured him that there were - and goats too. How about trees and green grass? Again: “we have all that” and the artist seemed relieved. Perhaps he was just being sarcastic, but in his paintings Chagall often identified himself with animals, including cows.

Friends of Chagall appealed to Alfred Barr, the first director of MOMA, to arrange an exhibition of his work but it took the State Department three months to issue an “emergency visa.” They sailed from Lisbon and when they arrived in New York, they were met at the pier by Marc’s New York agent Pierre Matisse, the son of Henri Matisse. He put them up at a hotel on E. 57th Street near his gallery and a wealthy patroness of the arts, Baroness Hilla Rebay sent a car and driver to bring them for a visit to her estate in Westport, CT. Three months later, after a harrowing forty day ocean voyage, their 25 year old daughter Ida and her husband arrived bringing with them 500 paintings and hundreds of drawings and gouaches.

Marc and Bella were devoted to each other since their childhoods in Vitebsk. Herself a writer, Bella was an all-purpose lover, muse, manager and substitute mother. She also was a frequent model, her face often seen floating in the sky in his paintings. They’d married in 1915, left for France in 1922 and by the time they arrived in America in 1941 both were in their fifties. Neither spoke English; he explained that it had taken thirty years for him to learn “bad” French and now it was too late to learn another language. He preferred to speak and write in Yiddish and when living in New York City, he delighted in roaming the Lower East Side where he could read Yiddish newspapers, converse with merchants and eat Jewish soul food.

The Chagalls lived in an astonishing number of residences during their short time in New York City. For the first few months they stayed in the Bronx at the Sholem Aleichem Cooperative Houses where there were other Yiddish speaking immigrants. Later they rented apartments on the elegant East Side: Hampton House at 28 E. 70th Street, a small apartment in a townhouse at 4 E. 74th St. between Fifth and Madison and another at 57 E. 73rd St. between Madison and Park. However, Marc never felt comfortable in cities and much preferred to live and work in the country. At the Lakeview Inn on Lake Waramaug, New Preston, CT (July 1941) he complained that at this “goyish” summer house “there is not even half a Jew... I am longing for Jews” — and also Yiddish newspapers. During summer vacations in 1943 and 1944, they stayed in the Adirondacks at the Evergreen Hotel in Cranberry Lake and also spent a brief time at Harbor Hills in Cold Spring on Hudson, NY. But just a few days after they thrilled to the news that Paris was liberated, catastrophe struck at Cranberry Lake.

There were several versions of Bella’s death on September 2, 1944. Chagall himself wrote that she’d developed a sore throat and fever and was brought to nearby Mercy General Hospital in Tupper Lake. But Bella was upset by the sight of so many nuns and during the admission process, when asked her religion, she refused and told Marc “I don’t like this place. Take me back to the hotel.” Recently when they were at Beaver Lake she’d been upset by a no Jews allowed sign. (It’s been suggested by several biographers that these anti-Semitic details may have been a fabrication that Marc made up to assuage guilt feelings that he didn’t realize the gravity of her illness and may have been responsible for the outcome.)

Bella lapsed into a coma shortly after returning from the hospital and died the very next day. There are few other known details and the cause listed on the death certificate was “Diabetes Mellitus.” Some people, including Marc and Ida, suggested that the throat infection could have been treated if penicillin was available at the time, but it seems more likely that the infection was due to a virus than to streptococcus so antibiotics would have been worthless. My own guess is that whatever the cause was of the throat infection, it was complicated by

diabetic coma or ketoacidosis and if she had been treated in a hospital she would have received insulin and IV fluids — far more useful than penicillin.

A funeral service was performed at Riverside Chapel in NYC and she was buried at Westchester Hills Cemetery, Hastings-on-Hudson on September 8. (Before they left France in 1941 Bella made Marc promise that if she were to die in America, that he'd return her remains to France but the war was still going strong in 1944.) A month later a memorial service held at Carnegie Hall was attended by 200 invited guests.

VIRGINIA

After Bella's death Marc was despondent and couldn't paint for many months. However he did produce 25 illustrations for her book *Burning Lights* that was published the next year. In the book's Afterward, Marc wrote, "Her last words were: 'My notebooks...' The thunder rolled, the clouds opened at six o'clock on the evening of September 2, 1944 when Bella left this world. Everything went dark."

Ida found a housekeeper to care for her father in the large studio apartment they shared in a mansion at 42 Riverside Drive and 76th Street. Virginia Haggard McNeil (1915-2006) was a well-educated daughter of an English diplomat, 28 years younger than Marc and just a year older than Ida. Her marriage to a failed Scotch painter was a disaster and she had a five year old daughter Jean McNeil. Before long Chagall and Virginia began an affair, she became pregnant and he was ashamed to tell friends that he'd sired an illegitimate child with a married gentile woman. Virginia confided to a friend, "For Marc's sake I don't want people to know" and contemplating conversion, she began reading the Bible: "You know that I love Jews and I want to be like them; I shall not be a religious Jew, but like Marc I believe the way they do, and their idea of God is the very same as mine, in spite of my upbringing." She never did convert.

Despite differences in their ages and backgrounds, Marc and Virginia initially had a loving relationship. She characterized him as "full of contradictions—generous

and guarded, naïve and shrewd, explosive and secret, humorous and sad, vulnerable and strong.” In the spring of 1945 they stayed at Beaver Lake House an inn in Krumville in Ulster County and that summer rented a house in Sag Harbor, L.I. where he worked on scenery and costumes for Stravinsky’s ballet *Firebird*. March 1946 found them at Dixie Farm in rural Wallkill, NY - “a nice farm house where it’s quiet and they give us very good food” and while Marc divided his time between Wallkill and Riverside Drive, Virginia was charged with finding a suitable house where they could live in a quiet country place in relative seclusion.

It was not an easy task but she finally settled on a house in High Falls (420 Mohonk Road) on nearly an acre of land that had a smaller hut (“atelier”) next door for Marc’s studio. The sales price was \$7,500 and there was news of “an immense parkway through New Paltz to Buffalo” [the New York Thruway] that probably would enhance the value of local real estate. Property tax was \$25 a year and later when this was increased to \$35, Virginia was furious that this was “inordinately high.” This is how she described the property:

It is a simple wooden house with screened porches, near a superb catalpa tree. It had been fondly built by a contented carpenter who had enjoyed it to the end of his days. A grassy valley lay before it; behind, the ground rose to a jagged ridge of rocks, crowning a wooden ravine. Next to the house was a small wooden cottage that immediately enchanted Marc - it reminded him of an isba [Russian peasant hut.]

Marc was in Paris from May to September 1946 preparing for a major exhibition and was absent when Virginia gave birth to David in Brooklyn Hospital (June 22, 1946.) He thanked his good friend friend the Yiddish novelist Yosef Opatoshu and his wife Adele (who had a summer home in nearby Croton Falls) for helping Virginia through this stressful time. He asked “What do you think of the little one? You probably made him into a Jew.” As David’s godfather, Yosef presided over the circumcision on the eighth day and then arranged for Virginia, baby David and her young daughter Jean to travel to High Falls. Because her husband refused to divorce her, the baby boy’s surname was his, McNeil.

Marc wrote to Virginia: "I am so happy for the two of us. You don't know yet how I love you....For me, you are my life. I can't live without you. Fate wanted me to meet you after dear Bella (whom you love too.)" Although his letters were full of concern for Virginia and the baby — Is she resting enough? — what is the baby eating? — but most of the content concerned himself. In one letter he wrote, "You know I don't feel "famous." I am still the same. I love solitude, the simple life...."

For the first two weeks after David's birth, Virginia was attended by her aunt but when she had to leave, it was difficult to find suitable help in the Catskills. Although Virginia loved the flowers and mountain views, water had to be caught in a cistern and an expensive well needed to be built. Marc hadn't left enough money so she had to borrow \$100 from the Opatoshus to buy used furniture and to pay phone and electric bills and for laundry, gardeners and plumbing repairs.

When Marc finally returned from France two month's after David's birth, he was enthusiastic about the wooded landscape, "Here in our place it is now so beautiful, it isn't Jewish at all — berries, worms, chicken, wild grass — everything whispers to me: become an American, don't go." In time he became friendly with a group of devout Jews who took him to a nearby synagogue to celebrate Yom Kippur and, as Virginia later recalled, "When he heard the toot-toot of Mr. Goldwasser's traveling store, he would go down to the road to buy pencils, paper and colored crayons and have a chat in Yiddish with Mr. Goldwasser." She recalled that "He could watch the cows from his studio window and the noise of our cocks and chickens created a familiar atmosphere...High Falls, with its simple people and its animals, was about as near to Marc's home in the suburbs of Vitebsk as any other place he had known since then."

In a letter to the Opatoshus, Marc wrote: "Though I don't know the language, you sense something that evokes emotions....the authenticity just sprang to our eyes." At other times he described how he admired the "dynamism in America even though it's primitive." Nevertheless, he was conflicted about whether or not to return to Europe. The Jewish world he knew was destroyed and he wondered where to go - France ("the land where people still create"), Canada, Palestine?

Seemingly imagining himself as the eternal wandering Jew, his poem *My Land* (written in Yiddish in Paris in June, 1946) begins -

*Only that land is mine
That lies in my soul.
As a native with no documents,
I enter that land.
It sees my sorrow and loneliness.
Puts me to sleep
And covers me with a fragrance - stone.*

*Gardens are blooming inside me, flowers I invented,
My own streets,
But there are no houses.
They have been destroyed since my childhood.
Their inhabitants stray in my air,
Seek a dwelling. They live in my soul.*

Three days before David was born, Marc wrote from Paris to Virginia, "I am very sure that as an artist I have to live here and in America too - not to cut ourselves off from America completely. In any case, I will live in America next autumn and winter and we'll see later. I already want to work in my little house with you beside me." But because of economic and political troubles in France, they remained in America. Again in late 1947, he contemplated liquidating everything and returning for good to France, perhaps somewhere on the Riviera. Ida had been promoting his celebrity abroad and her letters from Paris insisted that dealers were waiting impatiently to exhibit his work and if Chagall delayed returning he was liable to lose his standing.

In May 1948 a visit to High Falls by a Belgian photographer, Charles Leirens, presaged troubles to come. As described by Virginia in a letter to Adele Opatoshu, "We had a friend to stay for 3 days. Everything is so beautiful here, the smell is exquisite. Our friend took over 75 photos of all of us with his very

special cameras.” The photos (see attached) included one of Marc feeding a cow, another with his young son and an idyllic shot of the three of them amidst floral blooms.

In October 1947 Marc was off again, this time to arrange a 40 year retrospective to be held first in Paris, then Amsterdam and London. France was beautiful, the air was “good” although food, coal and other necessities were scarce. Back in High Falls he delayed returning for the Venice Biennial and while Virginia did almost all the work, he wrote to Yosef Opatoshu, “I am toiling on the packages together with the thin, young Virg [Virginia] who must also taste a bit of what it means to be a Jew with a sack on your back.” Before they departed, he visited Bella’s grave in Westchester and they finally set sail on August 17, 1948. This marked the end of any sustained residence in America.

In subsequent letters Marc recalled fondly how he’d been independent and “wildly free” in High Falls and when he bought a villa in Vence in early 1950 he wrote, “This is a gentile city and in these nasty, murderous times, I am longing for Jews, so the only thing left for me to do is to take the Bible in hand, or paint a biblical image for myself, to calm myself.” During the next few years, he couldn’t decide whether or not to sell the property in High Falls but feared burning bridges altogether - after all, he needed a lifeline in case they had to flee Europe again.

Charles Leirens, the photographer “friend” who had visited them in High Falls in 1947 turned up again in late 1951 and when Virginia’s husband finally granted her a divorce, instead of marrying Marc as he expected she would, she left with the 62 year old Belgian with whom she’d begun a torrid affair. Marc reacted violently but “the tall one” was determined to leave after seven years together. Taking their son David and her daughter Jean she married Leirens who was only a year younger than Marc and had a heart condition.

In a letter to friends Virginia justified her behavior:

I am still fond of him [Marc], as fond as ever, and deeply attached to Chagall the artist but his life is no longer his, he is caught up and carried away by an immense machine which is his fame and he likes it. Gone are those rare moments when we could get away from money talk, "prestige," publicity and art extras, when Mark just worked like the devil in some quiet place and had no thought for the money value of his paintings. Those were blissfully happy moments and we loved each other then. But at other times he treated me very much as a favorite piece of furniture, I was useful and a little bit ornamental too, but I hadn't any soul. I was there to fetch and carry, administer to his needs and help the "machine" to turn round smoothly. I wouldn't have minded so much if the high powered mechanism hadn't interfered with his work. Alas! He was receiving orders for certain types of productions which would fetch high prices. Instead of being his own savage self and painting the wild and beautiful things he is capable of, he consciously turned his hand to certain works which he was encouraged to make and convinced himself that it was what he wanted to do. His greatest desire was to paint from nature. This was firmly and severely discouraged.....The fame machine turns around inexorably and everybody gets richer and more heartless. (Sept. 21, 1952)

Marc wrote about Virginia:

She didn't have in herself even 1/10 of the genius of Bella, and in general of our Jewish wives of artists, who stand by their posts, holy and devoted...This is my tragedy and my mistake...And now, dark life has opened for me a grave more bitter than Bella's grave, because with her [Bella] death I lamented naturally and our love stayed whole for eternity.

VAVA

Alone again, Marc was devastated and depressed and Ida, with marital problems of her own, felt she couldn't leave him alone. This time she found a Jewish housekeeper Valentina Brodsky (1905-1993) who arrived in Vence on the same day that Virginia left. Ida wrote, "It is a temporary solution...but I wanted to gain time." However, she was mistaken - it was not temporary. Three months later the

housekeeper, known to all as Vava, in effect became Chagall's third wife - or surrogate mother. Although Virginia, the second, was his common-law wife, Marc considered her to be his wife in every respect - until she left him for the Belgian photographer.

Vava had a rather mysterious background but when hired by Ida she was down on her luck and cleverly insisted that if she was to stay with him, they would have to be formally married. Although Marc was 65 and she 47, their marriage provided a welcome sense of home and security. Vava always traveled with him, took care of business and was overprotective to a fault, limiting access to friends and even family. Many people described her as being greedy; indeed she later would divorce and then remarry Marc in order to have his will rewritten, in the process cutting out Ida whom she claimed didn't need her father's money.

Marc wrote that although she'd been hired "to rescue me from sadness," that sometimes he felt "imprisoned." In a letter to a friend in Tel Aviv: "I was forced to get married to another one so that I wouldn't go berserk alone in the huge house, and still be able to work a little." On the day of their wedding he wrote to Yosef Opatoshu, ""It seems that she is happy and I have a nice friend for life. Though only God knows how my life is twisted, and it seems, tortured, and when you imagine, through such a false human being [Virginia] without any soul and a pity for little Dovid." Two weeks later in another letter to the Opatshus he explained further but again couldn't mention Virginia's name:

There must be an end to my life with the English woman....She wanted it with her inexplicable craziness. She was in a big hurry to marry the Goy. And now you see, the Jewish woman who came the same day, April 16, to rescue me from the sadness alone in the house, became my wife on July 12. That's it. I hope that somehow the other one will gradually let me have David, though it seems that, formally, he cannot be adopted...For me she is dead. Sometimes I'd like to pity her. But she didn't have pity for me. Or for her children. (July 23, 1952)

Before Rosh Hashanah in 1955 Marc confessed to a friend in New York, "I miss the Jews, and indeed, the American Jews where I lived almost ten years ago. Please give my greetings to those who love me or believe in me, except for the bad ones [among the Jews]...." Although living in France, selling the country house in High Falls was much on Marc's mind. He vacillated between renting or selling and said that he only wished to recoup the original cost - \$7,500 plus \$1,500 for repairs. In fact, sale of the High Falls property wasn't completed until 1953 but the idyllic High Falls period had ended in 1948.

It was the height of McCarthyism and the FBI considered him to be a Communist because of past associations with organizations perceived to be Communist-fronts. Chagall was unable to get his re-entry visa renewed in 1951 and 1952. After prolonged diplomatic negotiations he was permitted to attend an event in Chicago in 1958 and between 1960 and 1974, he was able to return to the United States briefly on at least five more occasions. In 1964 Marc came to New York City for the dedication ceremony for his Peace window at the United Nations headquarters, in 1966 for the nine stained glass windows that he made for the Rockefeller's Union Church in Pocantico Hills and in 1967 for his murals in the foyer of the Metropolitan Opera. Each visit was surveilled by the Immigration & Naturalization Service which twice granted waivers for specific events but refused to allow an unrestricted visa. Vava always travelled with him but except for these brief visits there were no more prolonged idyls in rural America. As he aged and became feeble, travel became increasingly difficult.

When Marc Chagall, age 98, died at his home in Saint Paul-de Vence, he was buried in the Christian church's cemetery in the mayor's family plot where a large cross loomed above the grave (later removed.). He had expressed a wish for the simplest form of burial without religious rites but an anonymous Yiddish journalist from Paris asked for permission to say Kaddish. Vava refused but her son Piet insisted. Apparently Vava had secretly converted to Christianity and when she died, Dec. 24, 1993, she was buried next to her husband.

Ironically this secular Jew who had always craved proximity to others like him would lie forever among gentiles. And there was one final irony: Marc Chagall was buried on April Fool's Day - April 1, 1985.

ADDENDUM

When feminist poet Tina Barry moved from Brooklyn to High Falls and learned that Chagall and Virginia Haggard McNeil had lived there from 1946-1948, she took an interest not so much in the artist but in his lover and her young daughter Helen. Tina Barry wrote several poems about the two women and, in turn, fourteen woman artists in the mid-Hudson region created their own visual responses to these poems that were displayed at the Wired Gallery in High Falls in October, 2018.

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Yes, there are cows in America. Marc with David in High Falls.



Marc and Virginia





The house in High Falls, NY