

PAINTERS OF THE PALE



Aleksander Gierymski. (1850-1901) *Feast of Trumpets*. (1884)

INTRODUCTION. In the early 1980s I began researching my family's roots and, in particular, focused on my paternal grandparents who both had emigrated to America during the 1890s from a small *shtetl* in then-Czarist Russia that's now in Poland and known as Dabrowa Bialostocka. From the *landsmenshaft* I obtained names of former immigrants, corresponded with some and even met a few, One was Meyer Cooper whom I visited at his apartment in Brooklyn and after several minutes of chit-chat, he showed me a treasured possession. Back in the old days when laundries returned men's shirts, they inserted a piece of cardboard as a stiffener, and when Mr. Cooper had arrived in America in 1921, he painted on one of these what he recalled of his family's cottage in Dabrowa and, on the reverse side, the town's synagogue. Cooper was an unskilled artist but for me his crude pictures were an epiphany because, previously, all of my visual images of *shtetl* life were grim and in sepia colors that I'd seen in copies of *The Forvertz* in my grandparent's Bronx apartment, while in Meyer Cooper's pictures the sky was bright blue and the grass deep green. What a surprise!

It was then that I first began to wonder what my grandparent's world really looked like? Everyone is familiar with Marc Chagall's colorful paintings, but somehow they didn't seem authentic — more the fantastic expressions of his vivid imagination. But other than Chagall, I wasn't aware of any painters of Jewish life in Russia's former Pale of Settlement. After all, wasn't it religiously forbidden for Jews to make graven images and were 2-D images considered to be graven? Photography wasn't yet in wide use in my grandparent's time — certainly not in color — and the contemporary art world was trending away from realism toward impressionism and other isms. So I began to research the history of the generation of artists who had preceded Marc Chagall and whose names are hardly known today.

Some of these painters had such interesting personal narratives that my focus became more about their lives than their art *per se*. For the sake of convenience, in this review I'll be lumping together various 19th century Jewish artists under the rubric *Painters of the Pale* although, more correctly, the term Pale of Settlement only should apply to the vast lands under Russian control that included a large swath of eastern Poland, Byelorussia, Lithuania and Ukraine and ran from the Baltic to the Black Sea. But the pictures made by the artists whom I'll describe here, not only depicted what things actually looked like, but reflected the changing reality of modern Jewish history during a turbulent period. In effect, they opened a window on the lost world of our ancestors.

Michael Nevins

19th CENTURY JEWISH ART

Near the end of the 18th century Poland was partitioned three times by its neighbors: Prussia, Austria and Russia and by 1795 it no longer existed as a distinct political entity. It wasn't for 123 years, until after the end of World War I, that it reemerged as an independent nation. Nevertheless, a nationalistic spirit persisted and there were occasional revolts — remember that Frederick Chopin composed 28 nationalistic polonaises! Emancipation of European Jewry had come earlier in France (1791), Austro-Hungary (1867) and Germany (1871) than in Russia (1917) and was followed by the Enlightenment that, in turn, begat acculturation. Many Jews began dressing like gentiles, adopted the language of their neighbors, adopted family surnames and began sending their children to public schools. Indeed, the eastern form of Enlightenment, known as *haskala*, aimed at expanding intellectual and social awareness of Jewry within its own context.

Perhaps an appropriate choice for the beginning date of Jewish painting in the Pale of Settlement would be 1853 with the accession of Czar Alexander II to the throne. That ushered in three decades of relatively liberal times that offered Jews, serfs and other oppressed groups the hope of winning equal rights as citizens. However, these hopes were short-lived because after the popular czar was assassinated in 1881 there was a resurgence of nationalism, a wave of pogroms and a grim unofficial state policy vis-a-vis the Jews: “one third conversion, one third emigration and one third starvation.”

For many Jews the challenge of modernism was seductive and opened an intellectual Pandora’s box that couldn’t be contained by those who advocated maintaining the status quo. Their dilemma was how to retain the best of the old ways while engaging in the secular world; in 1863 the rallying cry for a generation of *maskilim* (enlightened ones) became the poet J.L. Gordon’s exhortation, “Be a man abroad and a Jew in your tent.” A Moravian scholar David Kaufmann was the first to use the term “Jewish art” and in 1901 his disciple, Samuel Krauss, wrote the following:

As late as ten years ago it would have been absurd to speak about a Jewish art. It is Kaufmann's own merit to have uncovered this art. Not only did he have to prove that such an art existed, he also had to prove that it could exist. He showed that the idea that the prohibition of images would obstruct the development of such an art was mistaken, and he even established it as an irrefutable fact that art in wide areas was not prohibited insofar as no worship was associated with it.

Conversely, that same year at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, Martin Buber denied the existence or even potential of Jewish art: “National art needs a soil from which to spring and a sky toward which to rise...A national style needs a homogeneous society from which it grows and for whom it exists.” Others suggested that it was “pretentious” to speak about Jewish Art as an entity, that it would be better to limit discussion to purely artistic considerations and not nationalistic ones. Nevertheless, for some enlightened artists their attempt to create a distinct secular Jewish art was inseparable from the quest for political emancipation and cultural autonomy and the first generation of Jewish artists, who were born at about mid-century, were soon followed by dozens more who began to paint about life around them. This is how one of them, El Lissitzky, described his childhood in Vitebsk during the 1890s:

The children of the cheder — in spite of the fact that for one generation they had not studied Talmud — still possessed the acid of analysis. As we grasped pencil and brush, we immediately started to analyze not only nature which surrounds us but also ourselves. What and who are we? What is our place among the nations? What is our culture like? And how should our art look? All this was brewing in the little towns of Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine.

Although the focus of my research was on Eastern Europe, any discussion of Jewish art history would be remiss if it omitted the German painter **MORITZ OPPENHEIM** (1799-1882) sometimes described as the first professional Jewish painter. He was born into an observant family in Frankfurt am-Main and studied in a *cheder*, but when anti-Jewish laws were repealed, he was allowed to enter a secular gymnasium at age 12. Later he studied art in Paris where his wealthy patrons included members of the Rothschild family. Oppenheim flattered his subjects and recalled in his memoirs that he became known as “The Rothschild among painters and the painter of Rothschilds.” While in his fifties, Oppenheim painted a cycle of twenty scenes that portrayed Jewish family life.



One of these oil paintings had the cumbersome title “The Return of the Jewish Volunteer from the Wars of Liberation to his Family Still Living in Accordance with Old Customs.” Painted in 1833, it shows a soldier in military dress and without a head covering who had just returned to his Orthodox family on the Sabbath after fighting against the Napoleonic armies.

The soldier wears The Iron Cross, a military decoration that would have been offensive for most observant Jews. The figures were dressed in the earlier style of pre-emancipation times and these pictures seemed to preach nostalgia for the old days. In effect they attempted to preserve Jewish identity at a time that Jewish leaders, such as Moses Mendelssohn, were trying to carve out a place in the modern world. Moritz Oppenheim seems to be addressing the generational conflict between loyalty to the state and Jewish tradition.

The dilemma of 19th century Jewish life was whether to remain as tolerated second-class citizens or to seek equality within European life with all its privileges and consequences? Moritz Oppenheim's success aroused interest throughout the Jewish world and induced later artists to incorporate Jewish themes into their works. Other successful west European Jewish painters included the Dutch artist **Joseph Israels** (1824-1911), the German **Max Lieberman** (1847-1935) and the French Impressionist **Camille Pissarro** (1830 -1903.) but none of them painted shtetl life in the Pale.

Nor was there anything recognizably Jewish in about one thousand works by **Isaak Levitan** (1860-1900) who generally was acknowledged to have been the greatest Russian landscape painter. Although Levitan never denied his roots and successfully assimilated into Russia's culture, he had a Slavic peasant's love of the land. He liked to roam the countryside with his dog and a rifle, hunting and sketching and then painting vistas that always were devoid of humans. On his trips Levitan often was accompanied by his famous friend Anton Chekhov and much was written about the affinity that they shared for nature. In their respective art forms each exerted a profound effect on the other's work; indeed, Levitan sometimes was described as "the Chekhov of the Russian landscape." This next painting, c.1899, suggests people moving across a wilderness and provides the only hint of Levitan's Jewishness; the title "On the Way to Zion" referenced the political context at the turn of the century.



Isaak Levitan suffered from bipolar disorder and died at age 40 of rheumatic heart disease. Although he was buried in a Jewish cemetery, later his remains were transferred and reinterred next to his friend Chekhov.

MARK ANTOKOLSKI (1843-1902) was another Russian Jew who achieved fame as a sculptor. As a young man he was apprenticed to a wood carver in Vilna, but through the patronage of a government official, he was admitted to the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. However, he clashed with the conservative faculty who expected him to choose classical subjects rather than scenes of everyday life. He drew inspiration from a trip he made to western Europe and when he returned, Antokolski sculpted a large statue of Czar Ivan “the Terrible.” Although it provoked critical controversy, the relatively liberal Czar Alexander II approved and acquired the bronze cast for the Hermitage Museum.

As Antokolski’s reputation grew, he was befriended by the most important Russian art critic of the time Vladimir Stassov. Stassov urged all ethnic Russians to develop their own authentic cultural expressions for the common good: “Though I myself am not Jewish, I still find it interesting and important to be concerned with the rights and obligations of the Jewish people. It seems to me that someone [among the gentiles] should occupy himself with it at a time when Jews themselves do not do what they should.” By that he meant that Jewish artists should paint or sculpt Jewish themes. Stassov championed Russian national art, particularly by a group of realist artists popularly known as “The Wanderers” [or Itinerants] who beginning during the 1870s began using their art as a positive force in the struggle for social progress. After Antokolsky joined this group, Stassov angrily shouted at him: “Look here...what’s the idea of calling yourself Mark? Are you ashamed of your own Mordecai? I simply cannot understand it. Where is your national pride in being a Jew? Yes, Yes, you should forget Mark and become proud of your ancient aristocratic forefather Mordecai. the great Mordecai!” Although Antokolsky didn’t heed his friend’s words, the idea must have sunk in because many years later he gave similar advice to his own students.

PAINTERS OF THE PALE

During the 1870s Peretz Smolenskin began to publish a Hebrew journal (*HaShacher*) in which he repudiated assimilation and encouraged Jewish identity through learning Hebrew and love of Zion. This had the appeal of forbidden fruit and some of its revolutionary ideas fired the minds of Jewish youth and undermined old ideas. Several among them were genre painters who will be discussed next.

MAURICY GOTTLIEB (1856-1879) was an artistic prodigy who showed such promise that at age thirteen his father was persuaded to send him to study at the Vienna Art Academy. However, overcoming parental objections, he transferred to Cracow in order to study with Jan Matejko who then was Poland's leading painter. He soon became Matejko's favorite, but when his mentor heard that his protegee intended to devote himself to Polish historical paintings like him, Matejko said, "My son, you are a Jew. You can't weep on the graves of the Polish kings; leave that to others." Having experienced envy and antisemitism from other students, after a half year Gottlieb quit Matejko's studio, moved to Munich and then on to Vienna. Although antisemitic incidents had moved him to paint his own people in a sympathetic, even romantic light, he wanted to be accepted as a Polish artist:

How I would like to eliminate all prejudices against my poor coreligionists! How I would like to extirpate the hatred of this poor people! How I would like to bring about the reconciliation of Poles and Jews, for the history of both is a history of suffering. True, it is presumptuous of me to think that I am called to be such an apostle. If I lack the strength to reach the final aim of this lofty goal, may the sympathy that my compatriots have for me...bear witness that, at the very least, I am on the right path toward its attainment...I am a Pole and a Jew and I wish, God willing, to work for both.

Gottlieb's artistic career lasted only about five years, but he completed more than three hundred works, only a few of which reflected the tension between his Jewish roots and his affinity for Polish nationalism. At the age of 20 Gottlieb was awarded a gold medal at a Munich art fair for a painting of Shylock and Jessica from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Jessica's face was modeled after his fiancée Laura Rosenfeld who was the daughter of a wealthy Viennese merchant family. But Laura had second thoughts about their engagement, had the contract annulled and married a wealthy banker.

This next painting titled "Day of Atonement" (1877) has been described as the first masterpiece on a Jewish theme ever performed by a Jewish artist. It seemed to prove that art and Judaism are compatible. The painting was completed when Gottlieb was 22 which was only about a year before he died. It depicted Jews praying in synagogue on Yom Kippur and was based on Gottlieb's memories of the synagogue in his childhood home (Drohowicz.) Most of the figures are family members or friends — as he wrote "at times I imagined that the shadows of my family who were already dead returned to the land of the living and surrounded me...and with their eyes, the eyes of the dead, they looked at me and seemed to plead, 'Give us life!'"



Gottlieb's selection of Yom Kippur had special significance because it's the day when Jews confess their sins. So what sin or sins was he confessing and how would he atone? His former fiancée Laura is seen twice in the woman's gallery — on the left standing and holding a prayer book and on the right bending over and whispering to a neighbor. Gottlieb, himself appears three times — in the right-center as a young man in a prayer shawl wearing a medallion with a Star of David and his initials in Hebrew; on the left, the same medallion on the neck of a young child in holiday clothes and open prayer book; and on the right side, as a distracted youth looking off to the side.

Although Gottlieb took up with another woman, he remained so distraught that the Hebrew inscription on the mantle of the Torah scroll said, “Donated in memory of the late honored teacher and rabbi Moshe Gottlieb, of blessed memory, 1878.” His father was horrified and made him erase it, but later Gottlieb painted it back in. The official diagnosis for Maurycy Gottlieb’s death at age 23 was “septic throat” but there were rumors that he might have committed suicide as had been predicted by the cryptic inscription. Years later in her memoirs Laura twice wrote that Gottlieb took his own life because of her. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Cracow and although his life had ended suddenly and mysteriously, his legacy endured. In effect, Maurycy Gottlieb’s message to Jewish artists was, “you shall go back to your own people; you shall find and see your own greatness and glory; you shall be your own selves again.” Three of his four brothers became painters and Leopold, born five years after Maurice’s death, achieved great success. As a later Polish painter, Leopold Pilichowsky, wrote:

Gottlieb was the first Jewish artist who perceived the poetry and beauty of Jewish life in exile. He was the first who saw in the lives of the poorly dressed Polish Jews, in their women and children, a highly developed rhythm, beauty, character, and type of culture. He understood, with his artistic knowledge and instinct, that the tallit can be used by the artist to create lives no less beautiful than the Greek or Roman toga.

ISIDOR KAUFMANN (1853-1921) was born in Arad, Hungary to enlightened parents, his father died early and he had little formal education or early artistic promise. In fact, he didn’t begin art studies until in his 20s when he found some benefactors and in 1876 he moved to Vienna where he became a successful society painter. His patrons included rich assimilated Jews who approved of his Dutch style paintings that were finely detailed and richly colored. Each summer Kaufmann would travel widely from village to village in Galicia, Poland or Ukraine sketching as he went. He wasn’t religiously observant and it’s unclear why he was drawn to paint Hasidic life, but his paintings don’t show either misery or squalor. Isidor Kaufmann’s subjects (see below) usually are dressed in their Sabbath best; presumably, his patrons were more interested in decorative pictures than sadness or poverty. Many observant Jews chose to remain in their shtetl because they believed that moving to a city would result in assimilation of their children. Kaufmann’s portraits usually were of sober Hasidic men, even little boys wear *shtreimels*. There is neither stress nor joy, the mood always is calm, the technique is precise and colors are vivid, indeed, Isidor Kaufmann was described as a master of “bourgeois realism.”



When Isidor Kaufmann died at age 67, a eulogist remarked, “No one better than he has ever solved the mystery that covers the soul of his race.” However, he was more a refined observer than an active participant. An art critic wrote, Isidor Kaufmann “was a good story teller, tasteful if not innovative, charming but not stimulating.” Nevertheless, his paintings won many awards — even Emperor Franz Joseph bought one — they commanded high prices in his own time and still do today.

LAZAR KRESTIN (1868-1938) grew up in Kovno, Lithuania where his father taught Talmud. He studied art in Vienna and became the best known student of Isidor Kaufmann. Like his mentor, Krestin painted Jews immersed in prayer, but as he matured his subject matter changed to be more in tune with events of the times. He worked in Munich, Vienna and Odessa. He became an avid Zionist and in 1910 moved

to Jerusalem to teach at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. This next painting, made in 1905 and titled “The Birth of the Jewish Resistance” depicted young Ukrainian Jews first fought back after the Kishinev pogroms.



In 1926 an Hungarian journalist interviewed Lazar Krestin who by then was nearing 60. In addition to providing insight into his personality, what follows here describes some of the difficulties that artists had to overcome when painting in the shtetls of the Pale.”

Krestin lived in a multistoried studio in Vienna like a mountain hermit. He was reluctant to receive visitors who might interrupt his work. To him work itself was holiest and more important than anything else; selling and profit did not interest him. Fortunately he had some admirers who didn't leave him alone until his creations reached the light of day from his hermit's seclusion. When we knock on his door he says, as if frightened, "You want to see my studio? There's nothing to see here, just a few pictures." But you say, "Dear Master, there in the corner...that picture of the little Talmud student with the big folio volumes is full of poetry. I don't believe that anyone who saw the dreaminess in his eyes and the paleness of his face would ever forget it. Tell us how did you get to know him?..."

Oh, the little Avromele?" The artist begins to warm up and his serious face softens with a smile. "He was a wonderful kid. I bumped into him in a small Galician village as I was seeking a model. He was a little Spinoza. What he said about man, the world, God, I had to collect all my knowledge to understand his philosophical disquisitions. He looked so deeply and so sadly that I will never forget it. Secretly he would come up to see me because it was considered to be forbidden in the village to have your picture painted.

Perhaps unconsciously, the notion of being made immortal lived within him or perhaps it was art that drew his spirit which hadn't found its way yet. At first he was happy that I painted him but one evening he came and begged me to destroy his picture because he couldn't go home until I did. He had sworn that to his mother. I was forced to fulfill his wishes and in his very presence I wiped it all out. But when he went away, from memory I painted him again as if he stood boldly in front of me and all his features were alive within me. Mind you, I never paint without a model.

On my Galician trip I, myself, got "assimilated" when I put on the garb of Polish Jews - shtreimel and kaftan - so they would trust me. That's how I gained my best models. When in one village I reappeared one year later, they greeted me with sticks and beat me out of town, Only in the outskirts did I learn why. One of the Jews whom I had painted died shortly thereafter and the whole village viewed this as punishment by God for allowing himself to be painted. In another village they regarded me as a police spy....In still another village I nestled in a corner of the Talmud school and imperceptibly made my sketches. But I was found out at night and the seder boys and their parents stormed my flat and having been threatened, I yielded to them and in their presence was forced to tear apart my sketches.

SAMUEL HIRSZENBERG (1865-1908) grew up in a poor family in Lodz, the eldest of ten children. He drew on scraps of paper and walls and one day a visiting doctor noticed his talent and arranged for a wealthy Jewish philanthropist to provide a stipend of 25 rubles a month to allow him to study art. In 1881, the same year that Alexander II was killed, the sixteen year old left home for Warsaw but soon transferred to Cracow where, like Maurycy Gottlieb before him, he studied with the famous realist painter Jan Matejko. One day as he wandered the streets of the Jewish quarter, Hirszenberg noted the contrast between the squalid houses of the workers compared to the elegant surroundings of bourgeois Jews and, as a result of this experience, his artistic trademark involved social distinctions and exploitation of the masses.

After four years Hirszenberg moved again, this time to Munich and then on to Paris, but the monthly stipend from his benefactors barely covered tuition and supplies. Undaunted, he continued to paint in his tiny dark room, so small that he had to stand in the hallway to fully view the canvas. Eventually he returned to his native city Lodz (Lvov, Lviv, Lemberg) and early paintings from this period showed grey figures in gloomy surroundings, reminiscent of western artists who painted social themes (e.g. Van Gogh, Kathe Kollowitz, Honore Daumier) but, increasingly, they showed a world in change.

“The Black Banner” (sometimes called “The Funeral of the Zadick”) was painted in 1905 shortly after the Kishinev pogrom and the abortive first Russian Revolution. The Zionist movement was gaining momentum and this picture depicts the funeral of a Hasidic leader. It was a time of devastating persecutions and pogroms and there’s confusion and fear on the faces of the mourners who seems to sense the same future for themselves.



One art critic suggested that this painting marked the end of the pre-modern era; another wrote that the black drape covering the coffin and the painting's title "The Black Banner" are Hirszenberg's reference to the Black Hundreds, the czarist-endorsed, anti-Semitic bands who were so destructive during the pogroms of 1905-1906. This painting also can be understood as the dissolution of a cohesive Jewish community being transformed by new social and political forces. But it was this large painting from 1904 that attracted the most attention - in fact, later many look-a-likes were painted by famous artists. It has variously been called, *Exile*, *They Wander*, *Galut*, *The Refugees* and shows a procession of homeless people moving soundlessly across a bleak snow field; a bent old rabbi leads, one man carries a Torah, and the scene conveys the plight of refugees and the eternal wandering of Jews. It was exhibited widely, including at the Paris Exposition where it established Hirszenberg's reputation.



A similar painting depicted above shocked the world because of its depiction of stark conditions in eastern Europe. During a world economic crisis, there was widespread unemployment in Russia, there were demonstrations by workers and government-incited pogroms and freezing and starving throngs trudged along the roads, seemingly with nowhere to go. In 1904 when a live tableau was performed by actors in a theater in Cracow, Hirszenberg who was in the audience was pushed up on stage and was cheered. It's odd that despite the painting's great acclaim, it mysteriously disappeared and never has been found.

Unlike the nostalgic works of Isidor Kaufmann, Hirszenberg's paintings evoked hopelessness and misery. He shared his people's suffering and his art was consistent with social voices of the time who were calling for human rights for all members of the exploited working class. As a contemporary wrote, "Some called Hirszenberg 'the painter of the Jews but he was a painter of all people as well.'"

MAURICE MINKOWSKI (1881-1930) who was the son of an assimilated manufacturer, was considered to be an artistic prodigy despite his being deaf and dumb as the result of an accident that he suffered at age five. No doubt he compensated for his disability through his artistic sensitivity and began drawing as a means of communication. He studied art in Cracow for four years, received the school's Golden Merit award and eventually his paintings were exhibited throughout Europe. If perhaps overly melodramatic, they depicted Polish-Jewish life during the last decades of czarist rule. Like for Samuel Hirszenberg, a pivotal event for Minkowski was the Kishinev pogrom in 1905 which turned him away from portraiture and landscape painting toward themes that reflected contemporary Jewish experience. Many of his pictures showed exhausted families uprooted from their homes and beginning their mass exodus away from the Pale.



Minkowski was a master of psychological insight which is exemplified by this painting one in 1910, titled *Hetzitz ve-Nifga* (He cast a glance and was impaired.) This painting shows twelve Jewish males of varying ages, apparently a study group, and each appears in deep thought. Our attention is drawn to the youth in the center who appears to be distracted, perhaps psychologically somewhat removed from the others. The picture's title comes from a Talmudic parable about four second century sages who had disobeyed the prohibition against mystical study (*kabbala*.) The repercussions were drastic: "Four entered the garden. One looked and died. One looked and hacked down the roots. One entered in peace and left in peace [Rabbi Akiva]." And one [Ben Zoma, presumably the youth in the center] looked and lost his mind. This painting can be understood as a metaphor for the conflicting and divergent possibilities of being Jewish in the early 20th century. Although Ben Zoma later returned to the world of his colleagues, he was unable to reapply his mind to rabbinic discourse and when he told others what he'd learned, it was said of him "Ben Zoma is without."

The episode suggests the inability to live in two worlds and seemed to reinforce rabbinic strictures against deviance. For many years this painting hung in the office of Ismar Schorsch, then the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Rabbi Schorsch equated Ben Zoma's skirmish with mysticism with the modern Jew's encounter with the world of secular ideas — enticing but dangerous. Having tasted the forbidden fruit one cannot go back, figuratively transformed, literally beyond the p[er]ale. Rabbi Schorsch finds the implicit message to be that the old and new worlds are incompatible; a proposition that he personally rejects but sees as the ultimate challenge to contemporary Judaism.

Although the question "What is Jewish Art?" has attracted great attention over the years, the work of these pre-1900 genre painters has usually been disparaged and devalued. Beginning with S. Ansky's ethnographic expedition into the villages of the Russian countryside in 1912, folk arts and crafts were exalted at the expense of genre painting. Moreover, to proponents of expressionist and cubist movements, realism not only was outmoded but many critics questioned whether it was art at all? This is how one harsh reviewer distinguished between the artistic views of western and eastern Europe:

[In the east] there clung a sorrowful, depressing and gloomy element. In the west, the conception is an artistic one, the treatment more objective and freer...To reach the beautiful so freely cannot be done by those who are so weary from the hardships of the day. They are also people whose whole art is a pensive glance back at the misery of their home and childhood...their work is enveloped in a veil of sadness and fatigue; there is no brightness in it, no sun, no joyous Greek spirit. Absent are bright meadows, free and open spaces, cheerful colours and carefree sensuality.

YEHUDA PEN (1854-1937) was born into a poor Lithuanian family and when his father died when the lad was only four; his mother discouraged youthful interest in drawing. However, he was apprenticed to a relative who had a small sign painting business where he learned the necessary technical skills. His master, a devout Hassid, told him to forget any ambitions to become an artist because “artists are drunkards and beggars who died of consumption or went mad.” However, Yehuda Pen persisted and when he began formal studies in 1880, he wore traditional Jewish clothes and spoke next to no Russian. His style went beyond mere description but depicted contemporary life within the context of the historic Jewish experience. He considered himself, first and foremost, to be “a Jewish artist” and in later years he impressed this upon the dozens of students who came to “Artist Pen’s School of Drawing and Painting” in Vitebsk.

Among them in 1906 was a local boy, **MARC CHAGALL**, but the master’s academic approach didn’t appeal to the student who studied with Pen for less than a year. Chagall much preferred painting subjects such as his grandfather in his pajamas eating *tzimmis*, or a man playing a fiddle on the roof or lovers floating in the sky. Shortly after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 ended, and amidst the idealism of the time, 31 year old Marc Chagall proposed forming a People’s Art School in Vitebsk with free tuition for poor students. He was appointed the town’s Commissar of Culture and tasked with organizing the decorations for a huge rally to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution. All of the local artists chipped in, hundreds of posters and banners were plastered around the city and most of the population of about 80,000 turned out. This poster that Chagall made for the rally was called “Onward, Onward” and captured the optimistic mood of the day with a jumping man bounding through a blue sky into the future.



In the years after the Russian Revolution momentum toward a unique Jewish national art receded. The next generation of Jewish painters included many now familiar names: e.g. Chaim Soutine, Manne Katz, Abel Penn, Chaim Gross, the Soyer brothers but there was little Jewish content in their work. I'; close by describing two more Jewish artists who literally went beyond the Pale. Although both began life within the boundaries of the Pale of Settlement, they achieved the Zionist dream of reaching the Holy Land.

BORIS SCHATZ (1866-1932) generally was considered to be “the father of Israeli art.” Born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Kovno, Lithuania, he was sent to yeshiva in the hope that he’d continue the clan’s rabbinic tradition. But religious life was not for him and Schatz left to study painting and sculpture, first in Vilna and later in Warsaw. One day he observed a street peddler calling out in Yiddish and this incident ignited his enthusiasm for using his art as a vehicle for what he described as “propaganda.” As Schatz recalled, “I worked with the passion of a prophet whose soul is filled with a message. I longed to reveal to everyone the soul of that Jewish pauper, tormented by hunger and cold, mortally wounded by human contempt; a man whose comical rags conceal the soul of a being.”

In order to improve his sculpting technique Schatz moved to Paris (1889-1895) where he became a student of the sculptor Mark Antokolski. As I explained earlier, Antokolski hadn’t followed the advise of the art critic Stasov to paint Jewish themes but now he stressed to his own student “the necessity of Jews remaining in Russia and getting closer to the people, their language, the literature of sharing the country’s joys and sorrows so that we learn to express them in our art and become an organic part of its national spirit.” Boris Schatz wasn’t impressed and said to himself, “Poor dreamer.”

Once again, the student didn’t follow his mentor’s advice to remain in Russia and instead he chose to leave. First Schatz went to Bulgaria where his reputation grew and he was hired to be the court sculptor. He founded an art school in Sofia, but in 1903 he was jolted by news of the first Kishinev pogrom. That same year he met Theodore Herzl, became a dedicated Zionist and at the Seventh Zionist Congress, he persuaded Herzl of his idea of creating a Jewish art school that would be named after Bezalel, the first artist mentioned in the Bible. When the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts opened in Jerusalem in 1906 it became a mecca for many emigres - including Samuel Hirszenberg and Lazar Krestin whom I’ve previously discussed.

Hirszenberg intended to stay for only a year or two but when he and his wife arrived, he plunged into his new life with enthusiasm and painted local subjects. He continued to rail against the economic system which resembled Europe in that the rich were exploiting the poor arabs and Yemenites. However, in a short time his chronic digestive symptoms worsened, he developed complications and within ten months of his arrival in Palestine he was dead at age 43. The first forty students all were women who were selected from among 400 applicants. Initially the school contained only a fabric and crafts department, but it soon expanded to include metal work and lithography. The school's official mission was said to be "to train the people of Jerusalem in crafts, develop original Jewish art and support Jewish artists, and to find visual expression for the much yearned-for national and spiritual independence that seeks to create a synthesis between European artistic traditions and the Jewish design traditions of the East and West, and to integrate it with the local culture of the Land of Israel."



During World War I, the Turks closed down the Bezalel School and Schatz was arrested, deported to Damascus and remained there under house arrest for two years. But when the British recaptured Palestine, he returned AND wrote a utopian book called *Jerusalem Rebuilt* that envisioned the city one hundred years in the future — in fact, in 2018! Schatz's initial ideas were formulated (prior to his expulsion) while sitting on Bezalel's roof which was his favorite vantage point overlooking the city. When the book finally appeared in 1924, Schatz explained that he'd written it in an attempt to escape the horrors of war.

This is where every Jew will go in order to develop his spirit and become familiar with the spirit of his people. This is where all the works created by Jews over thousands of years will be accumulated, sharing this endeavor with all humanity: a museum of Jewish art and wisdom. This is where the heavenly spirit will reside with which God has endowed us.

The Bezalel school re-opened after World War I, but there were financial difficulties and it had to close for a few years. While on a fund-raising trip, Boris Schatz died in Denver Colorado. Today his grave sits atop the Mount of Olives and the Bezalel School is government supported and remains one of Jerusalem's major cultural institutions.

LEOPOLD PILICHOWSKI (1869-1933) was born in a tiny Polish village where he had a traditional Jewish education. He excelled in Talmud studies and his parents dreamed of him becoming a great rabbi, but his hands were constantly carving and drawing and in the competition between head and hands, the hands won. The Hebrew and Yiddish writer David Frischmann (Warsaw, 1902) recalled his first meeting (1894) with the aspiring artist who then was fifteen years old:

He was the son of a poor Jewish farmer and had come to us in Lodz, into the city from the country. He came with nothing but his red cheeks and a dreamy sadness in his eyes,,,He told us that he wanted to become an artist....Well we had already had one "casualty" in our family. A nephew of my father....a man named David Hirszenberg, who had a shy little boy, called Samuel, who also came up with such strange ideas. He had already worked his way up to become an artist through starvation...And now this one too. It is said that the sea claims its victim every year....He had to search for a long time. Finally he found a noble man and his noble lady who looked after him. He first went to Munich and then to Paris...he attended art schools, he went hungry a lot, and became an outstanding artist.....He told me that he is working on a painting showing a Jew who carefully and as gently as possible touches an etrog and truly enjoys its beauty. Laughingly, he adds: "If the Goyem admire the beauty of nature in flowers and thousands of other plants, why should I not be allowed to show a Jew in the ecstasy of admiration for his single favorite plant? I am anxious to see his painting.



Leopold Pilichowsky was drawn to Paris, the Mecca of art, where he was influenced by the emerging schools of impressionism and cubism and it took a long time for him to find his Jewish soul. Although ghetto life was not to be forgotten, he felt that new life needed to be built on the foundations of the old and, like his contemporary from Lodz Samuel Hirszenberg, his work began to glorify the common man victimized by political events. In 1914 Pilichowsky moved with his family to London where he became an activist Zionist leader. During his long career there he painted many Jewish leaders (e.g. Bialik, Weizmann and Einstein) and late in life he was elected President of the Polish Jews of England and made a Knight of the Legion of Honor.

On a visit to Palestine in 1925, Pilichowsky attended the opening of the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus and then painted a monumental work to commemorate the event. It took several years to complete and the huge painting included more than one hundred invited dignitaries: Lord Balfour (in his robes of state), Lord Allenby, Chaim Weizmann, Rabbi Kook and hundreds of onlookers against a backdrop of mountains and plains.



Pilichowsky included himself in the foreground painting the scene and when the work finally was completed, it was brought to Buckingham Palace for a private showing for the King of England and royal family. This is how the painter described the event:

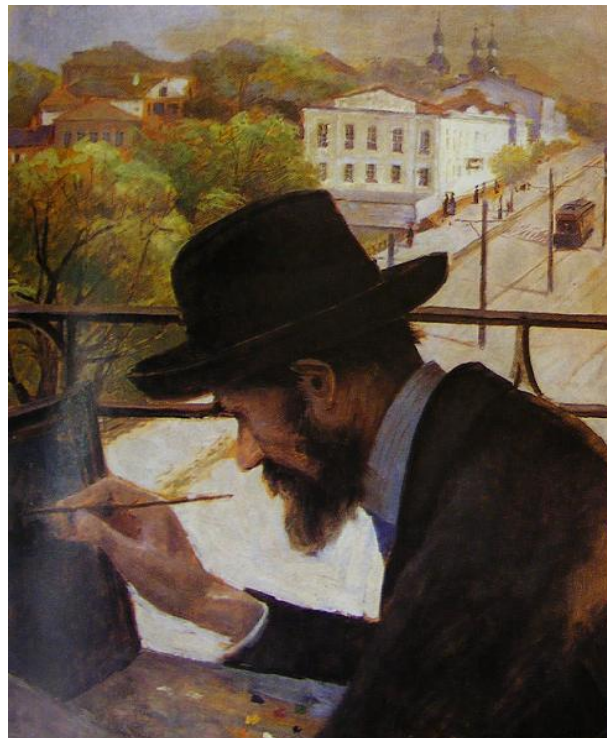
When I entered the throne room and saw my picture hanging opposite the chairs occupied by the king and queen, all the bitter moments of my life, all the hardships, frustrated hopes and disappointments of my career, seemed suddenly wiped out. That moment of appreciation from the King of England and Ruler of India made it all seem worth while. But I was not satisfied to have my picture seen only by the intellectuals and critics. I had painted it for the masses - as a monument of the past and a symbol of the future. [1928]

After the royal showing, the huge painting was exhibited at a gallery in the Jewish ghetto where over 10,000 people viewed it. Lord Balfour delivered the opening address and brought the painter to the speaker's platform. As Pilichowski later recalled, "I couldn't say a thing. I felt as if I spoke one word I would cry. Even my beautifully prepared speech welcoming the officials was lost." Next the painting was exhibited in Basle, the city of the Zionist Congresses, and then in Warsaw where there were more than 15,000 paid admissions — 5,000 students and orphans were admitted as the artist's guests.

In 1927 at a meeting commemorating the first decade of the Balfour Declaration, a choir sang hymns while an audience of more than 5,000 cheered. Pilichowski described how a bearded old man came up and declared that he saw *kedusha* (holiness) in the painting and asked if he might kiss his hands: “Tears fell in my soul and I, too moved to speak, [in turn] kissed the hands of the venerable patriarch.”

CONCLUSION

In 1978 art historian Avram Kampf wrote that the previous century had been only “a burst of energy, a flash of summer lightning.” Perhaps so, but these early paintings of Jews at work, study, prayer or protest are visual evidence that these people once existed — an example of art being more enduring than life. Sadly, today one has to search long and hard to find these genre paintings displayed. Even in Jewish museums they’re often hidden away in storage rather than hung on the walls. Contemporary curators seem to be more interested in showing what’s fashionable or familiar rather than in educating viewers about what for many was visual evidence of their roots. However, as one art critic observed, “a hundred years from now, these ...drawings will serve as a historical document of our times...When side-curls and yarmulkas have disappeared our successors will learn from these pictures how their ancestors looked and who they were.”



Note: This essay is adapted from a lecture I gave in October 2018 at The Learning Collaborative in New City, N.Y. That was based on research I did during the early 1980s and also from a documentary video I made that was used in 1984 at the Jewish Museum in NYC to educate docents prior to an exhibition held there.

Michael Nevins
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