

Marina Dmitrieva

Traces of Transit

Jewish Artists from Eastern Europe in Berlin

In the 1920s, Berlin was a hub for the transfer of culture between Eastern Europe, Paris, and New York. The German capital hosted Jewish artists from Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, where the Kultur-Liga was founded in 1918, but forced into line by Soviet authorities in 1924. Among these artists were figures such as Nathan Altman, Henryk Berlewi, El Lissitzky, Marc Chagall, and Issachar Ber Ryback. Once here, they became representatives of Modernism. At the same time, they made original contributions to the Jewish renaissance. Their creations left indelible traces on Europe's artistic landscape.

But the idea of tracing the curiously subtle interaction that exists between the concepts “Jewish” and “modern”... does not seem to me completely unappealing and pointless, especially since the Jews are usually considered adherents of tradition, rigid views, and convention.

Arthur Silbergleit¹

The work of East European Jewish artists in Germany is closely linked to the question of modernity. The search for new possibilities of expression was especially relevant just before the First World War and throughout the Weimar Republic. Many Jewish artists from Eastern Europe passed through Berlin or took up residence there. One distinguishing characteristic of these artists was that on the one hand they were familiar with traditional Jewish forms of life due to their origins; on the other hand, however, they had often made a radical break with this tradition. Contemporary observers such as Kurt Hiller characterised “a modern Jew” at that time as “intellectual, future-oriented, and torn”.² It was precisely this quality of being “torn” that made East European artists and intellectuals from Jewish backgrounds representative figures of modernity.

The relationship between tradition and modernity and the question of integration into society or dissociation from it were among the important topics debated by German

Marina Dmitrieva (1953) is a researcher at Geisteswissenschaftliches Zentrum Geschichte und Kultur Ostmitteleuropas, Leipzig.

¹ Arthur Silbergleit, review of Else Croner, *Die moderne Jüdin in the journal Ost und West*, 6 (1913), p. 443.

² Kurt Hiller, “Ausstellung der Pathetiker”, *Die Aktion. Wochenschrift für Politik, Literatur, Kunst*, 48 (1912), columns 1,514–1,516, quote from column 1,515.

Jews from the turn of the century onwards.³ At the end of the 19th century, the Jews living in Germany had developed various models of identity. The most common of these was “German citizen of the Jewish faith”. Assimilation was the only possible form of integration into society.

Although the 1871 Constitution of the German Empire gave Jewish men equal rights as citizens, Jews were never seen as fully integrated. The sociologist Georg Simmel, himself a converted Jew, described this position as that of a “wanderer” or “guest”, someone who “comes today and stays tomorrow”.⁴ Society’s attitude was in essence one of rejection, and this in turn strengthened the German Jews’ need for community. They set up Jewish associations, the most important of which was the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith (*Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*), which was established in 1893 to provide legal assistance in the fight against antisemitism.⁵ Describing the atmosphere at his parents’ Berlin home at Christmas, the philosopher and historian Gershom Scholem underscored in his memoirs the contradictions inherent in a form of assimilation that preserved expressions of the Jewish faith: “Under the Christmas tree stood a portrait of Herzl in a black frame... After that, I left the house at Christmas.”⁶

The generation born into assimilated families around 1900 developed a desire to find their own Jewish identity, one that was not necessarily based on religion. This search took different forms, ranging from the transfiguration and aestheticisation of East European Jewry as an ideal community, to the political utopia of Zionism. In all its forms, this search was a way of creating identity, a rediscovery of tradition on the way to renewal.⁷ Within this context, The Jewish discourse about art that took shape at the turn of the century assumed a particular explosiveness.⁸

The Figure of the “Eastern Jew”

Martin Buber, who had studied both philosophy and the history of art in Vienna and Leipzig, recognised the important role of art in the Jewish people’s search for identity.

³ As early as 1896, Nathan Birnbaum had founded a journal with the title *Die jüdische Moderne*; Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude* had the subtitle “Zeitschrift für jüdische Moderne”.

⁴ Georg Simmel, “Exkurs über den Fremden”, in idem, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Leipzig 1908), pp. 509–512.

⁵ Avraham Barkai, “Wehr dich!” *Der Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens 1893–1938* (München 2002).

⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main 1997), p. 32.

⁷ Shulamit Volkov, “Die Erfindung einer Tradition. Zur Entstehung des modernen Judentums in Deutschland”, in Volkov, *Das jüdische Projekt der Moderne. Zehn Essays* (München 2001), pp. 117–131.

⁸ “Eine neue Kunst für ein altes Volk”: *die Jüdische Renaissance in Berlin 1900 bis 1924* (exhibition catalogue) (Berlin 1991), pp. 8–22; Delphine Bechtel, *La renaissance culturelle juive en Europe centrale et orientale, 1897–1930: langue, littérature et construction nationale* (Paris 2002); Marina Dmitrieva, “Kunst und Judentum”, in Barbara Lange, ed., *Geschichte der bildenden Kunst in Deutschland 8: Vom Expressionismus bis heute* (München 2006), pp. 505–523, illustrations and text.

For the specific qualities of the nation are expressed more purely in artistic creation; everything that is peculiar to this people, and to this people alone, the unique and incomparable in it assumes a tangible and living form in its art. This means that our art is our people's best avenue for finding themselves.... Zionism and Jewish art are two children of our rebirth.⁹

This factor became decisive not only for the development of secular Jewish art, but also for its instrumentalisation by Zionism for educational purposes. Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, with their historical and fictional figures, gave rise to an interest among intellectuals in the world of East European Jewry.¹⁰ Readers attracted to Zionist ideas began to pay attention to the work of artists such as Ephraim Mose Lilien (1884–1925), who was originally from Drohobych, Galicia. Lilien's drawings of Jewish life combined the ornate lines of German *Jugendstil* with oriental motifs, and he worked both for the Munich journal *Die Jugend* and for socialist publications.

Lilien, who came from a poor family, but managed to work his way up, can be described as the founder of Zionist iconography. An ardent intermediary between intellectuals and wider Jewish circles, Lilien, together with Buber, played a decisive role in conceiving and shaping the journals *Ost und West* and *Jüdischer Almanach*. Lilien illustrated numerous books on Jewish topics and used the modern medium of photography to document Jewish life in Palestine. His strikingly sentimental art was very popular and created a visual stereotype of Jewish art.

For several artists and literary figures of Jewish descent, the First World War was a crucial experience in their relationship to Jewish culture. While serving on the eastern front, they encountered East European Jews, people who had been present as a literary construct invented by Buber, but had hitherto been absent in the consciousness of most German Jews in the form of real human beings with their own history and tradition. Now, however, new notions of identity and concepts of art emerged from these encounters.

This re-evaluation can be seen most strikingly demonstrated in the work of Berlin graphic artist Hermann Struck (1876–1944). In the sketches he drew while serving with the Supreme Command of All German Armed Forces in the East in Vilna (today Vilnius) and Kovno (today Kaunas), Struck captured on paper the landscapes of Lithuania and Belarus. More important, he drew portraits of the Jews in these regions. Struck then made lithographs of his sketches and published them in a book with the expressive title *The Face of East European Jewry* (*Das ostjüdische Antlitz*), which he wrote in collaboration with Arnold Zweig and published at Berlin Welt-Verlag.¹¹ The book was reprinted a number of times and became very popular. Struck's seemingly realistic sketches show people going about their everyday business. However, the

⁹ Martin Buber, "Von jüdischer Kunst" (1901), in idem, *Die jüdische Bewegung* (Berlin 1916), p. 63.

¹⁰ For examinations of the stereotypes that came to be associated with the idea of the "Eastern Jew" and of Buber, see the contributions in this issue by Steven E. Aschheim and Micha Brumlik (pages 61–74 and 89–100).

¹¹ Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck, *Das ostjüdische Antlitz* (Berlin 1920). This volume was reprinted in 1988. An English translation – *The Face of East European Jewry* – was published in 2004.

dignity, majesty, and psychological depth of the representations, which consciously used the idiom of a tradition going back to Rembrandt, simultaneously summon up the idea of “genuine”, traditional Jews in contrast to the “rootless” Jews of modernity. And “rootlessness”, as we know, was also one of the most widespread antisemitic stereotypes of the time. The painter Ludwig Meidner commented ironically:

Struck etched Jews at prayer – Eastern Jews, but very neat and tidy, noble, and inconspicuous, so as to be acceptable to even the most liberal Berlin household. He portrayed them as Pechstein portrayed the Polynesians: as a far-off people with traditional customs.¹²

Struck had been born in Berlin, but his encounter with the Jews of Eastern Europe was easy for him, because he was himself Jewish and a member of the *Mizrachi* party, the religious wing of the Zionist movement. Struck also produced numerous etchings of leading Zionists. His portrait of Theodor Herzl became, like Lilien’s photograph, an icon of the Zionist movement. At the same time, he was a renowned graphic artist with a leading position in the German art world. His book *Die Kunst des Radierens* [The art of etching] was reprinted five times between 1909 and 1923. Struck’s studio was a meeting place for young Jewish artists from Germany such as Jakob Steinhardt and Ludwig Meidner, and artists originally from Eastern Europe such as Joseph Budko, Abraham Palukst, and Marc Chagall, who learned the craft of etching from Struck.

Struck belonged both to the “universal” art world and to Zionist circles. On the eastern front as well, he had acted as a mediator and translator between the Lithuanian Jews and the German military administration. He enjoyed the trust of both sides. In 1923, Struck emigrated from Germany to Palestine and settled in Haifa.

The First World War also changed the worldview and artistic vision of Jakob Steinhardt (1887–1968). Steinhardt’s confrontation with “Eastern Jewry” was more dramatic than Struck’s. He believed, for example, that he had discovered his ancestors in the Jews of Lithuania and even “recognised” his great-grandmother in one old Jewish woman.¹³ The woodcuts in his collection *Pessach-Haggada* (1923), which was made up of prayers, blessings, and commentaries for the Passover seder meal, combine in a new way traditional Jewish culture with a world marked by social upheaval, misery, and wars.¹⁴

The new European order established by the Treaty of Versailles, with the founding of new nation-states on the territory of the former multinational empires, also affected traditional areas of Jewish settlement. The Russian Civil War and the Polish-Soviet War as well as the pogroms that accompanied these conflicts set in motion large-scale waves of emigration, much of which rolled through Germany.

During the postwar years, interest in the world of the East European Jews grew to such an extent that Gershom Scholem spoke critically of an “aesthetic ecstasy”.¹⁵

¹² Letter to Franz Landsberger (1934), quoted in Gerda Breuer, Ines Wagemann, eds., *Ludwig Meidner. Zeichner, Maler, Literat 1884–1966*, 1, (Stuttgart 1991), p. 115.

¹³ Stefan Behrens, ed., *Jakob Steinhardt: Das graphische Werk* (Berlin 1987), p. 10.

¹⁴ Michael Brenner interprets this way of combining tradition with current events as an expression of the “struggle for authenticity in the modern age”, see Michael Brenner, *Jüdische Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (München 2000), pp. 182–194, quote from pp. 186–187.

¹⁵ Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, p. 85

Many saw the life of the Hasidic Jews as a shining example of a community organised on socialist lines. An attempt was made to turn the socialist ideas of Gustav Landauer, one of Buber's friends, into reality within a community affiliated with the *Jüdisches Volksheim* in Berlin's Scheunenviertel, where many East European Jews lived.¹⁶

The treatment of Jewish themes in art also aroused interest among educated, non-Jewish Germans. Indications of this could be found in exhibitions of work by Jewish artists in leading galleries such as Paul Cassirer's and Tannhäuser's and in the publications of Jewish artists with publishing houses and journals such as Paul Westheim's *Kunstblatt*. Private and public collections bought works by Jewish artists. There was a "Jewish Pavilion" at Düsseldorf's Exhibition for Hygiene, Social Welfare, and Physical Exercise (*Ausstellung für Gesundheitspflege, soziale Fürsorge und Leibesübungen, Ge-So-Lei*) in 1926 and at Cologne's International Press Exhibition (*Internationale Pressa Ausstellung*) in 1928. In comparison with assimilated West European Jews, the figure of the "Eastern Jew" took on idealised features, as in Struck and Zweig's *The Face of East European Jewry*.

The search for "the mystical and spiritual" was already present in Expressionism, but the Jewish artists from Eastern Europe put an even greater emphasis on it.¹⁷ The art historian Franz Landsberger wrote: "Mysticism flows more strongly through the East European Jew, he is more fervent."¹⁸ Starting in the late 1920s, scholarly works also addressed East European Jewish artists such as Lasar Segal, Marc Chagall, and Issachar Ber Ryback with this aspect in mind.¹⁹

In the postwar era, centres and circles of Jewish culture were created in Poland and Ukraine, in Russia and Austria, and just as important, they established and maintained contact with one another. One of the most important centres of secular Jewish culture was the *Kultur-Liga*, which was founded in Kiev in 1918 and functioned as an independent institution until 1920. The *Kultur-Liga* had branches in Romania, Lithuania, and Poland. Its activities were based on the idea of Jewish cultural autonomy.²⁰ After its complete subordination to the then ministry of education – the Soviet People's Commissariat for Enlightenment – in 1924, the *Kultur-Liga* lost its function as an independent centre of Jewish enlightenment. By then, however, some of its members had moved to Warsaw, where they were soon joined by the centre itself. After that, the *Kultur-Liga* moved to Berlin for a while. In the opinion of Peretz Markisch, a

¹⁶ The *Jüdisches Volksheim* was set up in 1916 by the Zionist doctor and educator Siegfried Lehmann and took the English "Settlement System" as its model. It was designed to offer Jewish immigrants from the East the possibility of training, see Brenner, *Jüdische Kultur*, pp. 204-205.

¹⁷ In a contribution to the catalogue for the exhibition *Jewish Artists of Our Time*, 25 July-20 August 1929, the French art critic Waldemar George argued that an "expression judaïque" could be identified in modern art: This art, he said, had been created by "wandering prophets, destroyers and great agitators", see Henri Brendlé, ed., *Jüdische Künstler unserer Zeit* (Zürich 1929).

¹⁸ Franz Landsberger, *Einführung in die jüdische Kunst* (Berlin 1935), p. 259.

¹⁹ Karl Schwarz, *Die Juden in der Kunst* (Berlin 1928); Ernst Cohn-Wiener, *Die jüdische Kunst. Ihre Geschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin and Leipzig 1929); Landsberger, *Einführung*.

²⁰ *Kultur-Liga. Khudozhnii avangard 1910–1920-kh rokiv* (Kiev 2007); Gillel' Kazovskii, *Khudozhniki Kul'tur-Ligi* (Moscow 2003).

Yiddish author who specialised in short stories and plays, Berlin was to become the site of the “Third Temple”.²¹

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (*Yidisher Visenshaftlikher Institut*) was founded in Berlin in 1925 with its headquarters in Vilna (then Polish Wilno). The activities of this institute transcended borders, just as its leading figures had become citizens of different states as a result of the new European order.

During the 1920s, Berlin became an important centre of communication and exchange between east and west. Political émigrés crossed paths with official Soviet envoys, representatives from the world of autonomous art became acquainted with left-wing revolutionary artists. Between 1921 and 1924, Berlin was vortex of interaction among East European Jewish literary figures such as David Bergelson, Der Nister, David Hofsteyn and Uri Zwi Grinberg, David Einhorn, and Moyshe Kulbak; scholars such as Max Weinreich, Simon Dubnow, and Elias Tscherikower; and artists such as Henryk Berlewi, El Lissitzky, Marc Chagall, and Issachar Ber Ryback. The city was home to important Jewish publishing houses – such as Schocken, Philo, Farlag Yidish, Welt-Verlag, Dvir, Stybel, Wostok, Klal, and Jüdischer Verlag – as well as to important organisations – such as the Union of Eastern Jewish Associations (*Bund Ostjüdischer Vereine*), the Jewish Cultural Union (*Jüdischer Kulturbund*), and the Eastern Jewish Artists’ Union (*Ostjüdischer Künstlerbund*).²² Chagall remarked that he had never seen so many miracle-performing rabbis as in Berlin in 1922, and had never seen so many Constructivists as on the terrace of the Romanisches Café.²³

Polish-Jewish Artists in Germany

East European artists were extremely mobile in the early 1920s. By participating in exhibitions and contributing to publications (in Jewish circles and the international art world), many of them succeeded in establishing contacts throughout Europe and building up networks. In 1919, Jankel Adler (1895–1949), a native of Russia’s central Polish lands who had already been active as an artist in Germany before the war, travelled to Łódź, where he became an active member of the Young-Yiddish (*Yung-yidish*) circle. He was particularly energetic in calling for a new Jewish art. Upon returning to Germany, he was part of the art scene in Düsseldorf, and in 1920, he served as a representative of the Polish delegation to the congress of the Union of Progressive International Artists (*Union fortschrittlicher Künstler*) and the International Art Exhibition (*Internationale Kunstausstellung*) at the department store Tietz. In his own work, Adler sought to combine modern form with Jewish tradition. His 1921 portrait of his parents, with its emphasis on the “Jewishness” of their features, is

²¹ Hillel Kazovsky, “The Phenomenon of the Kultur-Lige”, in *Kultur-Liga. Khudozhnii avangard 1910–1920-kh rokiv*, pp. 24–36, quotation from p. 24.

²² Renate Fuks and Leo Fuks, “Yiddish Publishing Activities in the Weimar Republic, 1920–1933”, in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 33* (New York 1988), pp. 417–434; Lutz S. Malke, ed., *Europäische Moderne. Buch und Graphik aus Berliner Kunstverlagen 1890 bis 1933. Ausstellung der Kunstbibliothek Berlin* (Berlin 1989); Marina Kühn-Ludewig, *Jiddische Bücher aus Berlin (1918–1936)* (Nümbrecht 2008).

²³ Klaus Kändler, ed., *Berliner Begegnungen: Ausländische Künstler in Berlin 1918 bis 1933* (Berlin 1987), p. 274.

an acknowledgement of his origins. However, in his large paintings for the planetarium at the aforementioned Exhibition for Hygiene, Social Welfare, and Physical Exercise in 1926 – a series of pictures that went on to take first prize at the exhibition – Adler did not use any Jewish motifs.

Henryk Berlewi (1894–1967), a champion of the “Jewish renaissance” in Warsaw, was another artist who, during his period in Berlin from 1921 to 1923, developed a radical form of abstract composition that he called *Mechanofaktur*, which was exhibited at the gallery Der Sturm in 1924. Berlewi later recalled that his break with the Jewish tradition, which was a very dramatic experience for him, was influenced by El Lissitzky.²⁴ El Lissitzky had spent some time in Warsaw on his way to Berlin in 1921 and had introduced Berlewi to Suprematism, a new direction in Russian art. Berlewi in turn reported from Berlin for the Yiddish-language press in Poland, informing his readers about events in the international art world in Germany.

This double-life of Jewish artists in Germany during the 1920s – that of belonging to both Jewish cultural circles and the radical transnational avant-garde – seems to have been a widespread phenomenon, and it was accompanied by reflections addressing the artists’ own roots.

Artists from Russia

Some Russian-Jewish artists who stayed in Germany until the mid-1920s came to Berlin on the occasion of the First Russian Art Exhibition, which took place at the Van Diemen gallery in the autumn of 1922. They took advantage of the opportunity offered by having so many Jewish printers in the city to publish their works, some of which had been created while they were still living in Russia. They were particularly active in the field of book illustration. Nathan Altman published a deluxe edition of his *Jüdische Graphik* [Jewish graphic art] with an introduction by well-known art critic Max Osborn.²⁵ In these works, which had been drawn earlier, Altman was striving for a stylised reinterpretation of Jewish folk ornamentation (Illustration 3). By contrast, the cover illustration, which was produced later, shows that Altman’s work was also close to the polygraphic means of composition used in international Constructivism (Illustration 1 in colour insert).

Issachar Ber Ryback (1897–1935) was another artist who began publishing lithographs of drawings he had produced earlier, namely in 1917–18, while still in Ukraine. In his portfolio *Shtetl. Mayn khorever heym, a gedekhenish* [Shtetl. My destroyed home, a remembrance], he dealt with a tradition that already belonged to the past. The lithograph “The Great Synagogue”, a part of this collection, shows the great wooden synagogue in Mogilev, which Ryback also depicted in Expressionist-Cubist paintings and large-format charcoal drawings. Using expressive force and dynamic distortions, he depicted everyday life in an East European shtetl, imbuing it with a mystical ecstasy, just the way Buber had imagined it (Illustration 4).

²⁴ Henryk Berlewi, “El Lissitzky in Warschau”, in *El Lissitzky (exhibition catalogue)* (Hannover 1965), p. 63.

²⁵ Nathan Altman, *Jüdische Graphik. Mit Einleitung von Max Osborn* (Berlin 1923).



Illustration 3: Nathan Altman, Fantastic Animals, from his book “Evreiskaia Grafika” [Jewish graphic art] (Berlin 1923)



Illustration 4: Issachar Ber Ryback, *Simchat Tora (Festival of the Tora)*, sanguine drawing, 1922

Ryback had received his training at the Kiev School of Art and was an active member of the art section of the *Kultur-Liga*. During his time in Berlin, from 1921 to 1924, he was, like many other avant-garde artists, a member of the left-wing November Group and exhibited his works with the *Berliner Secession* group and at the *Juryfreie Kunstausstellung*. After a short trip to Russia, he finally settled in Paris in 1926.

Josef Chaikov (1888–1979, Illustration 5), who was born in Kiev and attended the local School of Art, spent the years 1910–1913 in Paris. He, too, was active in the art section of the *Kultur-Liga* and lived in Berlin from 1922 to 1923 before moving to Moscow. In Berlin, he worked as a book illustrator for a number of Jewish publishing houses, but he also created three-dimensional figures and bas-reliefs made of plaster, in which he abstracted forms in Cubist-Constructivist compositions. His treatise *Skulptur*, which appeared in Kiev as a publication of the *Kultur-Liga*, was published in the Berlin edition of the Polish-Jewish journal *Albatros* in 1923. Lazar (El) Lissitzky (1890–1941), who did the layout for the Constructivist title page of the catalogue produced to accompany the First Russian Art Exhibition and edited a Berlin-based international journal entitled *Veshch - Gegenstand - Objet* (1922), was another artist who illustrated books for Jewish publishers in this period.²⁶

The Yiddish-language journal *Milgroym* (Illustration 2 in colour insert) became a place where German and Russian-Jewish publicists could exchange ideas. Appearing in Berlin from 1922 to 1924 alongside a nearly identical Hebrew edition called *Rimon*, this journal published articles on both Jewish and “universal” art and literature, while aiming to transcend borders in order to reach its intended Jewish audience.

The programme of *Milgroym-Rimon* had some similarities with the aims of the *Kultur-Liga*; after all, *Kultur-Liga* activists David Bergelson and Der Nister were also involved in the journal. Rahel Wischnitzer-Bernstein, the journal’s editor, was an expert on illustrated medieval manuscripts and was also familiar with the *Kultur-Liga* and its goal of using art for the purpose of enlightenment.²⁷ Wischnitzer-Bernstein saw *Milgroym-Rimon* as a “pathfinder in the world”, a journal that would encompass the different strata of Jewish culture and combine them, the past with the present, Jewish art with art in general. She considered Jewish art to be part of a creative process, “defined not by national characteristics but solely by time and the artist’s personality”.²⁸

Wischnitzer-Bernstein thought of Jewish culture as an integral part of universal culture. Accordingly, the journal published discussions on the general and Jewish artistic themes that were being debated at the time, for example, Expressionism and Chinese painting. Contributions by renowned art historians such as Franz Landsberger and Julius Meier-Graefe on Cézanne, Rembrandt, or El Greco were as innovative in their approach as those by artists like Berlewi and Lissitzky.

In one article for *Milgroym*, Lissitzky combined his thoughts on the different directions in Jewish art with his memories of a 1916 trip he and Ryback had made to the Mogilev synagogue at the instigation of ethnographer Solomon An-ski and banker

²⁶ Susanne Marten-Finnis and Igor Dukhan, “Transnationale Öffentlichkeit im Russischen Berlin. Die Avantgarde-Zeitschrift Vešč-Gegenstand-Objet”, *OSTEUROPA*, 3/2008, pp. 37–48.

²⁷ See her report on a visit she made to Kiev in 1918: Rachel Bernstein-Wischnitzer, “Jüdische Kunst in Kiew und Petrograd (1918–1920)”, *Der Jude*, 5–6 (1920), pp. 353–356.

²⁸ Rachel Wischnitzer, “From My Archives”, in idem, ed., *From Dura to Rembrandt: Studies in the History of Art* (Milwaukee 1990), p. 166.



Illustration 5: Iosif Chaikov, Self-portrait, 1920

Horace Ginzburg (who funded An-ski's expeditions).²⁹ He saw the years between 1912 and 1915 as the zenith of the Jewish renaissance. In this period, Lissitzky wrote, a new generation of Jews had "suddenly" become "artistic" and gone to the "psychological borders" of the Pale of Settlement, the territory to which Russia's Jews were generally restricted. Lissitzky was referring to the breach of the prohibition on mimetic representation, which had made the break with tradition inevitable:

We took up our pencils and brushes and began to look not just at nature, but also at ourselves. Who are we? Where do we belong among the nations of the world? What is the nature of our culture, and what kind of art do we want to create?³⁰

According to Lissitzky, this new way of thinking about art had developed in a few towns in Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. From there, the movement headed to Paris and ended – "At the time, we thought it was the beginning" – with the First Exhibition of Jewish Art in Moscow in 1916. Lissitzky went on to add: "Today, true art is being created by those struggling against art." This provocative statement referred to the contradictory situation in which, so Lissitzky, modern Jewish art found itself.

The experience of artists from Eastern Europe during their stopover in Germany led not only to close contacts with the worlds of international and German art. It also forced them to consider theoretical questions concerning the relationship between Jewish and "universal" art, between "*yidishkayt* and civilization".³¹

The radical rejection of tradition, which from the point of view of traditional Jewry amounted to blasphemy, led to a kind of disorientation among some of these artists, even a "feeling that they did not belong in two senses, neither to Jewish tradition, nor to the history of European art".³² For Jankel Adler, this new art, which he called Expressionism, had come into being as a consequence of big city life: the streetcar clatter, the throngs of people, and the dissonant colours. This road also demanded sacrifices: "We are losing our connection with God and with our fathers."³³ And Chaikov was of the opinion that Jewish art should come into being out of the spirit of the present, the age of electrification, speed, steel construction, and concrete.³⁴

A kind of summary of Jewish art's development can be found in the book *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* [Contemporary Jewish graphic art]. Written by Kiev artist Boris Aronson (1900–1980), this book was published in Russian by the Berlin-based Petropolis Verlag in 1924.³⁵ Aronson saw the path of development leading from "eth-

²⁹ El Lissitzky, "Erinnerungen an die Mogilever Synagoge", *Milgroym*, 3 (1923), pp. 9–13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Hillel Kazovsky, "Between *yidishkayt* and Civilization", in Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov, eds., *The Shtetl: Image and Reality* [= Studies in Yiddish, 2] (Oxford 2000), pp. 80–90.

³² Armin A. Wallas, "Das Zelt. Jüdische Kunst zwischen den Weltkriegen", in *Jüdischer Almanach 1996* (Frankfurt am Main 1995), pp. 25–35, quote from p. 25.

³³ *Nasz Kurier* (5 December 1920), p. 4.

³⁴ Josef Chaikov, *Skulptur*, quoted in Ruth Apter-Gabriel, ed., *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-garde Art* (Jerusalem 1987), p. 231

³⁵ Boris Aronson, *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* (Berlin 1924). The same publisher published Aronson's book on Marc Chagall in 1924, in Russian and Yiddish.

nography” to “aesthetics” and identified three phases of modern Jewish art: imitation, stylisation, and individualisation. He argued that ethnographic interests preceded aesthetic ones, and that the graphic element in folk ornamentation and book illustration provided a model of orientation for modern Jewish art. According to Aronson, the renunciation of naturalism resulting from anti-mimetic Jewish tradition provided the impetus for the modern artist’s search for form.

At the same time, Aronson was of the opinion that contemporary Jewish artists would be unable to find their own style. In the event that they turned to Jewish motifs, they risked trivialising those themes; but on the way to abstraction, the Jewish world’s inner warmth and sense of security would be lost. To illustrate how artists were departing from the Jewish tradition, Aronson singled out one of Lissitzky’s illustrations for a volume of stories by Ilya Ehrenburg; there Constructivist composition was combined with elements of Jewish script (Illustration 6).³⁶ Aronson noted:

In general, every national style stands in contradiction to the overall atmosphere of our time, in which dynamics, mechanics, and fragments are so important.³⁷

Overall, the position of Jewish artists from East-Central and Eastern Europe in the world of German art seems to have been an ambivalent one. On the one hand, their transnational contacts and the radicalism of some of their artistic statements were representative for the period of high modernism. The fact that many of them held left-wing political views also contributed to their integration into the largely left-wing oriented German art world. A few years later, the Nazi regime condemned modern art movements across the board as “Jewish and cultural Bolshevism”.

On the other hand, for many East European artists, the construction of a national, Jewish modern art was accompanied by a search for roots that seemed thoroughly archaic. It was precisely this combination of radicalism and archaism that seemed an innovation to Germany’s educated middle class. For most of the artists from Eastern Europe, Germany was no more than a stopping point on their way to France, Britain, or the United States. Nonetheless, because they were so closely involved in artistic life and established many contacts during their time in Germany, they were able to make an important contribution to reflection on the nature of Jewish art and modern form. They have left behind traces on the landscape of European art that cannot be erased.

Translated by Gerald Holden, Frankfurt/Main

³⁶ Il’ja Erenburg, *Shest’ povestei o legkikh kontsakh* (Berlin 1922).

³⁷ Aronson, *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika*, pp. 103, 107.