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Art as Refuge: Sketches and Insights on the Jewish-Polish Art Scene from a Refugee's Perspective

Abstract: The works of Maurice Gottlieb and Samuel Hirszenberg express corporeal wandering and psychological ambulation characteristic of the refugee condition. The third artistic stratagem emerges in the works of the copper artist Arieh Merzer. His work embodies a liminal form of movement, an elusive dynamism etched into metallic surfaces. This interstitial motion is situated between the external and internal realms, occupying the depth of the relief medium that stands between painting and sculpture, engaging the world while simultaneously withdrawing from it. Merzer's aesthetic thereby exemplifies the intricate dialectic of the refugee experience, one alternately characterized by an inexorable sense of displacement and entrapment in a Penrose-like perpetual movement that can lead to new creative expressions. His art is an art as refuge.

Keywords: copper, refugee, Jewish art, metaloplastics.

Słowa kluczowe: miedź, uchodźca, sztuka żydowska, metaloplastyka.

Forward

The title of my article encapsulates the strategy and reveals the outlines of thoughts on which the following article is based. First, I am comparing the artistic act itself with refugees' existence and essence. Could we say that, in the heart of the artistic act itself, some important exilic features are manifested? Where is the artist located via his dealt subject? What is the process of artistic representation? Does creativity bound with refugee essences? That is a whole issue and debate in philosophy and hermeneutics

of art that both underlies and encompasses the frame of the following article but still requires some attention.[1]

I will try to put on refugee glasses while developing my topic, which means I will use some terms and concepts as well as use refugee jargon to describe this sometimes impossible space or layer: The refugee artist paints and creates from another place called home. It is there miles away but he is carrying it in a certain way within and there is an unbearable gap that the canvas sometimes can express and present: a kind of collage, assemblage or montage, to my understanding, forms of art that spread among refugees or displaced artists, a phenomenon that was very common at the beginning of the twentieth century.[2] This is an occurrence in a blurred and ambiguous space, something that cannot be captured since a gap is not a representable entity. A gap is the heart of the trauma, of the separation. In Hebrew, one says "revach," which is both the word for the physical gap but also indicates a feeling of comfort, relaxation, stability, and welfare. In this path, the refugee is moving, frequently expelled, or often making his own decision to leave for his awaited state of comfort and stability.

This gap can be described as an exilic space.

> To be in exile means to be out of place; also, to be rather elsewhere; also, not having that "elsewhere" where one would rather be. Thus, exile is a place of compulsory confinement, but also an unreal, a place that is itself out of place in the order of things. Anything may happen here, but nothing can be done here. In exile, uncertainty meets freedom. Creation is the issue of that wedlock.[3]

It is not by coincidence that creativity is an important tool in confronting the exilic gap. There is a kind of mutual reverberation between the existential exilic mode of the immigrant and the exilic features embedded in the artistic act itself. Creative activity can serve as an engine navigating

[1] See: Matthew Baigell, Milly Heyd (eds.), *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art* (New Brunswick, 2001). Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (London, 2000). Linda Nochlin, "Art and the Conditions of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation," *Poetics Today* 17 (1996), 3:317–337. Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting as Trauma," *Art in America* 76 (1988), 3:130–140, 172–173. Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca, 1996). Ead., "Mourning and Method," *The Art Bulletin* 84 (2002), 4:660–669.

[2] For a survey of that phenomenon in diverse historical art movements, see: Diane Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object* (New York, 1988). On the diasporic experience in painting, see: Ronald Brooks Kitaj, "First Diasporic Manifesto," in Mirzoeff (ed.), *Diaspora and Visual Culture*, 34–42.

[3] Zygmunt Bauman, "Assimilation into Exile: The Jew as a Polish Writer," *Poetics Today* 17 (1996), 4:569.

between the forces of assimilation and the push further to a new place that will take the immigrant out of the gap.

One can sometimes be a refugee or exile from one's own native land while staying in place when it is occupied and oppressed, one can be "stateless" within one's own country of birth, even before being uprooted. In that sense, a common thread connects the Polish and the Jewish nations: both experienced severance and alienation from their lands, the Jews with the long historical separation and exile from the land of Israel and Poles under their different enduring partitions.

The emergence of Modernism in Poland is unusual and differs from other modern European fields mainly due to the fact that it emerged under occupation and its complexity brings to mind the emergence of Modernism in the Jewish sphere.

With the Third Partition of 1795, Poland effectively ceased to exist as an independent state and remained merely as an idea among the conquering powers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. Art in all its branches had a role in preserving, shaping, and promoting this idea. Culture and art played an essential role during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

This fact did not allow the Polish Modernist artist to abandon his ties with conservatism, since he was in conflict with his very desire to preserve his national identity and heritage. The free and sovereign avant-garde artist could release all past ties in the name of the new and revolutionary ideal while the Modernist Polish artist often felt obliged to build his national culture. Hence, it is possible to identify two trends or shades in Polish Modernism: an international trend and a national Polish trend that often blends in unique forms.[4]

In that sense, Polish art and Jewish art had common inclinations and were both oscillating between the international and the national, an inclination that echoes the tension between being at home and being dispersed among the nations.

In the field of painting, Jewish and Polish art have another similar feature: both developed at a late stage in the nations' cultural history. The significant revival of Polish painting took place in the second half of the nineteenth century parallel to the awakening of the Jewish artistic visual expression in modern painting.

[4] Jan Cavanaugh, *Out Looking In: Early Modern Polish Art, 1890–1918* (Berkeley, 2000), 7.

In his book on the artist Jan Matejko, the art historian Stanisław Witkiewicz expressed the idea that the Polish genius was first conveyed in poetry and only later in music and finally in painting.[5]

Martin Buber identifies in Jewish culture different layers of expression and creation that are revealed at different stages of the historical-spiritual-artistic dialectic of the people. To a large extent, the way in which they are discovered reveals the psycho-artistic stratification of the Jewish people. In his opinion, the fact that Jewish formalism (i.e., plastic art in its various forms) comes at a late stage in the nation's development, after the arts of poetry, music and theater, indicates a Jewish soul that reflects a quality of relationality more than formality. Judaism did not encourage a formal visual perception of an object, like the perception of the object characteristic of the classical culture of Greece, and, from here, the Jew sees the successive relationships in the chain of events.

The ancient Jews were more "ear men" ("Ohrenmenschen") than "eye men" ("Augenmenschen") and their intuitive perception was based more on a sense of time than on spatial perceptions. In his opinion, the change occurred with the birth of Hasidism, which heralded a new Judaism and enabled a renewed connection to nature, space, and form.[6]

In this article, I would like to concentrate on the refugee state of mind that had been built from the decades of the Partitions onward and that gained significant momentum with the post-war refugee problem that spread around the Polish lands together with all European countries during the first part of the twentieth century; this affected everyone, including artists who were moving frequently around cities and who created different temporary and more established art centers.[7]

[5] Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Matejko* (Cracow, 1908), 13–14.

[6] Martin Buber (ed.), *Jüdische Künstler* (Berlin, 1903), 1–6.

[7] The reasons for Jewish migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stem both from economic and political reasons, some of which are related to the general migration in the modern era that resulted from the search for new sources of income and the rise of urban centers. In the Jewish context, the unprecedented demographic growth created a population density that also contributed to migration. Jews began to leave the towns and moved to the cities. Following the pogroms of 1881, huge waves of migration headed to the west, to the big cities and to America. Between 1881 and 1914, close to a million and a half Jews emigrated from Russia to America. The pogroms after World War I, antisemitism, and persecution contributed to the continuation of migration that culminated in the Holocaust and its aftermath. See: Shaul Shtampfer, "Gidul ha-ochlosia ve-hagira be-Yahadut Polin Lita ba-et ha-khadash," in Israel Bartal, Israel Gutman (eds.), *Kiyum ve-shever* (Jerusalem, 1997), 263–285. On Jewish immigration from Russia from 1881 to 1914, see: Shmuel Ettinger, *Beyn Polin LeRusia* (Jerusalem, 1994), 280–312.

The introverted movement (of wandering) versus physical wandering

There are different ways to start bringing visual representations of Polish-Jewish exilic features. A significant starting point would be the self-portrait of Maurycy Gottlieb (1856–1879) as Ahasuerus,[8] dated 1876 (at the National Museum in Kraków) and depicting the young Gottlieb portrait as a *Wandering Jew* (Fig. 1).[9] This is the Christian-Jewish myth of the Jewish cobbler who refused to let Jesus on his last journey rest in front of his home and who hence was cursed to be immortal and to keep wandering until Christ's Second Coming. Gottlieb could be depicting himself in the physical wandering movement on roads, which was actually a traditional artistic scene favored by artists throughout history, but he rather chose the position of the king who is actually living in his remote palace while his expressions and inner life reveal his wandering experience. In my reading, he reflects the refugee's experience in a complex way: not from a geographical journey between countries or among different cultures but from a fixed point, it is the king—the Polish king or the Jewish king—who is in exile. In his own fortress, he is split between identities: condemned to be a nomad between different identities, in Gottlieb's case a nomad

[8] From the extensive research on the topic of the Wandering Jew, I will mention: Galit Hasan-Rokem, Alan Dundes (eds.), *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington, 1986); George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Providence, 1965). The name Ahasver has been given to the Wandering Jew, probably adapted from Ahasuerus, the Persian king in the Book of Esther, who was a gentile whose very name among medieval Jews was an exemplum of a fool. See: David Daube, "Ahasver," in Hasan-Rokem, Dundes (eds.), *The Wandering Jew*, 36–38. Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Ahasver: The Enigma of a Name," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010), 4:544–550. In the Polish-Jewish historical context, the use of the name Ahasuerus can be associated with the love story of King Casimir with Esterka, a story that became a mythological test case for the Jewish-Polish relationship. King Casimir had an extramarital relationship with a Jewish woman named Esterka; they had sons who lived as Christians and daughters who kept their Judaism. During the nineteenth century, the story of Esterka and Casimir penetrated the fields of Polish-Jewish literature and became a permanent topic. See: Chone Shmeruk, "Contacts between Polish and Yiddish Literature: The Story of Esterka and King Casimir of Poland," in *Yiddish Literature in Poland: Historical Studies and Perspectives* (Jerusalem, 1981; in Hebrew), 207–279.

[9] Gottlieb made several important self-portraits: as a Polish nobleman, an Oriental Arab, and a self-portrait with masks. All reveal his multicultural and identity standpoint characteristics. For more on Gottlieb, see: Larry Silver, "Jewish Identity in Art and History: Maurycy Gottlieb as Early Jewish Artist," in Catherine M. Soussloff (ed.), *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley, 1999), 90–92. Ezra Mendelsohn, *Painting a People: Maurycy Gottlieb and Jewish Art* (Hanover, 2002).

Fig. 1. Maurycy Gottlieb, *Ahasuerus, Wandering Jew* (*Self-portrait*), 1876, oil on canvas, The National Museum in Kraków, Wikimedia Commons

in his home, in the synagogue and the art academy, in Drohobych and Vienna, among Polish, German, and Jewish cultures.

The motif of the Eternal or Wandering Jew expresses this complexity in a twofold way: first, in the curse of perpetual wandering, which is a kind of concentrated essence or an extreme description of the immigrant experience. It is the endless motion of migration in which the Jew moves between times and places without being able to settle in them at all. According to the myth, although he speaks all the local languages, he always remains on the margins, assigned and rejected without the ability to integrate into local communities and places.

But a second important aspect emerges with Maurycy Gottlieb's use of the motif. This is the inversion or the inter-identity Gordian connection that is expressed in the motif itself. For although the motif had developed in a Christian cultural space and became sometimes a political tool for the dissemination of antisemitism, at the height of which the image was

adopted by the Nazis, the image was also associated with a positive inner Jewish aspect.[10]

In early Jewish thought, the image of the eternal wanderer could be connected with Elijah the Prophet and with the Messiah. In the Midrash, we are told that, on the day of the destruction of the Temple, the Messiah was born.[11] The modern Jewish writer David Pinski wrote a messianic tragedy that takes place during the destruction of the Second Temple.[12] The play is based on the Midrash and describes a man who was looking for the baby Messiah who was born at the moment the Temple was destroyed. When the child eventually disappeared in a storm, he swore to find him. It was the stranger in the play who dedicated his life to the search for the Messiah and started the mythical wanderings towards salvation.

The redemptive element in the motif of the eternal wanderer that bound together Christian and Jewish aspirations was woven throughout history around the motif of foreignness and wandering. The motif marks the tension and contrasts between Christian culture and Judaism, but it also has a common focus: the messianic tension and the future salvation that are shared by both great religions on the religious cosmic level. By depicting himself as a Jewish wanderer, Gottlieb might reveal his inner feeling of foreignness as a Polish Jew who lives on the margins of identity. At the same time, he also expresses the greatness of the redemptive spirit as a person and especially as an artist.

[10] Galit Hasan-Rokem, "The Wandering Jew—a Jewish Perspective," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1986); id., "The Jewish Tradition of the Wandering Jew: The Poetics of Long Duration," in Joshua Levinson, Orbit Bashkin (eds.), *Jews and Journeys: Travel and the Performance of Jewish Identity* (Philadelphia, 2021), 171–182. Haviva Pedaya, "The Wandering Messiah and the Wandering Jew: Judaism and Christianity as a Two-Headed Structure and the Myth of His Feet and Shoes," in Gesine Palmer, Thomas Brose (eds.), *Religion und Politik: Das Messianische in Theologien, Religionswissenschaften und Philosophien des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen, 2013), 73–103. "Der ewige Jude" symbol was adopted by the Nazis and was both a title of an exhibition of antisemitism displayed at the Library of the German Museum in Munich in 1937, and the title of a pseudo-documentary film directed by Fritz Hippler with input from German Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels. See: Baruch Gitlis, *"Redemption" of Ahasuerus: The "Eternal Jew" in Nazi Film* (New York, 1991), 113–143.

[11] Lamentations Rabbah, 1:57.

[12] David Pinski, *The Eternal Jew*, 1906.

The physical wandering

A different significant entrance to the subject would be with Samuel Hirszenberg's *The Eternal Jew* (1899), which depicts a scene of horror: an old Jew, with an expression of great panic on his face, is running out of a dark forest of crosses where a mass killing took place (Fig. 2). Between crosses and masses of naked bodies, he looks straight at the viewer, as if to find refuge.[13]

His hand on his forehead could remind us of the sign of Cain, thus alluding to the Christian image of the Wandering Jew. The picture is currently stored in the Israel Museum and evokes the Holocaust, even though it was painted more than forty years before that cataclysm. A few years later, Hirszenberg, who, following Maurycy Gottlieb, was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków led by the famous Polish painter Jan Matejko, made several paintings on the refugee theme on his return to Łódź; one of those paintings became a most popular Jewish visual icon.

I refer to the painting *Galut (Exile)* which depicts a group of Jewish immigrants on their journey[14] (Fig. 3). There is no center or beginning for the column of refugees nor is there a destination. They are moving into the unknown as if the painting depicted the essence of that movement. In the center of the picture is a Jew carrying a wandering stick in the tradition of the Wandering Jew visual icon. This painting was extremely popular and hung in many Jewish homes, as it symbolizes Jewish existence in exile and the anticipation for its resolution or end.[15]

In modern times, the myth of the Eternal Jew underwent a transformation. Already in German Romanticism, the wanderer became a character who sometimes challenged binding conservative concepts; it also became connected with modern social mobility, multilingualism, and multiculturalism that continued developing. This positive view or at least ambiguous approach was also the inspiration for Gustave Courbet's painting *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*, made in 1854. It became a significant painting

[13] For an extensive analyse of the painting, see: Mirjam Rajner, Richard I. Cohen, "The Return of the Wandering Jew(s) in Samuel Hirszenberg's Art," *Ars Judaica* 7 (2011), 33–56.

[14] The original painting is lost. It was common as a postcard with inscriptions in Yiddish, Russian, and German and thus the image was preserved. See: Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Jews as Postcards, or Postcards as Jews: Mobility in a Modern Genre," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (2009), 4:512–513, 542–545.

[15] For a comprehensive analysis of the painting, its reception and further influences see: Richard I. Cohen, Mirjam Rajner, "Invoking Samuel Hirszenberg's Artistic Legacy—Encountering Exile," *Images* 8 (2014), 1:46–64.

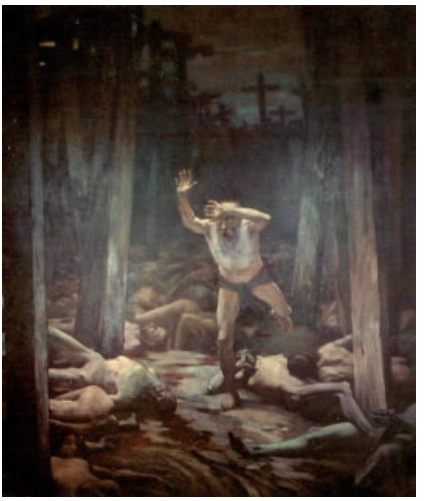

Fig. 2. Samuel Hirszenberg, *The Wandering Jew* (or *The Eternal Jew*), 1899, oil on canvas, The Israel Museum in Jerusalem

Fig. 3. Shmuel Hirszenberg, *Galut (Exile)*, 1904, oil on canvas, reproduced in "Ausstellung Jüdischer Künstler" exhibition catalogue (Berlin, 1907)

in the French Realist movement, where the image of the wanderer had penetrated and was situated sometimes on borderlines of cultures and beyond nationality as a reflection of the modern sense of foreignness and individuality.[16]

[16] Linda Nochlin, "Gustave Courbet's Meeting: A Portrait of the Artist as a Wandering Jew," *The Art Bulletin* 49 (1967), 3:209–222.

From the other side, it could be connected with transnationality, a quality that was sometimes reflected in the life and work of modern artists who were moving between borders and cultures and creating their own independent artistic worlds.

In the Jewish context, the motif was also connected with the renewed national spirit and with the aspiration to end wanderings and exile and to settle in a fixed place. Those prisms of the symbol can be significantly traced in the work of Maurycy Lilien (known as Efraim Moshe Lilien) and in Alfred Nossig's statue the Eternal Jew, both Polish-Jewish artists who borrowed the symbol creating a nationalistic impact.[17]

Between two aspects of the Wandering Jew that two of Jan Matejko's students expressed—the introverted movement and the physical movement—I would like to shed light on the issue from a different angle, one that was born in the Polish lands.

Motion hand-hammered in copper

The phenomenon of metal art known in Poland as metaloplastics has been discussed extensively by various researchers.[18] This revival of historic copper *repoussé* is a modern Jewish-Polish artistic phenomenon that was popular during the 1920s and 1930s especially in Warsaw and Łódź.

In the first congress for Jewish art in Poland, I presented the artist Arieh Merzer, one of the young copper artists of that group.[19] Merzer escaped Europe and immigrated to Israel in 1945, settled in Safed, and was one

[17] Richard I. Cohen, "The *Wandering Jew* from Medieval Legend to Modern Metaphor," in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Jonathan Karp (eds.), *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* (Philadelphia, 2008), 147–175.

[18] See: Khil Aron, *Bilder un geshtaltn fun Monparnas* (Paris, 1963), 586–598. Aviv Livnat, "Zikaron rakua be-nekhoshet: Sugiyot be-yetsirato shel ha-aman Arieh Merzer" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 2011); id., "Arieh Merzer and the Warsaw's Interwar Metaloplastics Art Scene," in Jerzy Malinowski, Renata Piątkowska, Tamara Sztyma-Knasiecka (eds.), *Jewish Artists and Central-Eastern Europe: Art Centers, Identity, Heritage from the 19th Century to the Second World War* (Warsaw, 2010), 345–351; id., "Copper and Its Meanderings: Perspectives on Jewish Metaloplastics in a Polish Context," *Studia Judaica* 22 (2019), 1:49–79.

[19] Among the members of the group were Marek Szwarc and Yosseph Brauner, Yosseph Śliwniak, Chaim Hanft, Johachim Kahane, Henryk Chajmowicz, Hartske Goldshlak, and others. Merzer was one of the younger copper artists of the group and his works form the largest corpus of metal art that had survived the war. On several artists of the circle, see: Agnieszka Chrzanowska, *Metaloplastyka żydowska w Polsce* (Warsaw, 2005).

of the founders of the artist colony.[20] His house and atelier opened to the public in 2023 and present a special copper exhibition of his work, which is dedicated to the memory of Polish-Jewish copper artists.[21]

Reflecting on the topic of refuge and asylum in Polish-Jewish history and culture, my thoughts around Polish-Jewish copper art have integrated with the refugee theme, beyond the facts that the artist himself took part in the Polish-Jewish immigrant group in Paris, was a refugee in the free zone during the Nazi occupation of France, escaped to Switzerland, and was among the labor camp prisoners which is a lesser known subject in historical research.

The question of why this ancient art technique of copper *repoussé* was reborn among Polish-Jewish artists and not elsewhere occupies me in my research. Jewish art was also appearing in Russia in Kiev, in England, Germany, France, and elsewhere, but the copper phenomena in its modern expression was very much a Polish phenomenon.

It is in Poland that a group of important and young artists decided to move away from painting and sculpture towards copper. Reflecting on the matter from the perspective of a Polish-Jewish refugee, I would like to share some more insights. [22]

I want to suggest that copper *repoussé* or copper beating art symbolically and spiritually but also technically manifests the inner state of the refugees' experience. It is an in-between position that, as the title of the present volume suggests, is between experience and memory. As a copper beating artist, one creates with refugee lines, which differs from drawn lines or sculpted ones.

When sculpting, one is located in the world, inventing and preparing a construction that will be situated in it; thus, the sculpture will gain the light of the world and will actually stand as a three-dimensional object situated in physical space. The painter stands in front of the world, depicting it, lighting his canvas's inner light from within, and actually creating a parallel world. These are different reflections of reality and possible worlds.

[20] On his Safed period, see: Aviv Livnat, "Zikhronot yidish mi-Tsfat," *Motar* 19–20 (2012), 7–22.

[21] https://shimur.org/news/new-heritage-museum-celebrates-copper-relief-artist-arieh-merzer/ [retrieved: 27 Aug. 2024].

[22] This comprehensive topic goes beyond the scope of this article. It was discussed, for example, in Livnat, "Zikaron rakua be-nekhoshet," 85–107.

The copper relief stands between those two modes: it is neither a painting nor a sculpture although it has qualities of those two different artistic modes. Its beaten lines are a mix of drawn and sculpted essences although the *repoussé* is a kind of in-between, inaccessible zone that is neither a depiction of outside space nor an act of (embodiment) situated in space. The lines of the *repoussé* work are "refugee lines" that sense the artistic scene not from a sculptor's standpoint in the world nor from a painter's position in front of the world, but from a hammering or copper beating position that blurs the dichotomy of inside and outside and seeks for connections through material memory. Thus, through copper itself and material memory, it builds a connection with lost heritage, home, and tradition.

Arieh Merzer: Refuge in copper

Merzer is a typical example of a Jewish artist at the beginning of the twentieth century who was not overlooked by the immigration and wandering movement that indeed played a significant factor in the development of his work. Merzer's biography can be divided into four chapters that took place in four different cities: Warsaw, Paris, Geneva, and Safed.

Merzer's life path began with a break and disconnection when his family had to leave the town of Pomiechówek near Warsaw and settled on Nalewki Street in the city. Merzer was born in 1905; when World War I broke out, he was nine years old. He celebrated his *bar mitzvah* when the war ended and Poland was established as an independent country. By age fourteen, Merzer had already left home and followed his artistic bent. Soon, a movement of "cultural exodus" cut him off from the Hasidic environment in which he had grown up into the world of modern art to which he was drawn from a young age. This trend characterized many of the young people of his generation who grew up in religious families and tried to integrate into the secular modern world.

In the early 1930s, he immigrated to Paris, the capital of modern art at the time, and stayed there for over a decade. With the Nazi invasion of France and the occupation of Paris, he managed at the last moment to escape to the free zone in the south of France, where he stayed in hiding amid refugee conditions for two years. His next stop was Switzerland, where he arrived a day before the borders were closed to refugees. There, he worked under forced labor at Camp de Sierre and then stayed

in Geneva. The Israeli chapter began with his arrival in Israel in 1945 on the immigrant ship "Lima" and later with his joint initiative together with a group of leading painters to found an art colony in Safed with the establishment of the State of Israel.

Each of the stations of his life is bound to be a story of cultural and artistic discourse and achievement against the background of time and place, as in each place Merzer developed his art and expanded his subjects that were influenced by the geography and politics of place. We can mention the social scenes in Paris, scenes from the life of the labor camp (which are today in the Yad Vashem Collection), or scenes from the days of immigration, from the war of liberation and later from the city of Safed. But Merzer always carried with him a deep Jewish core, which is the basic platform of his artistic and spiritual being: the same Warsaw kernel from which he never broke away and whose spirit is reflected and emanates both from the alleys of Safed and from the gazes of the heroes of the Bible, are engraved in his copper plates while the same Jewish kernel that he carried on throughout his life remains engraved in the copper plates through an embossed inner line.[23]

Merzer's migration movement was not only a technical geographical transition from the banks of the Vistula, to the Eiffel Tower, to Lake Geneva, and to the synagogue of the Ari. It was also a journey in an intercultural, interreligious space that conducted an internal multifaceted dialogue with different phases of Jewish history: movement towards Safed after the expulsion from Spain, movement throughout Europe itself, beginning with waves of migration from West to East and later a reverse modern wave, which also led many artists to the capitals of the West in their pursuit of the beckoning charms of the modern world and in the intricate relations with rising communism and fascism in Europe.

As mentioned, the story of Merzer's life and work can be linked to the four countries he stayed in during historical and dramatic moments. These were politically, socially, and artistically complex days and certainly affected the Jewish person who stayed in their districts, whether as a local

[23] From the period in Switzerland, see: Aria Merzer, *25 dessins*, text de I. Pougatch, preface du Prof. L. Hersch (Genève, 1945). Later on in Safed, three albums from his works on different subjects were published: On East European traditional Jewish life, see: id., *A World that Was*, intro. Dov Ber Malkin (Safed, 1947). Scenes from the Bible in: id., *Biblical Images: Sixteen Copper Reliefs*, intro. Itzik Manger (Safed, 1959). Themes from Safed were gathered in: id., *Safed and Its People: Eighteen Reliefs in Metal* (Safed, 1965).

or as an immigrant, and certainly affected an artist who lived, created, and reflected his *Zeitgeist*.

Merzer's work can also be divided according to these categories of place and time. Furthermore, my research aims to characterize the development of his artistic style according to this sequence. In this view, it is even possible to enumerate the visual artistic influences of the various places and to locate the nature of their influence on Merze's copper plates. In Poland, Naturalism and Impressionism can be mentioned as well as the local Polish Formism, to which he first and foremost became acquainted through his teachers at the academy and contemporary exhibitions. Those Polish and general influences were intertwined with influences of Jewish art as expressed both in the Jewish synagogues in Poland and in Jewish arts and crafts that were linked in the traditional Jewish narrative. This Jewish art could be found in the natural places where it grew, i.e., the traditional Jewish home and the Jewish community, as well as in private collections that began to be accessible to a Jewish audience in Warsaw, such as the Judaica collection of Mathias Bersohn, which, after his death in 1910, was presented by the Jewish community in Warsaw in the Judaica Museum, which brought together various collections and was named after him.[24]

From France, the influence of the texture of Rodin's sculpture as well as the influence of Cézanne's line and composition are evident mainly in his various nude works but also in the general treatment of light and color. In Geneva, he expressed the Minimalist drawing line when he could not continue his work in copper. In Safed, he combined the various influences and the tone of the works became clearer while he established a new kind of monumentality, one that can be compared with Chagall's airy composition. About Chagall and Merzer, the critic Lachmann writes,

> [B]oth know the Jewish types from self-observation. Chagall places them within the world of his lyrical and transcendent imagination, while Merzer stands on the ground of reality and the present. The external world almost does not exist for him. He only describes it in an allusive way. Man is the main thing for him, the Jewish man whom he places in the foreground of the picture, and in order to bring him even closer to the eyes of the viewer, he builds a sloping background and the

[24] Mathias Bersohn (1824–1908), banker, art collector, and patron. His important private collections of Polish and Jewish arts and crafts became the basis for the Muzeum Starożytności Żydowskich im. Mathiasa Bersohna (Mathias Bersohn Museum of Jewish Antiquities), founded in 1904 by the Warsaw Jewish community administration. Later, it was destroyed during the German occupation of Poland. See: Jacob Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun yidn in Varshe*, vol. 2 (New York, 1948), vol. 3 (New York, 1953), 328–332.

> figures depicted seem to slide from this gradient to the edge of the relief closest to us. In all his reliefs, beaten work, he builds his perspective of depth in a triangular space, whose edge is directed upwards, to the rear of the picture. The space is only hinted at by the shapes of houses that symbolize the outside world.[25]

This is a monumental "Jewish" line that derives its status from a closed and grounded composition. Those are not a collection of images that sail through the image space, breaking the spatial continuum with Cubist, Futurist, and Surrealist techniques, which construct perspectivism in the style of Chagall, as is clearly expressed in the Kyiv School, but a pursuit of a central image that is structurally rooted in one central space.[26] Within this space, there are openings and possibilities of connection to visible and hidden subspaces, such that the viewer is invited to take part in their discovery and construction.

To these spaces, I direct my research spotlight, bereaved spaces, which I locate in the spiritual-artistic infrastructure of his art. These spaces create a balance between opposing elements, as they mark a place in the middle, from which the growth of the various branches is possible. This concealed middle, hidden in the copper, creates balance and harmony without eliminating the conflicting foci but resolves and establishes them as one.[27]

These spaces develop throughout the years and are expressed in the formal and iconographic levels of the work. In this context, as well as in the distinct technical abilities of his copper hammering technique, his Safed copper work reaches full maturity; the painter Mordechai Levanon spoke about the intermediate abstract areas in Merzer's work and about

[25] Claire Lachmann, "Taaruchat Arieh Merzer be-veyt Pevzner Haifa," *Davar* (14 Feb. 1947).

[26] An important group of Jewish visual artists appeared in Kyev around 1918, among them were El Lyssitzki, Boris Aronson, Issaschar Ber Ryback, Joseph Tchaikov, and more. They were all part of the modern Jewish secular renaissance led by the Kulture Lige Yiddish organization (Culture League), which served as a platform for writers, poets, musicians, educators, designers, and book publishers, who were all influenced by Kultur Lige's vision of promoting Yiddish education for the people, Yiddish literature, and Jewish art as an important component for a Jewish cultural revolution. See: Hillel Kazovsky, "The Art Section of the 'Kultur Lige'," *Jews in Eastern Europe* (Jerusalem) 22 (1993), 5–22. Ruth Apter-Gabriel (ed.), *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Guarde Art, 1912–1928* (Jerusalem, 1987), 34–42.

[27] On bereaved space, see: Aviv Livnat, "Phenomenology of the Bereaved Space," in Alberto Perez-Gomez (ed.), *Architecture & Phenomenology* (Haifa, 2007); id., "Moment, Monument and Document – On Memory, Monuments and 'Bereaved Spaces' in the Israeli-German Sphere," *Protocols: History & Theory*, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, 14 (2000) and *Protocollage* (2011), 354–373 (in Hebrew).

the abstract areas between the figures as significant areas in his work.[28] Merzer's treatment of the texture of the picture with the help of contrasting areas and parts, that is, duality in the elements of his composition, was already noticed by the Polish critic Strakun.[29]

This critic also referred to the mystical aspect of Merzer's work. "The realistic representations, although they were not without characteristics of stylistic archaism or deformation, were proof that the artist deeply felt the hidden mysticism of exile." Strakun considered Merzer to be one of the more interesting representatives of national Jewish art based not only on a unique Jewish mentality but also on a conscious emphasis of Jewish elements.[30]

"The hidden mystique of exile" is the one that manifests itself in the everyday life of every Jew, in weekdays and holidays, in rituals and in the practice of life, in the various stations of life from childhood to old age, at a street corner, at a market stall, or in a synagogue, as the artist drew them directly from his life in Poland and through the prism of modern Yiddish literature, which he tried to reflect in his work.[31]

The hidden mystique of exile leads me to the bereaved spaces, the unknown areas that are hidden between the copper folds and that, in my view, mark the embodiment of the Hasidic essence in his work. How is the hidden Hasidic essence associated with exile? Hasidic thought drew on and developed the Lurianic Kabbalistic idea of the *Zimzum* (reduction) and based on it its worldview built on the principles of breaking of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*), shell (*klipah*), repair (*tikkun*), and redemption (*ge'ulah*), in which exile is intended to play a spiritual and structural role in its framework.

[28] The artist's daughter Eve Livnat-Merzer, who was a student of the painter Levanon, remembered a conversation she had with him when they went out together to paint in Safed (Merzer Archive).

[29] A critic of the exhibition of the Parisian group in Warsaw, which included, alongside Merzer, the painters Esther Karp and Ephraim Mandelbaum. See: Leon Strakun, "Grupa Paryska" (Wystawa w ZTKSP), Opinia nr 12 (23 kwietnia 1933), 12.

[30] Ibid.

[31] "The connections which exist between literature written in the Yiddish language and the work of Arieh Merzer far surpass the links which usually emerge between the spheres of literature and the visual arts in an ordinary cultural setting. Merzer's metal bas-reliefs and drawings share a close partnership with Yiddish literature in theme and atmosphere. This is even true for works which do not intend any literary reference, but which nevertheless easily inspire literary associations. Since the 1950s, critics and reviewers have pointed out this feature in Merzer's figures and have often bestowed him with the title of "the poet in metal," "the poet in copper," "the poet of metal-hammering." Yitskhok Niborski, "Arieh Merzer's Creations and Yiddish Literature," unpublished article, Merzer Archive.

The exile is the exile of the people from their country, a people that were scattered as in the ancient Kabbalistic shattering in the various diasporas and its very life and existence not only mark every moment of the historical spiritual drama, but they also have the mission of repairing the world by identifying and releasing the sparks imprisoned in the shells.[32] The hidden essence of exile is connected with the missing, disappearing, bereaved element, it builds on it, feeds, and nourishes it at the same time.

The Hasidic revolution was characterized by the perception of holiness and its reflection in the various levels of being, including the ordinary, mundane, simple life of the laboring Hasidic person, within the framework of "physical work" (*avoda ba-gashmiyut*) and not necessarily in "prayer chairs and holy halls" disconnected from everyday reality.

A reading of Merzer's work, one that, along with the folkloristic-anthropological perspective, also strives to read the hidden, spiritual layers of the work, a reading that looks for the launching point between the popular folkloristic, the literary, and the spiritual—such a reading is more multi-layered, more enriching, and also allows to my view an interesting, active, and creative place for the viewer who strives to distil the elements of his Jewish identity in the polarized modern reality.

The spiritual layers also attracted the attention of Joseph Sandel, who wrote that "in Merzer's metal work one feels an ancient symbolic emblematic. . . . A kind of preservation of a magical commemoration of a life that has passed, in the deepest substance of this life."[33]

A few years later, the critic elaborated on this spiritual element in the context of Merzer's Safed chapter:

> He brings realism and mysticism to the perfection of true art . . . One needs to be a great artist with a deep sense of Hasidism and Kabbalah, in order to convey the spiritually close but geographically distant atmosphere, an essentially diverse atmosphere of the episodes from Jewish life mentioned above. Arieh Merzer carries the two things in his work, as a common thread that weaves his work from the Hasidic court in Warsaw, where his career as a painter began, with Safed, the city of Kabbalah where he continues it.[34]

[32] It was Gershom Shalom who established the connection between the Lurianic myth and the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. See: Gershom Shalom, *Pirkey yesod behavant ha-Kabala ve-smaleha* (Yerushalim, 1976), 105–108.

[33] Joseph Sandel, "Arieh Merzer metaloplastyk," *Nasz Głos* (1959).

[34] Joseph Sandel, "Der metaloplastiker Arieh Merzer," *Yidishe Shriftn* (Oct. 1957, Warsaw), no. 10.

It will be the copper itself with its varied properties, as well as the heroes of the scenes and the symbols with which Merzer chose to create his world—companions on the journey of getting to know his world, biographical and spiritual. Through three of Merzer's reliefs on three different topics, I would like to bring some thoughts about the refugee experience and to situate them between Hirszenbeg and Gottlieb.

Rachel and the Penrose Triangle

The first relief I examine is a kind of symbolist scene depicting the biblical figure of Rachel, the great mother who stands by the side of the road, outside her tomb (see Fig. 4). She bows her head and covers her face with her hands. Her refined features are carefully described, her hair is neat, and she wears a long blouse. Its fantastic size is transformed to the entire height of the composition with an unrealistic attitude to the structure of the tomb, as well as to the caravans of the Israelites passing at its feet together with their wives and children holding travel sacks on their shoulders, as they set out on their journey to exile.

Among the artist's papers in his archive, I found an old photograph of Rachel's Tomb, which I understand was used to prepare the composition (Fig. 5). It is possible that the angle at which the tree is photographed, which occupies the entire height of the photograph, inspired Merzer in his design of Rachel's image. Rachel is indeed the tree standing on the side of the road, the Israelites marching under its shade.

In the Midrash, it is said that Jacob buried Rachel on the road to Ephrath and did not bury her in the Cave of the Patriarchs so that she would pray for her sons while they went into exile. According to the Midrash, the prophet Jeremiah awakened the fathers of the Jewish nation so that they would plead before God to cancel the decree of destruction. But because she begged her sister Leah for marrying Jacob and did not disgrace her, Rachel's prayer was indeed accepted and it was promised that the sons would return to their country.[35]

But in a more careful examination of the perspective arrangement in the work, it seems that there is a complexity built again, as in many of Merzer's works, on a triangular structure. The line of the road that opens up at the edge of the tomb structure and produces a ridge that rises up

[35] Genesis Rabbah 82:10.

Fig. 4. Arieh Merzer, *Rachel weeping for her children*, copper relief, the early 1950s, The Merzer Archive Collection, Tel Aviv [henceforth: MAC]

Fig. 5. Rachel's Tomb, *Bethlehem*, photograph, MAC

behind Rachel's back, opens an angle with the heads of the marchers that creates a special perspective line where the procession of figures descends to the left. This effect is like opening up a space between Rachel and the front of the empty space.

An effect of depth is created even though the figures seem to caress the hem of Rachel's dress. On the other hand, it seems as if Merzer succeeds in extracting the wooden quality from the photograph and in shaping Rachel herself as producing a range of depth, such that it seems as if the figures pass under her head or, alternatively, as if the upper part of her body, that is her head and hands cupped to her cheeks, are above the procession of the people. It seems that the sides of the triangle are in a topological relationship that plants them into each other in a kind of "Escher" structure.[36] Thus, the side of the road continues further behind Rachel, the side of the caravan in front of Rachel, but Rachel's back is in front of or above the caravan and a kind of gentle Penrose Triangle is formed[37] (Fig. 6).

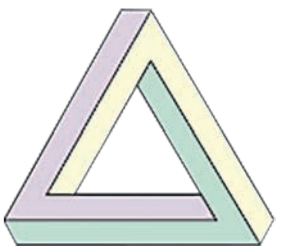

Fig. 6. The Penrose Triangle

It is possible to symbolically see this "Escheric" movement also as a hint of the circularity of the return. Thus, the closed circular movement expresses the two axes embodied in exile and return, which come to an emotional expression in the impossibility of consolation and in avoiding the sound of crying and tears. Rachel symbolizes the longings that never come to fruition, the essence of longings. These are longings that passed as the common thread in her personal life, with the long wait for Jacob and for a son for many years. Finally, Rachel ascended to the national level, containing and expressing the longing and the desire for the continuity of the Jewish nation. Rachel cries for her sons.

I find the Penrose Triangle that Merzer activated in the inner structure of his composition on a pivotal diasporic moment in Jewish meta-history to be a visual icon for the refugee status, for the complex situation of being

[36] I am referring here to the work of Maurits Cornelis Escher, whose graphic art had a strong mathematical component. Several of the worlds that he drew were built around impossible objects and appearances. See: Maurits Cornelis Escher, *Escher on Escher: Exploring the Infinite*, in eds. Janet Wilson, J. W. Vermeulen (New York, 1986).

[37] The Penrose Triangle devised and popularized in the 1950s by the mathematician and physicist Roger Penrose is an optical illusion consisting of an object that can be depicted in a perspective drawing but cannot exist as a solid object.

a refugee: the movement of the refugee that is out but always continues to flow even in the face of the impossibility of return. And he is constantly coming back with his thoughts and memory but the triangular lines are not meeting in the physical lanes. They are negotiating in the depths of copper.

The movement towards yesterdays: The Golden Peacock's magical flight

I would like to examine another motif in Merzer's work within the refugee perspective: the Golden Peacock (Di Goldene Pave). It is an important symbol in modern Yiddish culture as well as an old multicultural symbol reflected in many cultures and religions within history and, in my view, is bound with the refugee concept.[38]

Arieh Merzer placed the peacock in different historical contexts. The peacock flies over the sky of Safed, in the renewed Israel. It is also the bird that flies in the skies of the shtetl, the same peacock that carries the letters between lovers and flies across continents and overseas. This peacock returns in Merzer's work in a primordial historical flight to sit on a tree branch in the Garden of Eden. An entire corpus of Merzer's works describes the peacock in this context, with the peacock sitting on the branches as well as a significant relationship forged between it, Eve and the snake, implying another actor in the drama that took place in Paradise (see Figs. 7 and 8). The role of the peacock in this context demands explanation.[39]

To my understanding, in reconnecting the peacock with the Garden of Eden, Merzer allows us to connect to the historical origin of the story. The golden peacock did not break into modern Yiddish poetics out of nowhere. Its historical echo sounds throughout generations, in the landscapes of different cultures. The origin of the historical echo is in the Garden of Eden; therefore, it is connected to ideas of immortality and eternal life as well as to expulsion and wandering.[40]

[38] See: Ernst Thomas Reimbold, *Der Pfau: Mythologie und Symbolik* (München, 1983).

[39] For a discussion of this subject, see Aviv Livnat, "What is the Peacock Trying to Tell Us? On Dualism, Immortalization and Human-Animal Relations through the Peacock's Eyes," *Animals and Society* 35 (Winter 2007), 16–27 (in Hebrew).

[40] Reading a Muslim source that situates the peacock in Paradise having a role together with the snake in the narrative of the Fall, see: Livnat, "Zikaron rakua be-nekhoshet," 301–302.

Fig. 7. Arieh Merzer, *The golden peacock*, the early 1960s, copper relief, MAC

Fig. 8. Arieh Merzer, *Eve riding a doe*, the early 1950s, copper relief, MAC

Judaism developed the idea of the golden peacock, which in its flight symbolizes the lost connection with the old days. "Di Goldene Pave" is not the colorful zoological peacock, but a golden peacock, which is actually an ideal peacock. The eyes embroidered with feathers seem to look at the world from above, towards the past and towards the future. Perhaps it is a bird close to the throne of honor (*Kise ha-Kavod*) when the eye sweetens an ancient secret. The soul longs for this secret and this longing is manifested in many Yiddish poems and stories. The motif of the

golden peacock can be found in many Jewish poems at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost every important Yiddish poet has his own version for the motif: suffice it to mention Itsik Manger, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Aaron Glantz-Leyeles, Hayim Nahman Bialik, and many more.[41]

The peacock is associated with collective memory and symbolizes the aspiration of the group or the Jewish people to connect with a past that has been lost and to find a connection to a common root that will continue to shape the outline of flight and growth. It symbolizes a kind of longing of the Jewish collective that, with the power of its spirit and imagination, succeeds in running the golden peacock on the runway on its way to a magical take-off.

The icon burst into the Jewish symbolic space in a way that, in my opinion, required an attempt to provide an explanation for its very intense appearance during this period in Jewish history: the modern era, when shocks and upheavals threatened to tear apart the fabric of traditional Jewish life. I point out the historical contexts of those shocks that we all know: the rise of nationalism, Haskala and secularism, industrialization and the move to the city, the changes in the structure of the Jewish family, the formation of different and competing currents in the religious society, and more. The Jewish peacock "Di Goldene Pave" appeared in the skies of the Jewish town during these times of upheaval and shock as if calling for an act of preserving and perpetuating Jewish life in the new patterns.[42]

In the transition to the Jewish space, the peacock not only persisted in its magical flight, but ceased its immortal role of being used as a means of transport. Throughout history, the peacock has always been used as a kind of means of transport for delivery or transport. It carried the Far Eastern gods Indra and Kumara-Skanda, it pulled the Greek and Roman chariots of Juno and Hera, it even helped carry Muhammad up from the Temple Mount on the wings of the mythological creature Buraq, who had a peacock's tail. In alchemical thought, it carried transformational

[41] See: Benjamin J. Bialostotzky, "Fun folks lid tsum kunst lid," in id., *Di Mesholim fun Dubner Magid un andere eseyen* (New York, 1962).

[42] I was not content with studies that identified the peacock with the Yiddish folk song or with the role of the matchmaker or the postman and other specific role. These certainly shed light on fascinating aspects related to the symbol, but these explanations seemed to me to be part of a wider picture, a larger mosaic. I was looking for a deep platform that would carry all those different attributes and place them homogeneously. In my research, I encountered the intercultural symbolic space of the peacock, its various and diverse interpretations, as well as the similar and sometimes identical elements that make up its symbolic image.

qualities to man, intending to move him from one state to another. There was always something practical, something concrete about the role of the peacock. In the transition to the Jewish space, something changed, and the peacock lifted the harness of the carriage, stopped at the station, and let off the passengers. Man placed himself in front of the peacock, with the latter being an abstract embodiment of his desires and ideas. The Jewish peacock is not a means of transport, but henceforth carries a new message in the form of an ancient symbol, which appears and knocks on the door of modern man's consciousness.

In Manger's poem *Dos lid fun der Goldener Pave*, the golden peacock flies to look for yesterdays.[43] It searches all over the world and finally manages to find them only with a woman in black, the widow of those yesterdays. Only she—not the Turk, the fisherman, or the African in the field, who are all busy with material life—maintains the same channel of memory that makes it possible to reveal and illuminate those lost days.

I am suggesting that the golden peacock in modern Jewish culture symbolizes this impossible magical movement. It is the peacock's flight through a "Penrose Triangle" with a "refugee engine." This bird that was expelled from Paradise symbolizes with her lost gold feather the old, safe, and blissful lost garden and became a symbol for longing and aspiration. It flies from the lost to the unknown in a triangular movement with its forever-lost dimension.

The pupils' eyes of refugees

I am closing the article with a third copper relief entitled *Refugees* (Fig. 9). It is actually a biographical scene of the Merzer family and friends who, after escaping two years in the south of France, are crossing the border to Switzerland on the last possible day.

In the relief, the group huddles as they lean slightly and make hand or back contact with each other. The man hugs the girl and the woman who is carrying her baby son. Beside her, another woman is carrying a small bag together with the child. The individuals within the group pull in different directions and yet are woven together. The other woman, on the right, is

[43] Itsik Manger, "Dos lid fun der Goldener Pave," in id., *Lid un balade* (New York, 1952), 433. On the connections of Merzer's art and Manger's poetry, see: Helen Beer, "The Dialogue between Metal and Verse in the Artistic Landscapes of Arieh Merzer and Itsik Manger," *Studia Judaica* 23 (Cluj-Napoca, 2021), 5–24.

Fig. 9. Arieh Merzer, *Refugees*, the early 1950s, copper relief, MAC

leaning forward, the man is leaning to the side, and there is a feeling that the adults are pulling their rear bodies backwards bending down. This move creates a dimension of depth to the group itself, so that it occupies a significant chunk of space in the image. The three children form a triangle in the center and the three adults place a shielded triangle on top of it.

The heads of the adults are placed in the gap of the fence as if their heads were disturbed by the crossing. The refugees have almost no burden beyond their bodies and clothes, with the exception of a bag and a bundle in the girl's hand. The only one who brings her eyes to the front of the picture, as if looking out, is the woman in the center who is carrying her son. This is the artist's wife, Esther, who, as it turned out later in hindsight, saved the family by choosing between two possible lines of escape. One road led towards the Italian border and the other towards the Swiss border. Most refugees chose the Italian route, while Esther insisted on walking separately in the Swiss direction, even though, on the face of it, this choice did not seem promising, since this route was in demand and

therefore observation and guarding along it were greater. However, as fate would have it, the refugees who chose the direction of Italy were caught, while the small group of the Merzer family managed to escape and cross the border into Switzerland.[44]

The eyes of all the refugees are introverted and express an inner mindset, as Merzer usually treats the eyes; in this case, they reflect the state of helplessness, fear, and concentration on the goal of rescue.

When Merzer is already in Israel and returns to the dramatic moment, he commemorates the seeing eyes of his wife and hammered out only her pupils. This pupil exposure occurs at a dramatic moment: on the border. Merzer otherwise never revealed the pupils in his characters' eyes.[45] Carefully observing the relief, one can notice the way Merzer embosses the eyes of the participants in the scene. Why do the pupils appear in this relief? In a scene that describes a quest for asylum, a transition between states, the moment of death or re-creation, it is a look of fear, but also a look of strength and intensity. Looking at the image, it seems that these two pupils help to focus on a distinct area, as if to penetrate into the head, beyond the torn fence in the back, into the copper thicket. Are the two eyes refugees? They not only perceive but also emit in the very essence of their interspatial opening.

On the one hand, they are braided inside the eyeball, producing a locked circular movement. On the other hand, the eye has deeper, higher circles of observation. They represent a complete and loose layer. In Hebrew, *ishon* is both the black circle in the center of the eye and also a very little man. On the one hand, he is imprisoned, but, on the other hand, he creates an inter-human or super-human visual space or connection.

The heads of the parents are placed as if in the thicket of the barbed wire fence, while Merzer treats the background with an intense and relatively deep hammering texture. But it is interesting to see that, on both sides of the group, Merzer kept almost unprocessed copper. On the right

[44] After crossing the border, the family was separated. Merzer was taken to a forced labor camp, his little daughter stayed with a Christian woman, and his wife was hospitalized and later stayed with her baby. After two years in Switzerland, they managed to reunite and immigrate to Israel. See testimonies of Merzer's siblings and relevant documents in the Merzer Archive. On the refugee national policy in Switzerland, see: Alfred A. Hasler, *The Lifeboat Is Full: Switzerland and the Refugees, 1933–1945* (New York, 1969).

[45] It is the only copper relief I have found in which Merzer exposes the pupils, except for the cup-bearer and the baker's dreams in the stories of Joseph. It was their very dream that he emphasized with open eyes, but here, to my understanding, there was also a stylistic motive when he wanted to give the eyes an oriental touch.

and left sides of the group, at the level of the children on the sides, the copper is smooth. The pupils produce a unique effect that seems to be directed to the place between the hammered section and the treatment of the copper and its natural range, the untreated, the unbeaten, neither in nor out. The pupil of the eye points to the copper plane. But this is not the mountain of copper in this Swiss scene, but an inner plane of the copper that echoes the essence torn from the slab, the one that is ejected, the one that is exiled from itself and is in a kind of space of disappearance and re-creation. Creation within disappearance and disappearance within creation—this is the refugee quality that, in my opinion, Merzer succeeds in distilling in this scene.

Against the Penrose Triangle that produces an infinite and impossible movement, a vanishing point that is both external and internal settles and aims beyond to a point to which the Penrosian movement aspires. This is related to a high capacity for seeing, which also has a significant Hasidic connection that is reflected in the thought of Rabbi Nachman, who said, "The eyes are supreme and very high things, and if a person was blessed with kosher eyes, he would know great things only by the power of his eyes alone. Because the eyes always see but they don't know what they see."[46]

Epilogue

While the physical act of wandering and the internalized ambulation represent contrasting modes, Arieh Merzer's copper engravings express a novel, liminal trajectory of wandering. The kinetic traces etched into the copper surfaces harmonize exteriority and interiority by positioning themselves along the central axis. This engraved movement negotiates between spatial and conceptual between external and internal, as the relief line occupies and floats in the middle.

Art as refuge: it enables the artistic expression of wandering. It reveals an infinite, unbroken continuum oscillating between external and internal realms without beginning or end. It thus emblematizes Merzer's own diasporic trajectory from Poland, through Europe to Israel. In his works, Merzer continued to paint the flight of the golden peacock from the trees of Paradise, through the skies of the Shtetl, all the way to Safed: a trajectory expressing the impossible dialectic—forging new worlds while

[46] Eliezer Steinman (ed.), *Kitvey Rabbi Nachman mi-Bratslav* (Tel Aviv, 1951), 224.

preserving the indissoluble bonds to lost origins—that lies at the heart of the refugee's journey. Thus, while expressing his journey, Merzer's art of the refuge can emblematize a universal existential condition latent within us all. Although the refugee state frequently engenders anxiety and a sense of irreparable separation from one's roots, it can also reveal obstructed lines of connection.

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