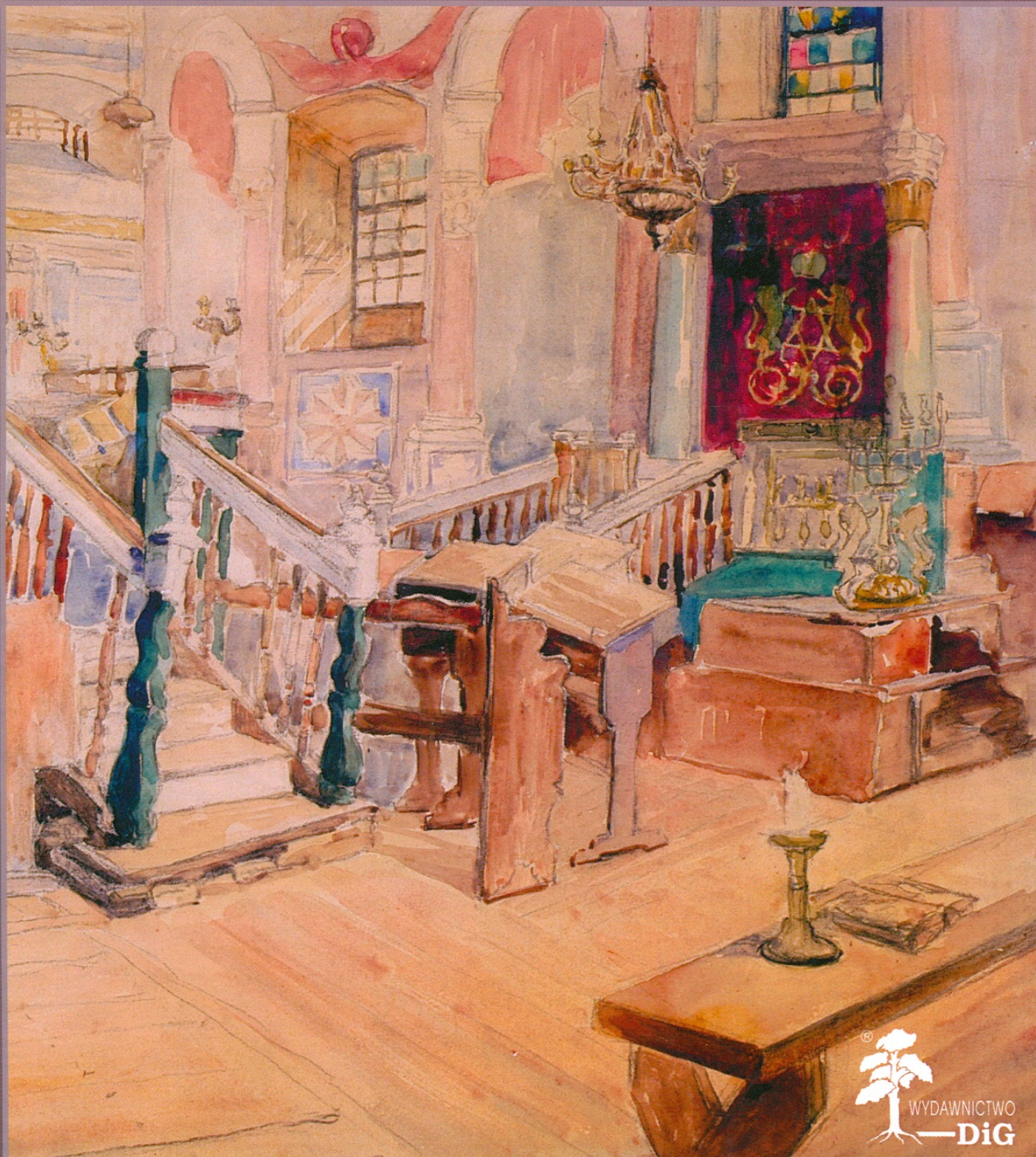


JEWISH ARTISTS AND CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE



JEWISH ARTISTS AND CENTRAL–EASTERN EUROPE

ART CENTERS — IDENTITY — HERITAGE
FROM THE 19TH CENTURY
TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Edited by
Jerzy Malinowski, Renata Piątkowska,
Tamara Sztyma–Knasiecka



Warszawa 2010

EUGENY KOTLYAR

Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, Kharkiv, Ukraine

Bezalel versus the Kultur-Lige: approaches to Jewish revival

The different directions taken in art by the Jewish national revival of the first decades of the 20th century crystallized in the work of two artistic unions: *the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts*, founded in 1906 in Jerusalem, and *the Kultur-Lige*, a cultural-educational organization established in 1918 in post-revolutionary Kiev, with branches later opening in Moscow and other cities of the young Soviet state. A comparison of these two unions will demonstrate how diametrically opposed to each other were their conceptions of the nature of this revival, about the role art was supposed to play within it, and about the objectives and the methods proclaimed by the two unions' leaders and realized in the courses of action they defined for themselves.

The gestation of the two movements which resulted in the unions' establishment was conditioned by initial circumstances by which both were equally affected: the course of Jewish emancipation, the exodus of the Jews beyond the limits of the ghetto, their gaining access to education in the arts in Russia and in Europe, and the evolution of Jewish art properly so called.

Both Bezalel and the Kultur-Lige were accorded a significant role to play in the project of the national building of the new Jewish life. The purpose of Bezalel was to be realized in the context of the Zionist movement; its objective was the support of the *Halutzim* in Eretz Yisrael and the formation of a cultural basis for the future Jewish

state. Boris Schatz (1866–1932), the founder of Bezalel, conceived of this undertaking as a Jewish artists' colony: the artists were supposed to have returned from *Galut* to their homeland, and to bring together in their work the European Jewish heritage with the traditional trades of Palestine, which were traceable back to the first eras of Jewish history in Eretz Yisrael.¹ Stooping dreamily over the Ark of the Covenant (1918) which he had created, the figure of the biblical sculptor Bezalel was taken as the embodiment of this idea. Schatz used this image as an expression of nostalgia for the biblical idyll, which by means of art he wanted to bring back to the Holy Land. He saw himself as the father of the new Jewish art, while the name of Bezalel was given not only to the School, but also to his own son, as well as to the sons of his colleagues. A milestone on the road leading to the creation of the Bezalel School became the tenth anniversary of Schatz' arrival in Bulgaria, where he had successfully developed and implemented a model for creating a national art, the model which he was later to resort to again in Palestine.² His method presupposed developing folklore and native ethnic sources and ornament, creating realistic types for the representation of national history, fostering trades and nearly industrial forms of production. Even in its first years,

¹ Schatz (1910: 10–16).

² Kotlyar (2008: 43–60).



1. The Kultur-Lige building housing the art studio and museum (to the early 1930s); Kyiv; photo by Eugeny Kotlyar, 2008.

Bezalel had not only already assumed a face of its own, but also became a direct and obvious means for the expression of the Jewish presence in Palestine (Fig. LXIV).

A comparable situation developed in Russia, where the Revolution of 1917 had granted Jews the freedom of national self-determination. Upon this impulse, the Kultur-Lige saw its mission, in “the development of Jewish secular culture by means of fostering all kinds of human creative endeavor,” as well as in the preparation of professionals for work in educating the new Jewry in view to the contemporary hovering notion of creating a Jewish national autonomous authority in the Crimea. The art of the Creative Wing of the Kultur-Lige was declared to be the harbinger of a new nation about to emerge from the gloom of the underground into the light of the sun of world culture as a part of

its search for its own national form. In contrast to Bezalel, which had been drawn into a kind of ethnographism, this form was supposed to replace both naturalism and subject. In *The Fiddler*, a bas-relief by Iosif Chaykov (1921), the main element was now not the figure of the Jewish musician, but the very music of form as such, its rhythms and its dynamic. Besides the project of renewing the *Yiddishland*, this art was meant to introduce into world culture, “a new original rhythm of creativity.”³

The common “national” source for the creative efforts of both movements was Jewish folk art. But in the hands of the early Bezalel this and other motifs were treated with an Orientalizing stylization, insofar as the

³ Kazovsky (2003: 37; orig.: Vos iz di Kultur-Lige?, *Kultur-Lige. Biuletten* 2 [1920]: 15–20).



2. Yosef Tchaikoff, *The Fiddler*, 1921; bas-relief, plaster, cardboard; the original lost.

School's leaders considered the Jews to be an Eastern people and saw in this stylization a representational grounding for the creation of an authentically national art. Members of the Kultur-Lige and followers of the avant-garde were, for their part, also attracted by the Jewish art tradition, but they were more concerned with the primitivistic plasticity of folk art.

Despite the unity of sources and subject matter and the centrality of the figure of the Jew, on which their attention was generally concentrated, the art platforms of the two unions stood in stark contrast the one to the other. This had to do with the difference in esthetic outlook as dictated by the times and the conceptual and political underpinnings of their two outlooks. The founding of Bezalel coincided with Modernism, then still flourishing in Europe, with historical Realism and

Estheticism, while the principles of its call to action could be traced back to the ideas of William Morris and *Russian Narodism*. In effect, the Jewish spirit of Schatz' Bezalel was replaced by the estheticization of traditional forms and their outer stylization in the manner of European Orientalism and the *Secession*. But if the generation standing at the fount of Bezalel — Schatz, Lilien, Hirszenberg (Hirschenberg), Struck — worked on romanticizing the images of *Galut Jewry* and took its bearings with a reference to machine tool forms of art, then the following generation — Raban, Stark, Gur-Arye, Goldberg — largely concentrated on the decorative character of the “Jewish-Palestinian Bezalel Style” with its ornamentation, outward luxury and mass quantity item production. They gave it a powerful line of development in a variety of genres, thus confirming a place of their own in world art.⁴

The members of the Kultur-Lige were, by contrast, taken with modernistic tendencies in world art, and particularly with folk plastic forms. This was consonant with the revolutionary attitudes prevalent in Soviet society, and stood in close proximity with the similar quest then under way in Ukrainian art. Works by their predecessor coreligionists were in their view naturalistic and extra-national. This was supposed to be true of the art of Schatz and Bezalel. They referred to the representatives of the realistic school, such as Isidore Kaufman, as the *Jewish Peredvizhniks* who ignored the achievements of folk art in everything that concerns form. Their direct harbingers were to the Kultur-Lige members the early Chagall, Falk, and Altman. But even the rationalistic painting of Altman, in their view, still suffered from naturalism (Fig. LXV). Even so, Chagall's painting *The Praying Jew* (1914) was a masterpiece, according to Ryback and Aronson, the ideologues of the Kultur-Lige: in this painting's architectonic, texture, “velvety” coloring and “ecstatic saturation” they saw genuinely Jewish features.

⁴ Bezalel (1983).

According to their conception of the matter, the national Jewish spirit was supposed to find its expression in abstract form in its own, “analytic–synthetic grey coloring and deep dark halftones,”⁵ all of which were evidenced by Ryback’s work (Fig. LXVI).

In addition to their own artistic creations, a key objective for both movements was to educate the young generation of artists. While Bezalel as a whole was, in effect, an art school with production studios, for the Kultur–Lige the establishment of art studios was a separate project in its own right. Pronouncements by Schatz and Epstein, the changeless leader standing at the helm of the Kultur–Lige’s art studio, doubtless had their impact upon conceptions of art education. Schatz rejected any formalistic questing, placing art in the service of the propaganda for the Jewish future. Mark Epstein (1899–1949), on the other hand, defended plastic experimentation, declaring that inessential, what the depicted object is, the crux of the

matter is that it should be clear that the painting or drawing was done by a Jew.

Comparing the structure of the curriculum in the two establishments, we should make a note of the shared features of their organization and their establishment of a multitude of art and applied departments. At the same time, the study models in Bezalel’s art classes were types taken after shtetl or Oriental Jews which were represented in accord with standard academic traditions and then stylized in conformity with modernist requirements for applied purposes. Among models meant to serve as a basis for students’ projects were some of Schatz’ own works. For the Kultur–Lige, goals were set rather in terms of constructing monumental images in more planar and generalized ways. The students painted large–scale, giving their preferences to subject matter taken from the diurnal routines of Jewish life. The models for still lives were shop signs with intentional use of stylized fonts



3. Boris Schatz, *The Biblical sculptor Bezalel at the Ark of the Covenant*, 1918; study for a monument, plaster; Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

⁵ Ryback (2007: 70 — translation from Yiddish: “Di vegn fun der yidisher moleray. [Rayoynes fun kinstler]” — *Ufgang* 1 [1919]).



4. Zeev Raban and Yaakov Stark, *Poster of a Bezalel exhibit in Jerusalem*, 1913; Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

and decorative articulation. Students pored over the works of old and new masters: from Greece to French modernism, with a special preference given to the Proto-Renaissance, and with a love for Pierro della Francesca, Mantegna and Botticelli, as well as for the Dutch painter Vermeer from Delft.⁶

His experience in founding applied studios in Bulgaria allowed Schatz to establish and successfully run a variety of production projects at Bezalel, something that provided him with a tangible profit. Here, as Schatz wrote, worked "Jews of the whole of the Galut world." Schatz organized shops for carpet weaving and dying of fabric, invited Yemenite silversmiths, opened wood carving shops, frame production shops and incrustation works, shops producing synagogue implements, furniture, and many others. He mentions some 35 directions in art, which found venues of development at his school. Bezalel's shops produced items on a high quality trade level, employing up to five hundred workers in their best years. There was also an attempt to establish a settlement where artisans' occupations would combine with tilling the soil.⁷ The art studio departments at the Kultur-Lige largely resembled Bezalel in their general orientation, with the exception of the theater-modeling department, which prepared stage set artists for Jewish theaters and the preparation of street plays. A number of applied studios were designated as auxiliary; on the basis of their work there was an anticipation of beginning to produce items for the general market, but no monetary means were found for the realization of this hope.

Art museums were established at both organizations, but, with the exception of objects of traditional art, everything in them was different in the cases of the two art unions: three museum departments at Bezalel were collections of specimens of Palestine fauna, maintained for the purpose of studying local nature and providing a collection of



5. Yosef Tchaikov, a cover page of a catalog of the Jewish Art Exhibition organized by the Kultur-Lige Arts Section; Kiev, 1920.

models for drawing; Palestine's archeological and artistic antiquities; as well as works by many Jewish artists, including those by teachers at the school. Included was also an impressive collection of synagogue utensils.⁸ A key place was occupied by the *Eternal Jew* by Samuel Hirszenberg, symbolizing a Jew in Galut and exported into forming part of the sign of the Bezalel National Museum.

The museum of the Kultur-Lige housed a different sort of artistic collection: specimens of Japanese engravings and works by the European masters, among which were paintings by Pieter Bruegel, Picasso, Exter, and finally, works by the artists of the Kultur-Lige itself. Studying closely the drawings executed by members of the studio from the first works and to the ripe creations, an

⁶ Brozgol (1980).

⁷ Schatz (1910: 17–32).

⁸ Schatz (1910: 32–36).

eye witness in 1924 remarked: "All the children's works are permeated with memories of the abandoned Jewish nest. [...] Everything is vivid, saturated, busy. But later on in the course of the artists' education there comes a break: the charming primitive, [...] from color to tone, from the luxury of children's fantasy — to the strict economic structure of the composition. From shapeless colorful visions — to the mastery of laconic form."⁹

These two unions' Zionist and Yiddishist utopias came up against challenges of a political, financial, and purely esthetic kind — the situation which eventually led, for a variety of reasons, to the dissolution of both initiatives. As an outcome of coincidence, the year 1932 became fateful for both artistic unions. With the death of Boris Schatz, his Bezalel retreated into the shadows of the past. But a creative and financial crisis afflicted his school even earlier, in the late 1920s, when supporters of the Parisian School, envisioning other pathways for Jewish art to follow in Eretz Yisrael, withdrew from him, leading to a cooling of interest in his work.

The functioning of the Kultur-Lige, in turn, once taken in hand by the Soviet institutional leadership, lost its independence, leading to a cessation of organized effort; the union's former members then followed individual creative paths of their own. Of the Kultur-Lige's various branches only the artistic studio in Kiev, reformed in 1924 into the Jewish Artistic-Industrial School, continued in the way of the principles proclaimed by the Kultur-Lige initially. By 1932, after its annexation by the Kiev Arts Technicum and the forced dismissal of a number of teachers from the "Jewish sector," with the sector's organizers Epstein and Bubarev heading the list, the Kultur-Lige was left without a face of its own.¹⁰ According to the reminiscences of one of the students, the real finale came with



6. Boris Schatz, *The Rabbi's Blessing*, before 1903; relief, terra-cotta, in: Julius Oppert, "Bible und Babel," *Ost und West* 3 (1903), p. 297.

a pogrom at the Technicum in 1933, when, at the height of the *Holodomor* (the Great Famine in Ukraine, 1932–1933), a number of unidentified men broke into the facility and began to smash works of sculpture and cut up canvasses.¹¹

The dramatic finale of the two establishments notwithstanding, the ideas central to the movements which gave them birth found their sequel in our time.

The applied and production forms instituted by Schatz were given a new life impulse in 1935, when the New Bezalel, headed by Jozef Budko, resumed the first one's work, became more clearly oriented toward the industrial development of the land, and eventually turned into the Bezalel Academy of the Arts, which remains still active today. Even though the artisan-style art of the Schatzean

⁹ *Pravda istorii* (2001: 144–146); in: *Kul'tur-Lige 'Pravda istorii,'* 102 (May 7, 1924).

¹⁰ State Archives of the City of Kiev, "Kiev Arts Technicum, 1930–1934," Collection no. R-360, Record Group 1, file 1a, fol. 5, 6, 7, 17.

¹¹ Brozgol (1980).

Bezalel provoked reiterated criticism and accusations of kitsch, traditionalist circles gave the “Bezalel style” their support. Schatz modernized the plastic forms of *shtetl* art, giving them new life, introducing a separate branch in the ritual and presentational line of Jewish art, which later achieved a label of its own as *Ars Judaica*. Especially noteworthy achievements in this area are those of such sculptors as Chaim Peretz, Yakob Grinwuzel, Harley Swedler, Dudik Swed, and the most famous among them, Frank Meisler (born 1930). This last created “office-type” sculpture in the round and a series of elitist souvenir items with Jewish themes. Achieving a new level and unprecedented volume of production, he fostered Schatz original idea of creating a “Jewish synagogal style.” His sculptural works, *tzedakah* boxes, and *aron ha-kodesh* doors decorate numerous synagogues, a number of them in the countries of the CIS, which make a point of purchasing pieces by Meisler as a mark of prestige and an indication of high social status. As an artist, master, and manager, he found the “formula for success” in transferring exclusivity into mass production, in combining traditional motifs with naturalism and refinement of execution.¹² His renowned *Jerusalemite Sphere* flooded the art market with pieces ranging from souvenirs to costly monumental works of sculpture which adorn the halls of many synagogues in cities such as Moscow, Kyiv, and Kharkiv today.

The legacy of the Kultur-Lige was less fortunate. Its achievements in the plastic arts were brushed aside by the generally disseminated doctrines of Socialist Realism, which from the mid-1930s on became the determining force in the work of Soviet artists. The remnant was censored or largely annihilated during the Nazi occupation. Those who had moved abroad were no longer united by objectives shared in common, so that each artist pursued his own path. Even so, in an unexpected way, the ideas of this movement

found their rebirth half-a-century later in the works of three generations of Kharkiv artists: Ben-Zion Vaks (1912–1989), Pavel Brozgol (1933–2004) and his son Mikhail (born 1955). In 1929–1933, Vaks studied with Epstein at the union’s art school. His final project, executed in the manner of a fresco, was a monumental two-meter portrait of Shalom Aleichem, flanked on its two sides by images of the old and the new Jewish worlds: the *shtetl* and New York, a thoroughly characteristic composition subject for members of the Kultur-Lige. Vaks’ pre-war works bear an obvious imprint of this school, but later he opts for a different venue: upon completion of studies at the Art Institute in Kharkiv, he becomes a full-fledged painter of the socialist era. Yet Epstein’s instruction remains a unique experience for him, one which he wants to transmit to the young Jewish painters. Just such an heir of his appears in the person of Pavel Brozgol, who accomplishes an act of creative revival in shifting from socialist method to the values of modernism and Jewish themes (Fig. LXVII).¹³ His indoor interiors become further peopled with elements belonging to a city apartment: Indian rubber plants and sofas are all transferred here from the Russian avant-garde. Later this mise-en-scene is infiltrated by living inhabitants, as well: *Jew in Green* (*Le juif en vert*) by Chagall, or the *Boy Mottle* from Shalom Aleichem. In the early 1990s many subject canvasses make their appearance, with Brozgol going public and exhibiting his works both in Ukraine and abroad.

His son Mikhail inherits his creative method, however, here the Jewish milieu is soon covered over by artistic formation of universalistic subjects, with the painter seeking for object formulae and inner geometry of composition. Occasionally he returns to the themes of his identity, such as in the cycles *Conversations with Father* and *Netchenskaya Street*, where the painter experiences anew his father’s compositions of the 1970s

¹² Meisler (2002).

¹³ Kotlyar (2006: 39–40).

and his own childhood memories of life in the early post-war years. In his own words, he maintains the painterly culture which his father had taught him as he walked in the footsteps of both the Jewish and the Russian Modernism. To date, the younger Brozgol is himself busy with the search for his own artistic successor.

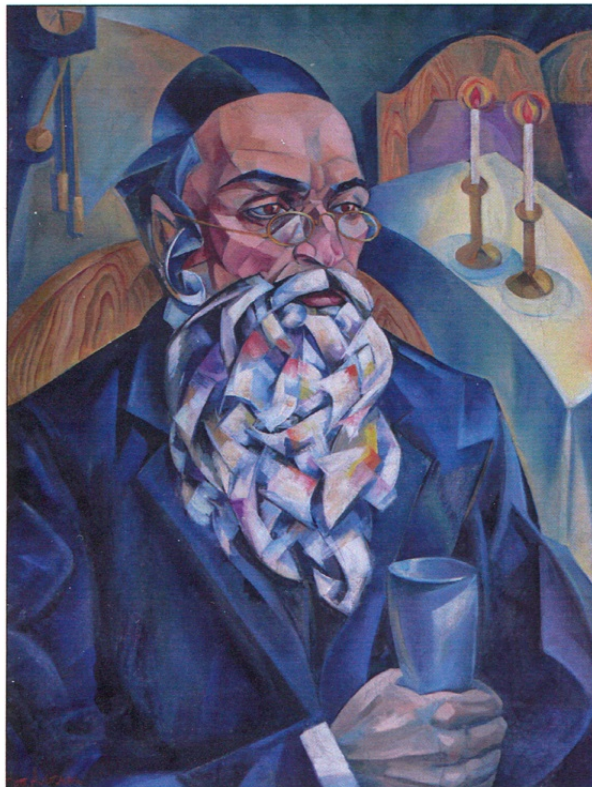
Thus, the relatively brief span of years of Bezalel's and the Kultur-Lige's active functioning left an appreciable mark on Jewish artistic culture, defining its two most extreme poles. Even so, despite the depth of

the conceptual and esthetic conflict between their two notions of Jewish art, it would be wrong to imagine the proponents of the two movements as facing each other across an unbridgeable chasm. Throughout the years of their opposition, there were to be found moderately rightist and leftist artists, whose presence makes it possible to speak of the mutual interpenetration of these two movements and the diversity of artistic forms which unfurled the Jewish artistic creations of the first third of the 20th century across the whole of the horizon of world art.

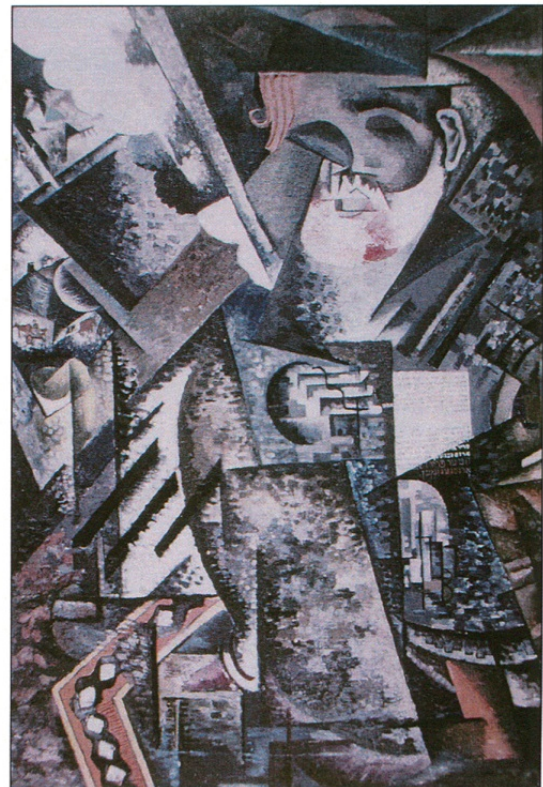
Bibliography:

- BEZALEL 1983 — "Bezalel" *shel Schatz, 1906–1929* [catalogue, Israel Museum], ed. Nurit Shiloh-Cohen, Jerusalem 1983
- BROZGOL 1980 — Brozgol, P.: "Jewish Arts Technicum in Kiev (Memories about my teacher Ben-zion Vaks)," unpublished manuscript, Kharkov, 1980 (in Russian)
- KAZOVSKY 2003 — Kazovsky, H.: *The Artist of the Kultur-Lige*, Gescharim, Jerusalem — Mosty Kultury, Moscow, 2003
- KOTLYAR 2008 — Kotlyar, E.: "'The Making of a National Art': Boris Schatz in Bulgaria," *Ars Judaica. The Bar-Ilan Journal of Jewish Art* 4 (2008): 43–60
- KOTLYAR 2006 — Kotlyar E.: "Gefilte Fish v ukrainski' olii. Evreiska tema v mistetstvi Kharkova: vid retrospektsii do suchasnogo zhivopysu," *Fine Art. Ukrainian Fine Art Theory and Practice Magazine* 4 (2006): 38–43
- MEISLER 2002 — Meisler, F.: *The Catalogue*, Tel-Aviv, 2002
- PRAVDA istorii: *diyatelnyst' evreiskoi kulturno-prosvitnytskoi organizatsii "Kul'turna Liga" u Kievi (1918–1925)*, Collection of documents and materials, ed. Rybakov, M., Kiev, 2001; in: *Kul'tur-Lige 'Pravda istorii,'* 102 (May 7, 1924)
- RYBACK, Aronson 2007 — Ryback, I.-B. & Aronson B.: "Paths of Jewish Painting," in: *Kultur-Lige. Artistic Avant-Garde of the 1910s and the 1920s.*, Kiev, 2007
- SCHATZ 1910 — Schatz, B.: *Bezalel: Ego Proshloe, nastoyashee i budushee*, Odessa, 1910

LXIV. The Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts building, Jerusalem (since 1965 the Jerusalem Artists House); photo by Eugeny Kotlyar, 2005.



LXV. Natan Altman, *Portrait of a Jew*, the 1910s; oil on canvas; collection of Alexander Feldman, Kharkov, Ukraine.



LXVI. Issachar Ber Ryback, *An Old Jew*, 1919; oil on canvas; Ryback Museum, Bat-Yam, Israel.



LXVII. Pavel Brozgol, *Sabbath*, 1992; oil on canvas; Collection of Mikhail Brozgol, Kharkov, Ukraine.



LXVIII. Chaim Meyer Fainshtein, *Old Vilna*, 1938; xylograph; Vilnius Gaon Jewish State Museum (henceforth: VGJSM).