

*William Gilcher*

### ***Izrael Lejzerowicz, artist and poet***

This essay sums up the state of knowledge about the Łódź painter and Yiddish-language critic and poet Izrael Lejzerowicz (לייזערװיטש ישראל).<sup>1</sup>

#### **Elements of biography<sup>2</sup>**

The painter was born 6 November 1902 (19 Chesvan 5663) in Łódź, the son of Lejb Lejzerowicz, a poor tailor, who was born in 1869 in Warka, and his wife Ruchla Koc, born in Warsaw in 1868. According to census reports and information from the family,<sup>3</sup> Izrael Lejzerowicz was one of seven children born to the couple between the mid-1890s and 1910. An older brother, Szmul (later Samuel Leiserowicz), born in 1896, was smuggled out of Poland to Germany to avoid military service during World War I. In October 1938, Samuel escaped to England where his wife Anja and their daughter Ruth joined him in January 1939. Samuel died in London in 1970; his daughter moved with her husband Geoffrey Lewis and their two children to the United States in 1960. One sister, Sura or Sala (later Sophie Leiserovic Rozynès), born in 1905, survived the war in Poland. She moved to Lyon, France, after the war with her new husband, Tobias Rozynès. She died there in 1981, leaving no children. Of the other brothers and sisters, one, Abram, died of peritonitis in Łódź before 1914. The other four children – Izrael, Estera (wife of the silver manufacturer Lajb Lasman), Szloma, and Chaja (Hela) – perished in the Holocaust, along with their father.

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<sup>1</sup> When he signed his name using Roman characters, the painter used this spelling of his name: Lejzerowicz. In various reference works, articles, and official documents, his family name is also cited as Lajzerowicz, Leiserowicz, Leizerowicz, Leizerovitch, or Lejzorowicz.

<sup>2</sup> The only contemporaneous biographical notes about the artist currently known come from the ghetto identity and building records, preserved in the Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi (State Archive in Łódź – APE) and from Oskar Rosenfeld's accounts for the ghetto's Statistical Department (*Statistische Abteilung*), published or preserved in the APE or the YIVO Archives in New York. The many secondary sources published since 1945 contain numerous inconsistencies due to the lack of official sources. In this article, known errors are eliminated while using those facts generally agreed upon.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with Ruth Lewis, née Leiserowicz, Bethesda, Maryland, USA, April 5 and 12, 2013.

Izrael Lejzerowicz was a disabled person; he may have suffered from kyphoscoliosis as a child. One source recounts that a childhood accident injured his back and left him permanently disabled. He also reportedly suffered from lung and heart problems, for which he sought treatment in Berlin in the 1920s, staying with his brother Samuel.

Little is yet confirmed from official sources about Lejzerowicz's formal education. The family reports he attended a traditional *cheder* for elementary education in Łódź. According to a 1942 report by Oskar Rosenfeld of the ghetto's Statistical Department, he studied on a scholarship provided by the Łódź industrialist Ettingon in an independent arts school in Berlin. Given the possibilities at the time, the school may have been an informal establishment operated by an individual artist or perhaps the Lewin-Funcke-Schule, where the Jewish-Polish artist Felka Płatek also studied in the 1920s. Ruth Lewis, the painter's niece, believes he also studied in Paris. Lejzerowicz was multi-lingual, speaking Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and German.

By the early 1920s, Lejzerowicz was contributing to avant-garde arts and literary projects in Łódź and beyond. He was active in the group around the publications *Toyz royt* (1922), *Vegn* (1923), and *Shveln* (1924–1925), and contributed to newspapers: *Der fraytik* (Łódź–Warsaw, 1924–1925), *Nayer volksblat* (1939–1923), *Lodzher togeblat* (in the late 1920s), and *Ekstrablat* (1926–1927).<sup>4</sup> He was also active in arts circles like the family of his patrons, Ewa Spektor Margolin and her husband, Dr. Julius Margolin.<sup>5</sup>

In the decades before the German invasion of September 1939, Lejzerowicz was active as a portrait painter and participated in group exhibitions of young Jewish artists in Łódź, the best known of which was called “St.Art,” short for “Stowarzyszenie Artystów.” He also created abstract, symbolic drawings and illustrations, often on religious themes<sup>6</sup> [Fig. 1].

He took part in exhibitions in Łódź, Kraków, and Warsaw. He deposited five early works in the new municipal art museum in Łódź. Two works, a self-portrait and a drawing, are still held today in the collections of the Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi.

<sup>4</sup> As reported by Chaim Leib Fox in his entry on Lejzerowicz in the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, eds E. Ojebach, M. Sztarkman, I. Charlsz, New York, 1963, vol. 5, columns 132–133.

<sup>5</sup> See W. Gilcher, “The Artist and the Patron: Izrael Lejzerowicz and the Margolin/Spektor Family in Pre-War Łódź,” [in:] *Art in Jewish Society*, eds J. Malinowski, R. Piątkowska, M. Stolarska-Fronia, T. Sztyma, Warsaw–Toruń 2016.

<sup>6</sup> More about the artist's work, see: I. Gadowska, “Interwar works by Izrael Lejzerowicz in the Context of the 'New Art' Millieu's Accomplishments in Łódź,” *Art Inquiry* 2017, vol. XIX, pp. 205–220.



Fig. 1. Izrael Lejzerowicz, *Masquerade* (poster design), 1926

Source: I. Gadowska, "Interwar Works by Izrael Lejzerowicz in the Context of the 'New Art' Milieu's Accomplishments in Łódź," *Art Inquiry* 2017, vol. XIX, p. 219.

Today, Lejzerowicz is remembered especially for his work in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto of Łódź during the Nazi occupation. Because of his talent and pre-war reputation, the artist enjoyed a connection to the highest Jewish authority in the ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski, appointed by the Nazis as the "Eldest of the Jews in Litzmannstadt." This connection and others provided him with work and the means of survival. Lejzerowicz did many portraits in the ghetto, mostly of prominent people, but some of the poor as well. Many of these sketches are preserved in the collections of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.<sup>7</sup> In 1942–43, he worked for the "Scholarly Department," the *Wissenschaftliche Abteilung*, established at the express direction of Hans Biebow, director of the German ghetto administration, where Lejzerowicz reportedly created "a series of Jewish motifs [that] enriched the folklore collection of the department."<sup>8</sup> He worked on an exhibition of Eastern European Jewish life and culture that was displayed in

<sup>7</sup> Żydowski Instytut Historyczny collections; see especially series A-888.

<sup>8</sup> *Getto-Enzyklopädie*, APL, PSZ 1103, card 139; published in book form in both Polish and English versions: *Encyklopedia getta. Niedokończony projekt archiwistów z łódzkiego getta*, eds K. Radziszewska, E. Wiatr, A. Sitarek, J. Walicki, M. Polit, Łódź 2014, p. 124 / *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto: The Unfinished Project of the Łódź Ghetto Archivists*, eds A. Sitarek, E. Wiatr, Łódź 2016, p. 126.

the department's space on Rynek Bałucki. Some of his paintings of ghetto life, now preserved at Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters' House, were probably created for the exhibition. Other works, described by the Statistical Department's chronicler Oskar Rosenfeld in an unpublished notebook,<sup>9</sup> do not appear to have survived except occasionally in photographs.

Before the war, Lejzerowicz lived with his family in a prominent building at Kilińskiego 49 in the center of Łódź. His mother died in 1931 and is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Łódź. During the ghetto period, the artist had a studio in flat 32 at Rybna 14A (Fischstrasse), which he shared with his father, whose fate is unknown.

There are various accounts of the artist's death; we believe he was still alive on August 1, 1944, in Łódź, as he is listed in "Szmul Rozenstajn's list," a dated petition from an assistant to Rumkowski requesting food rations for literary and artistic figures in the ghetto.<sup>10</sup> It is likely that Lejzerowicz was murdered at the time of the liquidation of the ghetto in August 1944 or upon arrival in Auschwitz. As a disabled person, Lejzerowicz would not have survived a selection at the death camp.

After the war, a number of drawings by Lejzerowicz were rescued by Nachman Zonabend and divided between two institutions in Israel: Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters' House. A second collection was acquired by the Jewish Historical Institute over several years in the late 1940's from the artist's sister. The Jewish Historical Institute also acquired individual works from various other people in the postwar period.

According to two accounts by the literary historian Chaim Leib Fox, one set of his paintings was found buried in a cellar wrapped up in canvas with this inscription:

לאמיר פאראייביקן די שיינקייט פון פארגיין – און מער ווי דאס פארמאגן מיר שוין נישט

"Let us immortalize the beauty of dying; we no longer possess anything else."<sup>11</sup>

### Why study Lejzerowicz?

Lejzerowicz should be restored to his rightful place as an artist and cultural figure of special significance in the cultural history of Polish Jews. Lejzerowicz is a particularly interesting figure to consider because he brings together the community of painters and also the community of writers in Łódź from the 1920s to the end of the Second World War.

<sup>9</sup> O. Rosenfeld, "Heft 12," Yad Vashem Archives, RG O-6/105, pp. 251–258.

<sup>10</sup> APŁ, PSŻ [Przełożony Starszeństwa Żydów], sygn. 1023.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. L. Fox, *ibidem*. The whereabouts of the canvas remain unknown.

A core question posed by Lejzerowicz's work: how does an artist as a person of culture respond to barbarity? Izrael Lejzerowicz is principally remembered today for his drawings that document and analyze the Litzmannstadt Ghetto of Łódź. But he did more: in his studio at Rybna 14a, Lejzerowicz hosted a salon for artists and writers in many languages – Yiddish, Polish, German, possibly Russian – giving himself and his guests a means of maintaining their dignity as human beings. Surrounded by Lejzerowicz's canvases, poets met and read their work in Polish, Yiddish, and German. He saved people's lives, both morally and literally, as recalled by members of his group, including especially the young Yiddish-language writer Chava Rosenfarb<sup>12</sup> and the young German-born poet Hilda Stern Cohen.<sup>13</sup>

### Lejzerowicz's project in the ghetto years

As time passed and conditions worsened in the ghetto, Izrael Lejzerowicz used his gifts and skills as a painter to develop a project of witness for future generations of humanity. Based on the surviving works and the notebooks preserved in the Jewish Historical Institute, we believe his goals were:

- to survive – physically, emotionally, spiritually;
- to build a community of like-minded people for mutual support – through the sharing of experience, information, knowledge, and profound, respectful presence for each other;
- to observe the reality of life around him;
- to record that reality in sketches, paintings, and poetry without sentimentality;
- to analyze – as a human being and as a painter – what was happening to himself and to the Jewish community imprisoned in the ghetto, including ways in which he, like others, was forced to cooperate with the oppressors for the sake of survival;

<sup>12</sup> Ch. Rosenfarb, *Boym fun lebn*, Tel Aviv 1972; *The Tree of Life. A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto*, translated from the Yiddish by the author in collaboration with Goldie Morgentaler, Madison 1985. The three volumes in this epic novel of life in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto of Łódź include evocations of Lejzerowicz and his literary salon. The painter is represented by the character Vladimir Winter.

Rosenfarb also discussed Lejzerowicz's stature as an artist, poet, and critic in an essay about the poet Simkha-Bunim Szajewicz, "Simkha-Bunim Shayeitch, dermonungen" ["Simkha-Bunim Shayeitch, Reminiscences"], *Di goldene keyt* 1991, no. 131, pp. 9–28. An edited English version of this text is: "The Last Poet of Lodz: The untold story of the great epic poem of the Holocaust – and the generous, tragic hero who wrote it," *Tablet*, September 2012, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/111880/the-last-poet-of-lodz> (access: 16.05.2014).

<sup>13</sup> H. Stern Cohen, *Genagelt ist meine Zunge: Lyrik und Prosa einer Holocaust-Überlebenden*, Hrsg. von E. Leibfried, S. Feuchert, W. Gilcher, Frankfurt/Main 2003; also *Words that Burn Within Me: Faith, Values, Survival*, eds W.V. Cohen, G. Rosen, W. Gilcher, transl. E. Forster, Washington 2008.

- to interpret his life and the life of the community in the light of Jewish and non-Jewish history and European art traditions;
- to transform his own suffering and that of the ghetto's people into increasingly visionary and sometimes apocalyptic, eschatological artwork.

All of this was a profound type of resistance to oppression. The world as Lejzerowicz knew it was ending. In doing this work, Lejzerowicz was taking part in a larger movement of archivists, historians, writers, photographers, and artists of all kinds to document and bear witness for the future.

Of course, Lejzerowicz's work is an indictment of the oppressors, including the Jewish leadership of the ghetto. As a whole, it is a lucid yet visionary expression of a human community pushed to the edge of the abyss, yet a community whose best were unwilling to abandon a sense of self-worth and a faith in ultimate redemption, whether by future human generations or by the creator.

The case of Lejzerowicz is yet more complicated, however, because of his connection to Chaim Rumkowski, the "Eldest of the Jews," i.e., because he had to work with the puppet regime that ran the ghetto on the Nazis' behalf. He used his talent to create portraits not just of Rumkowski, but of high-ranking German officers. Did he really have a choice? No. This renders him all the more human to all of us who were never compelled to live with the extreme situation he faced.



Fig. 2. Izrael Lejzerowicz, *Turned to Stone*

Source: *Ilustrowany Pojliszer Manchester* 1930, no. 3, p. 21.



One can say that Lejzerowicz's project was a massive failure. He did not survive. His community was scattered or destroyed. Few of his paintings – and almost none of his poetry – survive. Today, he is largely forgotten.

Yet Lejzerowicz inspired others to carry on their own work as artists: Chava Rosenfarb and Hilda Stern Cohen both pay homage to him in their writing. He saved their lives – physically and spiritually. When we, as members of that future generation of human beings that Lejzerowicz was looking to, see his work and try to understand and appreciate his struggles, we validate his suffering and pain. We hear his message. And we are faced with the terrifying challenge of having to think about what it might mean in our own lives and in our own times.

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### **Streszczenie**

#### **Izrael Lejzerowicz, artysta i poeta**

Izrael Lejzerowicz należy do pokolenia żydowskich artystów urodzonych na początku XX wieku. Na jego twórczość oddziaływały postimpresjonizm, ekspresjonizm, kubizm i konstruktywizm. Na początku lat 20. uczestniczył w awangardowych projektach artystycznych i literackich. W dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym malował głównie portrety

i kompozycje o charakterze symbolicznym. Po wybuchu II wojny światowej i utworzeniu w Łodzi getta, stał się jednym z artystów działających w kręgu władz zamkniętej dzielnicy. Chociaż na podstawie zachowanych dzieł, archiwaliów i notatek prasowych można zrekonstruować biografię twórcy, pozostaje on dziś niemal całkowicie zapomniany. Tekst stanowi próbę podsumowania aktualnej wiedzy na temat Izraela Lejzerowicza i jego artystycznych dokonań.