

SCHERF, THE JEWISH ARTIST



Каин и Авель



Top: *Cain and Abel*
Bottom: "The Travels of Binyamin the Third"
Mendele Mocher Sforim



Shabbat

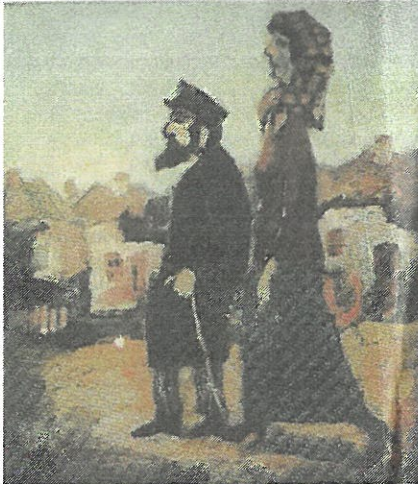
It must be true that Jews are a nation endowed with a rare wealth of talent – otherwise, would we ever permit ourselves to treat talent so wastefully? Indeed, even a multi-millionaire is only rich because he is never too lazy to bend over and pick up that coin...

This, however, is just an aside thought – let us now talk about Isiu Scherf (1913 – 1995), an artist both unique and at the same time very characteristic of that branch of Jewish culture which is customarily referred to as Ashkenazi-Yiddish culture. I. Scherf's personality and his creative work are yet another proof that Yiddish culture is not just a relic of the past, of a world that is no longer – but rather a starved and wounded, but still lively old tree – with a sparse transparent crown but powerful deep-reaching roots, capable of blossoming with fruitful young shoots.

From early childhood, Isiu Scherf spoke, thought and created in Yiddish. His adolescence and young adulthood passed amid the Jewish intelligentsia of Bukovina and Chernovtsy, a rich cultural environment saturated with the language. Even as a child, he enjoyed drawing more than anything – yet he did not receive a formal art education, save for lessons at a private studio of a painter named Levental. Isiu Scherf's creative career began at the age of 20, when he started working as the artist of *Chameleon* - the Jewish theater of Chernovtsy. From that point onward, the bumpy and not particularly profitable path of a Jewish stage artist becomes his main line of work, with occasional forages into easel painting, graphic art and book illustration. His first exhibition took place as early as 1936, followed by a series of post-war personal exhibitions in Iași and Bucharest.

The war years – fighting at the front lines and then in the infamous "labor army" – were a harsh test, yet these trials and tribulations saved Scherf from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. After the war, Isiu Scherf moves to Romania and settles in Iași, the cradle of Yiddish theater. As the chief artist of the Jewish Theater in Iași for 12 years, Scherf takes credit for over 50 stage productions – both classical (Jewish and international) and modern plays. He also worked for puppet theaters, and in the 1960 served as the leading stage artist of the State Jewish Theater in Bucharest. All we have today is a dim reflection of his work as a stage artist afforded by a handful of sketches and photographs, along with witness accounts. It seems clear, however, that he was far from flatly depicting simple life scenes – rather, his stage sets sought to capture the notional quality of a theatrical show and the rich symbolism of the stage metaphor. Among his most notable works was the stage set for *The Travels of Binyamin the Third*, a play based on a novel by Mendele Mocher Sforim that was staged at the theater in Iași, where the visual representation of *Tuneyadovka* became a colorful and rich allegory on the proverbial *shtetl* and its spiritual life.

In 1973, the artist immigrates to Israel. His talent and experience as a stage artist remained uncalled for. Once, when the famous Ida Kaminsky was to travel to Israel from Warsaw, she left her own stage artist behind: "Isiu Scherf is there!" Their creative partnership was a major success, yet it heralded no change of fortune for the artist: Israeli theater did not accept and did not understand the Jewish stage artist. For some time, Isiu Scherf lived at Kibbutz Giv'at Brenner, then in Rechovot where he taught drawing at Community Centers; several exhibitions of his paintings were held in Tel-Aviv, Ashkelon, Rishon-le-Zion and Rechovot. Still, no recognition or fame came his way: neither museums nor private collectors or critics took any interest.



"Великая суббота или короткая пятница"
Иллюстрация к Шолом-Алейхему



Иллюстрация к народной песне
"Едет еврей в Эрец-Исраэль
с заплаканными глазами"

"The Great Shabbat, or the Short Friday"
Sholem Aleichem

*"Jew Traveling to Eretz Israel, his Eyes Red
with Tears" – Folk Song Illustration*

The artist's record may not appear particularly impressive – but in art, one's worth is weighed not in awards and titles but on the scales of true talent. Isiu Scherf, stage artist and painter, worked in oil, watercolor, gouache, drew in pencil and ink, created monotypes and unique collages, as well as an art-form of his own invention – cardboard cut-outs, black on white.

In every genre and technique, in Chernovtsy or in Iasi, in Bucharest or Rechovot – he remained uniquely himself, a very Jewish artist immersed in the element of Yiddish culture - artistic, poetic, musical, spiritual and mundane. His drawings, filled with inner light, humor, kind irony and warmth accompany the series of lullabies written by his close friend, composer Leibus Levin; he illustrated children's and other folk songs; one of his largest projects was a 50-page cycle of graphics under the title "Jewish Sayings and Proverbs", where each sheet wins you over with the sharp wit of folk quips, brilliantly laconic silhouettes and compositions and expressive artistic language.

The artistic stature of this remarkable series is comparable with the album of easel paintings tracing the motifs of Jewish literary classics – books by I. L. Peretz, Moicher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem and others. (Sholem Aleichem's books were most tenderly and unwaveringly adored by the artist, and it was to him that Scherf dedicated more artworks than to all other authors put together). In these compositions, the artistic narrative describing the life of the *shtetl* takes a step back, giving way to clear and lapidary graphic "formulas" conveying the concentrated essence of the storyline yet retaining the charm of intimate knowledge, both of literary material and of the life it depicts.

The same pattern of stylistic, nay, ideological evolution can be traced in Isiu Scherf's paintings. His artistic legacy contains quite a few genre scenes ("Jew with Goat" and others), where the innumerable *Kasrilevkes* and their inhabitants are depicted in the customary realistic manner, truthfully and feelingly, with such characteristically Jewish sad humor. Gradually, however, the constraints of life-likeness grow too tight for I. Scherf as he takes a turn for the extremely expressive and intense language of symbols and allegories, periphrases and plastic metaphors. Perhaps this can be viewed as an effort to overcome "*shtetl* provincialism", to partake in the more modern trends of imaginative thinking.

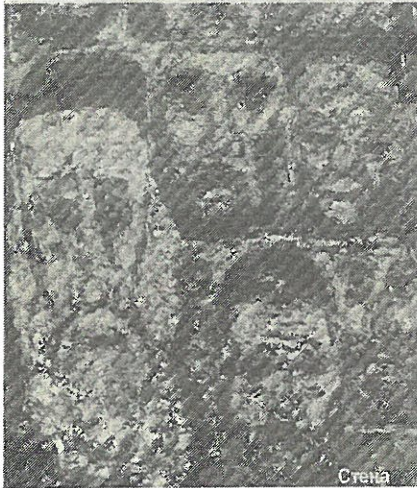
Indeed, we may not be looking at a change in style as much as at changing times, the passage of Time with the capital "T", on the global historical scale. The Holocaust of European Jewry during World War II (in Iasi alone, in just one day, more than 12,000 Jews were murdered at gunpoint) marked a deep rupture in the fabric of ethnic being, the total destruction of Jewish *shtetels*, big and small – from *Yegupetz* to *Tuneyadovka*, and with them, the death of the immense richness of Yiddish culture that had thrived for centuries.

Isiu Scherf's outlook on life has always been quite far from idyllic emotionalism, and now, after he survives, processes, internalizes the tragedy

of the Holocaust, lets it go right through his heart and soul, it takes on a pronounced dramatic quality.



xxx



The Wall

The artist's pallet is wrought with reflections of blood and fire – like flares in the viscous stuff of somber color.

In Isiu Scherf's art, this drama is realized not on the narrative, thematic level of specific events, but rather in the sphere of personal and ethnic self-identification, the feeling of being connected blood-and-sinew with the fate of his people; in the deep, secretive layers of Jewish mentality and Jewish spirituality, coded in ancient and new symbols. The bearers of this spirituality are mostly old men and little children; their primary wisdom and moral purity enter into complex interaction with the world of things (clocks, books, etc.) and symbolic animals. From the reality of being, people disappear into the un-being of sunken Atlantis, and return to us again from their un-being... And then the score of the Requiem no longer leaves any space for the comfort of tears behind laughter, or, if you will, for the salvation of laughter through tears.

Isiu Scherf's artworks have no "trade dress" – this aspect never concerned him. On the contrary – the artist, at a rather advanced age, as they would call it, willingly sets out on courageous experiments, inventively working with three-dimensional textures: indeed, some of his paintings can be described as "sculpture-paintings". Collage becomes his favorite genre, and no material is too unusual to use – wood, metal, leather, glass, paper, bindings and pages of ancient books, etc. Their conjunction, juxtaposition, mutual continuity and contrast create an effect of multiple layers of meaning, both in content and in form. The principle and technique of collage naturally overflow onto the frames of the paintings: Isiu Scherf always created a unique, one-of-a-kind frame for each painting – not a mere setting but an idea, not so much a commentary on the mood and central thought of the painting, but a different angle of view on those.

Isiu Scherf lived in Israel for over 20 years; he worked hard, created paintings – both smaller, chamber canvasses, and very unusual landscapes; taught art and had an occasional exhibition. His sense of soft, harmless humor never betrayed him; he lived in modest dignity, unpretentious and un-resentful, content within his small circle of loved ones, friends and a handful of colleagues.

The affluent Israeli society, the establishment that shunned, or by any measure, grossly undervalued Yiddish culture never did notice Isiu Scherf – an immensely talented and very Jewish painter, graphic and stage artist. And if there is such a thing as historical justice, then Isiu Scherf's art, even belatedly, will surely take its rightful place in the future history of Jewish art – be it "Yiddish" or "Hebrew" – of the second half of the past century.

Art photography: Boris Krishtul