

## J. Gens - Investigator and Propagator of Jewish Art

Julius Gens (17.11.1887 - 03.11.1957) is known as investigator of Estonian, Baltic-German and Russian art, bibliographer, exhibitor and art collector. He was born at Tartu in a merchant's family who had come from Vilnius. After finishing the high school at Tartu, he enrolled the local university, which he graduated from in 1911 as a lawyer.

Already in his early years he displayed interest in art, in his youth he practiced painting and for some time 1911 - 12 studied architecture in Munich. During the years of the World War I he lived in Moscow and St. Petersburg where he made close contacts with Russian artists - vanguardists, he got acquainted with Vladimir Mayakovsky. In 1918 J. Gens returned to Estonia where he first held the post of a lawyer and later until the beginning of the World War II he was engaged in a Swedish forest company.

At the same time he acted as art historian and collector. In the years of Civil War 1918 - 20 J. Gens was active in the protection of art treasures and was one of the founders of the first Estonian school of fine arts "Pallas" and the art society by the same name in 1919. In the beginning he held the post of a lecturer on art history in the aforementioned school. In the '20s and '30s J. Gens published investigations about Baltic-German artists W. Timm<sup>1</sup>, T. Neff, O. Moller, wrote reviews, arranged art exhibitions and published in small editions at his own expense unique bibliophilical works on art. In 1940 appeared the first volume of the catalogue of his library, lavishly illustrated, which, among others, included the list of Judaic department. By the time of the outbreak of World War II his library contained about 10.000 works on art among them incunabula and plenty of French books illustrated with the 18th century engravings in original. His collection also comprised many paintings by Estonian, Baltic-German, Russian artists and old masters, icons, about 5000 graphic sheets, 3000 bookplates, many objects of applied art, among them Japanese ivories, Chinese ceramics, etc. After his evacuation to Tashkent in 1941, the collection, left without care, was carried off. The books fell into the so-called Rosenberg's headquarters, from where they were carried to Germany. Then, as trophies of the Soviet troops, they reached Byelorussia into the library of the Minsk Academy of Sciences; they were not returned to the owner. The collection of bookplates went to the storages of Rosenberg's headquarters, where they were used as fuel by an uncultured charwoman. The remaining bookplates were returned to the owner who handed them over to the National Library.

During the post-war years Julius Gens acted as art historian and critic. He compiled in manuscript a unique bibliographical work in many volumes "Materials on Estonian Art". Similar work was compiled by him in Tashkent on Uzbek art, while he was holding the post of a bibliographer in the local library. His last years were full of tragic. Being groundlessly convicted during the period of Stalin personality cult, Julius Gens was put to prison, from where he was released when he was seriously ill, and he died in 1957.

The domains of Julius Gens' interests were Estonian, Baltic-German and Russian art. The research and popularization of Jewish art, however, makes up an essential part in his creative biography. Simultaneously he was active in Jewish cultural self-autonomy. His interest in Jewish art sprang up at the beginning of the '20s. In the 2nd volume of his reminiscences, written in Russian "Заметки библиофила"<sup>2</sup> (Notes of a Bibliophile) 1952. (Russian manuscript is now in possession of the reader) in the chapter "В поисках Синей птицы" (about Jewish art) he describes the beginning and process of his work as investigator and propagator of Jewish art. Unfortunately he wrote his memoirs being ill, and his personal archives having been lost during the years of the war. His reminiscences are influenced by the mentality of the period, and ruling ideology, which unwillingly affected their character.

---

<sup>1</sup> Briefe Wilhelm Timm's an seinen Vater aus den Jahren 1841-1846. Eingeleitet und herausgegeben von Julius Gens. Tartu-Dorpat 1931. 170 S., III.

<sup>2</sup> Генс Ю.Б. Заметки библиофила. Часть вторая. Таллинн, 1952(1953). Архив автора.

According to Julius Genss his first real contacts with Jewish art fell to the year 1921, when he in Berlin met Jewish art collectors and bibliophiles from the society "Soncino", which he also joined. At the same time he became acquainted with the Jewish material culture, cultish, religious and secular decorative art, illuminated manuscripts. The impressions received from Western Europe on assimilated Jewish milieu convinced Julius Genss that one must search for the Jewish art in the countries of Eastern Europe, where the Jews lived as a compact whole, where they had retained their traditional milieu, customs and sense of life.

He absorbs into respective literature being deeply impressed by album on Jewish ornament, compiled by the Russian art critic V. Stassov, by facsimiles on medieval Jewish manuscripts, issued in Germany. Regular studies took him to Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Soviet Russia. In Vilnius he visited the museum of Jewish art, founded by the writer An-Sky, which in the '20s was in an extremely bad condition, likewise many other museums containing collections of Jewish art. Julius Genss writes in his memoirs, "When examining the exhibits in Warsaw museum I asked the attendant about the number of visitors during a month. The answer was that within the last three months I was the first one." Many an interesting works of art complemented his art collection. In Vilnius had survived "dem Gaons Stibl"; it was in deplorable condition and Julius Genss succeeded in getting hold of the 17th century copper chandelier of "Gaon", which hung in his study until the summer of 1941. He always had his "Leica" with him and he took thousands of photographs in the depositories of museums, synagogues, graveyards, where he recorded lavishly ornamented old tombstones. His photo archives got also lost in the war years.

In his memoirs Julius Genss tells us about the fate of an album dedicated to Jewish ornament, compiled by An-Sky. An-Sky worked together with two assistants, who were occupied with reproducing ornaments, one of them being the future prominent Jewish graphic artist Salomon Judovin. In 1916 An-Sky sent the album to art historian Abram Efros in Moscow that the latter would write a foreword. But due to the war and revolution the album was not published. Julius Genss saw its advance copy at Tashkent in the hands of Efros during his evacuation.

In Vilnius Julius Genss made closer contacts with "J V O" and with the museum associated with it. He participated in the "J V O" congresses (among them in Paris) and in their undertakings. He dedicated to the society and presented it with the whole edition of the book "xxx" ("Jewish periodicals in Russia"), the basic text of which was written by the Russian-Estonian bibliographer Udo Ivask (1878 - 1922) and which was published at his own expense. It includes a detailed list of periodicals issued in Tsarist Russia. The foreword was written by Julius Genss.

Being deeply absorbed into the historical Jewish culture, Julius Genss came up with the idea to carry out in cooperation with the outstanding Estonian painter and graphic artist Ado Vabbe (1892 - 1961) a scroll illustrated with miniatures. The idea was put into practice in 1932. The scroll is dedicated to the Song of Songs (Shir HaShirim). The Hebrew text together with decorative initials and vignettes was executed by Julius Genss himself, who made excellent use of artistic possibilities offered by the hand script. The illustrations in tempera were carried out by Ado Vabbe, who skilfully associated the text with variously shaped miniatures. They include pages, which rhythmically organize the scroll. The smaller miniatures either make up a frame to the text or arrange it, avoiding, thus, monotony. The scroll is placed into a wooden case, which is decorated with motifs of Jewish ornament, carved by Ado Vabbe. Avoiding stylization in "national manner" Ado Vabbe did not make an attempt to imitate medieval Jewish miniatures, preferring mainly to be based on Renaissance art, gaining this way a great emotional effect. Some miniatures are carried out in picturesque manner, while the others are in real graphical manner. A whole range from these illustrations have been issued in Estonian art publications. The scroll itself is in the possession of the

reader. "Shir Hashirim" is worth of publishing as facsimile and the Center for Jewish Art could probably take interest in it.

Julius Genss propagated eagerly Jewish art. He made slides from his photographs, having them more than a thousand (they all got lost during war time). In February 1934 the exhibition "Jewish Art in Print and Picture" was arranged at Tartu on the initiative of Julius Genss and by the Tartu association "Society of Friends of the Jewish Scientific Institute, Estonia", which studied Jewish literature and history, The main stress was laid on applied art, while contemporary fine art was represented only by single samples. Julius Genss writes in his memoirs, "It is beyond doubt that Jewish art existed in ancient and medieval times. It is proved by all everyday and material culture. I delivered lectures on it, slides on the screen testify it ... It was necessary to prove the existence of Jewish art in our times. I myself had no doubts in it... In the course of years my library has been supplemented by a big Jewish department, which contained about 400 items. There were graphic albums, prints began to come in. The Production by S. Judovin was entirely represented". Julius Genss continues, "... to prove the existence of contemporary Jewish art is possible only by a relevant exhibition. I started the organizing work". As Julius Genss states in his reminiscences, he omitted painting because the transportation of paintings being expensive, and the artists would hardly have agreed to lend their valuable originals. Because of this, he decided in favour of graphics. Julius Genss began correspondence with artists, whereas he did not know them personally. But there were no refusals. This interesting correspondence got also lost during the years of the last war. Several hundred graphics sheets arrived. Julius Genss himself made passepartouts for them. Since the exhibition was to be a travelling one, all the exhibits went, according to Julius Genss, into two suitcases.

The exhibition was held at Tartu and in Tallinn in April and May in 1938, and in 1939 in Riga. It was not taken to other places because Julius Genss did not want to take any risk of losing the valuable collection due to the World War II, which had just broken out. Under war conditions Julius Genss failed to return the graphic sheets to the artists, and the exposition remained in his apartment when he evacuated to the rear. Yet, by a lucky chance, it partially survived. Julius Genss writes about it in his memoirs the following: "Having returned from evacuation I, after a few weeks, received a letter from unknown to me a professor of Tartu University. The latter said that having learned about my coming back, he wanted to let me know that he had retained about 50 of my books and an album on Jewish graphics. In fact he had to work at Rosenberg's headquarters, where part of the robbed treasures had been carried, and during his each visit he took along with him some books of my collection. Now he was asking me to take the books. About 15 of them were on Jewish art and the album included most prints of my collection of Jewish graphics. The professor was probably misled by the title of the album, which was "Viiralt".

Eduard Viiralt (1898 - 1954) is the greatest Estonian graphic artist of world standard and his sheets were highly priced. Julius Genss possessed a big collection of his engravings. He continues, "To the professor's sorrow, the sheets by Viiralt had been removed and replaced by Jewish graphics." In such a way the exhibition of Jewish graphics was preserved. Julius Genss presented his guests and acquaintances on their festive occasions with some sheets, some of them were missing from the beginning and because of that the collection is incomplete. Now it is in the possession of Julius Genss daughter in Moscow.

Now let's dwell on the exposition. In this connection Julius Genss writes in his memoirs: "Most numerous were represented the Polish artists, whose works I received from Paris, Warsaw and Vilnius. From USA arrived the works of eleven artists. The most prominent German graphic artist Herman Struck sent exhibits from Tel-Aviv, the most famous among them being the portrait of Albert Einstein executed in etching. From the artists of the Soviet Union the best represented was Salomon Judovin. The Vilnius Art School sent works by pupils. Kolnik delighted us with his engravings and illustrations to the fables by the

Rumanian origin writer Steinberg. From old masters were represented Israel's, Lieberman, but their works had little Jewish in them. Altman displayed Jewish ornaments ..."

It is interesting to follow Julius Genss' discussions about the exhibition: "The show was convincing, there could be no doubt it that we had to deal with the exhibition of Jewish art, it was national both in content and form.

This art could not come into being in the 19th century.... When at the beginning of the 20th century the Jewish artists who had come from "the Pall of Settlement" displayed interest and desire to create their own national art, they turned to the folk art of previous centuries. The foundation was partially laid by the aforementioned An-Sky. They started by copying the survived relics. The basic materials were ornaments on tombstones, wooden carvings, Hanukah lamps, paintings on synagogues, illuminated manuscripts.

The artists specifically modernized the distinctive Jewish attributes (Altman, Judovin), sometimes going to the extremes (Ryback), at times developing into a grotesque (Adler). The works are against the background of "Shtetl", winding roads, slanting houses, and "Shalom Aleichem" figures inhabiting them. The content is sometimes conveyed in a little exalted or naive manner (Mart Chagall), at times it is vulgarized by an empty gesticulation (Issachar ber Ryback, album "Dos Shtetl"). Many poorly talented artists vulgarized Jewish art. I like Chagall because I respect the sincerity of his production, I am fond of the realism of Judovin and Zylberberg (Zber). I consider the painting by Israels, depicting an old man at the threshold a masterpiece of Jewish art. I highly appreciate Friedländer who has come from Riga and is now working in America, and some others. And how many of them are still unknown to my ...

Jewish art burst into blossom as unexpectedly as it faded away. Flames are still glowing, but for how long? This art gave the Jews, a whole range of paintings and graphic sheets, which have not lost their vigour. It was born in "the Pall of Settlement", in Jewish ghettos, everywhere, where the Jews lived as a compact society. A Jewish writer and composer drew inspiration from there, and a playwright and an artist found their subjects there.

There is no "Pall of Settlement", no ghettos any more. Millions were killed by fascists, and the Jewish art, feeding on ghetto, the Jewish nation was to disappear.

The state of Israel remains. But Israel is the same Europe...

It is an attempt for equalization in everything, have its own army, its own ministers, own parliament, to be similar to other nations. It is normal, the Jews are not a second-rate nation in their own state. But to expect the rebirth of Jewish art from there is useless. It will be Jewish art, as it is French art in France, as it is Estonian art in Estonia."

These thoughts were written down in 1952, in a typical situation of this period of time, which, surely deepened the pessimistic mood, considering the merciless discrimination of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union in these years.

It is interesting to get acquainted with the attitude of the local Estonian art critic to the exhibition. At Tartu professor Sten Karling (1906 - 1987), the well-known Swedish art historian, who in the '30s headed the speciality of art history at Tartu University, wrote about the Jewish graphic art exhibition, held at the premises of art school "Pallas". In his short review in the local paper "Postimees" (Postman) he made an attempt to derive Jewish art from ancient East traditions, which he opposed to the solid and balanced classical Greek art. He writes, "... expressiveness, be it based on religious thought or feeling has greater Importance for it (Jewish art L.G.) than strict outer casing limited to form. One needs only to remind the Syrian paintings from early Christian era, where visional colouring has set its stamp upon it, to realize this essential contradiction between these two cognitions. And this is just this art charged with inner tension, not a harmonious way of analyzing held in check, which is predominating in the development of later generations." In his writings Karling brings forth the self-portrait by Mark Chagall, but special attention is paid to two graphic artists Artur

Kolnik and Fiszyl Zylberberg (Zber). According to Karling Zylberberg proceeds from the traditions of Polish art, especially from W. Skoczilas, and finally forms his manner in Paris. By the way, the Estonian National Museum, situated at Tartu, acquired from the exhibition only the woodcut "Notre Dame de Paris" (reproduced in the catalogue of the exhibition). Karling says that "the elaboration of Zylberberg's shapes and tone paintings make an impression by its technical mastership. From other artists Karling mentions Andre Rubinrot, coming from Poland.

An interesting review on the exhibition, held in Tallinn, is written by an outstanding art critic Hanno Kompus (1890-1974), which should be closely dealt with because it reveals the attitude of a highly erudited Estonian intellectual with wide mental outlook towards Jewish art.

In the beginning of his writing {published in local paper "Päevaleht" (Daily Newspaper)) Kompus confesses, "A bit sceptically I mount the steps in a house in Karja Street, where the Jewish Society is situated, and an exhibition titled "Jewish Graphic Art" was opened on Saturday.... Just now - already Jewish graphics.. now that the Jews still belong to various cultures, to which they, true enough, have in the course of times given valuable contribution. Isn't it a bit too early? I still feel scepticism when stepping over the threshold; the authors are the Jews, well, they can depict the Jews and Jewish milieu very well, but is the way of depicting, the style, where is the climate of this or other country, in art we say, art climate, is this Jewish? And, surely, this is important, this is essential." Yet Kompus begins to distinguish this "Jewish" which he did not expect to find at the exhibition. He writes, "It is surprising that on closer and longer examination the familiar features begin to reveal in these individual colourings or let us say, odour of cognition. You can smell and feel it, but it is not easy to put it into words because in its essence it is not simple and homogeneous.

First, there is a noticeable tendency towards technical skill.

The sense of virtuosity is typical of the Jews in other spheres as well. A lot of violin and piano virtuosos are the Jews. Moreover, it seems to me that very many artists are striving for elegance or better to say, for chic. Let us recall that the smartest ladies in our streets are the Jewish ladies. Even there, where an artist, such as Lichtenstein or Pacanovska on purpose keep away from elegant lines, avoid smuck in order to, by a certain roughness, or as if with some inaptness instill primitive immediate influence, even there the artists remain elegant. We do not see any calmness, simple lyrics or self-contained meditation or dreaming. No, we can say that all these sheets seek to exert influence, to suggest, to tell, to make an affect! They presume a spectator, and are eager to draw his attention to themselves, they are artistic.

This all does not mean that they lack feeling. But, and it seems to be very characteristic of them, as soon as a Jewish artist is captured by feelings, he turns them into an irony or grotesque."

In this connection Kompus mentions J. Schor and maintains that Kolnik is also ironical in his each sheet". He goes on, "This irony seems to be a typical feature penetrating everywhere. Is it due to the paradoxical situation of the Jews as a nation? Is it genuine Jewish?"

If we consider the Old Testament the genuine Jewish, and usually it is so, then one must admit that we do not find this at the present exhibition. The times of the Old Testament have gone for good, and do many Jews still use the Hebrew for communication?" Here Kompus maintains the position of the '20s. Now we know that the Hebrew is the official language in Israel and it has really become the language of communication. Kompus continues, "These artists here at the exhibition - they, at any rate, speak Yiddish". In this respect Kompus is right. "And if they don't speak Yiddish, but German, Polish, French or English, then still with an accent, and if not with an accent, but a good language, then, however, in their sentence, in their way of speaking there is some search for an effect, for ironical wittiness, for chic. The international artists from overseas and abroad have met in

Tallinn, and they turn out to be a Jewish company. The exhibition really displays Jewish graphics".

Kompus, like Karling brings forth Kolnik and Zylberberg, as well as Judovin, whom he places close to Russian modern wood carving school (Kravchenko). The expressionists are not appreciated by Kompus. It is understandable because expressionist tendencies were strong in Estonia in the '20s but in the '30s realistic trends became deeper, and Kompus, whose aesthetical views changed considerably, is in sympathy with the artists in whose production predominates realism.

Julius Genss underwent the same evolution. Benn, for instance, did not attract him, but at the same time he ordered a bookplate for the books in his library dealing with Jewish art, from Zylberberg. Turning over the leaves of the catalogue of the exhibition (Jewish Graphic Art, Tartu-Tallinn, April-May, 1938) we find that most numerous are represented Zylberberg by 33 and Kolnik by 20 works of art. The exposition was enriched by the expressionistic linocuts by Benn, stylish etchings by J. Adler and J. Lichtenstein, popular woodcuts by J. Friedländer and J. Schor, elegant Parisian-like sheets by F. Pacanovska and emotional engravings by A. Rubinrot.

Limited time does not allow the speaker to analyse the works of the exhibition in detail, but it is clear that the exhibition gives rather comprehensive survey about the Jewish graphic art at the end of the '30s.

In the post-war years Julius Genss did not deal with the problems of Jewish art any longer. He somehow became indifferent to this problem, which in the pre-war period had been the essence of his life. This is also explained by the fact why he, without regret, presented his friends and acquaintances with the works of his collection, among them with those from the portfolio of Jewish graphics.

As an art historian, Julius Genss was not very strong theorist, but, however, he was a man, who deeply appreciated art and understood it. He could with a passion typical of a collector, chase for a piece of art, which he had taken to, until it in the end found its way to his collection. He had a specific instinct to detect a rare book or a unique work of art in a place, where others indifferently passed by. He rummaged in the collections of the Baltic-German landowners, who as a result of the land reform in the beginning of the '20s were in need of money, forced to part with their collections. From there the valuable books and works of art reached on the shelves and walls of Julius Genss' apartment. Often he had no time for his family, he was either at his writing desk or in the dark-room developing a film from a foreign trip. Most of these valuables have got lost, some scraps are preserved in the collections of his children, the son and the daughter. But the activities of Julius Genss have not sunk into oblivion. Lately, the bibliographical publications of Russia ("Soviet Bibliography", Book. Investigations and Materials, etc.) have issued passages about his memoirs dealing with his activity as an art historian and collector. His bibliographical work "Materials on Estonian Art" is an indispensable source for local art historians.

Allow me to conclude my report with this optimistic note.