

Paper-cuts belong to one of the most interesting and beautiful branches of Jewish folkart. They were especially popular around the middle of the XIX century and even more so towards its end, throughout the Jewish communities of Poland and its neighbouring countries, Lithuania and Russia. But Jewish paper-cuts were also known in Central as well as in Northern Europe (Germany, Holland) and, with some differences in style, even among North African (Morocco) and Near Eastern Jewries.

While the disappearance of Polish Jewish paper-cuts had already set in at the beginning of this century, total destruction of the existing big centres of Jewish life in Europe during the Holocaust period erased even the scarce remains of that specific kind of popular art.

In the present preface, it is my intention to devote a few words to the art of Polish Jewish paper-cuts — an attempt which will draw us closer to that charming artistic branch and make it easier for us to understand Jehoshua Grossbard's works shown here.

Jewish paper-cuts, known in their different forms under various appellations such as "Misrach" and "Shiviti", "Shavuoth'l" and "Roisele", "Simchat Torah banner",

"Shir Hamalatche" — also called "Kimpetbrieflech" and the like, were typical examples. They do not belong to art "for art's sake" but were conceived to fulfill a specific need. The "Misrach" (East in Hebrew) as well as the "Shiviti" (so called with reference to the Biblical verse of Psalms XVI,8; "Shiviti adonai l'negdi tamid") were hanging on the Eastern wall of the house or the Synagogue (east as the direction of Jerusalem). But it was also made by the artists for the purpose of glorifying the name of God. This type of paper-cut among the most beautiful of the various kinds-would also serve as a wide-open field enabling the folk artist to give free expression to his inspiration and to his personal talents. It also gave him the possibility of representing various traditional Jewish motifs, characteristic of our religious-popular ornaments. In the centre of the paper-cut he would put the seven-branched candelabra—the Menorah—with the Holy Tablets of the Law, on top of them the Torah Crown, while around them, there would be the symbolic tiger, eagle, deer and lion. Sometimes, such a paper-cut would be adorned with all kinds of birds gathered around the Tree of Life or, with supernatural representations such as winged griffons, cherubs and the

Leviathan. This kind of composition would also, usually, comprise flowery or geometrical patterns. The "Shavuoth'l" and the "Roisele" belong to another category of paper-cuts of smaller dimensions. Their form—whether round or square—were mainly used for decorating windows during the Shavuoth Festival (Pentecost—Giving of the Law). During that holiday period, it was customary, in small Jewish towns of Poland, to decorate the doors of houses with greenery, while these charming small paper-cuts were pasted on the window-panes. Among the different motifs that would appear on them, we shall mention again the seven-branches candelabra, the Star of David, the Tree of Life, together with beasts, birds and flowers. These paper-cuts, ornaments of Jewish houses, were of course, well-known by their Christian neighbours too. As one of the stories has it, in this connection, one such "Shavuoth'l", the youthful work of the famous painter Maurycy Gottlieb (1856—1879) attracted the attention of a local Gentile landowner and art patron who later helped him to enrol into the Academy of Fine Arts of Cracow.

We know Simchat-Torah banners to be made in the form of coloured paper-cuts; "Shir Hamalechlech"

destined to guard both mother and her newly-born infant against the maleficence of Lilith and her demonic escorts; the "Mishenichnas Adar" paper-cuts, that were usually hung on the walls of houses of worship during the month of Adar; tablets for the "Counting of the Omer", etc.*)

The makers of Jewish paper-cuts were exclusively men, some of them pupils of the "Heder" and the "Yeshiva", but also some old men who carried out this art in their spare time. This occupation was always considered as "holy work" and it is therefore not surprising that it was executed not only with the best of the individual's talents, but also with love and appreciation for a creation bearing religious character and purpose.

The technique of making paper-cuts consisted of the following stages: a) folding into two of a sheet of paper of variable dimensions, b) drawing of the patterns, c) cutting of the drawings by means of a sharp

*) Reference is made to the catalogue "Exhibition of paper-cuts" presented by Ginza, the Circle for Jewish Folkart, Tel Aviv Museum, 1955 and to the catalogue "Jewish Paper-cuts", Ethnological Museum and Folklore Archives of the Haifa Municipality, 1959.

knife (or pen-knife), with the paper set on a wooden board. Upon unfolding the paper, a symmetrical "pattern" was obtained. There were, however, sometimes also some asymmetrical pieces. With this kind of technique, very often extremely delicate works were executed, that are impressive for their fine, filigree-like lines.

Nowadays, paper-cuts are hardly remembered. The custom disappeared so did its memory. Both the fragility and the delicacy of the material used for their manufacture — paper — are the reason why only a few specimens have still been preserved. It is therefore worthwhile to point out that a well known painter, such as Yehoshua Grossbard, has decided to go back to that particular artistic craft, and give new life to it.

Grossbard does not always use the technique practised by his forerunners; he works only with scissors, nor do his creations invariably submit to the rules of symmetry. Grossbard set on perpetuating the tradition of the old Jewish paper-cuts from Poland. If one of the characteristic features of folk-art is a certain continuity of old popular motifs, then certainly the seven-branches candelabra as well as the birds and the beasts in their heraldic representations — so typical

of Jewish ornamentation — are prominent among Grossbard's works, testifying to that very historical and artistic continuity.

Grossbard was born in Serock, near Warsaw. He left his hometown at an early age to Ciechanow and there studied at a Yeshiva. After several years spent learning there, he decided to learn drawing. There is little doubt that his study was influenced by his father, a painter of synagogues. While Grossbard was still a young boy, his father had found in him a faithful assistant for his craftsmanship that was at the same time a form of worship. Little wonder, therefore, that Jewish motifs should become familiar to his eyes and heart already from early infancy. After so many years he still draws on the riches of these patterns, elaborating on them transposing them on the canvas of his paintings or integrating them into his paper-cuts.

The warm reminiscences from the 'shtetele' receive an appropriate expression in the delicate creations of Yehoshua Grossbard.

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