

Through the Eyes of Witnesses: Visual Evidence of the Ghetto Life in Vilnius and Kaunas During World War II

Abstract

The article is focused on the works of art created, seen and discussed in Lithuania's largest ghettos in Vilnius and Kaunas as visual evidence of the ghetto life. The author explains the reasons why this phenomenon has been understudied, as well as why the important artefacts, including examples of design, have been overseen. The differences of intensity in artistic life in the Kaunas and Vilnius ghettos are discussed. The case study of a portrait of the composer, beloved music teacher and Vilnius Ghetto inmate Jacob Gersztein implemented by the painter Roza Suckever is examined as a case study in order to reveal the functioning of works of art in the ghetto and the importance of the image as a form of visual evidence for the contemporaries.

Keywords: design, documental source, Holocaust, ghetto, Lithuania, visual art.

This article is devoted to the phenomenon of works of art created, seen and discussed in Lithuanian largest ghettos in Vilnius (Vilne) and Kaunas (Kovna, Kovne). First, the key historical facts of these two ghettos should be recalled. The Vilnius Ghetto was established on 6 September 1941 in the Jewish quarters of the Old Town and liquidated on 23–24 September 1943. The Kaunas Ghetto, also called the Slobodke (in Yiddish) or

Vilijampolė (in Lithuanian) Ghetto after the city's district on the right bank of the River Neris, was founded on 10 July 1941. Jews were ordered to move in by 15 August 1941. Vilijampolė was isolated by the river from the central part of the city. It was also the area densely inhabited by Jewish workers, artisans, small businessmen. That were two main reasons why this particular area was chosen for the construction of the ghetto at the very beginning of the Nazi occupation. In 1943, the Kaunas Ghetto was converted into a concentration camp, and on 8 July 1944, its liquidation began.

In the so-called stabilisation period, which lasted from January 1942 until the autumn of 1943, mass annihilation campaigns were temporarily halted. During the stabilisation period in the Vilnius Ghetto, on 30 January 1942 the Writers and Artists' Society was established (Kruk 2002: 194–195),¹ and a theatre was founded at which the first premiere took place on 18 January 1942. Art exhibitions, lectures about art and more practical issues such as personal hygiene, diseases etc. also took place at the theatre's premises.² The ghetto's inhabitants had mixed feelings towards cultural activities. Some of them were indignant that so much fun was taking place in the presence of death. Yet the majority wanted a distraction from the dreary thoughts, and eagerly attended performances and concerts, which cannot be said about the lectures, which required concentration and intellectual efforts. Statistics about what people were reading also reflect the general mood, the will to relax and to escape from the brutal reality to the world of imagination. Among the most popular writers in the ghetto's library were the authors of high-suspense romantic and adventure novels by Edgar Wallace, Margaret Mitchell, Vicki Baum, Jules Verne, Karl May and Thomas Mayne Reid, as well as *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy and *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (Fishman 2017: 45). The latter was included in the index of books prohibited in Nazi Germany and occupied countries.

Artistic life in the Kaunas Ghetto was somewhat different, because visual art and design occupied a much more prominent place than in Vilnius. Besides, it is not so challenging to carry out research about the Kaunas Ghetto, as thanks to the Ältestenrat (The Council of the Elders) member Avraham Tory (originally Golub) quite a lot of artefacts have survived to this day. Tory was a lawyer and an outstanding figure within the pre-war Kaunas Jewish community. With the help of his assistant Pnina Sheinzon, whom he later married, Tory accumulated documents and artefacts testifying to the

¹ The Society's executive board consisted of the famous literary and book people Zelik Kalmanovich, Herman Kruk, Abraom Suckever and the artist Jacob Sher. The Society aimed to foster the intellectual traditions of Vilnius. Its main form of activity was lectures and discussions. The Society was supported by the Judenrat—financial subsidies were given and art works were bought. For example, the album *The Vilnius Ghetto* was purchased from Sher (Kostanian-Danzig, Rachel. *Spiritual Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto*. Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2004: 65).

² For more about the Vilnius Ghetto cultural activities see: Biber, Jevgenija and Kostanian, Rocha, and Rozina, Judita, eds. *Vilniaus geto afišos. Vilna Ghetto posters. Plakatin fun Vilner getto*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2006.

ghetto's life, and systematically kept a diary.³ Having put this material into five containers, he hid them away in several places. Three of these containers survived, and after the war were taken to Palestine via Poland and Bucharest.⁴ Today, the archive of Pnina and Avraham Tory is held in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Bearing in mind the amount of attention given by society and historians to the fate of Jews in the region defined by the influential American historian Timothy Snyder as the 'bloodlands',⁵ it is difficult to explain why the artistic work of the Vilnius and Kaunas Ghetto inmates still remains marginalised. The situation seems paradoxical, since the works of art by the artists who were active in the Kaunas Ghetto played a significant role in two recently held important exhibitions on the ghetto art: the show of portraits of ghetto inmates *Last Portrait: Painting for Posterity*, held in Yad Vashem in 2012,⁶ and *Art from the Holocaust*, a display of 100 works of art from Yad Vashem, organised in 2016 by Yad Vashem and the Deutsche Historisches Museum in Berlin on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of German-Israeli diplomatic relations.⁷ However, the paintings and drawings that were created in the Kaunas Ghetto were presented in both exhibitions as the works of individuals, not taking into consideration the different circumstances of life in each particular ghetto, where they were created, as well as the artists' place of birth and life before the Holocaust. Nor did Jacob Lipschitz (or Jokūbas Lipšicas in Lithuanian), or Josef Schlesinger or Ben Zion (Nolik) Schmidt become important names in the Holocaust art history after these exhibitions were held. Only the cases of two artists who survived the catastrophe — the talented Vilnius-born Samuel Bak, who chose to become an artist after the war, and the Liepaja-born survival Esther Lurie who was imprisoned in the Kaunas Ghetto — could be seen as an exception from this point of view. These two names are internationally renowned, and a separate wing dedicated to Samuel Bak's work was opened at the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum in Vilnius in the autumn of 2018. However, their fame does not contribute towards a better understanding of how important art was for the inhabitants of the ghettos in

³ Tory's diary is comprised of two volumes: *These Are Laws – In the German Style* and *The Slobodkė Ghetto 1942*, designed by the artists imprisoned in the ghetto, above all, Fritz Gadiel. The diary was published in Hebrew in 1983, in English in 1990 (Tory, Avraham. *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary*. Foreword by Gilbert, Martin; commentaries by Porat, Dina. Harvard University Press, 1990), and in Lithuanian in 2000 (Tory, Avraham. *Kauno getas: diena po dienos*. Foreword by Sužiedėlis, Saulius; commentaries by Porat, Dina. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2000).

⁴ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/avraham-tory>; seen on 15 June, 2019.

⁵ The term became very popular after the publication of Snyder's book *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010); in Lithuanian: idem, *Kruvinos žemės. Europa tarp Hitlerio ir Stalino* (2011).

⁶ See the exhibition's printed catalogue (*Last Portrait: Painting for Posterity*, ed. by Eliad Moreh-Rosenberg, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Art Museum, 2012) and information on the website of Yad Vashem: https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/last_portrait/index.asp; accessed on Febr. 1, 2020.

⁷ See, for example, the trilingual catalogue in German, English and Hebrew: Moreh-Rosenberg, Eliad and Smerling, Walter, eds. *Kunst aus dem Holocaust. האושהמה תונמה. Art from the Holocaust*. Wienand Verlag, 2016.

Lithuania, or in what kind of circumstances it was created. We still lack a wider and more complex overview of Jewish artistic life and the life of Jewish artists during the Nazi occupation in Ostland (Reichskommissariat Ostland or RKO), that included not only Lithuania, but also Latvia, Estonia and western Byelorussia.

One of the obstacles for accessing the works of art and understanding the legacy of the artists imprisoned in Lithuanian ghettos is the fact that the works are scattered in many different institutions: some of them are held in Lithuania, mainly in the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. The Tory collection, as has been mentioned already, was transferred to Yad Vashem in Israel. Several works by Esther Lurie from Kaunas and Alexander Bogen from Vilnius are kept at the Ghetto Fighters House in Lohamei HaGeta'ot kibbutz in Western Galilee. Some works are part of private collections in Israel and the United States. Even in Lithuania, one must dig for evidence of artistic life in the ghettos in different collections. For example, besides the aforementioned Samuel Bak's ghetto period drawings, the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum holds a small bundle of Roza (Rochl) Suckever's (Suck(i)ewer; Suckewer-Uszajewa) drawings and watercolours as well as posters created by her and other artists. The posters are part of the collection of the ghetto theatre's playbills, which is divided between the Museum and the Lithuanian Central State Archive (Biber at al 2006). It is only possible to say something about artistic activities in the Vilnius Ghetto by having all of these artefacts at one's disposal. In order to reconstruct history, all of them are crucial; however, the works and personality of, for instance, Roza Suckever, remain almost unknown outside Lithuania and Poland. In Poland, she is known mainly due to the fact that she along with a few other visual artists such as Szejna Efron, Bencion (Bencje) Michtom, belonged to the Yung Vilne literary group, which was established in the late 1920s to create and promote modern Yiddish art.⁸ Her life in the ghetto and fate afterwards remain understudied.

Another reason behind the lack of interest in the artistic heritage of the ghettos, at least in Lithuania, is the fact that none of the ghetto artists has become part of the national art discourse. All of the influential and most famous Jewish artists either moved abroad before the outbreak of the war and thus escaped death (for example, Neemiya Arbit Blatas from Kaunas who settled in New York in 1940), or retreated into the depths of the Soviet Union (for example, Rafael Chvoles from Vilnius), or were killed during the first days of the round-up of Jews (for example, Bencion Michtom in Vilnius or Zalé (Zalman) Bekeris in Kaunas).

Among the early victims of the ghetto killing campaigns were probably the most 'Lithuanian' of the Jewish artists, Černé Percikovičiūtė and Chaimas Mejeris Fainšteinas, who had both been well integrated into the Kaunas art scene and local artistic community before the war. In the meantime, entries about Vilnius Ghetto artists such as

⁸ See for comparison Lisek, Joanna. *Jung Wilne – żydowska grupa artystyczna* [Yung Vilne – Jewish Artistic Group]. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005.

Liza Daiches or Judel Mut, as well as the Kaunas Ghetto artists Peter Gadiel and Josef Schlesinger, are missing even in *The Dictionary of Lithuanian Artists*, which was published as recently as 2013 (Šatavičiūtė-Natalevičienė 2013). In other words, they are still non-existent in the history of Lithuanian art. The reasons can be clarified quite easily. Gadiel and Schlesinger arrived in Kaunas on the eve of World War II. They have been seen as accidental bystanders of Lithuanian cultural history, as their stay in Kaunas was limited to just a few months before the Nazi occupation and their imprisonment in the ghetto. As for Daiches and Mut, they were very young, and so they did not leave a strong imprint on artistic life in Vilnius. Moreover, Vilnius was part of Poland during the interwar period, and so the conviction that Jewish art created in the city during the 1920s and 1930s does not belong to Lithuanian artistic heritage is still present, even if Polish art from the same period is accepted as an integral part of the local heritage. Nevertheless, the situation is slowly changing. An extremely valuable contribution towards the exploration of art history from the Holocaust period is the 2015 book by Aistė Niunkaitė-Račiūnienė on the legendary model of Vilnius produced by the ghetto inmates (Niunkaitė-Račiūnienė 2015). It is a pioneering work, which reveals many interesting facts about cultural activities in the Vilnius Ghetto and its participants.

Among the artists in the ghettos who survived until the stabilisation period in 1942, Jacob Szer, Roza Suckever and Uma (original name Fania) Olkienicka-Le(h)rer were particularly active in Vilnius (Fig. 1, 2, 3). All three were local artists who were well known in the Vilnius Jewish cultural community and who were already becoming known outside the Jewish milieu. For example, on the eve of the war, Szer held a solo exhibition at the Vilnius City Art Museum. Incidentally, his works were still at the museum when the Nazis occupied the city, and because of his Jewish signature the works became noticed by Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce or ERR) and were subsequently confiscated. Some believe that these paintings, which unfortunately were never photographed or registered in any other way, along with the works of other Jewish artists including Rafael Chvoles and Bencion Michtom from Vilnius, and Zalmanas Bekeris, Chaimas Mejeris Fainšteinas, Esther Lurie and Černė Percikovičiūtė from Kaunas,⁹ could have been moved to the ERR centre in Berlin (Klimavičius 2011: 92). In short, the final fate of Szer's work is unknown.

All three of the above-mentioned artists were dedicated fosterers of Yiddish culture. Olkienicka worked at the YIVO Jewish Scientific Institute where she headed its Esther Rachel Kaminska's Theatre Museum. Szer, as well as Suckever, as mentioned before, belonged to the milieu of the modernist Yung Vilne group, even if he was not its member. All three firmly believed in leftist ideas, and were influenced by social utopianism, although it was only Suckever who did not avoid open social critique in her work.

⁹ See for comparison the list of art works of AG 'Litauen', Lithuanian Central State Archive, f. R-633, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 120-121 and the list of Jewish artists artworks in the depository of the Vilnius Art Museum, Archive of Lithuanian Art Museum, f. 2, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 1-2.

Olkienicka was more interested in graphic design, and Szer won fame as a painter of romantic views of the Old Vilnius.

In the Kaunas Ghetto, Peter Gadiel, Jacob Lipschitz (Jokūbas Lipšicas), Esther Lurie and Josef Schlesinger were particularly active. Among them, only Lipschitz was a native of Kaunas (Fig. 4). He was an alumnus of the Kaunas Art School and, from 1935, a member of the Lithuanian Artists' Union, taking part in the Union's group exhibitions and, in January 1940, holding a solo exhibition at the Union's premises. Lipschitz was killed, and the other three survived. The survivors arrived from other countries and by a turn of fate chose to travel to Lithuania on the eve of the war, where they found themselves at the epicentre of the Holocaust's mayhem.

Of Latvian descent, Esther Lurie's family lived in Palestine from 1934. In 1939, she travelled to Kaunas via France, Belgium and Holland to visit her relatives, where she settled down and began to attend classes at the local art school (Ramonienė 2006: 116). The young and active artist got involved in the local movement of female artists, became close to the Society of Female Artists of Lithuania and took part in its first exhibition in a still independent Lithuania in January 1940. Asked by the Ältestenrat to meticulously document daily life in the Kaunas Ghetto (Fig. 5), Lurie created numerous drawings while living there, and in 1944, she was sent to the Stutthof and then the Leibitsch camp. She survived and returned to Palestine via Italy and died in Tel Aviv in 1998.

Josef Schlesinger was an alumnus of the Prague Academy of Arts, where he had enrolled in 1938. Soon after he began his studies, in the spring of 1939 he was forced to flee the Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia with his parents. In Kaunas, Josef's father opened a textile workshop, while he continued his art studies in Lithuania and married Sarah Siegel. In August 1941, he found himself in the Kaunas Ghetto with his wife and parents. He was offered work at a toy workshop founded by Gadiel. Acting on the Ältestenrat's instructions, Schlesinger together with other artists documented the ghetto life and drew portraits of the Ältestenrat's members and other inmates (Fig. 6).¹⁰ When the ghetto was liquidated, he was sent to Dachau. Schlesinger survived and returned to Prague, where he finished his studies and worked as a painter and the head of several municipal art galleries.

Gadiel and his wife Rene Silverman fled from their native Germany, where they were under the threat of repressions both as Jews and as members of the Communist Party. Having stayed in the Netherlands and England for some time, when the Battle of France was over and the Battle of Britain was about to start in perhaps the late spring of 1940, they left England for Lithuania and joined the Rene's relatives in Kaunas. Lithuania was occupied by the Soviets soon after their arrival, but this was not a problem for Gadiel's family. Having received the nickname Fritz, a pet form of Friedrich and a slang

¹⁰ The majority of his works are held in the Yad Vashem collection, but recently a gallery of Vilijampolė Ghetto Jewish policemen portraits was found at the Lithuanian Central State Archive.

word meaning a German that was very popular during and after World War I, Peter got involved in the activities of the local branch of Agitprop, a communist propaganda organisation. Relations with the Communists and other political activists, together with his extraordinary artistic skills, ensured him an important position in the ghetto, where he founded and ran the so-called art workshop, thus saving the lives of some artistically gifted ghetto inmates who were unfit for heavy physical work. Peter and Rene survived, but their son Raanan, who was born in the ghetto, was killed during the so-called 'Children's Aktion'. According to Gadiel's biographers, he studied at the Bauhaus. However, so far the author of the article has not succeeded in finding his name among the former art school's student lists. In any case, it is obvious that he worked in a similar manner as the Bauhaus alumni, knew the principles of Constructivism, took an interest in typography and, in general, was an excellent graphic designer (Fig. 7, 8).

Today it is practically impossible to establish the authorship of the surviving constructivist-style artefacts from the Kaunas Ghetto, but it is not critically important if it is the work of Gadiel himself or any other artist from his group, as it is hardly possible that without Gadiel's organisation and supervision the information and direction signs and symbols of the ghetto's various services would have ever been created. According to contemporaries from the time, efforts to improve the ghetto's aesthetic environment had a positive psychological effect. A unique common work produced by Gadiel and Tory was a three-dimensional book documenting the ghetto's history, an unusual and impressive example of the pop-up technique. A copy is held in the permanent exhibition at Yad Vashem, and the original is kept in the museum's depository.

Witnesses to the history of the Vilnius Ghetto also confirm the importance of public art. In many memoirs, the décor of the sports ground is mentioned (Fig. 9). Without knowing the context, it is difficult to understand the value of these primitive drawings, but as we imagine in what poverty and distress the Vilnius Ghetto inmates lived, this modest attempt to improve their living conditions and decorate the environment acquires extraordinary meaning and significance. The logo of the Vilnius Ghetto, created by Emanuel Lubocki, as well as the famous collection of the ghetto cultural posters, regain a particular meaning and value in this context as well. That has been discussed by many authors before me (Jevgenija Biber, David Katz, Rocha Kostanian, Markas Petuchauskas, Judita Rozina a. o.; also drama *Ghetto* (1983) by Joshua Sobol based on the history of Vilnius' Ghetto Theatre could be mentioned).

There was a lack of everything in the ghetto: food, clothes and medical supplies. Artistic materials and tools were hardly a basic necessity. In Kaunas it was somewhat simpler to obtain these things, as paint, paintbrushes, canvas, wood and gypsum were needed for the ghetto's production activities. According to the librarian and ghetto chronicler Herman Kruk, in Vilnius artistic materials were supplied to Jakub Szer, who painted portraits and romantic views of the city's Old Town on commission from the Nazis (Kruk 2002: 189, 321). In special cases, paint was provided to other artists as well, for

example to Roza Suckever, who, among other works created the design and illustrations for the memorable Abraham Suckever poem *Un Azoj Zolstu Rejdn Cum Josem — or So Tell It To An Orphan* — which was calligraphically written by her on a separate sheet of high quality paper.¹¹ However, the largest and most significant part of Suckever’s surviving artistic heritage are her portraits of the ghetto inmates. It was in line with the general intention of the ghetto’s artists to document the ghetto’s life and its inhabitants as consistently as possible. During ‘richer’ periods, Suckever used paint (mainly acquerrel), whilst in ‘meagre’ periods, she had to do with pencils and sepia. All works of art, even the most modest ones, found a viewer in the ghetto, some of them becoming notable events in the community’s life. For example, Suckever’s drawings of Jacob Gersztein (Yankev Gerstein) are described in detail by several of the ghetto’s chroniclers.

Gersztein was a well-known music teacher, composer and children’s choirmaster who was popular with parents and children alike. He passed away on 27 September 1942 after a short illness. His physical state, of course, was aggravated by depression, so for many ghetto inmates the loss of Gersztein seemed even bigger — one more deep injustice which they got to bear. His death is mentioned in many of the ghetto’s diaries. It was recorded by Herman Kruk (Kruk 2002: 363-364),¹² commented upon by Grigorij Shur (Šuras 1997: 84) and lamented by the teenager Isaac Rudaszewski who described Gersztein as a beloved and respected teacher, a family friend and a moral authority for young people (Rudaševskis 2018: 104-107). According to the historian of Jewish literature Mindaugas Kvietkauskas who studied and translated Rudaszewski’s diary from Yiddish to Lithuanian:

“The author of the diary emotionally identified with him, because of his personal charm, his sincerity, valour and the values that he naturally imparted to the children. In the words of the fourteen-year-old, these values are named, simply but consciously, national pride, love for the native language, music and poetry. Without these, the teacher could not imagine his and other people’s future, thus keeping them alive” (Rudaševskis 2018: 20).

At Gersztein’s memorial service shiva held on 4 October 1942 in the hall of a former Jewish bank that had been transformed into the ghetto theatre, Isaac was listen-

¹¹ This artefact is kept in the collection of Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. The author of the article is grateful to the museum’s curators Iona Murauskaitė and Irina Nikitina for the information. According to Murauskaitė, the authorship was suggested by the researcher of the Yung Vilne group Joanna Lisek.

¹² Kruk recalled the event in detail, pointing out that “a delegation of literati, consisting of Kalman[owicz], Kr[uk], Blacher, L. Rudnicka, and Bergolski” stood at the bed of the dying Gersztein, and the artist Rachel Suckever drew him. That drawing, according to note no 50 in the English translation of Kruk’s diary, was reproduced in the first volume of the memoir by Shmerke Kaczerginski *Khurbn Vilne* [The destruction of Vilna] (1947: 80–81). However, this information is misleading, since the reproduction presents the same portrait, which survived and now belongs to the collection of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum in Vilnius. It was created by Roza Suckever a month later after the death of Gersztein on the occasion of his *shloshim*.

ing to solemn speeches, Gersztein's favourite songs sung by the renowned singer Luba Levicka and a new poem in memory of the deceased by the talented poet Abraham Suckever. Also, he was looking at the images of the dead Gersztein created by Roza Suckever (Rudaševskis 2018: 109). There were two of them. "A violinist performs several compositions. I am looking at the portrait of the deceased. He seems to be asleep, lulled to sleep by the melody..." Isaac confessed (Rudaševskis 2018: 109).

The surviving image of Gersztein, a modest drawing in sepia, was created by Suckever for the occasion of his *shloshim*, the thirty-days-after-burial memorial which was celebrated on 27 October 1942 in the ghetto theatre (Fig. 10). Gersztein's portrait by Suckever is an impressive visual document, based on the sketches drawn from life and addressed to those at time who did not participate in the depicted scene but who desperately needed to feel that they were witnesses of it, and future generations, namely, us. Both then and now, the viewer is stunned by the likeness of the portrait and the portrayed, the image and its model — what German art historian and visual culture theoretician Hans Belting calls 'likeness and presence'.¹³ The distance that an artwork provides is very important: it gives particular value to the personality, subject, event depicted in art work, makes it single and unrepeatable. In 1942 and before, there was so much actual death around that it often no longer seemed unique or significant. A work of art helped to realise the uniqueness of the depicted event, and transferred the experience of the daily life to another level, rendering it exclusive, enriching it with meaning and nobility. Certainly, visual art could not offer such intense moments of consolation and joy as music, theatre or literature for people brutally torn off from their usual life and imprisoned in an alien environment, constantly undergoing spiritual and physical suffering, living in poverty, contempt and constant fear of death, but it was also necessary and irreplaceable. Referring to Gersztein's portrait, we can once again underline the importance of the practical use of art in the conditions of the ghetto life.

The collection of posters for the ghetto's cultural events includes an announcement for Gersztein's *shloshim*, which, as already mentioned before, was held in the ghetto theatre on 27 October 1942 (Fig. 11). It is written in the skilled hand of a professional, obviously one of the ghetto's artists. It is an elegant calligraphic poster, by its form sending a message about the respect of the evening's organisers for the deceased and his work. According to Rudaszewski, who read his school essay about Gersztein during the event, "the hall was crammed with people" (Rudaševskis 2018: 124). The assembled soaked up the speakers' words and listened emotionally to the songs performed by Abraham Slipe's choir. Isaac was deeply moved by the prophecy of his teacher, Baruch Lubocki, who said that it was not until after the war that Gersztein's loss would be properly comprehended: "We don't know what life after the war will look like,

¹³ See for comparison Belting, Hans. *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

but we know for sure that the place of teacher Gersztein remains empty and nobody can replace him. And it is not until after we manage to restore our life that we will truly realise how great this loss has been” (Rudaševskis 2018: 125). Music, beautiful and meaningful words, and the feeling of togetherness along with such details as an artistic portrait of the deceased and a beautiful poster inviting people to the event helped the ghetto’s inhabitants to feel dignified in the dehumanising reality of life. These artefacts clearly demonstrated that every single human being and every single life was unique, valuable and significant even in a world, which tried to neglect that sentiment.

Gersztein’s portrait survived in one of the ghetto’s hiding places, where along with other finds discovered after the war it was handed over to the newly created Jewish Museum in Vilnius (Fig. 12). The Museum also had Suckever’s pre-war painting *Homeless Boy* (circa 1939), a moving image of a street child, clearly showing that Suckever was deeply concerned about the wrongs suffered by the ill-fated. In the midst of Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign, when the Jewish Museum was closed in 1949, Gersztein’s image found itself in the Revolution Museum of the Lithuanian SSR, as it was seen as a visual document, not a work of art, and *Homeless Boy* was given to the Lithuanian Art Museum. These two artefacts by the same artist were reunited in a single collection after 1989, when the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum was founded in Vilnius.

Gersztein’s portrait is an excellent proof that an image created by an artist is a kind of memory capsule, bringing us closer to the reality behind the image that inspired its creation. An image or a group of cognate images, can be easily turned into a personalised story, or at least its rudiment. That is why images have the power to kindle the imagination, which is indispensable in bringing the time of ‘others’ closer to the present. Photographs are not enough for this purpose. Works of art born in the conditions of dehumanising life are particularly powerful, as we see them as an attempt to withstand the pressure from the environment, to retain personal dignity and identity. No less interesting is the informational layer contained in the images, allowing us to realise the circumstances of their creation — in this case, the reality of the Holocaust victims. In other words, art created in ghettos is not just art, and it pertains not only to Jewish memory. It deserves to be more visible, more appreciated and more deeply understood. All manifestations and forms of totalitarian domination which humanity faced in the 20th century, either exerted by the Nazis or the communists, including intimidation, restrictions, torture, prisons and labour camps, radically changed the life of both the victims and the witnesses. In other words, art such as this, signals to us about such situations, becomes their authentic proof, and encourages and helps us to revise them.

In the presence of an artwork that was born under the conditions of terror, its aesthetical value becomes less significant and is measured differently, as the very fact of the emergence/birth of a work of art in extremely difficult conditions becomes most important. Yet, the works in which we see a spark of talent and perceive creativity affect us most deeply. It does not necessarily have to be an artist of Felix Nussbaum’s

scale. No less powerful are Samuel Bak's childish drawings made in the Vilnius Ghetto or Jacob Lipschitz's modest works from the Kaunas Ghetto. These drawings reflect the double function of art very well; we accept them both as the evidences of artistic talent and the visual documents of particular situation, the time of 'others'.

To take Bak's case, his drawings, first of all, testify to his attempts to escape from reality. They present a talented child's imaginary world, a world in which we recognise visions inspired by the books he read and the impressions of his former peaceful and normal life (Fig. 13). Interestingly, in those rare cases when Bak depicted the actual reality — the ghetto boys in rags, a tattered old woman, a roundup or tenants in a crammed room — his individual style would change (Fig. 14). It seems as if the boy's hand is constrained by the misery and the necessity to look for images yet undiscovered by other artists. An identical phenomenon related to the horror of reality surpassing imagination, and the inability to refer to any iconographic tradition, has been noticed by other researchers of art created in extreme conditions or as a result of traumatic experience (Barskova 2012: 546).

The author of the article would like to conclude with a cityscape by Jacob Lipschitz depicting the panorama of a modest suburb in Kaunas, which became the central part of the ghetto under the Nazis (Fig. 15). The value of this artistically rather insignificant work is created by its documentary value, our knowledge of the circumstances and the context of its emergence. In other words, it demonstrates that the Holocaust artworks are very often not self-sufficient, existing above all as an indexical reference to historical reality which we are unable either to fully comprehend or logically explain. However, there are artefacts, which have power to establish a particularly strong emotional link connecting us with that reality, and not allowing it to drift away.

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The List of Figures

- Fig. 1 A page from a passport with a photo, issued to Jacob (Jankiel) Szer in 1916 in Vilnius. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius
- Fig. 2 Spread of a foreign passport with photo, issued to Roza Suckever (Róża Suckiewerówna) in 1928 in Vilnius. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius
- Fig. 3 Spread of a passport with photo, issued to Fania (later Uma) Olkienicka in 1926 in Vilnius. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius
- Fig. 4 Jacob Lipschitz (Jokūbas Lipšicas). Self-portrait. 1943. Watercolour on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel
- Fig. 5 Esther Lurie. Self-portrait. Before 1944. Ink on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel
- Fig. 6 Josef Schlesinger. Self-portrait. 1943. Ink on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel
- Fig. 7 Calendar for the Kaunas' Ghetto Jewish Police Unit designed and produced in the Ghetto's Graphic Workshop established and directed by Peter 'Fritz' Gadiel in 1943. Lithuanian National Museum
- Fig. 8 Kaunas Ghetto Jewish Police and construction unit arm bands designed and produced in the Ghetto's Graphic Workshop established and directed by Peter 'Fritz' Gadiel. Lithuanian National Museum and Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel.
- Fig. 9 Vilnius Ghetto courtyard at Strashun 6 with a wall decoration on a sporting theme. Before 1943. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius
- Fig. 10 Roza Suckever. Dead Man: Portrait of Jakob Gersztein. 27 October, 1942. Sepia on paper. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius
- Fig. 11 Jakob Gersztein's 27 October, 1942 shloshim poster. Watercolour and Indian Ink on paper. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius
- Fig. 12 Portrait of Jakob Gersztein by Roza Suckever, among other Jewish cultural heritage items collected during the summer of 1944 from the ghetto's hiding places. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius
- Fig. 13 Samuel Bak. An Artist. Before 1944. Watercolour on paper. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius
- Fig. 14 Samuel Bak. A Roundup in the Ghetto, drawing from Pinkas. Ca 1943. Pencil on paper. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius
- Fig. 15 Jacob Lipschitz (Jokūbas Lipšicas). Krikščiuikaičio Street, Slobodka. 1943. Watercolour on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel

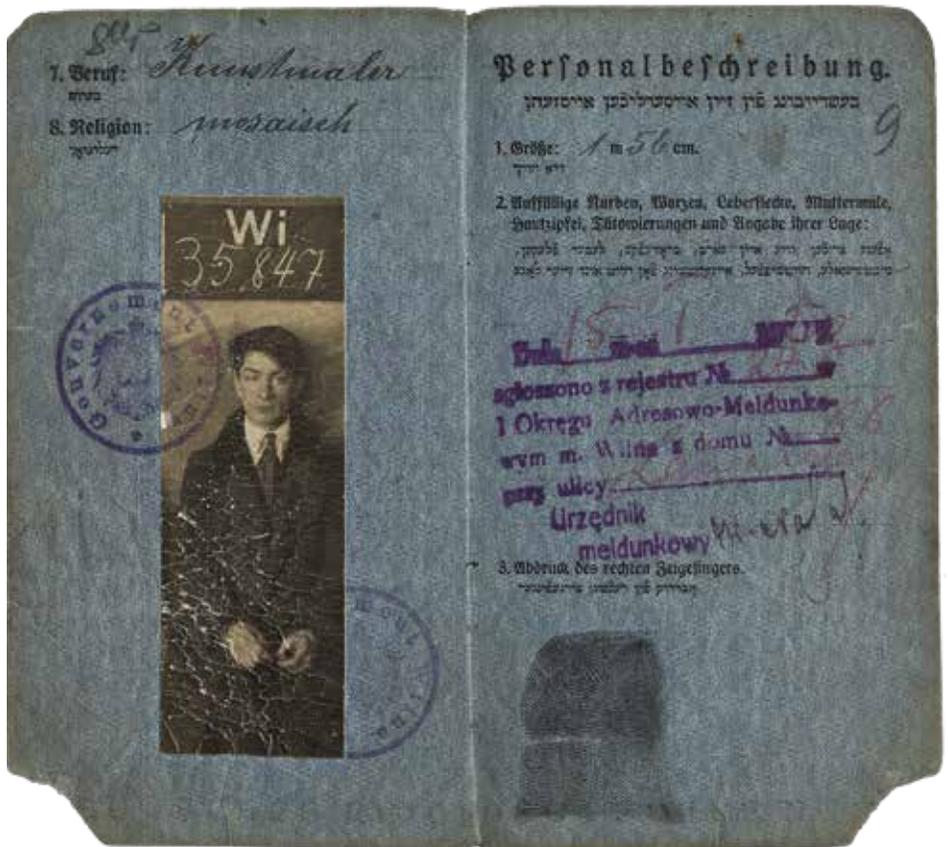


Fig. 1. A page from a passport with a photo, issued to Jacób (Jankiel) Szer in 1916 in Vilnius. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius



Fig. 2. Spread of a foreign passport with photo, issued to Roza Suckewer (Róża Suckiewerówna) in 1928 in Vilnius. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius



Fig. 3. Spread of a passport with photo, issued to Fania (later Uma) Olkienicka in 1926 in Vilnius. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius

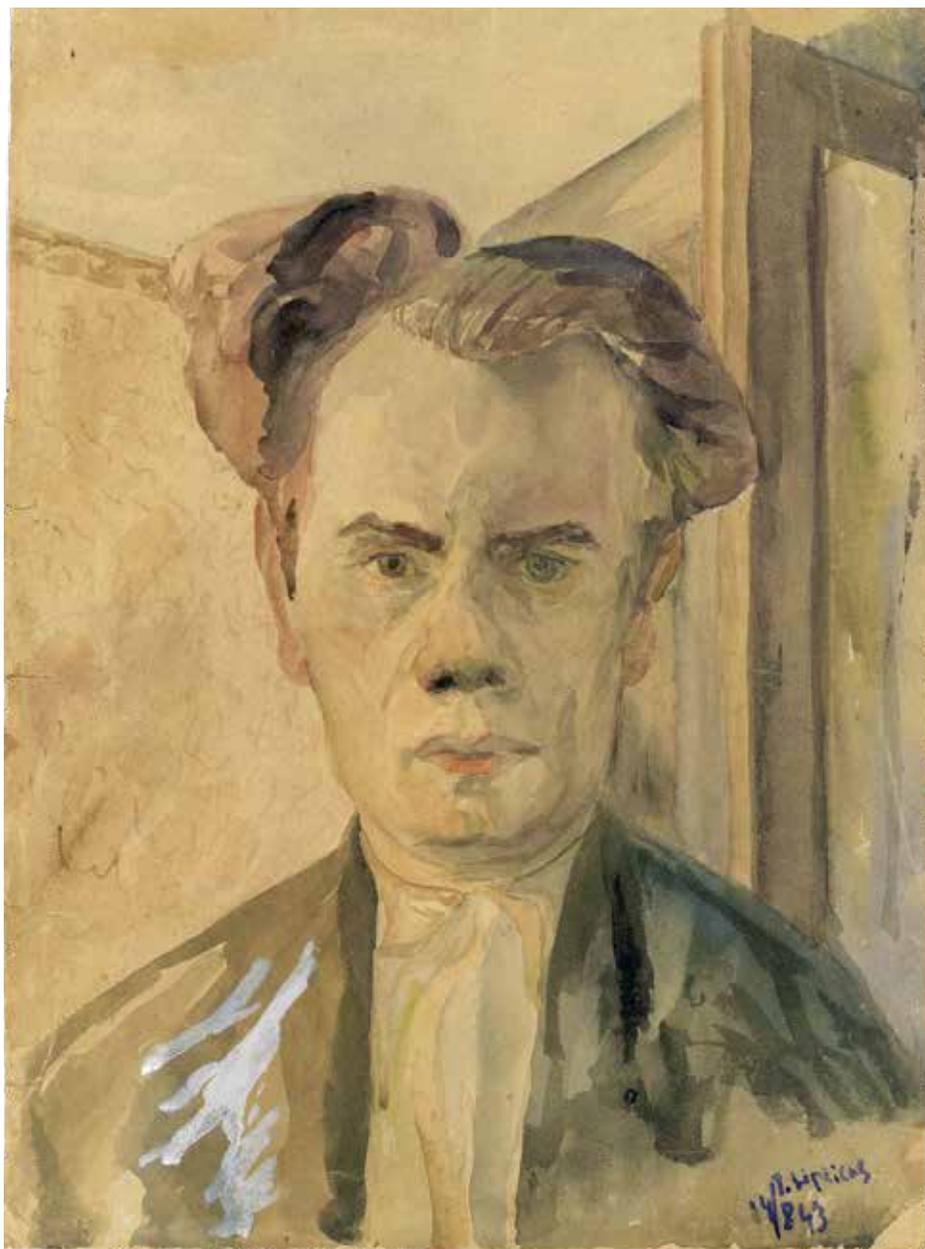


Fig. 4. Jacob Lipschitz (Jokūbas Lipšicas). Self-portrait. 1943. Watercolour on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel

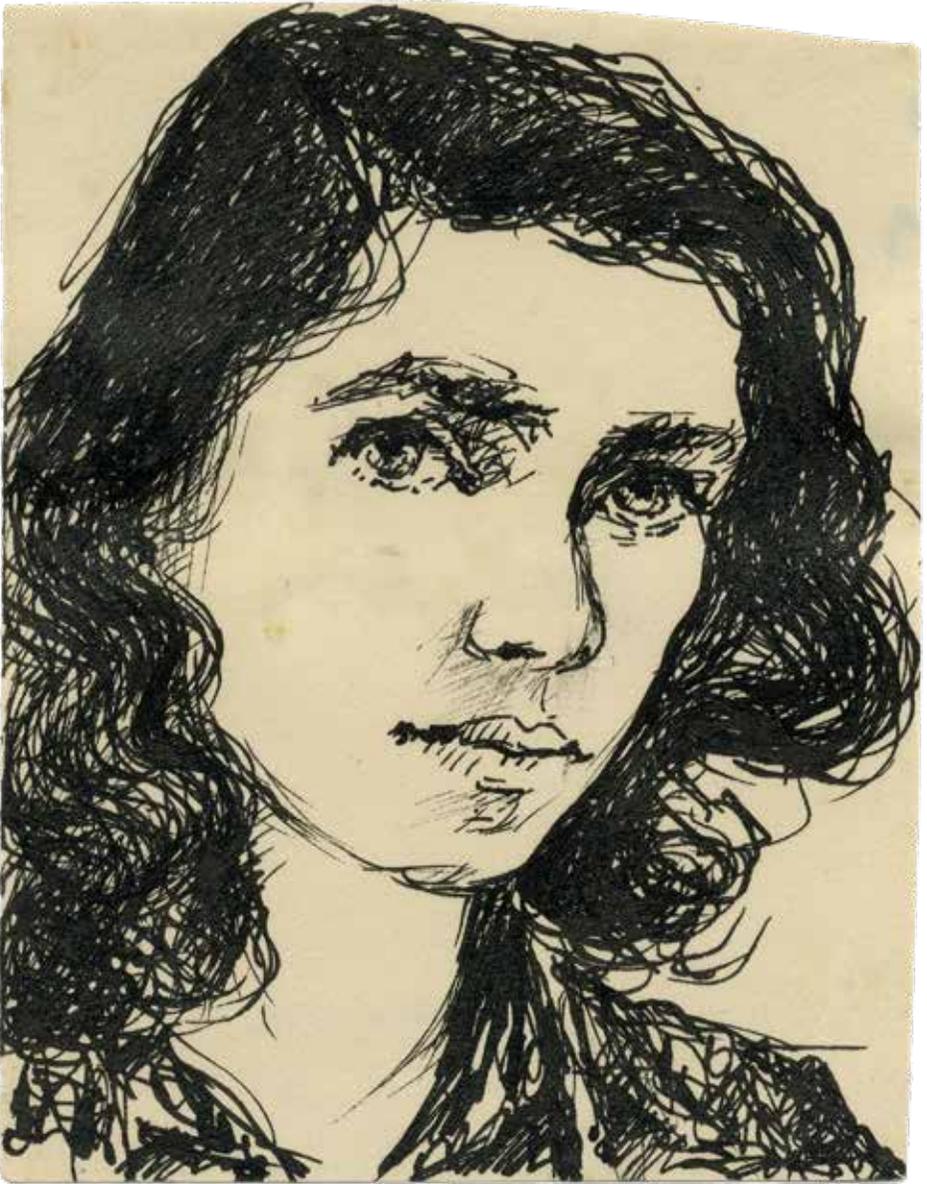


Fig. 5. Esther Lurie. Self-portrait. Before 1944. Ink on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel



Fig. 6. Josef Schlesinger. Self-portrait. 1943. Ink on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel



Fig. 7. Calendar for the Kaunas' Ghetto Jewish Police Unit designed and produced in the Ghetto's Graphic Workshop established and directed by Peter 'Fritz' Gadiel in 1943. Lithuanian National Museum



Fig. 8. Kaunas Ghetto Jewish Police and construction unit arm bands designed and produced in the Ghetto's Graphic Workshop established and directed by Peter 'Fritz' Gadiel. Lithuanian National Museum and Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel.



Fig. 9. Vilnius Ghetto courtyard at Strashun 6 with a wall decoration on a sporting theme. Before 1943. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius

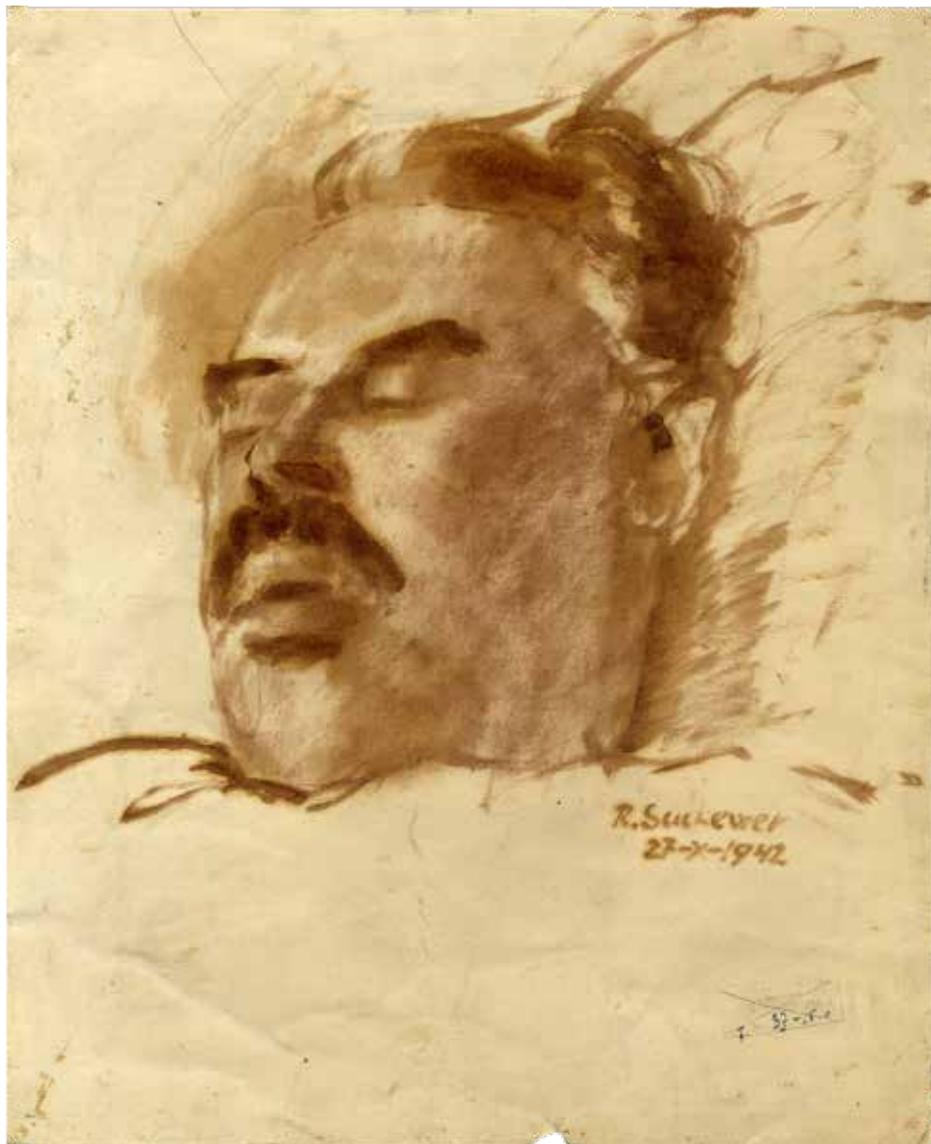


Fig. 10. Roza Suckever. *Dead Man: Portrait of Jakob Gersztejn*. 27 October, 1942. Sepia on paper. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius



Fig. 11. Jakob Gersztein's 27 October, 1942 shloshim poster. Watercolour and Indian Ink on paper. Lithuanian Central State Archive, Vilnius



Fig. 12. Portrait of Jacob Gersztein by Roza Suckever, among other Jewish cultural heritage items collected during the summer of 1944 from the ghetto's hiding places. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius



Fig. 13. Samuel Bak. *An Artist*. Before 1944. Watercolour on paper. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius

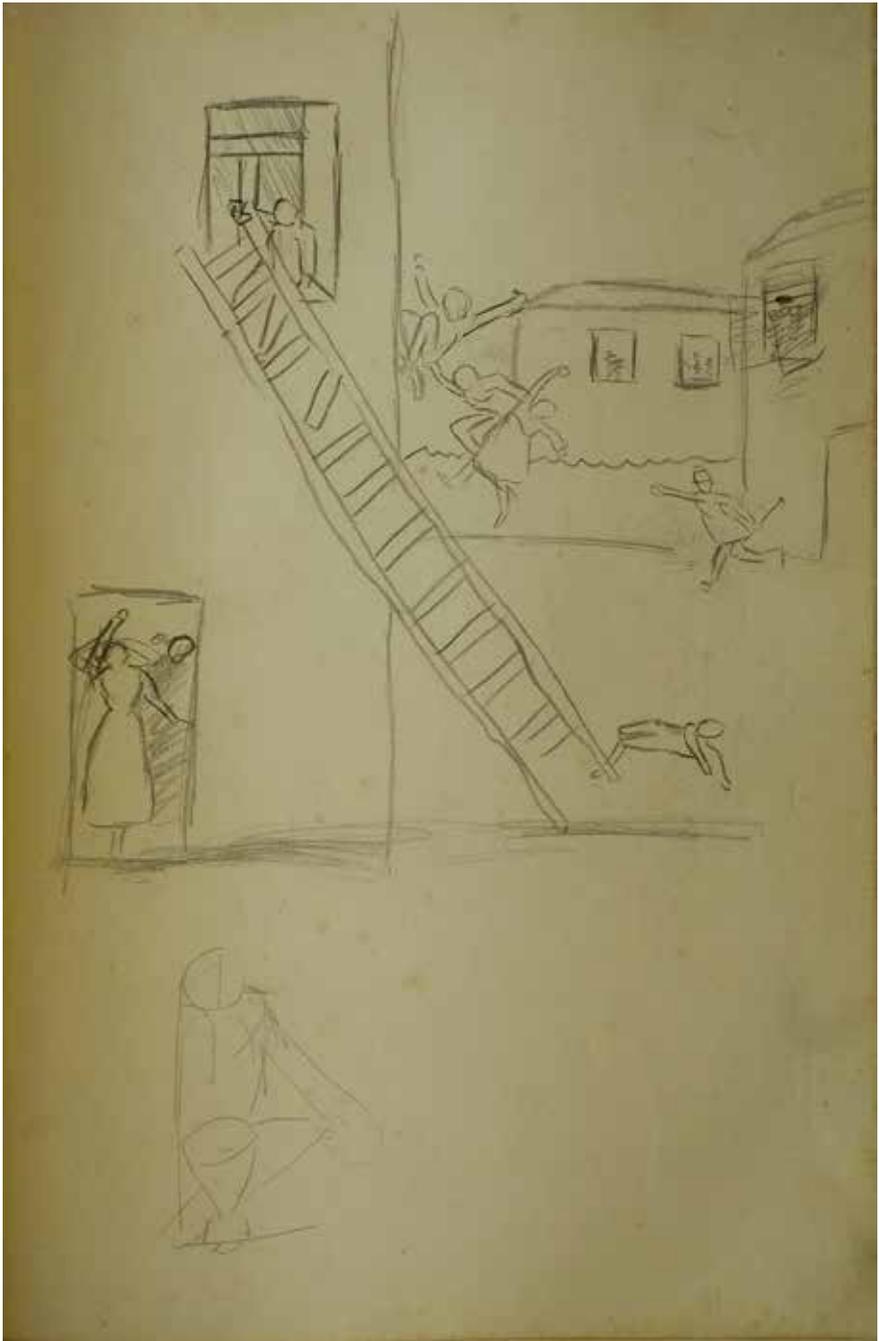


Fig. 14. *Samuel Bak. An Artist. Before 1944. Watercolour on paper. Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius*



Fig. 15. *Jacob Lipschitz (Jokūbas Lipšicas). Krikščiukaičio Street, Slobodka. 1943. Watercolour on paper. Tory Collection (Kovno Ghetto), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel*