art

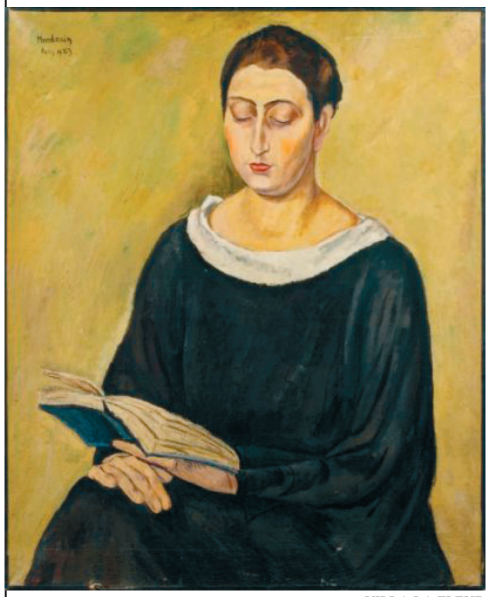
A Little Paris Just Outside Warsaw

East European Jewish Artists Rediscovered at Warsaw's Villa La Fleur Museum

By Benjamin Ivry

When art lovers think of the early 20th-century movement known as École de Paris, such Eastern European Jewish superstars as Marc Chagall, Moïse Kisling and Chaïm Soutine come to mind. All these celebrated artists went to France for inspiration, instruction and exaltation. Their contemporaries, however, included dozens of infinitely less famous Jewish artists of real quality, such as Joachim Weingart, Jerzy Ascher and Henryk Epstein.

The continuing obscurity, until now, of many of these talents is as much due to the crushing weight of exile as to the Holocaust, as both fates affected all the artists at Villa la Fleur in one way or another. Such obscurity may soon lessen, thanks to one passionate Polish collector: property development executive Marek Roefler, who in May opened Villa la Fleur, a small museum just outside Warsaw, featuring highlights from his collection of hundreds of paintings by École de Paris artists, most of them Jewish.



VILLA LA FLEUR

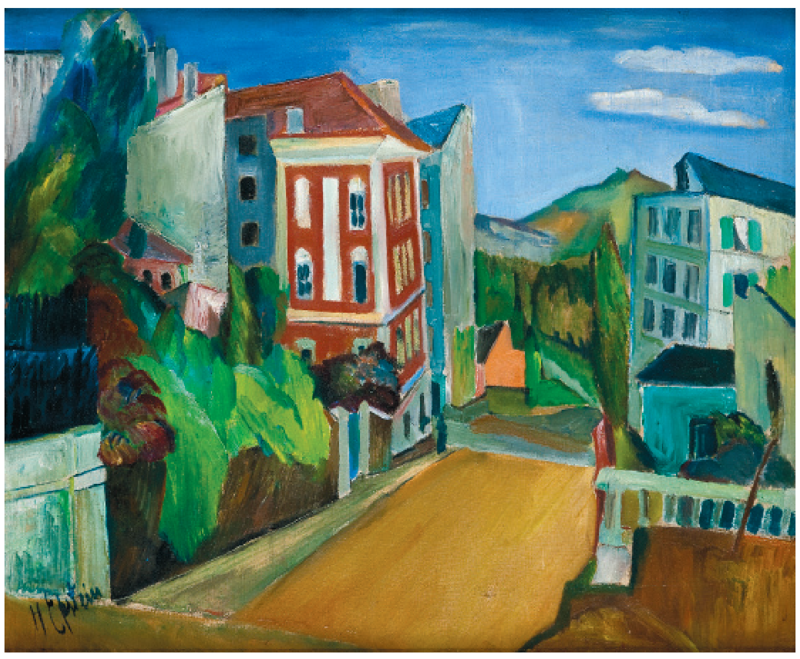
Engrossed: *Simon Mondzain's 1923 'Woman Reading' is a subtle portrait.*

While currently open only by appointment, with a modest website and a Facebook page, Villa la Fleur, a graciously light and airy suburban home originally built in 1906, is garnering considerable local excitement in a city still scarred by World War II, heavily laden with memorials that explain how more than 3.4 million Polish Jews were so efficiently slaughtered that today's Jewish population in Poland has been estimated at only 20,000.

In 2012, the much anticipated new Museum of the History of Polish Jews, designed by Finnish architects Rainer Mahlamäki and Ilmari Lahdelma, is scheduled to open on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, but unlike Villa la Fleur, which presents art for its own sake, this will be a historical museum, with more wartime horrors displayed, providing yet more occasions for grieving. Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute offers a carefully chosen permanent exhibit of "Jewish Artists in Warsaw, 1918–1939," yet these artists, too, are naturally presented within the context of appalling historical tragedy. Like the statues outside Yad Vashem, any artworks presented in a museum that is chiefly intended to commemorate appalling historical suffering must put art on a secondary plane of importance. By extension, this, in retrospect, rewrites the lives of artists according to how they involuntarily died, rather than how and why they lived.

By contrast, Villa la Fleur is an exuberant display of joy, reuniting in Poland part of the celebratory gusto of prewar Jewish painters who, unlike so-called "Holocaust composers," have yet to enjoy widespread revival. Last July, the newspaper "Le Monde" devoted a mocking article, "Philosemitism Without Any Jews," to how, suddenly and inexplicably, things Jewish appear to be all the rage in Cracow, where Jewish festivals abound and even a Jewish bookstore (run by Catholics, since there are no Jews to staff such a venture) opened. Though also run by non-Jews, Villa la Fleur offers more concrete, permanent evidence of genuine Jewish culture, not sad nostalgia for what is permanently lost and now lamented.

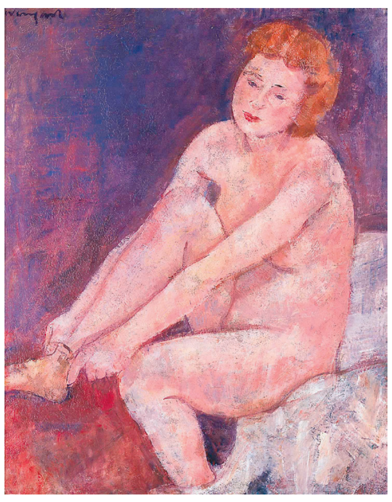
Roefler, bizarrely described in The Art Newspaper as an "oligarch," turns out to be a friendly, unpretentious, charismatic fellow with a mop of blond hair, resembling an infinitely fitter, much younger brother of screen actor Gérard Depardieu. Supermodel Naomi Campbell and other typical oligarch appendages were noticeably absent in the utilitarian Warsaw office of Dantex, the company of which he is CEO, where Roefler explains how over the past 20 years he had been intrigued by tennis player-turned-art dealer Wojciech Fibak and his early interest in École de Paris painters. Roefler was eventually bitten by the collecting bug, a malady he treats by studying upcoming online auctions in Israel, New York and London from the comfort of his home and his office. As Villa la Fleur curator Artur Winiarski explains, this describes the acquisition of such exuberant paintings as Weingart's 1930 "Nude" (a Bonnard-like celebration of flesh in which a woman puts on a stocking with seductive insouciance) and "Girl With Flowers," also from the 1930s, in which the subject's sly sideward glance belies the apparent innocence of her pose beside an abundant bouquet. Weingart, a native of Drohobych in Western Ukraine, urgently merits rediscovery.



VILLA LA FLEUR

Vivid Village: *Henri Epstein's 1915 'Landscape' is brilliantly colored.*

The same is true of Israel LeWin, another artist whose life has been obscured by posterity, despite the charm of his lovingly tender "Women in a Room" (1925), in which a mother and daughter lean their heads together, smiling as they collaborate on sewing work, while an architectural design over their heads resembles a chuppah, as if symbolizing their union in life. There are also some possible forebodings in these paintings, most notably in those by Warsaw-born Ascher, who would be murdered in deportation in 1943. Ascher's "Young Woman," from 1925, reflects the German New Objectivity movement, which attracted such Jewish artists as Felix Nussbaum, with a view of a melancholy subject leaning over a table laden with onions, tomatoes and other produce. They seem to bring no joy, as if expressing an awareness that the fruits of the earth may relatively soon turn poisonous. Clustered in a domestic setting where they crowd the walls, these works are redolent of the power and significance of home life in Jewish tradition. Even the potential loss of that home life is redolent of palpable tragedy.



VILLA LA FLEUR

Voluptuous Langour: *The eponymous 'Nude' at her ease dressing in Joachim Weingart's 1930 painting.*

Thus, Epstein's "Seaside in Brittany," undated but possibly from the late 1930s, employs a startling mix of turquoise and related hues to evoke an angrily churning sea. The seascape dwarfs a solitary figure in the middle distance, which can only witness the violent havoc, as if in premonition of already developing tragedies. Despite such moving images, the overall impression of Villa la Fleur is inspiringly upbeat. Its fine art is interspersed amid lavish Polish art deco furniture, much like a saner version of the Barnes Foundation. There are literal reminders from the Chelm-born artist Szymon Mondzain of Jews as People of the Book, in such canvases as "Woman Reading," from 1923, a sober, monumental image of intellectual force, and his earlier "Man With a Book" (1913), in which a man of Jewish appearance holds open a volume, pointing to a passage with his thumb while gripping a pipe in his other hand. Like "Woman Reading," "Man With a Book" provides the reader an architectural frame overhead to add extra dignity.

Other pleasures shine forth from the walls of Villa la Fleur, such as the need for speed that is expressed in "Horse Race," an undated painting by Mané-Katz, an artist who was born Emmanuel Katz in Kremenchuk, a city in Central Ukraine. Mané-Katz's highly dynamic study of motion seems influenced by such Italian futurists as Giacomo Balla, also obsessed with the pace at which the modern world was moving. There is comparable power in works by the Warsaw-born Mela Muter, such as "Idyll" from the 1940s, a Michelangelesque, mysteriously pagan allegory of figures tilling the soil and nurturing babies. Just as imaginatively fecund is Warsaw-born Henri Hayden's "Boy With Fish," from 1913, in which a familiar Cézanne image of a fisher boy is reimagined wearing an artist's smock and Rembrandt-like hat, holding a couple of red snappers with what seems utterly Beckettian gloom. Indeed, decades later in France, Hayden would become a close friend of Beckett's, when the historical situation would doubtless seem to confirm both men's leaning toward despair.

Entirely more triumphant is another splendid work by Mondzain, "Interior, Portrait of Madame Mondzain," much influenced by Vermeer's interiors revealing Dutch prostitutes in domestic occupations. Mondzain depicts, instead of a prostitute, his wife painstakingly playing the lute in front of well-filled bookshelves, a cultured *balebuste*, or housewife, who reminds the viewer of the richness of prewar Polish-Jewish culture. This may be a subject for futile regret in other parts of today's Poland, but it is acutely brought back to life in the Villa la Fleur collection. America's Jewish museums could do worse than contemplate a visiting exhibit of highlights from this collection.

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Even during a frigid Warsaw October, with the city's rank polluted air hovering above like an ominous cloud, Villa la Fleur, unheated on that day, proved a surprisingly heart-warming experience. A city that in 2006, over the vehement objections of Warsaw Ghetto survivor Marek Edelman, erected a huge statue in honor of the notoriously anti-Semitic politician Roman Dmowski — who also has a major Warsaw traffic roundabout named after him — does not really deserve an outpost of humanity as glowingly affirmative as Villa la Fleur.

Benjamin Ivry is a frequent contributor to the Forward.

Contact information for Villa la Fleur is available on the museum's website, www.villalafleur.com

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The Wonders of America BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

A Rabbinical Saint of the Ledger

At first blush, there's probably nothing duller than a ledger book in which columns of credits inhabit one side of the page and columns of debits the other. Only someone completely at home within the world of accountancy is capable of unlocking a ledger's secrets and of discerning a human story where the rest of us simply see numbers.

How strange, then, to read recently that great excitement attended the discovery of one such account book, which Kestenbaum & Co. auctioned off in late October. As it turned out, this was not just any old compilation of figures but one that belonged to the late Rabbi Eliezer Silver, the guiding light of the Vaad Hatzalah, an American organization that sought, against great odds, to rescue European Jewish leaders, especially those from yeshiva communities, from the Nazis. Moving in high circles, as well as in distinguished rabbinical ones, Rabbi Silver was not only the "personal friend of every United States president since Theodore Roosevelt" — or so claimed one of his obituaries — he was also widely acclaimed as the "Chief Rabbi of Cincinnati."

Outwardly, there's little to distinguish Rabbi Silver's ledger book, whose 45 pages cover the years 1939 through 1946, from the thousands of others in use all throughout the war years: A succession of numbers and names makes its way across the page, recording dollars raised and dollars spent and underscoring the extent to which monetary transactions fuel the modern world. But a closer look uncovers an altogether different, and far more chilling, reality: The numbers that were toted up reflect the sums of money the rabbi collected and expended in a valiant effort to ransom an estimated 10,000 lives, among them some of Europe's most renowned rabbis. Within the margins of Rabbi Silver's ledger book, numbers don't just reflect dollars and cents; they represent lives lost and lives saved.

Understandably, much is being made of this belated discovery. The auction literature hails it as a "one-of-a-kind window onto one of the darkest periods in world history," and as "the first definitive evidence of [Rabbi Silver's] radical approach to saving thousands from the clutches of the Nazi Holocaust." In both instances, this ledger book is associated, through and through, with the Holocaust.

Rabbi Silver's actions reflect a keen awareness of the past and of contemporary Jewish life.

But there's even more to it than that. Rabbi Silver's actions reflect, and shuttle between, a keen awareness of the Jewish past as well as an equally keen awareness of contemporary Jewish life. In the first instance, Rabbi Silver's heroic efforts to save the lives of his coreligionists were of a piece with the heroic efforts of his medieval Jewish counterparts to save the lives of their fellow Jews. The ransom of Jewish captives was both common practice and a common concern during the medieval period. Sometimes, it was the stuff of legend, like that recounted by Abraham Ibn Daud in his 12th century text, *Sefer Hakabbala* (Book of Received Tradition).

COURTESY OF KESTENBAUM & CO.

Heart of Gold: *Rabbi Silver raised funds to ransom Jews from the Nazis.*

In it, he told of how Spanish Jews purchased and redeemed several Babylonian Jewish leaders who, traveling on the high seas, had been captured by pirates. After being ransomed, they stayed in Spain, paving the way for its golden age. At other moments, bits and pieces of information culled from the Cairo Genizah demonstrate how communal representatives sought to raise funds in order to ransom a physician and his wife, a boy of about 10 and a "captive woman from Byzantium," suggesting once again that ransom loomed large within the orbit of medieval Jewry.

Although 20th century Cincinnati was a far cry from Cordoba and Cairo of the 12th, the precariousness of Jewish life has remained a constant. Like his coreligionists before him, Rabbi Silver responded to the dire situation of European Jewry by resorting to the tried and true tradition of ransoming the captive.

Far less gripping but no less potent in explaining the significance of Rabbi Silver's ledger book was the modernization of the rabbinate. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th century, the role of the rabbi, especially in the United States, expanded exponentially: Much was expected of him by his rapidly acculturating congregants. If, in the Old World, a rabbi's purview was often limited to teaching and to the supervision of kosher food, in the New World, it encompassed administration, organization-building and community relations. In other words, the rabbi became a professional. Accountability — and with it, the keeping of records — became an indispensable part of his job. And so it was with Rabbi Silver. While some of his colleagues preferred to make use of index cards and others loose-leaf notebooks, the Cincinnati rabbi demonstrated his commitment to the professionalization of the rabbinate by keeping an account book.

Ultimately, Rabbi Silver's ledger is a particularly compelling document of our time. In linking together medieval Jewish history, the modern-day imperatives of record keeping and the moral urgency of saving lives, it reminds us how the grand sweep of history can often be found in the most unlikely of sources.