

The Ohel Centre

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‘Soon after the first refugees from the Continent arrived in London, two philanthropists, the brothers Alexander and Benjamin Margulies, organised a club for Jewish intellectuals in Gower Street, which they named ‘Ohel’. A small number of us used to gather there every Friday afternoon to hold discussions and give lectures. Of the more permanent ‘members’ I recall the two folklorists, Dr J Maitlis and Dr. Olshwanger, the essayist Leo Koenig [*sic*], the short-story writer Leo Fuchs, the writer Joseph Leftwich, and the artists Jankel Adler, Marek Schwartz [Szwarc], Bloch, Meidner, Bomberg, and myself. There was also in our midst the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger – a man of obvious genius.’¹

‘Thousands of Polish Jewish refugees and members of the armed Forces were living a lonely life and were often in need of moral and material sustenance. For these ‘Ohel’ should become a real home.’²

From 1933 onwards, as more than 10,000 refugee artists, writers and those involved in the creative arts (both Jewish and non-Jewish) fled to Britain from across Europe as a result of Nazi persecution, a significant number of émigré cultural organisations were quickly established within the new homeland. Many were based in north London, particularly around Hampstead, a neighbourhood that welcomed many new émigrés, Jewish and Gentile, to its artistic and intellectual milieu.³ Despite the need for assimilation and integration, a strong impulse remained towards retaining a sense of cultural identity (and, as Monica Bohm Duchén’s essay indicates, in Josef Herman this impulse was especially profound). These varied organisations provided a congenial atmosphere in which like-minded individuals could seek intellectual and stimulating company among their fellow countrymen (membership was largely male), without the constraint of the English language and English cultural expectations. In the early 1940s these ‘associations’ flourished, variously organised along national, professional and religious lines, but also with a range of linguistic and political affiliations.⁴ These included the Free German League of Culture (FGLC), a cultural and social centre for German-speaking exiles, founded in Hampstead in December 1938, and one of the largest exile organisations in Britain (subsequently ‘Club 1943’, named for the year of its foundation, broke away from the FGLC, dissatisfied with its increasingly political slant); the Austrian Centre (AC), one of the cultural associations of the Free Austria Movement,⁵ which had opened in March 1939, with Sigmund Freud as Honorary President; as well as a

number of Anglo Czechoslovak Societies, including the Czechoslovak British Friendship Club and the Czechoslovak Institute.⁶

The *Ohel* (meaning ‘tent’)⁷ Centre was founded in late 1942 by the brothers Alexander⁸ (1902-1991) and Benzion Margulies (1890-1955), Polish Jewish émigrés from a manufacturing family from Galicia, who had arrived in Britain in the early 1930s from Germany and established the highly successful horological firm Time Products. Conceived as a largely philanthropic organisation,⁹ *Ohel* offered ‘a centre for political, social and cultural activities of Polish Jewry’,¹⁰ whose membership embraced artists, writers and political thinkers, and whose first Secretary, was the renowned Yiddishist Dr Jacob Maitlis. Falling under the auspices of the Federation of Polish Jews in Great Britain (an umbrella organisation also chaired by Alexander Margulies), *Ohel* was one of a number of Jewish/Yiddish/Polish cultural organisations founded or promoted by these energetic and philanthropic brothers.¹¹ Alexander (titular figurehead, while Benno organised the day-to-day running) presided over the official opening on Sunday, 22 November 1942 at 91 Gower Street, in the heart of university-land in central London. *The Jewish Chronicle* noted that the centre was extremely well-equipped, with a library, reading room, board and committee rooms, and a café-restaurant for the use of the members and their guests.¹²

As well as facilities for *Ohel* and the offices of the Federation, the upper floors of the building also housed those of the English language weekly newspaper, the *Polish Jewish Observer*,¹³ a four-page separate supplement to the *City and East London Observer*, edited by Joel Cang¹⁴ and available by subscription only. With its subsequent tag line: ‘Reports news and events of Polish and Continental Jewish communities’, its columns - filled with harrowing accounts of the tragic destruction of European Jewry - had little space for local Jewish cultural announcements, although it posted a small number of forthcoming events for émigrés, under both the auspices of the FGLC and *Ohel*. *Ohel* activities included concerts, charitable functions (such as a reception for Polish Jewish soldiers and an initiative to collect books for them in Polish, Yiddish, English and Hebrew), as well as debates and lectures, often given by leading members of the Polish Jewish community in exile.¹⁵ Literary receptions, as Herman himself observed, were also held,¹⁶ with renowned Yiddish writers such as Itzik Manger, Dr. Immanuel Olshwanger¹⁷ (whom, together with Jacob Maitlis, Herman classed as ‘folklorists’)¹⁸ and A M Fuchs, the Yiddish novelist.¹⁹

The visual arts were largely ignored by the *Observer*, although it recorded, somewhat vaguely, the opening exhibition of Ben Uri in its new Portman Street gallery in January 1944 (without actually mentioning Ben Uri by name). It also recorded the participation of Polish émigré and Ecole de Paris artist Marek Szwarc in its summer exhibition of the same year,²⁰ in which another *Ohel* member, German-born émigré artist Martin Bloch, also exhibited; however, Herman did not participate.²¹ Nor had he taken the opportunity to be part of Ben Uri's opening exhibition in January, despite the participation of his old friends Jankel Adler²² and Benno Schotz, together with Ludwig Meidner's wife, the painter Else Meidner, who also showed without her husband in the June exhibition.

Connections between the various artists, writers and poets were close and often overlapping. Manger was a close friend of Alexander Margulies, who sponsored his early books in London, as well as of Herman. Although *Ohel* was Polish in origin, it immediately embraced a range of nationalities. Besides Herman, the artists included David Bomberg, Ludwig Meidner, Martin Bloch and Alva (the pseudonym of Solomon Allweiss). Alva's west-London studio also became an informal and lively meeting place for 'Yiddish actors, Zionist leaders, German-Jewish refugees, Scottish painters, English women poets'²³ while Meidner, writing to Hilde Rosenbaum (a friend from Cologne who had immigrated with her family to Argentina) in August 1943, recalled that for a few months he was member of a 'Group of Jewish Artists'.²⁴ He mentions eight Jewish artists, most of them Polish, but explicitly names only Adler. Meidner continues that he withdrew from the group due to diverse disagreements and plans to found another group with two artists (unfortunately again no names), which should also be open to poets.

These cosmopolitan members were also acutely aware of the wider situation of Polish Jewry, both suffering under Nazi persecution and in the Polish army. On 20 June 1943 *Ohel* held a commemoration of Jewish writers and artists murdered by the Nazis in Polish ghettos, which was attended by, among others, Herman, Manger and the painter, Alva, the Berlin-born son of Galician parents.²⁵

Many of the *Ohel* members were also bound by a shared interest in Yiddish, rather than national, culture.²⁶ Herman commented in a *Jewish Quarterly* interview to commemorate his Camden Art Centre retrospective (1980), that 'I do not feel Polish though I was born in Warsaw. The cosmopolitan me wants no attachment to a particular place. Someone once

called me a refugee. Nowhere do I feel like a refugee.’²⁷ From the 1920s however, Polish-Jewish identity had been deeply bound up with Yiddish culture; pre-war Warsaw had been the spiritual and intellectual centre of Ashkenazi Jewry and the capital of the Yiddish cultural world. In London Herman not only retained his Jewish identity, but immersed himself thoroughly within the cultural milieu of *Yiddish-keit*, becoming involved, partly via *Ohel*, with a wide circle of erudite and prolific figures drawn from across contemporary Yiddish culture. Furthermore, despite Yiddish being no longer the language of his daily life, S J Goldsmith, the Yiddish journalist, noted of Herman that, although he was ‘articulate and incisive in several languages [...] perhaps he is liveliest in Yiddish.’²⁸

Ohel had a strong contingent of Yiddish writers, including the poets Itzik Manger (1901 – 1969, born in Austria-Hungary) and Avrom Stencl (1897-1983) and its cultural leanings were largely literary. Other Yiddish writers included Joseph Leftwich, particularly renowned as a translator of Yiddish into English (and one of the original ‘Whitechapel Boys’),²⁹ Leo Koenig (who in 1920 had edited the short-lived Yiddish periodical, *Renesans* (Renaissance)),³⁰ and A M Fuchs. *Ohel*’s Secretary, Dr Jacob Maitlis, was himself a renowned scholar of Yiddish folklore.

Such a rich cross-fertilisation between artists and writers would lead to a number of lively collaborations beyond *Ohel* itself; including a number of portraits of the writers, as well as occasional literary pieces and short stories written by the painters. A pen and ink portrait of Manger (1941) is reproduced in Alva’s autobiography,³¹ though he appears slighter and less significant than in Herman’s robust gouache. Herman’s sketch of Stencl (Ben Uri Collection) from 1946 indicates how his relationships with the Yiddish poets endured, even during his sojourn in Ystradgynlais. Herman also provided the frontispiece for a collection of Koenig’s essays published in Yiddish entitled *Folk un Literatur*³² and the Yiddish magazine *Eyrope*, which appeared for one brief issue in 1943, features pieces by Adler and Koenig.³³ Herman and Adler both provided illustrations to an article on Yiddish painters, which appeared in one of Stencl’s Yiddish monthly pamphlets, *Loshn un Lebn*, including Herman’s tragic *Memory of A Pogrom*.³⁴ Alva also illustrated Y.A. Liski’s short story: ‘On your way little Cossack’ published in London in 1942.³⁵ In contrast to *Lebn and Loshn* and founded in the same year as *Ohel* in 1942, The Jewish Culture Club (*Der Yiddisher Arbeter Kultur Farband*), also based in Hampstead, was explicitly left-wing in its Yiddish language publications. Its roots also lay with a group of Eastern European Jews who, like Herman, had come to England via Belgium, and a number of its contributors were also those involved with *Ohel*, Ben Uri and

Yiddish literature in general, including Stencl, Moshe Oved (Edward Good)³⁶, A M Fuchs and Koenig.³⁷ Once again it enabled a fertile crossover between artists and writers, offering an opportunity to proudly use their Yiddish language and visual creativity within a more politicised arena; for example, celebrating in November 1942 the 25th anniversary of the founding of the USSR with both text and image in a pamphlet entitled: *25 Yor Sovyetsn Farband (25 Years of the Soviet Union)*.³⁸

Beyond the confines of Gower Street, Alexander Margulies would also provide a direct link to the Ben Uri Art Gallery, where he subsequently became a distinguished Chairman. Herman later exhibited paintings and drawings jointly at Ben Uri with fellow émigré Martin Bloch in spring 1949,³⁹ only a matter of months before Ludwig and Else Meidner's only shared exhibition in England was also hosted by the gallery.⁴⁰ Herman would latterly raise the toast to Alexander as Ben Uri Chairman at its diamond Jubilee dinner in 1973; the *Chronicle's* account of this event notes the existence of a portrait of Margulies by Herman⁴¹ (Margulies was also sculpted in 1942 by Epstein).

As Monica Bohm-Duchen documents elsewhere in this catalogue, Herman was a prolific contributor to the Jewish cultural periodical *Jewish Quarterly*, established by Jacob Sonntag in 1953. Although its foundation postdates the period under discussion by several decades, its pages often provide a key source of information, translating earlier works from the original Yiddish into English, often for the first time. Herman's tribute to Jankel Adler: *Eyner Fun Undzer Tsayt* ('A Man of Our Times') which first appeared in Yiddish a year after Adler's death in 1950 was only finally translated into English in 1983.⁴²

Although to date the activities of *Ohel* and a number of related organisations, such as the Jewish Culture Club, remain largely undocumented, it is clear that these meeting places provided a much needed outlet, not only for the literary and artistic Polish Jewish community in exile, but also for a broader Yiddish speaking coterie – and without their existence much Yiddish culture in post-war Britain would have not been possible.

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¹ ed., Curtis, Tony *Josef Herman: Related Twilights – Notes from an Artist's Diary* (Bridgend: Seren, 2002), p. 71.

² *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 November 1942, p. 7.

³ See Hodin, J. P. 'A Study of the Cultural History of Hampstead in the Thirties' in *Hampstead in the Thirties: a committed decade*, in ed. Collins (London: Hampstead Artists' Council, 1975), p. 5.

⁴ See Vinzent, Jutta M and Powell, Jennifer *Art and Migration* (Birmingham: George bell Institute, 2005), pp. 7-63 for details of the founding of the mainly German, Czech and Austrian organisations, including the Free German League of Culture, the Free Austrian Movement and the Czech Institute.

⁵ By 1944 it had c. 3,500 members. See *Art and Migration*, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-32.

⁷ Whereas the literal Hebrew meaning of its name 'ohel' is a 'tent'; a further, more precise religious meaning is that of a shelter over the grave of a renowned rabbi, sage or sacred figure, so the name may also have suggested during the 1940s, to Hebrew speakers, the sense of a 'sacred shelter' or 'sacred space' – a refuge during the years of turmoil and exile; a place for coming together for study, discussion, contemplation, and scholarship.

⁸ Alexander Margulies also worked closely with Dr. Ignacy Schwarzbart (1888-1961, prominent Polish Zionist) and (before his suicide) Arthur Zygelboym, the two Jewish representatives on the Polish National Council of the Polish Government in Exile, both of whom played key roles in highlighting reports of Nazi atrocities against Jews in Poland, and who were also concerned about the fate of the Jewish soldiers fighting with the Polish army. In 1942 Schwarzbart held a press conference in London alleging that 1 million Jewish people had already been killed. The figures were reported in the media but were treated sceptically by both the British and by some other Polish politicians.

⁹ As he commented on the occasion of its first anniversary: 'Without boasting, I can claim that we have tried to do our best [...] to serve the community.' *Jewish Chronicle*, 22 October 1943, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 September 1942, p. 15.

¹¹ Amongst other initiatives, the brothers also published the Hebrew journal *Metsudah* during the 1940s under their new Ararat publishing house, in which they sought to promote modern Hebrew as a language of cultural endeavour.

¹² *Jewish Chronicle*, 27 November 1942, p. 7.

¹³ The British Library Newspaper section has an incomplete holding of this relatively short-lived supplement, starting with probably the first issue, dated Friday, 8 January 1943 and ending with, possibly, the last issue, dated 31 August 1945. Issues after 8 January and before early August 1943 are missing.

¹⁴ Joel Cang (1899-1974) was a Polish-born émigré, journalist, writer and commentator on eastern European Jewry. From 1927 he was Warsaw correspondent for the *News Chronicle* and the *Manchester Guardian* and from 1948 was closely connected with the *Jewish Chronicle*, first as Foreign Editor, then latterly as Deputy and then Associate Editor. He was also a passionate Yiddishist, acting as Treasurer for the London branch of YIVO, the New York-based Institute for Jewish Research.

¹⁵ *Polish Jewish Observer*, 8 October 1943, p. 4, reported a reception held at *Ohel* the previous week for the Polish Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, Mr Jan Stanczyk..

¹⁶ *Polish Jewish Observer*, 24 November 1943, p. 4, announced a forthcoming Literary afternoon to held at *Ohel* on Sunday 28 November 1943.

¹⁷ Immanuel Olschwanger (1888-1961).

¹⁸ *Related Twilights*, p. 71.

¹⁹ A M Fuchs (1890-1974) was a Yiddish novelist who lived in London for a number of years before finally moving to Israel. Herman may have confused his name with that of the actor Leo Fuchs.

²⁰ The Ben Uri Art Society's Summer Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings by Contemporary Artists (11 June – 7 August 1944), 14 Portman Street, London W1: Ben Uri Archive. In total more than a third of the 122 exhibits were by émigré artists (many former internees),

²¹ *Polish Jewish Observer*, 16 June 1944, p. 3. The Ben Uri Art Society's Summer Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings by Contemporary Artists (11 June – 7 August), 14 Portman Street, London W1; more than a third of the 122 exhibits were by émigré artists.

²² Ben Uri Art Gallery, Opening Exhibition (9 January -15 February 1944).

²³ S J Goldsmith, 'Alva at Seventy' in *Jewish Quarterly*, Volume 19, No 4 (72) Winter 1971-2, p. 50.

²⁴ See *Art and Migration*, p. 49.

²⁵ *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 June 1943, p. 9.

²⁶ See Monica Bohm-Duchen: Herman had only come to love Yiddish language and culture as a young adult: 'I detested the Yiddish I had heard as a child and wanted nothing to do with it. Its vocabulary comprised utility words with no beauty, no lyricism, no music... Until the age of seventeen, I preferred Polish.' 'And with my progress in Yiddish I too began feeling proud of my Jewish identity.'

²⁷ Burns, Carol 'Portrait of the Painter Josef Herman' in *Jewish Quarterly*, Volume 28, No 1 (102) Spring 1980, p. 40.

²⁸ Goldsmith, S J 'Josef Herman - the Jew, man and artist' in *Jewish Quarterly*, Volume 15, no 3 (55) Autumn 1967, pp. 23-26.

²⁹ See MacDougall, Sarah and Dickson, Rachel 'First Fruits' in *Whitechapel at War: Isaac Rosenberg and his circle* (London: Ben Uri, The London Jewish Museum of Art, 2008), p. 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³¹ Alva, *With Pen and Brush* (London: W H Allen, 1973), p. 53.

³² Leo Koenig, *Folk un literature* (London: Workers Circle Education Committee, c. 1947).

³³ Yankl Adler, 'Der farloyrener zun vet aheymkumen' (The lost son will return home) in *Eyrope* (London, 1943), p.14.

³⁴ *Loshn un Lebn*, 15 August 1943, pp. 10-14.

³⁵ Y. A. Liski was the pseudonym for the Yiddish writer Sumer Fuchs, brother of A. M. Fuchs. The names Liski and Fuchs both translate into English as 'fox'.

³⁶ Polish émigré Moshe Oved (1885-1958), born Edouard Goodack, also became known as Edward Good in London. A founding member of the Ben Uri Art Society in 1915, as well as a noted art collector, Yiddish writer, sculptor and jewellery designer, he owned 'Cameo Corner' which was one of the most prominent centres for the sale of jewellery in London during the first half of the twentieth century.

³⁷ See Srebrnik, H F *London Jews and British Communism, 1935-1945*, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1995), p. 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ 20 February – 20 March, 1949, Ben Uri Art Gallery, 14 Portman Street, W1.

⁴⁰ *Ludwig Meidner Drawings 1920-1922 and 1935-49 Else Meidner Paintings and Drawings 1935-49*. This joint London exhibition at the Ben Uri was described by Ludwig as a second-class funeral. See Riedel, Erik 'Ludwig and Else Meinder – Their Life and Work' in *Ludwig und Else Meidner*, (Frankfurt: Judisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, 2002), p. 21.

⁴¹ Current whereabouts unknown.

⁴² Josef Herman, 'A Man of Our Times' in *Jewish Quarterly*, Volume 31, no.1, (113) Autumn/Winter 1983/84., pp. 29-31.