

## *Expected Premonition*



*... being around, breathing, feeling well, being productive, and having infinite gratitude for life's gifts! ... (Samuel Bak)*

**Samuel Bak**

in conversation with  
Evelina Kolchinsky  
and Members of her Club E-20  
Zoom call February 12, 2021  
Transcribed by Cecilia Witteveen  
Edited by Samuel Bak

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## *Foreword*

*In 2020, during the Covid pandemic, Mrs. Evelina Kolchinsky started an internet club, Club E20. Once a week the group met on zoom to listen to a presentation by various people from all walks of life.*

*On February 12, 2021, Samuel Bak was invited by the Club E-20 to talk about 16 of his paintings.*

*This conversation became a 2 1/2 hour-long discussion about his life, his art, his position in the art world, politics and the general situation of the world.*

*As the video spread, it became clear that this was an important document adding to the knowledge and understanding of Mr. Bak and his art.*

*It was decided to transcribe the text and Mr. Bak made himself available to make adjustments, clarifications, and additions to the text.*

*The following document is based on the transcribed text but with considerable alterations.*

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Evelina Kolchinsky I would like to introduce you to the worldwide known painter, writer, and educator, Samuel Bak. Samuel Bak is also a Holocaust survivor and his art is very special, it reminds us not that much about the atrocity, but more about the life we can build from the remnants of tragedy.

And I would like to introduce the metaphor that there are many musicians but only seven keys. Nevertheless, great musicians managed to transcend this limitation and create unmistakably their own musical masterpieces, “Bach is Bach” and in the same regard “Bak is Bak.”

Samuel Bak built his own vocabulary, imagery, of metaphors that convey his very special message.

We have asked Samuel to approve the 16 selected works chosen by us from his oeuvre of over 8,000 works and to talk to us, to help us to decipher all these metaphors and his special language.

We will run a slide show and we will disappear. . .

Samuel Bak Good evening and thank you all for inviting me to speak.

As you were told, I am going to share some thoughts on 16 paintings that we chose to explore. Special thanks to you, Evelina for your wonderful introduction. Also, apologies to Igor Mandel for interrupting him - I took over the screen whilst he was speaking. I will do my best to complete all that remains to be said according to the stream of the incoming images. They will surely bring up details about my life and my art, and their interconnectedness.

As you can see, I am not in the studio where I spend most of my time, but in a small study packed with books, documents and it holds my computer. The atelier is just upstairs, a large and luminous space, crammed with canvases, papers, tubes of colors, and battalions of brushes, as well as a perpetual smell of drying paint. Perhaps some of you, who saw documentaries on my art, expected to see me in my true paradise on earth, but the need of the internet sent me downstairs.

Here is what happens when an artist is asked to speak of himself, he begins to brag! In spite of my 87 birthdays, a few age spots, impressive shrinkage of height but not in circumference, and a gray beard - I possess a good share of energy. Adding craft and imagination I get the best fuel for painting paintings.

Time is priceless. I work 7 days on 7, and my daily commute of 7 steps from my bedroom to my workplace doesn't require a mask! Moreover, the pandemic hasn't slowed me down. Perhaps because my chronic "paint-oholism" wouldn't agree to it. Long days of work accompanied by music, are my preferred state of being. I like the word LONG; I like the idea contained in longevity.

And there is another LONG of which I must warn you! Wait and you shall see my propensity for long speeches. My art dealer, Bernie Pucker, told me that I know how to turn short stories into long ones, so please bear with me.

Remembrances, remembrances. My mind has always been holding on to a lot of stuff, dramatic, joyful, unique, and precious leftovers of days bygone. Having had the privilege of being a wandering Jew, if not *THE Wandering Jew*, my recollections accumulated in numerous countries. I led different kinds of lives and experienced them in various languages. Nevertheless, all of them seem to be well preserved. Even my early childhood, so sweet before it became so shattered - is always on call.

Of course, we all know that human memory is not like a scanned document that dwells in a digital folder. Memory is a recreation, each and every time freshly produced by our brain. Moreover, feelings are sensitive scriptwriters, and our hearts have a lot to say about what and how we remember; because the cinema of our souls endlessly seeks consolation, comfort, and reassurance. This isn't new. Still, I shall try to be with you as candid as I can.

Just on another note: Evelina, please accept my thanks for introducing me as worldwide known. . .

Honestly, I do not know how to measure my fame. The internet has turned the sphere of the international art world into an interstellar space in which the best and the worst are uncontrollably paired. I have no idea where to place my personal galaxy in this vast cosmos.

On the other hand, I have a certain notion about the legacy of my art. I think that its message is quite distinct - but that is a different story.

Fame! Before the world was taken over by Facebook, Twitter and Google, when I was young and naïve, I considered myself on the verge of being famous. It lasted for several years. People recognized me in the street. The media was always on alert, enchanting, jealous, and unforgiving. I quickly learned the lessons of fame's inconveniences: loss of time, loss of privacy, and a share of unnecessary hassles. Celebrity came and went, leaving a slight aftertaste, and life returned to its palatable course.

All these commotions had no bearing on my artistic output. Artworks kept on emerging. Sometimes with ease, and at other times after intense labor. Creative journeys are unpredictable. My works generated shows, prompted articles, reviews, documentaries, books, and the passing of time allowed them to mark a terrain of their own.

This isn't a small accomplishment. Today's struggle for artistic acknowledgement is merciless. I was lucky to have the support of devoted friends and patrons.

My connection of over fifty years with the Pucker Gallery of Boston would merit its place in the Guinness Book of Records!

Art doesn't exist in an immaterial space, it is created by humans for humans. When an artist's standpoint is original, clear, and convincing, it helps. But even then, there are no guarantees. Fluctuations of taste and agreed-upon values often impose unforeseeable consequences.

How can I define the core of my art? As always, I am in search of the right words. I can't describe it in a sentence or two, without avoiding a definition that would be misleading.

On the one hand, my art differs from the established fashions and -isms of the present moment. On the other hand, it is clearly of our time.

A quick view of several of my paintings, so easily available on the internet, will tell you that what I paint is willingly anachronistic, visionary, metaphorical, ironic, intentionally unsettling, and occasionally sad.

Yes, sad, despite a bright and colorful palette and a very recognizable world. Stones are stones, water is water, and the skies display clouds. But the trees seem

to be floating, the stone-like clouds break and so do the various figures that from time to time crowd my canvases. I have been loyal to this distinctive vision for more than fifty years.

A reassuring sense of timelessness is also a quality that I try to achieve. Centuries have passed and Shakespeare hasn't lost his grip. He tells us how it works. Tragedy on the stage asks for a counterbalance of comedy, and similarly, light on a painted canvas needs the suggestion of shade.

In art, a confrontation of opposites is always of help. When I delve into the perception of our troubling and menacing world and its malaise with no end in sight, I am at a loss for words.

But these are exactly the subjects that are at the core of my art.

We live suspended between wars and ceasefires, destructions and restorations, sadness and hope. In short, all the stuff that describes our human condition!

Therefore, if I inject into my images an uncanny absurdity, even a detectable sense of humor, and above all a pleasant and harmonious allure, (please note that I always avoid the word BEAUTY!) - it is to make my images work as a lure that sweetens the above-mentioned pill.

The larger part of my public sees no problem with such a definition. But not all see it this way. For some beholders, it is merely "*Holocaust Art.*"

I strongly disagree with this limiting classification. For me, the Holocaust was and remains a very important, sacrosanct, and essential subject, the story of mankind's debacle - but in terms of art or literature, it isn't a genre!

Inevitably, it brings me to speak of my personal experience of the Holocaust. How did it begin?

Descartes told mankind, "We think therefore we are."

The Nazis told the Jews, "Stop thinking, we shall stop you from being."

They murdered 6 million Jews, among them one-and-a-half million children. A colossal slaughter went on, I was there, and by an utter miracle, I survived. When it began, I was 7, and when it ended, for me – a boy of 10.

It has left me with an unremovable deposit. What I am able to think, to be, and above all, to CREATE is profoundly affected by this experience.

No wonder that people keep on asking me, "How have you survived?"

How?

How do you explain miracles?

You accept life's games of chance and the inexplicable wonders. You stick to what you remember and try to figure out the when-what-and-how.

Sometimes you focus on what you remember of the peoples' remembering.

I could have written volumes but I wrote only one, and it has 500 pages. My narration speaks of strange occurrences, series of lifesaving connections. Such remembrances carry amazement, joy, and pain, which one must accept. Being among the living is a rare gift, and bearing testimony, a sacred duty.

Moreover, the arduous process of writing a memoir revived in me a deeply set network of priceless memories and strengthened them. It distanced me from the notorious sense of a survivor's guilt, and I concluded that my present life was fully deserved. Furthermore, there were other benefits. I unloaded from my shoulders Mother's heavy entrustment: A collection of fascinating stories that she so well implanted in me. Her untimely death at age 60 destined them to be lost - I was their sole rescuer. . .

In short, writing my memoir was a true act of liberation.

The outcome of my intense labor, entitled *Painted in Words* was published some 20 years ago and translated into several languages.

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Knowing that you are still listening to me, I want to make a small detour, and tell you about an unexpected phone call. It so much relates to all of the above!

On the receiver was the voice of my friend Andreas Nohl, the German translator of my memoir. For many survivors, German is the language of a horrible past. For me, it is not only the fabulous language of Heine, Zweig, or Kafka but also the literary language of Mother's beloved uncle, the poet and musician, Arno Nadel, who perished in Auschwitz.

I find in German the linguistic sibling of my cherished Yiddish.

Andreas Nohl is an award-winning translator of Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, and Kipling. Imagine my luck of being added to the list of his authors.

He called me today, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021. A day to remember as well as January 6<sup>th</sup>! My wife Josée and I were glued to the TV.

The storming of the United States Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, trying to wipe out our Democracy. And now the February Senate hearings, with certain representatives reassuring us about a very different America and giving us a clear warning about American Fascism.

We aren't in this alone: Russia, Poland, Hungary, and many more countries are being swept by similar winds!

Can the US reconquer its lost preeminence? Can it set an example? Can the crazy cult of one person, who imposed on us four years of white supremacy be overturned and let us hope that American decency shall rise again from its ashes?

Our telephone rang, and it was Andreas, "Oh Sam, you are there! I wanted to tell you that I was despairing about America, and then for two days I watched the Senate, I have been watching the extraordinary Americans who now revolt against the corrupt world of Trump – I believe in humanity!"

I couldn't have been happier. I hugged the phone and Josee proposed Champagne. We were not alone!

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Andreas Nohl is familiar with the many chapters of my intricate biography. 15 years ago, in a packed auditorium in Munich, I attended the presentation of his excellent translation. He agreed to read the pages that described my very last moments with Father. The story of his smuggling me out from the camp in a patched burlap sack as if I were a pile of chopped-up wood. And then the last days before the liberation, my father's murder by the Nazis.

I shall never forget how Andreas's voice began to break. Through the tears in my eyes, I saw him as a younger brother.

I am telling you all this because I believe that it says something about us all, and how we learn to relate to the complex world in which we exist. A world that my children and their children will one day inherit. What makes us human? The best,



and the worst lingers in all human beings. What are the defining circumstances that shape beliefs, provoke thoughts, and trigger actions?

I try to imagine a moral compass that guides us. But it must be of great fragility and I fear for its survival. Such thoughts float through my mind, while my hand mixes paints that will land on my canvas and turn it into one of my familiar mages. Images that try to question their viewers about these very intricate matters. Things are not what they seem to be. . .

As said before, the indelible Shoah is there, I carry it in me. Accepting this reality without becoming the anticipated product of its trauma is my life's ongoing struggle.

I was born in Vilna, today Vilnius, in 1933, the year Hitler seized power. Most members of my family, then citizens of an antisemitic Poland, saw the long shadows cast by Stalin and Hitler; they spelled danger. Yet, they created for me, their little prince, an illusion of a sunny paradise.

World War 2 came, and the rest is history. In July 1944 the Red Army, continuing its battle for Berlin, liberated Vilnius. Mother and I emerged from our hidings and found our world in ruins. We counted among the less than 5% of Vilna's Jews that had survived the annihilation of the Litvak diaspora.

My memoir *Painted in Words* speaks of all this. Our Jewish Vilna, the *Jerusalem of Lithuania*, my family's colorful saga. The events that led to my rare survival. And later, the years of growing up in hushed quarters with survivors and their circles of friends. Lodgings populated by the unavoidable ghosts of a shared tragedy. Israel, my various escapes and returns. The narrative isn't chronological. It is a gallery of stories in which the past and present intermingle. They interact on the pages of the book the way they do it in my art. Painting and writing have helped me a lot to stay balanced and I think I did a good job.

Furthermore, *Goddess Fortuna* often knocked on my door, and my life turned out brighter than I had dared to expect.

Lucky when I met the future mother of my three wonderful daughters, Annalisa, my first wife. We knew many sunny days and when they turned gray and stormy,

we split. And again I was lucky when I met Josée, my second wife. We now enjoy our fourth decade of sweet togetherness. I have wonderful grandsons and even a great-grandson called Sam.

And this isn't all. My passion for making art has never cooled down. My 70 years of professional work make me gape with awe. I created thousands of works, sketches, drawings, watercolors, etchings, and oils, that put bread on my table. My output enjoys two personal museums in Vilnius and Houston and heads for a third one in the University of Omaha.

What a rare fortune!

And how can I continue to count my blessings without mentioning the ones who sustained my career by firmly believing in me? First of all, my Boston friends and art dealers, Sue and Bernie Pucker. Our collaboration has lasted for more than half a century!

Then my friends, Cecilia Witteveen and Siegfried Schaefer, the tirelessly caring creators of my Catalog Raisonné. It offers an online eye-opening view of my entire production. My different styles and themes couldn't have been shown in any better way. But the list of my patrons is much longer than this!

Had my Grandmother Shifra been listening to my telling you all this, she would have interrupted us with her warnings of "the evil-eye, the evil-eye!" and made me spit three times "tfu, tfu, tfu." A rational mind's ancient superstition; a sure device against all possible dangers and disappointments. Her story is in my book and I am told that *Painted in Words* is a good read.

A few years ago, occasioned by an exhibition of my art at the *University of Omaha*, a class of *Creative Writing* had included the study of my memoir. For me it was an occasion to meet with several atypical undergraduates, Dreamers, Latinos, Asians, Blacks from underprivileged neighborhoods. They told me how they were moved by my writing, by the fate of the Jewish boy of the Ghetto. And how much my descriptions of loss, hardships, and adapting to different cultures resonated with their own.

I know that my work triggers animated discussions, exchanges of opinions and engenders new knowledge, especially when presented in centers of education. Its source is embedded in Jewish history, but it aims to reach a universal ground.

Many works of art that are rooted in specific cultures, touch us this way. You do not have to be a Russian to love Borodin, French to admire Zola, or Dutch to adore Van Gogh!

But let us proceed with my story, “The portrait of the Artist as a Young Man!” In 1948, the *Pan York*, a Cuban banana carrier downloads me and another 4,000 refugees in Israel. We are now in the early nineteen fifties, and the country is going through a period of great austerity.

At 18, before I begin my military service, a pending scholarship allows me to attend for an entire year the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem. My school has just accepted the materialistic and ideological constraints of the *New State*. The practicality of the “Fine Arts” is being questioned. Can the creation of paintings provide a decent living? We must now learn Graphic Art, design, layout, illustration, and the conception of posters.

The restraints sound persuasive. Humans must be adaptable or perish. But I can hardly dedicate myself to my true passion and feel utterly frustrated. Then another difficulty arises. A poster I sent to an international competition in Los Angeles brings me an award. I realize that I have entered it without the blessing of my professor, and although I apologize, our relationship is poisoned.



Love Animals and Protect Them, 1952

But I am becoming good at posters. A good poster delivers a clear message and it belongs to the realm of art, as shown by Toulouse Lautrec, A. M Cassandre, and Milton Glaser.

It did not take me long to grasp the difference between good posters and fine paintings. Paintings can carry complexities and ambiguities that posters refuse.

This special awareness matured in me when my work evolved around 1965 towards a representational mode of painting. I began by giving up many ploys of my former individuality that was anchored in my semiabstract mode of art. What kind of figurative realism will I produce? I propose a Renaissance-like style, slightly with a “tongue in cheek.” People love definitions and so my new way of painting is considered Allegorical, Metaphorical, Surrealist, Magic-Realist, or even prematurely Post-Modern. Some critics consider it outdated. . .

My concern is, to figure out the difference between valid and less valid art. As for the rest of all of the above, I leave it alone. I do not want my paintings to be sellers of simplistic ideas, rather echoes of our ongoing concerns for the world in which we live.

When Evelina and Igor asked me to choose images of paintings for this presentation, I suggested that they come up with their own choices. My friends proposed 16 works, and I gave my OK. These images will surely bring up surprising reminiscences and trigger thoughts. It will be fun to share them with you. Please consider all I say as footnotes. Do not see in what I say an approval or disapproval of your interpretations. When you look at my work trust your own feelings and have faith in your own thoughts. Bring to them what you have in yourself, and see how, and if, you can interact with my art.

This is not an easy undertaking. I have spoken about what is at its core at the start of this conversation. Most of the paintings that I created in the last fifty years are images of a world that seems to have survived a cataclysm. Many of the objects I depict require repair. Perhaps that is how I feel about the world in which I live. My life has known upheavals, and not only in the years of the Holocaust.

For Instance, in the middle of the Yom Kippur war, October 1983, when I served as a reserve soldier, I found myself on the Syrian border in the midst of a minefield. At 40 I could have been torn apart by a mine; the way I was destined to be killed by a German machine-gun at age 10. This was very scary, but it didn't determine my future attitudes or opinions.

On the contrary, it made me appreciate being around, breathing, feeling well, being productive, and having infinite gratitude for life's gifts!

Dear friends, this has been – as I warned you -- a very long introduction. . .  
But again I must make another indispensable detour.

Let us begin with an image that wasn't created by me, but by the great, fabulous, and unique Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). The famous *MELENCOLIA*, engraved in 1514. One of the iconic images of our civilization. The older I get the more I admire this masterpiece. I see in Dürer one of my most admired and important teachers.



Here is why I chose it and my story and believe me, it relates to this image!

WW 2 ends on May 8<sup>th</sup> and in 1945 Europe is in an indescribable mess. In the fall of the same year, Mother and I escape from Vilnius that is now occupied by the Soviets, make a halt in Lodz, and arrive in Berlin, occupied by the 4 Allies, United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France. Our search for Uncle Arno is futile. The US Army helps us to get to the refugee camp of Landsberg am Lech in Bavaria. A camp of displaced persons called DPs. It is located in old facilities of the German Army.

This DP camp is gradually becoming a Jewish Shtetl. About 5,000 inhabitants, survivors of camps, of hidings, ex-partisans, etc.

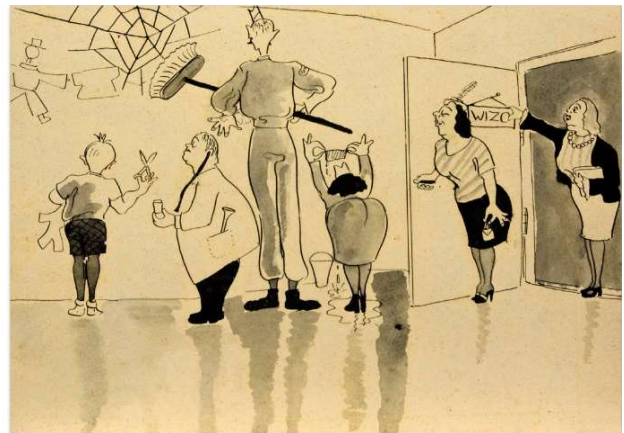
We live on the outskirts of an old and picturesque town, Landsberg, known for the prison in which Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. Its luxuriantly green and appealing surroundings include the infamous camps of the Dachau complex.

What do we do in the DP camp? We wait!

Men find women, women find men, couples beget offspring, and the sounds of crying babies pour into the streets of this reinvented Shtetl from innumerable windows. We have a newspaper in Yiddish printed in Latin type for which I make caricatures. And also a café for which I paint a mural. There are games of soccer and tournaments of chess, even a small orchestra of musicians that have survived the horror.



Comic on Chess, 1946



Comic: WIZO: Women International Zionist Organisation - Cleaning the Camp, 1947

But our essential existence is a matter of living while waiting. There is the rise of national, Zionist fervor. Many of the survivors want to go to Palestine, but the Jewish state still doesn't exist, and the British do not allow us in. Others, wary of wars and struggles, want to go to America, but the American authorities say NO! You have to have affidavits signed by relatives who would assume responsibility. We are stuck, but not unhappy. I have a couple of good friends of my age. Mostly I paint and paint, I am not Melancholic. I am not brooding with a measuring compass in my hand, I do not yet know that Dürer created such an image.

I am about 12, immersed in the *Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas when Mother says to me, "You are now 12, soon 13, practically grown-up. Stop reading stuff like the book in your hands, mere belletristic - read valid literature. Anything that was not written by a Nobel prize winner is not for you. With some exceptions. . . "

Soon after she gives me a book of short stories by Stefan Zweig. And that is how I get to Dürer.

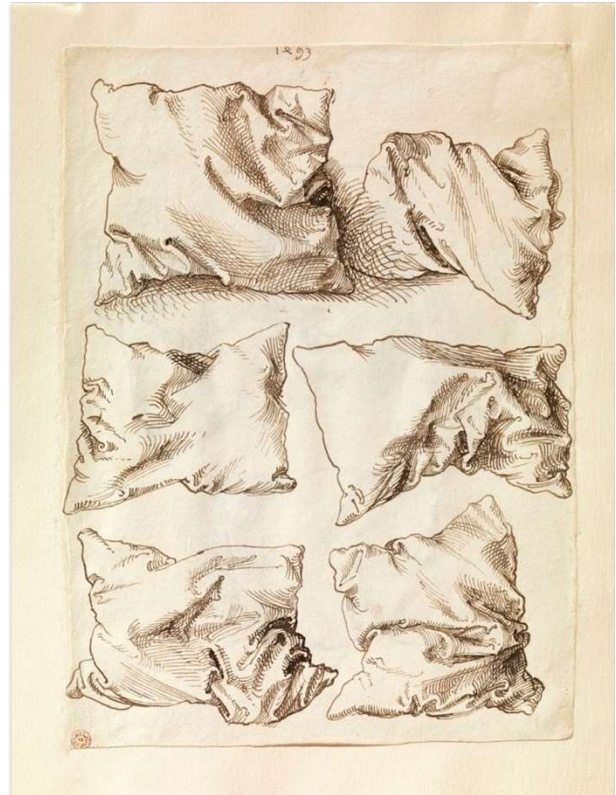
Today I wonder how she found one of the many books forbidden by the Nazis and destined for burning, in a German town like Landsberg, notorious for its sympathies with the Third Reich!

I read Polish and Yiddish and at times Russian. But Zweig wrote in German. Since this language has a great affinity to Yiddish, I picked it up very easily. An agelessly old German teacher, whom Mother found for me in Landsberg, gave me a notion of its grammar.

Zweig's book includes a short story called *The Invisible Collection*, that I still find spellbinding. It is the story of a collector of ancient prints, once a wealthy man, now blind because of age and macular degeneration, who subsists on the sale of his precious collection of which he is unaware. His precious engravings have gradually been substituted by his family with blank sheets of ancient paper. Carefully holding a blank page the blind collector is sure that he is displaying to his visitor Dürer's famous engraving, the *Melancholia*. He points out all the magical details of this masterpiece that now only exists in his mind. The impression of Dürer's magic of imagination, which transcended its material existence and were preserved by the brain was for me an unforgettable introduction to the suggestive power of art.

Soon after finishing reading, I hurried to the old city of Landsberg in search of books on Dürer. A fair reproduction of his *Melancholia* awaited me in an old book that included many of his inimitable masterpieces. I learned that he was a rare *Wunderkind*, a child prodigy, not unlike what people considered me to be.

Dürer, at 15, drew Himself, a Study of a Hand, and the image of a Pillow. It was in my book. And then another drawing, a Composition of Six Pillows. Pillows!



Unbelievable, uncanny. . . How they reminded me of the day in 1940, in which two Lithuanian policemen banged on our door, two men in long rain-drenched raincoats, and evicted, or rather threw out Mother and me from our apartment in one big rush! Before they closed the door on us, Mother shouted, “Grab a pillow, one never knows. . .”

We were sent down the staircase to the large courtyard of our apartment building. Other Jews, neighbors, stood there in the cold rain shivering with fear. I held on to the pillow as close as possible. Soon after we were ordered into the street and joined an endless line of Jews carrying packages of all sorts, old men and women, children, toddlers. . .



We advanced to the newly erected Ghetto. I wondered why Mother told me to take the pillow, maybe it meant something that was to represent the eternity of home? We were getting completely soaked, the wet pillow became too heavy to carry; I threw it away. Looking back I saw that muddy shoes walked over it and it disappeared, "Goodbye pillow, goodbye."

And then in Landsberg am Lech, in an old book with yellowing pages of Dürer's drawings I found it again! Just imagine my emotion. . .

The discovery of Dürer's amazing art, beyond his magical engraving of the *Melancholia*, became for me the summit of what art could achieve.

The *Old Pinakothek* of Munich reopened and allowed me to admire Dürer's *Four Evangelists*. Besides that, I also learned that Dürer was not a purebred German, rather the son of a Hungarian jeweler. And generations before my birth some of my great, great grandmothers might have been raped by Cossacks. Perhaps I wasn't a purebred Jew. I told myself that we somehow resembled. Wow!

I can easily say that by now I have been exploring Dürer's *Melancholia* for more than seventy years. Particularly since 1965. Its magic has never exhausted itself. Shamelessly I looted from it innumerable details and openly used them in a multitude of my paintings. Art comes from Art, and the looting or stealing of art is a very ancient custom. No one calls it theft, rather inspiration. Look at the globe in this etching, the huge cube (polyhedron), the rainbow, the bell, the timepiece and the scales of justice. Look at the figure of the angel. You will find them in Bak.



Melancholia of Old Age, 1977



Study after Dürer, 1999



Dürers Flight, 1989

Why is it called *Melancholia*? Probably because it is supposed to represent one of the four archetypes of the human psyche: the Phlegmatic, the Choleric, the Melancholic, and the Sanguine.

But above all, what blows my mind, is the visual music of the complex composition. Look how every shape resonates, or echoes, or belongs, or integrates with something else. The positioning and form of every line are crucial. Look how every form is fully incorporated into one continuous flow that takes hold of your eyes and gently guides them from place to place.

From 1956 to 1964 I tried to be a “modern” painter, leaning toward the language of abstraction. In the mid-sixties, I felt that my abstractions had exhausted themselves and I wanted to go on with something else.

I was over thirty when I returned to representational art. At that time, I knew that I had a personal story to tell, which I wanted to tell as indirectly as possible. Directly would have been too graphic, horrifying, even revolting. That was to be left for photography. I had to suggest it.

Hint at it by easily recognizable metaphors, which belonged to our mutual collection of familiar symbols. This would give my art a universal appeal. Dürer became for me an inexhaustible inspiration, a vibrant stimulus for my technical and expressive research.

Only books allowed me to learn how the old masters proceeded. As an art student of Bezalel, and later at the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris I was only taught how to make modern art. No one taught me how to work like the artists of the former centuries - I had to learn it by myself. It was fascinating!

## Portrait with Own Inner Self, 1967



This painting is directly inspired by Dürer's work. I tried to recreate the magic of his realism. Look at the texture of the fur, the hair of the beard, the fabric of the sleeves.

Its story is simple. Inside the old man lives a young one, whom we see as he pops up from the aging head. And if today I feel like the old man with the young man in me, - when I painted it I felt the opposite.

I was young, and the old man was somebody that I hoped one day to become. Not all the people I knew in my youth were granted the luxury of becoming old.

When I was young, five of my high school friends had lost their lives during their service in the Israeli army. Putting on years, aging, and looking the way I look now, paradoxically looked in that period of my life like a strange and unmerited luxury.

And there is something else of which I thought when I painted it. The wonderful magic of keeping the child in us forever alive. It makes me think of one of Picasso's famous saying, "When I was a child, I painted like an adult: it took me a life learning to paint like a child."

The art of preserving in us our youth demands a long life. Now, every time I look at myself in the mirror, I am amazed, "Is this me? How come?" I don't feel very different from how I felt fifty years ago!  
I am sure that most seniors experience the very same amazement.

Furthermore, this old man with the young man inside is an image that has, like all my other figurative works, a purely pictorial idea. It is rooted in my former abstractions. A search for shape and resonance. A musical rhythm embedded in the folds of sleeves...

## Once upon a Time, 1985



The everchanging speed of flowing time. Can Time be given stability, immobility, permanence? Perhaps that is what art does.

Speaking of my work habits I mentioned how incredibly precious I find Time. But what is Time? How do we perceive Time? When we are bored, one minute becomes an eternity. But when we recall a Time in which we were bored, there is no memory of it. Time was not recorded.

How do we deal with Time? Time affects us. We aren't immortal. It grinds us, little by little by little. We are less handsome, we are less healthy, Time is our metaphorical grinding stone.

In this painting, the grinding stone of Time has become the face of a huge clock. On the top, you see the number twelve and on the right the number three. But somehow it is a timepiece composed of different fractions. This grinding stone is a recreation of the concept of a grinding stone; not a functional one, since it is made of different blocks.

This grinding stone timepiece also tells you that there is another thing related to Time, *The Sound of Time* or *The Time of Sounds*.

When I was a child in Vilnius, we lived opposite a church and the time of day was announced by the sound of its bells. And later on, when I had to accept life's responsibilities - like getting up at five to get to my army unit by seven in the morning - I had an alarm clock with a bell almost like the one in this painting. My relationship with my alarm clock was one of hate and love. So here is a tribute to the bell of my alarm clock.

But this painting is also an image of Hope. The grinding stone cannot do damage, it is overpowered, dismantled. Of the two or three arms of normal clocks, here there is only one, and it is looking depressed and disconnected.

We have managed to stop the passing of time!

And there are trees and plants, and a faraway mountain.

Nature is telling us that with time things will grow again, become broken, but continue growing.

And so it goes on!

## Broken, 1969 - 1993



This is a still-life that I painted more than half a century ago. Years later, when I saw that something in it wasn't well-proportioned, or slightly off, I decided to return to it. I retouched and completed it with much care.

In its center is an Egg, the universal symbol of life. The Egg had already appeared in many of my earlier works, and it would go on materializing in many of my later paintings. Bringing to them not only its perfect and self-contained shape, but also its iconic identity and the many ponderings that come with this identity: fertility, nourishment, and above all the intriguing secret of life's beginning.

In this painting, the Egg is posed on a green cloth and reflected in a broken mirror. In the reflection it looks intact, but we can see that it is cracked. Did any of its content remain inside?

The still-life and the blue-green wall speak of a past disaster, an old egg-holder fell on its side. And the shattered mirror reflects a reality that is different from what we would expect from the painting's dark space.

It shows mountains and a clear sky, although what we see behind the objects placed on the table is mere darkness.

Is the reflection in the mirror a memory that speaks of the past?

The broken mirror, a symbol of a former catastrophe or the lack of luck, has always been an important component of our collective superstitions. The subconscious knows how to nourish our uncontrollable emotions.

In periods of mourning certain cultures have the custom of covering up all the mirrors. As if their mirroring is an expression of nature's indifference, which adds hurt to human loss and its inevitable pain.



## Multiple Voices, 1996



This painting belongs to a thematic series that I have painted a good number of times. It is based on the image of a quartet of musicians.

My first painting of a group of musicians was based on a photo of the *Juilliard String Quartet* on the jacket of an LP playing the quartets of Bartók. His compositions overwhelmed me, and I played them daily.

The figures you see in this image are dummy-like reconstructions of musicians. They come from a world that was destroyed and hastily recomposed. Fragments of memories that belong to a bygone life and speak of a past that was lost.

When I created this painting, innumerable events came to my mind. I thought of the violinists who were forced to accompany people sent to the gas chambers. I thought of the musicians who perished in Theresienstadt (Terezín). Some of them were famous but are now forgotten, others are rediscovered and will be forever treasured.

Independently, this painting relates to my love of music and its eternal power, and of how I feel when it penetrates my soul. When magical sounds and surprising rhythms, memorized or fresh melodies, and their unexpected variations, as well as crescendos and diminuendos accelerate the beating of my heart, my listening is completely focused, and I am transfixed. Today the large TV screen allows me to see all the details of music-making, and it is a feast! A finger, an eye, a baton, a sweeping arm...

But when I paint and listen to it from afar, music becomes a comforting presence, an epitome of beauty that must forever exist. Even in the scary images of dismay that sometimes invade my production.

This painting not only shows you a quartet of musicians but also some of their scarce audience, the fragments of human shapes. In a space that seems to be a bombed-out house, I tried to recreate the timeless beauty of a connection between souls.

My words may sound trite, but quartets of music touch me so very much because the string instruments represent human voices, and the precious connection between people who desire to listen and respond to each other is filled with Hope.

I discovered my pleasure of listening to music in Paris when I was a student. I shall never forget the organ concerts at the *Notre Dame*. And the free student tickets for the best of the best in innumerable concert halls!

The radio, when working at home, was always turned on to *France Musique*, a constant friend. I listened to Oliver Messiaen speaking of music. I discovered his *Quartet for the End of Time*, composed when he was a French army prisoner of the German Reich. Was it then, as a prisoner in the camp that he felt that the end of time had come?

It ended for some, for others it went on. . .

## Return to Vilnius, 2001



This painting evokes one of the memories that I have of my birth town, Vilna. It now belongs to the *Lewben Art Foundation of expatriate artists* that collects artworks by artists born in Lithuania.

The painting shows some of my basic reminiscences of Vilnius, the memories of a child that left his hometown at age 11.

Historically, before Vilnius became a city, it was a military fortress built on a hill, one of the rare hills in that area, which is a region full of lakes and rivers connecting them. Around the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century the town began to grow and expand. It was a significant station of commercial traffic and military control.

At a certain point, Lithuania accepted Christianity as its religion, the church became an important institution, the landowners more prosperous, and the military more powerful and commanding. The Duchy of Lithuania needed services for its developing administration and it invited Jews to come to Vilnius.

Most of those that came were from the Alsatian area in Germany, at the time their daily language was medieval German, which turned into Yiddish. Hebrew was reserved for religion and studies.

What were they supposed to do in Vilnius?

The Jews that settled in Vilnius were literate, educated, and capable merchants. They knew how to keep landowners' books and administer properties, knew how to cast coins, and were wonderful craftsmen.

Lithuania's rural population, animistic, and freshly converted to Christianity, needed their services. The early period of their settling granted them a privileged status and they were able to create, in the center of Vilnius, an area that granted them autonomy. With time, when various historical events destroyed the ancient Duchy, and the Empire of the Tzars occupied Lithuania, the attitudes towards Jews changed completely, and we now know the stories of harsh discriminations and pogroms.

The short-lived Jewish paradise of autonomy disappeared, and in 1940 the old center of Vilnius became the area which the Nazis turned into the notorious Ghetto. About 50,000 people were packed in old and overcrowded dwellings, built for 3,000 people.

When you look at this painting you can detect a hill with its castle, and the strange Cathedral of Vilnius, a Greek temple with a medieval belltower. But above all, you feel an enormous emptiness!

To your left and right are scrolls, or pages of paper that wait for a story that must be told! Painting this canvas I thought of all that remained of the Jewish community of my time.

The Jewish community of Vilnius was renowned. It was called *the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, and it was famous for its religious learning, the many professional societies, and its cultural institutions, literature, and theater. All that happened here resonated and inspired the world of the Yiddish culture.

This Vilna, forever gone, now only exists in books!

However, there is an awakening and reemerging interest of Lithuanians, wanting to know about this hidden part of their capital's history. There is a Jewish Museum, even a Samuel Bak Museum! Or as they call me in Lithuania: Samuelis Bakas.

What I tried to convey in this painting is my sense of loss and emptiness, and a flicker of hope of never being forgotten.

## Legend, 1975



Again, I returned to the idea of Life's mystery. How do you paint Life? How do you paint this miracle that has happened on our planet?

No one knows how it began, even the most intelligent of scientists cannot explain how it occurred. How was it that suddenly a couple of molecules met, and one said to the other: "I Like You, so let's make a family!" And it so happened, these things germinated and grew and became bigger, and bigger.

This canvas could be a metaphor of the growth of everything that surrounds us. Even Einstein's theory of the perpetually expanding universe could be added to the meaning of this canvas.

Over the years I have painted many paintings about Pears, with Pears, and of Pears, in endlessly varying forms and formations.

In 1966-1967, after having returned to live in Israel, I was contacted by representatives of the *Ministry of Culture* that saw in me a young and promising painter, who was bringing something new to Israeli art. They invited me to participate in an art exhibition in Paris, dedicated to *the Art of the New State*. I was told that I could send about eight midsize paintings.

At that time my style of painting was becoming a serious *Homage to Classical Art*, a reminder that our times not only accepted pluralism - it even encouraged it. And holding the balance between being deadly serious, and keeping my “tongue in cheek”, I was facing a challenge.

I thought, “What am I going to paint for Paris? What will the French understand? The French will understand the Pear!”



Why? Because when you say, “*une poire*” - a Pear in French, you speak of somebody a little stupid, and besides that, all the French are familiar with the famous French caricaturist Honoré Daumier, who drew King Louis Philippe in the shape of a Pear.

But my gratitude to Daumier wasn't the sole reason that the Pears invaded my repertory.

The Pear is a shape that has a very universal hold, it has something of the female form, and makes you think of a pregnant woman.

And besides that, it is a fruit! No one knows what specific fruit made man lose the Biblical paradise. In some ancient paintings, it was a Pear, later it became an Apple. And it is the Apple that acquired the role of the forbidden fruit of carnal knowledge. I chose the Pear as the fruit representing the *Knowledge of Life*.

I have depicted the Pear in multiple transformations of size and substance. It suggests our desire for understanding, of acquiring knowledge, for more and more learning. The fruit contains in itself the seeds of its multiplication. So does knowledge.

On this canvas, the seeds became other Pears, and the other Pears have in them other seeds, and life goes on and on and on. . . I wouldn't be able to create a more powerful tribute to this fabulous phenomenon called Life!

## Time is Money, 2008



Yes, Time is precious. This painting, called *Time is Money*, belongs to the *Samuelis Bakas Museum* in Vilnius. It is one of my rare paintings in which the title was born together with the image.

For as long as I can remember, I have always been short of having sufficient Time to do everything I wanted. Or so it seems to me. This might be a genetic disorder, or else, the result of the many disruptions of my life.

Arriving in Israel in 1948, I had to learn Hebrew, English, mathematics, algebra, and I was placed - the worst thing for me - in a school for the most outstanding pupils from all over Israel - because it was free.

I had an enormous hole in my conventional education, my brain was packed with information acquired from the mere reading of books, and it was of no practical use.

Days of 24 hours were not enough. I allowed myself to sleep for about five hours every night and the rest of the time I studied and studied to catch up. And somehow I did catch up, and I became as educated as people expected me to be...

But the sense that 24 hours a day do not suffice, has never left me!

Throughout my whole life, I felt that Life is a precious Gift, and that we must profit from every moment! And when people tell me, "You work too much, why don't

you relax? Why hurry all the time, it is not good for you!" I tell them it is not because "Time is money", it is simply because I don't know how to stop. Something is running in me all the time. A permanent escape? From death? Perhaps!

Rationally I realize that it might be wonderful to take time off. It might be a pleasure to stop this continuous running and relax. The endless use of every moment can be destructive. But, we live with contradictions, and although they can be a problem, let us accept that things that destroy some people, build up others!

My very mixed feelings are shown here. Two men running, and the one man is trying to tell the other, "Don't run, there is no need to rush!", the other one is showing him his watch and says, "Look at the time, we are going to be late and lose . . ." But he is already falling apart because he did not have time for his wife, he did not have time for his children, he did not even have the time to develop his brain!

So, all these mixed feelings are here on this canvas! A painting is a painted surface - it holds because there are forms, which relate to each other, rhythms in the shapes that echo, a sense of volume and space, and a composition that holds things in place!





Rushing to create Art. What is its substance, how do we proceed? When I think of my *Oeuvre* I sometimes feel that I am continuously pushing a Cart.

And I am pushing the Cart that contains in itself the subject matter of what happens when you push a Cart. This explains why there is a man pushing the Cart in which there is an image of another man pushing a Cart, on top of it there is a third man pushing a Cart, and from that Cart there is a tree that is growing. It is small but alive, real!

When seen through the eyes of rationality, there is something ridiculous about this whole assemblage - but something is growing! The growth of a tree is important! This sounds like a mass of contradictory ideas, serious, and mocking.

The pushing and pulling in opposite directions are a good indicator of my theme of contradictions that make us so human. Elements of irony, perhaps self-irony, a Jewish specialty, are always on display.

One of the reasons I chose to paint in a figurative style, which in the past has created so many religious paintings, martyrs, figures of power, and scenes of biblical events – is that it was serious.

You cannot look at life and grasp its complexity, without perspective. And what is a perspective if not a look from a given distance? Irony is the key to a vision that the great writers, whom I so much love, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Philip Roth, have constantly used.

Irony is a basic way of looking at things without sentimentality and with a dose of detachment that allows us a better understanding.

## Eye for Eye, 2015



I hope that this painting makes you think and reflect on what happened in Washington on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021!

What you see is one group of people confronting another group. Their mutual slogan is *An Eye for an Eye*! The world has known it since time eternal.

Certain groups are sure that they own the absolute truth and that they possess the unconditional right to everything they desire. To the ones who oppose them they yell, "Remove yourself from our path, we are right, and you are wrong!"

Tribal instincts push people to seek out those individuals who are similar to themselves in the color of skin, and in the beliefs that they hold sacred.

Tribal identifications of religion, wealth, or ethnicity reassure them so much that they will carve out the eyes of the ones who, according to themselves, tried to carve out theirs.

To hell with tolerance, long live racism. . .

Humanity, after having experienced catastrophes that resulted from confused aspirations or mismanagement, decided to experiment in totalitarianism. We want quiet and order, at any price, to hell with freedom.

Let us be led by a Führer, a Trump, a Stalin, or a Putin . . .

Democracy is a very delicate article, a very fragile thing!

Talking about this painting brought back to me all the contradictions that dance around in my head and they came out here!

## Settlement, 2015



I did a series of paintings on Justice the way it is revealed in our times, and I named it in two words, “JUST IS”.

Amanda Gorman, the young poet laureate of the USA attended the gallery opening of the exhibition of these paintings in Boston. I was very touched to hear her assert when reading her poem at the inauguration of Joe Biden as President of the USA, that “Justice” should be more than “JUST IS!”

We live in a country in which the scales of Justice are being destabilized by weights that have nothing in common with morals or laws.

I dedicated months to work on my Justice paintings after I read the book by Bryan Stevenson, "*JUST MERCY*." It reinforced in me what I already knew.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the times of American Slavery, there must have been about two million Black slaves. Today there are about two and a half million prisoners, many of them Black, in state and in private prisons; ninety percent of whom have not seen a judge.

Ninety percent of the people in American prisons were told by the authorities, "Now you have a choice: If you have the money, you pay a good lawyer and somebody, who is available straight away, will take care of you and your problem. If you don't have the money, we will find an inexpensive young lawyer who will very quickly deal with your problem, but no one knows when he will become available. You might rot in your cell for years.

So, we advise you to say that you are guilty of the crime of which you are accused, because then you will only get two, three years, perhaps five instead of twenty or thirty. . . It is in your own interest to admit and be imprisoned."

When I read all that - my blood boiled!

I live in a country where it is legitimate to imprison in private prisons a great number of people who were never judged. Today the number of such human beings is larger than in the times in which Lincoln decided to put an end to the crime of Slavery!

## Protected, 2018



So much happens in life by mere *Chance*.

I love the Chinese saying, “*Chance is the sound of a flying bird’s wing behind the back of a blind man.*” Will he make the right move, at the right time and catch it?

Chance is such an important component of what we call Luck. This landscape belongs to a series of paintings based on the form of the cube, reminiscent of Dürer’s etching.

Here you see the dice of a huge game of Chance, and every side is marked by a number, from one to six. We happen to see side number five, which has at its center a strange suggestion of a six, as if seen in a mirror. . .

And on the top of this Chance, the cube, there is a Still Life, because Life is Still There!

But the whole structure, the Chance and the Still Life seem to be sinking, little by little, in the mud, and into the water that reflects the sky.

Everything is surrounded by a yellow ribbon which we sometimes see when policemen mark off a crime scene.

It is clear something sad has happened here, somebody did not have the Chance, the Luck, to be born into a family with money, or was not intelligent enough to make money, will his life still be tolerable? Will he be able to afford it outside the walls of a prison?



## Figuring Out the Price of Freedom, 2008



This painting belongs to a series of paintings that I dedicated to the very famous image of the *Boy of the Warsaw Ghetto*, the Boy with raised arms. And I inserted into my painting the image of the sad angel of the *Melancholia*, which here is clad in blue, and made this dejected figure look at a heap of cut-outs of silhouettes.

Cut-outs based on the famous photo of the *Warsaw Ghetto Boy* that for me represents the million and a half of Jewish children slaughtered by the Nazis. The angel looks at what has been uncovered. These flat cut-outs are being uncovered little by little. They represent human bodies, but why are they flat?

In 1943 in Vilna, the Nazis began thinking of a possible defeat. They employed Jews of the Ghetto to dig out the bodies of over a hundred thousand people that were killed and buried in *Ponari* to make them disappear. They planned to achieve this by burning the bodies and spreading the ashes.

Thus, in case the Russians returned, their crimes would be hidden. How could they have imagined that the Soviets would not want to speak about the Holocaust, and, on the contrary, they covered it up as much as possible!

Some of the Jews who were digging out bodies recognized among the dead their own spouses, parents, family members, or friends. There is a documentary movie about the tunnel of *Ponari* that speaks of this tragedy.

The Germans called the dead bodies “*Figuren*”, which means: Figures! Because the dead were flattened by their own weight and by the layers upon layers of dead bodies.



This cruel definition has inspired the image of what you can see in perspective, the silhouette of the Boy with his arms raised.

## Still Life with Anything that Might Happen, 2020



The idea of putting some objects on a table and rendering their appearance has a long-established tradition in art, it is called “*Still Life*.”

Is it something that is alive, but doesn't move? Or is it something that questions the appearance of occurrences that our life seems to propose?

Still lives and our perception. What do we recognize when we look at what is visible? What do we know about things that we define by using words and by the limits of our vocabulary? We always describe the items we see by their exterior, a bottle, a pear, a glass, a lock, these are things that we know. And we think we know everything about them!

But I think that when we look at the world, we should tell ourselves that there are innumerable mysteries that we don't understand and that we shall never know them. Sometimes small problems look enormous to us, while enormous problems may be very simple to solve. So how do we determine the perception of the scale that we imagine?

All these wonderings, all these thoughts are contained in this “*Still Life with Anything that Might Happen*.”

## Expected Premonition, 1981



In my memoir *Painted in Words*, I described my escape from the Forced labor Camp HKP [Heeres-Kraftfahrpark]. Followed by our hiding, together with my mother, in what used to be a Benedictine Convent, among books and ancient manuscripts, about thousands upon hundreds of thousands of books, that were piled up in the corridors and jammed in all the rooms.

We were with a small group of Jews of the Ghetto. Not allowed to speak to each other, because our voices might have been detected, so we only whispered.

And I remember that I was sleeping on old books, close to Mother, when suddenly I felt her jump up, like waking from a nightmare. I whispered, “What happened to you?”, she answered, “Oh, I had a terrible dream. . .,”

At that time my father was in the camp and we knew that he was alive.

My mother continued talking, “I dreamt that I saw your father and he had a big black X on himself. A kind of a crossed-out sign. And he gave me a signal that he was gone, as if saying to me I am not there anymore . . . and I wonder what happened to him, I wonder, I wonder, I wonder. . .”

A week or maybe ten days after our liberation Mother discovered that close to the night of her dream my father was killed. His body was among the very last Jews executed in *Ponari*.

So, this signal of the black X, the sign that says, “You don’t have the right to live!” is on this unknown man. His yellow vest hints at the shape of the yellow star, our sign of identity, that we had to sew on our clothes.

And my own presence in the story of this painting is related to the pear on the wall, from which a smaller pear is coming out. Maybe it is my father and me? I don’t know!

*A Premonition that was Expected*, now you understand the story behind this painting.

## Self Portrait, 1995-1996



Myself, among cut-outs and reassembled images of the *Warsaw Boy*. I miraculously survived the *Children Action* [Kinder Aktion], when most of the HKP camp's children were taken by the German SS to be killed.

The HKP camp consisted of the last 1,200 Jews who survived the liquidation of the Ghetto. The labor camp produced burners for German army trucks and prepared loads of small cubes of wood to be used instead of gasoline. The wood was packed in big heavy sacks, about thirty or forty kilos each. A continuous line of prisoners brought them from the place where the wood was being cut up to the main gate, creating big piles of sacks to be loaded on trucks that were sent to the front.

Three days after the *Children Action*, I still was hiding under a bed, Father arrived, put me in the sack, then on his shoulder, and joined the line of carriers. He carried

me as if I was mere wood up to a small building on the border of the fence. The sack was lowered, and I was told to wait. A window opened, I ran. And I never saw Father again.

This is how I survived.

In this painting, I painted a Self Portrait of myself at that age, surrounded by images and many flat recreations of the *Boy of Warsaw*.



Here is the photo of the *Boy of Warsaw*.

At that time, I looked so much like this boy!

And I think that thousands upon thousands of Jewish children looked so much like this boy.

I always see in him a kind of a reflection of myself as well as the reflection of my best friend *Samek*, who was killed at age 7.

In my painting, in the very center, you can see him with a Jewish yellow star, the *gele-late* [a yellow patch]. And at the horizon there is a kind of a boat, or is it a boat? Heavy smoke coming out from high stacks that could be candles of the Shabbat or they might hint at the crematoria.

The heavy rocks seem to come from the *Wailing Wall of Jerusalem*.

And in the center of the painting, the shoes that are separated from the boy, are my tribute to Primo Levi, to his description of how the possession of shoes, was determining the possibility of remaining alive.

## The Family, 1974



“The Family” is a very large painting, about two meters on one meter sixty. It represents a reassembled portrait of people that seem to have emerged in our lives as memories of the past and now pose for someone who will take their picture.

As you see, the individual figures appear in different degrees of reality. In other circumstances I could speak about this painting for hours, I won't do it now! I leave you the image to look at and reflect on. What you see, and what you explain to yourself, is yours!

But here are two texts about “The Family” that I wrote many years ago.



The first is an excerpt from a letter to Joachim Jean Aberbach, printed in the 1974 catalog, "BAK Oils / Watercolours / Drawings 1972-1974" by Aberbach Fine Art, New York

*... "The Family" is an assemblage of faces and figures – like in a huge old-fashioned group portrait. They are set against a dark sky, covered by smoke, red with reflections of distant fires. Many of these faces remain enigmas, even to myself. I told you that here memory was guiding my hand, and it has revealed its vain struggle to recompose the images of those who have gone; yet some of them returned into being as flat, two-dimensional faces, and others as some kind of incomplete monuments, disclosing only a part of their known aspect. The group is towered by the reminiscence of my phenomenal, blind great grandfather – a man with a genius for mechanical constructions. His son, my grandfather, who was wounded in the Russo-Japanese War, and also some other members of my family who, at the time when I was a child, were, apparently, living in their pre-war paradise, quite eyeless as to the fate that awaited them, are surrounded by those who were destined to become targets for captivity, pain and extinction. They are all there in various degrees of "aliveness". Hiding among the great figures of the past are others in dirty army fatigues, who seem doomed to live in a state of eternal alert...*

The second text is a letter I wrote to Rolf Kallenbach who was my art dealer in Germany in the years 1978 – 1992.

He was also a filmmaker of Art-documentaries about Karl Appel, Hans Hartung, Arman and Samuel Bak. He produced a film solely dedicated to this painting.

*Rehov HaShikma, 41, Savyon, Israel  
17<sup>th</sup> April 1978*

*Dear Rolf,*

*I understand that you are taking on the not so very simple task of writing a commentary to the painting, "The Family". I shall try to elaborate a little on the text which accompanied this painting in the 1974 Aberbach catalogue, although I wonder if I can add very much to those few but incisive sentences in that catalogue. There is always the danger when explaining and speaking of art: the more words one uses, the less the real meaning of the images comes through.*

*I was not very conscious about every detail and every image while I was painting "The Family", and I wonder if what now seems to me to be their real meaning is what I had in mind while I was actually doing it. So, it really comes down to doing some analysis and commentary upon one's own work, - something that cannot be done without a certain measure of embarrassment ..... Well, let me say something about the organization of the structure of this painting:*

*Besides being what it seems at first view: an assemblage of figures such as one sees in an old-fashioned group photograph, it shows in a very clear way the upper part of the painter's easel supporting a surface on which two women with the grey and the pink hats are painted. And if you look well, there are some more figures that do not give you the three dimensional illusion but seem to be "dummy"-like painted surfaces.*

*It all has to do with the limitation of art to bring back to life and existence those who are gone. And I think that it is the ones who are gone who are the overwhelming majority in this group.*

*As if behind a cut portrait of Leonardo's in which the eyes have been taken away, there is the figure of my great grandfather with those black spectacles that blind people used to wear. He was a very expert technician, responsible for the extremely intricate safety mechanism in several banks in Vilna. He did it all without the help of his eyesight, since he lost it in an accident when very young.*

*Another figure, quite near to my great grandfather, was perhaps an attempt to describe his son-in-law, my grandfather. He was something of an artist and devoted his time to the most impossible inventions and design of machinery, though few people were ever interested in it. Although his work entailed tools and mechanics, he really had the nature of an artist and I remember that, as a child, I was always fascinated by the various devices he used and how they seemed to have a life of their very own. My grandfather was badly wounded in the Russo-Japanese war for which he volunteered to fight for his Tsar.*

*Don't ask me why a Jew had to volunteer to fight for Russia and the Tsar! It remains a mystery to me, and I don't think he ever provided a proper answer other than the simple fact that his unusual personality longed for adventure.*

*If we look at the left side of the painting, towards the foot, we see fragments of monuments. These might describe the impossibility of memory to reconstruct*

*images or details in their fullness. But it can also be a very personal remembrance of my first art lessons given to me in Vilna, and in which I tried to produce drawings from some of the debris of classical plaster copies, as used in the Academy of Fine Arts.*

*There is a hat atop a stone pillar. And next to it a man wearing the very same hat. I guess it had to do with the idea that “the hat makes the man”. This brings me to the memory of my own father, who was always very keen on dressing and appearing as smart as possible. I think that living in a provincial town where the feeling of anti-semitism was quite strong prompted the desire to appear more “worthy” and elegant than the rest of the crowd. This is a typical expression of Jewish frustration in those who believed in the possibility of assimilation.*

*In the very center there is a sort of assemblage. It has the silhouette of a head, which is also a target for shooting at, and it has some eyes pasted on it. I suppose these must be the eyes that look into the person who is viewing the painting. The bullet-holes that have pierced that target are related to the wish, unfortunately too often experienced, to annihilate the evidence of the past.*

*On the painter’s easel there are the two female figures, and next to them a wooden silhouette echoing the outline of the lady in pink. Her face is closed. Instead of a face there is a door on a hinge, and a hook keeps it closed. The eyes of the lady in grey look blindly into the future.*

*As a child I was always fascinated by the blind eyes of statues, those that populated the public gardens, or those of the saints standing against the church walls. Why were they not given any pupils with which to look at the world they had come into, I thought. I feel that the statue-like gaze of those figures in my painting is related to their refusal to see whatever is happening around them: the real nature of the fate that awaits them.*

*Again, this is very closely tied to my personal experience as a child at the time when I watched so intensely those crowds of refugees as they came and went through our house during the years of 1938 and 1939. I did not find it unnatural that my parents still believed that their pre-war paradise could go on forever.*

*The figures clad in white are reminiscent of packing, and of being blindfolded, or being wrapped in the cloth in which one wraps the dead. It also recalls to memory the cloth with which monuments are covered before their unveiling. And if you think about it, it is all quite closely related.*

*The symbol of life – the egg: once as a very fragile, broken fragment – then as a stone form which has been destroyed by cannon-balls – the third time as a shooting target made of wood. These are quite explicit about the nature of the gathering of all these figures.*

*To see this painting only as an elegy for the very near members of my family who perished in those tragic years would, I believe, be much too limited a view and much too limiting as an experience. I have also brought here participants from a further past, and I imagine that it is connected to the fascination with those fragments of memories and stories to which I listened as a child. Stories of a most complex family saga that had never been put down on paper and that have vanished forever with the ones who have disappeared .... far too soon ...*

*Of course there is also the natural process of disappearing, which is not accompanied by smoke-covered skies as in this painting. But in my own experience that was the predominating feature, and that is why it is so all-pervading in this painting.*

*I am thinking, Rolf, if whether on the whole it is all that important to go into those personal associations about this work when you are actually working on the script of the film. Perhaps the brief text that was already there would be too much.*

*Personally I could see the whole thing treated as a sequence of images, with the right music and the proper inter-cuttings. And the less words you use, the better I believe it will be for the film.*

*In my opinion, the ideal form is the one without the spoken word. It would perhaps then assume a certain universal language that only a painting is privileged to possess. ...*

I am very grateful that today, more than twenty different books are dedicated to the many aspects and subjects of my art. They offer innumerable interpretations and interesting insights.

At present, I have just finished work on informative texts concerning each one of the 512 works that I donated to the *University of Omaha*, for the creation of a *Samuel Bak Museum and Academic Center*.

It is a collaborative work that I share with an art historian, to be published in due time with images, essays and many informative sequences.

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[After having spoken about the 16 works, Samuel Bak answers questions.]

Question Evelina Kolchinsky (EK) The titles to your paintings are fascinating, *Silent Echo* or *Image and Imagination*, *Still Life with Anything that Might Happen*, or, my favorite, *Still Life with Antiquated Hope*, as absurd as it looks to me, sometimes the painting is secondary to the title, so I would like to know what idea comes first? The idea of a title and a narrative or. . .



Upper left: *Still Life with Antiquated Hope*, 2010-2020; upper center: *Silent Echo*, 2020; upper right: *Image and Imagination*, 2013; lower center: *Still Life with Anything that Might Happen*, 2020

Answer Samuel Bak (SB) It is as customary to give titles to paintings as it is to name people, animals, and sometimes objects. Adam's first task in paradise was exactly that.

When the mother of my three daughters was pregnant, we first let the joy of becoming parents fill us, and the right name would naturally pop up. But it depends on traditions, some of my friends were preparing names months in advance.

When I begin my work on a painting it has no title. But when it is finished, it gets one. Sometimes it imposes itself on me. Titles have their importance, they help us with preparing lists, and identifying works, but more importantly, they can suggest the images' meanings.

I choose titles that try to be helpful, but that does not mean that titles explain everything. Certainly not! And certainly not when you have painted as many paintings as I did, and you need a huge number of different titles. Often, I run out of ideas.

What about paintings that speak of the same subject, but in different forms? Can I use the same title over and over again? Sometimes I do.

For instance, in the case of the first series of the *Warsaw Boy* with the arms raised, I could not bring myself to give them titles. I began by calling the paintings "Study A", "Study B", "Study C" . . . The subject was so aching that I refrained from going any further.



Study A, 1995



Study B, 1995



Study C, 1995

You see, when I painted the images based on the famous photo of the surrendering boy, I thought of myself and my best friend Samek.

He was exactly my age, the son of Mother's best friend Manja Epstein, and he was given the same name I had, Samuel, or in a Polish diminutive, "Samek."

In 1940 Manja, fearing for Samek's life, entrusted him to his Christian nanny, who hid him in her home. Alas, the neighbors suspected that the woman was hiding a Jew, called the police, and they found him. They gunned him down cold-bloodedly and left his small body drenched in blood for hours on the stairs' landing. It was a warning. Here is what happens when you hide a Jew! The Christian nanny was imprisoned.

When I painted this boy, for me a very loaded subject, I thought of myself, I thought of the *Boy of Warsaw*, and inevitably, of Samek. We looked so much the same, and I could not go beyond titles like "Study D", "Study F" . . .

Years later, when I returned to paint the same subject, I called the series "Samek", sometimes "One of the Samek's". I gave different titles and ended up with fifty or more of these drawings and paintings. Most have different titles.

Yes, titles are necessary!

Presently, my German friends, who edit the Catalogue Raisonné of my works write, "Why is it that this painting was once named like this and in another publication named differently?"

It happened that for one catalog I called it with a certain title, and later I changed its name! There is always a possibility of improving a title, a name. A painting doesn't have a will of its own, it cannot protest!

When I became an American citizen I was asked if I wanted to change my name. I said, "No, no, no, BAK is fine!" And it made me think. You can change your name, but you are still the same person.

Question EK Sometimes they find old paintings and it is difficult to attribute them to a painter, so they argue, "Whose painting is this?" Do you think there are clues that will allow historians of the future to attribute specific paintings to BAK?

Answer SB The word "future", and what our imagination projects into it, points at countless possibilities. The Catalogue Raisonné of my work is online. If the future will preserve the technique of the digital information that exists today – there will

be no problem! I do not know of any other painter that has a Catalogue Raisonné as detailed as myself. So there should not be any problem in attributing my work.

But if we picture a supposed future of a nuclear extinction in which three or four people remain on the planet, I am not sure that they will be interested in the paintings of Samuel Bak . . .

So it depends very much on the future that we envisage.

Question EK You have symbols of past tragedies in your paintings, and you suggest that we use them as a Hope to rebuild Life. The symbols are everywhere, in your broken birds, that always look as if they are about to take off. And there is always something - a blue horizon, so there is always Hope!

Answer SB True, there is a lot of broken stuff in my paintings. And in my introduction I warned you about it. The sight of a broken item can hint at a past disaster, but it might also be something else.

Because in Art, the breaking up of formerly established shapes is part of the creative process. Take a composer who writes a melody, and then reworks it in innumerable variations. He creates a musical sentence and repeats it again and again, differently each and every time. The Cubists broke up reality into fragmented bits and pieces in order to create new shapes. Things that look familiar but appear altered, stylized, or broken are quite current in modern art. This is a pictorial language to which we are accustomed.



Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, c. 1438-1440

Think of painters like Michelangelo or Paolo Uccello, who in a Realism created in the time of the Renaissance, did the same. They painted one person hiding behind another, showing partial fragments of their bodies, which was another form of breaking up the appearance of things.

And your imagination completes it and makes it whole!



Breaking! What a familiar concept. When we were children we were told, “Careful, careful, don’t break it, hold on to it with both hands.” Breaking is loss, disaster, pain, while wholeness is peace, conservation, perfection, and eternity.

Peace and absence of loss wasn’t my experience. After having survived I lived in Israel among survivors, all of them broken people. Broken people, who came from worlds in ruins, and tried to resurface from it. Appear to the rest of the world looking absolutely normal, like anybody else. . .

My mother married a man who had survived Dachau. His wife and his two daughters perished in the camps. He was very polite, gentle, always smiling, always well dressed, but his spirit was badly cracked.

Being broken has so many different meanings. Not all are negative. Most bridges contain special cracks that keep them from crashing when they freeze or heat up in the sun. The acceptance of a certain degree of imperfection, the realization that we live in a reality that is not “A dream come true”, has in it something healthy.

In Jewish homes of past centuries there was always a corner that exposed a crack, or a small and uncompleted surface, to remind its inhabitants of the Temple’s destruction. The reach for perfection and wholeness is in certain cultures a sign of provocation and an invitation of danger.

Moslem creators of carpets avoid challenging the Devil by never ever perfectly repeating their familiar pattern. All of this has to do with perfection, imperfection, acceptance, brokenness. And then there is the joy of building something from a stockpile of fragments. Recycling.

The recreation of things that once existed gives us a sense of repair and reclaim. Most of my “Still Lives” look as if they were recreations from other “Still Lives.” Broken remains of an indecipherable past. They pretend to be something they are not. Mystery upon mystery . . .

Question EK From all these remnants of tragedies I get a sense that you absolutely do not have grudges!

Answer SB No, it seems to me that I don't have grudges. I shall have to check with my subconscious. I can't do that right now. . .

Question EK Would you please tell me what are your thoughts on forgiveness, not forgetting but forgiving. Is there a symbol for forgiveness in your paintings? How do you convey forgiveness?

Answer SB Forgiveness implies a lot. The French say that to understand means to forgive. But it isn't as simple as that. I have never thought about forgiveness as a subject in my art. Somewhere I wrote that the creative process contains many levels of consciousness. The subconscious also plays its part in it.

On the couch of the psychoanalyst, we suddenly say things that shed light on what we have never thought of before. The thoughts on the possibility of forgiving, or not forgiving, surely dwell there. In this hidden basement of the memory of things past.

I realized that the big machine of life on earth that defines our existence, our different civilizations, and administrates the behavior of generations, one step at a time, can be very cruel, "Remember what Amalek did to you". Take revenge!" This is chilling. Horrible things happen, and people do not always learn from them. Sharing experience is an imperative challenge.

Speaking of grudges. You know, my eyes are open, I have a sense of reality.

There was a film made about the forced labor camp HKP in Vilnius, and it showed the moments when some of the children destined for slaughter, were seeking to hide. The film was made by a Canadian filmmaker, a semi-documentary, with actors.

And when it was shown in Boston, I was invited to attend and to speak. It so happened that Boston has another survivor of the same camp, more or less my age.

So the two of us, two of those miraculously surviving children of the *Children Action*, Mr. H. and I found ourselves in a Cultural Center in Brookline, where the

film was shown to a packed audience - standing room only. And then came the talk after the screening.

It was about children and death. I told the audience that what frightened me most in those cruel times of the Shoah was the danger of being separated from my parents.

As a boy of 8 or 10, I wasn't able to grasp the idea of death or of dying. I thought that being dead might even be a nice thing because if killed I would straight away go to paradise. And in paradise I would be singing in a choir for the glory of Jesus - that was guaranteed by the Benedictine nuns, who were hiding me.

But the danger of being separated from my parents was another thing, this truly was frightening!

My speaking of children being separated from parents quickly projected me into our time: Trumptime! And when I said that I was thinking of what is being tolerated where I live now and where I pay my taxes and that American officials of the Trump administration separate children from their parents - some people got up and left.

How could I, as a Jew, compare. . . ?

We Jews own the history of the Holocaust.

What about never forgetting and never forgiving?

Was I wrong?

And, how could a tragedy of a million and a half-dead kids, children killed by the Nazis compare to the 1,500 or so, of Latinos, that were separated from their parents and who will probably never see them again, but on the other hand live in fine conditions...?

Maybe they are right, maybe I am wrong. . .

Numbers, statistics, are important, and so are individual lives. So, is our attention to others. What I tried to do with my words was to distinguish between collective tragedies and individual ones.

Remember that I spoke with students who came from underprivileged homes, or Latin America, and listened to their stories of abandonment and loss, I came to realize that I wasn't totally wrong!

Keep your eyes open and look at what is happening in the world. Look at what happened in Ruanda, look at what happened in Syria. Look at the vast area that was destroyed by [Dick] Cheney and [George W.] Bush, who sent American soldiers to die in Iraq for the interests of Haliburton and many other corporations, look at the upheaval of the Middle East. What about Syria that became a devastated country, the lives of millions of people destroyed. One can talk for hours about the disorders of our civilization.

People will say, “Here we go. . . Politics!”

I guess that we are touching one of the most complex things of my life, the definition of my identity. It might bring us back to Descartes, “I think, therefore I am”, I would continue, “I am, therefore I must think”. Like every other human being in the world, I am a political being. We relate to the Country in which we live. We relate to our Family, to our Tribe. Where do we place ourselves between what we consider as the “Pole of Good” and the “Pole of Evil”?

What gives meaning to our lives?

Question EK Using your own words, Tribes. We are all tribal animals. You were born in Vilna, at that time Poland, then it became UdSSR. You moved to Bavaria, then to Israel, Italy, France, Switzerland, United States. So which Tribe do you belong to? What nation do you belong to?

Answer SB It isn't easy to say... I certainly belong to several Tribes. One of my countries is *Painterland!*

I consider myself very Jewish, I consider myself a perfect Litvak. Moreover, if you ask me who I am and how I would define myself, I'd say something similar to what President Kennedy said when he was in Berlin. He said, “Ich bin ein Berliner!” And it is true, he grew up there as the son of the American ambassador in Berlin, in very challenging times.

I would say it in Yiddish, “Ich bin a Vilner”.

It means that I come from a city where there were multiple Jewish cultures. It was a deeply religious city, but also a secular one, with a lot of in-betweens.

My paternal Grandfather Hayim, as a student, was a Socialist and took part in the Revolution of 1905. When the police of the Tzar were arresting revolutionaries, he fled from Vilna to Paris.

There is very little in my early memory of the stereotyped Judaism in the sense of piety and tradition. I remember for instance the big synagogue of Vilnius. My maternal Grandfather Khone, a self-proclaimed atheist, took me on *Yom Kippur* to the big synagogue and I remember I was standing with him under his *Tallis*. The *Tallis* of his neighbor was somehow connected to his and they were probably telling each other jokes or making funny remarks, and they were shaking forwards and backwards. The two of them went to the synagogue because their wives made them, not because of God. They believed in Domestic Peace! And the two wives on the women's gallery above the ground floor, Grandmother Shifra and her friend, saw their husbands swinging forwards and backwards, and they "kvelled" [were delighted].

I thought that what went on between Grandfather and his friend must have been very funny. I wanted to understand but they were whispering to each other some adult jokes and did not include me. I was bored. This was the Judaism that I remember from my childhood. Never bring an Atheist to the Synagogue.

But Jewish holidays were another thing. Whatever was related to food was shared with much love. It was consumed in large groups and a very joyful ambiance. My authentic and short-lived religious feeling belongs to another planet. It was infused into my mind by the wonderful Benedictine nuns in the convent, in which I realized that Jesus came to save the world from the sin that Adam and Eve had committed! What was the sin? I discovered that they ate the Pear. Pears! Not the ones that BAK was to paint. . .

But life has its own logic. To make sense of it I must return to my paternal Grandfather Hayim. He abandoned Paris for Vilna because his wife, pregnant with my father, decided, to give birth to her new baby, in her family's city. So Paris had to be abandoned. Grandfather remained forever nostalgic. Paris remained his dream. Eating French onion-soup, that Grandmother Rachel detested, he would always sigh, "Oh, Paris, Paris, Paris!"

Paris the world capital of ART.

So as a child I grew up with the idea that Paris is the planet where artists come from or go to, to become important. It was a fantastic, indispensable station for anyone who had an artistic ambition.

And when living in Israel, even while serving in the army, I toiled every free minute to put aside money and go there. My going to Paris was a must!

And what happened in Paris? I fell in love with a young Italian woman, we went to Italy. A gallerist liked my art, and my exhibitions were successful. We lived in Rome and with time I became an Italian citizen. My two elder daughters were born in Rome.

Then one day, when my eldest returned from her Kindergarten and said, “Daddy, why did the Jews kill Jesus, he was such a nice man!” - I told my wife, “We are packing up and going to Israel. I am not going to send my children to the only Jewish school of Rome, which isn’t great, and on top of it is religious.” So, we went to Israel in order to be Goyim!

In Israel, my paintings became known and quite in demand, even popular. In a short time, I became a local celebrity, with all the headaches that fame causes. In 1974 I was invited to New York, and we moved to Manhattan for a three year stay. Like the builders of ancient cathedrals who traveled from one place to another, when, and where they were needed – I adapted myself to the demand.

And when many years later I married Josée, and the American market showed a rising interest in my art, we came up with the idea of settling in the States. We traveled to Boston to better explore the idea, looked for a house with a studio, and found the perfect one - and bought it. Luck, Luck, and Luck!

We returned to Switzerland and applied for a *Green Card*, got it, and left the country of the Alps. We immigrated bringing along a huge container packed with the output of years of painting. Also many books and the furniture we loved - and here I am. This is a comfortable place, where I have the space which my work requires, where I can shut myself in for eight hours a day and paint, paint, and paint! Josée loves to exercise and to read books, so while I am involved with canvases oils and brushes, she reads and cooks excellent and the most healthy food.

So, here I am! Still producing a lot of paintings, and I have many more stories to tell. . .

[The following questions were asked by various people who joined the zoom call, the questions have been shortened and summarized.]

After a short introduction the following image is shown.



The photo is from *Painted in Words* with the caption: *“In Landsberg am Lech, Germany, with Mother and my stepfather Markusha (Nathan Markovsky, a Dachau survivor), around the time of their wedding in 1947. The camera of a German photographer produced an unexpected Tikkun giving these displaced persons an aura of middle-class respectability.”*

Question The question is about Tikkun [Hebrew for “Repair”, Tikkun olam is the concept of “Mending the World”], and the drama that lives on in all families that lost many of their loved ones.

Answer SB *Still Life with Anything that Might Happen* speaks of the look of things and what they really are. And how difficult it is to grasp even a fraction of the world’s enormous complexity.

When walking in a street I tell myself, “Wow, there are thousands of lives passing me by, I will never have an idea of what is in any one of them, what is in their minds, what stories they carry, what experiences they could share”.

This is our human limitation.

Look how peaceful the three of us look in this staged photo. Nathan Markovsky, my stepfather, was a very gentle and lovely man, but I never really developed with him the kind of openness that perhaps could have existed between us. Maybe it rarely exists between Fathers and Sons. Later in life, when he wasn't there, I realized that I really loved him, but lacked the courage to put it in words, and I felt sad.

He lived much more with the ghosts of the lives that he had lost than he lived with us. He was a mathematical genius, he had a photographic memory, he could look at a page of numbers and tell you the results of multiplications, of divisions and whatsoever, it was a phenomenal ability! He was an international bridge player, master of chess, had a brilliant talent for writing in rhymes - but after Dachau he was broken. A most civil wreck!

Nightmares plagued him. Every night he woke up screaming, every night he was in Dachau, with a piece of bread in his hands that other prisoners were tearing out from his hands. He dreamt it thousands of times; thousands of times he woke up my mother and me with his screams.

Look at the photo and what do you see? A smiling gentleman. What can you tell about his story? Nothing!

So, this is life, this is how things are, and the desire for making a good appearance and respectability are setting the stage.

Pride and self-possession were very much a part of my Mother's attitude in her life, and I think she partly passed it on to me. I say partly because at times I was quite critical of it. I thought that my Mother was seeking too much.

Respectability and enviable appearances come at a price.

My Father was a very good-looking man, and the women of Vilnius knew that he had a feeble for the ones that weren't indifferent to his charms. Marital fidelity wasn't his strongest point.





Mother's so-called "friends" sometimes reported to her, "You know, Mitzia, we saw your husband with this lady there, and that other lady here. . ."

Mother would kind of smile with a certain air of superiority and answer, "You know, it is much better to be a partner in a very good business than have a poor business all for yourself!"

But after that, she would go into the bedroom and cry, and I, as a child, knew that something, which was going on between my parents, wasn't that simple...

But after my father was killed, Mother re-doubled her love and passion for him. She was married to a survivor from Dachau, but I don't think that she ever loved Markuscha as much as she loved my murdered father.

Appearances and substance – what do we know?

Question The first part: Being the guardians of general knowledge and not only the fragmented particles; and Tikkun, what would be your suggestions? How can we restore, repair the wholeness of the world?

Answer SB Well, this is a very demanding question.

Restoring The World - What an enterprise. Can we truly repair it?

I abound in such questions myself. My answers for matters of such importance are very bashful.

A lot depends on the evaluation of the problem. Some answers are easy. When the IRS asks me how much I gained, I have it black on white. For what you are asking I have my share of observed and experienced wonderments, and mainly remain with infinite question-marks.

Life and religion. Courageous acts are very significant. I have the greatest admiration for the Benedictine catholic nuns, who saved my life. Especially Sister Maria Mikulska. There is an ancient Jewish saying that saving one life equals the saving of the whole world!



Years ago, Sister Maria was awarded a medal of merit by the Lithuanian president, Valdas Adamkus.

I happened to be in Vilnius and I accepted it for her at the ceremony in the presidential palace. She had no other heirs.

Maria was a highly educated and pious person. After all she experienced during the war, she left the church and lived in Warsaw as a librarian. In a certain way, she moved from a life in a secluded cloister to a life dedicated to the betterment of other lives.

I say that as the Litvak I am, one who, despite all my secular distancing, culturally belongs to the worldview of Judaism that is inspired by the *Gaon of Vilna*. Deeds and Ethics are important. The *TARIAG MITZVOT* or the *613 Commandments* that you find in the scriptures tell us how to live in decency, and they are the only way to serve the mystery of God.

This means that by opening our eyes, by getting away from prejudices, by rejecting intolerance and racism, and accepting social justice, we can strive to decency and bring our share of TIKKUN.

This shall be our infinitesimal contribution to the improvement of a world that developed enormous mechanisms of self-destruction.

But how could I define the world?

It makes me think of a Hebrew poetess called Rachel, from long ago, and a phrase of one of her poems, "I only know to speak about myself, and my world is as big as the world of an ant."

Question Is there a difference in painting between fiction and non-fiction?

Answer SB I would say there is. The same difference as in literature between what you call autobiography and what you call fiction.

I had a good friend, a writer, who had published an autobiography. His fiction always contained his life, and since I knew him well, many of his stories were quite transparent. In his autobiography, he proposed the fictional image of himself, which he consciously desired to project.

You cannot invent beyond yourself!

But concerning your specific question, I should be more precise.

Before the invention of photography painters created on large canvases images of history. They spoke of reality, of events that had happened by utilizing fiction. Portraiture was supposed to be non-fiction. But people wanted to look younger and more beautiful, and artists complied.

Where are the borderlines? Do such borderlines between fiction and nonfiction exist? Perhaps only on the ads that make lists of books for sale.

Question What did you feel was the most critical situation in Vilnius?

Answer SB Perhaps, in a certain way, every moment of our life has the potential of being critical – but fortunately, we ignore it.

Not long ago, a man was killed not far away from where I live. He died because he was in his car, in a certain place, and at a certain crucial moment. Had his keys fallen from his hand when leaving his home, this might have retarded his exit and saved his life.

The mere nature of the Randomness of life's events makes it difficult for me to respond.

In my memoir, I have described a good number of crucial moments that happened to me when I was a child. I could not classify them in terms of importance.

Let me tell you about the time with Mother, after we had escaped from the forced-labor camp. We had nowhere to hide. For quite a long time we stood on a bridge

over a turbulent river. The raging streams captured my attention and amazed me. I didn't know that at the very same moment she was contemplating suicide, with me in her arms. Years later, when I was in my thirties Mother confessed her flash of despair and firm intention to this irrevocable act. Then a miracle saved our lives.

At other times choices of my own projected me to the brink of life. Some of them hunt my memory like swords of Damocles.

Earlier on I mentioned the Syrian minefield. I was with a friend, also a painter, two elderly guys on our northern border, mud-covered reservists of the *Yom Kippur war*, who felt like the most useless spare parts of an ineluctable war machine. Our officer had disappeared and no one asked us to do anything. There was a smell of decomposing bodies, the smoke of artillery, and explosions, my eyes burnt and I was constantly coughing.

At a distance, we perceived an incapacitated tank from which something dark was hanging, inert and dark. Maybe the tank's driver. Instead of hitting the ground, which would have been the right thing to do, I told my friend, "Let's have a look!" We went over to the tank and examined its bloody mess. While we stood there, we heard screaming and yelling, we looked out to our left and recognized far away silhouettes of soldiers making signs with their arms, "Don't move, don't move, DO NOT move!"

Two soldiers came with mine detectors and made us follow them.

"Tembelim [idiots]", they said, "You were in the middle of a minefield, Impossible to understand why you didn't blow up"

Had I died then, it would have been because of my stupidity.

Question Who are for you the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Answer SB There are so many artists that I admire.

Honestly, I wouldn't be able to make adequate lists. Monet, Braque, Bonnard, Picasso, Matisse, Hopper, Bacon, Magritte, Morandi, Klee, Vuillard, Beckman, Mondrian, Steinberg, - I could go on and on. I admire Anselm Kiefer, a German artist who speaks of the malaise of today's world.

Another important artist, Lucien Freud, always reminded the admirers of his paintings that "Art comes from Art."

Each one of the artists that I mentioned, and many equally important ones, offer me ideas and advice that I can freely use. I am grateful!

Question How do you deal with the contradiction of being on one side but also seeing the other side of the story?

Answer SB The world isn't black or white. It is made of many grays, but certain senses guide us to what is lighter and warn us what risks to become dark. But I guess that the question refers to my worldview. You have heard it before, I always say that I have questions, I don't have the answers.

From what I told you about myself, I guess that you see in me a Liberal. Great! I came to the States after living for ten years in Switzerland, which had a political party of the right, called "Liberal."

In the States I met Mother's beloved cousin Janusz, who had become an American Republican, he worryingly said to me, "You know, Samek, you sound to me like a liberal!", and I said, "Me, a liberal? Never, never!"

So, this is how you name things. Had people decided to dedicate their time to agree about what they mean by the words that they use - they would not have had the time for debates over other issues.

I was interested to see how "Liberal" was defined in the dictionary:

*LIBERAL – 1. willing to respect or accept behavior or opinions different from one's own, open to new ideas. 2. relating to or denoting a political and social philosophy that promotes individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise. 3. a supporter of policies that are socially progressive and promote social welfare. 4. a supporter of a political and social philosophy that promotes individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise.*

Did my Republican Cousin reject all this? I wonder. He was conditioned by the Lithuania of Smetona, and the Poland of Pilsudski, Stalin, Gomulka, and others, and was part of a world that accepted or rejected ideas - idiosyncratically. Political identities are too often rationalizations, which have nothing in common with Rational Thinking

I do not know how to be at the same time on both sides, But I have a sense of something that defines or completes me as a human being. I have a sense of what Justice is or could be, I have a conviction that every human being on this planet has the same right to life that I have.

Because there is a drought in Africa, and many people are condemned to die of hunger, they start looking for a place to survive, and being denied, they end up losing their lives.

How can we think that we have a bigger right to life and to comfort than they have?



Aylan Kurdi, 2015 © Reuters/Stringer

When I saw the photograph of the drowned Syrian boy laying on a beach, it broke my heart. I stopped painting the *Warsaw Boy*. Did I do paintings of drowned children? NO!

This new icon of suffering made me feel the very marginality of my art, of any art.

I don't know how to be on both sides. But I know that the two sides must speak to each other.

One of the major themes of the book by the famous philosopher, Martin Buber, *I and Thou* are that human life finds its meaning in relationships between individuals. These would not happen without communication, without talking. In his view, all of our relationships bring us ultimately into a relationship with the Devine.

I do not need to believe in God to know that what could be created in the connection between two sides is of the greatest importance. Some people call it Bipartisanship.

At present it is not very popular!

Question Is the fight between Hammer and Nails your reflection on destruction and violence?

Answer SB You are speaking of one of my recent series of paintings. They appear as a compacted group in a new publication of Pucker Gallery.

I still navigate among paintings with Hammers and Nails, and now they include humans, humanity. Hammers and Nails have been present in my paintings for several eternities. The Hammers, chopping up teapots, the Nails, holding things together.



Upper left: Inner Fire, 1989; upper center: Zerhakter Chaynik, 1966; upper right: Still Life with Nails, 2018  
Lower left: Together, 2020; lower right: Restitution, 2020

The troubling disorders of our recent times have made their return to my easel. The apparent violence of the last years, verbal as well as physical, social as well as political, made me shudder. Violence as a tool for solving “problems.” Violence sanctified.

There is a well-known saying, “To the hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Every child knows that the nail is an element of construction and that you cannot build a house without using nails. You cannot hammer in a nail without hitting it on its head!

Deposits of violence, components of life-preserving aggression exist in most of us. Our civilizations provide us with several systems of education that show us the place where violence is supposed to belong. And that is the root of the problem. How do we distinguish between the metaphorical potentials of these items? The good and the bad, which they contain; the control of the order that enables freedom. The power that falls apart and is reborn.

I have said it before, my paintings represent questions, not answers.

My response to my own fear of violence made me burst with this series of new works.

I would like to add a few more words on this subject.

Personally, I have always retracted from aggression. Aggressive people make me withdraw. Israel’s historical events, social and ethnic breakup, fear of annihilation, a permanent state of alert, are at the source of palpitating aggressivity. Aggression between people, aggression in driving, in language, even in the volume that people speak. An ongoing aggression that made me feel uncomfortable. . .

You asked me about forgiveness. I think that a good part of the aggression I spoke of, stems from the politically inspired reluctance to forgive the crimes of the Holocaust.

A few years ago, when I visited the opening of the *Holocaust Museum of Houston*, I heard the president of *Yad Vashem*, Rabbi Low, proclaim, “Do not Forget, and do not Forgive. . .”

Israel is encouraging an industry of “Remember what Amalek did to you.”

*Yad Vashem* risks becoming a tourist shop that sells and exploits the Holocaust. So sad. But that’s how it is.



I left Israel and was considered a “Yored” [Hebrew, pejoratively, a descender] I don’t have any bad feelings about it.

Ongoing aggressions that become part of every-day-life are not for me. Whenever in the last four years I listened to the news, especially to the rise of violent events, I was sick to the stomach. My series “JUST IS” speaks of the perversion of justice, and of the industry of private prisons, whose stocks went up the day that Trump was elected.

So, just think about the world in which we live. Think of a possible TIKKUN!

With President Biden things have now changed for the better, but it might be a very short-lived change. The world of yesterday may return in two years, and our present President could become as in-operational as *President Obama* was, paralyzed by a quick return of a Republican Senate.

Now some concluding remarks: From some of your earlier questionings I understood that you wanted to know what I thought of myself and my art, in relation to the wide world of ART.

It reminded me of Chagall, when he was asked a similar question.

There has hardly been an artist who believed in himself more than Chagall, his sense of self-importance was sacrosanct.

But when people called him *maître*, he would say, “Ne m’appelez pas *maître* [don’t call me master, or meter], call me *centimetre*.”

So, when looking at Titian, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Vermeer and at all the other Greats, I honestly feel like a millimeter...

But that isn’t a problem! I am doing my thing. My paintings are not bad, at times even good, and I must say, that when I see all the things that I have created, I am sometimes stunned. . . My goodness, what a tsunami of BAKs, does the world need such a pollution by paintings?

But rest assured, I go on painting, I love it, my present age isn’t a handicap, and it is more than OK. I am not utterly modest, I am more than a millimeter and I do believe that I am a good painter. And I am not fishing for compliments!

But how do you measure the permanent value of art without the three or four centuries that are needed in order to come up with a final judgment?

Interruption Igor Mandel: You belong to an extremely rare sort of painters who paint with their brains, not only with their hands. An extremely rare subcategory, the first one was Breugel, and maybe a little bit Dürer, and you can count maybe ten or fifteen painters like that. But let us say, even Michelangelo, what did he exactly create? Two, three themes. . .

Answer SB: He was the greatest illustrator of all times! He painted a bible on the most famous ceiling . . .

Interruption EK: I would like to add one more thing. Before we started our zoom call, I spent an hour with eight-year-old Penelope going through your paintings, and she was able to understand them. She understood perfectly well what a metaphor is, she understood one of your puns and she was crying when we came to a *Warsaw Boy*. So the facts of your paintings can speak to our generation, but also to an eight-year-old child. I think it is our duty to carry your thoughts to our grandchildren, and your art allows us to do this, so thank you Sam!

I think we are coming to the end and I hear many “Thank You’s”, and I am speechless. . .

Answer SB: It is good to reach the level of speechlessness, the computers will calm down and I will say Goodnight, and we shall all click on the button “Leave” - which is at times very difficult. . .

It reminds me of my family in years gone by when friends were leaving mother’s home, she would say, “Seit noch nischt gesunt, geyt noch nischt awek - noch eppes,” it means, “Don’t yet be healthy, don’t yet go away, and I have something to add” This was after hours with tea and cake, and long chatter at the door. It was a popular saying!



The Ghetto, 1976

The text has been transcribed from the zoom conversation and edited by Cecilia Witteveen  
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The Catalogue Raisonné is available online [www.art-archives.net](http://www.art-archives.net)

Direct link sorted by All Works, Paintings, All themes, Dating, Grid [https://www.kunst-archive.net/en/wvz/samuel\\_bak/works?v=grid&start=0&q=&group=date&filter=all&hpp=25&medium=2000001&categories=](https://www.kunst-archive.net/en/wvz/samuel_bak/works?v=grid&start=0&q=&group=date&filter=all&hpp=25&medium=2000001&categories=)

Pucker Gallery represents the artist and holds a large collection of works by Samuel Bak at its gallery in Newbury Street 240, Boston, MA

Direct link <https://www.puckergallery.com/artists#/samuel-bak/>

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