

The Contribution of some Jewish Painters to the Cultural Life of Oradea (1900–1940)

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SINCE THE first Jews settled in Oradea, the city of one of the oldest and most important Jewish communities, they have made significant and lasting contributions in the sciences, medicine, commerce, industry, transportation, communications, banking infrastructure and humanitarian service. The city's cultural life enhanced by establishing various cultural institutions, publishing at least 16 periodicals, managing theaters, opening public libraries and organizing fine arts exhibitions. Among the cultural associations and societies, the Friends of Music Association was planning to start a fiction magazine in 1873, was organizing concerts and lectures on musical themes in different institutions.¹ After the Union, Oradea became one of the most important cultural centers in Transylvania. The cultural, artistic events were numerous and those in the field of fine arts were supported by the cultural magazines that appeared after the Union, with educational and cultural purposes in many fields. Among these, *Cele trei Crisuri* distinguished itself and it was struggling to promote the arts, to establish collaboration between the artists of different nationalities.²

Oradea is “perhaps the clearest European instance of the Jewish urban culture that flourished for more than 200 years down to the Second World War.”³ Jewish architects (among which we will mention the Vago brothers, Vilmos Rendes, Jozsef Guttman, Marcell Komor, Nandor Bach, Dezso Jakab, Jozsef Reisinger, Geza Markus, Frigyes Spiegel, and Ferenc Loble) left their mark on the unique architectural style of the city, a modified Art Nouveau, referred to as Secessionist style. Besides these, well-known architects from Hungary (Rimanoczy father and son) and Austria (Fellner and Helmer) designed imposing buildings in the city. To the aforementioned architects we owe the existence of the palaces Moskovits, Vágó, Darvas-La Roche, Stern, Ullman, Black Eagle, as well as the Gendarmes School, the Park Hotel, the Stock Exchange building, the Neolog Synagogue, the Orthodox Synagogue surrounded by buildings for the school and congregation.

Oradea's striking collection of turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau buildings remind viewers of the once flourishing Jewish businesses. While all of them were erected before the First World War, the 1920s and 1930s were a period of stagnation with very little building in the central parts of the city, none of which was done by Jewish families. By the 1940s,

Oradea had 27 synagogues, of which only two stand nowadays, and a population of about 30,000 Jews, which accounted for about 20 percent of the entire population.

Besides the Romanian and Hungarian artists, several Jewish personalities from Oradea became conspicuous through their work and exhibition activity. By their contact with the great cultural centers of Europe, they brought an important contribution to the cultural life of the city in a time when very few Romanians travelled to Vienna, Prague or St. Petersburg to attend the prestigious art schools and academies that attracted so many young artists from other Balkan countries. For aspiring painters and sculptors, however, there were flexible options for study in the academies of the Habsburg Empire as well as in Munich, Paris and Dusseldorf.⁴

Among the Jewish painters that played a significant role in the cultural life of the city of Oradea at the beginning of the 20th century, as listed in Tereza Mózes' book *Evreii din Oradea (The Jews of Oradea)*—considered to be the best historic research source on the Jewish community of Oradea—were Barát Móric, Tibor Ernő and Leon Alex.

Barát Móric (1880–1944) was born in Bihor County in a family of intellectuals, his father being the principal of the Jewish Secondary School in Oradea. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest and attended the courses of the Faculty of Letters. After graduation in 1930, he returned to Oradea and participated in the regular exhibitions presenting both works inspired from the naturalist and post-impressionist genres. He painted oils, watercolors, pastels, urban landscapes, interiors, still life paintings, but he also drew his inspiration from the Jewish holidays. The paintings he created show “a special sense of shapes, a warm coloring; his landscapes are full of spontaneity and the realism of artistic expression.”⁵

However, the few works preserved in private collections in Oradea offer us a clear image of his work and reveal a painter with much sensibility for color, a painter who created valuable works in the pastel technique. In his works, the painter assimilated influences of diverse artistic movements: the Expressionist chromatics, the Fauvist influences of the artists from Baia Mare, the Impressionist ones—*Peisaj cu salcie pe malul unui pârâu* (Landscape with Willow on the Banks of a River)—and Post-Impressionist style due to his studies in Paris—*Un interior de atelier cu nud feminin* (Interior of a Study With Female Nude) or *Natură moartă cu ceas și cireșe* (Still Life with a Watch and Cherries).⁶ The painter created marine landscapes, being attracted by the light reflection on the water surface. In one of his *Marine Landscapes* the sea is agitated, the sky is covered by clouds that foreshadow the storm. The clouds create a dramatic effect as they cover most of the canvas; the horizon is lowered, giving the viewer a feeling of anxiety and restlessness. In his *Peisaj* (Landscape), the clouds—painted in long touches and thin brushing in discolored red—appear in the twilight, at the moment when the sun sends its last rays to the earth. The light gives the impression of peace, even though apparently.

In 1921, he exhibited in Cluj together with Ernő Tibor, Alfréd Macalik, Ödön Mikes, Hugó Mund, and Jenő Pozsonyi. Móric was also a teacher at the free painting school he opened during 1917–1921 and owner of a bookshop in Oradea. In December 1926, he participated in a painting exhibition in Oradea together with Ernő Tibor, Ödön Mikes, Alfréd Macalik, Mihály Kara, the varnishing being supported by the mayor of the city, Gheorghe Tulbure.⁷ In 1932, he accepted the invitation for the exhibition organized by *Asociația artelor frumoase (The Fine Arts Association)* and in 1939 he organized the

most significant event of the artist, his own exhibition at Bazar building in Oradea, a few months before celebrating 60 years of activity.

Some of his works were perishable and some others were destroyed on May 1944 when the Jews were banished from their houses with only bare necessities. In 1944 he was taken to the Oradea ghetto and onwards to Auschwitz where it is assumed that he died.

Tibor Ernő (1884–1945) discovered his passion for art when he was a teenager. As recognition of his talent, Tibor Ernő benefited from a grant offered by the city of Oradea. He studied painting at the Art Academy in Budapest where he copied the works of some great artists and made drawing and color studies. There he painted the Hungarian portraits of the poets Akos Dutka and Ady Andre whom he would later meet in Oradea where the two poets, together with some Jewish writers, would establish the literary society *A Holnap* (*Tomorrow*). The art critics acknowledged the rich creation of the painter since his first solo exhibition held in Oradea in 1907, in which he exhibited mainly portraits and landscapes, revealing the fact that the painter removed “the academic pattern, using cold chromatics and dark shades in opposition to the chromatic brightness of impressionist works.”⁸

Tibor Ernő had the chance to study in Paris in Paul Laurens’ class at the Julian Academy from 1906 to 1907. After studying for a year and a half at the Academy and then for half a year at Concarneau in Bretagne, Tibor, “from an apprentice, became a master who is no longer concerned with the story of the painting, on the contrary, under the influence of Impressionism, he paints in light colors, optimistic instances, while the fog is glowing.”⁹ Among the best works of the period we mention *Notre Damme din Paris* (Notre Damme du Paris), *Biserica din Concarneau* (The Church in Concarneau), *Hala de pește* (Fish Market), *Cărciuma* (The Pub), *Apus de soare* (Sunset).¹⁰

Tibor took part in the exhibitions, literary gatherings or meetings with the public organized by the society in Oradea, Arad, Timișoara, Bucharest, Baia Mare (where he got in touch with the Painting School in Baia Mare) in order to stir the public’s curiosity regarding the new artistic movements that had appeared in Europe.¹¹

During 1912-1914 he exhibited in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Dresden, Leipzig, Frankfurt and Hale, each time getting favorable reviews in the press. His conception in the arts field is “*the result of various philosophical and stylistic interferences*”¹² he experienced during his studies and his travels. He enriched his themes with subjects connected with the essential features of the places he passed by.¹³ Rarely in his paintings can anyone find characters depicted while relaxing or partying, but always while working. However, when that happens, one can feel the painter’s sympathy for the lives of people used to working and depicted in a natural attitude. During the First World War his activity slowed down a little as he continued to make drawings, sketches, and portraits of his brothers in arms.

After the war, he returned to Oradea to continue his experiments in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. His paintings are inspired from the picturesque life of the fairs and markets around Oradea, with their extremely lively and authentic atmosphere and numerous characters, depicted in groups—as in the paintings entitled *Femei la târg* (Women at the Fair), *Târg* (Fair), and *Două țărănci la târg* (Two Peasant Women at the Fair) and characterized by vivid chromatics, attention to the detail and a smooth brush painting. The colors he used during this period are shades of brown, moving towards deep shades of red, and a little green. He participated in the activity carried out by the

Painting School of Baia Mare, his works being inspired by the landscape in Dobrogea, by the life and oriental clothing style of Turkish-Tatar in *Orientalism* and *Peisaj dobrogean* (Dobrogea Landscape). Many of his works, representing portraits of great men, of old Jewish people, expressive, powerful figures, are still preserved either in the collection of Țării Crișurilor Museum or in private ones.

In his later years he devoted much of his time to capturing the atmosphere of the rural countryside, agricultural work and country fairs: *Turci la Balcic* (Turks at Balcic), *Țărani prășind* (Peasants Weeding), *Țărani pe câmp* (Peasants on the Field), *Bucătărie țărănească* (Rural Kitchen), *Casă țărănească* (Rural House), *Țărăncă la râu* (Peasant Woman at the River). He was a master of colors, using intense colors with broad strokes. The fields of *Sunflowers*, *Harvesting the Potatoes*, *Harvesting the Corn*, *Weeding* and especially *Gathering the Hay*, *Making Sheaves and Thrashing* are subjects that Tibor Ernő often dealt with besides the landscapes with sunsets, cottages with bluish walls that agree with the intense green of the thick top crowns of the trees.¹⁴

Among the themes treated in 1930s was the urban landscape with its old trams and period car always on the move, with people, carriages and sledges in a hurry. The old bridges built in the Secession style and imposing buildings are painted over and over again, showing the painter's love for his native city, as in *Peisaj cu pod* (Landscape with a Bridge) and *Peisaj din Oradea* (A Landscape of Oradea). While visiting France (1925) he painted a few urban landscapes inspired by Notre Dame Cathedral, the Eiffel Tower and Champs Elisée (*The Bank of Sena River*—oil on carton painted under the Impressionist manner and *Café* or *L'Hotel de la Paix*—watercolor). He held a solo exhibition in Paris and, on this occasion, he became member of the Independent Artists' Saloon. While in Italy (1927), he painted the places where common people lived and worked in Venice, Burano, Murano, Chioggia, Sotomarinno and Torcello. It is the case of the paintings entitled *Pescari din Veneția* (Fishermen in Venice) and *Podul Rialto din Veneția* (the Rialto Bridge in Venice).

The portraits painted by Tibor show the warm relationship between the painter and his friends and the keen understanding of his model's psychology. He painted the portraits of Ady Endre, Ákos Dutka, the writer Géza Tabéry and the painter Odön Mikes as well as the portraits of "some acquaintances of his whom he gives expressiveness, authenticity in the features marked by the old age that only the painter knew how to suggest, but with stout bodies that discharge energy. One can notice that in these portraits the painter acquired drawing and compositional studies, that he mastered the craft, going beyond the conventionality by emphasizing the characteristic features of the models and leaving the mark of his personality on the paintings."¹⁵

Tibor Ernő was in full artistic ascension when the first laws against Jewish population were issued. He could no longer take part in the Official Saloon in Bucharest as his paintings were rejected one by one. He could barely take part in the exhibitions held in Oradea and Cluj. Marginalized as an artist, he was interned in the ghetto, and then deported to Auschwitz where he had died just 12 days before the other Jewish prisoners were released.

Even though Leon Alex (1907–1944) was not born in Oradea, he trained as an artist in this city. Because of the poor financial means of the family, Alex was forced to

work as a tailor's apprentice instead of pursuing his studies. In 1918 he managed to enroll in the middle state school in Oradea that he graduated in 1922. Working for three years as a lithographer at the Sonnefeld Typograph, he discovered the secrets of engraving, of printing books and newspapers. Wanting to learn about the art of writing, he travelled to Baia Mare and then to Prague where he stayed for 2 years.¹⁶

His talent became known in 1932 in a series of travelling exhibitions comprising works with a strong social component. Due to his poor childhood he was ready to embrace communist ideology. While traveling to Prague he met the leaders of the Prague avant-garde. He started publishing in the magazines run and financed by Scarlat Callimachi in Botoșani, and prepared two sets of lithographies, an idea popular among the expressionists all over the world. By 1936 he had already had several travelling exhibitions in Romania. He became friends with poets and writers who were sympathizers with the vanguard movement, which gave him the opportunity to meet high-prestige authors. He was aware of what was happening in the artistic world in all Transylvanian centers. He was familiar with G. Szabó's graphic, the expressionist graphic of András Kunovits, with Vasile Kazar's illustrations, Vida Géza's drawings and sculptures, Hans Eder's works, etc.

In order to make himself known, Alex Leon made a portfolio with his works exhibited in 1934. With the money he made by selling the portfolios he could afford to go to Paris. In 1936 he enrolled to the Ranson Academy in Paris where he studied with Lajos Tihanyi, Marc Chagal, André Lhote and the sculptor Aristide Maillol. "The artist began to investigate human condition, to express moods, feelings, situations, even the extreme ones, those including nightmares, fear, oppression, jail, haunting of the subconscious, terror, sometimes up to physical annihilation, horrendous premonitions surpassed only by the realities of war and by the Holocaust."¹⁷ By releasing these ideas, the painter focused on some existential topics, such as the topic of the couple of lovers in works such as *Îndrăgostiți* (Lovers), *Cuplu* (Couple) or *Sărutul* (The Kiss).

He created few landscapes, interiors, self-portraits, and portraits. Only landscapes of the city he lived in—such as *Sinagogă de pe malul Crișului Repede* (Synagogue on the Bank of Crișul Repede River), *Peisaj urban* (Urban Landscape)—were discovered. Alex Leon was an exceptional portrait painter, depicting both physical and spiritual aspects of some friends and also countrymen or workmen Leon saw by chance: *Bărbat cu pălărie* (Man with a Hat), *Studiul-Portret de bărbat* (Study-Portrait of a Man) and *Bătrânul* (The Old Man), which make an impression by his rendering a sensation of authentic life. The nude studies and character studies are presented seated or in motion: *Portretul de femeie-Studiu* (Portrait of a Woman-Study), *Nud de femeie* (Nude of a Woman). His self-portraits depict a tired man, looking down, lost in thoughts with an expression of bitterness and depression on his face.

During his Parisian period, he became familiar with the newest European tendencies developing his personal expressionist creation based on empathy with the problems of the society in the first decade of the 20th century. However, his stay in Paris is cut short for unknown reasons. During 1939–1942, while he was living and working for a printing house in Oradea, processing photographs, he was not able to exhibit anymore due to the anti-Jewish context. Being sent to forced labor, Alex Leon became ill of typhus without being given any medical attention. He managed to escape and enroll in the Soviet army but he most likely did not survive the war.

Many of Alex Leon's works rendering images of hunger, oppression, war, death, work camps perished at that time. Part of the saved works can be found in Țării Crișurilor Museum collection and could be seen in 1974 during an exhibition in his honor, which was itinerated to the Art Museum in Bucharest.

Under a fairly liberal government the Jewish artists were able to create until 1927 when the Legion of Archangel Michael was established with the sole purpose of preserving Romania and its people from the overwhelming presence of foreigners, and especially that of Jews, in all aspects of life. Even though the Jews' contribution to the development of Romanian culture was acknowledged, they were still seen as outsiders. They agitated against Jews and even beat up over a hundred Jews in the streets during the National Student Congress. They openly discussed and demanded the exclusion of the Jews from school and universities; they vandalized synagogues and Jewish facilities. After the creation of the Christian Nationalist Party, things worsened as the party had as its primary program the introduction of national anti-Semitic policies.¹⁸

During the early 1930s journals supported the exclusion of Jews from the Romanian society as they considered that the Jews had invaded all fields of life and exposed those who adopted Romanian names or pseudonyms. Starting with the year 1937 with the inauguration of the Goga government and later on during the Antonescu regimes, the Jews were excluded from all fields of work, subjecting the entire Jewish population to a professional degradation that was specific to countries that imposed legal racial discrimination.¹⁹ The Jewish architects, painters and sculptors were expelled from professional associations.

The decree-law signed by King Carol II on August 8, 1940 framed the legal status of Jews in Romania, excluding them from many of the benefits of citizenship granted to them by the 1923 Constitution by legally and politically distinguishing between "Romanians by blood" and "Romanian citizens."²⁰

There is an important Jewish legacy to protect and to transmit farther on in the memory of those 25 thousand Jews from Oradea, exterminated in Auschwitz-Birkenau camps, in May 1944, together with more than 6 million Jewish souls.

As an acknowledgement of their valuable contribution, retrospective art exhibition signed by Leon Alex, accompanied by a catalogue was organized by Țării Crișurilor Museum in 1974. Moreover, the historian and art critic Dr. Maria Zintz organized a retrospective exhibition to honor Erno Tibor's work at Țării Crișurilor Museum in 1984. Later on in 1989, in collaboration with the Hebrew community and the Society for the Romanian-Israel Friendship, the same art critic organized the exhibition entitled *Light and Spirit* comprising works signed by Ernő Tibor, Moric Barát, Leon Alex, and Ernő Grünbaum—all victims of the Holocaust. It was the professor Raoul Șorban, the generous man who saved Jewish' lives by helping them to get to Romania during those years, who suggested the organization of an exhibition with works of some Jewish artists, victims of Holocaust in the north-western Transylvania, that were included in the collections of the museums of Oradea, Baia Mare, Cluj-Napoca. Dávid Jándi, József Klein and Martin Katz also joined the artists from Oradea. Some of the works exhibited were also sent to the National Art Museum in Bucharest a few months later, at the request of the Embassy of Israel.

Notes

1. Maria Zintz, *Artiști plastici din nordul Transilvaniei, victime ale Holocaustului* (Oradea: Editura A&A, 2007), 17.
2. Ibid., 55.
3. Fredric Bedoire, *The Jewish Contribution to Modern Architecture: 1830–1930* (KVAT Publishing House, 2004), 381.
4. S. A. Mansbach, “The ‘Foreignness’ of Classical Modern Art in Romania;” *Art Bulletin* 80, 5 (September 1998): 551.
5. Tereza Mózes, *Evreii din Oradea* (București: Editura Hasefer 1997), 164.
6. Zintz, *Artiști plastici din nordul Transilvaniei*, 80–81.
7. Ibid., 87–88.
8. Ibid.
9. Zintz, *Artiști plastici la Oradea* (Oradea: Editura Muzeului Țării Crișurilor, 2009), 54.
10. *Nagyváradai Napló* 218 (1908): 6.
11. Zintz, *Artiști plastici din nordul Transilvaniei*, 38–39.
12. Mózes, *Evreii*, 164.
13. Zintz, *Artiști plastici din nordul Transilvaniei*, 39.
14. Ibid, 44.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 109.
17. Ibid., 114–115.
18. <http://www.tikvah.ro/en/jews-in-oradea/history.html>.
19. Radu Ioanid, “The Exclusion of Jews from Romanian Society during the Antonescu Governments with and without the Iron Guard: Anti-Semitic Legislation, Romanianization, and Expropriation,” *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania: Final Report* (Bucuresti: Editura Polirom, 2005), 192–194.
20. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *Războiul împotriva evreilor: 1933–1945* (București: Editura Hasefer, 1999), 83.

Abstract

The Contribution of some Jewish Painters to the Cultural Life of Oradea (1900–1940)

The aim of the present paper is to present the contribution of some Jewish painters born in Oradea to the cultural life of the city from the early twentieth century until the outbreak of the Second World War. The Jewish population participated in every important development in the city's history - including religious, spiritual, educational, economic urbanization, and cultural domains. In the field of arts, they brought their own traditions, but at the same time an attitude of non-conformism and rebellion. There is an important Jewish legacy to protect and to transmit farther on in the memory of those thousands of Jews from Oradea, exterminated in Auschwitz-Birkenau camps, in May 1944, together with more than 6 million Jewish souls.

Keywords

Jewish painters, Tibor Ernő, Barát Móric, Alex Leon, cultural heritage