MAURYCY MINKOWSKI

Michael Nevins

After the Pogrom. c. 1910

Maurycy Minkowski (1881-1930) was born to a wealthy, assimilated family in Warsaw. A head injury that he suffered at age five left him permanently deaf and without speech. At the age of seven, he entered the Institute for the Deaf and showed an early talent for drawing, which encouraged his parents to pay for private lessons. No doubt he compensated for his disability through his artistic sensitivity and at age seven began drawing as a means of communication. At age 11 he was talented enough to be asked to paint a portrait of the Governor of Warsaw. In 1901, he began formal studies at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts from where he graduated in 1905 and was awarded the school's Golden Merit Medal.

The pivotal period of the deaf painter's life that influenced his art seems to have been events of the Polish Revolution in 1905 that included attacks on Jews. He witnessed a pogrom in **Bialystock** where the "plight of the children" left him shaken". This turned him away from portraiture and landscape painting toward themes that depicted the contemporary Jewish experience which he did with unusual psychological insight.

Having been informed of pogroms taking place in Odessa, he went there to document the events with a series of drawings. After that, he made a study trip through Germany and Austria and then returned to Warsaw. He stayed for only a short time however, then went to Paris in 1908, where he got married and decided to settle permanently. He became successful and his paintings were exhibited throughout Europe although he frequently went back to Poland to participate in open-air workshops and his paintings exhibited in Vilnius and Lodz.

Perhaps Minkowski's most famous painting, done in 1910, now is in the permanent collection of the Jewish Museum in New York. Titled *Hetzitz ve-Nifga* (He cast a glance and was impaired) it depicts twelve Jewish males of varying ages, apparently a study group, each in deep thought. Attention is focused on the central youthful figure who appears to be distracted and somewhat removed from the others. The clue to the painting's meaning is the title which comes from a Talmudic parable about four 2nd century sages who had disobeyed the injunction against mystical speculation. The repercussions were drastic.

Four eminent Rabbis entered the garden of mystical speculation.
Ben Azzai glimpsed and died.
Ben Zoma glimpsed and was damaged (lost his sanity)
Elisha ben Avuyah lost his faith.
Rabbi Akiva departed in peace.
(from Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 14b)

The central figure is Ben Zoma and may represent Minkowski himself. Although Ben Zoma later returned to the world of his colleagues, he was unable to reapply his mind to rabbinic discourse. And when he told others what he had learned, it was said of him, "Ben Zoma is already without." He died soon afterward. The episode suggests the inability to live in two worlds and reinforces rabbinic strictures against deviance.

This painting used to hang in the office of Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and appears on the cover of one of the rabbi's books. Chancellor Schorsch equates Ben Zoma's skirmish with mysticism with the modern Jew's encounter with the world of secular ideas - enticing but dangerous; a metaphor for the conflict between modernity and tradition. Having tasted the forbidden fruit, one cannot go back, becomes transformed, figuratively, and perhaps literally beyond the p(P)ale. In an essay "Art as Theology" Rabbi Schorsch wrote this analysis:

For Minkowski, it was Ben Zoma who most aptly symbolized the torment of his own transitional era: to navigate between two societies without foreclosing either.. Would the incursion of alien mores and foreign languages preclude the cultivation of one's ancient ways? The sensitive youth in Minkowski's painting has not tasted of Kabbalah but of secular learning. He has returned to his native turf but not wholeheartedly. His ears hear the faint beat of another drummer and his eyes are fixed on

the world outside. By seizing on the fate of Ben Zoma, Minkowski gave tangible form to the hidden agony of alienation.

Although Rabbi Schorsch found the artist's implicit message to be that the two world are incompatible - it was a proposition that he personally rejected but understood to be the ultimate challenge to contemporary Judaism.

Minkowski has come to mean a great deal to me. He is an ever present reminder of the Seminary's mission - to preserve the integrity and relevance of Judaism in the midst of a kaleidoscopic world. As in the past, the friction and ferment will continue to yield an enduring legacy of religious creativity.

In early November of 1930, Maurice Minkowski went to Argentina, where he had family, to help prepare the first overseas exhibition of his paintings. Later that month, while crossing a street he was unable to hear the honking of an oncoming taxi, was struck and killed. The exhibition of 200 paintings was presented as a posthumous tribute under the aegis of the Jewish Association of Argentina and in 1931, a committee was established to raise funds for purchase of his works.

In 1942, a great majority of his works were auctioned off. Most were purchased by the Argentine branch of YIVO and were stored at the Association Mutual Israelite Argentina in Buenos Aires. A few of the paintings were destroyed and many suffered damage in 1994, when the building was destroyed by a car bomb in an anti-Semitic massacre that killed 85 people.

The English art historian Cecil Roth assessed the work of Maurice Minkowski as follows: "Minkowski was considered a prodigy because in spite of being deaf and dumb, he managed to attain considerable

prominence. He remains one of the most realistic chroniclers of Polish-Jewish life during the last decades of Tsarist domination. His compositions depict pogroms and flights, but also the religious life of traditionalist Jewish communities…His gifts of psychological observation often mitigate the excessively dramatic quality of his realism." (*Jewish Art*, London, 1971.)