

*The Nebulous Identities of Maurycy Gottlieb*

By

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Polish, Jewish, multilingual, and artist are a few of the words that can be used to describe the nineteenth century painter, Maurycy Gottlieb. Throughout his short life and artistic career, Gottlieb sought to reconcile his various — and conflicting — identities. In this effort, Gottlieb attempted both to create an entirely new genre of artist, specifically Jewish artist, and to syncretize his dual alliance to Polish nationalism and to his Jewish identity. His success in preparing the way for a new form of history painting, as well as his lack of success in uniting his two main identities will be shown through an examination of his life and key works.

Born in February 1856 to a bourgeois family in the Galician province town of Drohobych, Gottlieb grew up surrounded by Christians and Jews alike.<sup>1</sup> Beyond these basic facts, however, there is little agreement among scholars about Gottlieb's upbringing and hometown. Many historians and art historians disagree over the exact conditions of Gottlieb's early life. In one view, Drohobych amounted to little more than a shtetl, and Gottlieb was raised in "a bleak picture of Orthodox Judaism"<sup>2</sup> characterized by disapproving parents and poverty. In stark contrast, other scholars argue that Gottlieb grew up in relative comfort as his father, Isaac Gottlieb, was a leader of the successful oil industry in Drohobych. According to the art historian Tom Sandqvist, an 1869 census of Drohobych reveals that out of a population of 17,000, more than half of the inhabitants were Jewish, and they all belonged to the "progressive" town synagogue.<sup>3</sup> Theories that Gottlieb's childhood was one of relative affluence are further supported by evi-

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<sup>1</sup> Sandqvist, Tom, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols: Ahasuerus at the Easel: Jewish Art and Jewish Artists in Central and Eastern European Modernism at the Turn of the Last Century* (Frankfurt am Main, DE: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014), ProQuest ebrary, 193.

<sup>2</sup>Lederhändler, Eli, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: Jews, Catholics, and the Burden of History* (Cary, US: Oxford University Press, ed. 2006), ProQuest ebrary, 360-361.

<sup>3</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 194-195.

dence that Gottlieb spoke Ukrainian, German, and, perhaps, Yiddish. As being multilingual is an indicator of being well educated, it is reasonable to conclude that the Gottlieb family one of means.<sup>4</sup> The art historian Eli Lederhendler takes this favorable interpretation of Gottlieb's childhood even farther, declaring that "Drohobycz...was no backwater, but rather a cosmopolitan city with a Jewish population that embraced the secular aspirations of its sons and even helped Gottlieb attend art school."<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the truth of Gottlieb's upbringing and his family's socioeconomic status, it is clear that religion played a central role in his early life. Although these narratives paint distinctly different views of Gottlieb's childhood, all reveal a single unifier: a strong connection to Judaism. This attachment to Judaic tradition heavily influenced Gottlieb's future artistic works, as well as his view of himself.

When he came of age, Gottlieb attended a local school in Drohobych. Due to numerous incidents of anti-Semitic harassment, Gottlieb moved to a German school and began to study art at the age of thirteen.<sup>6</sup> After an expulsion as a result of his drawing an unflattering caricature of a teacher, Gottlieb finally graduated and, in 1872, received a grant to study art at the Vienna Art Academy under the prominent history and biblical painter Carl Wurzinger.<sup>7</sup> In Vienna, Gottlieb was exposed not only to Polish nationalism, but also to Polish art due to the rather large Polish population in the city. At the Universal Exposition in Vienna, he was introduced to the Polish na-

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<sup>4</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 195.

<sup>5</sup> Lederhendler, Eli, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 361.

<sup>6</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 196.

<sup>7</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 196.

tionalist artist Jan Matejko.<sup>8</sup> Matejko had a great influence on Gottlieb, particularly on Gottlieb's history painting and the formation of Gottlieb's Polish identity. Matejko was noted for his works regarding Polish history and culture, and for his efforts to use history painting to inspire contemporary Polish pride. Gottlieb was particularly captivated by Matejko's *The Welcome of the Jews in 1096 by King Casimir*.<sup>9</sup> Seeing such a favorable portrayal of Jews' role in the history of a European state greatly impacted the previously harassed Jew and encouraged Gottlieb to combine both his Polish and Jewish identities in his art and in his self-identification. As Gottlieb saw more of Matejko's work and learned of the history of the Polish people, he became convinced that the Jews and the Poles were linked "by a common heritage of suffering."<sup>10</sup> He was so struck by Matejko's work and impressed by a feeling of interconnectedness between the two peoples that he switched his course of study to the Kraków Academy of Art where he sought Matejko's tutelage.<sup>11</sup>

Once in Kraków, Gottlieb attempted to emphasize his adopted Polish heritage, working diligently to learn Polish history, culture, and language. Although Galicia was home to a sizable Polish population, Gottlieb had never learned to speak Polish fluently; this particular issue caused him trouble in his effort to identify as a Pole.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Gottlieb's attempt to embrace a Polish identity was never fully accepted by his peers at the Academy. He was the victim

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<sup>8</sup> Soussloff, Catherine M, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 198.

<sup>11</sup> Goodman, Susan Tumarin, *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (New York, New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2001), 172.

<sup>12</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 89.

of fervent anti-Semitism. Many of Gottlieb's Polish classmates made him aware that the Jews, and thus Gottlieb, were responsible for the historic and, from the perspective of the Poles, disastrous partitions of Poland.<sup>13</sup><sup>14</sup> The harassment directed at Gottlieb was so forceful that he eventually felt the need to leave Kraków and return to the Vienna Academy of Art. Before departing, Gottlieb wrote that "I am Polish and Jewish...and I want, if God permits, to work for both the Poles and the Jews."<sup>15</sup> Although he had been driven away from the Kraków Academy of Art, Gottlieb remained determined to unite his Jewish and Polish heritages, and to represent both in his work.

After a short stint at the Vienna Academy of Art and at the urging of Matejko, who remained Gottlieb's mentor and friend, Gottlieb moved to the Munich Academy of Art to study under the renowned German history painter Karl von Piloty.<sup>16</sup> In Munich, Gottlieb truly developed the Jewish side of his identity and produced his famous 1876 self portrait *Ahasuerus* (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup> This painting emphasizes not only Gottlieb's interest in Jewish identity and history, but also his interest in the works of the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn, particularly those featuring Jews. Using the complex character of Ahasuerus, Gottlieb sought to define a multi-faceted Jewish identity for himself. The first identity, denoted by the oriental and regal objects seen in Figure 1, such as the earring and crown, refer to the Old Testament Persian King Ahasuerus who, initially, sen-

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<sup>13</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 198.

<sup>14</sup> The complicated history of the partitions of Poland and the effects of these partitions upon the various populations within Poland are unable to be fully examined here as they are beyond the scope of this work.

<sup>15</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 198.

<sup>16</sup> Goodman, *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 90.

tenced all the Jews living within his realm to death. Upon learning that his wife, Esther, was a Jew, Ahasuerus repealed the order to murder all the Jews, and instead executed the enemies of the Jewish people.<sup>18</sup> The second identity of Ahasuerus is that of the Wandering Jew. According to the New Testament, Ahasuerus is the name of a Jewish man who taunted Christ along the pathway to Calvary. For his crime, Ahasuerus was condemned to wander the globe for eternity, or until he accepted Christ as the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>19</sup> This Ahasuerus represents the underlying dispute between Christians and Jews about Christ's life and message. Gottlieb was the first European Jew to produce an image of the Wandering Jew.<sup>20</sup> These conflicting figures are both central in Gottlieb's self portrait and demonstrate both his internal struggle with accepting his Jewish identity, and his difficulty in pinpointing the role of Jews in Christian Europe. In Figure 1, Gottlieb focuses heavily on his distinctly un-European features, thus revealing his obsession with his appearance. Thick lips, sallow skin, dark, curly hair, a curved nose, and dark, large eyes are all evident in the painting. These physical characteristics prevented Gottlieb, during his lifetime, from being perceived as anything besides a Jew in Europe.<sup>21</sup> Being immediately recognizable as Jewish must have caused Gottlieb significant heartache, especially in his endeavor to identify as Polish. The "otherness" exemplified in Gottlieb's facial features resulted in much anti-Semitic harassment, and caused Gottlieb to blame his genetic makeup and looks for his difficulty in at-

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<sup>18</sup> Goodman, *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, Richard I., *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, and London, England: University of California Press, 1998), 225-226.

<sup>21</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 206.

taining a harmony between his Jewish and Polish identities.<sup>22</sup> This painting also demonstrates the profound influence that Rembrandt's works, which Gottlieb would have encountered in Munich, had on Gottlieb. The large, wide brushstrokes, obscure colors, and the overall petulant mood of *Ahasuerus* are all hallmarks of Rembrandt.<sup>23</sup> Besides borrowing from Rembrandt's style, Gottlieb was influenced by Rembrandt's paintings of Jews in Amsterdam, or at least by those paintings whose subjects were perceived as being Jewish by late nineteenth century critics.<sup>24</sup> For Gottlieb, Rembrandt's depictions of Jews provided a model for acceptable images of Jews and informed how Gottlieb would paint his own Jewish subjects.<sup>25</sup>

Following Rembrandt's stylistic standard, Gottlieb's 1876 painting *Shylock and Jessica* (Figure 2) utilizes thick brushstrokes, and emits a strong moodiness. This piece contains the same dual view of Jewry as Gottlieb's *Ahasuerus* does: that Jews are at once malignant (the Wandering Jew) and ambivalent (the Persian king).<sup>26</sup> Derived from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, Gottlieb's *Shylock and Jessica* portrays a distinctly European vision of an evil Jew. Shylock is depicted with a stereotypical large, hooked nose, a long, white beard, and black clothing. The black dress itself, typical of a moneylender, reinforces the common stereotype that all Jews were miserly and greedy.<sup>27</sup> A feeling of ambivalence arises upon closer inspection of the painting. In Figure 2, Shylock lovingly embraces his daughter Jessica, and signals his trust in her

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<sup>22</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols, 193-194*.

<sup>23</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Goodman, *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Goodman, *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 93.

<sup>27</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 92.

by handing her a key. This depiction of fatherly love breaks away from the Jewish stereotype encoded in Shylock's features and presents a mixed view of Shylock as a Jew. Perhaps it is Jessica who, although lacking in Jewish caricatured features, is symbolic of the anti-Semitic view that Jews are untrustworthy. In the painting, Jessica accepts her father's love and trust, yet her duplicity and intention to elope with a Christian are made clear as she turns her head and eyes away from her father and looks to something, or someone, outside the frame.<sup>28</sup> Gottlieb's conflicted feelings about his Jewish heritage are made explicit in this painting, as *Shylock and Jessica* clearly depicts Jews as being either good, bad, or somewhere in between. By creating this work, Gottlieb validated himself as the creator of "Jewish history painting," even though the work's subject is derived from a fictional literary source, and one which is decidedly Christian.<sup>29</sup> With this new sense of his purpose in the artistic world, and inspired by the history painting education he had received in Munich, Gottlieb sought to create more examples of this Jewish history genre in the few remaining years of his life.

In 1878, Gottlieb visited Rome, where he was able to enjoy the support and company of his mentor, Matejko, and the Polish artistic community residing there.<sup>30</sup> Gottlieb was so moved by feelings of brotherhood and inspired once again to unite his Polish and Jewish heritage, that he wrote in his diary "how much wouldn't I like to eliminate all the prejudices about my poor co-religionists, the hatred against this poor people!"<sup>31</sup> It is striking that Gottlieb neither refers to

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<sup>28</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 199.

<sup>30</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 201.

<sup>31</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 201.

himself as Jewish nor uses the term “Jew.” Instead, he refers to his fellow Jews as “co-religionists.” Aside from this noteworthy word-choice (or lack thereof) Gottlieb’s impassioned text despairing against the cruelty shown towards Jews and towards himself signifies his identification as one within the Jewish community. Furthermore, Gottlieb’s passionate desire to combine his Jewish and Polish heritages was reignited by his visit to Rome. With Matejko’s love for him reaffirmed, Gottlieb returned to Kraków, where he lived in a neighboring village populated by other struggling Polish artists. Gottlieb worked there to achieve both his personal goal of melding his two identities and his professional goal of being a Jewish history painter.<sup>32</sup>

Gottlieb’s last completed painting, finished in 1878, several months prior to his death, is *Jews Praying in the Synagogue at Yom Kippur* (Figure 3).<sup>33</sup> This painting represents the culmination of Gottlieb’s efforts to unite his identities both in his life, and in his career. Gottlieb, supremely sad in life, conveys his desolation and imminent death in this painting. In addition to including a self portrait, *Jews Praying in the Synagogue at Yom Kippur* also incorporates a memorial to Gottlieb’s twenty-three year old self on the cover of the Torah. The inscription reads “Donated in memory of our late honored teacher and rabbi Moshe Gottlieb of blessed memory 1878.”<sup>34</sup> Taking into account the above memorial, it is no surprise that Gottlieb chose Yom Kippur, the holiday commemorating atonement and repentance, as the subject of this painting. This work is the most accurate portrayal (in that it demonstrates a realistic Jewish scene) of Jewish life that Gottlieb ever created, yet despite portraying his Jewish heritage in a positive and history

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<sup>32</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 201.

<sup>33</sup> Goodman, *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 172.

<sup>34</sup>Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 99.

painter light, Gottlieb also shows himself as removed from his Jewish culture and fellow Jews.<sup>35</sup> The image of Gottlieb, similar to that in *Ahasuerus*, is depicted with his eyes cast downwards and away from the center of the image. Gottlieb is shown refusing to either look at the Torah or engage in prayer as the other Jews do, and sets himself apart from all the other figures in the painting.<sup>36</sup> Figure 3 thus indicates an apparent distress with Judaism and highlights Gottlieb's inability to come to terms with his identity as a Jew. This inability to reconcile with his Jewish identity may have prompted Gottlieb to commit suicide in 1879.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, Gottlieb failed in his attempt to unite his identities. Yet, by creating a work that displays a significant portion of Jewish religious life, Gottlieb was successful in his effort to create a new form of history painting — one dedicated specifically to Jewish history.

Similar to many who aspire to unite and assimilate multiple heritages and ethnicities, Maurycy Gottlieb lived a life of contradictions. Uncomfortable with his identity as a Jew and unable to be fully accepted as a Pole, Gottlieb despaired whilst constantly flitting between his identities. Yet Gottlieb worked tirelessly to create a hybrid (although not unified) identity, and to create a new genre of painting which was entirely dedicated to Jewish history. In creating and paving the way for Jewish history painting as an artistic genre, Gottlieb was victorious. During his lifetime, Gottlieb was able to create the founding works of Jewish history painting even as he failed in his personal endeavor to amalgamate his Jewish and Polish identities. Ultimately, Got-

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<sup>35</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 98.

<sup>36</sup> Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Sandqvist, *Europäisierung des Gewaltmonopols*, 202.

tlieb's personal identity remained nebulous and mercurial, never fully aligning within the parameters of a Jewish identity nor those of a Polish identity.

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Images

Figure 1



Maurycy Gottlieb, *Ahasuerus*, oil on canvas, 1876, Gallery of 19th Century Polish Art, Kraków, Poland.

Figure 2



Maurycy Gottlieb, *Shylock and Jessica*, oil on canvas, 1876, private collection.

Figure 3



Maurycy Gottlieb, *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur*, oil on canvas, 1878, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel.