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Fragile Images

Jews and Art in Yugoslavia, 1918–1945

By

Mirjam Rajner



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*For Jon and Talia
with love*





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My initial research dealing with artists of Jewish origin from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia was part of a general interest in artistic creativity during the Holocaust era, and developed during my 2005–2006 post-doctoral fellowship at the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem. The supportive and intellectually rich atmosphere at the Institute soon led me towards the realization that the entire field of modern Jewish culture and visual expression tied to the region of former Yugoslavia is still largely an understudied area in need of a broader approach, a path on which this book, I hope, takes a step forward. Therefore, I am thankful to Prof. Dan Michman of the Yad Vashem Institute and Bar-Ilan University, as well as to Prof. Gershon Bacon of Bar-Ilan University, who from the very beginning encouraged me to follow this path, while an Israel Science Foundation Grant (2007–2011; grant no. 87/07) generously enabled me to conduct research and travel extensively in the region. My colleagues at Bar-Ilan's Faculty for Jewish Studies were unfailingly interested and helpful, and I would especially like to thank Prof. Moises Orfali, Prof. Shmuel Refael Vivante and Prof. Ilia Rodov. I am also grateful to Prof. Richard I. Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for his insightful comments and ongoing support for the entire project.

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The outcome of these contacts was an international workshop in 2013 entitled *The Holocaust in Yugoslavia: History, Memory and Culture—a Reappraisal* at Yad Vashem's International Institute for Holocaust Research (with the support of the Israel Science Foundation, grant no. 1876/12, and Yad Vashem),

which brought together some of these and younger experts in the field, encouraging an exchange of ideas between historians, literary historians, art historians, and musicologists. From 2016 on, several academic gatherings in Belgrade (organized by the Institute for Literature and Art), Jerusalem (the 17th World Congress of Jewish Studies) and Cracow (the 11th Congress of the European Association for Jewish Studies), to name the more prominent ones, continued to expand the field, gradually creating what came to be known as Southeastern European Jewish Studies—a new and growing discipline. All of it paralleled and further enriched my book project.

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Note on Personal Names

Throughout this work I have spelled personal names as the individuals cited spelled them. If they spelled an originally Germanic name in Slavicized form (for example Špicer or Fridrih), I have also done so. If an individual at the outset of his or her artistic development or cultural activities used the Germanized form of the name, I have preserved that form. Thus, I refer to Weiller and Moritz Levy, rather than Vajler or Moric Levi, the form used after World War Two.



Introduction

While walking through the leafy garden surrounding the premises of the Lavoslav Schwarz Foundation's Home for the Elderly in Zagreb, Croatia, one encounters a sculpture of a small, bespectacled old man hunched over a large book (fig. 1). To a visitor used to conceiving of Jews as "the people of the book," its placement on the premises of a *Jewish* institution quickly brings to mind images from the world of study, such as that of a traditional Talmud scholar absorbed in his reading. However, the man's head is uncovered, he sports a mustache instead of a beard, and he is portrayed in the act of writing. Although the sculpture is unlabeled, an onlooker familiar with the history of Socialist Yugoslavia will easily identify in it an entirely different image. The sculpture's features recall Moša Pijade (1890–1957), the well-known communist leader and Yugoslav politician of Serbian-Jewish origin, Tito's close aide and one of the founding fathers of the new Yugoslavia. The large book on his knees is in this context understood to be not the Talmud, but Marx's *Das Kapital* which Pijade co-translated into Serbian while serving a fourteen-year sentence in the Yugoslav monarchy's prisons, where he was sent as a communist due to his illegal political activities.¹

The sculpture has a story of its own. It was relocated to its current premises at the height of the bloody civil war that raged in the region between 1991 and 1995, resulting in the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the formation of the independent nation-states: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia. Until then the sculpture of Moša Pijade had a place of honor in front of Zagreb's Worker's University that bore his name. It was placed there in 1961 to commemorate Pijade primarily as an outstanding pre-World War II communist and revolutionary, a national hero who participated in the formation of socialist Yugoslavia. Moreover, being a journalist and an artist, Pijade's name suited a new educational establishment like the Worker's University, which offered classes for adults. Later, especially during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the University, now simply known locally as "Moša," became a popular meeting place for young intellectuals, renowned for its avant-garde film and theater clubs, musical festivals, and publishing activities.²

1 For the sources of Moša Pijade's biography, see Chapter 1, n. 1.

2 See Vlado Velčić, *Moša Pijade Workers' University and Workers' Education* (Belgrade: Confederation of Trade Unions of Yugoslavia, 1965); and <http://www.zagrebacki.info/2012/04/mosa-pijade.html> (last accessed 1 November 2017).

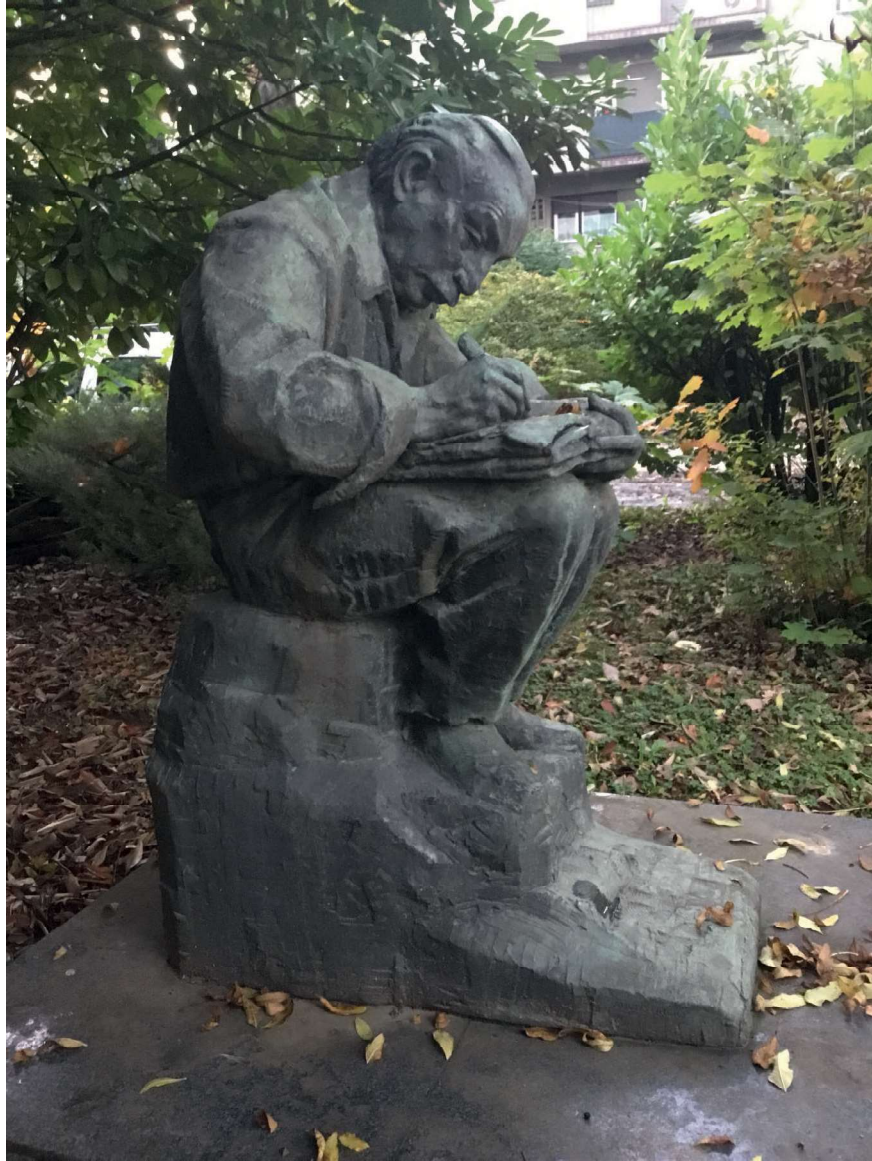


FIGURE 0.1 August Augustinčić, *Monument to Moša Pijade*, 1954, bronze, 134 cm, Zagreb
PHOTO: MIRJAM RAJNER

The removal—or often destruction—of public sculptures such as that of Pijade became one of the hallmarks of the conflict in the region. It was especially relevant for Croatia, where the breakup of Yugoslavia led in the 1990s to a war of independence. Serbian communists, such as Pijade, were now viewed as having played a leading role in glorification of the WWII partisan campaign;³ the changes that followed the communist takeover after WWII were seen in the post-Yugoslav era as having been oppressive, thus inviting the removal or destruction of communist-era monuments.⁴

The well-known Croatian sculptor Antun Augustinčić who created the sculpture of Pijade in Zagreb, sculpted as well *The Monument to Marshall Tito* (1948), one of the best known sculptures idolizing Josip Broz Tito, the leader of the Yugoslav partisans and Socialist Yugoslavia.⁵ The fact that this sculpture stands in front of Tito's family home in the Croat village of Kumrovec may have inspired the somewhat ironic decision to place Pijade's sculpture, due to his Jewish origin, in the garden of a "Jewish home," and thus offer it shelter in the company of the few elderly Holocaust survivors, anti-fascists, and former Jewish partisan fighters who were still living there in the early 1990s. Being relegated to the closed-in Jewish community premises was certainly the last thing Pijade would have imagined as the fate of the "Yugoslav people's" memory of him. In fact, his sculpture could now be seen as complementing yet another of Augustinčić's creations—that of *Moses* holding the Ten Commandments, standing in a remote part of the Jewish section of Mirogoj, Zagreb's central cemetery.⁶ As part of a nowadays somewhat neglected commemoration site dedicated to the community's victims of the Holocaust who perished during

3 The partisans were in fact an all-Yugoslav military force based on ideology rather than ethnicity, and many Croat anti-fascists and communists fought in their ranks. See Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945, I: The Chetniks* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 79–84; 134; Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, *Tito* (Zagreb: Profil, 2015), 183–92.

4 According to data collected by the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters in Croatia between 1991 and 2000, 2964 monuments and insignia memorializing the National Liberation Struggle (NOB) and the Yugoslav partisans' victory in World War II were destroyed, damaged, or removed. However, there were also a number of exceptions to the rule, depending on the local population of the area in which the monuments stood, or as the result of relatives who protected the monuments or removed them privately, trying to preserve the family's memory of their partisan and anti-fascist stand. See Tihomir Cipek, "Sjećanje na 1945: čuvanje i brisanje, o snazi obiteljskih narativa," in *Kultura sjećanja: 1945; povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*, eds. Sulejman Bosto and Tihomir Cipek (Zagreb: Disput, 2009), 160–63.

5 See Lidija Merenik, "Kultura zaborava; Jugoslovenska umetnost i kulturna politika oko 1945. i njena sudbina pola veka kasnije na primeru portreta Josipa Broza Tita," in *ibid.*, 132–33. See also <http://gaa.mhz.hr/en/galerija-antuna-augustincica-s65> (last accessed 13 July 2019).

6 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mojsije_Antun_Augustin%C4%8Di%C4%87_Mirogoj_srpanj_2008.jpg (last accessed 5 March 2018).

World War II in Ustasha and Nazi camps, the biblical Moses and his namesake Moša belong to a history that prefers to be forgotten.

In Tito's Yugoslavia the Jewish community enjoyed relatively favorable conditions and was afforded a degree of autonomy not encountered elsewhere in the communist world.⁷ Nevertheless, until 1991 the research and publications devoted to local Jewish history, culture, and the tragedy of the Holocaust were primarily carried out internally, by Jewish institutions, mainly the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia and the Jewish Historical Museum, both situated in Belgrade, and not by the academic world at large which, in the name of the ideology of "brotherhood and unity," did not explore "national cultures" and their postwar grievances, but rather the "common socialist reality."⁸

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the formation of independent nation-states inspired numerous volumes analyzing and revising their individual histories. It also sparked some local academic interest in the Jewish presence in the region, an interest which is nowadays gradually increasing and attracting predominantly local scholars.⁹ With access to newly released archival material and new methodology, these scholars have made important contributions, primarily in the field of history. In their work they focus on the history of the Jews in the region's various communities, areas, and periods from the nineteenth century through the interwar period, World War II, and the Holocaust. Such studies revive the memory of Jewish life as being part of

7 Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 207; Paul Benjamin Gordiejew, *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 104; Ari Kerckänen, *Yugoslav Jewry: Aspects of Post-World War II and Post-Yugoslav Developments* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2001), 41, 93–99; Emil Kerenji, "Jewish Citizens of Socialist Yugoslavia: Politics of Jewish Identity in a Socialist State, 1944–1974," (PhD diss., The University of Michigan, 2008), 179–281.

8 Gordiejew, *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry*, 101. Although surprisingly rich and often including contributions by non-Jewish scholars, such "intercommunity" research often lacked the necessary critical approach and comparison with broader Jewish and non-Jewish topics. Thus, Harriet Pass Freidenreich's pioneering *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (1979) filled the gap for a number of years and served younger scholars interested in the field as basic reading.

9 Among the most outstanding are Ljiljana Dobrović, and Ivo Goldstein in Croatia, and Milan Koljanin and Milan Ristović in Serbia. References to their publications will be made throughout this book. In addition to the local scholars, it is important to also single out Ženi Lebl, an Israeli researcher of Serbian Jewish origin, who through her numerous works published in Serbia and Israel contributed greatly to the history of Serbian and Macedonian Jews. To this should be added that a growing body of research conducted by already established—but also younger—scholars such as Eliezer Papo, Krinka Vidaković Petrov, Katja Šmid, Ivana Vučina Simović, and others, exists in the fields of the Judeo-Spanish language and literature, and the Jewish Sephardic tradition in the region.

coexistence in the region and of its multicultural and multiethnic past. In relating to the tragic and painful period of World War II and the Holocaust, they also offer a path towards reconciliation and teach about the acceptance of the “other.” All of them promote pluralism, in contrast to the increasing and excessive nationalism, racial isolationism, and xenophobia evident today.

This book aims to open a new chapter of research on Jewish life as it flourished in Yugoslavia in the shadow of the wars of the twentieth century. Instead of relating to the history of the community as a whole, it focuses on individuals and their lives—in this case a group of artists of Jewish origin active before, during, and after the Holocaust in the region of Yugoslavia.¹⁰ The new destruction that erupted fifty years after the WWII in Yugoslavia evoked memories of the past war; among the Jews this was primarily the memory and postmemory of the Holocaust.¹¹ Thus, the art capable of addressing this most difficult period of the Jewish presence in the region became central to my inquiry. Holocaust-related art is usually treated as a separate discipline, mainly seen either as art created by the victims during the war years throughout Europe, or as art produced in reaction to the Holocaust and its aftermath in America, Israel, and Europe.¹² As a well-established field of research, Holocaust art offered me a framework within which to explore little known works created by artists of Jewish origin, works that had been created in places such as the Jasenovac concentration camp, in prisons, and on the run by artists-refugees, or by survivors in the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust. While I found this new and unknown chapter in the field of Holocaust art to be compelling, I increasingly felt that to focus exclusively on the period of the Holocaust was in effect to isolate the artists and their work from the rich fabric of creativity and life in the society they lived in before the onset of the destruction. Further, it omitted the

10 As is the case with research of local Jewish history, that of the art created by artists of Jewish origin living in the region has been fostered by the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade, which holds some of their works in its permanent exhibition. Milica Mihailović, formerly the museum’s director, initiated a number of important exhibitions and accompanying catalogues, but, as with other publications of the Jewish community, they reached a limited, predominantly Jewish, audience.

11 The term “postmemory” as the “inherited” memory of the second and third generations of the Holocaust survivors’ descendants was introduced by Marianne Hirsch in her *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

12 Groundbreaking research in this field includes Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton, *Art of the Holocaust* (New York: Rutledge Press, 1981); Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993); *After Auschwitz: Responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art*, ed. Monica Bohm-Duchen (Sunderland, Great Britain: Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, 1995).

exploration of the new circumstances of post-WWII Yugoslav society, which number of Jews, artists included, began to take part in shaping as partisans while the war was still being waged. In order to fully understand the processes occurring before, during, and after the Holocaust, I felt it would be necessary to start from the formation of Yugoslavia after WWI and the role artists of Jewish descent played in the newly founded country.

However, it is important to note that though the artists in this book have a common ethnic origin, they do not share a unique Jewish identity visible in their art as a “national” trait, as was the case, for example, in the Serbian or Croatian national schools of art rooted in nineteenth-century romanticism. Although there were occasional attempts to create a “new Jewish national art” inspired by the Zionist cultural movement, popular mainly among young Yugoslav Jews during the 1920s and early 1930s, the main characteristic of these artists and the art they created, as will be demonstrated, is their “hybridity.” Often, one artist incorporates several identities, which change and fluctuate over time and find expression in their art.¹³ It was this fluctuating, diasporic identity of a Jewish “other” that set them apart from their immediate one-nation surroundings. Thus, it was precisely the idea of a multinational and multicultural Yugoslavia that enabled them to feel more equal and integrated while feeling free to express their Jewish specificity—or not.¹⁴

The expression of one’s identity in art will thus be central to this study. It appears as a common thread that runs through the artists’ lives and the art they created. When the art they created is examined through the prism of identity, two common themes become clear. At first, the artists felt free to explore, to take on, and to leave behind a kaleidoscopic variety of identities: national, ideological, and personal. But, as history took its course, the freedom of change and self-definition that the artists (and others) had enjoyed became increasingly limited. This is the second theme which the artists in this book have in common—the circumscription of identity, until finally all that was left was a single label: Jew. As world events conspired to close the doors on the freedom that Jews in Yugoslavia had enjoyed, the “yellow badge” became the symbol of a society in which a person, artists included, could no longer define himself, but had to live with the identity that was forced upon him. This dual experience of

13 On such hybrid modern Jewish identities, see David Biale, “Introduction to Part Three: Modern Encounters,” in *Cultures of the Jews: a New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 725–30.

14 This approach lies in stark contrast to the until recently perpetuated pan-Jewish view which follows the development of modern art created by Jewish artists through different periods and countries. See, for instance, Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver, *Jewish Art: a Modern History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

identity—first multiple, self-determined and changing, and then involuntary, uniform, and determined by outside forces—represents thus the very meaning of being Jewish for the artists in this book. It was this type of Jewish identity, I would argue—first manifold, then singular—that led the artists to create as they did.

In order to examine such identity, it will be necessary to turn to the artist's biography. Although the use of biographies is nowadays usually rejected as an outdated Renaissance-based art-historical tradition, in this case of involvement with the art of a minority, "Jewish" biography is relevant as it creates a microhistory.¹⁵ The universality of modern art will thus be challenged by an inquiry into the constant intertwining of the artists' rapidly changing Jewish and non-Jewish surroundings with their identities, as well as into the equally swift alteration of the social, political, and historical circumstances of the time in which they lived.

In order to understand how these changes affected the artists' self-perception and the art they created, this book is organized chronologically in four parts. The first part deals with the formation of Yugoslavia and artists' explorations of different national and supranational identities; the second part addresses the rise of European fascism and anti-Semitism, prompting most Jewish artists to identify with liberal and leftist ideologies; the third part focuses on the tragedy of the Holocaust which erased the individual's choice of identity by excluding and marking all Jews, including the artists discussed in this book, as "threatening, unwanted aliens" destined for extinction; finally, the fourth part of the book analyzes the unique Yugoslav case of Jewish survival—the participation in a partisan-led war of liberation, revolution, and the formation of a new, communist-led society in which the artists' identities once again underwent change—in some cases posthumously. In the spirit of "brotherhood and unity" they became ethnically undefined, universal "victims of fascism"; or, if viewed as insufficiently supportive of the new regime, they were simply consigned to oblivion.

In order to illustrate the wide variety of such changeable, self-chosen or imposed identities, I have selected a group of seven artists of Jewish origin, six men and one woman, who were active in the territory of former Yugoslavia in the period beginning before World War I, continuing through the interwar period, World War II, the Holocaust, and in its immediate aftermath. The artists in the group—Moša Pijade, Daniel Kabiljo, Adolf Weiller, Bora Baruh,

¹⁵ See Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History," *The American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 579–86. See also Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews, Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

Daniel Ozmo, Ivan Rein, and Johanna Lutzer—were chosen because each of them presents a unique and different story, tied to the time and place in which they lived. Their biographies interact with the history of the era, and their lives and the art they created appear, disappear, and reappear throughout the book at different places and times, marked by the huge changes in the world around them. Among the members of the group are acculturated artists, well-integrated into Serbian and Yugoslav society; Croatian Zionists; followers of the Sephardic national movement from Sarajevo; members of the prewar illegal Communist Party; cosmopolitans; refugees; camp inmates; partisans; and survivors. Often, one artist incorporates several of these identities, which wax and wane over time and find surprising expression in their art. They were active in different regions—Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia—but created works in a modernist international artistic language. Their art is thus both local and universal, and also, at times, “Jewish,” especially when they felt moved to respond to the events affecting them, and as Jews turned to a specifically Jewish iconography. The multifaceted nature of their work thus makes their images “fragile,” prone to rapid change and threatened with destruction.

By integrating this group of artists into the broader perspective of visual culture and art created in the former Yugoslavia, this book also aims to contribute to the discourse accompanying new approaches towards the history of modern European art. In contrast to explorations of the “universal” art created in Western art centers, this approach strives to highlight and underline the importance of art created in “peripheral areas,” i.e. in local art centers.¹⁶ Moreover, the Yugoslav artists of Jewish origin, since they were both Jewish and southeast European, played the role of the “other” vis-à-vis the society in which they lived and also towards the West. But it was precisely the mobility of these Jewish artists and their often lengthy periods of study in west European art centers such as Vienna, Munich, and Paris, that, as I hope to show, occasionally bestowed upon them the role of mediator between West and East.

Since most of the artists in the group developed and created a corpus of work between the two wars and continued to produce art during the World War II years, it is possible to explore the continuity of their artistic creation. Initially, as shown in the first part of the book, Pijade, Kabiljo, and Weiller were exploring different identities—Serbian, Yugoslav, Sephardic, Croatian, or Zionist. Threatened by the rise of fascism, the younger artists, discussed in the second part of the book, turned to the universal, social, and avant-garde art aligned with the European and Yugoslav left. The Spanish Civil War made

¹⁶ See Steven A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: from the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Baruh and Rein especially sensitive to the theme of refugees, while expressionist graphic art inspired Ozmo's criticism of the social order. The World War II years, the theme of the third part, were for them, as Jews, deeply traumatic as they lived through the murder of their families and friends, and saw the mass destruction of the Jewish people. In many cases the artists' life circumstances during the war changed dramatically—Baruh lived through the bombing of Belgrade, Ozmo found himself in the Jasenovac camp, and Rein became a refugee on the Adriatic coast. Unfortunately, only three of the artists discussed in the book survived the war.

In the third part of the book I have made extensive use of primary sources and ego-documents (such as archival material, unpublished wartime diaries and letters) as well as memoirs and literary creations in order to give insight into the world of the victims, illuminating it, I hope, in a new way. In contrast to the traditional approach—which usually emphasizes either martyrdom and loss, or heroism and resistance—these sources present the everyday aspects of life that included the struggle for physical, spiritual, and cultural survival. A case in point is Johanna Lutzer, a refugee artist from Vienna, whose diaries shed light upon a Jewish woman's coping skills and survival. The reader will see that much of the victims' art was created not in order to document death and suffering, but rather to depict life as it enveloped them, situations in which they were involved, and experiences they lived through. The artists continued to create so as to express their emotions, preserve memories, explore the iconography and formal artistic developments with which they were involved before the war, instill hope, or to simply visualize the atmosphere and mood of their surrounding environment.

The fourth part of the book explores the artists' participation in the war as partisans. Baruh, for example, took part in the partisan campaign out of conviction, and created propaganda art that helped shape the ideology of the future new society. In contrast, Lutzer, as a foreign refugee evacuated by Croatian partisans, created art for their Agitprop office out of a need to survive. Finally, in the concluding chapter of the book, I will explore the posthumous reception, interpretation, and use of the art of Baruh and Ozmo in the early years of Tito's Yugoslavia, where it was now presented by Moša Pijade as "anti-fascist." In contrast to this re-interpretation, the art of Adolf Weiller, who survived the war, is examined against the broader context of east European Jewish and Holocaust art. Weiller's art, created during World War II and in its aftermath, and which only recently came to light, carries a message of remembrance. The rising tide of nationalism and Holocaust ignorance or denial gives this rediscovered work a special relevance. The integration of these memories into post-Yugoslav societies, no matter how painful and traumatic, is needed for a *tikkun olam*, a repairing of the world.