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Keywords: NA

Classification: LCC Code: N7053

Language: English



Great Britain
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573352
Print ISSN: 2515-5785
Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 23 | Issue 16 | Compilation 1.0



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Marc Chagall: Where Art Thou?

Zinaida Gimpelevich

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I. INTRODUCTION

Marc Chagall (Old style. June 24, 1887, Viciebsk, Biełaruś), – (New style. March 28, 1985, St. Paul-De-Vence, France) has been a worldwide known modernist artist since the early twentieth century. On top of his mastery of fine art, he was a poignant poet and prose author of articles, letters, and memoirs.

Indeed, finding a fine-art lover who doesn't appreciate the artist's contribution to Modernism¹ and world fine-art culture is impossible. Every museum of stature owns Chagall's paintings and drawings. Thus, the museum in Nice has Chagall's seventeen original canvases on permanent display. Visitors to North American and European Art museums could admire the artist's work from different times in Washington, New York, Dallas, Chicago (the latter museum has 114 of Chagall's original works), and Toronto. Moscow and Petersburg art museums permanently display his art. Biełaruś (his birth country) exhibits Marc Chagall's works in Viciebsk's and Minsk's museums.

It is a part of human nature to seize something we like and to claim possession of it. Thus, Russia and France persistently claim the artist's creative art. Both countries have insisted on exclusivity to the artist's creativity, philosophy, and career for decades. In truth, the artist appreciated a short shelter in Russia's Moscow and Petersburg in the 1910s, the early 1920s and the refuge in the USA during WWII. Chagall also cherished his sixty-three years of habitation in France. However, the artist insisted in his epistolary, articles and, mainly, in his autobiography that no

matter where he lived, his motherland, historic Biełaruś, always had a primary place in his life and creative work.

It is also true that compared to Russia and France, Biełaruś, Chagall's birth country, began to return the artist's name and work to his Biełarusian-Jewish roots only recently. Biełarusian, French, and Russian claims are based on Chagall's work at various times in these countries (each culture uses a different spelling of the artist's name.)² Biełaruś, due to the Tsarist and Soviet (Russian) forceful dependence, was late in joining this entitlement to the artist's origin, birthplace, first steps to maturity, education, and artistic inspiration. Currently, the country strongly asserts the evidence that his life and career began and flourished in historic Biełaruś.³ Chagall himself perpetually propagated his Biełarusian-Jewish roots. Thus, the artist's letters, articles, and autobiography *Moja żyzn'* (My

¹ Modernism is an art movement of the late 19th and early 1950s of the 20th century. Modernism encompassed philosophy, fine art, and literary cultures.

² Mojše Sehal (Yiddish); Mark Šahał (Biełarusian); Марк Шагал (Russian); Marc Chagall (English & French).

³ The Soviet Biełarusian government (following Moscow's instructions) considered every emigrant to be "an enemy of the Soviet people." In this respect, Stalin's politics continued by next Soviet and post-Soviet rulers. Further on we will discuss this point in more details.

Life)⁴ concentrate on his love and nostalgia for his birth country, historic Bielaruś. When asked about his origin, he immediately and enthusiastically responded: "Viciebsk!" (Russified: Vitebsk). The memoir and epistolary work, built on the artist's phenomenal memory, powerfully fortified and transpired in his fine art and writings dedicated to his birthplace. Thus, he states: "Every artist was born somewhere, and even if later he is influenced by a new environment, a certain essence, the specific odour of his native land will always be in his work."⁵ Indeed, no matter which style or direction — Surrealism, Suprematism, Cubism, fantasy, fairy tales, or any other he used in his creativity — the viewer finds an image of Viciebsk in each of Chagall's artworks and writings.

The current study aims to elaborate on and confirm the artist's relation to his homeland.

II. VICIEBSK (BIEŁARUŚ)

Chagall's native Viciebsk has a rich but primarily tragic history. Every European country (Western and Slavic alike: distant and close "neighbour") would try to occupy this beautiful place, surrounded by forests and lakes. In this respect,

⁴ *My Life* is subtitled as *A Novel of My Life*. It was written in Russian. The artist's written Russian and French were rather shaky. All of his writings were edited by his wife, Bella Rosenfeld-Chagall (1895, Viciebsk--1944, New York). Bella Rosenfeld-Chagall was much better educated compared to her husband. Her written and oral Russian and French were near-native. She edited the Russian version of the memoir and translated *My Life* into French. From that on, *My Life* was translated in many languages (predominantly from her French translation). *My Life* was first published in 1931 by Parisian press *Stock*. Da Capo Press is one of the most active presses that from the late 1940s, continued to produce the artist's autobiography in various languages. Currently, all the editions are out of print except for the latest translation into English by Elisabeth Abbott (New York: Da Capo Press). The only problem with this edition is the lack of publication data. The last edition (in original Russian) that is used here was published in 1994. *My Life* (Moscow: Ellis Luck, 1994). It is a carbon copy of the 1931 first edition. As above mentioned, Chagall left behind a rich heritage of epistolary and scholarly works. Please see: Lev Berinskii. *Mark Chagal. The Angel Over the Roofs. Poems, Prose, Articles, Letters, Presentations*. Translated from Yiddish into Russian by L. Berinski. (Moscow: LiveLib, 1989).

⁵ *The Artist, The Works of the Mind*. (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1947) p. 21.

Russia was particularly aggressive from ancient times.

The city, founded in 974, has a river, Vićba, from which the town received its name. At the time of Chagall's birth, Viciebsk had 66 000 inhabitants. More than half of them were Jews (52.3%). The others were (predominantly) Orthodox Christians and Catholics. A smaller number of Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, and other ethnicities also lived there for ages. They established smaller communities centred around prayer houses, churches, and synagogues. Currently, the city's population is 373 674, where Jews are about 5,000 citizens.

Notwithstanding religious and cultural differences, the Viciebsk population did not experience hostility toward each other. Each ethnicity had a traditional place and trade in the city. Despite invasions and partitions, churches, prayer houses, and synagogues of ancient times were well attended and preserved for a long time. The town's architecture survived the horrors of the Russian Civil War and WWI but was utterly ruined in WWII.

During his long creative Life, Chagall produced numerous artworks in various genres: paintings on canvases, drawings, graphics, book illustrations, and stained glass (to name a few). He was also a unique iconographer; though a devoted Jew, the artist wholeheartedly respected Christianity. To him, it was a younger and more energetic branch of Judaism. Thus, the artist was sorry that he was too shy to ask a famous rabbi a few burning questions while meeting him. The first question was: "Is it true that Israeli people are chosen by God?" And the second quest was: "It would be nice to know his (rabbi's) thoughts concerning Christ, whose bright and shiny image has lived in my soul forever."⁶

While in France, his home was always open to generations of Bielarusians of later emigrations. A telling example is his meeting with open arms

⁶ The reader of his memoir would understand that Chagall himself responded positively to these questions. *My Life*, pp. 124-25. Rabbi is translated as a scholar, mentor, and a teacher.

another Bielarussian genius artist, Barys Zaborau (Russified: Boris Zaborov; 1935, Minsk—2021, Paris). Chagall helped Zaborau get a private studio and presented the artist to Parisian and other major European art gallery owners.

Until his last days, Chagall dreamt of visiting his motherland. When by a Soviet invitation to the art festival in 1973, the artist came to Moscow, he asked permission to visit Bielarus and "his country," Viciebsk. The Soviet government did not allow his dream to come true. Nevertheless, the artist continually expressed his love for the motherland during his long and productive life. Repeatedly he imprinted this undying feeling in his artworks and confirmed it in his autobiography, *My Life*, and other writings. This attitude is evident from his response to the injustice of the Soviets: "My Fatherland (Motherland) is in my soul. Do you understand?! I am coming there without an entrance visa. When lonely, it sees it, puts me to bed, and wraps me up like mother did."⁷

My Life starts with a self-explanatory dedication to Chagall's dearest subjects and topics: "To my parents, wife, and native city."⁸ The artist's mother tongues were Yiddish (Litvak's variant)⁹ and Hebrew. His oral Bielarussian and Russian were fluent but accentuated.

Overall, whatever translation of *My Life* one reads, the person is captured by the bright and sharp witticism of the author. No matter whether

⁷ *My Life*, p.179.

⁸ *My Life*, p. 1.

⁹ Litvak, Litvaki (plural form) have been a common name for Bielarussian Jews. It originated from the Bielarussian names: Litva (historic Bielarus) and Ličviny (Christian Bielarussians). Litvaki (Bielarussian Jews) spoke a special dialect of Yiddish. The place, where ancient Bielarussians lived from early ages formed the Grand Duchy of Litva (GDL) in the thirteenth century. In the 15th century GDL became one of the most powerful states in Europe. It included parts of Kyivan Rus where old Bielarussian was a common language. Migration of Jews to Bielarus began by the end of the twelve century and picked by the 16th century. The Bielarussian princes and governors invited Jews for their knowledge of the Bible, commerce, banking system, mastery in jewelry, stonework, knowledge of textile, dressmaking and other practical professions. In fact, historic Bielarus (GDL) was the only country in the world that invited Jews with open arms during the Middle Ages.

the artist witnessed an event or re-narrated his family's story, the chronicle of his life transforms even tragic circumstances into a humorous, light weighted phrase or tale. Thus, an autobiography starts with his exclamation: "I was stillborn!"

The entire narrative describes well the diversity of Chagall's character. Indeed, from early childhood, he followed his instincts and demonstrated stubborn resistance to anybody who tried to submit his will. His mother, who loved him most of her children, called her Mojše "a contrarian boy." Her son did not take this as an offence. Rather often in his autobiography, the author agreed with his mother's opinion. Indeed, Chagall's originality and insistence on personal self-efficiency and originality transpire in the artist's fine art, which is often contrarian compared to ordinary people's taste and way of life.

III. MARC CHAGALL BIOGRAPHY

Chagall was the eldest of nine children and, indeed, the favourite child of his mother. From an early age, he demonstrated an incredible imagination, phenomenal memory, strong will, and unusual habits. The youngster's best pastime was sitting alone on the rooftop of the family's poor dwelling and watching fires. Though Viciebsk of his childhood had some beautiful stone churches, synagogues, and gentry houses, the town's dwellings were predominantly wooden. His family home didn't avoid the town's conflagrations. Chagall powerfully describes this phenomenon in his memoir: "I adore fires! The fire is everywhere! Half of the sky is covered by smoke. Its glow is reflected in the river!"¹⁰ A single spark would often transfer to a neighbour's wooden fence or house, affecting the entire neighbourhood. This extraordinary attraction to fire the artist carried for life. He often used the images in his fine art.

While on the roof, the boy felt like a stargazer. The artist describes the morning and evening stars as a living part of Viciebsk: "My dear, native stars of mine; they accompanied me on my way to school and waited for me on my way back home. Forgive

¹⁰ *My Life*, p. 36.

me, my poor stars. I left you alone at such a terrible height! Oh, my sad and joyful town!"¹¹

Marc Chagall was born to a traditional Bielarussian Hasidic family with many respectable Rabbies on both sides of his parents.¹² This religious mysticism has roots in the German Jewish community of the 12th century but became prominent in Slavic lands only in the middle of the 18th century. Hasids' philosophy and teachings were the opposite of the traditional Hebrew attitude of endless woe, based on expulsion from paradise, dispersion, and ageless slavery.

In contrast, Hasidism teachings used preachings, symbolism, and metaphors based on simple stories easily understood by ordinary people. They taught that God is everywhere and has a place in each soul that portrays the joy of this unity with Him. Hasids often used mysticism that came to them from the ancient tradition of interpretation (encoding and decoding) of the Hebrew Bible. This written and oral history of Hebrew culture proceeded for ages. The preachers of this branch of the Hebrew religion were males. Indeed, Jewish girls and women were predominantly illiterate. Only a few (from well-to-do families) knew other languages besides Yiddish and some Hebrew. Professional males, of course, had a better chance of learning foreign languages and cultures.

However, women like Chagall's grandmothers and mother were often excellent storytellers. Some of the stories came from oral interpretations of family lines and tradition. Others re-narrated stories they heard in synagogues while sitting on the balcony, covered by a curtain. Females were not allowed to sit by their male relatives.

Most of Viciebsk's families, of various confessions, were as poor as Chagall's father, a labourer in a small herring shop. He had worked there for thirty-two years, from his teenage years to his deathbed. Chagall describes his father, Khadski (Zachar) Chagall (Segal), in his autobiography: "I see my father as a riddle and incomprehensibly

¹¹ *My life*, p. 6.

¹² A rabbi was a person who knew Hebrew Bible by heart and could interpret its meaning. Traditionally, a rabbi had a home school, where he taught boys (from the age of five to the thirteen) the basics of the Bible.

sad person. He was constantly tired, anxious, and silent. His greyish-blue eyes, which would rarely be lightened up, had a thoughtful, poetic expression. He was skinny and very tall. My father was moving and lifting heavy barrels at the herring shop, and my heart was broken when I saw him doing it. Seeing when he took a herring out of a barrel with his bare and cold hands was also painful. My father's working day lasted for twelve-thirteen hours. His fat boss often stood behind him, watching his work, and did nothing. Father returned home in dirty working clothing, covered by a juice of pickled herring."¹³

Indeed, the artist's portraits and sketches of his father show us an exhausted person in poor health. Chagall tenderly recalls a memory of dry sugared pears that his father would occasionally bring to his children. This paragraph about his father ended unexpectedly with a phrase contradicting Chagall's earlier statement, where he said that he could not understand his father. "I alone understood him, for he was the flesh and blood of his people."¹⁴

Like everyone in the family, Zachar Chagal (Sehal) was under the complete spell of his wife, Feige-Ita (Ida). She was a tiny woman with an iron will. Feige-Ita had a green finger and grew seasonal vegetables at her small plot. She added tremendously to the family's income by selling out-of-home seasonable vegetables, berries, apples, and household items: needles, threads, and scissors.

Unlike her husband, Feige-Ita loved conversations; as abovementioned, she was a good storyteller and loved company. Her eldest son was her primary companion and a good listener.

All the Hasids loved stories, music, dancing, and singing. They used carnival elements in their feeling of unification with God. In translation from Hebrew, the word "Hasid" means "compassion" and "love." It is also translated as a phrase: "the one who loves God."

¹³ *My Life*, p.7–9.

¹⁴ *My Life*, p. 10.

Marc Chagall's family was typical in Viciebsk, where most Jews practiced Hasiditism. From early childhood, he was immersed in this religious culture that taught him to love and celebrate life and God. Indeed, Chagall's attitude to God was solid, personal, grateful, and truly special. He often used lyrical prose while addressing Him in prayer, calling the Deity "My God," and making himself and God in possession of each other. Thus, in the later years of his life, the artist addresses the Deity as such: "My God, thank You for this clarity that You willed to my soul. Thank You for this peace that You gave to my soul. My dear God, the night is coming; my eyes close till sunrise, and then I will paint new pictures for You of earth and sky."¹⁵ Indeed, the artist's paintings and writings constantly demonstrate the artist's gratitude to life and God.

Chagall's mother hoped her lively "contrary boy" would be learned enough to continue the family tradition and become a rebbe (rabbi) someday. Thus, when he turned five, she brought him to a cheder (a Jewish primary school) to learn the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language. At this stage of education, the kids had a teacher hired and controlled by a rabbi (a teacher was called "melamed.") The next step was to study with a local rabbi. This move to religious education didn't last for long. Chagall's mother, who, as mentioned, was practically the head of the family, and a down-to-earth person (not a dreamer like her husband), sent her son to a Russian school where kids studied the basics of math, reading, and writing. To enroll him, she bribed the headmaster with fifty rubles. This bribe allowed her son to attend a school that, by Russian tsarists' law, accepted only Christian students. By then, the mother realized that her Mojše would never be a rabbi and hoped her son would become a clerk with a clean job and a good salary. This dream of Feige-Ita never came true. And though her son was naturally and passionately religious, the rabbi (rebbe) career did not attract him. Neither a clerk in the bank nor any other office job suited him. Consequently, he

¹⁵ Zina Gimpelevich. *The Portrayal of Jews in Modern Bielarussian Literature*. (Montreal & Kingston & London & Chicago: McGill-Queens University press) p. 306.

didn't succeed in a Russian school either. The writer insists in his biography that he studied and knew every subject matter in that school, but due to his stuttering and shyness, he could not answer the teachers' questions.

As strange as it sounds, such a phenomenon is not rare for students of different ages whose learning abilities are based on the inspiration and self-understanding of the subject matter. These people cannot reproduce borrowed knowledge even though they understand it. We see this psychological trend of the artist as he tells the story about his art education.

IV. MOTHER... I WANT TO BE AN ARTIST! CHAGALL'S ART EDUCATION

Mojšhe's first steps to fine art began with copying portraits and figures from *Naša Niva (Our Land)*, a popular Bielarussian paper.¹⁶ Soon his drawings covered all the walls of the Chagalls' modest home. After he saw a sign on one of the houses, *Pen's School of Paintings and Drawings*, Mojšhe declared to his mother that he wanted to become an artist and needed to study at Pen's¹⁷ school. This request stupefied his mother, who was not keen on her son's choice. After a long struggle, she gave up and brought her son to the artist's studio to get his opinion on her son's artistic ability.

Yehuda Pen (1854–1937) was an academically trained easel painter, portraitist, ethnographer,

¹⁶ This paper exists today; it is led by Bielarussian opposition, printed in Vilnius (Vilnia); the paper is available online.

¹⁷ Pen was loved and cherished by his compatriots before and after Chagall settled in France. Tragically, a person of such influence, who lived through injustices of the Russian Pale of Settlement, inflicted by the tsarism (Jews were not allowed to live in Russian large cities), did not survive the Soviet yoke. The NKVD (Soviet secret police) organized the artist's brutal murder in notorious 1937 (that was the year when Soviets destroyed Bielarussian intelligentsia from all the walks of life). Despite a natural fear of the NKVD, the entire population of Viciebsk—people of different generations and walks of life, participated in the funeral procession Their demonstration of respect and appreciation for the beloved artist was symbolic. The Viciebsk's citizens showed the murderers that the city's soul was alive and that Soviets could not triumph over the citizens' heritage and love for truth. They did so despite the NKVD's warning the population against participation in the funeral. Thus, the NKVD turned out to be impotent in subduing the people individual and collective will.

and educator. The master was a strict adherent to academic Realism. However, most of his students, the School of Paris (1905-1939) members, like Chagall, preferred Modernism. Many of them earned a world name. Nevertheless, Pen's compatriots and his students highly appreciated the artist; in addition to Jewish tradition, he freely and soulfully used spiritual energies offered by all the cultures and traditions of Christians and other ethnicities of Viciebsk. The further important detail of the master's educative program was that he didn't discriminate against girls and accepted the capable ones to his school.

Upon examining Mojše's drawings, Pen, recognizing the family's poverty, admitted him to his school without a fee. Chagall admired Pen and considered him his second father as he warmly described the artist in his autobiography: "Viciebsk's suburbs. Pen. The land where my ancestors rest is the dearest of my possessions today. I love Pen. His flattering small figure always stands in front of my eyes. In my memory, he exists together with my father. I always stumble on him in my thoughts and dreams, where we are walking together empty streets of our town. How many times, staying on his school threshold, I was about to implore him: 'I need no glory; I only want to become like you, a modest artist whose paintings would be hanging in your home besides yours.'"¹⁸

Chagall spent less than a month and a half with the master. Thus, when he saw Pen's realistic pictures, where every figure was "as if a living one," Chagall confessed: "This is not my road. I feel it in my guts; it is not mine. But what is mine? I do not know it yet."¹⁹

Chagall's subsequent learning happened in Petersburg in 1906, where he attended various art schools for three years with approximately the same "success" he had with Pen. Chagall recognizes in his autobiography that he cannot receive knowledge from mentors but needs to draw and paint using his imagination, soulful emotions, and vision. Nevertheless, he learned enough about the technical operation necessary

for his profession. The master developed a strong perspective acuity and colour scheme (both qualities are comparable and equal in individual originality only to Matisse and Picasso). In Petersburg, the artist supported himself by painting houses and store signs. During this "study" period, Chagall often visited "his city" and relatives, mainly to see his sweetheart and wife-to-be, Bella Rosenfeld.

In 1911, thanks to a stipend from Maxim Vinover (1863-1926),²⁰ Chagall moved to Paris, where he changed his first name to Marc. Like his compatriots, that also were part of the *School of Paris* (1905-1939), he lived in La Ruche.²¹ This year, Chagall took classes at the Académie La Palette and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. However, the artist spent most of his time in the Parisien museums, where he copied works of old masters and, later, interpreted them in his manner and style. His other passion was Parisian streets, which reminded him of his native streets of Viciebsk.

Chagall began regularly exhibiting his works in Paris in 1912 at the Salon des Indépendants. Consequently, salons in Berlin, London, and other major European cities opened their doors to his shows. This success continued until he returned to Viciebsk in 1914. He planned a short visit during which he hoped to marry Bella Rosenfeld and visit his family. Events of WWI and the Russian Revolution made him stay in Soviet Russia longer. For a brief period, Chagall believed in Soviet propaganda and played a significant role in developing artistic life in Viciebsk. Thus, he served as Fine Art and Cultural Commissar in his beloved city and established Viciebsk's Art College. In 1920, due to the impossibility of continuing his work in Viciebsk, he had to move

²⁰ M. Vinover (1863-1926) was a famous lawyer, an activist for human rights, a patron of the arts, and the leader of the Jewish community in Russian Empire.

²¹ La Ruche (The Beehive) is a three-storey building designed in 1900 by Alexander Gustave Eiffel. It was reconstructed and owned by the French sculptor and patron of impoverished artists, Alfred Boucher, who hosted hungry artists from around the world in his huge home with miniscule rooms. We remind the reader that over forty of those artists from *the School of Paris* came from the historic Bielarús.

¹⁸ *My life*, p. 62.

¹⁹ *My life*, p. 59.

to Moscow with his wife and daughter Ida (born in 1916). In Moscow, the family, despite his work for the *Habima theatre*, hardly survived hunger and cold. In 1922, the Soviet Government allowed the family to emigrate to France.

Chagall did not like the Tsarist and Soviet Russian empires. He viewed Russia as an antisemitic backward country that exploited the peasantry and working classes, turning the people into slaves of the system.²² He also did not recognize Russian fine art that, according to the artist, was not original but a lousy copy of great European fine art.²³

Unlike in Moscow, his life in France was happy regarding family life, work, and respect for French and world original art and its representatives. He also enjoyed admiration from his friends and associates. Indeed, no one dictated to him how to do his work; he was free, successful, and, later on, prosperous.

There are many manuscripts, articles, and web writings dedicated to Chagall. They continually appear to this day.²⁴ This statement is proven in every biography and critical study devoted to him and his works. The most detailed literature emerged in the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Among them stands out: A book (album) by German art historians Ingo F. Walter and R. Metcher entitled: *Chagall*.²⁵ The volume is well-translated from English into Russian. Metcher's study is followed by Aleksandra Shatskikh's: *Vitebsk. The Life of Art*.²⁶ The latter work is among the soundest sources for understanding Chagall's roots and background. Prof. Suzan Tumarkin-Goodman compiled an excellent study (consisting of essays by professors Zvi Gitelman, Benjamin Harshav, Vladislav Ivanov, Jeffrey Veidlinger, and herself) in a volume (album), *Chagall And the Artists of the*

Russian Jewish Theater.²⁷ The only drawback of these and other publications is their stubborn repetition of a mistake in pronouncing Chagall's identity as Russian or Russian-French." However, his memoir is an antidote that repeatedly shows his contrarian idea of belonging primarily to his home country, the core of which is his native Viciebsk.

V. CHAGALL'S MEMOIR

There are many controversial data about the time of writing of the memoir. Thus, one of the earlier suggestions was written by Chagall's first scholar, Prof. Franz Meyer (Kunsthistoriker).²⁸ According to Prof. Meyer, Chagall wrote his memoirs in 1915-16 during his service at Petersburg's military bureau. Other scholars, like Shatskikh and Tumarkin, state that the autobiography was first written during the most difficult (due to the consequences of the Russian Empire's Revolutions and Civil War) of 1918-1922. However, the most critical fact is that this exquisite literary work was written and indicates clearly that the author spent more time in Viciebsk, Berlin, and Paris than in Moscow/Petersburg in the 1910s and 1920s and 1930s. Thus, his twenty illustrations to *My Life* were published in 1923 separately as an album in Berlin, while his poetic autobiography was finished in Paris.

We understand that every scholar of Chagall's heritage meticulously researched the subject matter and saw his creative work according to their personal understanding of fine art. Indeed, each of us has "My Chagall." Yet, the autobiography remains the most precious to understanding the writer's poetic character, origin, and road to fame. The memoir presents unique facts about Chagall's tender and nostalgic

²² *My Life*, p. 99.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 98.

²⁴ Zina Gimpelevich. *The Portrayal of Jews in Modern Bielarussian Literature*. (Montreal & Kingston & London & Chicago: McGill-Queens University press, 2023) pp. 52-3.

²⁵ F. Walter & R. Metcher. *Chagall*. (Cologne: Tachen, 2000) 95 pp.

²⁶ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk* (Russified). *The Life of Art*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007) 391 pp.

²⁷ Susan Tumarkin-Goodman. *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007) 228 pp.

²⁸ Meyer Franz. *The Artist and His Art and His Private Myths; MARC CHAGALL*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964). 774 pp. The edition has Chagall's Illustrations in black and white and 53 color plates. Prof. Meyer was the director of art museum Kunstmuseum in Basel. He was married to the Chagall's only daughter, Ida Chagall. They had three children together.

attitude toward his birthplace, historic Bielarús, which, once again, for him meant the city of Viciebsk. Chagall never identified this city with Russia: "But Viciebsk is a special place... There are tenths, hundreds of synagogues, churches, meat shops, and passersbys. Is it Russia? No, this is my city, where I always return to. And with what a deeply warm feeling! There I painted Viciebsk's series in 1914. I painted everything I saw. But only from home; I didn't want to go out; I looked through the windows. It was enough for me to paint fences, trees, floors, and chairs. A very ancient man is sitting in front of me on the chair.— 'Who are you? I ask him with my eyes.' — 'What? Don't you know me? You never heard of a preacher from Slucak?!'. "How do I tell him what I want from him? What if he leaves immediately? But no, he agreed to be my model! He made himself comfortable on the chair and immediately fell asleep. Did you see a portrait of an elder in the green? This is he!"²⁹

We interpret this example as one of many deep emotional feelings towards the Fatherland that continued throughout Chagall's long and productive life. Indeed, his life, work, and inspiration never abandoned his birthplace. And the artist's memoir, *My Life*, in which he confirms his Bielarussianness and approach to art, ensures this statement.

VI. VICIEBSK AGAIN: THE TOWN OF MARK CHAGALL

In front of an entrance to Viciebsk, the traveller is met with the colossal sign: VICIEBSK, THE TOWN OF MARK CHAGALL."

However, the sign appeared only in the late 1990s. It was not welcomed during the Soviet times. Currently, Chagall has two museums in Viciebsk, which were difficult to establish because of the communist government's restrictions. However, Bielarusians managed to establish memorials in honour of their compatriot.

The first museum is located in a small, old dwelling where the artist grew up. The place displays a character of that time: it exhibits more

than modest hand-made furniture, kitchen necessities, and skimpy clothing of the former inhabitants. The other one is the Chagall's Museum in Viciebsk's Art Center. This place has over 300 originals of Chagall's graphics [donated by his daughter Ida (1916–1994) and granddaughter Bella] in 1992.³⁰

Due to Soviet antisemitism and its anti-religious position, the establishment of the museums was close to impossible until three leading Bielarussian members of the intelligentsia [the masterful Bielarussian prose writer Vasil Bykaŭ (1922–2003), the prominent poet Ryhor Baradulin (1935-2014), and an excellent Bielarussian poet and translator from Viciebsk David Šymanovič (1932-2014)] made it happen. The latter two poets translated Chagall's poetry into Bielarussian and Russian from his native Yiddish. Thousands of like-minded Bielarusians supported Bykaŭ, Baradulin, and Šymanovič. Together they fought with the government and won permission to establish a monument and two museums in Chagall's native Bielarussian town, Viciebsk.

The following excerpts from Bykaŭ keynote speeches of 1991-95, delivered at festivities in Viciebsk, illuminate the Bielarussian adherence to Chagall. The writer powerfully described the stupidity and obscurantism of Soviet officialdom that attempted to bury the artist's significance for his birth country and his compatriots' memory of him. Bykaŭ also spoke passionately about Chagall's sense of national belonging. The writer vividly depicted the artist's birthplace, pointed out the importance of Chagall's art of Jewish and Christian Bielarussian cultures, and described how the two, combined with Chagall's talent, transformed his work into a store of universal culture: "With his roots in the Bielarussian milieu, he is a leading artist of Jewish and Bielarussian culture, and both phenomena are natural and lawful. Every artist comes into the world from their national background, whereas a child absorbs its forms, outlooks, smell, and colours. At last, Chagall established himself within a tremendous and eternal culture where he

³⁰ Ida was named after her grandmother, Feige-Ita (Ida), while Bella was named after her grandmother, Bella Rosenfeld, Chagall's first wife.

²⁹ Ibid.

belonged to the whole world. Mankind is thankful to him and acknowledges with gratitude that little corner of the earth, unknown before, that gave birth to him."³¹

Chagall is as well-known to the world culture as Pablo Picasso (Málaga, October 25., 1881—Mougins, France, April 8., 1973). Both artists were central figures of the *School of Paris* (1905-1939) and founders and developers of new forms and styles in Modernism. Thus, Chagall fathered surrealism, and Picasso created cubism. The originality of each of them is not disputable, as well as a thorny individual road to personal success.³² Were they close friends? Not at all: they had very atypical temperaments and characters. As we established, Chagall was the dreamer, the poet, the author, and the family man. He loved and cherished his parentage, wife, and their daughter. The artist was in perpetual love for life. Picasso was not a family man. He was a fighter who endlessly fought for personal changes in his life. Neither were they competitors: Chagall and Picasso respected each other and their differences. Indeed, the artists achieved fame and success due to their search for new forms, diverse approaches to life, hard work, and an early call to fine art. Both loved to portray nature and people. Rather often, each of them would use various animals as models. It is symbolic that Chagall depicted mainly cows, while Picasso preferred bulls.

Despite equality in fame and place in fine art, the significant difference between the two masters is still apparent in the question of their motherland. Thus, no one ever doubted Picasso's Spanish origin. At the same time, Chagall, as we continue to state, was constantly identified as a Russian, French, or Russian-French artist in most Western and Russian manuscripts dedicated to his works by various art historians. And though Picasso could travel between Spain and France as soon as the artist came to money and as often as he

pleased, Chagall could not. During Stalinism, his road to the motherland was prohibited — those who returned to the USSR were imprisoned, exiled, or murdered.

Many called Chagall "a golden boy" and "the luckiest artist of the modernist era." However, it is essential to state that two poets and writers, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) and Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961), recognized Chagall's intellectual and artistic genius before his fellow artists did.

We conclude the current study with Chagall's words: "God forgive me if I could not express my deep love for all the people on earth. And my family are sacred people to me. Truly, I think so."³³

In these terms, dear reader, we invite you to accept the master's love for us all and to return similar feelings to his eternal memory. Indeed, it is lovely to feel gratitude to Him, who left us such a rich inheritance in fine art, literature, and world culture.

³¹ Vasil Bykaŭ. "Chagall and Viciebsk are inseparable." (The article is in Bielarusian), published in *Chagall's days in Viciebsk: 1991-95*). The volume of forty-seven scholarly articles and recorded speeches is compiled and edited by David Šymanovič. (Viciebsk: Paŭkov, 1996) p.26.

³² It is interesting to note that both artists received museums in their home countries at the same time.

³³ *My Life*, 191.

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