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A Tableau of a Crime Taking Shape under the Viewer's Gaze: The Trajectories of Yosef Kuzkovski's *The Last Way* (1944–1970)



Figure 1: The Last Way, oil on canvas, 1948, Dimensions: 300 x 160 cm (118,1 x 63 in).

Anyone walking into the hallway of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, is greeted by the troubling painting by Y. Kuzkovski *If I Forget This* – a terrible rendering of the Action. This canvas deals with the events of Babi Yar and Panari, of Ninth Fort and Rumbula and of a thousand better known or unidentified locations where the Jewish catastrophe took place in the twentieth century. This piece serves as a powerful reminder to Knesset representatives, the people's elect. [. . .]. Thanks to his powerful artistic mastery, Yosef Kuzkovski brought immortality to the millennial tragedy of the Jewish people and conveyed the urgent call from the martyrs: "This should never ever happen again!"¹

1 David Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski. Pamyati khudozhnika* (Tel-Aviv: Kariv, 1975), 5.

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These are the opening lines of a book about Yosef Kuzkovski² (1902–1970), a Jewish artist born in Mogilev, who worked in Soviet Ukraine (until 1941), Uzbekistan (1941–1948), and Latvia (1948–1969). Published in Israel in 1975, the volume pays homage to the recently deceased painter, who had settled in Israel in 1969. It features a collection of memoirs by the painter and one of his relatives. Its editor, David Zilberman, had belonged to the same Jewish memory group, seeking to commemorate the extermination of the Jews in Latvia as a painter. Zilberman defined himself as a person who “fought against Soviet power” while he was in Rīga between 1958 and 1971 and sought to emigrate to Israel.³ Conceived in the political context of the 1970s, the book placed Kuzkovski’s work in an anti-Soviet regime perspective. This article aims to restore the historicity of the artist’s approach and to highlight the opportunities (partial and negotiated) for Holocaust memory opened up in Soviet public and semi-public spheres in the 1960s.

Kuzkovski established his position as a professional artist in Ukraine in the 1930s. During the war, like many Soviet refugees from the occupied territories, he resided in Uzbekistan. Paying close attention to the bloody events in Nazi-occupied Ukraine, where his relatives had remained, he began in 1944 to paint a work depicting the mass murder in Babyn Yar, which would become *The Last Way*. The painting was finished by 1948, when the artist took up residence in Rīga. Conceived three years after the Babyn Yar massacre, the painting had been worked out during a phase of the official and partial acknowledgment of the extermination of Soviet Jews (1944–1947)⁴ and was finalized during the period of its silencing (1947–1959). The present article restores its genesis, then its public exposure in the 1960s, in order to show a progressive universalization of the pictorial representation of

2 The spelling of the artist’s name varies depending on the country: Iossif Kuz’kovski in Ukraine, Iossifs Kuzkovskis in Latvia, and Yosef Kuzkovski in Israel and the US. I adopt Yosef Kuzkovski throughout.

3 Interview with David Zilberman at the Museum “Jews in Latvia” (MEL), # 12_05_Zilberman, 2012.

4 On the vacillating recognition of the Holocaust by Soviet authorities, cf. Karel C. Berkhoff, “‘Total annihilation of the Jewish Population’: The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941–1945,” *Kritika* 10, no. 1 (2009): 61–105; Kiril Feferman, *Soviet Jewish Stepchild: The Holocaust in the Soviet Mindset, 1941–1964* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009). On its visibility in cinema, see Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust, Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Valérie Pozner, Alexandre Sumpf, and Vanessa Voisin, eds., *Filmer la guerre: les Soviétiques face à la Shoah, 1941–1946* (Paris: Mémorial de la Shoah, 2015); Valérie Pozner, Alexandre Sumpf, and Vanessa Voisin, “Que faire des images soviétiques de la Shoah?,” *1895. Mille huit cent quatre-vingt-quinze* 76 (2015): 8–41; Irina Tcherneva, “Historiciser les images soviétiques de la Shoah (Estonie, Lituanie, 1944–1948),” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 3 (139) (2018): 59–78.

Babyn Yar. Specific audiences of the painting arose as a result of the post-Stalinist “thaw,” when Soviet republics tolerated the emergence of public knowledge of the Holocaust.⁵ By examining the painting’s audiences, I explore the variety of semi-private and public spheres that highlight an interplay of social initiatives in Holocaust memory.

Recent scholarship provides examples of the resurgence of this memory in literature, the press, and the erection of public monuments.⁶ This article brings into conversation the evocation of the Holocaust in the media and the arts with factors specific to the Khrushchevian and Brezhnevian periods, namely the revelations of World War II war crimes trials held in the Soviet Union. Latvia, which the USSR had re-annexed in 1944 (after the first occupation in 1940–1941), first made some of its trials public in 1959. The Communist Party and state authorities disclosed written and visual materials on the crimes that year, while the work by Yosef Kuzkovski was shown in several Latvian cities where the trials were held. Thus, the painting should be analyzed on the border between state initiatives and social commemorative endeavors.

The sources of this chapter include the archives of arts administrations, the documentation of Artists’ Unions, and the publishing houses in Rīga, as well as the files of the local KGB, which was leading the investigations into crimes against humanity, and the records of Soviet political authorities.⁷ I also draw on the visual and textual archives of the Museum “Jews in Latvia,” the city of Jēkabpils, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC.⁸

5 Zvi Gitelman, “Soviet Reaction to the Holocaust, 1945–1991,” in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR*, ed. Lucian Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); Irina Tcherneva and Vanessa Voisin, “La Shoah dans les documentaires soviétiques des années 1960: une reconnaissance ambiguë,” in *Filmer la guerre*, 115–122; Victoria Khiterer, “Memorialization of the Holocaust in Minsk and Kyiv,” in *Holocaust Resistance in Europe and America: New Aspects and Dilemmas*, ed. Victoria Khiterer and Abigali S. Gruber (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 95–131.

6 Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraiikh, eds., *Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014); Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2018); Ilya Lenski, *Holocaust Commemoration in Latvia in the Course of Time. 1945–2015*, exhibition catalogue (Rīga: Muzejs Ebreji Latvijā, 2017).

7 All of these are held in the State Archives of Latvia (Latvijas Valsts arhīvs, LVA). I also examined the archival collections found in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia and the Artists’ Union of Latvia.

8 In particular, I compared the documents of the Museum “Jews in Latvia” to publications and texts held in the archives of the USHMM. The research into photographs and their identification was carried out in the Latvia State Archives of Audiovisual Documents (LVKFFDA).

Finally, Eric Le Bourhis and I carried out interviews with representatives of the Jewish community in Latvia.⁹ These sources permit me to open a window on the visual presence of the Holocaust's remembrance. Moreover, a cross-analysis of the artistic imagery with the social environment where it was exhibited underpins this history of the social usage of the art works dedicated to the Holocaust. My purpose is to show an array of perspectives that viewers could adopt and to clarify how the perceptions of works of art were shaped by the various installations or exhibitions. Thus, I restore Kuzkovski's multifaceted career in order to reposition his artwork on the Holocaust within the wider context of his oeuvre. A visual analysis of the painting and its etchings helps to redraw the genesis of different aspects of his representation of Babyn Yar. I also examine official arrangements surrounding the painting's exhibition within the more flexible semi-public sphere of the 1960s. Finally, I look at various uses of the painting by specific audiences, namely the Jewish communities in Latvia.

Official or Fringe Artist? The Construction of a Pluralistic Career

Born in a family of construction workers, Kuzkovski grew up in a Yiddish-speaking environment and studied in a traditional Jewish school in a small Ukrainian town.¹⁰ As a teenager of humble beginnings, he found a job in 1919 as a shop sign designer.¹¹ He then volunteered to fight in the ranks of the Red Army in 1919–1920 and drew portraits of the soldiers. As early as 1922, he started a career drawing posters for one of Kyiv's prestigious cinema theaters, then for the film administration. Later he would admit that cinema had a strong influence on his painting style. He turned again to the world of cinema in 1939 and collaborated with studios in Kyiv designing posters and film sets, becoming familiar through this work with the technique of lithography.

In 1926, Yosef Kuzkovski gained recognition as an official painter by joining the Trade Union of Art Workers. Between 1927 and 1930, he enrolled in the Faculty for Graphic Arts in the Kyiv State Art Institute, though he never finished the

⁹ Ten interviews with individuals involved in the trials to various degrees were held in Rīga and Jēkabpils in 2017.

¹⁰ Abstracts of Kuzkovski's memoirs in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 9.

¹¹ Kuzkovski's autobiography, LVA, 230/3/136/6.

curriculum.¹² In his autobiography, Kuzkovski explained that he dropped out because of the school's strong stance against formalism, a claim that is confirmed by his memoirs.¹³ During the war, while in Uzbekistan, he painted works illustrating the commitment of the hinterland population to the war effort and pursued his work as a poster designer. Between 1943 and 1944, he made propaganda posters that were hung in storefront windows, known as TASS Windows, and published in *Pravda*. He also produced agitprop work, characterized by images in factories and kolkhozes. Many cinematographers, painters, and photographers willingly contributed to the war effort in this manner.¹⁴ For this, the Uzbek branch of the Art Workers Trade Union welcomed Kuzkovski as a member, which then allowed him to host other exhibitions in Uzbekistan in 1944–1945.

During the 1920s and 1930s, he dedicated just a few works to the Soviet Jewish population. In 1938, he painted a representation of the Kuban agricultural settlements in the Crimea, showing Jewish peasants toiling on the land.¹⁵ He constructed a panel depicting sports competitions between the Don Jews and the Don Cossacks. This piece appeared in the first exhibition of his works, which took place in 1941 in Kyiv, shortly before the advance of the Wehrmacht forced him to flee to Uzbekistan. The panel was destroyed during the bombing of the city.¹⁶ Kuzkovski's first major work on the fate of the Jewish population dates from the period of his evacuation to Uzbekistan. While working on the depiction of the Babyn Yar massacre between 1944 and 1948, he moved to Latvia. There he created paintings on the mobilization of the hinterland population and a large panel commissioned by the state, *Celebrating Victory!* (1947). It was displayed during the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution.

Parallel with these developments, the painter returned to his first activity as a poster maker and participated in decorating the city. He painted portraits of political figures that were plastered on four-story buildings. In 1949, he initiated a series on Lenin with the drawing *Lenin in Rīga*. Then came a mosaic, *Stalin Is Our*

12 LVA, 230/3/136. This file on Kuzkovski contains a collection of relevant documents, others are found in his file of the USSR Artists' Union at the Russian Archives for Arts and Literature (RGALI), 2082/4/530.

13 Kuzkovski's memoirs in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 18.

14 Vanessa Voisin, Valérie Pozner, and Irina Tcherneva, eds., *Perejit voïnu. Kinoindustriia v SSSR, 1939–1949* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2018).

15 This political project gave birth to the film *Jews on Land* (*Evrei na zemle*, directed by A. Room. Script by V. Shklovsky, 1926), examined by Valérie Pozner, Eric Aunoble, and Alexandre Ivanov in Valérie Pozner and Natacha Laurent, eds., *Kinojudaica. Les représentations des Juifs dans le cinéma de Russie et d'Union soviétique des années 1910 aux années 1980* (Paris: Nouveau monde éditions, 2012), 131–219.

16 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 20–21.

Sun (1950), shown on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the annexation of Latvia.¹⁷ Aside from the portraits of political leaders, a genre that held strong potential for legitimation but also came with heightened surveillance, Kuzkovski began to illustrate books in 1951. He worked on novels by Valentin Kataev, Aleksei Tolstoi, and Nikolai Ostrovsky, recounting moments of heroism during the Crimean War, the Second World War, and the Russian Civil War.¹⁸ During late Stalinism, Kuzkovski's work remained classical in its themes and artistic techniques. At the same time, progressively he demonstrated a stronger inclination to represent the place occupied by the Jews in the USSR. According to the memoirs published by Zilberman, he tried to increase the presence of Jewish characters in his illustrations for Vladimir Belyaev's novel, *The Old Fortress* (1952). In 1948, he wished to settle in Birobidzhan and to work for a Yiddish publishing house, *Der Emes*, and for the newspaper *Einikait*.¹⁹ However, it was the heyday of the state's antisemitic campaign, arrests, and massive lay-offs, and *Der Emes* was closed.²⁰

The status of his relationship to official commissioners of the arts is certainly at the root of Kuzkovski's turn to themes of heroism with settings of the Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II. Kuzkovski secured the institutional and financial support of the Artists' Union of Latvia. His career was on the rise. In the first half of the 1950s, he sat on two of the Union's governing bodies. He was part of the editorial team of the State Publishing House (Gosizdat).²¹ His professional commitment was officially commended in 1956.²² Kuzkovski became a member of a dense network of various state commissioners, the army, and the publishing world. Despite the antisemitic atmosphere upon his arrival in Riga,²³ he gained the support of

17 Kuzkovski's artistic card, LVA, 230/3/136/2–5.

18 The painter worked on Mihail Lermontov, *Geroi nacheho vremeni* [A Hero of Our Time] (1951), and on tales of the war in Crimea: Leo Tolstoy, *Sevastopol'skie rasskazy* [Sevastopol Sketches] (1953). He illustrated a novel by Anna Sakse, which details the beginnings of the revolutionary struggle: *Trudovoe plemia* [The Laboring Tribe] (1954). Other books he illustrated are also devoted to this theme: Kavi Nadzmi, *Vessennie vetry* [Winds of Spring] (1950), Aleksei Tolstoi, *Hozhdenie po mukam* [The Path of Torments] (1956), exhibited on the occasion of the Red Army's 41st anniversary, and Emmanuil Kazakevich, *Siniia tetrad'* [The Blue Notebook] (1963–1969). The story of the civil war is partly reported in these novels, but also in Nikolai Ostrovsky, *Rozhdeniye burei* [Born of the Storm] (1960), and Belyaev, *Staraia krepost'* [The Old Fortress], (1952). The three other books illustrated by Kuzkovski dealt with World War II: Boris Polevoi, *Povest' o nastoyaschem cheloveke* [The Story of a Real Man] (1958) and *Glubokij tyl* [The Deep Rear] (1962–1963), and Valenkin Kataev, *Syn polka* [Son of the Regiment] (1969).

19 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, op.cit., 33.

20 Gennadi Kostyrchenko, *Stalin protiv 'kosmopolitov'. Vlast' i evreiskaia intelligentsia v SSSR* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010).

21 LVA, 230/3/136/32.

22 LVA, 230/3/136/14.

23 Mentioned by his spouse Olga Kuzkovskaya in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 26–27.

some members of the artistic circles, such as Arturs Eglītis, delegate from Soviet Russia and deputy director of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Latvia. He assumed Kuzkovski's unwavering patronage, organized his exhibitions, and composed the catalogues. He would be of even greater assistance in 1969 when the artist left the USSR for Israel and Eglītis helped him take his paintings out of the country.²⁴ And there was yet another guardian angel: Vladimirs Kaupužs, the Latvian Minister of Culture (1962–1986), another Latvian from Russia.

At the end of the 1950s, a military commission, recently created within the Artists' Union, initiated a series of exhibitions on World War II.²⁵ Kuzkovski participated in meetings between painters and members of the military until 1968. That year, in appreciation of his remarkable commitment, he was shortlisted for a state distinction.²⁶ His institutional recognition seemed to have reached its apex at this time: his works were selected to be shown at the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy in Moscow.²⁷ However, at the end of 1969, he chose to emigrate to Israel, which led to his ejection from the professional Union.²⁸

In parallel with this official trajectory, another one was unfolding. After his depiction of Babyn Yar, the artist pursued his work on the Holocaust in the 1960s. In 1959, he made the etching *The Ghetto Uprising*. In the following years, he felt encouraged to continue working on this theme, as remembrance of Babyn Yar resurfaced after 1962 due to the mobilization of survivors and the public involvement of poet Evgenii Evtushenko and composer Dmitrii Shostakovich.²⁹ Kuzkovski maintained a connection with Babyn Yar and met the composer. In addition, in 1963, he started painting a series in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast of Birobidzhan, where he lived alongside those who had endured repression and dismissal following accusations of "bourgeois nationalism."³⁰ He made other paintings dedicated to the Holocaust during a visit in 1965 to the Ninth Fort in Kaunas on the occasion of the opening of the Fort's museum,³¹ which gave rise to the production of *We Will Live* (fig. 2).

24 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 35. A special regulation from the Council of Minister of Soviet Latvia prohibited works of arts from leaving the territory. LVA, collection of the Latvian Council of Ministers, 270/1c/1952/31.

25 LVA, 230/1/390 and 452.

26 LVA, 230/3/136/26–27.

27 LVA, 230/3/136/29.

28 LVA, 230/3/136/17.

29 Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Khrushchëva: vlast', intelligentsiia, evreiskii vopros* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii, 2012)

30 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 45.

31 The visit was organized by a network of Jewish communities from the Baltic republics. Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 49.

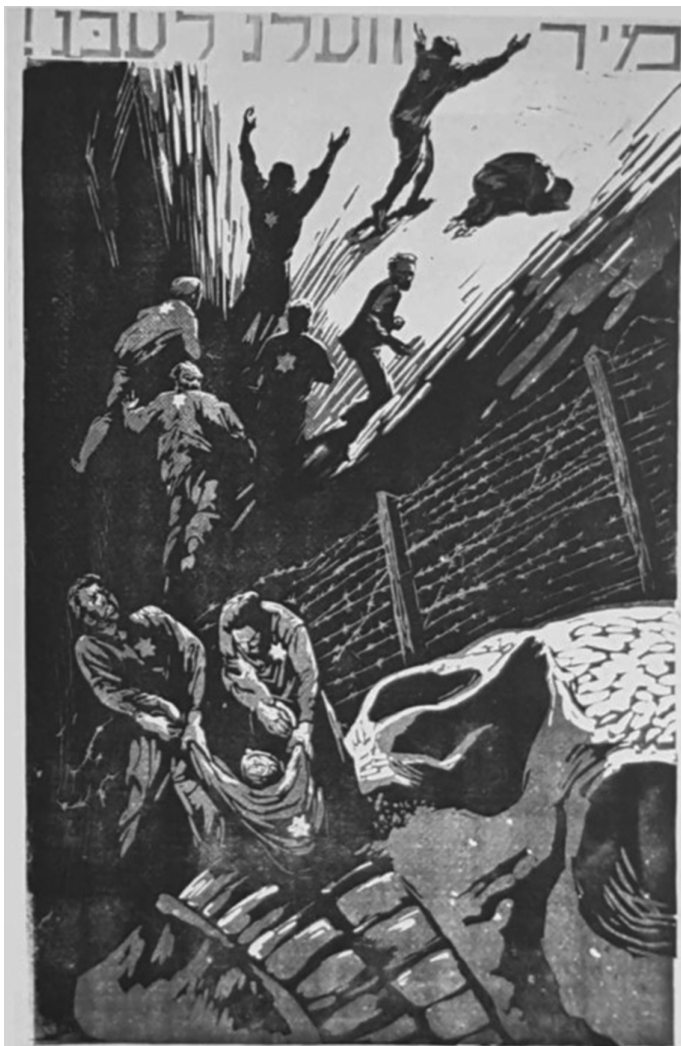


Figure 2: *We Will Live*, 1965, colored etching, ink. Size: 74 x 45 cm (29.1 x 17.7 in).

Were these two trajectories distinct? Such an extrapolation is certainly supported by the split of Kuzkovski's work into two collections, one preserved in Latvia and the other in Israel.³² The Artists' Union of Latvia kept in its archives illustrations for novels by Boris Polevoi and Aleksei Tolstoi and portraits of academician Solo-

³² Some of the publications and catalogues are held at the USHMM.

mons Hillers and the 1919 Latvian Bolshevik figure Pēteris Stučka.³³ Some private collections in Israel seem to also have preserved works on the Holocaust, following a first exhibition in Israel in 1970. After Kuzkovski's settlement in Israel, several books, postcards, and stamps appeared that convey a coherent vision of the artist's work. In her memoirs, the painter's wife contrasted the commissioned work for the state with the dissident's personal creations: "The icons of the Party that Kuzkovski created worked as invisible protection against the KGB's snitches. They made it possible to hold meetings at our house with dozens of Jews from the Soviet Union."³⁴

Here, his activity may be re-read through the prism of the work he did at the end of the 1960s and after his arrival in Israel.³⁵ Still, it would be anachronistic to assert that in the earlier decades Kuzkovski had created the "party icons" exclusively for utilitarian purposes. Both of these collections are institutional constructs and correspond to two imaginary trajectories that obscure the connection that lies behind both of the artist's commitments. The biography of the artist reveals a complex nexus of artistic references and institutional supporters, a certain proximity to authority, which also allowed Kuzkovski to advocate for the memory of the Holocaust in the 1960s.

The Genesis of *The Last Way* (Uzbekistan 1944-Rīga 1948)

Kuzkovski started to develop the painting on the Babyn Yar massacre while in Uzbekistan in 1944. The execution took place on September 29 and 30, 1941, in a ravine on the northwestern edge of Kyiv. After the mass murder of the Jewish population, the ravine was kept in use for the execution of Soviet prisoners of war and Roma.³⁶ In August 1943, the Germans had forced hundreds of prisoners of war to exhume and burn all the bodies in an operation aimed at erasing the physical evidence of the crimes. When the city was liberated on November 6, 1943, Soviet authorities found an empty ravine.³⁷

³³ Artwork numbers: 1346, 1349, 1351, 1352, 1742, 1338, Collection in the Artists' Union of Latvia.

³⁴ Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 30.

³⁵ Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 6.

³⁶ The total number of people murdered at Babyn Yar is estimated at 100,000.

³⁷ Karel Berkhoff, "The Dispersal and Oblivion of the Ashes and Bones of Babi Yar," in *Lessons and Legacies XII: New Directions in Holocaust Research and Education*, ed. Wendy Lower and Lauren Faulkner Rossi, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 256–276. Martin Dean, *Investigating Babyn Yar: Shadows from the Valley of Death* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024).

In 1941–1942 and again in 1943, the Soviet press published reports on the tragedy, lending it an exceptional public resonance.³⁸ This was also accompanied with a progressive de-Judaization of the victims.³⁹ In 1943, foreign journalists from the *New-York Times* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* visited the site.⁴⁰ The same year, the writer Boris Gorbатов (1908–1954) published in *Pravda* the novel *The Unvanquished* [*Nepokorennye*], about the fate of the Kyiv's population during the occupation. Gorbатов only evoked the Babyn Yar massacre, whereas film director Mark Donskoy surreptitiously represented it in cinema in 1943–1945.⁴¹ The real condition of the victims' murder was not reproduced on the silver screen (all were shown dressed, for instance). However, the film made clear that the victims of this massacre were Kyiv's Jews.

Kuzkovski's relatives remained in Kyiv and were directly under the threat of Nazi extermination policy. Therefore, he was on the lookout for "reports of mass

38 For the media coverage, see Karel Berkhoff, "Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population": The Holocaust in the Soviet Media," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 10, no. 1 (2009): 61–105. For a study of the representation of the murder in literature, see Boris Czerny, "Témoignages et œuvres littéraires sur le massacre de Babij Jar, 1941–1948," *Cahiers du monde russe* 53, no. 4 (2012): 523–70. For the feature film, see Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 40–56; Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, 134–56. See also the pedagogical video by Valérie Pozner and Vanessa Voisin for the exhibition "Filmer la guerre: les Soviétiques face à la Shoah," Mémorial de la Shoah, 2015: https://filmer-la-guerre.memorialdelashoah.org/sequence_pedagogique.html, accessed Feb. 14, 2024, as well as the contribution by Karel Berkhoff, "What Does Soviet Footage from the 1940s Tell Us about the Holocaust in Kyiv and Its Soviet Aftermath?" at the conference "Documenting Nazi Crimes through Film: Soviet Union, 1942–1945" (Panel 6: "Historicizing the Footage: Case Studies of the Image in the Light of Other Types of Archives: Ukraine," <https://www.vhh-project.eu/videos/what-does-soviet-footage-from-the-1940s-tell-us-about-the-holocaust-in-kyiv-and-its-soviet-aftermath/>, accessed Feb. 14, 2024. See also Pavel Polian and D. Burago, eds., *Ovrag smerti–ovrag pamyati. Stikhi o Babyem Yare. Antologiyav 2-kh knigakh* (Kyiv: Vidavnychy dim Dmitra Burago – BO "BF "«Memorial Golokostu "Babyn Yar" 2021).

39 Nathalie Moine, *Les vivants et les morts. Genèse, histoire et héritages de la documentation soviétique des crimes commis en territoires occupés pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, fin XIX-eme-début XXIe siècle* (HDR diss., National Center for Scientific Research [CNRS], 2015), 359–370.

40 The visit was filmed in November 1943 (Russian State Film and Photo Archives, no. 5204, and Central State CinePhotoFono Archive of Ukraine H. Pschenychnyi, no. 2593) and represents a part of three sessions dedicated to filming the site of the massacre by Soviet cameramen.

41 Olga Gershenson, "Les Insoumis (1945), ou comment le roman soviétique est devenu un film juif," in Pozner and Laurent, *Kinojudaica*, 341–364.

assassinations of Jews in German-occupied territories⁴² and Jewish refugees in Uzbekistan, who spoke about the antisemitic Nazi propaganda they had witnessed.⁴³ The first information regarding the scope of the killing was made public in November 1941 in major newspapers such as *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, which reported a total of 52,000 Jewish victims in Kyiv.⁴⁴ The following year, the Yiddish-language press provided detailed data.⁴⁵ The Soviet press's approach to the facts of the Holocaust delivers a striking example of the vacillating identification of the victims.⁴⁶ Often the newsreels did not identify the Jewish origin of the victims, whereas the newspaper articles on these killing sites, published simultaneously, did. Thus, citizens who remained concerned about the extermination of the Jewish people could cross-check



Figure 3: Sketch *The Action*, 1944. Photograph signed by Kuzkovski. LVA, 230/3/238/42.

42 Olga Kuzkovskaia's memoirs in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 24.

43 For instance, this was the case with refugees from the Baltic territories, as noted in the interview with Hanna Rozenberg. MEL, # 14_18_Rozenberg_1,2 [2014].

44 Published on November 19, 1941. Cited in Moine, *Les vivants et les morts*, 359. Cf. Paula Chan, *Eyes on the Ground: Soviet Investigations of the Nazi Occupation* (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2023), 185–196, 202–209.

45 Arkadi Zeltser, "The Subject of 'Jews in Babi Yar' in the Soviet Union in the Years 1941–1945," https://www.yadvashem.org/research/about/mirilashvili-center/articles/babi-yar.html#footnote1_jnfrfzz accessed March 25, 2019.

46 For the general approach of the Holocaust by the Soviet press, see also Dov Ber Kerler, "The Soviet Yiddish Press: *Eynikayt* during the War, 1942–1945," in *Why Didn't the Press Shout? American and International Journalism during the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Moses Shapiro (Jersey City, NJ: Yeshiva University Press, 2003), 221–249.



Figure 4: Sketch *The Action*, 1944. Photograph. MEL (I)1274 P 4567.



Figure 5: Sketch, January 1948. Reproduction in the catalogue of Kuzkovski's personal exhibition, 1963. LVA, 230/3/238/24.

the information available to them and did so, as was the case with Babyn Yar.⁴⁷ The fragmented nature of the data at Kuzkovski's disposal determined the depiction of the events. More than a detailed pictorial work serving as a testimonial, it was intended from its conception as an attempt at a more general reach.

The finished painting (Figure 1) foregrounds the path leading to the execution site. This motif avoids the direct representation of the extreme violence. A study of these etchings allows us to observe that Kuzkovski was torn about this narrative all the way to the last brushstrokes in 1948. The sketch entitled "the Action," dating from 1944 (Figure 3) and another one from 1948 (Figure 5), referring the Nazi German term *Aktion*, depict the execution by firing squad.⁴⁸ In the first sketch, the group, portrayed in the background, is distanced from a victim of two policemen. The scope of the representation is made dynamic by the introduction of a machine gun at the center of the picture and a corpse. Another sketch from 1944 bearing the same title (Figure 4) shows the emergence of the motif of the path leading to death. This pathway will become the heart of the painting to the point of inspiring its title – *The Last Way*. Present in the Donskoy film depicting the victims' fateful journey, the theme of the path evokes a crucial issue: a dialectic of choice between nascent disobedience and the adoption of a posture of harmlessness. This conflictual component of the representation of the Holocaust was expressed during the debates surrounding Donskoy's film⁴⁹ and in the press.⁵⁰ The sketches reveal it: Kuzkovski hesitated between acceptance and revolt. The choice he made was in tune with the perspective of "heroic realism." His paintings during World War II, with their larger format and lateral extension, glorifying the population's commitment in the background, are evocative of this movement.⁵¹ Furthermore, in Riga, while the painter was still working on Babyn Yar, he composed another work extolling victory.⁵² He placed his characters in the same manner, whether they were *Led to the Slaughter* (the title he gave to the painting between 1945 and 1947) or to liberation.

The second substantial concern is the place the painter gave to the viewer. Starting with the first sketches, Kuzkovski blurred the figures of the perpetrators; they do not have any national or social characteristics. An important element can

47 Zeltser, "The Subject of 'Jews in Babi Yar.'"

48 The mass killing is depicted by Felix Lemberski, whose parents perished in Babyn Yar. Lemberski himself evacuated to safety in the Urals. From 1944 and 1952, he worked on a series of paintings dealing with the tragedy, including *The Slaughter of Babi Yar*.

49 Olga Gershenson, "Between the Permitted and the Forbidden: The Politics of Holocaust Representation in *The Unvanquished* (1945)," in Murav and Estraiikh, *Soviet Jews*, 174–181.

50 In 1945, the theme of rebellion in Babyn Yar emerged in an article by Moyshe Mizhiritski, see Zeltser, "The Subject of 'Jews in Babi Yar.'"

51 LVA, 230/3/238/42.

52 LVA, 230/3/136/20.

be seen in the sketch dating from 1948, when compared to the preparatory drawings and the final painting. The drawings illustrating the act of killing present the point of view of one of the executioners (Figure 3). But in the final painting, the viewer is invited to “look from the pit.” Even if the whole painting can still evoke the gaze of one of the policemen who accompanies the group walking towards death, the fragments cut out in the 1960s, as we shall see, show the executioners removed from the line of sight.⁵³ The version that forces the viewer to look “from” the ravine and erases the perpetrators from sight was reused in the 1960s in a commemorative perspective (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Fragment embedded into the obelisk. Photo 103 from the archives of Iossif Schneider. Personal archives of Uri Schneider, Israel.

This painting was given several titles over the years: *The Action*, *The Last Way*, *If I Forget This*, *Babi Yar*, and *To the Memory of the Victims of Nazism*. According to the painter's wife, these titles changed on the basis of the readiness of the audience and the Soviet institutions to accept the theme of Nazi antisemitism. She stated that the original title was *If I Forget This*, in biblical reference to the exodus of the Jews. The title *Babi Yar* seems to have been more readily accepted in the immediate aftermath of the war, when *The Unvanquished* was released. Between 1947 and 1959, the artist

⁵³ Artwork “Walking Towards Death,” LVA, 230/3/238/48.

entitled his painting *The Last Way*. Finally, after 1959, he named it *To the Memory of the Victims of Nazism*, abiding by the unifying gaze on the victims that Soviet authorities had imposed. The initial ambivalence of the pictorial codes – between revolt and acceptance, a gaze placed “from the pit,” and the erasure of the perpetrators from the representation – would find an echo in the various interpretations of the painting.

***The Last Way* and Lenin's Panegyric: The Public Exposure of Kuzkovski's Holocaust Paintings**

In the immediate postwar period, the painting was not displayed. When Kuzkovski settled in Rīga in 1945, the theme drew a hostile response from his Latvian peers and from the Moscow Commission that frequently visited to place state orders. Kuzkovski tried to build trust with those members of the Commission susceptible to being more sensitive to the plight of the Holocaust. Some advised the artist to gain legitimacy by working on commissions more “in tune with official expectations.” Others suggested he keep working on the Babyn Yar massacre without trying to exhibit the painting itself.⁵⁴

Indeed, after the judgement of the German leaders responsible for the occupation of the Baltic countries and their public execution in Rīga in 1946,⁵⁵ all information on Nazi crimes committed in Latvia disappeared from the media. The coordinated persecution of the Jewish populations of the USSR contributed to the memory of the Holocaust fading from the public arena from 1948 onwards, whereas the judgement of war criminals continued behind closed doors.⁵⁶ The re-emergence of a public discourse at the level of each Soviet republic gradually re-appeared in the late 1950s.⁵⁷ In Latvia, the trial of the architect of the Kurtenhof camp (Salaspils) in 1959 opened a series of more than ten trials held in Rīga and the eastern regions of the country. Television, written press, and radio programs

⁵⁴ Memoirs of Kuzkovski's spouse in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 28–30, 32–33.

⁵⁵ Dmitri Astashkin, *Rizhsky process*, <https://histrf.ru/biblioteka/Soviet-Nuremberg/Rizhsky-process>, accessed March 15, 2019. The trial records do not mention Babyn Yar, whereas the key perpetrator at Babyn Yar, Friedrich Jeckeln, was one of the major defendants.

⁵⁶ See the special issue of *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*, “Juger les criminels de guerre à l'est de l'Europe (1943–1991),” no. 214 (2021).

⁵⁷ Khiterer, “Memorialization of the Holocaust”; Vanessa Voisin, “Le procès de Jérusalem et la représentation de la Shoah en URSS,” in *Le Moment Eichmann*, ed. Sylvie Lindeperg and Annette Wieviorka (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016), 139–168; Tcherneva and Voisin, “La Shoah dans les documents soviétiques.”

spread information on the major places of the Holocaust in Latvia. Thus, in 1961, Latvian television broadcast a contribution about the Rīga ghetto and the extermination of its 25,000 inhabitants in the Rumbula woods.⁵⁸ In 1965, a highly mediated trial addressed the executions of civilians in eastern Latvia in 1941 and 1942 (including Jews and Roma).⁵⁹ The hearings were broadcast by radio and TV and the trial was given daily four-hour time slots.⁶⁰ Rich evidence emerged about the murders of the Jewish population in the Rīga and Rēzekne ghettos,⁶¹ as well as about Rumbula and other murder locations.⁶² The historical events were featured in the midst of the case indictments, and were substantiated by public statements from witnesses and survivors.⁶³ The verdict of the trial mentioned Jewish and Roma populations as distinct categories of victims.⁶⁴ On October 24, 1965, another TV show recounted the events in Rumbula.⁶⁵ It came several months after another program on war crimes that featured an exceptional episode on the capital's ghetto.⁶⁶ Here again, the press singled out the Jewish population as a specific category of victims, provided figures, published documents from the occupiers where the policy of extermination was mentioned, and quoted testimonies.⁶⁷ The story of the extermination of the Latvian Jews started to be covered by documentary film in 1963.⁶⁸

How did the art sphere react to these disclosures, even if only partial and negotiated? First of all, the military commission within the Artists' Union of Latvia contributed to the setting up of a travelling (Rīga-Moscow) multi-year exhibition entitled *In the Name of Peace* and dedicated to the Second World War. When the commission made its selection from among the available works in 1959, Kuzkovski was among the finalists and the commission members visited his workshop. One of the commission's members was his mentor Arturs Eglītis.⁶⁹ Remarkably,

58 LVA, Collection of the Republic's Television Studio, 1184/3/312/111–114.

59 The Latvian KGB and the Soviet Council of Ministers intended the trials to stand as a prime example of condemnation of Nazi crimes against the republic. LVA, Collection of the Party's Latvian Central Committee, PA-101/28/57/35–36.

60 LVA, 1184/3/903, 934, 1005, 1023.

61 LVA, 1986/1/45038/vol. 27/59 – 65.

62 LVA, 1986/1/45038/vol. 9/202 – 215, vol. 26.

63 LVA, 1986/1/45038/vol. 35, 37.

64 LVA, 1986/1/45038/vol. 37/344 – 370.

65 LVA, 1184/3/934/145.

66 LVA, 1184/3/886/35–52.

67 Z. Banka, M. Borisov, E. Karklins, Ju. Dmitriev, K. Sausnitis, "Fachistskie oubiitsy pered soudom naroda" [Fascist assassins facing the People's Court], *Sovetskaia Latvia*, October 12, 1965.

68 Irina Tcherneva, "Créer 'les documents qui accusent'. Documentaires sur les crimes de guerre en Lettonie soviétique, 1961–1971," *Cahiers du monde russe* 61, no. 3–4, 2020: 463–498.

69 LVA, 230/1/390/2, 9, 19.

Kuzkovski's works on mass murder were not selected for the exhibit. He participated in the exhibitions with his illustrations and paintings showcasing the people's commitment during the war, while works from other artists depicting Nazi killings in Latvia were featured.⁷⁰ Paradoxically, within this highly politicized framework, Kuzkovski exhibited works pertaining to other themes of the war⁷¹ in Riga and Moscow.⁷²

In the USSR, Kuzkovski's work on the Holocaust was never the object of a specific exhibition per se. Nevertheless, the Artists' Union, with the approval of the Latvian Republic's Council of Ministers, agreed to show Kuzkovski's paintings and etchings on the Holocaust in private exhibitions. Held within the art milieu, they bore less obvious political implications than exhibitions initiated by the military commission. The painting *The Last Way* (by then entitled *To the Memory of the Victims of Fascism*) and the etchings *The Ghetto Uprising* and *We Will Live* were exhibited on the initiative of Arturs Eglitis. Catalogues published as early as 1963⁷³ showed their reproductions. This focus on the Holocaust gave rise to tensions, as can be seen in the following abstract of the memoirs:

In 1964, the director [of the museum] refused to show [*The Last Way*], describing it as "utterly nationalistic." As a sign of protest, Kuzkovski declined his participation and requested that all the works lent to the museum be returned to his home. [. . .] Suddenly, the museum's director sent a car to Kuzkovski's house to have the painting brought to the museum. [. . .] The number of paintings evoking Jewishness was limited, whereas there was a profusion of those on Lenin, illustrations and portraits, sketches and fragments. However, the new painting *The Warsaw Ghetto*⁷⁴ was exhibited with the following caption "Please, brothers, do not stand by." It was unusual for the Soviet Union to have this type of caption in Yiddish.⁷⁵

A strong politicization of the issue by the director of the museum was indisputably due to the fact that the commemoration of the Babyn Yar massacre was posed as a civic phenomenon from 1962 onwards. Through negotiations and conflicts, writers and journalists, poets and filmmakers, as well as architects, campaigned for its enduring visibility in Kyiv.⁷⁶ The Soviet republic of Latvia seems to have experienced

⁷⁰ For example, the works of Semen Shegelman and Artur Ritov, LVA, 230/1/451/73.

⁷¹ Particularly his illustrations for *The Deep Rear* by Boris Polevoi. LVA, 230/3/238.

⁷² The exhibition "In the Name of Peace" and an exhibition on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Soviet Latvia (Riga) in 1965.

⁷³ LVA, 230/3/238/7–27.

⁷⁴ This is a distinct etching of *The Ghetto Uprising*, dated from 1964.

⁷⁵ Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 46.

⁷⁶ Viktoria Khiterer found that between 1965 and 1969 the commemoration at Babyn Yar witnessed a resurgence of repression by local authorities and in turn a form of politicization of this struggle, see Khiterer, Khiterer, "Memorialization of the Holocaust." In his study of the situation

a more subdued movement. Other personal exhibitions of Kuzkovski's works were held there during this decade, notably one in April 1967 at the VEF Culture Palace, a factory building where one year and a half earlier a highly mediatized trial had been held.⁷⁷ These exhibitions gave the public the opportunity to see art works on the Holocaust, as well as portraits of public figures from Rīga's Jewish community.

On the opening night, Jewish artists gave speeches, including in Yiddish. One of them emphasized the major contribution of Kuzkovski's paintings to the cultural life of the Soviet Jewish population. The factory's management showed open support for this endeavor.⁷⁸ Reception in the painter's workshop during recurring "open house" events were another way of showing the artworks to a large audience⁷⁹ (Figure 7).

They were organized with the help of the Latvian branch of the Artists' Union and were open to the public. This scale of the gatherings, which can be qualified as semi-public, allowed for a privileged exposure of those paintings that mattered particularly to the painter.

Within these more or less mediatized exhibitions, his works on the Holocaust were exhibited alongside paintings on Lenin or the wartime patriotic effort, producing an impact on the way the viewers perceived them. Some abstracts from the visitor's book of the 1964 exhibition in the State Museum of Latvian and Russian Art testify to this interrelatedness:

I really liked the paintings of Lenin and Stučka, *Lenin in 1900*, and others. [. . .] The painting *Celebrating Victory!* also leaves a good impression. I was overwhelmed by the big and truthful painting *To the Memory of the Victims of Fascism*. [. . .] Signed F. Arones.

[. . .] *To the Memory of the Victims of Fascism* and *The Ghetto Uprising* left an extraordinary mark upon us. It strengthened our hatred of fascism. We would like our Soviet artists to further stigmatize Hitler's followers. As a former officer in the Soviet army during the Great Patriotic War,⁸⁰ I met many victims of fascism. Signed: a group of tourists from Minsk.⁸¹

of the Jewish population in the USSR after Stalin's death, Kostyrchenko dedicates a chapter to political conflicts surrounding the artistic representation of Babyn Yar, see Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Khrushchëva*, 351–370. In his J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro Annual Lecture at the USHMM, Karel C. Berkhoff suggested a long-term history of this memory, see Berkhoff, "Babi Yar: Site of Mass Murder, Ravine of Oblivion," *Occasional Paper*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C., 11 February 2011, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Publication_OP_2011-02.pdf, accessed May 30, 2024.

⁷⁷ LVA, 230/3/238/29–31.

⁷⁸ Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 54.

⁷⁹ Programs and leaflets. LVA, 230/3/238/29–31.

⁸⁰ The officially recognized term used to designate World War II in the USSR.

⁸¹ Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 115–117.



Figure 7: Press photograph taken in the painter's workshop. One can see the etching *We Will Live* hanging on the wall. Rīga, January 14, 1967. Photographer Juris Poišs. LVKFFDA, # 6663-1.

Some visitors inscribed the representation of the Holocaust in a more orthodox interpretation of the Second World War, without blurring the memory of the tragedy endured by the Jews in the midst of other categories of victims. Others searched for a more accentuated recognition of this tragedy. According to a comment from a visitor, recounted by Zilberman, the 1964 exhibition “turned into an expression of the Jews’ solidarity with their painter under the banner of the national theme that was so close to their hearts.”⁸² The variety of the testimonies shows the vectors of interpretation, depending on the socialization of the viewers and on the immediate social environment of the works’ contemplation. Undeniably, Kuzkovski’s works occupied a middle position between the public narratives of crimes committed in the republic and more specific commemorative efforts. The following pages address the issue of singular reuses of these paintings by the

⁸² Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 46.

Jewish communities of Latvia, exploring a semi-public sphere where distinct memories of the Holocaust emerged.

The Painting as Used by Memorial Communities (1963–1970)

Simultaneously to the official exhibitions, private visits to Kuzkovski's workshop and "open house" constituted opportunities to showcase his paintings and etchings on the Holocaust to a group that was forming around the remembrance of the Holocaust in Latvia.⁸³ Several members from the Riga Jewish community started to gather information and to advocate for the recognition of a form of cultural autonomy for the Jewish population and for the right to emigrate to Israel.⁸⁴ This tight-knit community featured lawyer David Garber, Mark Blum, David Zilberman, and Frida Mihelson (a survivor of the Rumbula massacre).⁸⁵ They met Yosef Kuzkovski in the early 1960s. He showed them *The Last Way* and commented on it, as recalled by Zilberman:

The painting can be split into two sections, left and right. To the right – the people, the Jews. In the center – the young mother and her newborn baby. To the left – the fascists⁸⁶ and their dogs. I [Kuzkovski] voluntarily blurred and greyed this [last] part. In the image, the armed executioners can almost be identified with the raging pack of dogs. There are no human attributes. Only boundless and meaningless cruelty. Thoughts, emotions and figural images do not belong to the left-hand side. They are escorting the people. Upon closer inspection of the group and each individual, one perceives that these are Soviet Jews. The young mother's face in the center expresses fury. She could very well have been a member of the Komsomol. [. . .] The old man, who wears a rabbi's kippah, is discouraged. He is the opposite figure from the woman. He represents wisdom. As if he had already seen this over the centuries laden with bloody pogroms.⁸⁷

Kuzkovski also described the masculine figure to the left as being that of a Jewish Red Army soldier, who escaped from a Nazi prison and was arrested with his

⁸³ A documented testimony of these initiatives can be seen in Shmuel Tseitline's *Dokumental'naia istoria evreev Rigi* (Riga, 1989).

⁸⁴ MEL, # 12_05_Zilberman.

⁸⁵ Frida Michelson's book, *I Survived in Rumbula*, was first published through non-institutional channels in the USSR thanks to the work of David Zilberman. Then it was published in Israel in 1973 and in New York in 1979. It was published in Riga in 2005, then in Russia in 2011.

⁸⁶ This term was used in the USSR to designate Nazis.

⁸⁷ Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 38.

family by the occupiers. One should be cautious with statements credited to the painter, as they were remembered and reported by a witness. However, these statements, made in private, show an expression between a religious and cultural Jewish perspective and a leitmotif of resistance or revolt, specific to the Soviet discourse on the Holocaust.⁸⁸ Thus, the members of the group perceived the painting as located at the intersection between “Nazi barbarism” and “the ulterior profanation of Jewish mass graves.”⁸⁹ Kuzkovski and the members of the Rīga Jewish community were products of a divergent political socialization,⁹⁰ even if they progressively developed a close relationship.

Between 1962 and 1964, the group started to turn the Rumbula woods into a place of homage to the departed.⁹¹ The Jewish volunteers took care of the neglected site of mass murder, which the local population continued to excavate for valuables. To mark the location's symbolic importance, Kuzkovski made a sign (Figure 8), which was placed at the side of the Rīga-Moscow railroad for everyone to see. This billboard was brought down by the Rīga municipal services on several occasions. Even though a note specified that this was on behalf of the fight against *fascism*, the city still felt this was a taunt aimed at the Soviet authorities, according to Shmuel Tseitline. The use of *The Last Way* expanded within the framework of this movement and this representation of the Babyn Yar massacre started to encompass, within this growing perception, other places of the Holocaust. As Mark Blum noted:

To commemorate the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Kuzkovski commissioned Schneider [. . .] to photograph a fragment of *The Last Way*. Artist Zalman Baron erected an obelisk made of seven-meter-wide wood planks. The photograph was placed under a glass panel in a frame carved in its center. Baron painted the obelisk black and, following Kuzkovski's blueprint, drew drops of blood. We gathered 50 people in spring 1963 for this illegal demonstration. It was merely the beginning of a “Jewish revolution.”⁹²

Inaugurating the obelisk (Figure 9) was a moment of consecration: candles were lit in front of the painting, prayers were spoken. Later the painting was abundantly photographed and visitors took pictures of themselves standing next to it (Figures 6 and 10). These acts broke with the usual distance adopted by spectators in a museum setting. In this way, the painting made its entry into people's daily lives.

⁸⁸ In particular, to its literature. See Harriet Murav, “Poetry After Kerch’: Representing Jewish Mass Death in the Soviet Union,” in Murav and Estraiikh, *Soviet Jews*, 159–161.

⁸⁹ Olga Kuzkovskaia, in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 36.

⁹⁰ Olga Kuzkovskaia, in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 38.

⁹¹ I would like to thank Uri Schneider and Ilya Lenski for the opportunity to consult with them on unclassified pictures taken by professional photographer Iossif Schneider, a member of this movement.

⁹² Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 43–44.



Figure 8: Photograph of the sign. Private collection of Iossif Schneider. Courtesy of Uri Schneider, Israel.

Used in the obelisk, the artwork was now open to new legitimacy, but also to changes. The canvas and the material were modified, and the painting was re-framed. The artist *cut out* his initial work for the members of the community and placed the old man of faith and the rebelling soldier at the center the image of the young woman and her baby. The representations of these most vulnerable categories of the population (the woman, the child, the elderly) were now stabilized in the public imagery (fig. 6). Reframing the painting removed the diversity of the population that was taken to the execution site and the wide array of attitudes towards imminent death. Kuzkovski toned down traces of fear and psychological col-



Figure 9: Photo # 126. Iossif Schneider. Personal archives of Uri Schneider, Israel.

lapse and foregrounded the old man's stoicism. He also expunged references to violent representation of the landscape. Moreover, this new framing turned the rage of the young woman, who may have been a member of the Communist Youth (as he stated in private), into a more universalized form of dignity in the face of death.

The reemployment of the painting became more frequent as a system of reproduction was put in place. The painter's diversification of techniques (paintings, etchings) prompted the production of copies.⁹³ Aron Chpil'berg⁹⁴ "put uninter-

⁹³ This technique was used to print militant posters. Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 40.

⁹⁴ Aron Chpil'berg [Spielberg], who came from Leningrad, had the opportunity to look at the painting in early 1966 when he visited the Kuzkovskis. He printed copies of pictures he took of

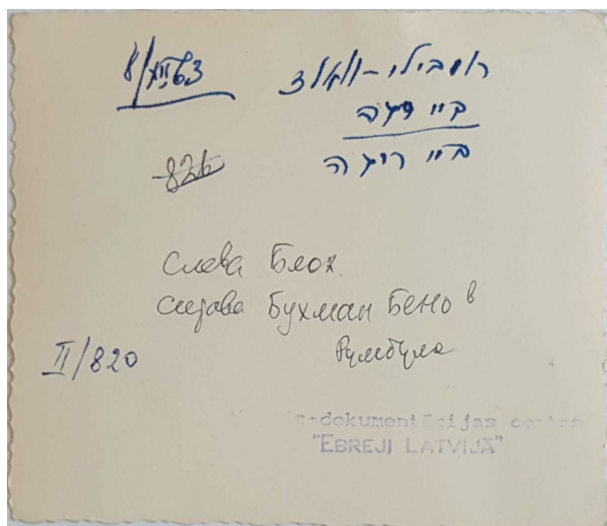


Figure 10a & b: Members of the Jewish Association standing in front of the memorial in the Rumbula forest, December 8, 1963. d MEL # F II 820.

the painting and distributed them to "dozens" of people, according to his memoirs published in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 87.

rupted work” into its “reproductions accompanied by books on Jewish and Zionist culture which [were] sent out to cities all over the Soviet Union. [. . .] The etchings in particular were massively circulated across the country. In Rīga, Kuzkovski's paintings could be seen in practically every home where there was a national streak.”⁹⁵ This quotation reveals the milieu in which the packages were being circulated. They were integrated with *samizdat* works and destined for an audience of Soviet Jews, potentially receptive to the Israeli cause.⁹⁶ The literature⁹⁷ that was sent along with each etching played on the expectations of the viewers of these reproductions. In return, the painting contributed to incitement of the memory of the Holocaust, crucial to the social mobilization for recognition of the rights of the Jews,⁹⁸ knowing that the Babyn Yar memory was on the political forefront.

Furthermore, circulating in Latvia, Kuzkovski's paintings on the Holocaust resonated with local commemorative endeavors. Two Latvian towns related to Kuzkovski's exhibitions were shaken by trials of war criminals in the second half of the 1960s. The first one, Jēkabpils, served at the time as the stage of debates surrounding the atrocities that had been committed there less than a quarter-century earlier. Those who had committed crimes there⁹⁹ first stood trial in June 1965. They were members of an auxiliary police unit accused of having taken part in the execution of the Jewish inhabitants of Kūkas on August 10, 1941, as well as the murder of members of the Communist Party on September 10, 1941.¹⁰⁰ A second trial, set up six months later, stood in judgment of crimes committed in Krustpils and Kaķīši. Two exhibitions by Kuzkovski in Jēkabpils – in spring 1965 and November 1966 – should be seen as part of an array of public events remembering the war crimes. Set up by the Department of Culture and the Party's District Organization, they were not illicit gatherings. Representatives of the Party and the city attended a meeting with the artist. In 1965, paintings about the Holocaust were exhibited for several weeks in the Culture Palace located in the city center. A group of Kuzkovski's friends came from Rīga for the occasion and there were almost 500 local visi-

95 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 57.

96 For the history of the Soviet Jewish milieu, united around a sustained religious practice and/or sensitized to the right to immigrate to Israel, see Pauline Peretz, who studied *Nativ's* diplomatic work in favor of Jewish emigration from the USSR to Israel: Peretz, *Let My People Go: The Transnational Politics of Soviet Jewish Emigration during the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2017).

97 They were churning out copies from textbooks, dictionaries, and texts by Bialik and Zhabotinski. Iossif Schneider took an active part in the endeavor. Tseitline, *Dokumental'naia istoria evreev Rigi*, 284–286. As for David Zilberman, he was in charge of the translations. MEL, # 12_05_Zilberman.

98 Maurice Kriegel, “Trois mémoires de la Shoah: États-Unis, Israël, France,” *Le Débat* 117, no. 5 (2001): 59–72.

99 In Jēkabpils and Krustpils (the towns were merged into Jēkabpils in 1962).

100 KGB file on the trial. LVA, 1986/1/45034 and the prosecutor's file LVA, 856/2A/1101, 1102.

tors. The exhibition's opening featured poetry readings and an introduction to musical pieces by Jewish artists from Latvia. The evening was hosted in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Latvian. The guests from the Latvian capital were taken to the old Jewish cemetery, where the destroyed synagogue had stood and where the Jewish population had been murdered.¹⁰¹

The exhibition was advertised in the press¹⁰² and the visit was privately documented by Iossif Schneider. In one of his photographs (Figure 12), lawyer David Garber, who came from Rīga to attend the exhibition, and Reizel Miljun, a survivor from Krustpils, can be seen in the old Jewish cemetery which had been cleared by locals in 1958. There, Kuzkovski met local witnesses, among whom was a man who, after having been affected by the events of the Holocaust, helped to rearrange the graves and started to attend synagogue (Figure 11). These meetings coincided with the public status of the exhibition. Reproductions of *The Last Way* were circulated locally. For example, one of the interviewees, Frída Minskere, born in Preiļi and whose immediate family perished during the Holocaust, has a photograph of it. Another inhabitant of Krustpils had his displayed in his home.¹⁰³

The interviews conducted in Jēkabpils attest to the extent to which knowledge of the perpetrators and their victims remained a part of everyone's daily life. In the immediate postwar era, survivors had informed the police of known perpetrators. Among the accused, some tried to justify themselves publicly. There were strong expectations for justice from survivors. Yet they were not informed of the judgement rendered.¹⁰⁴ The trials of the perpetrators of Jēkabpils took place in Rīga, far from the sight of locals. A series of plain articles without any supporting documentation or images was published in the local press. Any mention of the Holocaust was erased from the unique documentary dedicated to the first trial¹⁰⁵ broadcast on national TV in 1966–1967. However, through Kuzkovski's exhibitions and meetings, the local Jewish memorial group was consolidating a local memory of the Holocaust of its own.

101 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 50–51.

102 "Josifa Kuzkovska darbu izstāde Jēkabpilī," *Padomju Daugava*, November 19, 1966, and "Kad portreti atdzīvojas," *Padomju Daugava*, November 29, 1966.

103 Interviews with Frída Minskere and Zinaida Livche led by Irina Tcherneva and Eric Le Bourhis on July 18, 2017.

104 On the trials, held *in camera* since 1944, see Uldis Lasmanis, "Holokausta Jēkabpils pilsētā," in *Holokausta pētniecības problēmas Latvijā*, ed. Andris Caune (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2008), 260–286.

105 *Mazpilsētas hronika* [Chronicles from a small town], directed by Gerceļs Franks (Rīga studio, 1966).



Figures 11 and 12: Private collection of Iossif Schneider. Courtesy of Uri Schneider, Israel.

A similar dynamic can be witnessed in Daugavpils, where the painter's works were shown at the same time as the legal proceedings were taking place. The network regrouping Jewish artists, Arturs Eglītis, the Daugavpils Museum of History and Arts, and the Secretary of the Party's municipal organization, all helped to set up an exhibition there in 1967. The Party's local branch explicitly addressed the painter's commitment to Jewish culture in the USSR. There were over 5,000 at-

tendees and various public meetings with Kuzkovski were held. The event took place shortly before the trial of the Daugavpils auxiliary policemen.¹⁰⁶ One can thus observe that locally the memorial encounters around works of art could be supported by the authorities, and thus differed from the highly conflictual relations between the Rīga memorial group and the municipal authorities.

Yosef Kuzkovski, one of the prominent figures in the struggle for memory in Rumbula, together with his paintings should thus be considered as mediators between different levels of knowledge and experience of Nazi crimes. Kuzkovski's work on the Holocaust was never concealed, nor was it ever acknowledged as such by the administrative and political authorities. The painter remained close to both the political authorities and the community representing the victims, two groups that often clashed.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the legitimacy that derived from his pictorial work and status within the Artists' Union allowed him to hold this bridging position. During official meetings, he was among those representing "the Jews from Rīga." Foreign visitors and members of "progressive" political movements in the West were now directed to him – a "Jewish artist."¹⁰⁸ Between 1963 and 1970, the distance between the authorities and the memorial group in Rīga was growing, for several reasons. First, none of the trials specifically addressed the tragic events of the Holocaust that occurred in Rīga. In the phases of the triangular relations between the USSR, Israel, and the United States, Pauline Peretz distinguishes three turning points: the year 1963, when in the United States a campaign was launched to provide aid to Soviet Jews; the Six-Day War in 1967, after which the Liaison Bureau (*Nativ*) was created in Israel to encourage Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union to the country and oriented itself exclusively in favor of immigration; and finally, the Leningrad trial in 1970 and the crackdown on advocates of immigration to Israel finally drove a wedge between the Soviet Union and its Jews.¹⁰⁹

106 The defendants were accused of having murdered the city's Jews as well as partisans in the summer of 1941. The trial was held in the club of the main factory in the town on December 18–27, 1967, and was covered in at least three newspaper articles. Report to the Director of the Daugavpils Museum, November 30, 1966, LVA, 230/3/136/25; testimonies in Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 49, 52.

107 Tseitline, *Dokumental'naia istoria evreev Rigi*, 333–424.

108 Zilberman, *Iossif Kuzkovski*, 47–48. In December 1964, a meeting of the "representatives of Rīga the Jewish community" was organized with Paul Novick, a reporter from the Yiddish-language American newspaper *Morgn Frayhayt* [Morning Freedom]. Among the people gathered at this meeting were Mark Razumny (a prewar reporter and correspondent), Moisei Shneiderov (an operator in the Rīga Studio), Iossif Schneider, and Kuzkovski. Tseitline, *Dokumental'naia istoria evreev Rigi*, 290–291. Aron Vergelis, editor-in-chief of the Yiddish-language periodical *Sovetish Heymland* [Soviet Homeland] published in Moscow, suggested to the painter that he publish a reproduction of *The Last Way*.

109 Pauline Peretz, "Une influence méconnue de l'État hébreu sur sa diaspora. Israël, la communauté juive américaine et le mouvement d'aide aux Juifs soviétiques (1958–1979)," *Hypothèses* 1, no. 8 (2005): 179–88.



Figures 13–16: Manuscript using Kuzkovski's visual material. 1970. MEL, # Npk 2113.

Yosef, son of Binyamin, Candle of Israel [Netzach Yisrael - NY], a righteous man for blessing who passed away. May peace be upon him in heaven
may he rest deceased. Tevet 26, year.

‘On these I cry and my eyes are overflowing tears with the passing away of the soul (...)

The sacred, the important, the dear (soul) Yosef, son of Binyamin, NY, a righteous man for blessing torah savant (...)

Blessed be you

the spirit of the sacred and the pure

and blessed be your soul

and to your spirit in the sky.

a bright rest

be at whole.

above of the high angels and glory

And your bones will rest without decay and you will not

feel sorry in the grave for any sadness, and I am poor and painful.

Desecrated from crimes and sins I came here
 to your burial place, to your place of rest,
 To reconcile you and speak to your heart what I have said
 And I have acted and things have come to my heart which are against your honor and splendor and
 glory and magnificence I acknowledge and leave, and say I answered your bones Yosef son of Binya-
 min, rest in peace NY a righteous man for blessing in Heaven he shall rest, and we shall say amen,
 amen, amen.¹¹⁰

After the outbreak of these political tensions and, on an individual level, after the painter's immigration to Israel, the reproduction of his painting and the reinterpretation of his path was even more channeled. For example, an anonymous author¹¹¹ dedicated a handmade book to him in 1970.¹¹² It contains a fragment of *The Last Way* (Figure 13), taken in black and white by an amateur photographer. It keeps the group of victims in its entirety, but acquires a quality of atemporality and non-territoriality. It could be a pogrom, or any persecution, especially since one finds three photographs of the Warsaw ghetto on subsequent pages. The author also attached prayers for the dead in Hebrew to the reproduction of the fragment and to a self-portrait of the painter (made in a style reminiscent of iconography) (Figures 14–16). During commemorative meetings in Rumbula, the painting had begun its transformation into an icon by means of the extension of its significance to other sites of the Holocaust and the accompaniment of the viewing by a moment of reverence and religious symbolism. In the handmade book, its “iconic” usage became salient, and the painting is supplemented with prayers and excerpts from the Torah.

The exhibition of *The Last Way* and other works of Kuzkovski about the Holocaust, if studied in its political and social context, deepens an understanding of a stratified collective stance in the Soviet Union concerning the Holocaust in the 1950s and 1960s. The painting was appropriated within multiple fragmented private and semi-public spheres, starting with the circles of activists committed to a memorial effort in Rumbula and ending with a wider group of citizens, who were concerned by the bloody crimes of the war. Thus, a memory formation of the Holocaust crossed different layers of Latvian society during a period when debates around war crimes opened a space for various re-narrations of the Second World War. Moreover, the “interpreters” (and Kuzkovski, above all) acted on the painting, selecting fragments, literally reframing and re-editing it with the help of texts, oral commentaries, or other images. This incremental reframing progres-

¹¹⁰ The translation from Hebrew is by Lital Henig, to whom I would like to express my gratitude.

¹¹¹ Signed “Yosef, David's son.”

¹¹² August–September 1970. MEL, # NPK 2113.

sively reinforced two perspectives: the gaze from the ravine and the disappearance of the perpetrators from the representation.

This chapter has embraced the diversity of audiences of the painting: those whose family members experienced a tragic fate during the Holocaust and those who simply went to the painter's public exhibitions. Tracing their appropriations helps to clarify the way these groups were structured and measures the variations in distance and proximity they adopted towards the dynamics and actions spurred by the state. Yosef Kuzkovski's work played a major part as a connecting link between collective representations of the crimes, the memorial effort, and state proceedings that only seemed to be for show, on the one hand, and an autonomous social framework that was gradually empowered, on the other.

The political authorities were at pains to control the impact of his paintings on society and had no control over the circulation of their reproductions. Analyzed at the crossroads of social history and the history of art, the painting is viewed here as a "space of experience." Different layers of meaning had accumulated while the painter worked on his representation. Then, they were reinterpreted when the work was reproduced. The diversity of mediums in which *The Last Way* was circulated and made public played a large part in the emphasis, or conversely, the disappearance of some elements that the artist had himself been debating.

The history of the painting also reveals diverse levels of conflict and politicization of the memory of war. Between 1962 and 1970, individuals and groups who personally viewed the artwork experienced a change in attitude towards the Soviet state and its official recognition of the crimes. Through the interpretation of the same painting, one can see how memorial communities in Rīga gradually distanced themselves from the judicial and political proceedings led by the state. While exhibited locally, his paintings on the Holocaust theme were integrated into autonomous commemorative social initiatives. Through Kuzkovski's exhibitions, local Jewish survivors were given the opportunity to be publicly visible and to plead on behalf of their memory.

