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AT HOME IN RUSSIA

Review of book: *Glants, Musya. Where is My Home? The Art and Life of the Russian Jewish Sculptor Mark Antokolsky, 1843–1902.*

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, a division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010: xxvii, 399 p., ill.

*Plachu za nenavist' prezrenem
Liubov' dayu vam za liubov'!*

*[Hatred I repay with contempt
For love I give you love!]*

Ruvim Kulisher St. Petersburg, 1848

In 1848, the Russian language poem 'Otvét Slavianinu' (An Answer to the Slav) by Ruvim Kulisher (1828–1896), a twenty-year-old student at the Imperial St. Petersburg University, presented the lonely voice of a young Russian Jew bemoaning the prevalent anti-Jewish sentiment of Russian society. What makes Kulisher's voice absolutely unique for its time is its superb literary quality, comparable to the best works of modern Russian poetry. Scholars observed that, had Kulisher's poem been published when it was composed, it would have

given aspiring Jewish-Russian authors a model to follow: learn from Russian masterpieces and infuse your work with Jewish subject matter. However, none of the younger generation of modern Russian Jewish poets such as Mandelshtam, Utkin or Bagritsky, ever claimed Kulisher as an influence.

Kulisher's example shows that the history of Russian Jewish modernity is still missing the story of a whole generation of Russian Jews. These pathfinders of modernity on Russian soil, mainly born in the 1830s and 1840s, rarely made it into Jewish history. Their individual stories hardly conform to the conventional facets of Russian Jewish life, such as *haskalah*, nationalism, and socialism, which have been tackled by historiography. Thus, in the history of modern Jewish art, the life and contribution of one Marc (Chagall) is paid due respect and scholarly attention, while the life and contribution of another Mark (Antokolsky) is largely overlooked. Antokolsky's biography by Musya Glants repairs this historiographical incongruence and attempts to restore historical continuity in the development of modern Russian Jewish art.

Ten chapters of the book provide a critical account of Antokolsky's life and work, from his childhood in Vilna, to his formative period as a student at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, to his last years in Paris. Glants attempts to recreate both the minor details of the artist's biography and the larger historical and artistic context. As a biographer, Glants did not have a rich supply of sources, since Antokolsky kept no diary, nor did he write any memoirs. Thus, Glants relies on memoirs by Antokolsky's contemporaries, critical accounts of his work in the contemporary press, and other published materials. In addition, she introduces to scholarship the treasure trove of Antokolsky's correspondence, which Glants found in Russian archival repositories, carefully translated into English, and skillfully integrated into her narrative. Antokolsky's correspondents included a wide range of influential intellectuals and public figures, who shaped both modern Russian art and Russian Jewish modernity. This impressive pool included leading figures in the Russian art world, such as Vladimir Stasov and Il'ia Repin, as well as leading figures of modern Russian Jewry, such as barons Evzel, Goratsii and David Gintsburg. Antokolsky's letters reveal his close involvement in the development of modern Russian national art, his deep concern with the fate of modern Russian Jews, and his belief that Russia and her Jews were interdependent and in desperate need of developing mutual understanding.

Glants's analysis pushes the birthdate of modern Russian Jewish art back to the early 1860s, when the first works of Antokolsky appeared. As if he were following Kulisher's model, Antokolsky, then a young student at the Imperial Academy of Art in St. Petersburg, created an image of a Jew in a manner that was profoundly influenced by the contemporary Russian artistic canon, and thus introduced the Jewish theme to Russian visual art. Glants traces the development of Antokolsky's unique artistic style through an examination of his early work. Antokolsky's bas-relief 'Jewish tailor' (1864) was a breakthrough depiction of

a Jew in Russian art. Neither Biblical character nor antisemitic caricature, it was the figure of an everyday Jew which entered Russian art directly from the Jewish street. The sculptor's next work, the bas-relief 'Jewish miser' (1865), despite its explicitly Jewish subject, was above all an exploration of human character in general. The bas-relief 'Inquisition's raid on secret seder' (1868) is a deep reflection upon the tragic paths of the history of the Jews and of humanity in general. Glants considers this theme a leitmotif of Antokolsky's art. Ultimately, she argues, Antokolsky's style was shaped by his political, aesthetical, and philosophical beliefs. His worldview as a modern Russian Jew was a significant factor in his work.

Glants notes that Antokolsky's career began at an important turning point in the history of Russian society and of Russian art in particular. The Great Reforms of tsar Alexander II, which went as far as to grant freedom to the Russian peasants and lift many restrictions for Russian Jews, inspired a major political and intellectual awakening of Russian society. This development shaped Antokolsky's political outlook, based upon historical optimism, strong belief in the positive potential of the Russian monarchy, and personal admiration of tsar-liberator Alexander II. Glants illustrates this point by showing that throughout his long career Antokolsky persistently used his talent to portray members of the imperial dynasty: from Ivan the Terrible (1869) — Antokolsky's first major work personally praised by Alexander II — to Nicholas II (1896), the last Russian tsar. These portrayals were far from neutral; they emphasized individual features and revealed the internal struggles of their powerful subjects. As a whole, Antokolsky's gallery of sculptural portraits of Russian tsars also carried out the artist's ideas of historical continuity and progress of the Russian state: violently created by Ivan IV (the Terrible), brutally consolidated by Peter I (the Great), and benevolently developed and carefully cultivated by Alexander II (the Liberator) and his successors.

In the era of the Great Reforms, Russian art-painting and sculpture in particular—also assumed a new role in the rapidly changing society. In the 1860s, a new generation of Russian artists, best represented by the group of painters called *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers), redefined subject matter and claimed that the principal task of art was to find and depict the beauty of real life, focusing on simple people and the problems of everyday life. Thus, they believed, the artist would be a useful citizen and could fulfill his mission as a public intellectual, leader, and teacher. The philosophy of the *Peredvizhniki* deeply influenced Antokolsky. Another important influence was the Mamontovskii circle in Paris, a hotbed of Russian symbolism. However, Glants maintains, Antokolsky did not feel entirely comfortable within the aesthetic constraints of both realism and symbolism. His work was never a mere copy or embellishment of a real life subject, but a deep reflection on it. Antokolsky's series 'Friends of Mankind' — esus (1874), Socrates (1870s), Spinoza (1878)—were neither

portraits nor monuments, but whole organic characters invested with profound symbolism. Glants's analysis reveals the contrast between physical weakness and intellectual and spiritual might in the figure of Socrates. Glants also highlights the universal humanistic appeal embodied by Antokolsky's interpretation of two Jews — Jesus and Spinoza. Their universalism was an integral part of their Jewishness, and made them, as well as the entire Jewish people, an integral part of humankind. Ultimately, Glants argues, Antokolsky re-imagined and re-conceptualized Jesus and Spinoza as precursors of Jewish modernity.

Antokolsky's interest in the historical Jesus and in the original meaning of his teachings was shared by leading European intellectuals of his time. Glants mentions Ernest Renan, the author of the revolutionary 'Life of Jesus' (1863), who was fascinated by Antokolsky's 'Christ before the judgment of the people' displayed at the World Fair of 1878 in Paris, and called it 'a message from a Jew to the Christian world.' At home, a new generation of Russian Jews, while following Antokolsky's leads in their own intellectual and artistic pursuits, rejected many core beliefs that motivated his work. Simon Dubnow, who like Antokolsky considered himself 'reborn' as a modern Jew in the imperial capital city of St. Petersburg, was also inspired by a modern interpretation of Jewish history. However, his 'History of Hasidism' (1888)—profoundly influenced by Renan's 'Life of Jesus'—was aimed at rebuilding a collective Jewish identity on a national basis. Glants' analysis reveals that Antokolsky's strong belief in the possibility of successful Jewish integration into Russian society through civil and cultural 'self-improvement' endured until the artist's last day.

Challenged by the pogroms of 1881 and personally insulted by the Russian antisemitic press, Antokolsky still considered Russia home for himself and millions of other Russian Jews. Glants shows that in his response to antisemites Antokolsky pointed out that Jews and Russians needed unity, mutual understanding, and the common goal 'to love our homeland and to awake everything good in people.' In addition to his appeals in the press, Antokolsky vividly articulated this thesis in his art, creating images of the glorious Russian past, from the explorer Ermak (1891) to the chronicler Nestor (1889), which would ensure Russia's present and inspire her better future.

Glants concludes with an analysis of Antokolsky's last unfinished project, a testimony to his undying historical optimism. In 1901–1902, just before his death, Antokolsky returned to his 1860s work, the 'Inquisition's raid on a secret seder.' Now he conceived of it as part of a planned 'World tragedy' series, which would present misunderstanding, extreme animosity and violence, but culminate in reconciliation among humans. Antokolsky's optimism, based on faith in universal humanity, imperial Russian patriotism, and deeply felt Jewishness, was shared by a whole generation of modern Russian Jews, which Glants's book helps to save from oblivion.

It should be noted that Glants's comprehensive biography could still do

better for its subject. The analysis of Antokolsky's historical context (largely explained through works of early twentieth century scholars, such as Dubnow) should have been complemented with concepts developed by recent scholarship in Russian Jewish history (in addition to a single work by Benjamin Nathans, cited by Glants). A proper contextualization of Antokolsky's art would require a visual background (in addition to Antokolsky's own work presented in the book), since he shared many of his topics and creative approaches (such as portrayals of Russian tsars, Jesus, and historical figures) with his influential Russian contemporaries mentioned by Glants. Finally, and more importantly, an analysis of Antokolsky's art as a missing link in the development of modern Jewish art is lacking in the book.

Overall, some weaknesses and limitations notwithstanding, Glants's book accomplishes the vital task of chronicling the life and bringing out the creative legacy of Mark Antokolsky, a key representative of a lost generation of modern Russian Jews, and a key figure in modern Jewish art.