

Title of presentation as announced in Program Book: *“A Gift to Biro-Bidjan, Chicago, 1937: From Despair to New Hope,”* by Nathan Harpaz.

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Description:

In 1937 fourteen Chicago area artists created a folio of woodcuts as a fundraising project for the Jewish autonomy Biro-Bidjan in the Soviet Union. These artists were also active in the Works Progress Administration during the Depression era. The woodcuts reveal scenes of oppression and despair against images of “new hope” and optimism. Some of them reflect the hardship of the Depression in the United State or the persecution of Jews in Europe and others express the expectations of the New Deal program or Stalin’s solution for a Jewish homeland. This presentation will explore the process of the study of these rare woodcuts from the acceptance of the portfolio to the research and publication.

**A Gift to Biro-Bidjan: Chicago, 1937
From Despair to New Hope**

By **Nathan Harpaz**

The idea of a Jewish autonomous region in the heart of Siberia emerged from Lenin’s nationalities policy that encouraged each ethnic group in the Soviet Union to settle its own territory, develop its language and culture, and contribute to the building of socialism.

Soviet Jews, who were suffering through a wave of pogroms and anti-Semitism, were given the land around Biro-Bidjan in 1927, more than 20 years before the establishment of the

State of Israel. In 1934, Josef Stalin officially declared Biro-Bidjan as the Jewish autonomy for solving the “Jewish problem.” This land was inhospitable — an unsettled territory with a very cold climate, thousands of miles from European Russia, with no infrastructure.

To convince Jews to move to this area, the Soviet government offered each settler 600 rubles and free railroad passage and food for the journey. In the early 1930s, the government released *The Seekers of Happiness*, a film about a poor American family's decision to emigrate to Biro-Bidjan. Posters of smiling workers hauling grain and driving tractors were printed to promote a Soviet version of the Promised Land.

Jews did come from all over the world — Argentina, the United States, even Palestine — to settle in communes in the new homeland. In the 1930s, there was an even more compelling reason for Soviet Jews, especially those from the Ukraine, to come to Biro-Bidjan. Tens of thousands of Soviets were suffering and dying of starvation in the first half of that decade under Stalin's brutal collectivization policies.

The Soviets promoted the use of Yiddish in Biro-Bidjan because they considered it the language of the secular, proletarian culture that replaced the “religious” Hebrew. At the height of the Biro-Bidjan project (1934-37), the settlers established Yiddish cultural institutions including schools, newspapers, a library and a theater, the Kaganovich Jewish Theatre, founded in 1934 in a modern Bauhaus style building. Members of the Moscow State Jewish Theatre attended the theater opening, and the first play produced there was by the notable Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem.

The first exodus from Biro-Bidjan began almost as soon as the settlers arrived. Between 1928 and 1938, 41,000 Jews arrived; by the end of 1938, 28,000 of those had left voluntarily. As the political climate worsened in the late 1930s, the entire political leadership and membership of the writer's club of Biro-Bidjan disappeared into labor camps.

Despite an ideological conflict with the Zionist movement, which advocated for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, American Jews founded two organizations to support the Jewish autonomy in the Soviet Union.

In 1926, a group of American Jews met in Philadelphia to form ICOR, Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union (the acronym stands for the Yiddish translation). Their first mission was to raise funds for Jewish collectives in the Crimea. One of the chief supporters of ICOR in Chicago was Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company and founder of the Museum of Science and Industry. He opposed the principles of the Soviet government, but he believed it was essential to take a chance on the good faith of the Soviet leaders and their proposal for Jewish autonomy.

Rosenwald contributed more than \$2 million to ICOR. Although some historians have discovered connections between ICOR and the American Communist Party in promoting socialism in Biro-Bidjan, the main goal of this organization was a humanitarian effort to save the European Jews from the future Holocaust.

In February 1936, Jacob Grossberg, a Chicago attorney and one of the founders of the American Jewish Congress, met with prominent Chicago Jews to form a local chapter of Ambijan, an organization founded in New York to support Biro-Bidjan. Despite fierce opposition from those who preferred to assist the Jews in Palestine, Grossberg and the

members of Chicago Ambijan, like those in ICOR, truly believed that moving Jews from Europe to Biro-Bidjan would protect them from persecution and future disaster.

The revival of the woodcut as a graphic medium started in the late 19th century. Artists like Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch transformed the woodcut from a narrative illustration into a tool to express individual ideas. They experimented with the wooden block to produce textures and tones that were more dramatic.

This trend continued into the 20th century with the emergence of German Expressionism. Most of the German Expressionists were graphic-minded. They made prolific use of the leading print mediums, especially the woodcut, using the sharp contrast of black and white and the hard, dramatic cuts to express their souls and to turn a small format into a monumental image.

Graphic works also had a solid tradition in the history of Jewish art. Jews used calligraphy to scribe in accordance with certain stylistic rules. The Jewish attachment to the book promoted the evolution of book illustrations. Jewish artists like Herman Struck, Joseph Budko and Jacob Steinhardt, who produced powerful graphic work with Jewish themes, inspired future artists.

Herman Struck (1887-1944) contributed internationally to the development of etching and created prints representing views of Israel and Jewish culture in various lands. His student, Joseph Budko (1880-1940), followed his lead and turned to graphic art. Budko developed a style that combined personal attitude with Jewish mentality, a synthesis of Jewish tradition and modern artistic approach. He also revived the spirit of Jewish book illustration, elevating it to modern design.

In 1913, Jacob Steinhardt (1887-1969) and Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966) founded the Berlin Expressionist group known as Die Pathetiker (The Suffering Ones), which focused mainly on graphic arts. Steinhardt became one of the most prominent woodcut artists using a neo-Gothic or Biblical style and refining the technique of block printing.

The Federal Arts Program of the U.S. Works Progress Administration established a Graphic Arts Division in 1935. The replicated prints and public murals created during this period contained social messages that were targeted to a Depression-weary mass audience. The artists of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, who were active members of the WPA, produced graphic art and public murals.

In 1937, the Chicago Society of Artists began publishing an annual block-print calendar to expose Chicago artists to a wider audience and to finance the society's activities. The *Artist Calendar – 1937* was published in the summer of 1936 and featured woodcuts by 30 artists, including four artists who contributed to *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*: Fritz Brod, Abraham Weiner, Louis Weiner, and Todros Geller. This calendar project, used as a fund-raising tool, preceded the ICOR publication of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*.

Among the artists who participated in *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, Todros Geller was the most prominent graphic artist. He illustrated more than 40 books, and several books of his

woodcuts were published. In the same year *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* was produced, L.M. Stein published Geller's woodcuts album, *From Land to Land*.

The artists of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* made remarkable use of woodcut techniques to promote their ideas. Black silhouette, where the artist carves out background spaces from the wooden block, was applied mainly for the motif of "despair." White silhouette, where the artist carves out the area of the subject, was used primarily for the motif of "new hope." The dramatic contrast of black-and-white woodcut emphasizes the symbolism of "dark" versus "light" and "despair" versus "new hope."

The red-and white-woodcut was attached to the black cover of the portfolio. There is no reference, on the image or in the introductory text, to the identity of the artist who created this woodcut; however, socially and stylistically it corresponds to Todros Geller's work. Chicago publisher L.M. Stein, who produced the portfolio, had a lengthy working relationship with Geller and shared a similar ideology. Beginning in 1926, Stein published books illustrated by Geller and monographs of the artist, including the most extensive album, *From Land to Land*, which was published in 1937, the same year as *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*. Stein and Geller, considered "radical progressives," were part of the Chicago Jewish Left who believed in promoting the Yiddish language. The two supported the Soviet Union for its commitment to the Yiddish language and to the Jewish settlement in Biro-Bidjan. The selection of a socialistic red color in the title page woodcut reflects their ideology.

The text on Title Page, inscribed in Yiddish and English, is accompanied by two small images that reflect the "despair" against "new hope" themes of the portfolio.

The "despair" motif is expressed symbolically by smokestacks discharging dark plumes of smoke into an urban, industrial landscape. Since the Industrial Revolution, artists had used the image of smoking chimneys to portray the threat of the urban environment. Geller displayed two images using this motif in *From Land to Land*, produced in 1937 as part of the WPA project. In the woodcut *Chicago Towers*, the smoke spreads from the chimneys, almost engulfing the nearby tall buildings. South of Chicago is a somber scene filled with a dramatic view of smokestacks that resemble those on the title page of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*. In the context of the Depression, the smokestacks represent suffering and despair.

At the top of TitlePage, a human figure looks skyward and stretches a hand toward the rising sun for "new hope." While the smokestacks of despair are expressionistic in design, the new hope image is inspired from Geller's works of the 1920s, which were designed in the Art Nouveau style. The Jewish artist Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925), who developed a "Zionist Art" by blending tradition and modernism, influenced his early illustrations. Lilien's Art Nouveau-style images included the motif of light as a symbol of optimism, elevating the Jewish people from "darkness to a great light". In the same manner, Bolshevik posters during and after the Communist Revolution used the rising sun as a symbol of the "new world order."

Alex Topchevsky (later known as Alex Topp) was born in Chicago and studied at Hull House under the instruction of his brother Morris Topchevsky and Enella Benedict. He earned his M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and his education degree from Loyola University in Chicago.

He traveled and painted in Mexico, Central America and Europe. His works were exhibited at Art Institute of Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum in New York, and they are included in the collections of the Smithsonian Institute and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

During the Depression, Topchevsky worked for the WPA as an easel painter and muralist for various government agencies and public institutions.

Exodus from Germany is the only image in the portfolio that directly portrays a specific political theme. Topchevsky was reacting to the historical events that were occurring in Nazi Germany. From 1933 to 1937, German Jews were gradually stripped of their rights and were under increasing legal and social restrictions. The artist's image suggests a solution of evacuating from the hostile country and moving to a safe homeland. In the context of the portfolio, one of the optional destinies is the Jewish autonomous region, Biro-Bidjan.

Topchevsky constructed a striking composition in Exodus from Germany. He used an explosive perspective where the escapees, carrying a pitchfork, a violin or a book, move in a procession between two geometric symbols: the Nazi swastika and the illuminated, round shape of a sack carried by one of them.

A circular object like a sack being carried by a human figure symbolizes the poor, the homeless and the refugee, or as used by the expressionist artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944), the wanderer. Aaron Bohrod in *West Side*, used this symbol in dual meanings – as a victim of the Great Depression in Chicago or as the Jew who lacks a homeland.

Topchevsky employs the woodcut technique of white silhouette to intensify the drama. In the darkness, a flame emerges from the swastika, spreads into the circular element and turns it into a glowing object like the rising sun, symbolizing new hope.

A Chicago native, William Jacobs studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and at Hull House. His teachers were Herman Sachs and Enella Benedict. During the early 1930s, Jacobs painted in Dayton, Ohio, and Chicago. His works were exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago Woman's Aid and the Jewish Women's Art Club. He was awarded the Artists' Guild prize in design from the Art Institute of Chicago. As one of the WPA artists during the Depression, he participated in the painting of murals in the corridors of Chicago's Spaulding High School.

In the book *Art of Today: Chicago, 1933* (written by J.Z. Jacobson and published by L.M. Stein), Jacobs reveals how he was influenced by Expressionism, his interest in the typical Depression-era industrial scenes and his cosmopolitan inclination:

Generally I consider my art a purely personal expression; occasionally I don't. I consider it, also, a contribution to society. ... I consider my work an expression of the age. I am

painting industrial subjects and find them very interesting. . . . I believe that art should be Universal in spirit, and therefore I do not consider my work an expression of the spirit of any national, racial, religious, political, social or economic group, body, background or attitude.

The satiric nature of *Persecution* is analogous to the militaristic, brutal graphics of the German expressionist George Grosz (1893-1959) who supported Communism after the November Revolution but retreated later because of Stalin's atrocities. Jacobs uses the woodcut medium to create a contrast between the wide white spaces in the pastoral landscape and the dark mass in the oppressed crowd. The soldiers and the refugees march in one direction, except one figure on the left who looks up and raises a fist in rebellion. The mother and child in the center of the composition resemble the introverted mother-child images of German expressionist artist Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945).

Faithful to his statement about the "universal spirit," Jacobs does not disclose the ethnic identity of the sufferers or their oppressors in *Persecution*. Including this image in *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, however, links the persecution with the need for a Jewish homeland.

Between 1926 and 1930, Chicago-born Aaron Bohrod studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York. Influenced by teacher John Sloan, Bohrod selected themes that involved the immediate world around him. After returning to Chicago in 1930, he painted views of the city and its working class. The artist stated:

I may be in a Pacific Jungle, a European battlefield or a Chicago alley; no matter. What I will paint as a result of exposure to the locale that inspires a given work, will, I hope, first indicate what to a certain extent that place and the activity in it looked like.

As a WPA artist during the Depression, Bohrod painted public murals, including *Old State Capitol in the Vandalia, Ill., post office*, (1936); *Breaking the Prairie – Log City 1887 in the Galesburg, Ill., post office* (1939); and *Clinton in Winter in the Clinton, Ill., post office* (1939).

Bohrod's name was placed at the head of the artists list inside *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* in recognition of his prominence (the other names are in alphabetic order). His works were shown in various exhibitions, and they are now included in the collections of major museums in the United States, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

West Side is a typical Depression-era scene by Bohrod. It is parallel to his oil painting *Landscape near Chicago* (1934) in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, where he uses the debris to create an atmosphere of negligence and despair. In addition to the run-down car in *West Side*, he displays an old man carrying a bag of belongings on his back, like Topchevsky's figure in *Exodus from Germany*. The

urban landscape of apartment buildings with wooden porches at the back of the houses and water tanks in the background is typical of Chicago's West Side.

After the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, Jews moved to the city's West Side around the Maxwell Street Market business district and near Hull House. Between 1880 and 1900, a new wave of 55,000 Russian and Polish Jews crowded into this area. Yiddish was the language of choice and Yiddish theaters, 40 synagogues and dozens of Hebrew schools were established. The Jewish history of the West Side shares themes of immigration, Yiddish culture and new hope with the Biro-Bidjan portfolio.

The symbolic interpretations of a figure carrying a sack suggest refuge, poverty, wandering, or despair, which correspond to the reality of life in Chicago during the Depression and with other images produced by Bohrod during his participation in the WPA. The selection by the artist of this specific neighborhood in Chicago and the depiction of a burdened figure in *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* suggest a Jewish relevance.

David Bekker was born in Vilna, Poland. He studied at the Antokolsky Art School in Russia; the Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem, Palestine; and the Academy of Fine Arts in Denver. His distinguished teachers in Bezalel were Boris Schatz and Abel Pann. During the Depression, Bekker was a WPA artist who created images of human suffering and painted murals in Illinois public buildings. In 1932, he published a portfolio of woodcuts, *Myths and Moods*. His works are included in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the Tel Aviv Museum.

In the book *Art of Today: Chicago, 1933* (written by J.Z. Jacobson and published by L.M. Stein), Bekker reveals his identity and his inspiration:

As a descendant of the persecuted Jewish people, branded with a yellow badge of humiliation and rendered impervious to the onslaughts of an antagonistic world by a soul which has never surrendered, I feel impelled to give form in my work to pathos, sorrow, strife and triumphant joy.

Bronx Express is the title of a Yiddish play written in 1919 by Osip Dymov (1878-1959), whose real name was Yosef Perlman. He wrote symbolist plays that addressed the problem of Jewish wandering and suffering through the ages. In *Bronx Express*, Dymov deals with the experience of the Jewish immigrants in the United States and their difficult in choosing between the values of the old country and the New World.

David Bekker based his woodcut on the description of the theater scene in the prologue to *Bronx Express*:

Subway car on the Bronx Express line. Afternoon rush hour of a hot day in August. The car is packed with people: men, women, and children, old and young. Some sit, some stand. Many read newspapers.

In the conversation in the subway car, Hungerproud, one of the main characters in the play, reveals his identity as a socialist and extremist. When asked if he observes Yom

Kippur, he replies, “Well Yom Kippur is Yom Kippur, for the proletariat too.” When asked why he reads the Yiddish paper and not the English, Hungerproud answers, “Yiddish is better. I’m on the way home; I feel like forty winks. I open the Yiddish paper. I read the editorial, and I’m asleep from 14th Street to Harlem 160th. I walk in for supper refreshed.”

David Bekker presents the image Bronx Express as a caricature composed of few lines and a neutral, white background. Beyond the humorous and satiric nature of the play, issues like Jewish traditions, the Jewish Left and the Yiddish language are associated with the ideas behind the Biro-Bidjan settlement.

Louis Weiner was born in Vinnitza, Ukraine, and studied at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago. He was a member of the Palette and Chisel Club, the Little Gallery of Evanston and the Chicago Society of Artists. His works have been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Midland Club of Chicago.

For many years, he contributed block prints to the annual calendar of the Chicago Society of Artists.

In the book *Art of Today: Chicago, 1933* (written by J.Z. Jacobson and published by L.M. Stein), Weiner, like William Jacobs, emphasizes the universal nature of his work:

I avoid the introduction into my work of national, racial, or religious elements for their own sake. I believe that art is universal and makes use of elements, emotions, and phenomena which are in their essence the same the world over and in all time.

No Business expresses the universal themes of poverty and despair, but the site that Weiner selected is local and specific. It is the Maxwell Street Market in the heart of the Jewish community of Chicago’s West Side. The images of orthodox Jews and the structures of the stands resemble those in Geller’s woodcut *Maxwell Street, 1925*.

Maxwell Street was far removed from the realization of the American Dream. Resembling the bazaar-like atmosphere of an Eastern European town, it was the “old country” come to life, instead of the progress and the prosperity of the New World. It echoed the same dilemma of identity that was recognized in *Bronx Express*.

Like Bohrod’s *West Side*, *No Business* expresses, in historical and geographical contexts, the economic hopelessness of the Depression or the despair of identity of the Jewish immigrants.

Born in New York, Mitchell Siporin was an infant when his family moved to Chicago in 1911. He studied under Todros Geller and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Siporin grew up in a Yiddish-speaking home where his family members admired the works of Jewish literary masters like Isaac Leib Peretz, the father of Yiddish literature; the humorist writer Sholem Aleichem; and Bialik, the Hebrew nationalist poet. Siporin’s early work reflected his interest in the labor movement and in other sociopolitical issues. During the Depression, he was a prolific member of the WPA

project. He created several public murals, including those in the St. Louis post office; the Decatur, Ill., post office; and Chicago's Lane Tech High School. His works are included in the Art Institute of Chicago, and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In 1936, a year before Siporin created *Workers Family*, he painted an homage to social reformer and humanitarian Jane Addams as part of the WPA project. Addams was the founder of Hull House, which was near the Jewish neighborhood of Maxwell Street. In the painting, Siporin presents Jane Addams in the midst of poor women and children; next to them, a worker and a farmer shake hands.

The labor issue is the prime topic of *Workers Family*. It is a typical Depression-era scene with working-class people positioned in front of an industrial, urban landscape with smokestacks in the background that emit thick plumes of dark smoke into the sky. Siporin stages the family as if they are sitting for a family portrait. It is a social-realist image that uses the medium of woodcut to create a dazzling contrast between the illuminated human figures and the dark buildings behind them.

Siporin displays three generations in *Workers Family*: the bearded grandfather in the back and the young boy in the front looking at his parents with anticipation. This motif of the continuity of values and traditions from generation to generation reappeared in 1938 when Siporin painted the murals in Chicago's Lane Technical High School. In the four-panel mural *Teaching of the Arts*, Siporin presents allegories of drama, visual arts, literature, and music. In the teaching of the literature and the visual arts, old bearded teachers transfer the knowledge to the next generation.

In the context of the Biro-Bidjan project, *Workers Family* is a socialist resolution where the family as a whole participates in building new hope.

Born in Chicago, Edward Millman attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and later became the chief illustrator for the *Chicago Evening American*. Attracted by the murals of Mexican artist Diego Rivera, he traveled to Mexico to enrich his art education. Millman became one of the most productive WPA muralists in Illinois during the Depression. He painted *Early Pioneers*, *Social Consciousness*, and *Growth of Democracy* in Illinois for the Decatur post office; *Manufacture of Plowshares* in Moline for the Moline post office; *Blessing of Water* for the Chicago Bureau of Water (located in City Hall); and *The Contribution of Women to American Progress* for Chicago's Lucy Flower Technical High School. His works are included in the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

While Millman's public murals of the late 1930s are complex compositions of epic and allegorical motifs that were inspired by the Mexican muralists, Shoemaker is a more reserved and restrained image.

The same year *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* was produced, Millman worked on the murals for the Moline post office and the Chicago Bureau of Water. *The Manufacture of Plowshares* in Moline depicts laborers like in *Shoemaker*, but it is a more dramatic and dynamic scene where workers and machines almost struggle with each other. *Blessing of Water* is an allegorical poem of human survival. Like *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, it deals with despair and hope — on one side, the humans suffer because of drought; on the other side, the discovery of water leads to a celebration of life.

Millman applies different approaches in *Shoemaker* by considering the unique medium of the small-format graphic. The shoemaker is portrayed like a skilled worker of the “old country.” The woman in the background appears as a black silhouette, creating a somber atmosphere.

In this woodcut, Millman applies symbolism as he does in his murals, but in a more condensed manner: the pairs of shoes represent the eternal “wanderer.” Vincent Van Gogh painted worn shoes as a metaphor for the endless wanderings of the vagabond seeking, in vain, for a haven of rest. This is analogous to the “Wanderer” who carries a sack on his back in the woodcuts of Munch, Topchevsky and Bohrod.

The symbolic meaning of the “shoes” is linked to the overall concept of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* by repeating the continuous desire of Jews to find the path to a final, peaceful destination.

Fritzi Brod was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia. She studied at Lycee in Prague and Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna. After immigrating to the United States in 1924, she attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Brod established herself as an innovative textile designer, and her fabrics gained great reputation in the American fashion world. She wrote several design books, including *200 Motifs and Design*, *Flowers in Nature and Design*, and *Decorative Design*. Brod’s documentary material, including a scrapbook with clippings, exhibition catalogs and photographs, is in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.

In the mid-1930s, Brod created numerous works on paper, mostly woodcuts and lithographs. More than 50 of these are in the collection of Northwestern University’s Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art. In most of the graphics she features women, the majority of whom were inspired by German Expressionism; only a few of them reflect a design approach.

Brod selected the woodcut *In the Workshop* for the portfolio for the same reason that Millman included *Shoemaker*. Both deal with labor, a common theme during the Depression. Although Brod’s graphics during the mid-1930s were mostly expressionistic, she preferred to submit a woodcut that represented her decorative or design approach.

The design of *In the Workshop* was inspired by Art Nouveau: the slanted heads, the delicate lines and the ornamental patterns. This design creates a contrast to the gloomy mood of the scene. Five women are crowded in a small shop, where a *Vogue* magazine

hangs on the wall. These women sit quietly, concentrating on their sewing. Two of the women in the front are in the darkness; their faces are black silhouettes. A dazzling light from the window illuminates the rest.

Brod, like other artists of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, uses the unique medium of black-and-white woodcut to express the symbolism of dark against light and new hope overcoming despair.

A native of Chicago, Bernece Berkman studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and also privately with Todros Geller and Rudolph Weisenborn. She later attended Hunter College in New York and studied under the direction of artist Stuart Davis at the New School for Social Research. Her works are included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh and Seattle Art Museum.

Berkman's mentors, Geller and Weisenborn, inspired her artistic development. Like Geller, she perceived art as a tool for social reform; like Weisenborn, she preferred to apply Expressionism in a Cubist manner.

In *Toward a Newer Life*, Berkman merges the current motifs of despair and hope with the Bible narrative of the slavery of the Jews in Egypt. This complex composition blends the Jewish slaves in Egypt with the workers of the Great Depression. They are surrounded by either Egyptian pyramids or by a modern industrial district with a smokestack.

Berkman intensifies the drama by the expressive gestures of the hands. One hand angrily grasps a machine part; others are extended upward. The large, illuminated figure in the center resembles one of Pablo Picasso's figures in the mural *Guernica*, an homage to the human suffering during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso completed the mural in 1937, the same year *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* was published in Chicago.

Picasso based this figure in *Guernica*, with arms outstretched and looking up in anguish and prayer, on previous works that he created in the early 1930's that presented his visual interpretation of the Crucifixion. Berkman's figure uses arm gestures similar to the figure in the woodcut *The Cry* (1919), created by German artist Otto Dix (1891-1969). Dix, like Berkman, was socially conscientious and developed a style that was a synthesis of expressionism and cubism.

Although Berkman's woodcut displays a scene of oppression and despair, she grotesquely titled it *Toward a Newer Life*. The theme of the slavery in Egypt followed by the exodus to the Promised Land serves as a message for universal social justice, as well as for the Jewish desire for a homeland.

Morris Topchevsky was born in Bialystock, Poland. His father immigrated to the United States in 1910, and the rest of the family followed later. Four of the Topchevsky children perished in the Bialystock pogroms of 1905.

Topchevsky studied art at the Hull House and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His teachers were Enella Benedict and Albert Krenbiel. In 1925, he traveled to Mexico

with Jane Addams to visit poor neighborhoods and to meet with local leaders. During his studies, Topchevsky worked as a billboard designer and painter. When he became ill from toxic paint, his doctor advised him to move to a better climate to improve his health. In 1926, he traveled back to Mexico.

His experiences in Mexico had a dramatic influence on his career. He was inspired by the Aztec and Maya sculptures and by the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949). When Topchevsky returned to Chicago during the Depression, he applied the social messages and monumental effect of the Mexican muralists to his work. His works expressed the agony of the unemployed and scenes of Chicago's industrial areas. In 1936, he painted the mural North American Children Working in Holmes School in Oak Park, Ill.

Topchevsky was the most politically radical artist of those who contributed to *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*. In the book *Art of Today: Chicago, 1933* (written by J.Z. Jacobson and published by L.M. Stein), he boldly revealed his revolutionary ideas:

At the present time of class struggle, danger of war and mass starvation, the artist cannot isolate himself from the problems of the world, and the most valuable contribution to society will come from the artists who are social revolutionists.

In all my work I have felt that movement of masses of people is the most important element. At first it was because I was fascinated by the problem it afforded. At the present, and I hope in my future work, it will be a means of helping the revolutionary movement of this country and the liberation of the working masses of the entire world.

In 1933, the year he was quoted, Topchevsky created the painting *Century of Progress*. He grotesquely displayed unemployed workers in shantytown observing the extravagant pavilions of Chicago's World's Fair, *A Century of Progress*, which celebrated the city's 100 years of "advancement."

To a New Life is a social-realist image that resembles Soviet scenes of Stalin's era. *New Life* was also the title of the publication of ICOR, the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union that sponsored the portfolio. The man and woman in front are pioneer workers of the "new world order." The man holds a hammer, a common Soviet symbol, in his hand. In his other hand, he holds a blueprint, a new plan for a "new life."

The woman holds a book, which represents the ideology behind the new social order. The scene in the back breaks the realistic atmosphere by presenting a dream-like image of the Old Jew. Topchevsky curved largely into the wooden block to illuminate the workers and the surrealist scene of the old man behind them. Like a theater drama, he proposes a solution for a new life, for which the *Biro-Bidjan* project is an optional response.

Abraham Weiner was born in Vinnitza, Ukraine. He earned a degree in architecture from the University of Michigan in 1922 and later studied under Frederick Victor Poole (1865-

1936) at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He also studied at the studio of John Norton (1876-1934) and at the New Bauhaus under Alexander Archipenko (1887-1964). The New Bauhaus, a continuation of the German Bauhaus that was closed by the Nazis, was founded in Chicago in 1937 by La'szlo' Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946). Weiner's work was exhibited at Northwestern University in 1931, the Art Institute of Chicago in 1931 and 1934, and Cornell University in 1933. He worked as an architectural draftsman and as a set designer for 20th Century Fox Film Corporation.

Milk and Honey is an improvisation of Grant Wood's American Gothic. At the annual juried exhibition in Chicago in 1930, American Gothic won the Art Institute purchase prize. Despite controversial debate about Wood's artistic intentions, American Gothic became one of the most influential works, locally and nationally, and a model for a new realism during the Depression.

Like Wood in American Gothic, Weiner stages an old man and a young woman in a rural environment. His farm landscape, which resembles Wood's Midwestern scenes, replaces the Carpenter Gothic-style house of American Gothic. Weiner transfers the agricultural tool from the old man to the young woman. In American Gothic, the old man holds the pitchfork; in Milk and Honey, the young woman grasps the rake. The pitchfork and the rake, symbols of farming and rural life, echo in both images. In American Gothic, the lines of the pitchfork repeat in the Gothic window, the woman's apron and the man's outfit. In Milk and Honey, Weiner — in a remarkable utilization of woodcut technique — replicates the lines of the rake over the entire composition.

For Weiner, the glorification of rural life focuses on the land of Milk and Honey: the Promised Land, a biblical utopia of peace and harmony. Weiner transfers the rake to the woman to signify labor equality in the new world order. Photos of women pioneers driving tractors in Biro-Bidjan illustrated this progressive trend. The Biro-Bidjan project, where rural life and socialism blended with ethnic identity, replaced the visionary role of the Holy Land.

Raymond Katz was born in Kassa, Hungary, and came to the United States in 1909. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. In the late 1920s, he worked as a director of the Poster Department at Paramount Studios. He was appointed the Director of Posters for the Chicago Civic Opera in 1930. During the Great Depression, notable architect Frank Lloyd Wright urged Katz to become a muralist. In 1933, he was commissioned to paint a mural for the Century of Progress exposition in Chicago. In 1936, he painted the mural History of the Immigrant for the Madison, Ill., post office. Katz's works were included in various exhibitions and now are part of several museum collections, including those of the Art Institute of Chicago; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and the Jewish Museum, New York. His murals, bas-reliefs and stained glass designs adorn more than 200 Jewish synagogues in the United States.

Katz and other Jewish artists in Chicago who expressed Jewish and Biblical themes were inspired by the artist Abel Pann (1883-1963). Pann, who is regarded as the leading painter of the Land of Israel, exhibited in the Art Institute of Chicago in 1920.

Early in his career, Katz began to explore the artistic possibilities inherent in the characters of the Hebrew alphabet. He developed aesthetic and philosophical interpretations of each letter and became the leading innovator and pioneer in the field of Hebraic art.

Katz applies this concept in the woodcut *Moses and the Burning Bush*. Hebrew letters appears in Moses' head, his cane and inside the flame. The initial of Moses' name crowns his head. The letter in the flame is the first letter of the name of God. A combination of images and Hebrew letters appeared commonly in illustrations of the scene *Moses and the Burning Bush* in the Haggadah, the book of Passover.

The symbolism of the burning bush corresponds to the motifs of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*. The miracle of the burning bush occurred in the desert when Moses led the Jews from Egypt to the Holy Land. The flame represents tribulation, and the survival of the bush represents eternity. The Jewish people endured persecution and pogroms on their final destination to the Promised Land.

Katz uses the white silhouette method of woodcut production to enhance the miraculous atmosphere. In complete darkness, the pattern of the flame is repeated throughout the composition — in the sky, the desert dunes and even in Moses' gown. This approach resembles Munch's *The Scream* (1893), where the sound waves echo in the entire image, or Abraham Weiner's *Milk and Honey*, where the shape of the rake is replicated throughout the composition.

A native of Vinnitza, Ukraine, Todros Geller immigrated to Canada in 1906 and moved to Chicago in 1918. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and became a leading artist among the city's art community. Known as the "dean" of Chicago's Jewish artists, he was as a mentor and a source of inspiration to others, including Aaron Bohrod and Mitchell Siporin.

Geller was a master printmaker who published several books of his graphics. For three consecutive years, he received awards for his woodcuts at the Annual Library of Congress National Print Exhibitions. He taught art at the Jewish People's Institute in Chicago (1920–27), and conducted classes in his studio. Many prominent Chicago artists studied drawing and painting under Geller.

Geller's works were included in various exhibitions, and they are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Like David Bekker's *Bronx Express*, which was based on a Yiddish play, Geller's *Raisins and Almonds* was inspired by a Yiddish poem of the same title. The founder of the modern Yiddish theatre, Abraham Goldfaden, wrote the poem in 1880 as part of his

operetta *Shulamis*, which features a mother singing a lullaby to her son. The poem is an allegory of the Jewish people's longing to return to their homeland:

Under Baby's cradle in the night
Stands a goat so soft and snowy white
The Goat will go to the market
To bring you wonderful treats
He'll bring you raisins and almonds
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

In Eastern Europe, goats were an important staple of Jewish life, believed to be endowed with mystical qualities. The goat became an insignia or dominant symbol in Geller's artistic vocabulary. On the cover of his book *From Land to Land* (1937), he positioned the goat on the shore of Lake Michigan with Chicago's skyline as a backdrop. *Raisins and Almonds* is also included in this book published by L.M. Stein.

In *Raisins and Almonds*, Geller draws a circle of life starting with the scene of Goldfaden's lullaby, where the mother and the goat surround the cradle. In the second scene, the boy is studying in a way traditional to Jewish towns in Eastern Europe. Then, the grown-up man is wandering into the real world with a sack carried on his back, passing an open market. Continuing his journey, he works as a tailor to earn money to immigrate to the New World.

The scene of the elevated train and the smokestacks marks his arrival in Chicago. From this point, the episodes turn political and current: unemployed workers demonstrate with banners and flags in their hands. The last dream-like scene in the cycle repeats the theme of "new hope" in the title page of the portfolio: a man stands in an illuminated space looking up and grasping a newly planted tree.

Born and reared in the Hull House district, Ceil Rosenberg finished grade school at 10, and high school at 13, too young to be admitted to the Art Institute of Chicago. Eventually, at the Institute, she was a prize student. She had her first lessons at Hull House and later studied in the studios of Todros Geller and Raymond Katz. *New Hope*, Ceil Rosenberg's woodcut, is the most realistic image in the portfolio. Rosenberg, a WPA artist during the Depression, captured urban views in a dogmatic realism. Her image *Winter Scene*, which features Chicago, was selected as the cover of the book, *A New Deal for the Arts*, published in 1997 by the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., and the University of Washington, Seattle. At the time Rosenberg created *Winter Scene*, artists of the Soviet Union adapted Social Realism as the official state-supported artistic trend. In 1933, the Moscow exhibition *Artists of the Russian Federation Over Fifteen Years* marked a new era. It rejected Russian avant-garde artists like Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) and declared Social Realism as the leading style during Stalin's era.

The term "social realism" appeared in a 1932 article in the *Literary Gazette*: "The masses demand of an artist honesty, truthfulness, and a revolutionary, socialist realism in the

representation of the proletarian revolution.” A year later, Maksim Gorki published his essay “On Socialist Realism,” which dealt with “a new direction essential to us – socialist realism, which – it stands to reason – can be created only from the data of socialist experience.”

New Hope repeats the concept of the “New Jew” in contrast to the “Old Jew” as it appears in Morris Topchevsky’s *To a New Life*. Rosenberg’s approach to this theme is more simplistic and direct. She focuses on the faces of two generations: the old, religious Jew positioned in the back and the young, secular pioneer holding the pitchfork in his hand.

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