

WEEKEND

Both traditional and subversive

While the internationally renowned photographer Moï Ver was alive, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art declined to hold an exhibition by the avant-garde – and deeply Zionist – artist. Now, 30 years after his death, and after retrospectives in European capitals, his wish has come true

Naama Riba

The 16th Zionist Congress, held in Zurich in 1929, was not just a diplomatic event at which the Jewish Agency, to be headed by Chaim Weizmann, was established. Adjacent to the main auditorium, an exhibition of photographs titled “Life and its Face” was on display. The images, the work of a 25-year-old artist named Moshe Vorobeichic, documented Jewish life in Vilna (today Vilnius) – which was known for much of its history as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” reflecting its status as a major center of Jewish life in Europe and globally. That series of photographs would become one of the crucial remaining visual records of the community, which was almost completely annihilated in World War II.

The images of Jewish Vilna are among the most striking photographs currently on display in an exhibition titled “Moï Ver / Moshe Raviv: Modernism in Transition,” curated by Dr. Rona Sela, at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (through March 15). Accompanying the exhibition is a comprehensive Hebrew-language book about the artist published jointly by the Magnes Press and the Tel Aviv Museum. The book, written by Sela, and art historian and a former curator at the museum, was recently launched in an event at the exhibition.

Although photographs make up most of the show, there are also examples of graphic design, and paintings and posters by the artist, who over the years used several different surnames: Raviv, Ver, Vorobeichic and, for a short time, Ankorion. For our purposes, he will be called Moï Ver, the name with which he signed his photographic works in Europe. It’s likely that he adopted the name, which derives from the first syllable, in each case, of both his first name and surname, as inspired by the photographer Man Ray, who was active at the time in Paris.

Yossi Raviv, the artist’s Israeli-born son, relates that the family has gone by the name Raviv since 1951. “[My father] was supposed to go to France for work purposes, and Ben-Gurion was then pressing for people to Hebraize their Diaspora names. Dad wanted to make it ‘Ankorion,’ which, like Vorobeichic, means ‘little sparrow.’ A Tel Aviv lawyer named Arye Ankorion told my father: ‘There’s already one Ankorion in Tel Aviv, and that’s enough. Find a different name.’ So my father, who was well versed in kabbala and the Bible, and knew the biblical word *raviv*, which means ‘little dew drop,’ chose that name. For many years we were the only ‘Raviv’ in Israel.”

Moï Ver took most of his photographs of Jewish Vilna in 1928, documenting the life of the Jewish community through images of books, sacred objects, entrances to homes, stores and streets, together with the poverty and the beggars. His point of view is personal, avant-garde, shot diagonally and from different heights. Key influences were the artist-photographers El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy – the latter was his teacher. The images were first exhibited at the Jewish Artists Association in Vilna in the summer of 1929. Even today, on view in the show, they retain an avant-garde character.

How was it that an exhibition of Moï Ver’s work was held at the most important Jewish-Zionist event of the time when he was only 25? Sela suspected that she might find the answer to this question in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. There, poring through the contents of hundreds of files connected to the 16th Zionist Congress, she discovered several documents that helped her understand how such a young artist pulled off such a feat. She learned, for example, that officials from the Tarbut Hebrew Teachers Seminary in Vilna sent an official letter on the artist’s behalf to the bureau of the Zionist Congress, emphasizing that the series of photographs exhibited in Vilna had stirred great interest. They presented “a comprehensive, outstanding picture of our life in the Diaspora,” the officials wrote, adding, “We have no doubt that an exhibition of works by the painter Moshe Vorobeichic in the halls of the [Zionist] Congress will generate great interest also among the delegates and guests.” Moï Ver himself visited the Congress venue, and met leading Zionist figures such as Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and Berl Katznelson.

Two years later, in 1931, the series was published in the form of a book. Titled “The Jewish Street in Vilna,” it was brought out in Hebrew, Yiddish, English

and German, and all told sold 12,000 copies. “Even today that’s an exceptional figure for an art and photography book – a level of sales like that is considered an achievement,” Sela tells Haaretz in an interview. The introduction to the book was written by the Yiddish and Hebrew author and poet Zalman Shneour.

“And so was the Album published in dedication to the Jewish street, a museum in miniature, a meeting-place for all twilight-shadows, trembling shadows and joys wavering on the border-line of picturesque past and modern present,” Shneour wrote laudingly. “Highlights, half-shadows, and darkness! A change of angles, or redirected light and so the character of the picture is entirely altered.”

With unabashed admiration, Shneour likens Moï Ver to Marc Chagall. “Chagall painted his birthplace, Vitebsk – referring to the Belarussian city near where Chagall lived in his youth and which appears in many of his paintings – ‘he knew how to plant in the hearts of people, differing in culture and environment, a love for his Jewish Vitebsk – for

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the town of blue and purple houses, the ancient cemetery with those odd vibrations as of hovering souls in the air; with the brown and green and black Jews.”

Of Moï Ver’s photographs, Shneour wrote: “He knew how to select the choicest bits and discard the rest: the traditional pattern, the sentimentality clinging to synagogues and old cemeteries. With the love of the explorer he enlarged and underlined that which the eternally hurrying passer-by scarcely notices. With sharp scissors he cut out squares and circles brimful of the essence of the Jewish street.”

Zionism and Bohemia

Interest in Moï Ver has risen to new heights in recent years, after his archive was made accessible to scholars and curators. That happened following the death of his wife and his daughter, and with the encouragement of his son, Yossi. Nissan Perez, a former chief photography curator of the Israel Museum, notes that he was familiar with the work of Moï Ver 45 years ago, but was prevented from doing extensive research by the unavailability of archival materials.

The exhibition in Tel Aviv, which opened last summer, is the fourth large retrospective of the artist in recent years. The first was held in Vilna, in 2019, at Lithuania’s National Gallery of Art, and was curated by Perez. In 2023 exhibitions of Moï Ver’s works were held at the Pompidou Center in Paris and at the Museum of Warsaw. The Israeli ex-

hibition began as a collaboration with the museums in Paris and Warsaw, but once the war in Gaza began, it became impossible to bring photographs to Israel from either museum or from private collectors abroad. Hence, the Tel Aviv exhibition focuses on findings from the extensive archive located in Israel.

The impression one gleans is of a fascinating artist who spoke five languages and at various times lived in Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Germany, France, Mandatory Palestine and Israel. He was both an artist of the avant garde and a staunch Zionist, ready to work with the institutions of pre-state Israel. These poles, between which he moved over the years, also characterized his circle of acquaintances, who ran the gamut from Zionist functionaries to dyed-in-the-wool bohemians.

‘An unfamiliar world’

Moses Vorobeichic, the son of Shlomo and Shifra, was born in 1904 in the town of Lyebiedzyeva (today in Belarus). In 1915 the family moved to Vilna, where he attended the Vilnius Drawing School and then studied architecture and photography in addition to painting at Vilnius University.

“From the cheder... to the gymnasium to the art department at the university, an unfamiliar world altogether, because one is not fluent in the language,” he wrote in his memoirs, referring to Polish. “Besides the mother tongue, which is Yiddish, we learned, spoke, and lived Russian, its writers and poets. A few years passed until we absorbed and were fluent in Polish and its culture.”

Following his studies in Vilna, he started to organize exhibitions and applied – unsuccessfully – to schools in the United States and Belgium. In 1927, he began studies at the Bauhaus school, in Dessau, in Germany, with such pioneering teachers as Moholy-Nagy, Josef Albers, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Hans Meyer. In 1929, a photography department opened at the institution, and Moï Ver fell in love with that medium. “In that tower of light I learned about culture, art and love of humanity,” he wrote in a letter to his uncle. “I was suddenly taken by the craft of photography. I learned the discipline thoroughly.”

His first visit to Paris took place in 1928. In a postcard to that same uncle, he noted that his time in the city had “opened his eyes.” After completing his studies at the Bauhaus school, and after the Zionist Congress in Zurich, he furthered his technical training in photography in the French capital. In 1931, which was probably the most productive year in his life, he published a photographic series titled “Paris.”

“He created a portrait of a city that offers optimistic, constructive pleasures,” Sela writes of those photographs in the book, “a metropolis in which the speed and the tempestuousness are intoxicating and pleasurable, and the photographs underscore and augment the freneticism of the city.”

That same year, he created another important series, “Ci-Contre,” literally “opposite.” The original series contains 110 photographs and photocollages of urban landscapes, some of which are identifiable, such as victory columns in Paris, or the Eiffel Tower, and also



The artist’s “Self-portrait on the beach,” 1931. Nissan Perez: “Everyone talked about him as one of the most amazing and innovative of photographers.”

Photo reproduction by Yigal Pardo/courtesy Yossi Raviv, Moï Ver Archive

shots of Venice, Rome and Vilna. The photographs have as their principal subjects lampposts, sidewalks, window bars and people, some of them revelers, others manual laborers – an entire mosaic of urbanism.

For years, Moï Ver tried to have the series exhibited at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. In a 1983 letter to Micha Bar-Am, then the museum’s photography curator, he wrote, “I present to you the series of photographs and photomontages that I told you about. They were done in the first years of the 1930s, close to the time I left the Bauhaus, and of course this whole work bears the imprint of that school, which has since become a legend. As you see, the photographs have their basis in graphics. But they also express a worldview.”

“During his Paris period, he was a prodigy,” Perez says. “Everyone talked about him as one of the most amazing and innovative of photographers. He was written about with incredible enthusiasm.”

“Ci-Contre” was set to be published at the time by the German historian and art critic Franz Roh, as part of a series that included earlier volumes by the Jewish photographers Moholy-Nagy and Aenne Biermann (books that are now collectors’ items that sell for thousands of dollars). However, Sela notes in the book about Moï Ver, Roh encountered difficulties with the publisher and was unable to get the book into print. “Roh considered trying to interest a different publisher, and in the meantime was incarcerated in Dachau, because some of his work was perceived by the Nazis as a cultural threat,” Sela writes.

“The photographic maquette of ‘Ci-Contre’ – a mockup of the book that Ver sent to Roh before publication – remained with Roh,” she adds. “Contact with the German having been cut off, Moï Ver thought it was lost. After Roh’s death, a German collector couple acquired his estate, and the ‘Ci-Contre’ series was published for the first time as a book only in 2004. The maquette was displayed in an exhibition at the Pinakothek der Mod-

erne [museum] in Munich that same year – nine years after Moï Ver’s death, and seven decades after it was created in the 1930s.”

While working on the present exhibition, Sela ran into a problem: The “Ci-Contre” maquette, which had been acquired by the Pompidou Center, could not be sent to Israel while the war in Gaza raged. “The series is the peak he achieved in his avant-garde work. It reflects the singular visual handwriting Moï Ver developed in his European period, under the influence of photographic experimental realism,” Sela says. “There was no way to mount the exhibition without it.”

In the course of her archival research, Sela discovered the original prints from a 1987 exhibition in Cologne, in which Moï Ver exhibited a different version of the “Ci-Contre” series. She also found the artists’ instructions (a new maquette) on how he wanted each photograph to be displayed, as well as photos of its actual

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installation in Cologne. The prints themselves, however, were not stored together in Ver’s archive, but instead were filed in different drawers, based, for example, on the city in which they were shot. Eventually, says Sela, “I discovered that most of the Ci-Contre series actually existed in Israel. And, on the basis of Ver’s drawing, I was able to put together all the pieces and reconstruct the series. Bear in mind that this series was shown only once in Ver’s life and now again in Tel Aviv and in the book.”

Adieu, Paris

In 1934, as the Nazis consolidated their power in Germany, and after a newspaper in Poland published an uncredited series of his photographs without permission or credit – an antisemitic act, as the goal was to avoid tarnishing the paper’s reputation – Moï Ver decided to leave his beloved Paris and make the move to Palestine, which he had visited two years earlier. His first wife, Rosalia, and their daughter, Liliana, remained in Poland.

Settling in Tel Aviv, for the next two decades he photographed the Zionist way of life: the settling of the land by the kibbutzim, the building of Tel Aviv, the country’s modern industry, as well as the city of Safed, where he moved after the War of Independence. Earlier, in 1937, he had traveled to Poland to meet his wife and daughter, where he also photographed *hachshara* “kibbutzim” – training farms for groups preparing themselves for farming life in the Land of Israel – images that are displayed comprehensively in the exhibition.

There is no knowing who among those in the photographs made the move to Palestine and who perished in the Holocaust – as Moï Ver himself wrote in another letter to Micha Bar-Am, this one in 1984, in another attempt to persuade him to ex-

hibit his work at the Tel Aviv Museum. “I already don’t need to tell you that I have rare photographs of Polish and Lithuanian Jewry, of whom the Holocaust left only photographs.” Sela notes that she found three requests to Bar-Am and also to the late director of the museum, Dr. Haim Gamzu. She doesn’t know why the letters didn’t lead to an exhibition.

Later, in addition to his photographic work, Moï Ver also worked in graphic design and designed posters and exhibitions. He was quite independent in his work, wasn’t a member of the Photographers Association and did little photographic work for Zionist organizations like the Jewish National Fund, Keren Hayesod and the Jewish Agency.

He was different in terms of style from other photographers in Israel and also differed in his working methods, which required him to charge higher fees for his work than his peers. Sela writes, for example, that in addition to his distinctive angles, Moï Ver aimed the camera straight at the broiling sun, contrary to the standard rules of photography. “That action burned the negative and created powerful contrasts, which could be interpreted as a subversive act and as an attempt to develop a personal language in the face of the collective style that was imposed on the space.”

In 1938, the artist met Ruth Fein, who became the mother of his two additional children. They were born during the war, when Moï Ver didn’t know the fate of his first wife and firstborn child. In fact, they survived, though his parents, his brother, his sister and his nieces all perished. When Rosalia and their daughter moved to Palestine in 1946, Moï Ver divorced her and formally married Ruth.

After the War of Independence, he helped found the artists colony in Safed, where he died in 1995. “We stayed with Mom in Tel Aviv and she was the breadwinner,” his son relates. “He would go to teach in all kinds of places. We never moved to Safed with him, we only went there on holidays and for vacations. Over the years, he began to hold exhibitions there and to sell works and make a living from painting. In the archive we have another few dozen oil paintings that aren’t in the exhibition.”

Moï Ver can be ranked among the finest photographers of his generation who came to pre-state Palestine and took part in socially engaged photography. Among them were Beno Rothenberg, Rudi Weissenstein, Walter Zadek, Naftali Avnon and the best-known of them: Zoltan Kluger and Boris Carmi. But as a result of the name changes and also his other occupations, such as graphic design, his insistence on a personal style, and above all his move to Safed, where he devoted the remainder of his life to painting – Moï Ver was displaced from the general discourse and remained less well-known than some of his peers, whose work appeared in historical literature and who also took part in exhibitions.

Sela notes additional reasons for Moï Ver’s being excluded from the Israeli canon. “For many years, photography here was something of a stepchild in the field of art, because it had the ‘halo of the socially engaged.’ Compare that to parallels elsewhere, like Socialist Realism in Russia – so many exhibitions and books have been dedicated to that [school of art] worldwide. In addition, in Israel, everything that was modernist, alternative or other in the field of photography did not gain recognition and was sidelined by the museum establishment until the 1990s.”



Left: “Tel Aviv, a city is born,” 1936-37. Right: Image from the “Vilna Jewish Quarter” series, 1931.



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