

Yaacov – Jacques – His Mother Called him Djeki

Thoughts and recollections on Yaacov-Jacques Grinberg

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It was in the most unlikely of circumstances that I had first met Jacques Grinberg (who at the time was still known, and had signed his works, as Yaacov) when considering our respective character traits, objectives and attributes. At 19, serving as privates in the Israeli army, we were both stationed at the 611 Food Supply Unit of the Logistics Corps, at the Tzrifin camp, a former British military base still known at the time by the name of Sarafand. Back in 1960 this military base was considered by many as a kind of penal colony for gifted high-school graduates supposedly destined for the more prestigious combating units (the likes that we, indeed, were kicked out from to end up there), yet neither of us really aspired to a brilliant career in the military, preferring instead the unheroic and lackluster base of Tzrifin and feeling ourselves very much with one foot outside the army already, the existential center of our lives having gravitated towards the vibrant art scene of nearby Tel Aviv.

Though still privates in the military, we already perceived ourselves, each in his respective domain, as artists of the avant-garde – a perception that no doubt was at the background of our swift befriending and spontaneous like-mindedness, which happened in no time. We were easy to attribute artistic greatness and foresee a certain artistic future to one another. In a matter of two days we forged a tight friendship between us that would last for many years to come, despite the distance that was to separate us for most of our lives, having lived in different countries and in very different artistic scenes.

I think that already at the start of our friendship I could perceive in Jacques that pure, profound, strong and uncompromising love for the good and the beautiful – almost in the ancient Greek sense of these words – side by side with a deep-seated doubt, a mistrust in their very possibility at the specific historical-political moment we were born into, and, as a consequence, a deep mistrust in authority of every kind.

A similar view of the cultural and political moment I had known from myself, and this had very likely tightened the ties of our friendship further.

Our friendship was at its closest and most fruitful at these times in particular: from our initial meeting to the time Jacques moved to Paris, in April 1962; later when I myself came to Paris to stay for short periods – in November 1964, throughout the second half of 1965, and in the end of 1969; again in 1970, when Jacques came to Israel, bringing his family with him to live in Bat Yam for a year and entertaining the thought of staying. Following that we would only meet in Paris during occasional visits I had made there. It was purely by chance fate that I happened to be in Paris in the summer of 2011, and was able to attend his cremation ceremony at the Père Lachaise crematorium.

During the first intensive phase of our friendship, while still in the military, we would make daily trips to the city. Yaacov attended evening classes at the Avni Institute, the old Tel Aviv art establishment, where a core group of young aspiring artists had gathered. At times I would join him and attend lectures by Joav BarEl and others. Yaacov was particularly fond of the teachings of Streichman, and admired sculptor Dov Feigin, too. Among his peers at Avni were Moshe Gershuni and his wife at the time, Bianca Eshel-Gershuni, also of Bulgarian origin.

It is strange that I have neglected to mention Jacques's Bulgarian background till now: If I am not mistaken, he immigrated to Israel aged 12, with his parents and sister. Yet his Bulgarian-ness was at odds with that of the majority of Bulgarian Jews. His parents represented the two poles of this Jewry: His mother, with her Mediterranean-style cooking, Ladino songs and tarot cards, was a descendent of the expelled Jews of Spain, while his father, a Marxist intellectual and a communist since an early age, was a man of learning, an "Ashkenazi Bulgarian" – back in Bulgaria he held the position of deputy minister (of economy, I think), but was removed from office during one of the purges there, after which he took his family and emigrated, landing in the fledgling state of Israel. His non-Zionist worldview surely had an impact on his son as well.

Neither of us had completed their military service, ridding ourselves of it through an early discharge, each at a time. Yaacov preceded me in 4-5 months. When he finished his studies at the Avni Institute, he held a joint exhibition with a fellow graduate at the Katz Gallery, in Dizengoff Street, following which he began to paint feverishly, preparing new works for a show at the Chemerinski Gallery, in Gordon Street. Half-way between those two galleries stood Café Kassit, the famed meeting spot for artists in Tel Aviv, which became our regular nighttime hangout.

The majority of the works in Grinberg's early exhibitions were mid-format oil paintings of feminine figures, painted in a near-monochromatic color palette – mostly the many variants of black, gray and white or experiments in red and black. These were not identified portraits, as the shaping of the faces, influence perhaps by Streichman, were all marked by abstraction. Here and there one could already tell an expressionist influence, mostly that of a Soutine.

Now known as Jacques Grinberg, his formative years in Paris and in its art world (to many, the city still seemed at the forefront of modern painting) presented a new and vital stage in his development, both personally and artistically. During those same years I too had experienced a crucial stage in my development, first in Tel Aviv and then in London. Our correspondence grew sparse and sporadic, but still we managed somehow to keep in touch. When we saw each other again in Paris at different times across the 1960's, I had found him to be in a strong position, quite at the height of his artistic and public status: He joined the New Figuration (*Nouvelle figuration*), a group of young artists active in Paris at the time who sought to counter the abstract tendencies of the 1950's. Along with others in the group, Jacques belonged to Galerie Schoeller, a prominent gallery. He exhibited his work in the most prestigious annual Parisian show, and started garnering attention from collectors.

In 1964, when I first saw Jacques's Parisian work, along with that of his colleagues from the figurative bunch – Arroyo, Aznar, Segui and others – I detected in him an intriguing link to Francis Bacon, but with a more political bent. Most of his canvases at the time were characterized by a monochromatic and nearly flat background that contrasted with a dominant figure looming at front, itself framed by a seemingly arbitrary and brutal cut, in a way as to yield a structure that pushes away from



Photo-booth portrait, roughly the second half of the 1960's

realism to foreground a more political aspect.

To offer my own interpretation, the human figures in Grinberg's canvases of the 1960's carry each the heavy load of a tormented, defeated humanism. To me, this looked like an attempt at conveying the legacy of the European fate in the first half of the twentieth century via an uncommon Marxist prism, but without setting aside the breakthroughs of the different avant-gardes (de Kooning was also a favorite of his).

If Bacon's tormented reshaping of the human figure in the aftermath of World War II owes to his own misgivings and inner contradictions – such as his homosexuality, his alcoholism and his nihilist bent – the same degradation of the figure that we see in Grinberg is never due to psychology, but rather to the woes of contemporary society and class divisions.

At the end of that decade the Schoeller gallery went bankrupt, an event that shook his world completely – works of his' that were previously acquired by Schoeller were dumped *en masse* into the market. Another devastating development for him was the rise of American pop art, a movement that seemed to be taking over the world of painting, and, in general, the growing dominance of New York as new center of the international art world. This – as well as his failed, hesitant attempt at moving back to Israel.

From the 1970's on Grinberg's canvases and drawings undergo a multitude of transformations, both thematically and formally. If one insists on generalizing, we may say that his paintings grow increasingly didactic. Or symbolic; a symbolism that occasionally took the shape of unlikely hybrids, with Jewish-Kabbalic symbols mingled with the world of a hash smoker. During that time, he had a prolific output of works on paper, which were marked by a flat graphic character over the white of the support. In his own world, he grew increasingly introverted and domestic.

As the years went by, Jacques Grinberg's work became a *terra incognita* to viewers in Israel. Several attempts were made to draw attention to his work here, but were met with little success. In September 1972, as we were publishing the first issues of "Siman Kria," which was to become the leading literary magazine in Tel Aviv during the 1970's and 1980's, I insisted on featuring one of Jacques's drawing on the cover, with an additional portfolio of his prints in the magazine's pages. Two of my poetry collections also featured paintings of his' on the cover. But only now are we gratified with a veritable exhibition of his work, which fills me with pleasure.