

Liselotte Grschebina.

A woman with a camera wandering between two heritages

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Introduction

The national narrative represents the collective experience and memory constructed by an ongoing “cultural industry”. Photography serves as one of the main venues in the process of building and exchanging national knowledge (Manikowska, 2018; Moser 2019). Moreover, photographers play a central role in the creation of visual archives, that can become active cultural agents in the nation building project. Thus, photographs and photographers do not only play a central role in the making of heritage, but also contribute to the formation and preservation of heritage for future generations (Sekula 1986).

The Zionist movement used photography for national campaigns, in order to mediate their national ideological ideas, almost since the beginning of Zionist activities in Palestine/Eretz-Israel (Mandatory Palestine) (Azoulay 2012). The photos, which were produced by numerous photographers, were used as an instrumental tool in the creation of a collective national consciousness and played a key role in constructing the national narratives and myths. The rise of the Nazi party in the 1930s prompted the flight of Jewish photographers from Germany to Mandatory Palestine. Among them were Tim Gidal, Alfred Bernheim, Helmar Lerski, Hans Pinn, Walter Zadek, Alfons Himmelreich, Ellen Auerbach, Lilly Brauer, Anna Landes, and Liselotte Grschebina. Most of the photographers brought with them both cultural heritage and photographic techniques from their homeland – Germany.

The current case study delves into the private archive of the German-Jewish photographer Liselotte Grschebina, that worked in Palestine/Eretz-Israel from the beginning of the twentieth century until the founding of the state of Israel. Grschebina’s work is rooted in the German cultural heritage and photography techniques, as well as the Zionist ideology and national culture. By examining her production of imagery at the service of the Zionist group through the lenses of her socialization into photography during the rise of the Third Reich, the study questions the process of heritage construction through these two opposed ideologies.

Furthermore, as Grschebina engaged with the Zionist ideals in Palestine/Eretz-Israel by using German photography techniques, the term heritage will be examined while delving into the complex process embedded in the creation of local heritage.

The research was conducted by using mixed methods: visual analysis of Grschebina's photographs, located in the *Israel Museum* archive, and an interview with the photographs' curator. Analyzing Grschebina's corpus explores the affinities and the relations between the photographic techniques developed by the Nazis and the Zionist ideology, and the ways both technique and ideology, of opposing perspectives, create heritage.

German cultures migrating from Germany to Palestine/Eretz-Israel in the 1930s

Between 1933 and 1941, nearly 90,000 German-speaking Jews that were living in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia found refuge in Mandatory Palestine. The *Yishuv* (Hebrew for the Jewish settlement in Palestine/Eretz-Israel), which was in itself a community of immigrants, did not easily absorb the German-speaking Jews (Sela-Sheffy 2006). Even though numerous studies have stressed the German-speaking Jews' great intellectual contribution to the making of the Jewish nation and to the Westernization of Israel, the dominant narrative regarding the German Jews, called *Yekkes*, in Mandatory Palestine and the state of Israel is that of cultural alienation (Yosef 2014). Jews in the *Yishuv* rebuked the *Yekkes* for their unwillingness to integrate into the local Zionist community and culture. The term *Yekke* alludes to the stereotype of the emigrants as highly cultured urban intellectuals; it connotes cultural difference and formal stiffness as traces of their European bourgeois past. The term meant to ridicule German-speaking Jews and mock their deeply habitualized formal manners. In the Israeli context of a young Jewish nation in the process of being created, the *Yekkes* provided "an almost ideal projection surface for what the Israeli, Jew, should not be. They were the inner Other" (Farges 2018, p. 485). The emigrants were forced to adjust to the new society and culture designed by the local Zionist movement in order to create a unified "melting pot". Thus, the emigrants were forced to be incorporated through the adoption of a new set of norms, aesthetics, and behavioral gestures. The Zionist cultural repertoire was seeking to create the "New Hebrew man" also called the "New Jew" (Almog 2000). The "New Jew" was a pioneer, a farmer, and a fighter. His archetypal character included physical and mental strength as well as stubbornness and persistence against all odds. The image of "muscle Judaism", a term coined by Max Nordau during the Second Zionist Congress of 1898, represented the opposite of the German Jew (Shapira 1997). Resisting this cultural rebirth, the German-speaking immigrants would not, and in some cases could not, free themselves easily from their diasporic roots and become

Sabras.¹ The process of incorporating Zionism while erasing the traces of European socialization was an ongoing cultural battle between the veterans and the newcomers and among the German Jews themselves (Farges 2018).

German Jewish artists in Palestine/Eretz-Israel

The immigration of Jews from Germany to Mandatory Palestine included quite a few artists. However, the artists' absorption in the field of Hebrew culture, which was then making its first steps and was largely immersed in the nation building project, wasn't simple. These migrant artists found it difficult to integrate in the local art field due to the limited scope of its activity and to the cultural difference between the new-immigrant artists and the established formulators of Hebrew culture in Palestine/Eretz-Israel. Nevertheless, the leadership of the Yishuv made great efforts to absorb artists who had emigrated from Germany before the founding of the state. Thus, for example, the renewal of the *Bezalel Academy of Art's* activities has been credited to encouraging the immigration of Jewish artists of German origin (Gelber 1990). As a result, in the 1930s about 70% of all students at Bezalel were of central European origin. No wonder therefore that the teaching language at Bezalel at that period was German, despite great opposition from the Zionist institutions. In the 1940s the head of Bezalel was the artist Mordechai Ardon (Bronstein). Ardon, himself of German origin, developed the institution and added, alongside the existing art course, also crafts courses, including: sculpture, metalwork, graphic design and drawing (Ofrat 1987). Jewish artists from Germany were not only engaged in developing the connection between art and crafts and between the academy and the museum, but even developed new creative disciplines and founded new factories. The ceramics artists Hedwig Grossman and Rudi Lehmann, who immigrated in 1933, are a typical example. The couple developed the art of ceramics in the Yishuv and even founded a few ceramics factories in Haifa and in Kibbutz Yagur, which employed Jewish, Arab, and Armenian ceramics artists (Keller 2005). However, despite the many successes, many artists found it hard to make a living and turned to other occupations: construction work, whitewashing, painting theater sets, and herding sheep, pushing artmaking to the margins. Another problem that prevented the artists from Germany from integrating into the local culture field was the Eretz-Israeli artists' frosty attitude towards Germany. In addition, artists of German origin found it difficult to translate the new cultural environment and landscape they were confronted with into their work, and to make art in the techniques they had been used to as active artists in Germany (Ofrat 2015). Most of them had been pupils of German expressionism and

1 *Asabra* is a modern Hebrew term that defines any Jew born in Israel. The term came into widespread use in the 1930s to refer to a Jew who had been born in Mandatory Palestine.

the Bauhaus. Their attempts to create a local synthesis out of all of these elements were not welcomed by the art hegemony, which at the time operated mainly in Tel Aviv. The artist Miron Sima recounts:

In Tel Aviv there was a café [...] Zaritski, Frankel and others sat there [...] Zaritsky told me:² ‘You come from Germany?’ ‘Yes’ – I answered. ‘Germans don’t have painting at all’, he said. I told him that actually in Germany there is important painting, and that modern art passes through Germany – the Bauhaus, Kokoschka, Paul Klee, Otto Dix etc. I felt very foreign, I saw that between their aesthetic approach and our less glamorous approach there was an abyss (in: Tamuz, Levite and Ofrat 1980, p. 86).

Nevertheless, and despite the many difficulties, Jewish artists of German origin became a central part of the Eretz-Israeli culture field, be it in the area of creation and publicity (Ruth-Cohan 2018), in developing the art academy, or in founding and directing galleries, museums, and craft-making factories. In particular, German Jewish artists made a considerable contribution to developing the discipline of photography and to documenting the Zionist project at its inception (Oren 1995; 2009; Hansen-Glucklich 2017).

Between two worlds: Liselotte Grschebina’s photography project

Liselotte Grschebina (1908–1994) was born in 1908 in Karlsruhe, Germany. During the years 1925–1929, Grschebina studied painting and graphic design at the local art academy, *Baden State Art School*, located in Karlsruhe (BLK), and commercial photography at the *School of Applied Arts* in Stuttgart. In January 1932 Grschebina opened her own studio, *Bilfoto*, announcing her specialization in child photography (Sela 2008).³

Having left Germany, Grschebina arrived in Mandatory Palestine in 1934, where she met Ellen Auerbach in Tel Aviv. The two opened a studio called *Ishon* (Hebrew for eyeball as well as little person) and promoted their specialization in children’s photos. Grschebina then began to integrate into the German community in Palestine/Eretz-Israel and became friends with other photographers of German origin such as Walter Zadek, Walter Kristeller, Alfons Himmerlich, Fritz Cohen, Anne Landes,

2 Joseph Zaritski (1891–1985) was a central member of the *New Horizons* artists group, which developed abstract painting in Palestine – Eretz-Israel.

3 It is important to note that during her days in Germany Grschebina also photographed “artistic images” of everyday object and sand plaster replicas of classical sculptures, using the technique of layer-combination to create unique textures. This style is more enigmatic and softer and less realistic and sharp than the photographs she made in Mandatory Palestine.

and Lilly Brauer. Together they founded the *Palestine Professional Photographers Association*. Grschebina undertook assignments for the *Palestine Railways* and the dairy company *Tnuva* (Hebrew for crop). She submitted photographs to the sports pages of Jewish newspapers, and from 1934–1947 was the official photographer of the *Women's International Zionist Organization* (WIZO). Grschebina was also one of the founders of Israel's first association of photographers – *Association of Professional Photographers* (Kaplan 2008). Grschebina's son, Beni Gjebin, discovered the photographer's archive only after her death. In the year 2000 the archive of Grschebina's photographs, with approximately 1,800 photos, was given to the photography department of the Israel Museum by Beni Gjebin and his wife Rina Shoham, with the assistance of Rachel and Dov Gottesmann.

Methods

The visual data consists of 46 photographs which were selected from the Israel Museum's digital archive. The digital archive includes only part of the 1800 photos in Grschebina's archive, from which the photographs were selected chronologically, covering the years 1929–1940. The photographs included those that were taken in her old homeland (Germany) and in her new homeland (Palestine/Eretz-Israel). The photographs were divided into three general topics: "Portraits", "Athletes", and "Pioneers". Their "Artistic style" was analyzed through the main techniques that were used: the low angle perspective and the staged background and photomontage. In addition, an interview was conducted with Dr. Noam Gal (2020), the curator of Photography at the Israel Museum. The interview lasted approximately 1,5 hours and was recorded, transcribed, and translated from Hebrew into English.

Analysis

The low angle perspective: Between the personal and the collective

The low angle perspective was popular in Germany during the socialization of Grschebina as a photographer. This technique makes the photographed subject look larger, wider, and taller, giving them a hero-like appearance. Grschebina took a lot of portraits, using the low angle technique frequently. After settling down in the Yishuv she photographed portraits of the Palestine/Eretz-Israel human and ideological environment. Among the many portraits she took before the establishment of the state of Israel, one can find Jewish children in Tel Aviv, Zionist pioneers, Jewish athletes, and Jewish immigrants from Arab countries.

Fig. 1: Liselotte Grschebina, Discus thrower, 1937 (Copyright: The Israel Museum Jerusalem)



Fig. 2: Liselotte Grschebina, Untitled, 1940 (Copyright: The Israel Museum Jerusalem)



Most of the photographs that she captured using this technique wished to arouse admiration for the heroism of the photographed figures.

A comparison between the photographs taken in Germany and the photographs taken in Palestine/Eretz-Israel shows a similar use of the low angle technique. In other words, the photographic techniques developed within the German propaganda machine helped Grschebina create a wide variety of heroic images that championed the Zionist ideal. Thus, the practices of the fascist propaganda machine were harnessed to promote the Zionist propaganda, against which, among other things, fascism was directed. To add to and augment the effect of the image and of the photographed subjects who were taking part in the nation founding project, Grschebina usually shot figures in action from a low angle. The technique of freezing the movement was also widely used in German photography at that time.

For example, photographs of female athletes that were taken in Germany and capture bodies in motion were photographed in the same way by Grschebina. (Fig. 1) The local Jewish athletes were caught in Grschebina's lenses during movement: just before making an active bodily gesture like throwing the discus or lifting a Javelin. The athletes' poses, in which their masculine bodies were frozen in time by the camera, displayed a lot of similarities with the subject, style, and visual language of photographers that served the Nazi party. Gal points to Grschebina's visual dialogue with two German photographers in particular Lenny Riefenstahl and Anna Koppiz:

People say that they recognize exactly a similar photo of Lenny Riefenstahl. It is right. Yet it is interesting that it is not Lenny Riefenstahl photograph but Grschebina's. [...] Moreover, looking at Grschebina's athletes' photographs, you can also compare them to those of Anna Koppiz's who was recruited by the Nazi party to shoot sports photography. The two women photographers – Koppiz and Grschebina – were working at the same time and with same issues and materials.

However, despite using the same techniques, Grschebina aimed to reflect a different ideology than the one promoted by antisemitism. In her photos these techniques were used to admire the Zionist muscular archetype of the "New Jew". (Fig. 2) The Zionist athletes, the industry worker, and the farmer were portrayed as strong, confident, and impressive *haluzim* (Hebrew for pioneers). These images emphasize the healthy body and soul of those Jews that immigrated from the diaspora to the promised land. They functioned as a correction of the stereotypical image of the diasporic Jew that was portrayed as weak, pale, timid, and afraid. By recruiting the German techniques to show the strength of the Jewish body, Grschebina strived to subvert the antisemitic images while contributing to the creation of the national heritage.

Despite these similarities, Grschebina's photographs of Palestine/Eretz-Israel deviated from those she took in Germany. Most of the images created in Palestine/Eretz-Israel show anonymous and nameless figures, as opposed to her Germany photos where she captured her immediate family – sister and husband – as well as famous German actors and well-known bohemians and athletes. Even though she used the same technique that had been shaped in Germany, the changes she chose to make in her Palestine photography period may imply that in the local photographs, it was more important to her to emphasize the power of the anonymous collective. The anonymous collective, as opposed to the glorified individual hero, was presented in the figure of an altruist enlisting together with his comrades, “as one”, for the common project of nation building. Thus, Grschebina's photography disposed of the singular individual and the achievements he has accumulated thanks to his personal abilities, be it in the areas of culture, sports, or society. This decision, which may have stemmed from ideological motives, suggests that Grschebina made a distinction between photographic techniques she wished to keep using in the new country, and those that no longer suited her artistic intentions and her ideological goals.

Staged background and photomontage

Constructing the background of a photograph, whether it is a realistic environment, a stage context, or a photomontage, enables the photographer to gain control of the composition. By putting together the background of the photo, the image can intensify the ideological narrative that is embedded in it. This tendency coincided with photographs taken after the Third Reich had come to power, which often showed backgrounds of activity and progress. These backgrounds conveyed a message of movement, building, and renewal. Physical construction in Germany sought to attest to the spiritual reconstruction of the German people (Prehn 2015). These backgrounds turned into a strategy for representing power. Sometimes, the visual juxtaposition of man and progress even diminished the man and gave more space to the background – progress – which became the central ideological-political message.

Photographs of the immediate living environment, with its objects (buildings, roads) and living creatures (people, animals), appear in Grschebina's photographs from Germany and from Palestine. In her photographs from Germany, the background focuses on the everyday-life scenery, especially the urban environment: city streets, laborers, and newspaper sellers. After her immigration to Palestine/Eretz-Israel in the 1930s, Grschebina was introduced to a completely different living surrounding than the one she had known in her home city of Karlsruhe. Like many Zionist photographers at the time, Grschebina's camera lenses were focused in Mandatory Palestine on the countryside, the collective settlements, and the new, emerging, Western cityscapes. These backgrounds of her photos were used to evoke admiration of the Zionist modernist progress.

Fig. 3: Liselotte Grschebina, Tel Aviv, 1939 (Copyright: The Israel Museum Jerusalem)



Fig. 4: *Liselotte Grschebina, Wizo, 1940 (Copyright: The Israel Museum Jerusalem)*



For this reason, the photo's background showed mostly new settlements, mainly that of Tel Aviv, which was being built at the time. (Fig. 3) Only a few photographs were taken of one of the most important cities in Palestine/Eretz-Israel – the Old City of Jerusalem, which showed the glory of the past instead of the national awakening of the present.

In other photos made by Grschebina the background was staged, usually by using a white or black cloth. This clean background served to detach the person that was photographed from any recognized place or space. Locating the figure against the backdrop of a heterotopian landscape erased all possible Oriental features, wrapping the photograph in a context that might imply that the local (Middle Eastern) was part of the global (Western) world. (Fig. 4)

Staging the background of the photographed figures was, as already mentioned, an important part of ideological photography. In other words, ideological photography needed the background and gave it great importance, since it was able to emphasize the political messages that the photograph wished to convey. Gal has emphasized the ways Grschebina was exposed to these techniques and the ways she was recruited to employ them in her new ideological setting:

Grschebina studied and created at a critical moment in the development of photography in Europe, especially in Germany. She was exposed to many genres, trends, and voices, and she implemented them in her work [...]. This is an ideological photography, in the sense that her [Grschebina] immediate commitment was to the procedure and practices of the Zionist ideology and beliefs. Their [the Zionist institutions'] way of commissioning a photographer would be to tell him [the photographer]: 'Now we want representations of pioneers in the kibbutz.'

In this sense, Grschebina seems to be an outcome of the socialization she received in an era that started to use photography in the service of modern political agendas. Regarding Zionist photography, Oren (2009) claims that the ideological photography was not only simply about translating political narratives into an image. The politicized photograph created an image of the different "brave new worlds" that were the wishful outcomes of these ideologies.

The monolithic, hegemonic iconography of photography is based on a Western point of view that had adapted to the modernism of the first half of the 20th Century. Photography thus created something that was not purely 'documentary', but mainly utopian (Oren 2009, p. 38). Grschebina, like other creators at the time, committed herself to this purpose. Being part of the Jewish intelligentsia, she served the main Zionist aims while holding both Zionist and modernist conceptions. As Gal indicated:

The series of sports photographs, both in Germany and in Israel, contain immediate beauty and visual attractiveness. Both series are communicative and affective. At the same time, they easily transmit embodiments of ideology that sometimes have the connotation of the Nazi or Soviet ideology. Nevertheless, and surprisingly, it is the service of a different ideology [Zionism], or maybe it is the same ideology but with different hands. The fact that national photography is abruptly passing into Jewish or Zionist hands is an interesting development and fascinating statement.

Conclusion

The photographs taken by Grschebina, a photographer who immigrated from Germany to Mandatory Palestine, show that even though she moved from one continent to the other, she did not move from one technique to the other. While Grschebina was wandering between two territories, she took with her the practices that evolved in the Third Reich's photographic repertoire. Thus, when she struggled to establish herself in the new land and adjust to a new ideology, she continued to use the techniques she learned in Germany. In that sense, Grschebina's work did not undergo transfiguration. She changed the cultural heritage that she helped build, but did not change the praxis she used. The Third Reich in Germany and Zionism in Mandatory Palestine held two very different ideologies and narrative. Despite that, Grschebina managed to translate the methods that served the Third Reich and to apply them in the Zionist context and to the Zionist goals. Thus, the photographs involved the creation of a narrative of continuity with the past, and at the same time referenced the new home and a new set of ideological-political meaning.

The ways Grschebina transmitted the German cultural heritages and transformed it into a new visual language, show how cultural heritage can wander around and create new ideas that even oppose the original one. Grschebina imported a cultural tradition and created through it a new heritage in her new homeland. Using various elements of artistic work that were developed in Germany, and using them to recreate a new visual narrative/heritage, imply that heritage can cross cultural or ideological boundaries and be converted to a different ideological language/nature. Though Grschebina was employed by the *Jewish National Fund* (Keren Kayemet) and then by WIZO, the ideological component is present through all the issues she dealt with in Israel, even if not directly. This visual language that had already been visible in German photographs (Kaplan 2008) likens the Mandatory Palestine photographers to Georg Simmel's "stranger", who is located in "a vantage point that compares and judges [...] the unknown against the known, the present against the past, the indigenous against the foreign" (in: Ashkenazi 2018, p. 93–94). The strangers embody "two worlds"; they have a position of "inside and outside" and a

bifocal vision. Their photographs constitute an in-between gaze, a manifestation of a ceaseless dialog with both “here” and “there”. This description perfectly describes Grschebina’s work, which holds a dual perspective, always containing both past and present, distance and intimacy.

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