

“Lea Grundig and Miriam Novitch: Art, Remembrance, and Politics in the Cold War”

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a) Introduction

Recent scholarship has convincingly pointed out that the Cold War not only divided the world into two blocs but also created specific circumstances under which arts and culture developed very differently. After the collapse of the Communist Bloc in the early 1990s, international research has aimed to contextualize so called “Cold War Cultures”. [FOL. 2] Five years ago, in 2009, the exhibition “Art of Two Germanys” shown in Los Angeles, Nuremberg, and Berlin shaped our understanding of how political agendas in Cold War East and West Germany influenced the visual arts.

[FOL. 3] However, (in my presentation), I’m not going to focus that much on the conditions of “Cold War Cultures”, but rather on a micro-level of historical observation, on a more biographical-personal level of history. In this paper, I will argue, that, in the 1960s, when the Cold War reached its peak and relations between Israel and the GDR were at a low point, two important figures of East German – Lea Grundig – and Israeli – Miriam Novitch – postwar cultural history were undermining the supposed stability of the two ideological blocs and proved so, that the exchange of thoughts, ideas, and artworks was possible even in the “hot phase” of the Cold War, roughly between the Cuba Crisis of 1962 and the 1975 Helsinki conference. To this dominant Cold War narrative of two aggressive and hostile ideologies, I will add a concrete story of personal Cold War relationships to show how this has influenced art, remembrance, and politics in the 1960s.

In order to do so, I will present you some aspects of the correspondence between Grundig and Novitch which I have discovered in 2010 in Grundig’s archive at the Academy of Arts Berlin.

The letters are dating from 1965 to 1969 and they do concern, as mentioned above, art, remembrance, and politics. From an archival point of view, I must mention that only Novitch's letters are existing in the Berlin archive but I am about to find Grundig's letters here in an Israeli archive, as well.

My thesis is that the letters by Novitch to Grundig prove that artworks of the Jewish East German Communist and Grundig could be seen as a sign of spiritual resistance and a unique artefact of the commemoration of the Holocaust by a surviving, politically engaged German Jew. The contextualization of these letters might be another step towards a critical reexamination of the cultural relationship between Israel and the GDR during the 1960s.

The German-Jewish graphic artist, Holocaust survivor, and cultural politician Lea Grundig, was president of the East German Association of Visual Artists, from 1964 to 1970. During these years, but even before, she was in contact with several Israeli individuals and institutions while her party, the East German Socialist Party (SED), was not interested in relations with the Jewish state at all, following Soviet anti-Israeli policies. **[FOL. 4]** Not only because of Walter Ulbricht's – head of the SED since 1950 – visit in Egypt in 1965, but also because the Six-Days-War in 1967 and the Yom-Kippur-War in 1973, both in which the GDR supported Syria with weapons, technology and manpower, the 1960s marking the low point of the GDR-Israeli affairs.

[FOL. 5] Meanwhile, in Israel, Miriam Novitch, a Russian-French Jew, founder and curator of the Ghetto Fighters' House Art Museum, and also a Holocaust survivor, was collecting artworks by Grundig and other Eastern artists as artifacts of what she called *spiritual resistance* against the Nazis. According to the Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer, every form of

Jewish resistance is significant and worth research because it demonstrates unique qualities of humanity during an extremely inhumane situation.

While the first part of my talk deals with the letters, in the second part, I will try to sketch out some possible questions for future research on Lea Grundig as a Jewish artist and, more generally, on the German-Israeli Cold War cultural history, with which I will finish my paper.

b) Biographical Information

As we have already heard from Angelika and Eckhart, the biographical history of Lea Grundig between a Jewish orthodox family settled in the early 20th century in Dresden [FOL. 6], her “conversion” to Communism in the mid-1920s together with Hans, her engagement in the Widerstand against the Nazis, which still needs to be investigated, her migration to Israel in 1940 and her return, re-establishment, and way to political power in postwar Germany is familiar to you. [Fol. 7] This account was mainly established by herself through her autobiography published in 1958 for the first time and then until 1984 in ten editions and by East German art historians like Eberhard Bartke, Wolfgang Hütt or Peter Feist. After the German reunification in 1990, Grundig’s story was re-told in the 1996 publication “Lea Grundig – Jew, Communist, Graphic Artist”. However, none of these publications have ever focused on her relationships to Israel after 1949 nor they analyzed her correspondence with Novitch. So, based on the state of research, we do not know if Grundig has ever met Novitch here in Tel Aviv, Haifa or Jerusalem or how and when they got to know to each other.

[FOL. 8] Like Grundig’s, Novitch’s biography demonstrates the incalculable impact of the Nazi terror in Europe. The following biographical sketch is based on Barbara Distel’s paper on Novitch as collector which is also the only German publication on her. Novitch was born in 1908 in the county of Grodno and died in 1990 in Israel. After studying in Vilnius, she

moved to Paris. When Germany occupied France in the summer of 1940, Novitch became part of the Résistance. The Gestapo captured Novitch in 1943 and imprisoned her in the camp at Vittel. According to Distel, this experience of suffering was a turning point in Novitch's attitude towards the "Jewish question". She began intensively to identify with Judaism and turned to Zionism, which she had previously rejected. In 1946 Novitch moved to Palestine together with Zivia Lubetkin and Yitzhak Zuckermann, surviving leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. They became residents of the kibbutz "The Ghetto Fighters" among other Jewish partisans and survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto. Since her experiences in France, Novitch saw it as "her life's work and mission to preserve the memory of the murdered European Jews". The members of the kibbutz decided to establish a museum to show the resistance of Jews against the Nazis by "emphasizing the bravery, spiritual triumph and the incredible ability of Holocaust survivors and the fighters of the revolt". As curator of the art collection, Novitch collected artistic works depicting the Holocaust as well as art works created in situ: in Concentration and forced labor camps, hiding places, and ghettos. Novitch's activities turned the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum into one of the oldest and largest art collections worldwide with an emphasis on the Holocaust. It was also Novitch who shaped the term *spiritual resistance* in order to describe the artists' motivations for working during these dark times, understanding the importance and uniqueness of the art created under inhuman conditions. When presenting a selection of drawings and prints from the collection of the Ghetto Fighters' House in some major US-art museums in 1978/79, the back-then curator of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Tom L. Freudenheim, wrote in his introductory essay:

"If there are profound artistic statements here, they are primarily in the realm of reminding us that the artist remains an artist in spite of all. It is an extraordinary testimonial to the vitality of the creative energy that even incarceration cannot stifle. And, of course, this art individualizes and lost in the accumulated data that surrounds

all of history [...] The artists who created these works in the midst of unspeakable tragedy remind us of that fact and of the incredible ability of people to retain their humanity. That is not a new role for art, even if it attains new meaning here.”

The significance of the term “spiritual resistance” to describe what Freudenheim has called an “extraordinary testimonial to the vitality of the creative energy” has been recently adopted by Rachel Kostanian-Danzig in her publication “Spiritual resistance in the Vilna Ghetto” of 2002 and will also be implemented in the following observations on the letters by Novitch to Grundig.

c) The letters in the Academy of Arts, Berlin

The mentioned letters are date from 1965 to 1969. The letters by Novitch are written in English, French, and partly in German. Grundig’s answers are entirely in German. The corpus includes six letters, of which five are by Novitch.

To summarize the content in short: Novitch convinced Grundig to send graphics to the Ghetto Fighters’ House and explained her advocacy for Holocaust remembrance throughout Europe: “Your gifts are very important for our Museum, for its collection of art, drawings, paintings and engravings on the subject of war and the struggle for peace. Any further gifts will be welcomed”, as she wrote in August 1968 to Lea Grundig.

In response, Grundig sent graphics at least three times to Israel, in summer 1965, spring 1966, and autumn 1968. In the end, 17 graphics by Grundig entered Novitch’s art collection. The letters also address the topic of Israeli holocaust commemoration within in the framework of Novitch’s museum. **[FOL. 9]** That is why Novitch also collected works by Leo Haas, born in

1901, and Herbert Sandberg, born in 1908, both Berlin-based German Jews and Holocaust survivors living in the GDR. While Grundig migrated to Palestine to escape the Holocaust, Haas was imprisoned in such concentration camps as Nisko in Poland and Theresienstadt in the Czech Republic, and Sandberg was a prisoner in Buchenwald. Both created art illegally during that time. Theirs' appears to be highly authentic material derived from Jewish eyewitnesses, whereas Grundig's graphics reflect the Holocaust on another level, one she described as "fantastic realism"

[FOL. 10] Novitch frequently speaks about her journeys through Europe, travelling to the sites of former concentration camps in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands: "I received your kind letter addressed in Frankfurt. I am still in Germany, and I'll remain here until the end of the year. I am assisting at several trials and collecting new documents and writing about. Now I am in the city of Oldenburg, where is brought to trial the SS man responsible for the killing of the Jew from Ukraine, I am also at Hagen, and will remain here at the trial of the Sobibor camp [...] and I am also travelling as far as Hechingen, to assist at a trial where is the question of extermination of the Jewish people from my city of Wilna... so you see there is a lot to do. From my lovely sejour in Hungary remained only nice memories and I am all again in the work", as Novitch mentioned in September 1965.

We do also have photographic evidence that Novitch visited West and East German memorial sites, such as Dachau and Buchenwald. She also visited Berlin. A photograph, now in the archive of the Ghetto Fighters' House, shows Novitch in front of the Soviet Monument in Treptower Park—located in East Berlin. While Novitch was travelling, she also collected art works and met artists personally. She was doing scientific research for the "International Federation of the Resistance", founded in 1951 in Vienna. She also was busy visiting art exhibitions. For example, in spring 1969, she saw a Grundig-exhibition in Milan, Italy.

Since my time is limited, I can only touch on some of the topics addressed in the letters. Firstly and basically it can be said that the exchange of thoughts and artworks was only possible by post. This may sound trivial but we have to note that the GDR monitored correspondence massively and perfidiously.

Secondly: It is remarkably that Novitch never addressed Grundig's state positions in the GDR – for example her presidency and membership in the SED – or her professional career as Professor for graphic art at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts which she held beginning in 1949. **[FOL. 11]** While Novitch's focus was foremost on Grundig's role as an individual, as a Jewish artist who had created important works, Grundig described herself as a partisan artist fighting collectively for the Communist ideal. While Novitch believed Grundig's reputation was based on her Holocaust-cycles, Grundig had to fight rigorously for the acceptance of these works in the GDR in the 1950s and created later, in the 1960s, on other topics such as the image of the working class or the fight against the nuclear war. We might say that Novitch's appreciation for the fellow Jew Grundig was one-sided. Nevertheless, for Grundig the interaction with Novitch and her art museum seemed of high importance, because she presented her graphics as gifts and ignored the GDR's state anti-Israeli attitudes.

[FOL. 12] Thirdly: Novitch's journeys and activities demonstrate the international and spatial dimensions of the Holocaust as a European phenomenon which transcended every border of the so called "Iron Curtain". Even though Holocaust remembrance in the GDR was focused on German and Soviet Communism, by lending artworks, Grundig, Haas and Sandberg somehow participated in the politics of memory performed by an Israeli art institution. While Novitch had opportunities to travel relatively independently on both sides of the "Iron Curtain", for Grundig this was not the case.

Fourthly: Novitch and Grundig were both victims of the Holocaust, but draw very different conclusions from their experiences: Novitch settled in Israel after having lived in Russia and France, she never returned permanently back to her origins. Novitch was a refugee who found a new home in Israel. In Israel, she rediscovered her Jewishness, which she had denied before the war. That makes her a representative for many European Jews after the Holocaust. [FOL. 13] On the other hand some Jews – such as Grundig – returned to their origins, even to Germany and even if the majority of the Jews had migrated and cancelled all connections to the places of their origins. It seems that Communist Jews in East Germany tended to negate their Jewishness in order to follow the Communist ideal of a society without classes, because according to Marx, the “Jewish question” was seen not as a religious or cultural issue but as a class struggle. Intellectuals, artists or politicians as Hanns Eisler, Anna Seghers, Victor Klemperer or Hermann Axen also negated widely their Jewish descent in the GDR after 1945 – that is: as far as we know today.

To summarize, Grundig and Novitch represent two versions of the Jewish reaction to the Holocaust after 1945: assimilation and disappearance on the one hand, Renaissance and reactivation of one’s own cultural roots on the other.

Fifthly: By acquiring graphics from the GDR and integrating them into an Israeli art collection, Novitch undermined the traditional separation of Eastern, considered to be constrained art, and Western, considered to be free and independent art, because she evidently did not judge art by the country of its origin or by political agenda but by content and morality. Again, Novitch emphasized inner-artistic categories and not so much external factors like politics or ideology. This represents a significant difference from the point of view in the GDR, where art was seen as superstructure dependent, that is, derived from and reflecting the economy, politics, and social structure determined by the SED as Eckhart has

shown. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, Grundig's "official" artworks mirrored these tendencies in GDR-cultural policies.

d) Summary

Art historical research after the German reunification used to stress the limited artistic Holocaust remembrance in the Eastern state. It was the common opinion within the art historical community that under the dictatorial conditions of the GDR, no individual forms of Holocaust remembrance overstepping state regulations had been possible. This was underlined by the fact of the problematic relationships between Israel and the GDR from 1949 onwards. Since the GDR never took responsibility for German guilt in relationship to Jewish persecution in the era of World War II, and Soviet policy was designed to help anti-Israeli allies such as Egypt, Syria, and Iran, the GDR and Israel had no political common ground. **[FOL. 14]** Even though many leading Eastern intellectuals, artists and politicians were of Jewish descent – for example Stefan Heym, Arnold Zweig, Helene Weigel, John Heartfield, or Albert Norden – it was only in the late 1980s that the GDR was interested in improving the relationships with Israel on a higher diplomatic level: **[FOL. 15]** In 1988, Erich Honecker, head of the SED after Ulbricht since 1971, laid the foundation stone for the *Centrum Iudaicum* in Berlin, which has been partly destroyed fifty years before, in 1938.

[FOL. 16] However, we have seen that if one leaves the macro level of global Cold War politics and focuses on a much more in-depth study of the micro level of biographies and individual cases, we observe that the Iron Curtain was to a certain extent made of Nylon. By travelling, writing and exchanging letters, collecting and creating art, Grundig and Novitch developed specific and genuine forms of overcoming Cold War borders in 1960s Europe.

e) Outlook

Let me conclude my presentation on Grundig and Novitch with some reflections upon three future research fields which might be investigated, discussed, and evaluated after our conference.

[Fol. 17] First: By stressing the importance of Grundig's role in the concept of spiritual resistance of Novitch, I have tried to show that her relationship undermined Cold War politics. If we shift our attention beyond that Cold War framework, there might be more interesting and challenging aspects of what I would like to call the "art of being Jewish" in the case of Lea Grundig. Scholars in Jewish studies have argued, that "Jewish art is far from monolithic in style, form and subject" and that "Jewish art needs to be studied" because it "is continually shaped by difference". The research of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp in their book "The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times", published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2008 and Baskind and Silver's convincing "Jewish Art. A Modern History" (London 2011), might serve as examples. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp are arguing that the question "What is Jewish art?" points to the fact, that "the "modern Jewish experience" has in some sense been a pointedly artistic one". These scholars have also observed that some Jewish artists in the 20th century in the West strategically decided whether to be Jewish or not. To quote again from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Karp: "When does "Jewish" matter? Under what circumstances, whether historical or conceptual, is the Jewishness of the artist or the work's subject or style or its contexts of creation or reception relevant? When does Jewishness demand explanation? When is it explanatory? What does it account for?"

All of these highly interesting questions have not been asked – as far as I know – for any German-Jewish artist from the East. We simply do not know if Grundig has observed her art as "being Jewish" or if she felt that her "Jewish" topics need to be explained – whether to an

Israeli audience or a German audience - or if her “Jewish” art was in any aspect meaningful for her personally or her reception in Israel.

In my point of view, this lack of research is still a consequence of elder art historical narratives which were partly re-written by scholars today. In dominant narratives, the Grundig was mainly and most importantly configured in her being a partisan and Communist artist fighting against her “conservative Jewish family”, the capitalist system, Fascism, and enemies in West Germany making and marking her as ‘other’, i.e. as someone, who cut off her Jewish roots and her past identity. This might be not totally wrong, but it is to some extent an ideological construction and leads to a simplified and narrowed image of Grundig as a historical figure and artist. Instead, it might be interesting to reflect her “otherness” with regards of her being a Jewish, female artist within different social and cultural contexts. This could also contribute to a more complex and multi-perspective view on her life and work.

[Fol. 18] Second: Much art historical work needs to be done to contextualize Grundig’s art into the history of German-Jewish art of the 20th century. In February 2013, a group of international scholars was discussing the issue of German-Jewish art of the 20th century at the Annual Conference of the College Art Association in New York. The discussion made clear, that especially German research tends mainly to analyze art of the 20th century under ideological and political perspectives. As a result, other narratives of the history of art – for example a Jewish perspective – are often underestimated or unknown. In my opinion, it might be interesting to embed Grundig’s works not only into the politicized Dresden art-scene of the 1920s and early 1930s, but also into the debates on Jewish art in Germany which rose under intellectuals of the Weimar Republic and even later in exile-discourses.

[Fol. 19] For example: What does it mean for the interpretation of Grundig's graphics when the art historian Ernst Cohn-Wiener writes in his book "The Jewish Art. From its beginnings to the Present" (Berlin 1929): "Jewish art tends to the book and the graphic arts, because it tends to the thought [...] conscious Jewish art lives in the Expressionism." And he continues with Ludwig Meidner and Jakob Steinhardt as "Jewish expressionists" struggling for a distinct "Jewish" style and form. Both, Meidner and Steinhardt were described by Baskind and Silver as "cultural prophets of doom" providing "a distinctly Jewish vision". Was Grundig also such a cultural prophet, being Jewish by style, form, and content?

[Fol. 20] Especially the compelling book by Ziva Amishai-Maisels on "The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts" (1993) has aimed to show art historical sources of inspiration for Grundig in the works by Samuel Hirszenberg and others. One could also question if the cultural sources of East European Jewishness to which the Langer family has belong, influenced Grundig's visual memory before and during her exile.

[Fol. 21] And, as Baskind and Silver have pointed out, the genres of landscape painting and portrait of laborers were a specialty of immigrated German-Jewish artists like Anna Ticho or Leopold Krakauer – and, that is to say, Grundig. Grundig also depicted the "common men" in the landscape and cities – if those works by Grundig were "suggesting a different, regional model for the new "Hebrew" settler [...] to become a pioneer in the region", as Baskind and Silver wrote for the early Israeli art, needs to be investigated.

[Fol. 22] Until now, the qualities of her Israeli portraits and landscapes have not been seen within her artistic development since the 1920s. Bartke's account of 1975 might serve as an example of how the official, partisan art history of the GDR has underestimated the "exile experience" in Grundig's case. Bartke wrote that Grundig's art of portraying was nearly

complete as early as in the 1920s when she got in touch with communist politics and ideology. In fact, Grundig was an extraordinary observer of the Dresden proletariat and depicted fascinating portraits until the mid-1930s. However, it should not be forgotten that she moved on in this genre during her years in exile. When she continued in portraying in the early 1950s in the GDR, she returned to her artistic roots AND she continued also her latest experience in sketching Jews, Arabs, and refugees. **[Fol. 23]** The same holds true for the genre of landscape for which Bartke tells us in 1975, that, in the 1930s, she “uncovered the social physiognomy” of the city of Dresden, its “face of the class”. When in Israel, she then “developed her natural sense for the beauty of landscape” interpreted by him as an act of liberation. But Bartke is not going any further in saying that this “exile experience” marked its influence even after 1949 in a series of landscape graphics of East German and other natural beauties.

[Fol. 24] What Baskind and Silver name in her modern history of Jewish art “a desire for a new national ideology, the “New Jew” leads me finally to my third and last point: For me, it seems that a comparative approach of the visual, architectonic, and performing arts in both, the early GDR and early Israel, might reveal new aspects of Cold War Cultures in terms of nation-building and the construction of national art and identity. Both countries – however they might differentiate in many aspects – were unified on one hand by the challenge to find new symbols, buildings, ceremonies, visuals etc. to define themselves as being different or being something other than their neighbors or historic ancestors. But on the other hand they were also unified by the issue of absorbing traditions and create a “new state” for “new men”: “New Jews” here and “New Workers” there. In short: What did it mean to “perform the state” in both, postwar Germany and postwar Israel?

If this conference and my reflections here will provide a small impetus for more questions and future research on German-Israeli relationships in the 20th century in both countries, I would be very pleased.

[her Jewishness was excluded in the analysis of her work, until now → change = aim of future research]