

P R E F A C E

This book tells the story—through narrative, correspondence, original documents, and illustrations—of the remarkable life of Marc Chagall, an artist and a Jew, thrown into the excitement and turmoil of the twentieth century. It is a large volume, reflecting the immense range of Chagall's ninety-eight years of creative life and wanderings (1887–1985). He had three wives and three cultural identities: Jewish, Russian, and French. He was influenced by Fauvism, Russian Neo-Primitivism, and avant-garde painting, by Yiddish literature, Russian poetry, and the Hebrew Bible; he was attracted to Surrealism and Expressionism, Zionism and Communism, yet always recoiled from groups and ideologies and retreated into his own private world. Chagall was, in his own perception, a Wandering Jew, who carried his home on his back around the globe. The major stations of his life were the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Russia, the Tsarist capital St.-Petersburg, post-Cubist Paris, Russia in World War I, the Revolutionary Soviet Union, Berlin, again Paris, Palestine, Vichy France, New York City and upstate New York, again France, Israel, and his final home in the French Riviera.

The book offers a new reconstruction of Marc Chagall's life and consciousness, based on hundreds of letters and original documents found in many pri-



"Remembrance," gouache, India ink, and pencil on paper. A Jew goes into exile, tears in his eyes, carrying not a peddler's sack but the memory of his home with him. To represent Chagall's own Jewish experiences, he uses the icon of a religious Jew, not of the young generation: elderly, with hat and beard. Drawing with Chagall's whimsical asymmetries. It is the small, minimal version of a house, with mother or grandmother in the door (see the image of his grandfather on the roof in Chapter 2). In the lower right corner is a penciled date: 914 (with Chagall's typical omission of the "1" for one thousand). The signature in ink above it seems to be renewed on top of an earlier penciled signature. To the left of it is an inscription in German: Erinnerung 1914; this must have been added when Chagall was in Berlin in 1922–1923. The painting is ascribed to ca. 1918, but Chagall's date sends us back to the experience of exile in 1914–1915, when Vitebsk was flooded by refugees and to other paintings of the Wandering Jew of that period.

vate and public archives. It is written on two interrelated levels: (1) the voices of Marc Chagall and his contemporaries, as recorded in Chagall's autobiographical writings, private letters, official documents, and other texts, all annotated and translated into English; and (2) my own narrative voice, connecting the original documents and telling the story of the major stages in Chagall's life and their historical and cultural contexts; these portions are set off typographically.

Most of the original texts presented here have never been published before. The book contains Chagall's own autobiographical writings of various years, as well as hundreds of letters written in several languages by Chagall or by his contemporaries and companions.

I wrote the Introduction and Chapter 1, as well as many passages—a kind of narrative “voice-over” running throughout the book. It is a story quite different from the well-known Chagall biography, repeated in many books and catalogues. It is based on a rethinking of all available documentary material, both known and hitherto unknown. Yet in most cases, I have tried not to interpret the documents or analyze the motivations of their protagonists; I let them speak for themselves, leaving a great deal open to the reader's impressions and interpretations.

The book can be read as a nonfictional novel, written by an omniscient author who presents the characters and lets them speak for themselves. It is not just a book about Marc Chagall, but a book about the times and places he lived in; large chunks of modern history, and particularly Jewish history, are reflected in it.

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The scope of Chagall's written legacy, mostly unknown, required a division of the material into two books. This volume contains his autobiographical writings, a selection of the correspondence, and my narrative outline of his life. His public statements, lectures, essays, and interviews are included in a separate volume, *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*. For interpretations of Chagall's paintings and iconography, the reader may turn to my forthcoming book *The Art of Marc Chagall*.

The letters and documents are inevitably of a double selection. First, a great deal of material has been preserved for some periods and with some correspondents, yet for others little or nothing survived. Second, we have many written utterances on some topics, while others remained oral, painterly, intuitive, and not articulated in language. For reasons of space, I selected only about a third of the original letters available to us; many letter exchanges had to be excerpted, and other correspondents not included. Nevertheless, I have tried to represent each kind of issue and, even when curtailed, every correspondence has been represented with sufficient continuity for the scattered letters to echo and respond to each other.

Thus, for the first time, we have a well-documented image of Chagall's stormy activities as "commissar" (actually, "Plenipotentiary for Matters of Art in Vitebsk Province"). It is a vivid example of the involved yet precarious role of the revolutionary artist in molding the culture of the Russian Revolution. And for the first time, Chagall's pro-Zionist and pro-Communist sentiments and disappointments of various years are openly exposed. Above all, the sources of his art, his apprenticeship, his struggles and successes, his explorations of a range of different artistic media, and the religious problematic of his church art are illuminated from within. Furthermore, in many letters we can see his incessant, anxious, yet ambivalent attachment to the Jewish world, and the central place it occupied in Chagall's consciousness throughout his life.

An especially interesting period was the seven years (1945–1952) in the prime of his life, when Chagall lived with Virginia Haggard. Between his two official marriages—with Bella (Berta) Rosenfeld (1915–1944) and Vava (Valentina) Brodsky (1952–1985)—the common-law marriage with Virginia, blessed by their son David, occurred at a critical time in Chagall's life, when he moved from the American haven back to post-Holocaust Europe. During this time, he was sympathetic to Soviet Russia and bitterly defeated by Stalin's anti-Semitism; admired the new

State of Israel and contemplated working for Christian churches; recovered his prewar engravings, published them, and received First Prize in the Venice Biennale of 1948; bought houses and pondered his homelessness; and was accepted as a major European artist. We have hundreds of letters written by Virginia in English or French to many friends and collectors, notably their close friends, the Yiddish writer Yosef Opatoshu and his wife Adele, describing daily events, little joys, and big worries; as well as many letters from Chagall to Virginia, the Opatoshus, the art chronicler Pavel Ettinger in Moscow, and others. Even personal and business letters not written by Marc himself reflect his responses to a large extent. Virginia told me that Marc would "dictate" such letters to her, though, no doubt, her style and personality dominated the text. These letters raise a curtain on Chagall's daily life, exploits, loves, and ambitions, whose like we do not have for any other period.

Of particular interest is the correspondence with Chagall's collectors and friends, notably Louis Stern, Bernard Reis, Chagall's dealer Pierre Matisse in New York, and Professor John Ulric Nef in Chicago, conducted by Marc, his daughter Ida, Virginia, or Vava; as well as his correspondence with friends in Israel, notably Meir Dizengoff, first Mayor of Tel Aviv; Kadish Luz, Speaker of the Knesset; and Abraham Sutzkever, anti-Nazi partisan, Yiddish poet and editor. And last but not least, Chagall's letters to Charles Marq, the master artist who for twenty-seven years collaborated with Chagall and produced all his stained glass windows, and to Charles Sorlier, the master printer of his lithographs.

I have also recovered the complete early version of Chagall's autobiography from a manuscript of 1924 (see Chapter 2). Later, this autobiography was expanded and reworked in a French translation by Bella Chagall (whose French at the time was a few years old) and published in 1931 as *Ma vie*, from which the well-known English *My Life* and all translations in other languages were made. The published version is prodigiously quoted in books on Chagall, but the ear-

lier version is more authentic and precise, and includes many details that were later suppressed or omitted. Furthermore, I have included several additional autobiographical chapters, scattered in long-forgotten Russian and Yiddish journals between 1922 and 1939, as well as Chagall's poems, written in Yiddish on specific occasions and contributing to the story of his life.

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Preparing Chagall's multilingual letters and texts for a contemporary reader involved international detective work, seeking and finding letters and manuscripts in dozens of public and private archives; retrieving publications in old and marginal journals; and translating them all into English. In addition, I tried to identify the dates and events; place the texts in their chronological context, where they responded to and complemented each other; decipher allusions to persons or events mentioned in them; and provide hundreds of annotations. Thus, I tried to reconstruct the world in which Chagall moved—a large chunk of the twentieth century.

In principle, all texts appear in this book in their chronological order. As a result, and as in real life, Chagall's relations with a variety of persons and topics are interlaced with no system. For the reader's convenience, the flow of time has been divided into chapters; their titles take off from some event or theme, but other themes flow in and out and the title topic may continue in later chapters.

Several memoirs, however, written after the events but mainly describing an earlier period are placed in the earlier time frame. Thus, a memoir on Chagall's work in the Moscow Yiddish Theater, published in 1928, is placed in the period of his work there (1920). Essays containing recollections of his Russian teachers Yury Pen and Léon Bakst, his early mentors and friends Maxim Vinaver, Yakov Tugendhold, and Dr. Isidore Elyashev, or his visit with Max Liebermann in Berlin, all written in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, are placed in the time frame of their main focus. Similarly, Chagall's second French period, starting in 1923,

is introduced by an interview given in 1927, centering on his adoption of France as his "Second Vitebsk"; and the FBI surveillance of Chagall in the United States is given in the summary Report of the FBI, placed at the beginning of his American period.

Persons and events are briefly described the first time they become relevant to the text. Names mentioned in passing are merely identified, whereas key events and historical and biographical contexts are introduced either in the narrator's essay or in a margin note. There is an obvious exception: The many names mentioned in Chagall's autobiography (Chapter 2) are merely identified there, while more substantial descriptions are given when the person actually appears on the scene, from Chapter 3 onward. Important clarifications of the text and its connotations are provided in margin notes, whereas references and other annotations are in the endnotes.

I have indicated in each text the language from which it was translated (French, Yiddish, Russian, German, or Hebrew) or transcribed (English). The date, whenever available, is registered in the exact form of the original. Therefore, if the full date is given in numbers, we must distinguish between the European way, writing day first and month second; and the American way, starting with the month. For example, "3.12" can mean either December 3 in a European context, or March 12 in an American context, respectively. From an analysis of the content, in most cases it was possible to reconstruct the correct date. Whenever the numbers are unclear, I indicated the correct month in words, or added a reconstructed date in brackets.

The word *rebe* in Yiddish (from the Hebrew *rabi*) has several distinctly different meanings, disambiguated by native speakers in each context. In English we shall distinguish as follows: *Rebbe* is the hereditary head of a Hasidic dynasty; *rebbe* is a religious schoolteacher in *Heder* (also used metaphorically, for someone's teacher, if the person was a pupil and follower of his); *Reb* followed by a

name is equivalent to "Mr." ("Reb Alter"); *Rov* (Hebrew *Rav*) is a clearly defined title of a religious authority, a person with a rabbinical degree and a hired religious head of a Jewish community, similar to the contemporary American concept of "Rabbi." It is important to note that the word *Yidish* in Yiddish, or *Evrey-sky* in Russian, means both the nation (Jewish) and the language (Yiddish). In the English translation we could use only one meaning, depending on the context, yet the other should be kept in mind. Another ambiguity.

An interesting detail is the fact that in many letters and paintings, Chagall wrote the year without the "1" for one thousand; thus, "928" means "1928." This reflected Chagall's primarily spoken knowledge of Russian: For the English "nineteen twenty-eight" the Russian says "nine hundred twenty-eight," omitting the thousand. He knew languages mainly by talking.

A caution: We must not use our contemporary modes of judgment about Chagall's discourse. He was a cosmopolitan and liberal man, and yet, when addressing other Jews in Yiddish, he often used the same clichés as his parents or the "folk" in the Pale of Settlement. Thus, people belonged to categories: You don't encounter a "man" but either a "Goy" or a "Jew," and a woman is either a "Goya" or a "Jewess." There is nothing necessarily pejorative about such expressions, though they may carry stereotypical connotations, it was simply part of his language and social categorization. For example, when describing his work in Mexico, he refers to the Mexicans as "the black-yellow Goyim. Something sings out of their souls." And a "Goy" could also be an assimilated Jew or any Jew illiterate in Judaism, like Chagall himself.

social categorization:
The usage is somewhat like that in African-American novels, referring to a "brother" or a "sister," just as an indication that they are black.

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I have not preserved all awkward spellings, but I have retained some colorful idioms or disjointed syntax. In letters written in English, I left the language as is, even when it is not quite idiomatic or correct, as in Ida Chagall's English letters. Parentheses are often used by Chagall and other authors; brackets indicate my

own insertions—providing either complementary information [] or explanatory information [=]. Many ellipses are used in the original; ellipses in brackets [. . .] indicate my deletion of text.

The structure of this book is as follows: In Chapter 1, “Imagining Chagall’s Childhood and Youth” I set the cultural and political context of Chagall’s early life. Chapter 2, “Chagall’s First Autobiography,” contains the early version of Marc Chagall’s own mythologized story. Chapters 3–25 resume Chagall’s life story, through letters and texts, starting with his earliest experiences in learning art, around 1900, and continuing through his death in 1985. My own introductions and interventions are always indented.

Abbreviations

- Marc Chagall and His Times** Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Marc Chagall on Art and Culture** Benjamin Harshav, editor, *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater** *Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992 (pp. 15–204 by B. Harshav).
- Marc Chagall: Les années russes** *Marc Chagall: Les années russes, 1907–1922*, Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1995 (two essays and twenty interpretations by B.H.).¹
- The Meaning of Yiddish** *The Meaning of Yiddish*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; paperback edition: Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Language in Time of Revolution** *Language in Time of Revolution*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993; paperback edition: Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Ma vie** Marc Chagall, *Ma vie*, Traduit de russe par Bella Chagall, Préface d’André Salmon, Paris: Librairie Stock, 1931.

My Life Marc Chagall, *My Life*, Translated from the French by Elisabeth Abbott, New York: Orion Press, 1960.

My Own World Marc Chagall, *My Own World*, Chapter 2 in this volume.

Acknowledgments

I encountered the legendary Marc Chagall in my childhood, when he came with Bella to my native Vilna in the summer of 1935 to inaugurate a Jewish Art Museum, which he had initiated. We had a *dacha* next to a summer colony for “weak” (actually, tubercular) Jewish city children, directed that summer by my father, Dr. Abraham Hrushovski, who hosted a visit by the great historian Shimon Dubnov and Marc Chagall (see the photo in Chapter 12). Sixty years later, I was fortunate to talk and correspond with members of the family: Marc Chagall’s daughter Ida Chagall, still impressive in her last days; her ex-husband and dean of Chagall studies Franz Meyer; the artist’s son, songwriter and novelist David McNeil; and Chagall’s granddaughters Bella Meyer and Meret Meyer-Graber, who spend a great deal of time and energy on the Chagall legacy.

My special thanks and admiration go to the foremost Chagall specialist and indefatigable researcher Meret Meyer-Graber, granddaughter of Marc Chagall and daughter of his ground-breaking biographer Franz Meyer, who opened to me her mother’s large collection of documents, letters, and photographs. Of special value are the many letters, reviews, and documents, copied for Ida Chagall on a typewriter by the prominent Jewish Russian literary scholar Ilya Samuilovich Zilbershteyn in Moscow in 1959.

A most unusual role in this book was played by Virginia Haggard-Leirens, Chagall’s common-law wife for seven years. She generously shared with me Chagall’s personal letters to her and allowed me to use the hundreds of letters she wrote to friends and business relations during their life together, which I found in various archives fifty years later. Our vivid picture of Chagall’s private life owes a great

deal to Virginia's intelligent and prolific letter writing, describing it in all its colorful details from within. Though she had not seen her own letters in half a century, they support and supplement her own book of memoirs.² Virginia answered dozens of my queries in writing, clarifying many forgotten issues, and made many photographs available to me. Her presence in this book speaks for itself.

The book benefited from the contributions of the Moscow art historian Dr. Alexandra Shatskikh, who put at my disposal her annotated edition of Chagall's letters to Pavel Ettinger and responded to many queries, based on her extensive knowledge of the period.

The book was enriched by material from the files on Chagall in the archives of the FBI and the U.S. Department of State, released according to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The material was obtained by the Public Citizen Litigation Group in Washington, D.C., directed by David Vladeck, whose grandfather B. Vladeck was a friend of Chagall and a Yiddish poet, as well as a prominent political leader in New York City under Mayor LaGuardia. I owe special thanks to Attorneys Lucinda Sykes and Douglas Stevick, who applied their indefatigable effort and professional devotion to the cause of uncovering the truth.

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All private and public owners of letters published here were marvelously forthcoming. They deserve my thanks and the gratitude of Chagall scholars and readers of this book. Unfortunately, there are still many inaccessible letters in various collections; their eventual availability will surely add to our knowledge, as well as to the value of the documents themselves.

The author would be most grateful for any additional letters or other texts and memoirs, as well as corrections of my inevitable mistakes—to be used for my work in progress on Chagall's life and art: Benjamin Harshav, J. & H. Blaustein Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature and Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Yale University. Department of Comparative Literature, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520-8299, USA . E-Mail: Benjamin.Harshav@yale.edu

—B. H.