

Appendix D

This is the transcript of parts of the interview recorded on tape that Dr. David Roskies had with Rachel Wischnitzer in her home during the fall of 1971.¹

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Rachel Wischnitzer: Have you seen the collection of Rimon?

David Roskies: I have only seen individual copies.

RW: I was in London and discovered for myself illuminated manuscripts at the British Museum. So I had photographs made of them and wrote an article which I published here in America. I sent it to the Jewish Quarterly Review. My English was still bad. It is not good now either. But at that time, of course, I was just starting. You know, in Russian schools you had French and German, but not English. So I didn't have English as a child. I can learn a language only hearing it. I cannot learn theoretically but I have to start really talking in the language. So, English ... I started in the way ... Well, I gave some lectures in London under the auspices of Moses Gaster. Do you know him?

DR: Yes. The folklorist, of course.

RW: The father of ...

DR: I'm studying with his son, now.

RW: Oh, ya?

DR: Yes, at Colombia.

RW: He later published the little book on the ketubah. The same publishing house.

DR: What years are we talking about, now?

RW: 1919. So, I arrived there after the war. After the war I went to Russia to get my parents out. I was an Austrian citizen. So was my husband. He was an Austrian officer during the war. So, we were separated. He was on the front and I was in Vienna working for Buber's Der Jude. So, when the war was over I decided to go to Russia, to St. Petersburg where my parents were. I went from Vienna. I got the permission to help Austrian officers in Kiev as a translator. So, that's how I arranged to go through Kiev to St. Petersburg. It was a time when everybody was starving. It was a horrible period but I survived. I arrived to

1. The rest, what precedes and follows the following text, is missing from the tape. The text that appears here in transcript form is recorded on side "B" of the tape.

St. Petersburg and it was difficult to get my parents out. But my father left through Finland. Finland is just near St. Petersburg by train. But you have to have permission. He went legally with a Finnish guide. Not by train but walking. It was important to get my father out because he was in danger. So I remained there with my mother because she didn't want to go. She was afraid to go. She was hysterical at the time, of course. The war, the revolution ... So I had to stay home in St. Petersburg for quite a while. Then I left at the end (well, I could always leave because I was a foreigner) but I got for my mother all the papers, it was necessary, because I could prove that she wasn't born in Russia but in Brody and was also actually an Austrian.

DR: Galicia!

RW: It's true but I proved it all the same because my mother had changed her papers during the war not to be taken for a foreigner so that she quoted Byalystock as the place of her birth, where the whole family lived. So I had to prove on the contrary that she was born in Brody. So we left officially, wonderfully. We were the only ones in the train from St. Petersburg going to Finland. So from there I sent telegrams to my brother who was living in Paris and learnt where my husband was. I didn't know! My husband was in London at the end of the war. I arrived in London and then that was a new life over there. I wasn't sure that I would really survive, come out of Russia because of my mother. I started to go to the British Museum and study the Hebrew illuminated manuscripts. That's the beginning of everything because from London we went to Berlin and we found through a Russian Jewish friend, Mr. Sev, from St. Petersburg a connection with another man who helped us to start that publication.

DR: What year was this?

RW: That was 1922. We published until 1924.

DR: What was the goal, the purpose of the magazine?

RW: By now Germany was defeated. We came to Berlin because my husband got a position as a director of the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden. Do you understand German?

DR: Yes.

RW: Therefore we went to Berlin. We couldn't stay in London because after all it was very difficult for ... Jewish activities were very very ... I mean, you can't compare London with any other city from the Jewish point of view. So when he got the invitation to come to Berlin for that position, of course, we went to Berlin. We got through Mr. Sev that connection with Kagan who published in

St. Petersburg a wonderful Russian magazine, Zhar-Ptitsa that means "Phoenix."² Zhar-Ptitsa was also symbolic.

DR: How did you find the editors and the people to edit the literary section of it?

RW: Well, my husband made the literary part of it. He was a historian, a Jewish historian. He published a number of books. He needed editors for the translations into Hebrew and Yiddish.

DR: Why did you decide ... wasn't it unusual at the time?

RW: That's what I wanted to say. Germany was defeated and the German language was no longer the universal language which was before particularly for Jews. English was not too good and then also being in Berlin we couldn't do everything in English. Impossible. So, we decided we will do it in Hebrew and Yiddish in order to reach the Jewish people. There was in Germany a publication Ost und West ...

DR: A very famous one.

RW: You can't compare with what we did. Also it was old-fashioned. I had another ... Berlin was at that time the center for Jewish activities, for people coming from Russia. Chagall was in Berlin, Boris Aronson who is a theatrical artist was in Berlin and we had all the artworks in Rimon. Then Ryback who died in Paris of cancer. So all these people were in Berlin. Then Bialik was in Berlin.

DR: Did you have a literary circle as well? How did the writers congregate around the magazines? How did you ...?

RW: Well, we didn't have a salon. People just came.

DR: Was it financed simply ... it must have been enormously expensive ...

RW: Well, the trick was this. There was inflation. Everyday a different price on everything. So with a few hundred dollars we could publish. So when you sent issues of Milgroym or Rimon to New York and we got a few hundred dollars then could publish the next and so on. But the first one was financed by Mr. Paenson who was a businessman and was very interested in Jewish art and science. We met him also through Mr. Sev. I don't remember.

DR: Who were the writers and artists that you knew personally in those years in Berlin?

2. Rachel Wischnitzer does not seem to remember well here. Zhar-Ptitsa in fact was an emigre magazine.

RW: I knew all of them, of course. Chagall I met in Russia at that period ...

DR: Oh, when you were in St. Petersburg ...

RW: I met him there and I remember how there was a meeting of artists and I remember how I told him "You don't look Russian, what's with you?" "Yes, I was several years in Paris." He was dressed like that. And he had free manners that the others didn't have, of course. You don't know what it means to live in a country where there is a revolution. Everything changes. People get rigid, terribly rigid and in their movements even, in their talk. Suppose you're in the French revolution. It was in that way probably. So Chagall moved. So I knew that between 1910 and 1914 he was in Paris. Then he went back just a few days before the beginning of the war. He didn't realize what was going on and had to stay on ...

DR: ... stayed in Vitebsk. My particular interest is in some of the writers who participated in Milgroym.

RW: So Chagall arrived from Russia with his wife and his little child, the daughter, and also with a nurse. The child was not so small. You didn't live with servants then. And she came from Soviet Russia with a nurse! A Russian woman, a Russian woman. So that was Chagall. Yes, we had one evening at the Hilfsverein and invited all of them. I and my husband invited all of them. Chagall was the main figure. He was already well-known. He was very well-known because before going to Russia, before world war one, that means in 1914, he had left in Berlin paintings with Shtorm. Shtorm was an organization of very leftist artists, expressionist. The German expressionists were very much impressed by his work so that he was famous in that circle. When he arrived everybody knew him already. He arrived in 1922 in Berlin. Everybody knew him. Now, I invited also Dr. William Kohn who was at the Kunstwerkmuseum, no, the Oriental Museum in Berlin. He was a specialist in Chinese art. Therefore I had one article in Chinese art also in the Rimon. The Rimon was not meant to be just a Jewish art journal. Because we wanted the Jewish public to learn something about art in general. You can't consider Jewish art as something isolated. It had to be integrated. Even today it is not yet integrated. But, of course, a lot has been done and Chagall is not regarded just a Jewish artist ...

DR: Of course.

RW: ... so that means it's all different.

DR: On the other hand, you also tried to maintain the highest standards of writers, I mean, Belle Lettre, that you published. Did you know personally Kulbak or Der Nister or

Bergelson?

RW: My husband did. It was his field. I was interested, I knew only my part of the magazine. Of course, *Der Nister* I knew. I mean, I didn't have any close relationships with them. They came to see my husband. He was the editor of the literary part. You see? And I had to deal only with the artists.

DR: Do you think that there was a give-and-take between artists and writers?

RW: No. Because there was also difference in culture. The Jewish writers were still in a sort of nineteenth century approach to things. The artists were all very advanced. I don't think there was the same expressionist movement in literature at that time. You know. ||

DR: Well, there were poets at that time, particularly in Berlin, where Yiddish poets especially were beginning to write. Peretz Markish was one. He was in Warsaw ...

RW: I remember the name.

DR: Kulbak did write for a time expressionist poetry. *Der Nister* was a symbolist. So, that's the earlier movement before expressionism.

RW: You see, there was a difference and there was no relationship at all.

DR: That's very interesting.

RW: Also, don't forget that artists were not Yiddishists ...

DR: Yes.

RW: They belonged to a very different group of people.

DR: They were more cosmopolitan in that sense.

RW: Except for Chagall, whose mother tongue is Yiddish, he speaks very well Russian, the artists ..., I don't know, Aronson, for instance, was the son of a rabbi of Kiev. I don't know whether he spoke Yiddish. You can see him in New York, you can talk to him.

DR: How many issues were published, how many copies of each, do you remember?

RW: Only in the hundreds, I think, or maybe one thousand.

DR: Really? That few!

RW: Yes, because it was not so easy, I mean. The main thing was to send to America. And it was in the period 1922-1924. It was still after the war. The German Jewish community could not read Hebrew and Yiddish. For them it was just the period after the war, Germany was defeated. There was nothing ... There was no article of the Bezalel group in Israel. We didn't like their trend. They just thought that out of the Hebrew alphabeth they could create an art. It was a big mistake. It was a provincial point of view. Or, the ornaments out of letters. Well, that could be done in the ninth century by the Arabs. It was no art for the twentieth century. So, we didn't have any articles on Israel. At that time there was nothing in Israel. You can see the approach. We were so much more advanced.

RW: Was there still a lot of fluidity between the Soviet Union and Germany at that time? Culturally, I mean.

RW: The Soviet Union organized an exhibition in 1922-1923. And it's interesting that there came Altman. He was a very good artist. Soviet Russia at that time was still sympathetic. They didn't yet realize that art was not in their line. Chagall left because he just couldn't get along with them. He was lucky. He had very good connections so that he got permission to leave. The others left illegally. Aroson and the others couldn't get permission. Nobody could. There was still a Jewish art movement and there were a lot of exhibitions. I wrote about that exhibition in a German magazine Osteuropa, an article on that exhibition. So, there were still connections at that time between Germany and Soviet Russia also in the field of art.

DR: Why did Rimon only last until 1924? Was it purely financial?

RW: The inflation was over by 1924. So we couldn't any longer produce for several hundred dollars.

DR: Simply for financial reasons, then.

RW: It was a financial reason. Only through America we could.

DR: Now, you told me how you got interested in old Hebrew manuscripts in London. How did your interest grow in synagogue architecture?

RW: Well, I am an architect.

DR: I didn't know that.

RW: I graduated from the school of architecture. It had nothing to do with synagogues. At that time I didn't have any projects. Today there are so many projects about church

and synagogue. In America everything is different. Maybe in Germany today they also would have architectural schools with projects on synagogues. Well, how shall I tell the story so that it may interest you. When did it start? Yes, when I finished my studies in Paris in 1907 I went to St. Petersburg. My parents lived there. They lived before in Warsaw where I graduated from high school. That's why I also speak Polish but Russian is my mother tongue. So, when I graduated from the architectural school I decided to go to Russia and work there as an architect. In order to work there as an architect I would have to pass an examination in the academy in St. Petersburg which was not so easy. In the meantime I worked for a year in an architectural office and started to write out of desperation because it was so horrible for me to work in an office. I wrote an article. When I lived in Paris I visited a sculptor. Rosso was his name. He did some interesting new work. So, when I arrived to Russia I wrote an article and sent it to a Russian newspaper. The editor ..., I don't remember his name, I'm starting forgetting names. I remembered it the other day. He wrote me that he was going to send it to an art magazine but he encouraged me to continue to write. Then one day he invited me to go to Finland to visit Repin. Repin was a famous Russian painter of the realist school which was already an old-fashioned school at the time, but he was still a famous man. It was a very interesting visit. I became a writer ...

DR: ... out of desperation.

RW: Out of desperation. I felt that working in an office was terrible and what else could I do as a woman? Then I became acquainted with some people at the Jewish Encyclopedia in the Russian language. I started writing for them. I became connected with the Jewish intelligentsia in St. Petersburg. And so by and by I wrote an article on the synagogue for the encyclopedia on ceremonial objects. All these things which ...

DR: Did you go on field trips, that is, to visit particularly interesting synagogues?

RW: I went some time later. Yes. They decided to publish the history of the Jewish people in Russian. Mr. Braudo was the main librarian at the Russian division in St. Petersburg public library. In St. Petersburg there were things you just can't imagine. You only know about pogroms in the provinces. In St. Petersburg there was never a pogrom. You have heard of the Jewish lawyer Vinaver, Sliosberg, and so on ...

DR: Yes.

RW: That was a group which lived in a different atmosphere.

That's why they wrote the history of the Jews in Russia before the war started and that volume became volume one. That was published in 1914. For this volume I wrote an article in Jewish art. In order to write it I went to Kiev. Actually, I went because my father had to do something in Kiev. I had to collect photographs on some objects. Here were several families Dubrotzky, Gaipering, very rich sugar producing industrialists and Dubrotzky had the collection of some Jewish artists. One of them was Hanok³ ... the reproducer. That's I started collecting photographs.

DR: When did you ..., you said later you started going on field trips to see synagogues. When was that?

RW: Well, I didn't see too many. In Russia?

DR: I don't know.

RW: In Germany, yes, I went around a lot. In Russia I didn't. The book on Russian synagogues was written by Piechota. Do you know the book?

DR: No.

RW: I haven't written on Russian synagogues. He is the only one. I have included him in the book History of Synagogal Art⁴

DR: Oh, yes, I own the book. I didn't recognize the name. I have this. This was in Poland.

RW: Well, it was published in English also.

DR: Were these Jews?

RW: I don't think so. I don't know. I asked different people but nobody knows who they are. It's a couple. They were not Jewish people.

DR: Ya, but who knows.

RW: In Germany ..., I was in Spain, of course, ... In Germany I mostly traveled. We lived there eighteen years, you know. I was collecting material. So, when I arrived here the first book was on Dura Europos. Have you seen it? When the book came out we had to leave Berlin because of all sorts of things. It was very dangerous to live there. So we didn't have yet an affidavit for America. Therefore we went first to Paris. We stayed for two years in Paris before we got the visa. I arrived here with my son even before my husband because I had Russian quota. Therefore I could, I

3. The name is unintelligible.

4. Unintelligible here.

took my son. My husband had a Polish quota as an Austrian. The Polish quota was not so good, I mean. He had to stay in France which was quota. So I arranged from here for him a Dominican visa. So he could go to Santo Domingo and stay there. It was very dangerous to stay in France.

DR: What year was this?

RW: 1939.

DR: Oh!

RW: 1939-1940. I arrived on January 1940. He arrived 1941. He stayed for quite some time in Paris. You know what happened in Paris? He had to go to a camp. You know, all the foreigners, ... The French become so terribly frantic when there is a war or something, you know. So they took Jews who were against Hitler to camps, you know. My husband spent quite some time in a camp. Then the Joint Jewish committee where he worked some time did nothing to free him. Only my brother who was French. Through a lawyer, a woman, you know there are a lot of French lawyers. So she had connection at the Prefecture and at the police and so they were able to You have no idea of what we went through. So, my husband arrived here later. No, when I was, when I arrived in Paris from Berlin I met there Mrs. Brodsky. These Brodskys, the younger generation, she had no money. She was a painter, not married, not young, a wonderful person. She told me, you know, that they had excavated a synagogue in Syria. I didn't know because in Berlin we didn't have the last news. We were rather isolated. So she said archeologists had excavated, a count, Dominic Dubissant, and she gave a course on those excavations at the Sorbonne. So I went to the Sorbonne, without her I wouldn't have known probably. He was very happy. He knew about some of my articles I wrote in German. I attended his course and he asked me to review his book he published, the Vatican published his book on Dura Europos. So my first article in this country was a review in the Jewish Social Studies of his book. Writing the review I found that I had different views. That is my book.

DR: Haven't there been recent excavations that bear out your thesis?

RW: Actually it has been accepted by everyone. You know that the messianic idea ..., how did I get? I found all the frescos converge in the ark. You see? They enter the sequence of the painting. The idea that connects them all you can understand only if you read them in that sequence, that means from the entrance around the two sides and terminating at the ark. So Dominic Dubissant thought that there are three registers of painting ... So he thought in one line the pictures were the directions of the Hebrew

alphabet from right to left and the second line went from left to right and so on. I thought there must be a unifying point and that's how you solve the problem when you think there is a "Gestalt" behind it. And, of course, I was right. Now, Krelin who was entrusted with writing the reports on the excavations, I will show you one volume, he died already. Everybody died already, you know? Goodenough?

DR: Yes.

RW: You know about Goodenough?

DR: Yes.

RW: Krelin who brought the preliminary report in 1936 wrote there is no messianic idea there. But here in the last volume here he accepts hesitatingly, I mean, you know ... I spoke with somebody I said you know Krelin has accepted ... "Well, you know, he didn't quite accept ..." That's true. He just didn't like the idea that somebody else, ... but he quotes me in every single volume. Every chapter he gives the pages of my ... He wanted to collaborate with me. In the meantime I was glad that I didn't because then I wouldn't have my own book. I would have been a sort of resistant.

DR: When was the synagogue actually built?

RW: This synagogue, in the third century, in 1245. So, he wrote a very learned work with hundreds and hundreds of footnotes. I know of some scholars who prefer to read my book because it is shorter. They see what is all about. But of course his is much more learned.

DR: What happened to stultify the creative energy ..., what happened in Jewish history or in Jewish culture to stultify the creativity around the synagogue?

RW: You mean why everything became so anti-art and anti-..., that's what you mean?

DR: Yes, yes.

RW: Persecutions. Christianity. You see for instance here is the beginning of one chapter. You see how it begins. Read that and you will see how in every chapter he did ... That is why I was in a hurry to publish my book, because I thought that I wanted to be mentioned in the final report. Otherwise, you know, your work gets lost. So, therefore, I ...

DR: The whole thesis of messianism is extremely exciting because it has become a "cause celebre" in Jewish historiography in the recent decades. It is an ongoing discussion now between Gershon Scholem at the Hebrew

university and everyone else, and he insists that the messianic theme has been constant throughout Jewish history ...

RW: I think so.

DR: ... and there are others who refuse to accept that. What interests him especially is when messianism becomes deviant and becomes antinomian. The movements in Jewish history were so extreme that they ended up in breaking with the community and with the traditional structure.

RW: Actually, ... I do not know what happened to preserve the Jewish people whether it is zionism, an idea cherished for a long time, I do not know. Was it the persecutions that preserved them? That they could not assimilate?

R: My hope is that that is not the only reason. That there was some ...

RW: ... it's difficult to decide.

DR: Yes. Are there Greek influences here?

RW: Oh, yes. Actually, Dura was a hellenistic city. (...)⁵

DR: How did the taboo against human figures ... I mean, here there are so many examples of human beings and scenes ...

RW: Well, because there was a sensation.

DR: Yes. Well, I know a little bit of Islamic art and, say, the very first mosque, the mosque of Omar that was built, you still have representations of human figures whereas in our later mosques that disappears and becomes an ...

RW: ... in Omar was there ...

DR: Animals. No, there are no human beings, I think, there are plants and...

RW: ... there are any human figures in Arab Spanish fifteenth century somewhere but no they are more rigid, the Arabs.

DR: How do you explain this phenomenon then in Dura Europos?

RW: Oh, well, because there was beautiful pagan art ... the book⁶ ... oriental and the version in the Public Library and take the other volumes on Dura Europos and you will see why all those temples and their frescos there also frescos of

5. The tape here is difficult to understand.

6. Text is unintelligible.

...⁷ there was also a Christian chapel very poor. The Christians were very poor. The Christian community was not yet legal at that time.

DR: Are there any other examples subsequent to Dura Europos?

RW: I find that mosaic was also ... A..Ü no, they had excavations in Gaza ... David with a harp ... Do you know Hebrew?

DR: Yes!

RW: Look at this. I just got these two publications ...

DR: Oh, my...

RW: So, you see, art was widespread up to the seventh century.

DR: Oh, this is exquisite!

RW: It's a beautiful city, Gaza.

DR: I didn't know ...

RW: I haven't published anything about the excavations in Gaza. How did I know about it? There was a lecture at the Institute of Fine Art ...⁸

7. Text is unintelligible.

8. The text terminates here.