

Paul Kor – A Life Story

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“I had a happy childhood,” said Paul Kornowski when describing his early years in an immigrant neighborhood in Paris’s 20th arrondissement in the last decade before the outbreak of the Second World War. The circumstances of life into which he was born were not easy: his parents, Yitzhak and Haya Kornowski (“Monsieur Jacques” and “Madame Helene” to their French acquaintances) came to France from the Lodz area of Poland in the early 1920s, six years before Paul was born, on August 1, 1926. Like many Jews who emigrated during those years from Eastern Europe, the two lived amidst laborers and small merchants and made efforts to be absorbed into their new country both economically and culturally. Their families, of whom Paul knew very little, stayed behind. Except for a single visit by the young Kornowski family to Poland in the early 1930s, Jacques and Helene never saw their parents again and almost none of their siblings, most of whom later perished in the Holocaust. Not wanting to bequeath their mother tongue, Yiddish, to their children, they spoke with them exclusively in broken French with a foreign accent. The young Paul did not have grandparents, uncles and aunts around, or deep cultural roots, but this did not overshadow those first years in which he was engulfed by his parents’ loving care: “I had a father and a mother, and a brother with whom to fight, and that was enough. I needed nothing else,” he used to say.

His parents had three boys: their eldest son, George, died when he was two. Paul was born one year after his passing, and then came Henri, three years younger. The family's economic situation was reasonable: Monsieur Jacques and Madame Helene, both offspring of textile merchants, opened a tailoring and dressmaking shop, where Jacques spent most of his time practicing *haute couture*, leaning over his sewing machine, while Helene helped him as necessary, sewing pajamas, shirts and socks. The children were always dressed in custom-made outfits, like rich children. Jacques, an opera lover, was a friendly, diligent man. Helene was energetic and devoted herself to her children. Each summer, during the months of July and August, she would rent a country house not far from Paris, where she spent memorable vacations with the children. Paul remembered them mainly by their colors: yellow fields, blue skies, tanned skin, and lots of space and tranquility.

Their life style was strictly secular, with no trace of the religious lives of their families from Poland. Except for eating *matzo* (unleavened bread) served at the table alongside bread in the spring, Paul was not familiar with any Jewish customs and holidays. The only time he visited a synagogue in his childhood was during the aforementioned visit to Poland, of which he remembered an elderly man dressed in strange clothes – probably his orthodox grandfather – who took him to a place where people swayed and whispered. The new immigrants succeeded in instilling an absolute French identity in their two young sons. At times the epithet “*sale Juif*” (“dirty Jew”) was heard at school, but it was quite meaningless to the children. It was simply a common slur that even Jewish children sometimes hurled at their gentile friends.

At the outbreak of World War II, the Kornowski family (Paul was thirteen at the time, and Henri – ten) stayed in a rented house in the country for the 1939 summer vacation. When news about the outbreak of war arrived, they hastily returned to Paris, where a French Army mobilization order awaited Jacques. Despite the dramatic turn of events and the father's prolonged mobilization, life in the winter of 1939-1940 continued on its normal course. The mother ran the shop, the children went to school, and in Paul's memory these months were not etched as particularly frightening. Only toward the spring of 1940, as a mass of Parisians began streaming eastward, Helene decided to flee as well. She traveled with her two boys in the long convoys, which were sometimes bombed by German aircraft (Paul vividly remembered a German plane diving over his head, making a terrible noise), to the village of Lautrec in Normandy, a few miles away from the Omaha beach where the Allies would land four years later. They stayed with Madame Aigre, whom Paul remembered as a warm and welcoming woman, despite her name – which means "sour" in French.

When the father was discharged from his military service, the family returned home. Paul always considered this move the mistake that determined their fate. Had they stayed in hiding in Lautrec, all four of them might have survived until the liberation.

In September 1940 Paul did not return to school. He never really inquired why his studies were cut short. His parents were probably afraid to let him out of their sight during the day, for in those months the round-up of Jews had already begun in Paris and they were afraid he would be captured by the Germans. The noose gradually tightened around them. They were troubled

mainly by the economic decrees. An Aryan trustee was appointed for Monsieur Jacques' shop. He was to monitor its activity, the accounts, and the textile stock. The small stock held by the shop was invaluable. A year later, in November 1941, when the father was caught and sent to the transit camp at Drancy, he would send a postcard to his wife reminding her to "guard the fabrics," for which she could get coal for heating.

Despite the new conditions, the family still led a relatively routine life in the winter of 1940-1941 as well. But the happy childhood ended promptly in August 1941. In one of the last weekends of summer, which Helene and the boys spent in the country as usual, the father joined them for what would be their last time together. On Monday morning, August 23, he got on his bike and headed back to Paris. A short while after he had already left, a friend of the family came to warn him not to leave, since roads to Paris were blocked in an operation to catch Jews. It was too late. The fifteen-year old Paul jumped on his bike in the hope of catching up with his father, but at some point, where the road branched off, he took the wrong path and missed him. In his testimonial interview for the Spielberg Archive in 1996 he recounted the story with great tears. "I didn't cry at the time," he said. "I was in shock. Now I cry: I took the wrong path, and all at once it was all over. I had a father – I no longer had a father."

For a short time Paul used to travel to the Drancy camp near Paris to pass packages to his father, through the guard. Then a postcard came in which the father notified them that he was being sent on a train to an "unknown

destination.” Only years after the war did the family locate his name in the lists of deportees to Auschwitz.

The family’s livelihood relied mainly on the shop’s fabric stock, which was gradually sold off. Paul worked in an umbrella factory and was saved from the round-up of Jewish men thanks to his young looks. After Paul’s good friend and peer was caught, his mother decided to leave Occupied France and take her children south. Paul was the first to hit the road: in the summer of 1942 he joined a group that was smuggled across the border to Free France. From the border-crossing he took a train to Nice, where his father’s childhood friend met him. A short while later his mother, Helene, and younger brother, Henri, arrived the same way.

Paul worked as a tailor’s assistant, and was soon promoted to “part-time employee.” Living conditions were reasonable and the atmosphere was neither hostile, nor anti-Semitic. The family was cautious and did not look Jewish. At one time, the manager of the factory in which Paul worked asked him: “You’re not Jewish, are you?” and he spontaneously replied, “Of course not.”

But this relative peace was abruptly interrupted following a seventeen-year old Paul’s youthful mischief. One Sunday he went with a friend to the mountains near the Italian border. In a deserted customs hut they stopped for a rest (in retrospect, Paul realized that they had waited there to transfer anti-fascist pamphlets to Italian partisans who never turned up for the meeting). Paul, who by then used to paint a lot, took a piece of coal in order to scribble something,

but this time he did not draw but rather wrote on the hut's wall: "Death to the Germans!" adding his full name and address, 9 Berlioz Street, Nice.

A patrol of French gendarmes who passed by several days later reported the incident to the Nice police commander, who passed the complaint on to the head of the quarter in which the Kornowski family lived. Luckily for Paul, the commander was also a member of the underground. He summoned a Jewish acquaintance, Notkovitch, who was also a friend of the Kornowskis, to help him locate the boy and warn him. Notkovitch who knew Paul well, arranged to smuggle him and his brother to Switzerland within a matter of hours, via the Jewish children's aid society, OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants). This happened in September 1943. The two spent Yom Kippur in a transit camp near Geneva, where they had been transferred with the group of children who crossed the border with them. Food in the camp was scarce and the children were hungry. The Jewish community donated the holiday meal to those children who intended to fast. Paul, who had never heard of Yom Kippur before, volunteered to fast in order to win a meal.

Paul and his brother spent four and a half years in a children's home near Geneva managed by OSE. Paul's artistic talent was discovered in psychotechnical aptitude tests given to the children and he was sent to the Geneva School of Art and subsequently to a school of graphic arts. One day his sculpture teacher patted him on the shoulder and said to him: "Mr. Kornowski, the war has ended." Several days later, while he was in the shower, he heard a call from the direction of the offices: "Paulo, your mother is on the phone." The towel with which he wrapped himself dropped as he ran

down the hall. Naked and dripping he talked with his mother, of whose fate he had had no idea until then, for the first time. The decision to stay in Switzerland for two more years resulted from the mother's difficulty in re-acquiring the shop and the flat that had been taken from the family, and from the boys' desire to complete their studies. On March 17, 1947, when he was 21, Paul returned to Paris. He enrolled in the École des Beaux-Arts and concurrently studied graphic art with one of France's foremost graphic artists, Paul Colin. In 1948 his mother re-married an Auschwitz survivor. "These were strange times. Paris was sad. People tried to rearrange their lives and it wasn't easy. I somehow managed to get through this relatively well," he would later recount.

Although at the children's home in Switzerland he discovered his Judaism, learned about its customs and festivals, and was even a member of a Zionist youth movement for some time, Paul had no intention of immigrating to Israel. The change of plan occurred unexpectedly when, in March 1948, while riding the Métro to school, he read in the paper about the fighting in the War of Independence. Learning about the attack waged against the nascent State of Israel angered him. He left his studies, volunteered for Mahal (foreign volunteers) and left for the Daphne camp near Marseilles. After completing his light arms training, he became a guide and helped transfer Jewish refugees to the ships that took them to Israel. On July 24, 1948 he boarded a decrepit Dakota plane to Israel with a group of twenty guides and landed at the Haifa airport. He intended to stay in Israel for a year, but that trip changed his life. Except for a short period of time, he never left Israel again.

Immediately upon his arrival in the country, Paul was drafted by the IDF and sent with the Seventh Brigade on patrol duty in Rosh Hanikra in the north. In October 1948, as a regular soldier, he painted the figure of a soldier whose appearance was far-removed from the hero of the time, the beautiful sabra: Old and miserable, holding a mess-kit fork, his soldier looks about gloomily. "A soldier of a homeland, a soldier without a homeland... the soldier who died, and the one who is about to die, the soldier who laughs, and the soldier who cries, the poor guy who is ordered around, and the fool who lets an idiot officer order him," read the ironic text which Paul inscribed in French underneath his painted counterpart, a text so typical of him. His whole life he hated wars, but at the same time showed great interest in them. He was fascinated by the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War; he studied their history in depth and knew their every detail.

As should be expected, his solitude and distance from his hometown burdened Paul the newcomer. His mother was angry with him for dropping out of school and for leaving her again. In Israel he knew no one. But within a short while things started falling into place; when his painting skill was discovered, he was shifted to the IDF Education Command in Jaffa. The British Army's manuals were being translated at the time, and the IDF needed an illustrator to adapt the original drawings to its own needs. There, at the Education Command, he met Pnina, who became the love of his life and whom he married in August 1950.

Before his discharge from the IDF, Paul had already begun working at the Arieli Press, and began a career as a graphic artist. It was then that he started

signing his works with the name by which he has been known since then, Paul Kor. The first poster he created was commissioned by the Israeli government, a well-known poster that became a classic: "War Loan, Victory Loan." The subsequent posters would be created at the independent graphics studio he opened on Alharizi Street, Tel Aviv, where he lived until his marriage with Pnina. He had few personal belongings there: in the backpack he brought with him to Israel he had only a photograph of his uncle Yidel, his father's brother, who was a soldier in the French Foreign Legion, a few clothes, shoes with thick soles, and a sketchbook.

Before long Paul Kor gained a reputation as an important, sought-after graphic artist. For a while he was a partner in the Tag sign company, for which he prepared sketches for various billboards (such as "Visit the Tel Aviv Zoo") and was also a partner in a big office for exhibition and graphic design, Grundman-Zak-Kor. From 1956 he worked at the studio he bought on Yavne Street, Tel Aviv, which had since become his second home. During those years he designed tourism posters and placards for Israel's holidays and Purim parades, as well as books and series of stamps and banknotes. "I am the only artist whose paintings almost every citizen holds in his pocket," he used to say, referring to the 100 lira note that bore Theodor Herzl's figure. During his career he received forty-five awards for his graphic work in Israel and abroad.

In 1955 Pnina and Paul Kornowski's first child, Yoram, was born, and in 1960 their youngest – Ran. Despite his great success, their economic situation, which deteriorated with the economic recession in the 1960s, overshadowed their lives. Thus, in 1966, with a heavy heart, Paul went to Paris, where he was

appointed art director of the reputed advertising agency Publicis. His family joined him a year later.

This was Paul's first return to Paris since he had immigrated to Israel in 1948. The long break was caused, among other things, by an affair that clouded his first years in Israel: when he was still a Mahal guide in Nice he was asked by Hagana members to submit his identification documents for a Hagana agent's cover in France. After Paul's arrival in Israel the French authorities traced the agent who operated in France under the name of Paul Kornowski, and while looking for him, performed a search in Paul's mother's home in Paris. The mother was deeply distressed (she thought her son was wanted by the authorities), and Paul himself was not allowed into France for many years, being suspected of illegal activity. He had to invest considerable efforts in looking for people who would testify that he was in Israel during the time the false Paul Kornowski was active in France, and therefore he was not the wanted man. Only when his version was finally accepted was he permitted to re-visit Paris.

After two years at Publicis, Paul and his family returned to Israel. He was appointed art director at the advertising company Shaham-Levinson-Ayalon, a position which he held until 1970.

Shortly after the Yom Kippur war (1973) – a highly traumatic experience for Paul – he took a fateful decision to give up his profession as a graphic designer and become a painter once again. He had abandoned that dream twenty-five years earlier, as a young man in post-war Paris, for a lucrative

profession, and now he decided to fulfill his dream. Graphic design forced him to compromise, to operate within strict frames and negotiate with clients and bureaucracy, and he detested all this. So, at the age of forty-eight he decided to devote himself exclusively to art and to the constant struggle against material frugality which is the lot of any nascent artist.

Consciously and intentionally he did not try to relate to Israeli reality and current affairs in his work, but rather to create a magical world with inner rules of its own, akin to a “no-place in a no-time,” much like the literary work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez with whom Kor felt an almost magical affinity. The figures he created were bald and ear-less, usually meticulously dressed (for deep down, he remained a tailor’s apprentice). At the outset of his painting career they were characterized by large heads and small organs and were dressed in pastel-colored striped fabrics. Paul believed that these were the *musselmen* from the camps, in inmate uniform, who re-acquired their humanity in his works, and whom he continued to preserve as if he had the power to give them life.

Despite the detachment of his artwork from what he dubbed the Israeli “brouhaha,” Paul tried to become a true Israeli. He served in the IDF reserve for many years, was well-versed in Israeli politics, and conducted an “up-to-date” Israeli family life. The children from the home in Geneva, all of whom stayed in Paris – among them his younger brother Henri, pantomimist Gilles Segal, Dr. Maurice Wexler and Dr. Paul Kramar – remained among his good friends in Israel and abroad. The shared history and memories bound him to this group. When he arrived in Paris in 1966, the group welcomed him with

open arms, and after then he has made a habit of meeting them as frequently as possible. He also paid regular visits to his mother, who lived in Paris until she passed away in 1981.

Even though two of Paul Kor's monotypes are included in the collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and although he staged numerous exhibitions, mainly at the Rosenfeld Gallery in Tel Aviv, he felt generally ostracized by the Israeli artistic establishment. This state of affairs was described by poet Nathan Zach: "If there indeed is a quality representation in Israel for fantastic realism in art, Paul Kor is undoubtedly its most faithful agent. If this fact has slipped the attention of many art critics for such a long time, it is in no way the artist's responsibility."

Fame came late and from an unexpected direction. In 1974 Kor published a book of paintings for children without text at the French Galerie Maeght. The book scored a great success and was exhibited at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. In 1985, after Ran Zipher, the son of close family friends was killed in Lebanon, Kor wrote and painted a sketch for an illustrated book in his memory entitled *The Story of a Hawk*. The book was published by Keter along with another children's book by Kor, *The Fish who Didn't Want to be a Fish*, created in a technique of short page/long page generating an effect of alternating images. Major success came with *Caspion the Little Fish* where the image of this silvery little fish, that became the figure most identified with Paul Kor as one of the most admired Israeli children's authors of all times, was introduced. In an interview with *Ha'aretz* he recalled Caspion's history: "On the table in my studio lay an open pack of cigarettes, and a ray of light fell on the

cigarettes' silver wrapping and shone on it. From there, in a split second, came the idea to write a story about a silver fish." Along with *Caspion* published by Dvir, he also published *The Magical Zoo* (an adaptation of a book he had published several years earlier in France), for which he received the Gutman Award.

Within fourteen years Kor published some twenty children's books, fifteen of them with Dvir Publishing House. Most of them stayed at the top of the bestseller list for many weeks. The reception of these books was extraordinary among the young readership as well as among parents and educators. "I love macaroni and Paul Kor," a ten-year old girl once wrote to him, one of the hundreds of young fans who flooded him with letters.

Concurrently, he continued painting, and in his last years started responding to the Israeli reality in his works, which gradually drew farther and farther away from the magical world which he had fashioned and within which he created until then. Ever since the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin Kor tried to depict the great rift and frustration he carried with him, as well as conveying old age and illness. Under the optimism and humor with which he tried to imbue his entire life, and which he manifested in the colorful world he often painted and illustrated, he discovered depression and horror. "I was born a short while after World War I and from my very first day the world has seen endless war. Italy fighting Ethiopia, the Spanish War, World War II and all the wars that followed. So how can I really be a happy man?" he said in an interview with *Ha'aretz* before the opening of his last one-person exhibition, *Almost Black*, at the Bar-David Museum in Kibbutz Bar'am in the Galilee in the

year 2000. "All the suffering in the world is contained within these paintings, fifty works mostly executed in shades of black and dark gray," he concluded, and through his typical humor burst a pessimistic vein, with which even he had not been familiar.

A year later, on May 24, 2001, at the age of seventy-four, Paul Kornowski died in Tel Aviv after a severe illness.