

## Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion*: An Enduring Work of Political Art

Ariel Kravitz

College of Arts and Science, Vanderbilt University

**The works of Marc Chagall, a prominent and prolific Jewish artist, are among the most significant and recognizable creations to have emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *White Crucifixion* was Chagall's passionate response to the escalating atrocities by the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party that resulted in *Kristallnacht*. This paper examines the early life of the artist in Czarist Russia amidst historical persecution and anti-Semitism, as well as the social and political milieu in which the *White Crucifixion* was created. The painting's unique combination of Christian and Jewish imagery, with an illuminated and crucified "Jewish Jesus" at the focal point, and surrounded by scenes depicting Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis is explored in detail. The paper demonstrates that the distinctive religious and cultural experiences of Marc Chagall provided the palate from which the plight of the Jews was immortalized on canvas and which expressed his outrage. Condemning the world for their silence and imploring them to act in the face of inhumanity, the *White Crucifixion* remains an enduring work of political art whose message is as applicable today as it was in 1938.**

Marc Chagall, a prominent Jewish artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, painted the *White Crucifixion* in 1938, at a time of increasing political unrest towards the German Jews by the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party. At the focal point of the painting is the portrayal of a crucified "Jewish Jesus," surrounded primarily by scenes of Jewish suffering. Arising from his distinctive personal experiences as an Eastern European Jew and his deep-rooted perspective on anti-Semitism, the creation of the *White Crucifixion* was the artist's passionate response to the atrocities that would later signify the birth of the Holocaust. Through his unique integration of Christian icons and Jewish symbolic imagery, Chagall's protest of Jewish persecution is a multi-faceted and enduring work of political art.

The artist was born as Moïshe (Movcha) Shagal in the small Belorussian town of Vitebsk on July 6, 1887. With a heritage marked by historical persecution and anti-Semitism, he arrived as the Jewish community was recovering from the latest wave of pogroms that had swept through Russia just five years earlier (Harshav, *His Time* 36; Wilson 3). The oldest of eight children, Chagall spent his childhood surrounded by a loving Hasidic family that was more culturally Jewish, rather than religiously observant. (Harshav, *His Time* 29; Wilson 4-5). His was a unique world that was socially and culturally rich, a blend of emotional warmth and a quest for knowledge.

Like most other Jews in Czarist Russia,

Chagall's family was poor and oppressed, devoid of basic civil rights. Confined to a geographic area within the Russian Empire known as the "Pale of Settlement," these Jewish cities and villages, or *shtetls*, were politically controlled by Christian authorities (Harshav, *His Times* 44). The political climate also limited admittance of Jewish children who could attend Russian schools, but Chagall was admitted into the third grade at a secular school after his mother paid a bribe to a Russian official. After his Bar Mitzvah (Jewish passage into adulthood) at age thirteen, he dropped the practice and rituals of his religion and instead immersed himself in Russian culture and began the study of art. Chagall quickly learned "the importance of portraying the local world, its houses and fences, and the dignity of Jewish faces and rituals – ethnography as an object of art" (Harshav, *Art* 9).

He thereafter studied with numerous artists, traveling back and forth from Czarist Russia to France, having to obtain a special permit to do so because he was a Jew (Harshav, *Art* 8-10; Harshav, *His Times* 35-38). In Paris, Chagall pursued his "expressive, unconventional approach to painting" (Harriss 2). Yet, Chagall's art remained faithful to the land of his childhood. During an interview in 1944, Chagall described this phenomenon: "[t]he root-soil of my art was Vitebsk, but like a tree, my art needed Paris like water, otherwise it would wither and die" (Harshav, *Art* 84). It was during this period in Paris that he adopted the more cosmopolitan, secular name of "Marc Chagall," modeled

after the respected Russian-Jewish sculptor, Marc Antokolsky (Harshav, *His Times* 63-64).

Chagall returned to his native land in 1914, where he remained throughout World War I and the Russian Revolution. Although the civil rights of Chagall along with other Jewish artists were greatly improved under the post-revolutionary regime, Chagall felt confined by the Soviet ideology towards artistic expression. Unwilling to conform to the ideals of painting political art of the revolution, he returned to Paris in 1922. Commenting on his liberation to now pursue his art as “poetry,” Chagall stated, “I can freely say today that I owe all I have succeeded in achieving to Paris, to France, of which the air, the men, nature were for me the true school of my life and of my art” (Harsav, *Art* 84-85). It was here that Chagall was most prolific and where 16 years later, he would paint the *White Crucifixion*.

An active participant of the artistic and intellectual community in Paris, frequently traveling across Europe to attend the display of his works at museums and exhibits, Chagall became increasingly concerned over the new wave of anti-Semitism that was gaining momentum. The rise of the Nazi party and the election of Adolph Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in 1933 initiated a new level of atrocities targeting the Jews. Immediately, a wide range of laws were enacted, from mandating boycotts against Jewish shops to restricting public education for Jews to prohibiting kosher butchering (“Kristallnacht”). Personally experiencing the breadth of this reemergence of anti-Semitism, three of Chagall’s paintings that were on display in Mannheim, Germany, including a portrait of a Rabbi studying Talmud, were destroyed by the Nazis that same year (Wilson 112-113). In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, stripping Jews of their German citizenship and prohibiting sexual relations and marriage between Jews and non-Jews. By the following year, Jews were excluded from voting and “Jews Not Welcome” signs were commonplace throughout Germany (“Kristallnacht”). Encountering little opposition from a predominantly Christian Europe, 1938 ushered in bolder measures of anti-Semitism. Laws now restricted Jewish economic activity, including professional practice, and required Jews to register for a census and carry identification cards. Labeling of Jews by requiring them to wear a sign around their neck became commonplace. All Jews of Polish citizenship residing in Germany were arrested by the Nazis and interned in “relocation camps” (later

discovered to be concentration camps) on the Polish border. Throughout 1938, while many Jews made a futile attempt to escape their plight under the Nazi regime, pogroms that ravaged villages, destroying synagogues and murdering their Jewish residents, became routine occurrences in several German cities (Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s” 142; Harries 109).

Finally, it was the events of November 9, 1938 that compelled Chagall to artistically react to the spiraling inhumanity of the Nazis. *Kristallnacht*, “the Night of Broken Glass,” now considered by historians to signify the inception of the Holocaust, was a nationwide pogrom of “orchestrated terror” against the Jews (Etzioni 12; “Kristallnacht”). It arose from the assassination of an official at the German Embassy in Paris by the son of Polish Jews, outraged that his parents had been expelled from Germany and forced into a “relocation camp.” Considering the assassination “as a conspiratorial attack by ‘International Jewry’ against the Reich and, symbolically, against the Fuehrer himself,” Goebbels, Hitler’s Chief of Propaganda, used this event as the excuse to launch *Kristallnacht*. Mobs throughout Germany and its Austrian and Sudetenland territories openly attacked Jews, murdering nearly 100 and injuring hundreds, set as many as 2000 synagogues on fire, destroyed 7500 shops, broke store windows and vandalized schools and cemeteries. At least 30,000 Jews were arrested and immediately deported to concentration and forced labor camps (“Kristallnacht”). A historian remembering *Kristallnacht* summarized its political significance as follows: “It was an expression of anti-Semitism as an organized political force, raised to a new level of mass hatred and hysteria” (Etzioni 12).

Chagall painted the *White Crucifixion* on the heels of these horrific events as a work of political art, to express his outrage, awaken public sensitivity and compel the world to respond to the inhumanity. Combining Christian and Jewish imagery, an illuminated and crucified “Jewish Jesus” is the focal point, surrounded by actual depictions of Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis. Characteristic of the *White Crucifixion* as well as the artist’s other works, “...Chagall is carrying Vitebsk with him, as in a suitcase of the mind, wherever he goes” (Wilson 5). The scenes in this painting reflect the texture of his childhood, drawing from familiar places, people and their rituals in the *shtetls*.

The painting is an oil on canvas measuring 60 ¾ x 55 inches (Chagall). The color is drab and

solemn, reflecting the oppressiveness of the subject and the somber environment in Vitebsk (Kuh 90). The little color that is used amidst the overall grey tone of the painting enhances the effectiveness of Chagall's statement. Moving clockwise, directly left of Jesus' outstretched arm, a synagogue is torched by a soldier, with its Ark or *Aron Kodesh* (holy cabinet) and Torah scrolls (books of Jewish law) ablaze. The bright burst of the yellow and orange colors of the flames creates a powerful image of devastation, especially against the dull backdrop of the painting. Sacred contents of the burning house of worship are strewn beneath the soldier's feet, including prayer books, a Chanukah menorah (9-branched candelabrum), and the eternal light or *Ner Tamid* (symbol of G-d's eternal presence) which characteristically is found above a synagogue Ark ("Synagogues"). Further below the soldier's boots are an open *siddur* (prayerbook) and an unraveled burning Torah scroll. Amidst this devastation, Jews flee in all directions, attempting to escape with their most valuable possessions. With a sack flung over his back, surrounded by the decimated sacred objects from the burning synagogue, is the legendary *Wandering Jew*, a historical imaginary eyewitness to the crucifixion who was told by Jesus to "go on forever until I return" (Jacobs). On the lower left side of the work, a villager, sadly looking back on the ruin, also flees, clutching his most prized possession, a Torah. He wears only one shoe, illustrating that in his haste, saving the Torah was paramount to putting on his other shoe; he could live without his shoe but not without his faith. Next to him, in the left corner, an old man wearing a blank sign around his neck, but obviously Chagall's reference to the 1938 German laws labeling Jews, along with a sobbing villager, also attempt to escape. The features of these men appear blurred as if to signify they are withering away, having succumbed to the brutality that surrounds them. However, the clothing worn by two of the men displays color, albeit dull, indicating that they retain some life and that their energy may propel them to safety.

Below the men, at the bottom middle of the painting, a mother clutches her baby, tenderly cupping his head in a desperate attempt to protect him. She is the only figure in the painting with pristine human features. Unabashedly seeking eye-contact with the viewer, her circumstances render her the medium through which the viewer is transported into the whirlwind of activity and suffering that is occurring in the painting. Her eyes reflect a mother's desperation that is univer-

sally understood, as there is little in life that is as pure and recognizable as a mother's love for her child and the relentless attempts that she would make to save her baby. It is as if she is imploring the viewer to act, her eyes screaming, "From one mother to another, please help me!" As the character that a viewer would instinctively empathize with, Chagall chose this figure from the others as his intermediary to compel the world to respond to brutality against the Jews.

Continuing clockwise on the left side of the painting, a boatload of refugees from the pogrom is immobilized in the water from its overload. Some lean over the boat, exhausted and dejected, while others "raise their hands to the heavens or to Jesus, seeking salvation" (Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's" 140). They, along with the villagers who attempt to escape by land, depict the plan of the patriarch Jacob "that has saved the Jews to this day: if threatened, the Jews scatter, so that if one is killed, the others will be saved" (Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's" 142).

Directly above, Chagall depicts the *shtetl* that has been ravaged by the Nazis. Homes are ransacked and in flames. Lying in the cemetery is a dead but unburied villager, which is the final indignity and is sacrilegious in Judaism. A goat faithfully sits beside a chair in the snow, waiting for his guardian to return. Three surviving villagers of the pogrom, sitting despondently near a basket and violin in the snow amidst the ruins, are unable to console themselves with music or even eat (Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's" 140). Above this vignette, while part of the same scene, a horde of villagers carrying red flags charge forward, drawing from Chagall's personal experience of the Russian Revolution that had successfully overthrown the dictatorial government of the Czar. Yet, "their meager weapons seem inadequate to effect the hoped-for salvation" (Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's" 140). It has also been suggested that this scene represents Chagall's hope that the red-flagged Soviet Army, then at odds with Hitler, would attempt to liberate the village (Amishai-Maisels, "Christological" 461; "White").

While the explanatory vignettes surrounding the crucifixion realistically depict the Nazi pogroms and the resultant Jewish suffering, the focal scene, which runs vertically down the center of the painting, is more spiritual and symbolic, highlighting the Christian-Jewish duality. Floating above the crucified Jesus are four biblical figures. Clearly Jewish in their appearance, the three long-

bearded men wear either a full-sized *tallis* (prayer shawl) or a long black coat (worn by Orthodox Jews as a sign of respect); also worn are *yarmulkes* (head covering) and *tefillin* (small leather box with straps containing scripture passages) (“Synagogues”; Tilles). The woman wears a long dress and a kerchief as a head-covering. Mourning the death of Jesus, their Jewish brother, they “float[] out of the darkness into the ray of light that illuminates him” (Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s” 139). The shaft of light from above continues through to the bottom of the painting and within it are two halos, one encircling the head of Jesus, a Christian icon, while the other surrounds a menorah’s burning candles, a Jewish icon. Also within the shaft of light, leaning against the crucifix, is a ladder, presumably “Jacob’s Ladder.” Symbolic of salvation to both Jews and Christians, Jews view this icon as the ladder to heaven based on their own actions, while Christians view Jesus through his redemption as their “Jacob’s Ladder” to heaven (“Jacob’s”).

Utilizing the most universal and emotion-evoking Christian icon, Chagall depicts the crucifixion with a “Jewish Jesus,” transforming him into a Jewish icon. Instead of a loincloth, wrapped around Jesus’ waist is a *tallis*, universally associated with a Jewish man, having earned the right to wear one after his Bar Mitzvah. Ironically, instead of its usual placement around a man’s shoulders, Chagall positions the *tallis* over the area that would undeniably reveal his Judaism as a result of a *bris* (ritual circumcision). Like other pious Jews, Chagall’s Jesus wears a full head covering, instead of his traditional open crown of thorns. Above his bowed head, “INRI” appears (acronym for the Latin “Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Ivdæorvm”), known to Christians as being associated with the crucifixion. The English translation is “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (“What”). Hebrew lettering appears directly underneath, further evidence that he is a Jew. The Hebrew letters chosen by Chagall resulted in a pun, as their more common interpretation was “the Christian” rather than “the man from Nazareth,” thus becoming “Jesus the Christian, King of the Jews” (Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s” 139; Wilson 122). Through these variations, Chagall depicts a “Jewish Jesus,” significant to Christians and Jews alike.

It is important to note that the concept of a “Jewish Jesus” as a symbol of Jewish suffering was not unique to either Chagall or the greater artistic community. It had been used by numerous Jewish writers to symbolize universal suffering and as

“an emblem of violence and a reminder of Christian enmity against Jews” (Plank 964). Renown poet Uri-Tsvi Grinberg, whose writings were often published in the same literary journals as Chagall’s illustrations, highlighted this icon. He even published a Yiddish poem in the form of a cross, with the acronym “INRI” printed in large Latin letters, mirroring the “INRI” that later appears in the *White Crucifixion* (Harshav, “The Role” 9-10). The practice of depicting a “Jewish Jesus” by Jewish artists dates back to the 1870’s, and includes sculptors such as the Russian Marc Antokolsky, from whom Chagall modeled his name (Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s” 145; Pappas 414). Chagall himself had sketched and later painted a Jewish “Christ Child” on the cross in *Golgotha* (1912). The common link for these artists was that there was a political meaning to the “Jewish Jesus,” all variations on the theme that “acts of anti-Semitism were resolutely anti-Christian in nature” (Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s” 145). And, these Jewish artists resorted to the use of this icon to impart this political message of Jewish pain and suffering when threatened with or in reaction to anti-Semitic outbreaks and pogroms (Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s” 143-149).

While the concept is not unique, the political ramifications of choosing a “Jewish Jesus” in the context of the horrific events that unfolded at that time to invoke the painting were unprecedented. *White Crucifixion* as a powerful work of political art was intended by Chagall “as a commentary upon Jewish reality in the late 1930s, when anti-Semitic fervor was sweeping across Europe” (Levine 178). He explained many years later that “their [the Jews] crucifixion in the streets of Vitebsk and other places took on the tragic appearance of the crucified Christ Himself” (Wilson 140). Thus, Chagall’s choice of this Jewish crucifixion was a natural one, for no other icon could conjure up more passion and emotion or more effectively awaken sensitivity in his largely Christian audience.

As is characteristic of his other paintings, Chagall “tells us that his paintings are to be looked at – not interpreted” (Kuh 90). And, a Christian audience would immediately understand Chagall’s message. The crucifixion depicted in the painting clearly reveals Jesus not as “the Son of G-d,” but rather as “the human victim of violence” (Godfrey 39). As such, the painting reveals Jesus sharing his suffering with the Jewish mother who attempts to save her baby, and the Jewish refugees who are subject to torture or murder at the hands of the Nazis. As their brother, Jesus is suffering not

only for Christians but for all of the persecuted Jews. Yet, in this painting, there is no suggestion of redemption and "suffering remains man's lasting fate," for both Christians and Jews (Levine 178). The crucified Jew "hangs powerless" amidst "a world of unleashed terror within which no saving voice can be heard nor any redeeming signs perceived ... To have redemptive meaning, the cross must answer the victims who whirl here in torment" (Plank 964). Still, the Christian world remains silent.

This demonstrates yet another facet of the *White Crucifixion* as a work of political art. Not only was the painting an expression of Chagall's outrage over the atrocities that were being perpetrated by the Nazis, it also acted as a powerful means and desperate attempt to denounce silence and to compel the people of the world into action. In unmistakable terms which would be understood by all Christians, from the most educated and elite to the commoners, the painting screams " 'Don't you see? Don't you understand? When the Nazis kill Jews they are killing Christ' " (Morgan 128). By addressing Christians in their own iconic language, the artist was conveying to them the deep meaning of the events, not only to the Jews but to them, as Christians (Amishai-Maisels, "Christological" 462-463). And, to remain silent under these circumstances was anti-Christian. Chagall knew only too well the power that sprung from such silence, for that had been his reality. He forever carried with him the scars of his Russian-Jewish heritage, inflicted by the actual and historical pogroms that he and his people had been subjected to, and the oppressive grip of persecution from which his inner being could never escape. As well, he was equally aware that these unimaginable periods of brutality at best encountered little opposition from Christians. Chagall later commented: "Two thousand years of Christianity in the world ... but, with few exceptions their hearts are silent" (Coleman 13). And, it was at this silence, in the wake of this organized political statement of anti-Semitism by the Nazis culminating in *Kristallnacht*, that Chagall targeted his message in the *White Crucifixion*. Depicting the crucifixion as a source of unity between Christians and Jews, the painting would hopefully elicit a deeper understanding as to the true meaning of the cross, which would end their reign of silence and finally compel Christians to respond to the Nazi regime.

That Chagall understood the political ramifications resulting from this powerful work of art becomes evident with the disclosure that the painting the public has come to know as the *White Crucifixion*

is an alteration from its original form. "[D]esigned to raise awareness of the events in Hitler's Germany and their implications for mankind in general," the original painting was exhibited in Paris in early 1940 ("White"). There, the placard worn around the neck of the old man escaping from the pogrom, appearing in the lower left corner of the painting, read " 'Ich bin Jude' (I am a Jew)." Also, the original painting contained inverted swastikas both on the flag above the burning synagogue and on the armband of the responsible soldier. It has been suggested that Chagall found the symbol so offensive that he could not bring himself to draw the swastika correctly and thus superstitiously reversed its position. Chagall painted over the inscription and symbols either after the Nazi invasion of France in May, 1940 or the occupation of Paris in June, 1940, where Chagall and his family resided ("White"). Realizing that the political statement made in the painting's original form was "too literal," Chagall explained that he feared for the safety of the painting if confiscated (Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's" 140). He had already experienced the destruction of three of his paintings in 1933 during Hitler's rise to power. While unarticulated, it is not too far a leap to suggest that Chagall also feared for his own safety at having made such an obvious anti-Nazi statement, for which he could be killed.

As I became immersed in my research, attempting to understand the essence of the *White Crucifixion*, it became vividly clear as to why I was drawn to this work of political art. It had stirred up deep feelings that I was incapable of immediately explaining or verbalizing. Like the artist, I too grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust. Unlike the Hebrew school classmates of my youth, whose first inklings about the Holocaust came in the context of reading Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* and who were shocked to learn about the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi regime, I remained un-phased. For, to me, the granddaughter of a survivor who had endured 4 years, 9 months and 2 days as a "living dead" object, the atrocities of the Holocaust have always been very real; they pulse through my veins and weave through the fabric of my soul. The Jews painted by Chagall in the *White Crucifixion* who are making a futile attempt to flee from the Nazis are recognizable to me. They are the aunts, uncles and great-grandparents who are standing next to my grandfather as a boy in Czechoslovakia, smiling into the camera for a photograph that hangs on the living room wall in my home. They are real people who were brutally murdered by the Nazis and whose love for me I will never know. The painting is the lesson

of the Holocaust that my grandfather used to live by: that we are Christians and Jews together, all just brothers and sisters under one G-d, whose mandates compel us to act in the face of injustice and evil.

Chagall was “the master poet of the Jewish world, the Walt Whitman of the *shtetl*” (Lacayo 2). In a work that could have only been created by an artist whose religious and cultural experiences provided the palate from which the plight of the Jews was immortalized on canvas, Chagall tells their story, while expressing his outrage and awakening public sensitivity to these horrific events. Condemning the world for their silence and imploring them to act in the face of inhumanity, the *White Crucifixion* remains an enduring work of political art whose message is as applicable today as it was in 1938.

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