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Celestine Bohlen's front-page report on the discovery of Bruno Schulz's murals by Benjamin Geissler and the international controversy surrounding their removal. Continued on page A10.

Artwork by Holocaust Victim Is Focus of Dispute

By CELESTINE BOHLEN

A bitter international scandal has erupted in a city in Ukraine, about 30 miles from the Polish border, where last month workers from Yad Vashem, Israel's main Holocaust museum, chiseled five fragments from a newly discovered series of wall paintings. They are the last known work of Bruno Schulz, a Polish Jewish writer, artist and Holocaust victim.

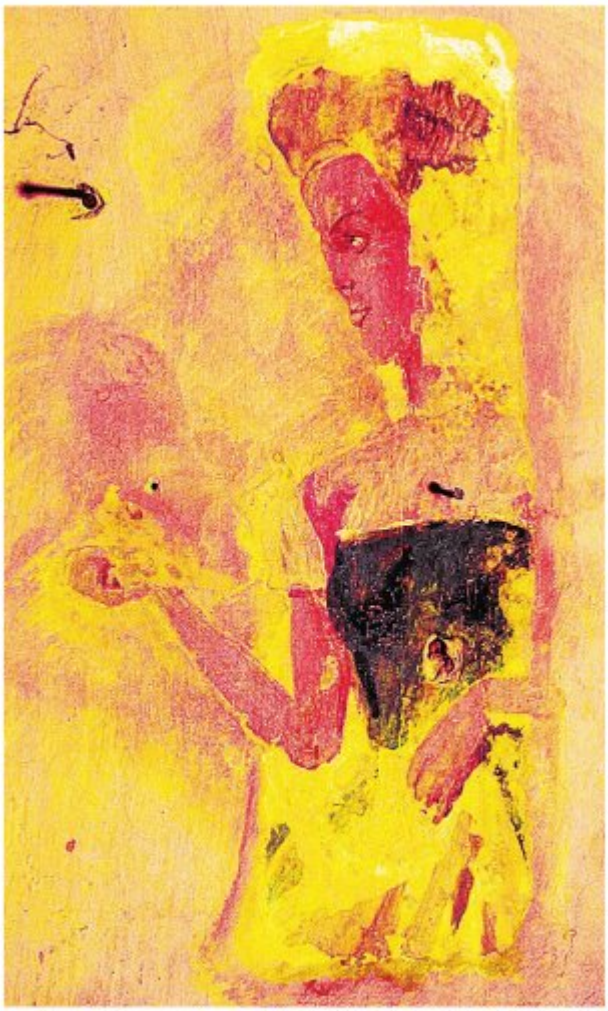
With that single act, whose legality is disputed, Yad Vashem, the most august memorial to Jewish victims of Nazi slaughter, has unleashed a rumble of protests through a part of Europe that still feels battered and bruised by a vicious and violent century.

The Schulz murals, illustrations of Grimm fairy tales that decorated the nursery of a Gestapo officer's son, have been caught in the throes of that history. According to Yad Vashem, the fragments in its possession, which depict a princess, a horse-drawn carriage and several shadowy figures, including two dwarfs, are now being restored. Plans call for them to be put on display at Yad Vashem's new historical museum in Jerusalem, which is to open in 2004.

Schulz, an evocative writer whose stylized drawings also have a cult following, painted the murals under duress. He was working on them when he was shot to death on Nov. 19, 1942, in Nazi-occupied Drogobych (pronounced droh-HOH-bich), or Drohobycz, as it had been known between the wars, when it was part of Poland. They were found last winter by Benjamin Geissler, a German filmmaker, in an apartment inside the villa once occupied by Franz Landau, the Gestapo officer who demanded them. Mr. Geissler, 37, had come to research a film on Schulz, a tragic figure who, it was once said, was born an Austrian, lived as a Pole and died as a Jew.

In written statements, representatives of Yad Vashem defended the removal of the fragments. They said they had approval from local authorities in Drogobych, a

Continued on Page A10



Benjamin Geissler

A fragment of a mural by Bruno Schulz, a Jewish artist, removed by representatives of Yad Vashem.

The New York Times · June 20, 2001 · Celestine Bohlen · Page A1 / Page A10

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Continued From Page A1

point that the authorities vehemently dispute.

But the crux of Yad Vashem's argument refers to a higher claim to property left by Jewish Holocaust victims, particularly in Poland, where the prewar Jewish community of 3.5 million has now dwindled to several thousand.

''Most of the Holocaust survivors live in Israel, but the remnants of the vibrant Jewish life, and of the suffering of the victims and the survivors are scattered throughout Europe,'' wrote Lisa Davidson, an assistant spokeswoman for the museum. ''Therefore we have the moral right to those remnants.''

This argument has been fiercely disputed in Poland, where Schulz is seen first and foremost as a Polish writer. His luminous, sensuous style, in books like ''The Street of Crocodiles'' (originally titled ''Cinnamon Shops'') and ''The Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass,'' has earned him a faithful following inside and outside Poland.

When Jerzy Ficowski, a Warsaw-based author and editor who is Poland's leading expert on Schulz, heard that Yad Vashem had taken the fragments, he dismissed it as an absurd impossibility.

''Alas, after a few days I had to retract my denials because Yad Vashem itself acknowledged what it considers to be an act of justice, and what I consider a crime,'' he said through a Polish translator.

Ms. Davidson of Yad Vashem said that Drogobych officials had told the museum's representatives that the disposition of the wall paintings was up to the Kaluzhni family, owners of the apartment where they had been found. She also said that the same officials said that the city had final authority over the murals.

But Nikola Mykhac, head of the city's cultural affairs department, said in a telephone interview that no one from the city administration had given written or oral permission for removal or export of the fragments.

''There was no talk of taking away these effects,'' he said. ''We cannot even imagine how they could have removed them from a technical point of view.'' Mr. Mykhac said he only helped arrange an initial viewing of the wall paintings by the Yad Vashem representatives.

Once the removal, which took place from May 19 to May 21, was discovered, the event become front-page news in Poland. Polish officials issued a statement condemning the action, which they said bordered on vandalism, and cultural commentators delved into the tricky question of whether Schulz was a Jewish author writing in Polish or a Polish author of Jewish origin.



Benjamin Geissler

The wall of the apartment once occupied by a Gestapo officer, where the art by Bruno Schulz was removed by representatives of Yad Vashem.



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Drogobych, now in Urkraine, where the murals were discovered.

Ukraine's claim to Schulz, which is based purely on geography, is more accidental. But still, Drogobych, once a bustling multicultural center in Galicia, an Austro-Hungarian province, was where Schulz spent his first and final years. (He went to university in Vienna, where his family fled just before World War I.) ''This town and land became a self-sufficient microcosm,'' he wrote in ''The Republic of Dreams,'' an essay.

''This was his small homeland, the only world where he could breathe and work, as he himself has said,'' Mr. Ficowski said. ''He rejected all offers to move elsewhere, to Warsaw or wherever, because he was not able to create anywhere but Drogobycz. Thus his artwork was not only chopped up, and a part of it taken away; it was also wrenched from its most important context.''

Perhaps the most bitter reaction has come from Drogobych's tiny Jewish community, made up of fewer than 400 Jews.

Dora Katznelson, 80, vice president of the Reform Jewish congregation in Drogobych, was so infuriated that she sent a letter to the Israeli government, which was later published in the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza.

''Not just Jews and Poles,'' Ms. Katznelson wrote, ''but also Ukrainians who read every day in Ukrainian newspapers about the barbarous theft of Schulz's paintings, cry in wonder, 'Yad Vashem? It's impossible.' ''

Born in Bialystok, in Poland, Ms. Katznelson has spent 40 years in Drogobych and said she had once seen firsthand the city administration's indifference to the legacy of the Jewish community. She was present in 1992 when a top city official declined to accept a monument to Schulz sent by Israel on the 50th anniversary of his death, arguing that residents would criticize him for raising a monument to ''a stranger,'' even though Schulz was a native son.

Anti-Semitism, which has deep roots in the region, has periodically erupted into violence, most virulently during the Nazi occupation. The years under Soviet rule were marked by another kind of repression.

In Israel some have suggested that this history of intolerance was reason enough to remove the wall fragments to Yad Vashem. ''Who cares about them in Drogobych?'' scoffed Yehuda Bauer, a former official at Yad Vashem who was quoted in Gazeta Wyborcza on June 1.

Still, Ms. Katznelson is convinced that Drogobych is the right place for a memorial to Schulz. ''These were the last paintings of a great Polish Jewish artist, and as his last creation, it should stay here,'' she said in an interview.

Even when they were thought to be lost, the murals have been an integral part of Schulz's story. It was well known that he had been commanded by Landau to decorate the walls of his son's nursery in a villa that had itself been taken from a Jewish family.

For 60 years the murals — not frescoes, since they were not painted in fresh plaster but in a compound made from cheese — went undetected in the Villa Landau, as the building came to be known. It had been divided into five apartments after Drohobych became part of the Soviet Ukraine after World War II.

It was only last February, when Benjamin Geissler and his father, Christian Geissler, arrived to research their film, that a close inspection was finally made of the tiny pantry off the kitchen in the apartment of Nikolai Kaluzhni, a former Communist Party clerk, and his wife, Nadezhda.

There, behind the onions and garlic and beneath a coat of rose-colored paint, the Geisslers found the faint outline of Schulz's sketches. Later Polish and Ukrainian experts came to the apartment, cleaned some parts of the walls and confirmed that the work was Schulz's.

Afterward, Benjamin Geissler began a campaign to raise money to turn the Villa Landau into a museum to Schulz and to resettle the current tenants. Anticipating the danger of looters, he also wrote to the Ukrainian Culture Ministry, asking for guards at the site.

He received no response. Later, when he went to Jerusalem to interview survivors of the Drogobych ghetto, officials at Yad Vashem gave him no indication of their plans, he said.

Meanwhile, Benjamin Geissler said, he received a letter from Mr. Kaluzhni, dated May 17, saying that a group from Israel was ready to pay $3,000 for the murals, which, according to the city, had become his property through the process of privatization. In the letter Mr. Kaluzhni said he had refused the offer. What happened next is unclear, but two days later, the crew from Yad Vashem, led by a Ukrainian immigrant to Israel, arrived.

All together, five fragments — the three large sketches, each roughly one-and-a-half square feet, and two smaller patches — were removed after gauze was taped on the wall to protect the surface. The crew applied gauze to another fragment but left it behind. How the fragments were taken out of the country is not clear: under laws from the Soviet era, export of cultural property created before World War II requires approval from the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture.

According to diplomats from both countries, the Ukrainian and the Polish governments have filed formal inquiries with the Israeli government. But so far, they said, they have received no response.

Presumably, much more of the original murals remains in the apartment, but it is uncertain how or when the work will be uncovered.

''The picture is destroyed,'' Mr. Geissler said in a telephone interview from Hamburg, ''and nobody will know the whole picture. For me, it is very tragic to see Bruno Schulz only as a Jewish victim or only as a Polish writer. He is simply Bruno Schulz, and this is a violent postmortem attack against him.''