

ICONS *of* ALONE

NEW WORK BY SAMUEL BAK



Pucker Gallery • Boston

THERE ARE NO ROADS BACK

BY MARK CELINSCAK

Prior to the start of the Second World War, Vilna was known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” It was a center of Jewish cultural, political, religious, and social life. Jews comprised nearly a third of its residents. In June 1941 the German army conquered the city. Soon Jews were required to wear the yellow Star of David, they were subject to curfews and their property was confiscated. By September 1941 the city’s Jews were forced into a ghetto. Moreover, the Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce, a Nazi organization established to appropriate cultural property during the war, was sent to the city. It was determined to destroy much of the Jewish culture in Vilna.

A group of forced laborers were assigned to aid in the ransacking and destruction. Among them were artists, poets, and scholars. From this group, the Paper Brigade was formed. They were a covert unit who hid and smuggled rare books, sculptures, and paintings during the war. Led by two Yiddish poets, Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski, the Paper Brigade saved a great deal of Vilna’s cultural heritage from Nazi devastation. In his diary Kaczerginski remarked, “On a daily basis, sacks and baskets of treasures are transferred from the

bunker—letters, manuscripts, and books by famous Jewish personalities. . . . The Polish inhabitants of the courtyard are constantly calling in policemen and other officials; they think we are digging for gold. They can’t understand why we need these dirty pieces of paper that are stuffed amidst the feathers of pillowcases and blankets.”¹ During the Nazi onslaught, these courageous acts were a type of cultural defiance of tyranny.

Meanwhile, and still imprisoned in the ghetto in 1942, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski bestowed on a then nine-year-old Samuel Bak the official record of the Jewish community known as the *Pinkas*. Hoping the book would be preserved, it contained not only a chronicle of Vilna’s history, but also blank pages, a rare commodity in the ghetto. According to Bak, they asked him to “draw on it whatever arose from my imagination. I was expected to leave my own record on the pages of this ancient book and keep it alive.”² Despite the devastation all around him, the child artist continued to document and create. As Theodore Weeks notes, “Cultural life in the Vilnius ghetto was amazingly rich. . . . Most ghetto residents . . . appeared grateful for any kind of distraction from the grim reality surrounding them. . . .”³ Indeed,

¹ As quoted in David E. Fishman, “The Last Zamlers: Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski in Vilna, 1944-1945.” In *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*. Edited by Jeffrey Veidlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 166.

² Samuel Bak, *Painted in Words* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 5.

³ Theodore R. Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), p. 173.

Sutzkever and Kacerginski later invited Bak to participate in an art exhibition organized in the ghetto. Why risk life to preserve a culture that is being destroyed in front of one's eyes? Why attempt to create art when life all around you is being extinguished? Why document the suffering of it all?

In Samuel Bak's new series *Alone*, the artist reflects on familiar Holocaust themes such as ghettoization, displacement, memorialization, and loss. In *Study for Ghetto – A* (BK2792), the artist depicts a community obliterated. When the Vilna ghetto was established, it was divided into two sections, a larger area that contained 29,000 Jews, and a smaller space that held 11,000.⁴ As in all other works presented in the *Alone* series, there are no human beings or any substitutions that could possibly represent them. And yet their absence haunts these works. In *Study for Ghetto – A*, collapsed walls, shattered buildings, and concrete slabs with bullet holes slope toward the center of the frame reminding us of the rich, vibrant life that was once present. We are witness to the vestiges of a destroyed community. "All nature seems happy and free," the poet Kacerginski observes in "Friling" (trans. Springtime), "But locked in the Ghetto/ I stand like a beggar/ I beg for some sunshine for me." In *Study for Ghetto – A*, darkness descends on the ravaged community; nature is barely evident beyond the ghetto. Only a dark blue sky appears, marginally, above the walls atop the frame. By 1944 the Vilna ghetto,



Study for Ghetto – A (BK2792)



Alone – A (BK2790)

located in the traditional Jewish quarter of town that included the Old Synagogue, had been utterly devastated. For Bak the artist, much like Kacerginski the poet, creative expression allows for some form of control over a stark, painful reality.

In Bak's *Alone – A* (BK2790) we are presented with a fractured Star of David enveloped by a turbulent sea. A familiar symbol in the artist's work, Bak has remarked that "I have returned to the Star of David over and over again, attracted by the simplicity of its shape and by the clarity of its meaning—an icon of humiliation

that has acquired the status of proud identity. At times I depicted it as if it were made of metal, wood, fabric or stone."⁵ The stunning blue of the water reaches back to meet an analogous sky. Bak's star is comprised of frames of houses, once again collapsing toward the center as in the previously discussed *Study for Ghetto – A*. The Nazis attacked the Jewish community, forcing them to search for shelter elsewhere. "The sea stormed with anger/ with the torment of the journey," Kacerginski writes in "S'vet geshen" (trans. It Will Happen). Perhaps paralleling Bak's *Alone – A*, Kacerginski's poem was written about the British attack on the *SS Exodus*, a ship which took part in *Aliyah Bet*, the illegal immigration by Jews to Mandatory Palestine. In July 1947, the *SS Exodus* carried more than 4,500 Holocaust survivors towards Palestine. A discolored white cloth flag with a blue Star of David hung from the ship's mast. Bak's *Unfulfilled Promise* (BK2779) captures what such a

moment must have been like for these refugees. Despite not depicting human life, Bak's ship conjures the Holocaust survivors aboard the *SS Exodus* who were desperately seeking a way to leave a war-worn Europe. The twin funnel of the marooned ship evokes crematoria chimneys. "The ship must flee on the deep," Kacerginski continues, "No one must find us/ O storm wind/ O bring mother and child/ Quickly to the desired shore/ Enough waiting!" In *Unfulfilled Promise*, wooden planks lay next to the ship waiting to be traversed onto land. Yet, in the middle of the frame, Bak positions a question mark being lowered down between the chimneys. Their lives have been destroyed, so why would they stay in Europe? If countries around the world continue to shut their borders, where can they go? If immigration to their desired

destination, Mandatory Palestine, has been deemed illegal, what alternatives exist? Before the *SS Exodus* arrived at its intended destination, it was surrounded by British destroyers. As in Bak's *Study for Alone – F* (BK2786), the Star of David stands in for the survivors aboard a ship in search of sanctuary; they are hemmed in by an unforgiving force. In this instance, jagged rocks pierce the Star of David. "But suddenly battleships fall upon us," Kacerginski explains, "Gone is our luck/ They are sending us back." The British intercepted the



Unfulfilled Promise (BK2779)



Study for Alone – F (BK2786)



Study for Alone – G (BK2787)

SS Exodus and returned the refugees to Europe, landing at Port-de-Bouc, France. The passengers refused to disembark and conducted a hunger strike that lasted more than three weeks. When French authorities rejected British demands to forcibly remove them, the refugees were returned to displaced persons camps in the British zone of occupied Germany, the scene of the crime. Freedom and safety once again seem so distant. And yet, Kacerginski hopes, "It will happen/ It must happen/ And we all will be together again/ You will see, you will see/ Our ship also will sail freely on all the seas/ Our holy longing/ To return to the land of the prophets/ It will be, it will materialize/ I hear already the song/ As they bless us Welcome/ Blessed are those who come." By 1948 the State of Israel was declared, and an influx of Holocaust survivors arrived.

Most Jews in Vilna were killed in Ponary, today a suburb of the city. Located about ten kilometers from downtown Vilna, prior to the war, Ponary was an idyllic spot for holiday picnics and general recreation. According to Yitzhak Arad, between 50,000 and 60,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered in Ponary by the Einsatzgruppen and Lithuanian collaborators.⁶ In Bak's *Study for Alone – G* (BK2787), a Star of David again comprises destroyed

⁴ Theodore R. Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), p. 171.

⁵ Samuel Bak, "Speaking About the Unspeakable: A Lecture by Samuel Bak." *International Colloquy about the Holocaust and the Arts*, European Parliament, Strasbourg, France (October 2002).

⁶ Yitzhak Arad, "Preface." In Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary, 1941–1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*. Edited by Yitzhak Arad (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 15.

homes, possibly from the ghetto, but this time it is placed in a field. Indeed, one imagines that the Ponary forest lies just beyond the “ghetto walls” of Bak’s star, its weight compressing the earth as if a shallow grave. *Alone – B* (BK2791) presents a similar image, only this time the field has gone dark, and along with it, the sky. Prior to the Nazi invasion of Lithuania, the occupying Soviets had dug large pits to store fuel tanks. The Germans later used the same pits to murder and conceal the dead. “Quiet, quiet, let’s be silent,” Kaczerginski implores in “Shtiler Shtiler” (trans. Quiet Quiet), “Dead are growing here/ They were planted by the tyrant/ See their bloom appear.” Kaczerginski wrote this poem about the Ponary massacre. The accompanying music was written by another child prodigy, an eleven-year-old Alexander Volkovitski (the pianist Alexander Tamir) for a music competition in the ghetto. “Tears no help commands,” the poet continues, “Our pain callous people/ Never understand/ Seas and oceans have their order/ Prison also has its border/ Our torment is endless/ Is endless.” In Bak’s *Smoke* (BK2776), we see tombstones and other debris being carried off into the atmosphere, the chimneys billowing fumes. Nearly 5,000 Vilna Jews were deported and killed in extermination camps



Alone – B (BK2791)



Smoke (BK2776)



The Very Last Days (BK2780)

in German-occupied Poland. *Smoke* presents a surreal, unstable graveyard in motion in the sky. The anonymity of genocidal killing prevented proper burial and mourning. The mass graves, the crematoria ovens, and chimneys ensured that traditional forms of grieving for the dead was virtually impossible. The artist asks: how can we remember such a loss? Those who suffered did so as a community and individually—and both alone. “Their story was my story,” Bak notes, “And in me it was also a story about a trauma that had been silenced for too many years.”⁷ The artist thus offers a visual diary to those stories. And yet, the chasm between those who experience such suffering and the rest of us remains vast. How do we break down those walls, traverse that gap and learn from aloneness? Bak’s art provides a setting to engage with the profound moral questions that relate to such anguish.

In September 1943, under orders of the Reichsführer of the Schutzstaffel Heinrich Himmler, the Vilna ghetto was liquidated. Those who remained in the ghetto were either sent to Estonia, the extermination camps in Poland or killed in Ponary. The artist and his mother were sent to the HKP 562 forced labor camp in Vilna. In Bak’s *The Very Last Days* (BK2780) we are presented with a scene of chaos and destruction. A Star of

David balances on a precipice; a crematoria chimney crashes onto the city below. One imagines the destruction not only of the Vilna ghetto, but of life itself. “They say that the Ghetto is golden and glowing,” Kaczerginski remembers in “Friling,” “But sunlight and tears make me blind.” By the fall of 1943, the destruction of the Jews of Vilna is nearly complete. Of those trapped in the city during the war, only a few hundred survived. The Nazis murdered around ninety percent of Lithuania’s Jews. Bak’s *Ner Tamid* (BK2796) depicts a smoldering ghetto. Ladders hint at



Ner Tamid (BK2796)



Tower (BK2778)

possible escape, wooden planks connect wrecked buildings, while a single candle, nearly buried underground, sheds light on the destruction. It is lit in memory of the dead. *Tower* (BK2778) depicts the aftermath. A toppled home shows signs of life, but it also evokes the crematoria chimney. Bullet holes scar the concrete façade. “All the roads lead to Ponar now,” Kaczerginski declares in “Shtiler Shtiler,” “There are no roads back.” Indeed, no roads back to a world that is no more. Only memories remain, those of the community, and those of the individual, alone.

— DR. MARK CELINCAK

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⁷ Bak, *Painted in Words*, p. 479.



Another One (Ghetto)
Oil on linen
38.5 x 64"
BK2775



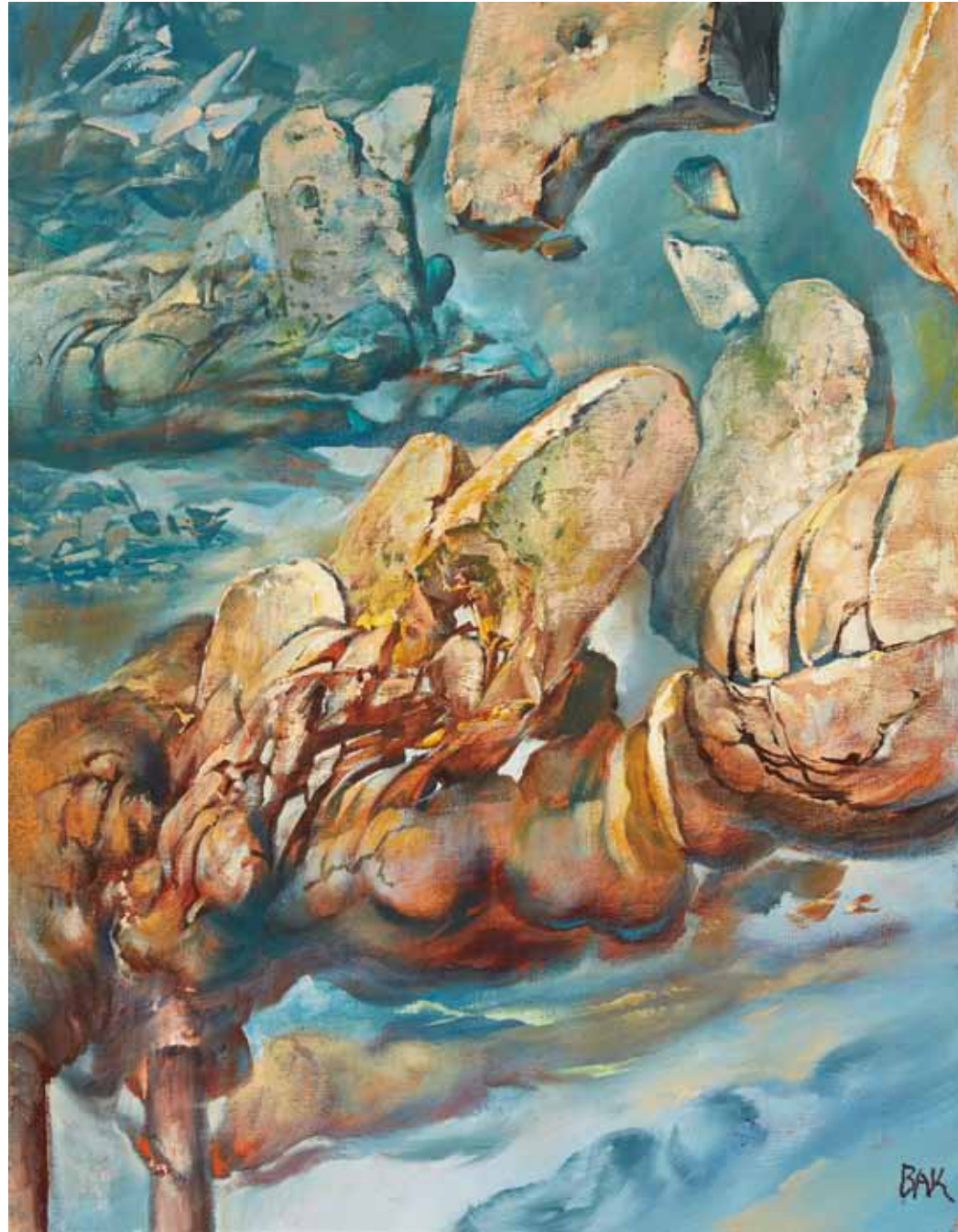
Smoke
Oil on canvas
63 x 55.25"
BK2776



Study for Smoke – A
Oil on canvas
18.25 x 14"
BK2798



Study for Smoke – B
Oil on canvas
18.25 x 14"
BK2799



Study for Smoke – C
Oil on canvas
18.25 x 14"
BK2800



Study for Smoke – D
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2801



Alone - B
Oil on canvas
54 x 54"
BK2791



Study for Alone - A
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2781



Study for Alone - C
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2783



Study for Alone - D
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2784



Study for Alone - E
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2785



Study for Alone – F
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2786



Study for Alone – G
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2787



Study for Alone - H
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2788



Study for Alone - I
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2789



Ner Tamid
Oil on linen
48.25 x 64.25"
BK2796



Study for Ghetto - B
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2793



Study for Ghetto - A
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2792



Study for a Ghetto
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2795



Study for Ghetto - C
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2794



Tower
Oil on canvas
18.25 x 14"
BK2778



Unfulfilled Promise
Oil on canvas
14 x 18"
BK2779



The Very Last Days
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2780



Study for a Cloudy Day
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2797



Covered
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2802

SAMUEL BAK



Samuel Bak was born in Vilna, Poland in 1933, at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under Soviet and then German occupation. Bak's artistic talent was first recognized during an exhibition of his work in the Ghetto of Vilna when he was nine years old. While he and his mother survived, his father and four grandparents all perished at the hands of the Nazis. At the end of World War II, he fled with his mother to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp, where he enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School in Munich. In 1948, they immigrated to the newly established state of Israel.

He studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and completed his mandatory service in the Israeli army. In 1956, he went to Paris to continue his education at the École des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his artistic studies. In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings was met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to exhibit at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, followed by solo exhibitions at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums in 1963.

It was subsequent to these exhibitions that a major change in his art occurred. There was a distinct

shift from abstract forms to a metaphysical figurative means of expression. Ultimately, this transformation crystallized into his present pictorial language. Bak's work weaves together personal history and Jewish history to articulate an iconography of his Holocaust experience. Across seven decades of artistic production Samuel Bak has explored and reworked a set of metaphors, a visual grammar, and a vocabulary that ultimately privileges questions. His art depicts a world destroyed, and yet provisionally pieced back together, preserving the memory of the twentieth-century ruination of Jewish life and culture by way of an artistic passion and precision that stubbornly announces the creativity of the human spirit.

Since 1959, the artist has had numerous exhibitions in major museums, galleries, and universities throughout Europe, Israel, and the United States, including retrospectives at Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem and the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. He has lived and worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, Rome, New York, and Lausanne. In 1993, he settled in Massachusetts and became an American citizen. Bak has been the subject of numerous articles, scholarly works, and nineteen books, most notably a 400-page monograph entitled *Between Worlds*. In 2001, he published his touching memoir, *Painted in Words*, which has been translated into four languages. He has also been the subject of two documentary films and was the recipient of the

2002 German Herkomer Cultural Prize. Samuel Bak has received honorary doctorate degrees from: the University of New Hampshire in Durham; Seton Hill University in Greenburg, Pennsylvania; Massachusetts College of Art in Boston; the University of Nebraska Omaha; and Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, MA.

In 2017, The Samuel Bak Museum opened in the Tolerance Center of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. In addition to the more than 50 works already donated by the artist, the Museum will accept more than 100 works in the coming years, and ultimately build a collection that spans the artist's career. Also in 2017, Samuel Bak was nominated by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, and subsequently named by the city's mayor as an Honorary Citizen of Vilnius. He is only the 15th person to receive this honor, joining Ronald Reagan and Shimon Peres for their exceptional contributions to Lithuania. In 2019, The Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center, In Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan, opened at the Holocaust Museum Houston to house more than 125 works donated by the artist. Also in 2019, the Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy and the Natan & Hannah Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies partnered with Pucker Gallery to create *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak*, an exhibition of Sam Bak's works at University of Nebraska Omaha.

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ICONS of ALONE

NEW WORK BY SAMUEL BAK

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PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION:

3 December 2022 • 3 to 6 PM • The artist will be present

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Cover:
Alone – A
Oil on linen
36.25 x 36.25"
BK2790

Study for Alone – B
Oil on canvas
14 x 18.25"
BK2782