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Samuel Bak. Photo from personal archive.

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INTERVIEWS 28 January 2024

Interview by Laima Vincé

Laima Vincé: How do you identify yourself as a writer?

Samuel Bak: I am a Yiddish writer who writes in English.

Laima Vincé: You have lived in many countries, in various cultures, and on different continents. How would you define your identity?

Samuel Bak: This is a tricky existentialist question because it contains a lot of components. Are you a Jew because of how other people identify you—according to Sartre’s interpretation. Why does he get to decide? We recompose our memories in a way that protects us. We should not destroy a person’s structure of self-protection. When I think of myself, I think that maybe because I have lived in so many different countries and represent different things for different people that others construct my identity for me. But the happy childhood I had in Vilnius has shaped my inner identity. I am the perfect wandering Jew. I am lucky that life has enriched me in so many ways. I was the first and only grandson born to two sets of loving grandparents, and a set of loving parents. I have fantastic memories of my childhood in Vilna. I was so loved. My childhood was a lost paradise. For anyone growing up is a loss of paradise. But my childhood ended with the Holocaust. All four of my grandparents, my father, my extended family, and my community were killed. My personality at age eight was already formed when my mother and I were arrested by Lithuanian policemen and marched to the Vilna ghetto. I truly believed that my parents would protect me. I had the privilege as a child that I was so sure of the love that surrounded me that I felt as though I were safer than I really was.

I was invited here locally in Weston to speak at a viewing of the film, *The Good Nazi*, along with another man who survived the H.K.P labor camp. The people in the audience were uncomfortable when I said that the good Nazi was the one who killed as many Jews as possible. In that film there are child actors who play children who are killed in the *kinder aktion* (child action). I think that the children didn’t realize that the worst thing is dying. The most terrible thing for a child is to be separated from their parents. I feel terrible that my taxpayer money is being used to separate children from their parents at the United States border with Mexico.

Laima Vincé:What is the relationship between your work as a painter and your work as a writer?

Samuel Bak: My memoir is closely related to my paintings. I did not write with the self-consciousness that the professional writer has. I desired to bring back to life something that I knew existed in my memory. It is part of the huge storehouse of memories my mother had. I thought to myself: all these people will disappear completely unless I write about them from my memory. The memoir is directly related to my painting of the family, which is housed at the Pucker Gallery in Boston.

There is humor in the memoir. I think that humor is indispensable. It is a part of despair.

For me one of the major challenges of writing this memoir was language. English is not my mother tongue. It is a language I acquired at an adult age. My English teacher in Israel planted in me this desire to learn this language. When I wrote this book in English, I had the problem that my memories kept coming back to me in words from different childhood languages.

In my paintings I write about what happened a short time ago. What has been in the past is what will be in the future. Tragically, people do not change. It is part of human nature that we repeat the past. The state of war is part of our process of life. We have constantly a state of war in ourselves. The immune system is out there looking for enemies. The immune system does not work. War is always happening on this planet. Man kills man. Man helps man. All this is part of my memory. Appearances. How things seem to look. What memories are. How a past is reconstructed. The past is not a folder that comes up on your computer and you put memories into it. Memory is a creative process. It is a collage of different things. It always comes back in different ways. My paintings are made

from bits and pieces of things that resemble other things. My memoir is not written in chronological order, but through association. There is a sense of timelessness in my writing.



'The Family' by Samuel Bak. Permission of Pucker Gallery.

Laima Vincé: What motivated you to write your memoir?

Samuel Bak: I wanted to recreate my family before all the memories are gone. I wanted to bring back to life to some degree people who would have been otherwise forgotten. I never forgave myself for not insisting my mother write the histories of our family. I try to keep her memories alive.

Laima Vincé: How difficult was it to return to your childhood while writing your memoir?

Samuel Bak: It was very demanding. I have been painting for 80 years. I can say that there is not one day I do not paint. If I don't paint, I don't exist. This was the longest period of my life that I did not paint. I sat morning to evening completely immersed in my writing. I wrote and rewrote. I was not happy with my English. Irene Taylor helped me shorten the book. It was 1,000 pages long. She also corrected the tenses without losing the character of my narration. She never dared to change one word without discussing it and asking me if I was comfortable with it. I was totally immersed in it. So many things came up.

When I finished this book, Rimvydas Stankevičius, who was then a member of the Lithuanian parliament, came to visit. He wanted to talk to me about the priest and nuns who were mine and my mother's rescuers. He invited me to return to Vilnius to do an exhibit. I was not quite ready to go back to Vilnius for the first time since the war at the same time that I was traveling there for a retrospective show, so Josée and I decided to travel in May 2001, before the show, just to see Vilnius. Rimvydas and Emanuelis Zingeris met me at the airport with a welcoming crowd. They took care of us. One morning, very early, I went out on my own to explore the city and to find our old apartment. Everything had changed, and at the same time, it was still the same. It was like seeing double of everything. One afternoon Rimvydas took me to see the Minister of Culture. His office was in the building where our old apartment had been located. The only thing that has remained the same was the windows. The Minister's office was in the apartment of old Mr. Bonumovich. As I sat there speaking with the Minister, an old scene played out for me that took place in that very same room. Mr. Bonumovich's Great Dane jumped up on him and he fell over and broke his leg. I had come to Vilnius to be a child again. The first time I went to my childhood home I saw the iron wrought railings but did not have the courage to go inside.

Laima Vincė: Do you think it is appropriate to write about the Lithuanian Jewish experience alongside the Christian Lithuanian experience when writing about Lithuanian diaspora literature in North America?

Samuel Bak: I have a problem with the word "appropriate." I believe that whatever deals with life, and especially with life in dire times, merits examination. There is no better way of exploring how individuals behave than by way of comparisons. Similar historic and geographic conditions, as well as social, cultural, religious, and ethnic factors alone, do not determine how people act. What about personality, character, temperament, looks, etc.? It would be very important to speak of these subjects in the sense of their contexts. Today, in our post-holocaust times, when such heavy shadows of guilt still linger over the present Lithuania, it might be very important to specify and distinguish the origins of so much human suffering. Lithuanians who tried to save Jews were executed, while other Lithuanians preferred to join the executioners. The backdrop of all that has filled volumes upon volumes of data. In brief: it is more than "appropriate" to put the memoirs of Lithuanians and Litvaks under the same historic roof, on condition of clarifying the complex factors that determined the origins and the aftermath of those tragic years.

Laima Vincė: Having survived the Holocaust through a miracle how do you feel about today's world? Will it take a miracle for humanity to survive?

Samuel Bak: Well, again, the question is what does the word miracle mean? You touch here on a big philosophical debate of determinism. Miracles. Superior powers and so on. When you size out apples that go into a [cider] machine thousands of apples go through that machine and only a few apples do not fit into the machine. And those apples are put aside. When Jews were thrown into the machine of the Shoah, or the Holocaust, a few apples that somehow did not fit in to be destroyed remained. And I am among these apples. So, I think that there is some random thing that is the filtering of situations. When I look again at the details of how that machine worked, I realize that I was lucky to encounter people who were ready to pay with their own lives to save me. There were also some totally paradoxical situations. For instance, the sister of my grandfather was in a certain way kidnapped by Lithuanian nobility, brought up in a convent, and this enabled us to hide in that convent where my mother's aunt was brought up. So, I cannot explain these things because I come to the very same pool where it is called luck.

Laima Vincé: You write so tenderly about your rescuers, Sister Maria and Father Statkauskas, in your memoir. What were they like as people? How do you remember them as a child?

Samuel Bak: Well, I cannot say that I knew them intimately. I knew for instance that later on that Father Statkauskas, who was a professor at Stefan Batory University (later Vilnius University), suffered repressions under the Soviets. The Russian authorities took away his right to teach, took away his right to be a priest. I was told he went to villages in a clandestine way, and he offered his services to people who needed him. He did a lot of good for these people. I'm saying this as a non-believer. I'm admiring what he could bring to believers. Sister Maria was an extraordinary person. But it was extraordinary luck that put her in a place where she was able to open the door to me and my mother when we were desperate. We were thinking that we were going to our death, but she was able to save us in the last moment. What happened to her? I know that she left the order and settled in Warsaw and became a librarian. Again, there is not a big distance between Father Statkauskas who brings enlightenment of one of a kind and Sister Maria who brings enlightenment of another kind by bringing books to people. Books that have in them more question marks than the New Testament, but still... This is what I know about her. But my memory of them as a child was that they were the figures of saviors.

Laima Vincé: In your memoir you write that they were kind to you and your mother and the other Jews they were hiding.

Samuel Bak: Oh yes, they were devoted and assuming a terrible danger to themselves. Because they would have been executed on the spot had it been discovered that they were hiding Jews.

Laima Vincé: What has painting taught you in all these years of work? What is the essence of the lessons that come to you through painting?

Samuel Bak: I wish I knew. I wish I knew. To me it's very mysterious. I am there in front of a white canvas, and I am trying to make it disappear. I am trying to make it become a space. Into this space I inject something of the world, pictures of the world in which I live, but not the images I can see, like a copy or a photograph, but what I do are images that are unphotographable, which are like in poetry, like in writing, are fiction that tries to convey reality, to communicate something.

Besides the very sad first act of my life, between the ages of 7 and 10, when I lost my father, my grandparents, on the whole, I consider myself someone who had a very lucky life, and that is something that I cannot attribute to the fact that I am gifted more than somebody else. But also, the circumstances of my life have put themselves together so that I was able to think about things that happened to me, to think how they belong to the world of belief, to find for them a mode of expression. I'm lucky to have met people who believe in what I am doing. They nourish this outpouring of my work by publications and in other ways. I always felt that I should sell the amount of work that keeps me alive in a comfortable condition. But at the same time, I always dreamt of the possibility of being able to give away my work, so that the larger public can see them. By now I've certainly donated more than a thousand of my works. I've given the University of Omaha about over 500 quite important works. These paintings I had put aside. I never put them out for sale.

Then there are the 150 works that I gave to the museum in Vilnius. They can rotate them. They can change them around. There are more works on top of that. They have a very fine collection of my work. The Bak Gallery in

Houston also has a very large donation. The *Facing History and Ourselves* project has also received from me. So, various museums, like the one in Florida, have a yearlong exhibit of my work.

All this to me is very meaningful. The people come and teachers use my work to speak of things that would frighten people and make them push away if these things were presented in graphic images. This goes also because people can see lessons that transcend the specific reactionary forces of antisemitism and so on.

Laima Vincé: As an educator myself, I see how there is an invitation to step inside these paintings.

Samuel Bak: I very much believe in the Socratic system of education. And in conversation in which you ask people for connection.

Laima Vincé: We have talked about how association functions in your painting and writing, and how these associations are linked.

Samuel Bak: Every time it is a slightly different form. Memory is a recreation.

Laima Vincé: Also, every one of us has our own private set of symbols. You approach memory through association, through linking images and seeing in the span of a lifetime how those symbols are linked and what they reveal. A pear for you as a symbol is not the same as for somebody else. Looking at your body of work, the viewer learns how to read the symbols, to interpret the symbols.

Samuel Bak: This is true.

Laima Vincé: How do painting and writing interrelate for you?

Samuel Bak: I think that these two elements complete themselves very much. I have worked for the theater. I've done a good number of productions, costumes, lights, scenery, and so on. I like to write, I like to read, I like to paint. If I had today age 20, I wonder if I would have gone into painting. Maybe I would have gone into filmmaking because movies contain all these elements together. The only problem with movies is that they do not give you the incredible luxury that painting gives you, which is total control. When you are painting you have total control. You are by yourself. You are with the painting. You do with it whatever you want. When you make a film—oh my goodness—you have the producers, you have the investors, you have people who disagree with your message, you have actors who may like each other or dislike each other. You have to battle the reality of movie making. There is an enormous waste of talent in all these conflicts. While you are in front of the painting, or in front of the computer, you have total control. So, I don't know. When I think about it more deeply, I think I am happy with my choice.

The perception of the painting is extremely immediate. I look at a painting and I know exactly what I've seen. I look at a book and I need several hours to know what there is inside. So, I look at the painting and I see everything. I don't have to remember the left when I look to the right. While when I read a book, it may be a very long book. I am

in my 80s. I still need a lot of memory to read a book. What was on the pages before that may return later. Then I understand what Nabokov said: "I am only writing for people who would reread my books twice. One reading does not give you enough of the truth." My wife and I have a passion for a second viewing of a movie. Only with the second viewing we really know what's happening and we truly enjoy the work.

Laima Vincė: How do you feel about today's Lithuania? Has enough healing taken place since the events of your childhood during the Holocaust?

Samuel Bak: I think for me it's very difficult to come up with a very clear and well-intentioned judgment. What I can say from my own perspective is that I am very grateful to the people who have created the Bak Museum in Vilnius. I am very grateful to the authorities who have recognized me as a positive force. I was knighted. I was made an honorary citizen of Vilnius. I have medals from Lithuania that I could cover myself up with. This is a fantastic feeling. I accepted all of that not as an individual, but as somebody who represents a much larger group of people who have disappeared, who are not there. So, I always stress that I am accepting it in the name of those who died in the Shoah.

At the same time, I know the world in which we exist. I know that democracy is a very fragile way of governing. I know that there are very bad winds blowing in Eastern Europe. I know that people in power today who represent a coalition cannot guarantee that in a few years some dangerous powers may not take over.

Lithuania has a frightening bear as a neighbor. Poland is not very encouraging, and Hungary is even worse. So, for the time being I feel very grateful to the courageous people who manage to hold onto democracy. I am extremely grateful to the people in the Bak Museum who work to tell the story of the Holocaust. Mine is the story of one person, but I know that it is something that the current generation of Lithuanians know little about. Because again political interests of the past have wiped out certain times.

Laima Vincė: Please share your thoughts on acceptance and forgiveness.

Samuel Bak: Yes, of course, they are two different things, but first of all, acceptance means to realize what the real components of human nature are. I profoundly believe that the very best and the very worst is embedded in each of us. And given certain circumstances, we can either belong to this group or the other group. Nature itself is structured as a struggle. When I think of the physiological me, I know that there is a war going on inside of me by viruses, bacteria, that are killing other bacteria, helping me digest. There is a struggle. I think that in human society there is always a struggle. The fact that there is such a thing as Lithuania, Portugal, Australia, and so on is because certain historical events have brought certain tribes together. Tribes fighting other tribes has created national identities. All this happens on one planet and if we lose this one planet, we won't have any other place to go. So somehow, we need to become very practical to think how we can share the planet.

We created the League of Nations when World War I ended. That war was called the war to end all wars. But I think we realized it was not exactly like that. It's very much because it is easy for certain leaders to galvanize populations by triggering an explosion of hate. We must accept that the best way to create a living space for coming generations is through the need for compromises.

And so, this is acceptance. To stop the vicious cycle of destruction we must really learn to forgive.

I think that one of the worst slogans that I hear from survivors of the Holocaust is “Never forget never forgive.” I think that at a certain point the abused should contribute by forgiving and trying to turn a new page. I think that if you look well at what has happened in history, you realized that some of the most horrible things were committed by sheer ignorance or sheer manipulation by a small clique of people.

I cannot help but think of what the German industrialists—who were afraid of the Russian Bolsheviks—said about Hitler: “This clown, let’s give him the power and he will save our country.”

Then I think of what the Americans did with Trump by saying, “This clown, let’s give him the power and he will save our skin.” And here is where we have got. I am living today in the States, very comfortably, but I do not have any more the sense of security that I had here ten or twenty years ago. Today I live here really with the sense that maybe I shouldn’t have thrown out my suitcases the way I did fifteen years ago. This is the reality in which we live.

Laima Vincé: As you reflect back on a lifetime of painting, what is the single most important life lesson that you take away?

Samuel Bak: I think it’s the appreciation of the incredible gift that I have of still being able to produce paintings and still hoping I have not produced the best I could.

Laima Vincé: What would you like to say about art and literature for future generations? Can art heal?

Samuel Bak: Art and literature are words that can be defined in many ways. They can represent many things. For me art and literature are a form of communication in which certain individuals try to share their way of life with other individuals. Art and literature may change their techniques, their forms. I think about how literature began when around a fire in a cave someone began telling a story, then the story became a printed page, then it became a series for television, and so on. Forms change but there is always a need for people to share their experience of life, their lessons. And they want to speak. It’s a matter of conversation, a matter of communication. And yes, of course, there is decorative art. I am reluctant to use the word beauty because no one knows what beauty is. For one generation beauty is something different than for another. The beautiful ladies of Reubens would be put on a very strong diet today. I think it is a matter of communication, of sharing what you need to say.

I owe very much to my painting for a certain balance that I found in my life. The fact that my paintings are used for so many educational projects gives me the sense that my work is not just the product of a self-indulgent obsessive man who has to put some paint on a canvas every day, but also that my paintings have meaning for other people.

It’s very rewarding, almost a miraculous perception of what might happen in life.

It’s social responsibility.

I owe so much to my father who convinced my mother to marry him. I wouldn’t have existed if those two hadn’t gotten together. If my mother hadn’t believed the gun my father was threatening to kill himself and her with was a toy gun, she may not have married him. Maybe she wouldn’t have married him if she wasn’t afraid to die. I wrote about it. It’s a very ridiculous and funny thing, but I am here.

This interview was first published in *Vanished Lands: Memory and Postmemory in North American Lithuanian Diaspora Literature*, Peter Lang, 2023.