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Interview

The Kabbalistic-Masonic Art of Rabbi David Rosenberg — Jewish Kabbalah and Freemasonry in the Nineteenth Century

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The researcher Peter Lanchidi has defended a PhD thesis entitled “The Kabbalistic-Masonic Art of Rabbi David Rosenberg — Jewish Kabbalah and Freemasonry in the Nineteenth Century” at the BenGurion University of the Negev in Beersheva (Israel), under the supervision of Prof. Boaz Huss (BenGurion University) and Prof. JeanPierre Brach (École Pratique des Hautes Études), on August 30, 2022.

Peter Lanchidi was born in 1975, in Hungary, and holds a BA in art history and aesthetics from the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, and an MA in Jewish Civilizations, a joint programme of Paideia, the European Institute for Jewish Studies in Stockholm, Sweden and the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg (HfJS), Germany, and was an Azrieli Fellow during his doctoral studies. Previously, Peter Lanchidi worked as a lawyer in Budapest and Paris. His scholarly publications are available at <https://bgu.academia.edu/PeterLanchidi>

What were the reasons that led you to focus your research on Freemasonry?

It happened by mere coincidence. I have a background in art history and aesthetics, on the one hand, and Jewish studies on the other, and so I wanted to combine the two: working with Jewish visual material. At the same time, I developed an interest in Kabbalah. It was during my MA studies that upon consultation with my professor in Kabbalah, Boaz Huss (who later became my PhD supervisor), he advised me to visit the Jewish Museum in Stockholm to see a very interesting bilingual (French and Hebrew) lithograph that was crowded with Kabbalistic and Masonic symbols. So I did, and the artwork captivated me to such a degree that it did not take long before I decided to write my PhD on the author, David Rosenberg, and his work.

What were the sources you used?

Given the highly interdisciplinary nature of my research (Kabbalah, Freemasonry, Western Esotericism, Jewish-Christian relations, art history, etc.), the fact that Rosenberg's works are scattered geographically, and due to the long and circuitous reception history of the rabbi's works, the investigation required intensive and widespread archival work, which led me to carry out research in, or use primary sources from, close to 100 archives, collections, libraries, and museums in 18 countries on four continents. Primary sources included all sorts of print, such as lithographs, engravings, drawings, sketches, and illustrations; manuscripts, diaries, correspondences; minute books, proceedings, and transactions; catechisms, monitors, and *tuileurs*; Masonic lectures, addresses, orations, sermons, and services; all sorts of ephemera; and contemporary periodicals, journals, and newspapers.

What were the main difficulties you encountered? How did you surmount them?

The difficulties presented themselves in two main ways. The first difficulty was the above-mentioned scattered nature of the primary sources. This challenge was met by the extensive research trips I made during the years of my PhD. The other difficulty was posed by the nature of Masonic sources: some are difficult to access and at times even the secondary literature is not readily available. These conditions and circumstances required intensive correspondence, coordination, and planning.

What major historical problems has your work resolved?

The Freemason Rabbi David Rosenberg made a name for himself with his Kabbalistic-Masonic lithographs in the Paris of the July Monarchy (1830-1848) and London. Through the artwork of the rabbi, I explored the interplay between Kabbalah and Freemasonry in the nineteenth century. Although scholarly research on the two main components of Rosenberg's art—nineteenth-century Kabbalah and Freemasonry—looks back on several decades, large areas have been either overlooked or left almost entirely untouched in both fields, one of them being the connection between the two—which occasioned this research on the topic. Given the pivotal role that Freemasonry played in shaping our culture from the eighteenth century onwards and its significance for Jews in the era of growing emancipation, the investigation of the relationship between Kabbalah and Freemasonry promised to yield new and significant insights into the history of the period, including Jewish-Christian relations within the fraternity.

The main questions of the dissertation were how, why, and to what ends did Jews use Kabbalah within Freemasonry in the nineteenth century, and how and why was Kabbalah "working" within the Masonic milieu? Another, no less important aim of the research was to bring to light the life and works of this hitherto little-known Jewish Freemason and the reception histories of his art.

The historical reading of Rosenberg's works brought to light several new aspects of

Kabbalah in the nineteenth century in relation to Freemasonry and beyond. In the wider Masonic intellectual milieu, Kabbalah was met with a heightened interest due to the antiquarian/philological endeavours being in vogue that were to recover the original meanings of Masonic terms. On a personal level, Kabbalah was used by the rabbi as a tool for assimilation within esoteric Masonic circles for it bestowed an insider status upon him as well as respectability. Furthermore, Rosenberg provided a strong Kabbalistic underpinning for the Jewish origin of Freemasonry narrative in a polemic against Prussian Masonic intolerance against Jews. An important finding of the research concerns the early divergent perceptions of Kabbalah by the adherents of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement and the esoteric circles. The uncommon opportunity to see the intellectual workings within these groups was made possible by a unique feature of Rosenberg's works, namely that the rabbi put forward the very same Kabbalistic argumentation and worldview in these two distinct intellectual milieus but with different reasons and aims—and receptions.

The reception history of Rosenberg's artwork in the United States shed light on a hitherto overlooked debate that evolved between Jewish and Christian brethren over the question whether Freemasonry was sectarian and what kind of religious outlook it should have. The controversy entered the public sphere and engulfed both the Masonic and the Jewish press. One of Rosenberg's works and his Kabbalistic Jewish origin of Freemasonry narrative were embraced by American Jewish Masons in the debate in fighting against Christian prayers in Masonic rituals and the dedication of Masonic lodges to saints. This American edition of Rosenberg's lithograph, which had a strong cross-denominational appeal, arrived in Jamaica and reached even Australia, where lectures were delivered on it until the end of the nineteenth century.

Finally, the close study of Rosenberg's lithographs reveals their unique characteristics. The iconography and the style of his artworks evince an innovative amalgamation of Jewish, Kabbalistic, and Masonic genres and symbolism, to which the rabbi added the visual heritage of Western esotericism. Within this domain, his truly unique invention was the Masonic *ilan*: the Kabbalistic tree infused with Masonic content. With the *arboreal* imaging of the office-bearers of the Masonic lodge, he not only enriched the Masonic symbolic expressions, but created a diagram that resonated well within the milieu of esoteric Freemasonry, steeped in philological "excavations" and the pursuit of ancient wisdom. These aspects of Rosenberg's prints—which, to a large extent, comprise of hitherto unpublished visual materials—brought to light important new dimensions of Freemasonry and Jewish participation therein: cultural exchange and cross-fertilization between Jewish and Masonic genres, symbols, and heritage in general.

Could you please summarize the essence of your thesis in two lines?

The dissertation investigates the interplay between Kabbalah and Freemasonry in visual materials in the nineteenth century and what it tells us about Jewish-Christian relations within the fraternity.

What were the lessons, at all levels, personal and professional, that you have deducted from your research experience?

I will start with the professional take-away: Freemasonry not only constitutes a pivotal ingredient in our historical and cultural heritage, without which many of the political, social, economic, artistic, etc. aspects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be fully understood, but that it is in itself, in its own right, constitutes a highly interesting subject worthy of scholarly attention. Secondly, I was astonished by the massiveness and richness of Masonic collections and, perhaps even more, by the extent to which these are unexplored and uncharted by scholars.

Concerning the personal lessons that I learned throughout my research, I would like to highlight two. First, following the footsteps of Rosenberg and many other figures, it became palpable—on a more intimate, personal level—how mobile and adventurous these people were in an era, in which moving around took weeks or months and involved uncertainties and hazards of various kinds. Reading through dozens of personal accounts in archives and learning the faith of many of these figures, one is not only amazed, but develops respect for these people. Secondly, I was struck by the dedication, helpfulness, and kindness of Masonic archivists who were always more than ready and happy to assist me in my research.

Now, what are your professional plans?

Having earned my PhD degree, now I am busy with several projects. I teach two courses on Freemasonry and its visual aspects at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest and occasionally I give public lectures on the subject as well. I am working on the publication of two books out of my PhD dissertation and several scholarly articles. I am also planning an exhibition on Rosenberg, for which I would like to collect and exhibit his entire artistic production and to present it in various historical contexts. Finally, I am intent on doing a postdoc and continue my scholarly investigations of Freemasonry.

Would you like to highlight an aspect that has not been covered and you consider worthy of review?

An important aspect of my research—not connected directly to Freemasonry—was the Jewish participation in lithography, the cutting-edge printing technology of the nineteenth century. From an art historical point of view, the case study on Rosenberg, who was employed as a calligrapher and copyist in the Royal Library in Paris, provides us with a unique insight into the life and struggles of a Jewish pioneer in lithography. It reveals many practical and technical

aspects of lithography: the processes Rosenberg experimented with, the conditions in which he had to work, and ways in which he tried to further his lithographic career. Furthermore, since he was forced to rely on the workshops of other lithographers—among them some of the most distinguished French lithographers—the research also contributed to the history of nineteenth-century French lithography.

This interview was done October 7, 2022.

Authors of the Interview: Ricardo Martínez Esquivel and Yván Pozuelo Andrés,
Director and Editor *REHMLAC+*.