

Icon of Loss: *Recent Paintings by Samuel Bak*



PUCKER GALLERY | BOSTON



As I was working on my last series of paintings based on the well-known photo of the Jewish boy from the Warsaw Ghetto, I could not help reflecting on the countless millions of children that perish in man's senseless conflicts, wars, and genocides — past and present.

I thought, “What an unspeakable abuse of our young innocents, our little just ones!”

In terming these lost children “just ones” and completing exactly 36 of them for this exhibition, I must have been stirred by a memory of the ancient Midrash that speaks of there being 36 just men in the world — in Hebrew, *lamed-vav* (36) *tsadikim* (just men).

Suddenly it dawned on me that the phrase contains a marvelous and moving message: *lamed-vav* in Hebrew also means: “teach about the six (millions. . .)!”

Samuel Bak, April 2008

Front Cover:

BK1177 *For the Many Davids*

Oil on Canvas 18 x 24"

Left: BK1197 *With a Blue Thread*

Oil on Canvas 30 x 24"

Icon of Loss

Danna Nolan Fewell
Gary A. Phillips



It is a haunting photograph we know well: A child arrested between life and death. Frozen in time, his solemn, anxious face and adult-like gesture of surrender are incongruent with his knobby knees, oversized cap, and diminutive stature. The time: April – May, 1943. The place: the Warsaw ghetto. Terrified Jews, mostly women and children, are herded at S.S. gunpoint from their hiding place. Forefronted and firmly positioned on the photograph's Golden Mean, the boy is isolated from family and community in a fearful solitude at the moment when his fate is sealed, his childhood ended. With hands held high, apprehended as if a dangerous criminal or revolutionary, he is the target of both gun and camera.¹

One of forty-nine photographs assembled into an album by Jürgen Stroop, the commandant charged with the Warsaw ghetto cleansing, the image was captioned: “Pulled from the bunker by force.” This heading, like others in the collection, depict the Jews as combatants, rebels, and traitors, and the Warsaw uprising as an act of war. The album, a report to and birthday present for Heinrich Himmler, was entitled: “THE JEWISH QUARTER OF WARSAW IS NO MORE.”

Originally taken to boast the deadly thoroughness of the S.S. operation, the photograph, because of its composition and circumstances, has become an icon of the Shoah. In the figure of the boy, the human and the inhuman collide: a child's anguish captured by the camera's reveling gaze. Intention and effect, evil and innocence, are bound together in ironic struggle. Moreover, the boy's position and posture fit a familiar theological and artistic syntax. His isolation, uplifted arms, and outwardly turned palms make the image, in the words of Samuel Bak, "the most poignant image of Jewish Crucifixion."² A mimicry of crucifixion iconography, the boy appears to be reaching out to God, desiring, pleading for life in the face of imminent death.

The gesture, however, is multi-layered. As Bak observes, "Arms that reach for the sky are also a gesture of surrender, of giving up. When you superimpose the image of a crucified Son on that of the little Warsaw boy with his uplifted arms, you are made to wonder, Where is God the Father?"³ But the hands that reach up also implicitly reach out: Where is *anyone* who would play the part of God the Father or savior? The child confronts us, interrupting the world in which we live and compelling us to acknowledge its horrors.

Since the photograph's first appearance at the Nuremberg Trials, the image of the Warsaw boy has grown, in poet Yala Korwin's words, to "haunt the callous world, to accuse it, with ever stronger voice."⁴ Appropriated by poets, novelists, film makers, playwrights, philosophers, and art and cultural historians, it has become an emblem of Holocaust martyrdom, its symbolic status so firmly entrenched that a public outcry arose in 1982 when *The New York Times* reported that the boy had actually survived and had been identified. One Holocaust historian, concerned for what revisionists might make of this story, protested that the photograph was "too holy to let people do with it what they want."⁵

Despite the passionate insistence that the photograph "requires a greater level of responsibility from historians than almost any other,"⁶ its sanctity has eroded through commodification and familiarity.⁷ Serving as a popular insignia of the Shoah, the photo enables us to ingest the past in an iconic capsule, shielding us from the magnitude of real suffering and loss. It condenses six million lives and deaths into one event, compressing an epoch of violence into a single, manageable moment.

But for Samuel Bak, the boy has always been an exorbitant presence, an excessive sign and sign of excess where a multitude of lives and deaths converge and overflow — Bak's executed childhood friend Samek Epstein, family members slaughtered in the forest of Ponari, the martyred Jewish children, Bak himself as child survivor and adult painter. In the mid 1990's Bak rescued the boy from his photographic confinement, transporting him and his viewers to various other sites and points in time, disassembling and reassembling him in dozens of makeshift monuments. "I painted impossible

memorials,” writes Bak, “ — monuments that could never exist, tombstones of sorts, humble ‘reliquaries,’ unassuming cutouts, and perishable bricolages that called up the ghostlike presence of the Warsaw boy. Such were the only tangible markings of memory that I could produce.”⁸ Marking “a past that can never be fully remembered or forgotten,”⁹ the boy’s very iteration in Bak’s works witnesses to the elusiveness of memory, the incomplete and uncontained past, the excess and the silence at its core.

In *Icon of Loss*, the Warsaw child returns in multiple apparitions, a spectral, modern-day Virgil, who guides Bak and his viewers through a Purgatorial maze among ghetto walls that confine, blockade, and divert (*Against the Wall*, p. 9, *Walled In*, p. 41), among trees uprooted, severed, and dismembered (*Under Some Trees*, p. 23), over ravenous terrain (*On No Ground*, p. 46) and insatiable waters (*One Child Island*, p. 25, *High Wind*, p. 31, *Passing*, p. 30) eager to swallow, to erase, the once-living. But refusing to be denied or digested (*Alive*, p. 14), the child presses us to follow. He marks multiple sites where presence and loss collapse, presences of absence, absences of presence, holes into which Bak as painterly subject repeatedly slips to be repositioned (*The Cup was Full*, p. 18, *De Profundis*, p. 13) to renew his exhumations, excavations, and expeditions into a punctured past (*Figuring Out*, p. 34). As viewers we peer into holes in memory, holes on canvas, openings through which we might glimpse uncanny faces yet to be snatched back from the abyss, spaces that confront us with unfillable emptiness, the inability to remember, incompleteness, silence, a “rent at the heart of the world.”¹⁰ The boy — Bak’s psychopomp who escorts us across a landscape of loss — becomes the keyhole, a doorway, a threshold (*From Ashes*, p. 16) that guides us into a fragmentary past that resists being remade whole.

He leads us to an *Ancient Memory*, p. 44, where ruins of a communal, family compound lie in the shape of the captured child. Constituted by the traces of all who labored to make the child who he is, to protect him, to defend his life and liberty, it is another Masada where defenses are breached and only a remnant survives. Our child guide, formed by, seemingly just risen from, this ruined crypt, raises his hands. Is it a gesture of surrender? Defiance? Celebration? Mourning? A summons for us to follow him over the precipice?

Fortress walls give way to barricades (*Targeted*, p. 22), blind alleys (*Signal of Identity*, p. 43), and ghettos (*Walled In*, p. 41) where children are walled in, walled out, walled up, and converted into the very bricks and mortar that form the walls themselves. Walls consume Bak imaginatively and the children literally, a sober realization of the Nazi effort to transform all Jews into consumables: hair for pillows, gold fillings for jewelry, skin for lampshades, life for labor.

We encounter this theme, too, in *Apprenticeship*, p. 29, where two ghostly wooden doubles — conscripted laborers for the Nazi death factory? — face one another across an erupting volcano. Stationed perilously close to rivulets of molten steel that threaten to ignite them at any moment, these child sentinels glow in

the eerie light of a demonic perversion of Sinai belching unholy smoke. In *Burning*, p. 28, the boy, like Isaac in the *Akedah* — or some juvenile suicide bomber? — carries implements of his own destruction and, like so many Jewish infants, burns without benefit of being gassed.

In *Collective*, p. 32, a fore-grounded cross awaits repair — or perhaps its next usage — upon a stack of stones serving simultaneously as barricade, crypt, sacrificial altar, and workbench. Like a crowd on a train station platform, or school children eagerly raising their hands to answer a teacher's question, a throng of wooden boys press against the barrier and into the viewers' space, splintering bodies offering an endless supply of raw material for new crosses and sacrificial pyres. In the distance, more crosses loom. Smoke bellows against the horizon. A kindling of the Kinder, the children wait for, wait to become, the train of smoke that will take them home.

We waft on this trail of smoke to Bak's childhood fantasies where ladders, boats, wings, hot-air balloons, and flying machines litter the play-space of escape. In *Holding a Promise*, p. 42, a young Noah stands ready to launch his tiny skiff rigged with a tattered rainbow-shaped sail. He carries no cargo besides himself and a bundle of sticks. Is this kindling intended for a thanksgiving sacrifice to God once the flood has been safely navigated? Or has little Noah become Isaac, carrying wood for another burnt offering orchestrated under false pretenses? Fake hands falsely signal surrender while the boy's real pair grip makeshift masts, reminiscent of Jewish captives feigning submission while effecting modest acts of resistance. Unsettled sea, rocky shoals, and the scanty sail, hint that escape, safety, and divine protection are open to question.

From here we are transported to *Bluebird Land*, p. 12, and Bak's childhood fascination with airplanes and flying. Though the boy points upward in a gesture of flight, he remains stranded on crutches, struggling for mobility. Abandoned, unreachable ladders clutter the landscape, signs of foiled attempts to climb out of the nightmare. Rust-laden bluebirds sporting prison garb perch in the foreground. Are they caged birds eternally grounded? Or if refurbished, could they be capable of flight?

In *Six Wings for One*, p. 37 the boy discards his crutches, and even his shoes, and boards a hot-air balloon, intimating escape. Is he pilot or mere passenger? Are his empty shoes ballast or do they foreshadow his future? Is the balloon indeed extant and inflated beyond the frame of the painting? Or does it lie deflated in the folds of silk draping over the gondola? Are the ropes connected to some means of escape? Or are they, like the ropes of *In Their Own Image*, p. 36, the strings of an unreliable puppeteer?

The angelic wings, though many, are heavy and burdensome rather than uplifting. Is there a savior here? If so, who, what kind is it? Will the breeze bear the boy aloft? Or will it, as in *Ruakh*, p. 39, dash the balloon to the ground, smother the boy in a shroud, and disperse his body parts over a hostile terrain? Will it turn into a *High Wind*, p. 31, that churns up the face of the deep and leaves the boy stranded at sea

(*Passing*, p. 30, *One Child Island*, p. 25)? Six wings, six million needing rescue: theological constructions of salvation fail to add up in a world where no divine wings descend from off stage or off canvas to spirit away condemned children.

We find ourselves taken to the labor camp, where imagination is the boyhood Bak's mode of survival. After the other Vilna children are transported, Bak spends many silent, unmoving hours hidden sandwiched between a mattress and a wall. In *Hide and Dream*, p. 24, surrendering hands are artificial decoys that camouflage the boy's actual arms bound close to his body. Ropes and branches, reminiscent of the bundle of sticks in *Holding a Promise*, p. 42, evoke a biblical binding and sacrificial fire that, ignited at any moment, could transform him into the human torch of *Burning*, p. 28. Ironically, these branches sprout growth, suggesting both the family tree that endangers him and the family members who protect him.

Family trees bring us to the forest of Ponari where many of Bak's family members were executed, their bodies concealed in a mass grave. *Under Some Trees*, p. 23, we find severed trunks floating through the air, restless spirits haunting a site of horror, while the earth itself heaves forth uncut stones to mark the unmarked graves, to signify the unimaginable, to point to the absence and the inability to remember and restore.

From this execution site, the boy subpoenas us as witnesses to other criminal acts visited upon Jewish children. A crime scene cordoned off with yellow ribbon used elsewhere (*Identification*, p. 15) to fashion the Star of David, *Cumulative Data*, p. 33, rounds up all the usual suspects who wait with hands raised ready to participate in a police line-up. The central figure, despite being dazed and injured, is reluctant to lower his weapon. Pressed uncomfortably close to the yellow tape and its corralled "criminals," we wonder, as with the original photo, what constitutes "evidence" and who defines "criminal" and "crime."

And what becomes of such "criminals"? *Exposure*, p. 40, gives answer. A victim of torture and dismemberment, the boy is exhibited on a ghetto wall. Is he a warning, as was Samek Epstein, to other Jews? Or a proxy sacrificed for their temporary survival? Multiple yellow patches suggest that he is not the first, nor will he be the last, to undergo such treatment. *Against the Wall*, p. 9 displays the boy's severed head and hands as testimony to earlier unspeakable acts. A trophy to trauma, terror, and predatory success, the child's remains hang mounted as sportsman's prize or warrior's spoil, boasting the great prowess the killing of children requires.

But like the Warsaw photograph, a trophy celebrating a successful kill is, in *Identification*, p. 15, transformed into a monument honoring a life taken. A Star of David hangs about the boy's neck like a military war metal. But the youthful visage renders ironic the tribute. Is it to a life of service? Death given in service? But service to what end?

Across one canvas after another, the child leads Bak in a relentless pursuit and recovery of identity. The boy's elusive face throws us in a quandary. For every face we see, there is a face that is featureless, swathed, crossed-out, turned from sight. We cannot picture the child we are called to hold *In Memoriam*, p. 26-27. We cannot make out the *Unknown*, p. 19, child who stands flanked by a wooden likeness, covering his own face with a smudged, holey, silhouetted canvas. We cannot clear away the floating severed, rootless trees that cross out the boy's face in *On No Ground*, p. 46. We cannot peak beneath the shrouds of *Ruakh*, p. 39, *With the Fabric of Stars*, p. 38, or *Crossed Out II*, p. 20. Who is this boy marked for execution? We are struck by the blankness, by the loss of memory, by the void at the core of our past.



BK1164 *Against the Wall*
Oil on Canvas 11 x 14"

And still, he bids us follow him, although we cannot see his face and we do not know where we are heading. Have we reached a dead end in *Signal of Identity*, p. 43? A partial Star of David, posted perhaps as a warning, blends into his clothing, blurring communal with personal identity. Does the knapsack carry Bak's own cargo of memories — the sack that saved him, the pillow that comforted him? Are these provisions that will see him, as a perpetual refugee, through another day? Will the knapsack equip him to rescue others?

A different and double burden of identity appears in *Carrying a Cross*, p. 21: crossed timbers tied over a Star of David replace the more promising rucksack. Tethers extending outside the frame lash him to the past and threaten to choke him should he advance further. With sagging socks, short pants, and arms pleading for some adult to pick him up, the childish figure, ironically towering above the landscape, is grossly mismatched with the cross he carries. Has he just escaped a scheduled execution? Or does he lumber toward some unidentifiable, awaiting Golgotha?

We might imagine such a Golgotha in *With a Blue Thread*, p. 2 where, flanked by a cross, the stone boy uses his perpetually uplifted hands to support the crossbar of an unfinished yellow triangle as though stubbornly reclaiming the Jewish roots of “the Crucifixion.” The rejected stone has become the chief cornerstone, so claims the Matthean Gospel writer about Jesus and the Psalmist about restored Israel. But here we find ironic commentary on both traditions: the Warsaw boy becomes the new load-bearing cornerstone upon which both the cross rests and the star hangs. What is to be constructed from this unexpected foundation? What are we to make of Judaism and Christianity in the Post-Shoah age where their promises of, and responsibilities for, redemption hang by a thread?

Despite erasure, occlusion, and elusive identity, the boy manifests the art of resistance. While often captured in wood and stone, he also appears to us in flesh-and-blood, reminding us that the ghost, the image, the monument, was once a real boy. Against all odds, against history itself, he musters his own resurrection (*Alive*, p. 14), claims agency (*Holding a Promise*, p. 42), offers signs of resistance (*For the Many Davids*, cover image, *In Their Own Image*, p. 36), and stubbornly endures (*De Profundis*, p. 13). Discontent to be frozen in photographic time, he exerts a difficult, perhaps impossible, freedom, urging us to imagine other ways this story might have been told.

With these unruly, contrary manifestations, the resilient but elusive revenant brings us to the precipice of the present where we are confronted with the ways we fashion our children in our own image (*In Their Own Image*, p. 36), saddling them both with our religious ideas and expectations and our propensity to solve all problems with violence. Do we not inhabit a world where diminutive Davids battle oppressive Goliaths, where hundreds of thousands of conscripted child soldiers face dehumanization, torture, and death in the service of ideological puppeteers, where countless young Isaacs suffer violence at the hands

of those charged with their very protection, where the young are consumed like common commodities, where the little just ones perish?

At this precipice our expedition with Bak and his boy halts, brought up short, its incompleteness gaping before us. We are left pondering the burdens yet to be carried, the questions yet to be posed to history and to ourselves, and — perhaps most importantly — the company and the icons we keep. Bak invites us to become a community committed to living with ghosts, with loss. How do we now respond *For All the Davids*, past and present, who risk oblivion? How do we, as individuals, as communities, journey forth in search of that elusive *tikkun olam* with such ragged holes at the core of our world?

1 For a discussion of the photo and its appropriation, see Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004).

2 *Between Worlds: The Paintings and Drawings of Samuel Bak from 1946 to 2001*. Irene Taylor, ed. (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2002), 297.

3 Raskin, 150.

4 Yala Korwin, "The Little Boy With His Hands Up," *To Tell the Story: Poems of the Holocaust* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1987), 75.

5 Dr. Lucjan Dobroszycki of the YIVO institute in New York. Quoted in David Margolick, "Rockland Physician Thinks He is the Boy in Holocaust Photo Taken in Warsaw," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1982.

6 Ibid.

7 See Bak's discussion of his response to the banalization of the photo in Raskin, 151-52.

8 *Between Worlds*, 297.

9 The language of Sam Durrant discussing Paul de Man's concept of "true mourning" in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 31.

10 Martin Buber's description of Job in *On the Bible*. Nahum Glatzer, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 191.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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BK1163 *Bluebird Land*
Oil on Canvas 16 x 20"



BK1173 *De Profundis*
Oil on Canvas 12 x 16"



BK1165 *Alive*
Oil on Canvas 11 x 14"



BK1182 *Identification*
Oil on Canvas 11 x 14"



BK1178 *From Ashes*
Oil on Canvas 14 x 11"



BK1188 *One Two Three*
Oil on Canvas 16 x 20"



BK1193 *The Cup Was Full*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 18"

Right: BK1195 Unknown
Oil on Canvas 24 x 18"





BK1171 *Crossed Out II*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 18"



BK1169 *Carrying a Cross*
Oil on Canvas 18 x 14"



BK1192 *Targeted*
Oil on Canvas 40 x 30"



BK1194 *Under Some Trees*
Oil on Canvas 11 x 14"



BK1179 *Hide and Dream*
Oil on Canvas 16 x 13"



BK1185 *One Child Island*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 18"



BAK 07



BK1183 *In Memoriam*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 36"



BK1168 *Burning*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 18"



BK1167 *Apprenticeship*
Oil on Canvas 18 x 18"



BK1187 *Passing*
Oil on Canvas 30 x 24"



BK1180 *High Wind*
Oil on Canvas 16 x 12"



BK1170 *Collective*
Oil on Canvas 18 x 24"



BK1172 *Cumulative Data*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 30"

BK1176 *Figuring Out*
Oil on Canvas 30 x 40"





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BK1184 *In Their Own Image*
Oil on Canvas 30 x 24"



BK1191 *Six Wings for One*
Oil on Canvas 30 x 24"



BK1198 *With the Fabric of Stars*
Oil on Canvas 16 x 12"



BK1189 *Ruakh*
Oil on Canvas 18 x 24"



BK1175 *Exposure*
Oil on Canvas 24 x 18"



BK1196 *Walled In*
Oil on Canvas 30 x 24"



BK1181 *Holding a Promise*
Oil on Canvas 36 x 24"



BK1190 *Signal of Identity*
Oil on Canvas 40 x 30"



BK1166 *Ancient Memory*
Oil on Canvas 30 x 40"

Samuel Bak

BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Bak was born on August 12, 1933 in Vilna, Poland at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under Soviet, 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 both 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 and his mother were located in the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp. Here, he was enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School in Munich. In 1948 they immigrated to the newly established state of Israel, where he studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and completed his mandatory service in the Israeli army. In 1956 the artist went to Paris where he continued his studies at the École des Beaux Arts and received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his studies. In 1959, Bak moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to participate in the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and in 1963 solo exhibitions were held at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums. It was subsequent to these exhibitions, during the years 1963-1964, that a major change in his art occurred. There was a distinct shift from abstract forms to a meta-physical figurative artistic expression. Ultimately, this transformation crystallized into his present pictorial language. Subsequently, the artist lived and worked in Rome, Tel Aviv, New York, and Lausanne. In an artistic career of over sixty years his work has been exhibited extensively in major museums, galleries, and universities throughout Europe, Israel, and the United States. Since 1993 he has resided with his wife, Josée, in the Boston area. Mr. Bak has been the subject of numerous articles, scholarly works, and fifteen 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 several languages. He has also been the subject of two documentary films and was the recipient of the 2002 German Herkomer Cultural Prize.

The art of Samuel Bak has been represented by Pucker Gallery for 40 years. For a complete list of exhibitions and publications please visit www.puckergallery.com.



BK1186 *On No Ground*
Oil on Canvas 18 x 18"

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BK1174 *Display* Oil on Canvas 12 x 16"

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The public is invited to attend.
The artist will be present.

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