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Self-portrait of Bruno Schultz. The writer was immersed in Jewish culture yet unfamiliar with the Yiddish language. (Courtesy)

Focus on Bruno Schultz

The latest event in the 'Torn Screen' lecture series on Polish Jewry in cinema zooms in on a cult figure

• By BARRY DAVIS

Bruno Schultz may have wanted to get away from the world but, it seems, the world always knew where to find him.

Schultz is the subject of the forthcoming installment of the "Torn Screen – Jews and Poles in the Lenses of Camera" lecture series run by the Polish Institute, the Institute for the History of Polish Jewry and Israel-Poland Relations at Tel Aviv University and Seminar Hakibbutzim. The lecture, which will be presented by Aviv Livnat on April 6 at 6 p.m. at Seminar Hakibbutzim in Ramat Aviv, is called Bruno Schultz and the Jewish-Polish Avant Garde During the Interwar Period and will be interspersed by excerpts of the 1973 movie *The Hour-Glass Sanatorium* by Polish director Wojciech Has, based on a book written by Schultz called *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. Has, whose father had Jewish roots, fed off Schultz's tome to produce a visual tapestry that incorporates strands from a dozen stories by Schulz in a haunting transcendental work that explores the process of decay as it relates to memory and culture.

Bruno Schultz was born in July 1892 and was killed by a Nazi officer in November 1942. He was a Jewish Polish writer, artist, literary critic and art teacher and is regarded as one of the great Polish-language prose stylists of the 20th century. He was born in Drohobycz in the province of Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and

spent most of his life there.

However, despite his reluctance to relocate physically, events appeared to take over Schultz's life whether he liked it or not. "He was very devoted to his family, especially after his father died," explains Livnat. "He took care of his mother and siblings after that."

From his home base in Drohobycz, Schultz developed his extraordinary imagination through a combination of identities and nationalities. He was a Jew who thought and wrote in Polish, was fluent in German, and was immersed in Jewish culture yet unfamiliar with the Yiddish language. Even so, there was nothing cosmopolitan about him. His genius fed off specific local and ethnic sources. He preferred not to leave his provincial hometown, which over the course of his life belonged to four countries – the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Poland, the Soviet Union and Ukraine.

"It is interesting that he had such a close working relationship with the poet Dvora Fogel, who came from an entirely secular Polish home but wrote in Yiddish," continues Livnat. "Schultz did not speak Yiddish but it was all around him and he had a spiritual bond with the language and culture."

Rather than reflecting an insular outlook, Livnat feels that Schultz's preference to stay put is a result of the peripatetic nature of his mind and creative explorations.

"There have been many artists who, because their spirit was so extensive and they had an

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ability to see such a wide picture, had to physically remain in the same place. [Early 20th-century Portuguese writer] Fernando Pessoa, for example, hardly moved away from his home region in Portugal."

Livnat believes there were also other, more practical, reasons for Schultz's reluctance to hit the road.

"He was often sickly but he was also loyal to his students."

Livnat, who is also a guitarist who plays contemporary jazz and Jewish jazz music together with his saxophonist-flutist brother Arik, says he has been fascinated with the creative endeavor of Jewish and non-Jewish Polish artists in the interwar period for some time.

"That delineation is a bit problematic," he says. "There were Jewish artists whose work was not particularly Jewish, and non-Jewish artists who had something Jewish about their work. For example, you get those figures floating over the shtetl – like in Chagall's work – but you don't get that in Schultz's writing. However, you can still sense the mythological shtetl and the bustling life there in Schultz's work. You sense his deep historical roots."

Besides Schultz, Livnat is particularly interested in the work of Jewish metalloplastic artists who worked in Poland between the world wars.

"Most did not survive the Holocaust," he says, adding that those who did produced a large body of memorable works. The latter include Warsaw-born artist Arie Merzer, who worked in hand-hammered copper and who eventually made aliya at the inception of the state, helping to establish the artists' colony in Safed, and painter-sculptor Marek Szwarc, who moved to Paris after World War II.

"There was a lot of complicated politics between the world wars, and it was a challenging era when a lot of important artistic and intellectual work was achieved," Livnat notes. "Initially, with the newly won independence of Poland, there was hope. But that hope dissi-

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– Aviv Livnat

pated and it spawned some unique artistic expression. The Polish avant-garde movement of the time includes a lot of Jewish artists."

Schultz certainly had a unique take on reality, even though he was largely a frustrated writer and his oeuvre is not voluminous. His early literary efforts were not praised by contemporary artists but he was eventually encouraged to persist with his writing by Fogel and renowned writer Zofia Nalkowska.

The Hourglass Sanatorium is based on a format of a collection of dreamlike ethereal, poetic short stories that reflect on the death of the narrator's father, as well as on the modest Jewish quarter of Schultz's hometown. The hourglass in the title refers to the symbol used by Poles in obituaries and death notices.

"It has become a cult movie over the years, and is admired by many directors, including Martin Scorsese," Livnat notes.

Schultz's father was not often around at home during his life, and was immersed in his work as a bookkeeper and cloth trader. In the last story of *The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, called "Father's Last Escape," the eponymous character's business has been closed down and he has been usurped by his wife and other members of his family. The father responds by becoming as elusive as possible by, among other ruses, turning himself into wallpaper and eventually into a large crablike insect that runs around the house in a never-ending search for something or other.

"Schultz's book is also about searching for roots," says Livnat. "There is some kind of escapism there but he also tries to read between the lines of a world which is no longer there. His prose is an effort to embark on journey to the root of the myth."

There will be two more events in the "Torn Screen – Jews and Poles in the Lenses of Camera lecture series" – "Between Victims and Bystanders: Polish Righteous Among the Nations in Documentary Movies" which will be presented by Judi Meltz and Dr. Havi Dreifuss on May 4 and "Torn from the Roots: The Jews in Poland 1968" by Irit Shamgar and Dr. Anat Plocker on May 18.



A scene from 'The Hourglass Sanatorium.' The film is based on Schultz's book 'The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass.'