

Dora Sowden Writes:

From A Window In Europe A Visit To The Ben Uri Art Gallery

YOU may find many places of Jewish interest in London. Cultural and social clubs, communal buildings, executive headquarters, are widely scattered through its centre and suburbs. But you are hardly likely to find a place more interesting than the Ben Uri Art Gallery in Portman Street. It is a mere stone's throw from one of the world's busiest thoroughfares—Oxford Street—yet once on the doorstep, the rush and tumble somehow falls away. As the door is opened by the welcoming attendant in charge, you are immediately in the mood for the rich and rare display before you.

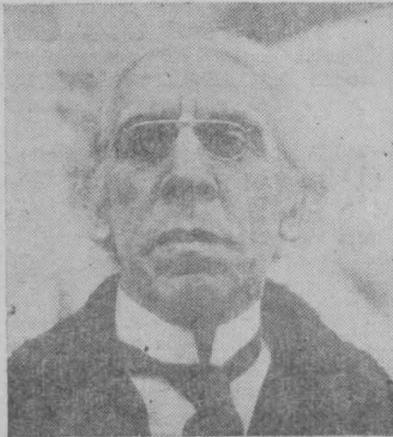
The Ben Uri Art Gallery is no new thing. As a Jewish Art and Literary Society it was formed in 1915 through the effort and energy of an artist called Berson, some of whose own work was afterwards the nucleus of what is now a formidable collection. The first President of the Society was Israel Zangwill. Since its inception, its object has been to assemble representative Jewish works of art—works by Jewish artists and of Jewish theme. It has been enabled to do this by purchase and donation. Several patrons have helped the Society. Several artists have shown consideration in naming their figure. Some donors have presented items from their personal possessions.

Rare and Beautiful Works

And thus, in the past thirty years the Society has gradually acquired examples of work which is now rare and will become rarer. Among the treasures which the Ben Uri Gallery owns you may read the names of Leopold Pilichowski (who was associated with its activities), Mane-Katz, Josef Israels, Jacob Kramer, Jacob Epstein, Henry Glicenstein, A. A. Wolmark, Minkowski, Kibel, Amshevitze. Each piece is remarkable both for what it is and what it stands for: as a work of art and as a manifestation of the Jewish genius.

But since the object of the Ben Uri Society is not only to establish an Art Museum but to act as a rallying place for artists of all kinds and art lovers, Portman Street is often the venue for lectures, concerts, discussions and exhibitions.

In its annals, the Society recalls with pride its reception in 1921 to Glicenstein. Nowadays its functions are perhaps not so spectacular but quite memorable in themselves. When I visited it a show of paintings, sculpture and drawings of Jewish subjects was in progress. Of the 150 or so exhibits many were on loan, some for sale. And not all the artists were Jewish. The Tate Gallery had sent Holman Hunt's "Eliezer and Rebekah at the Well," besides two or three other fine things. Dr. N. Barou (of the Jewish World Congress) had lent four exquisite carvings of Chassidic figures in ecstasy by I. Rybeck. Viscount Samuel had lent a head of himself by Benno Elkan. Lucien Pissarro's "The Crowning of Esther"



Israel Zangwill . . .
the first President

was lent by Mrs. Pissarro. Several drawings and oils by Feliks Topolski were also on view—the Palestinian sketches, all excellent, the oils rather crowded and "messy."

All the Joseph Oppenheimer pictures—including a pen-and-ink of Yehudi Menuhin—were arresting in their vigour and tension as well as in their skill. But the same could be said of nearly all that was there—one could hardly tear oneself away from each individual exhibit. I reacted violently against only one picture—an oil entitled "Let My People Go," which in lurid colours and not very good proportions showed a large figure pointing to a tiny sinking ship—a poster-like affair too crude for oil, too static for effect, too obviously excited for good art. There was less rhetoric about other scenes—"In a Concentration Camp," by Ludwig Meidner, and "Nazi Sacrilege," by C. J. Ross, with far more eloquence. For the rest, except for Topolski's glimpses of Belsen, and other concentration camps, the subjects were peaceable, some even in repose, especially the older and more traditional studies.

Oppenheimer Etchings

A whole room was devoted to the work of Professor Moritz Oppenheimer (1800-1882) all the pictures being lent for the purpose by Mr. S. S. Cramer. Sixteen squarish panels of almost even size depicted with fidelity and craftsmanship the main festivals and events of Jewish family life. Conventional in style these records are remarkable not only for their documentary value but for their extraordinary use of black and white in oil. There was colour in only two pictures—in one, the yellow of a candle flame: in the other, a suggestion of outdoor tints. The result had a strong resemblance to a photographic impression but with more of the "human" values emphasised. I can see that such pictures should in time come to have a unique significance and not merely for their subjects.

Incidentally, I found news of a shipmate in this most unlikely of places. When I signed the visitors' book and the attendant saw me write

"South Africa," she said, "Oh! You are the second South African we have had here this week. We had a Mr. Koinik of Port Elizabeth here. He came in one day, bought two of the best things we had for sale, ordered a portrait of himself and flew away to Africa the next day." She looked at me as if she expected me to do the same any moment—we are becoming a kind of legend here, we South Africans. I said "I know Mr. Koinik. He came over on the same ship as I. He is an art collector—and business man. I'm not in business." She understood. And she left me to my communings with the catalogue.

Musical Interludes

On other occasions, Ben Uri has unusual music to offer. The other night, Vera Benenson illustrated contrasts in rhythm on the piano by choosing works from Beethoven, Alan Rawsthorne, Bela Bartok and Poulenc in similar (or shall we say comparable) mood. It was both instructive and entertaining to find the "dog beneath the skin" of each, or to put it more poetically, the touch that makes for kinship.

Perhaps some of you may like to know how the name Ben Uri came to be chosen for this Society. L. Berson, the founder, wished to stress the association of the newly constituted Society with Jewry as a whole and Eretz Israel in particular and not merely as an English movement. Since Bezalel, the Biblical architect-sculptor, who built the Tabernacle and moulded the Menorah, was the son of Uri, and since the School of Art in Jerusalem already bore the name of Bezalel, Berson decided on "Ben Uri." And so it stands here for the struggle for Jewish self-expression and recognition, for the encouragement of the arts, particularly the plastic arts, and for the spread of artistic appreciation among Jews themselves.

If it does not quite achieve its aim, I am not competent to judge the rea-

sons. Why should there be only one example of the work of Amshevitze? Why is there nothing by our Moses Kottler? Why is so little heard or known of this Society among Jews abroad? Why is the door shut so that two bells are required to open it? I can guess the answers for nearly all these questions, and so, I am sure, can you—lack of money for purchase, lack of staff for caretaking, etc. But if this is to be more than a semi-public venture, more than a sales gallery and concert hall, surely something more should be done about it? There is room for such a rally-point here, but it should fulfil its function more completely. We would like to see South Africans and other Dominionites make Ben Uri grow through a persistent and regular interest and support. Visitors, I was told, are always welcome. So are new members.

Mr. Levitan Brings Information From Poland

The representative of the S.A. Association to Support Free Poland, Mr. J. Levitan, returned to Johannesburg from his trip to Europe. He spent almost three weeks in Poland and brought with him some information about relatives of local Jews.

Those who have registered at the office of Mr. J. Levitan or at the Jewish Workers' Club are requested to call at the office of the club (15 Upper Ross Street, Doornfontein) till Monday, January 27, inclusive (every evening with the exception of Saturday, from 7.30 p.m. to 9.30 p.m., on Sunday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.).

Induction of Rev. Isaac Richards

The induction of the Rev. Isaac Richards, H.C.F., newly-appointed Minister of the United Jewish Reform Congregation will take place at Temple Israel, on Friday evening, January 24.

The Service will be held in conjunction with the annual visit of the Mayor, Mayoress and City Councilors.

The Service will commence at 8 p.m. The Jewish community is cordially invited to attend.

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You can render an everlasting service to our people by remembering the Jewish National Fund in your will. A Jew who makes provision in his will for this sacred work will perpetuate his name in Eretz Israel. Many Jews have made their names live for ever on the ancient soil. Your name, too, can live for ever in Eretz Israel by

REMEMBERING, IN YOUR WILL, the

J. N. F.