

Images and the Duty of Memory: *The Survival of a People Due to Their Spirit* (1957) by Fanny Rabel¹

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Abstract

Though often cited as a prominent example of Mexican muralism, Fanny Rabel's mural, *The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit* (1957) has not been the object of the detailed study it merits. This study aims to reverse this unwarranted historiographical void through detailed analysis of the rich iconography of the painting. The mural's message and style correspond on multiple levels to the humanistic philosophy and commitment to social justice of the Mexican School of Painting (Escuela Mexicana de Pintura), while its thematic originality reveals distinct expressive elements of muralism that are imbedded in the artist's personal experience.

Introduction

Fanny Rabel's mural, *The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit* (1957) (fig. 2), has been cited often as a prominent example of Mexican muralism, but has not been the object of the detailed study it merits. This paper aims to initiate the reversal of this unjust historiographical void through detailed analysis of the rich iconography of the painting. The mural's message and style correspond on multiple levels to the humanistic philosophy and commitment to social justice of the Mexican School of Painting (Escuela Mexicana de Pintura), while its thematic originality reveals distinct expressive elements of muralism that deserve further exploration. The only existing publication dedicated specifically to this mural is an interactive CD produced in 2004 by the Israeli Sports Centre (CDI, as abbreviated in Spanish), where the work is located. It is an extremely useful and informative source that seems to be based on a commentary written by Rabel herself. There are also statements in the CDI's newsletter made by the artist, which are essential primary sources regarding the mural's iconographic display. These statements include some interesting anecdotes related to the particular circumstances of its making.²

The few monographs on Rabel (generally catalog essays written to supplement exhibits of her paintings and graphic works) usually include a listing of her mural production as part of the

¹ I am deeply grateful to my dear colleague Karen Cordero Reiman for her careful editing of the English version of this text because it has greatly enhanced the value of my research.

² I profoundly thank the Mr. Jorge Wigisser, General Manager of the CDI, Adriana González Focke, the person in charge of Cultural Activities, and Pilar Rangel, the person in charge of the Historical Archives, for giving me access to the mural, to the interactive material and to Rabel's archive, which were published in the Center's newsletters and are cited in this text. Credits for the CD texts are attributed to Raquel Kleinberg and Rina Gitlin. Ariel Hojehman was in charge of the CD project, and the original idea was conceived by Guillermo Treistman.

chronology of her artistic development, but none of these sources includes a detailed analysis of this aspect of her work.³

In some of the classical books on the history on Mexican painting, Rabel's work is either mentioned or illustrated, but never analyzed in detail. A close reading of these sources suggests some of the motives that may have triggered its critical invisibility. For example, in 1964, the renowned expert Raquel Tibol, who stayed close to the mural's creation in its different stages, expressed a favorable but at the same time ambiguous critique in her *Historia General del Arte Mexicano*: "... in spite of its prophetic and Hebraic theme..." the work "is outlined within the realistic and eloquent guidelines that characterize the Mexican School."⁴ It is clear that even though the author recognizes the artistic value of the painting, her own leftist political affiliation led her to distrust the mural's religious content because at first sight the Judaic theme seems inappropriate for the movement's revolutionary orientation. On the other hand, in a newspaper article published by the same critic shortly after the mural's inauguration, she recognized the work's value more explicitly, mainly in relation to Rabel's artistic development, and as a disclosure that muralism is "now a universal value on which historical and cultural treasures from other peoples can be modeled."⁵

A few years later, in 1969, recognizing its formal value as a work of art, the well-known critic Antonio Rodriguez included a reproduction of the mural in his book on the history of the muralist movement.⁶ However, this evaluation reveals a certain indetermination, as the work was reproduced in black and white, unlike other examples that were reproduced in color. It was not accompanied by a critical commentary to reinforce its artistic significance. Subsequently, in *El hombre en llamas' A History of Mural Painting in Mexico* (1970), the same author observed that Rabel "in her mural of 125 square meters about Israel (*Survival of a People*), limited her contribution to the description of the vicissitudes within this complex human family"⁷ and suggests that her mural *Circle of Time* is superior. Rodriguez's view may also reflect his ideological

³ See, for example, Gual, Enrique F., *La pintura de Fanny Rabel*, México, Anahuac, c1968 and *Fanny Rabel: 50 años de producción artística: exposición retrospectiva*, México, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1983.

⁴ Tibol, Raquel, *Historia General del Arte Mexicano. Época Moderna y Contemporánea*, México y Buenos Aires, Editorial Hermes, 1964, p. 188. Following Tibol's harsh criticism, Rabel repainted several figures in the mural, most notably those of Moses and Herzl. See Rabel, Fanny, "Recuerdos e incidentes de un mural," *VII Aniversario del Centro Deportivo Israelita*, October 1957, p. 42. In the archive of Rabel's daughter, Paloma Woolrich, there is a beautiful invitation, designed by Rabel herself, to Tibol's wedding that took place in 1957 in the CDI's salon. I sincerely thank Paloma for allowing me to review her documents and for sharing fascinating anecdotes about the strong relationship between both women.

⁵ Tibol, Raquel, "Tres murales," undated newspaper article, Paloma Woolrich's archive, June 13th 2001.

⁶ Rodríguez, Antonio, *A History of Mexican Mural Painting*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1969, fig. 273, p. 463.

⁷ Rodríguez, Antonio, *El hombre en llamas. Historia de la pintura mural en México*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1970, p. 446.

affiliation and a possible ignorance of the Judaic themes. Even without definitively identifying the reasons behind his attitude, the critic's unexplained silence cannot be ignored.

The Life of the Artist

Fanny Rabinovich (1922-2008), known as Fanny Rabel, was born in the city of Lublin, Poland, into a Jewish family of stage actors, who due to their profession and the difficult situation in Europe, spent a great deal of time traveling through different areas of Poland, Russia and France, where Rabel received her initial schooling. Later on, in 1938, fleeing from fascism and the imminent war, the artist and her family moved to Mexico, where shortly after, as a Mexican citizen, she would develop a prolific and brilliant artistic career. The artist had always acknowledged the fact that Mexico “*received her with open arms*” and that she found there “*all kinds of opportunities.*”⁸

Given her family's precarious condition as recent immigrants, Rabel had to work to contribute to their sustenance, while continuing to develop her artistic inclinations by attending drawing and printmaking courses at the Nocturnal Art School for Workers. Shortly afterwards she joined David Alfaro Siqueiros' group. In 1942, she began studying at the recently established National School for Painting and Sculpture “*La Esmeralda,*” where she met with teachers such as José Chávez Morado, Feliciano Peña, Raúl Anguiano, Carlos Orozco Romero, Francisco Zúñiga, Alfredo Zalce, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Through her acquaintance with Kahlo, Rabel became part of the group known as “*los Fridos*”⁹ and continued her incursion in the field of mural painting. Later on in 1945, she worked as Rivera's assistant.

Rabel was a key member of the Popular Graphics Workshop (Taller de Gráfica Popular) and the Mexican Salon of Fine Arts (Salón de la Plástica Mexicana). She produced an extensive range of work, including prints, easel paintings and murals, and participated in numerous collective and individual exhibitions throughout her life. Her style evolved from realism to expressionism; yet, her originality remained intact, as did her capacity to transmit profound emotions, from intense pain to love and tenderness.

Rabel's Judaism

Although Rabel was involved in the artistic and intellectual circles of her time, she has never forgotten her Jewish roots. Some of her colleagues acknowledged that her greatness stemmed from a profound connection to the culture and history of her people. For instance, in 1945, on the

⁸ Fanny Rabel, interviewed by Akive Gutman, in “Fanny Rabel y el Mural del C.D.I.”, *CDI Newspaper*, June 1957, Year III, No. 37, p. 16.

⁹ A group of artists that got its name because they were close disciples of Frida. The group's members were Fanny Rabel, Guillermo Monroy, Arturo Estrada and Arturo García Bustos, who joined the group after the first three.

occasion of her first exhibition of oil paintings, drawings and prints at the Israeli Popular League (Liga Popular Israelita), Frida Kahlo wrote an affectionate and sensitive presentation:

She paints as she lives, with enormous courage, an acute intelligence and sensitivity, with all the love and joy that her twenty years give her. But what I judge most important in her painting are the deep roots that tie her to the tradition and strength of her people. Her painting is not personal, but social. She is fundamentally concerned with class issues and has observed, with an exceptional maturity, the character and style of her models, always endowing them with vital emotion. All of this without pretensions, and full of the femininity and finesse that make her so complete.¹⁰

Diego Rivera, on the same occasion, concurred with his wife noting that “*a bitter residue, left by ancestral tradition and the recent past, combined with an emotion that foresees the continuation of yesterday’s pain in the future, defines the general tone of Fanny’s paintings.*”¹¹ Sensitively and accurately, Rivera observed in this statement one of the most pervasive characteristics of Rabel’s work, manifested in the majority of the works she created at different stages of her life.

The experience of forced exile left in Rabel and the majority of her generation—both direct survivors of the Shoah¹² and their contemporaries who witnessed this horror—an intense and incurable pain. This undoubtedly fueled her rebellion against social injustice, and led her to direct her art towards a humanistic commitment, an aspect closely tied to the Mexican School of Painting and particularly, the movement of muralism.

As the artist candidly admitted, her style was that of the “*Mexican School of Painting and particularly the neorealist trend that does not aim to produce a photographic copy of nature, but to express the social and historic background of the creatures it represents, imbuing them with humanistic ideals.*” To this she added: “I would say that neo-realism is one of the least selfish means of searching for truth.”¹³ Thus, Rabel, like many other members of her wounded generation, reconciled her cultural and religious roots with the deep social commitment of the international left, and in particular with the Mexican School of Painting.

¹⁰ Frida Kahlo, “Presentación para Fanny Rabel,” Catalogue for the exhibition of paintings and drawings by Fanny Rabinovich at the Popular Israeli League (Liga Popular Israelita), August 8th to 31st, 1945. Consulted at the Paloma Woolrich’s archive.

¹¹ Texts reproduced in the selection of critical texts of the catalogue *Fanny Rabel: 50 años de producción artística: exposición retrospectiva*, Mexico, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1983, and originally published in *Exposición de pinturas y dibujos de Fanny Rabel*, Liga Popular Israelita, México, D.F., August 1945.

¹² The word Holocaust, literally, means massacre.

¹³ Fanny Rabel, “Fanny Rabel y el Mural ...”, op. cit., p. 16.

Becoming a Muralist



Figure 1

Rabel's process of becoming a muralist was indisputably unique. She was able to combine her experiences as apprentice to David Alfaro Siqueiros, whom she assisted in the Mexican Electricians Union (1939-40); as an assistant to Diego Rivera, with whom she collaborated at the National Palace (1945); and the first mural experience with Frida Kahlo, in which she participated between 1943 and 1945. From these two masters of muralism, she learned technical and political aspects that characterized the founding movement. And from Frida, she gained a consciousness of the multiple options open to muralism, mainly with regard to its inspiration from popular art and the conviction of freedom of expression. Rabel once said that her experience with Frida was the trigger for the birth of her "ambition to create mural paintings."¹⁴

Muralism is generally associated in the collective imagination with masculine action. And even though most of the murals from the Mexican School of Painting were produced by men, Rabel was able to acquire a solid foundation in this field. She worked on a considerable number of murals in the course of her career: as part of the group Los Fridos, *We Love Peace and the World Head over Heels for Beauty* (1943) at the La Rosita pulque bar and *Single Mothers Work Together to Solve their Problem* (1945) for the House of the Single Mother (Casa de la Madre Soltera).

As an individual artist, she worked on *Alphabetization* (1952) for the Labels and Prints company in Coyoacan;¹⁵ *The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit* (1957), the work of art that is studied in this text; *The Constitution* (1960) for the Mexican Revolution Pavillion; *A Circle in Time* (1964-65) for the National Museum of Anthropology and History; *Towards Health* (1962) for the Children's Hospital of Mexico; and *The Mexican Family* (1983-84) for the Public Register of Property and Commerce.

For Rabel, who was always aware of and committed to the social issues of her time, the "fundamental painting" of the modern world was "muralism," since, as she noted, "because of its size and conception, it gives a more open public image." Rabel also believed that "the mural can be

¹⁴ Fanny Rabel, "Fanny Rabel y el Mural ...", op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁵ This work disappeared. In Paloma Woolrich's archives, there are some unpublished photographs showing clearly that Rabel had assimilated the content and characteristic style of the Mexican Painting School, which must have been a good presentation letter to convince the CDI to commission the work of art analyzed in this text.

seen by anyone who walks these corridors” and that “in comparison, paintings at best end up in museums or collectors’ homes.” This is why, she asserted, in keeping with her liberal spirit, she always had “the idea that art must be for a general public” and consequently sought to express herself, not only through small format paintings but also and foremost, through monumental public works.¹⁶ The mural that is examined here was created precisely with this public purpose and social commitment in mind.

The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit, History, and Collective Memory



Figure 2

At the beginning of the 1950s, the CDI in Mexico City decided to commission an important mural to decorate the Great Hall of their Social Building. Different proposals were discussed. Initially, Rabel suggested working on “The Song of Songs” but the project was rejected. Afterwards, one committee proposed and approved a project based on the Maccabees. The artist reworked it, according to suggestions from the architect Kaspé, while proposals from other artists were still being evaluated.¹⁷ When Samuel Dultzin, CDI founding member and the original promoter of the mural, died, the project was put on hold for several years. Sometime later,¹⁸ proposals were once again requested from different artists. On this occasion, the well-known painter and architect Juan O’Gorman was chosen, but subsequently he resigned, and Rabel finally got the opportunity she had longed for.¹⁹

Rabel started a long and conscientious research process, reading numerous texts and preparing several sketches until she finally conceived the definitive work, titled *The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit* (fig. 2). The central theme, based on a text by León Bayón about the prophetic spirit of Jewish history,²⁰ was “the Jewish people’s longing for redemption with the prophets as central characters in the painting ... [and] the survival of the Jewish people’s spirit throughout history.”²¹ Interestingly, years earlier when Rabel was a student, she had written a

¹⁶ Fanny Rabel, quoted by Zárate, Mónica, “Mujeres entre los andamios también hubo...” in *Intervención. Revista Electrónica de Comunicación*, February 2011, consulted in <http://interaccion.comfil.edu.mx> on February 1st 2011.

¹⁷ In Paloma Woolrich’s archives, there is a manuscript by Raquel Tibol that describes the initial project in full detail.

¹⁸ The commission was completed thanks to the posthumous donation of Mr. Jack Reider to the CDI, by his sons, Enrique and Jerry Reider. See *Cincuenta años del Centro Deportivo Israelita*, Mexico, Litografía Delta, S.A. de C.V., 2000, p. 66.

¹⁹ Rabel, “Recuerdos ...,” op. cit., p. 41

²⁰ Rabel, “Fanny Rabel y el mural ...,” op. cit., p. 16.

²¹ Ibid. p. 67.

school paper entitled “The Prophets,” demonstrating her lifelong interest and knowledge on the theme.²² The first paragraphs of the commemorative plaque found beside the piece states:

This mural represents a symbolic synthesis of the spiritual factors that allowed the Jewish people to survive the tragic events of their historic destiny. There are three culminating aspects: the ethical principles enunciated by Moses, the legislator; the longing for universal peace expressed by the prophet Isaiah and the construction of the new State whose roots are in the five times millenary tradition.²³

Thus, the pictorial genre of the mural coincided with one of the Mexican School of Painting’s recurrent interests, History; yet, it was not national history, but the history of Judaism throughout time. In Mexican muralism, key historical events are frequently interwoven with popular traditions and customs at different points in time; in Rabel’s painting, the history of the Jewish people is visually expressed. Consequently, Rabel created a singular amalgamation of historical and sacred events, interlaced with moral precepts, customs, and allegories, following her personal interest in history and the tradition of the Mexican School of Painting.

From a chronological point of view, the mural presents a wide spectrum spanning from the time of Moses to the creation of the modern State of Israel in 1948. However, and typical of the historical narrative of Mexican muralism, the artist was not concerned with representing all the events of the past in a scrupulous manner, but rather with selecting those that were truly significant at the time the painting was made. The so-called “collective memory” belongs to the Mexican Jewish community that commissioned the piece in the mid-twentieth century. This collective memory (a concept originally developed by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs²⁴ and later taken up by the French Pierre Nora, a representative of the so-called “new history”) is generally described as the “truth of what was lived and remembered” with all its inexplicable magic and sacrality.²⁵ It is the history of the Jewish people that must not be forgotten and that, as represented by Rabel, fully justifies, together with other reasons, the creation of the modern State of Israel, which at that time had only been in existence for a decade.

In contrast to most occidental narrative works of art that are painted to be viewed from left to right, the directionality of this mural is original, because it is intended to be observed as Hebrew writing, from right to left. Rabel achieved, right from the outset, an association of the images represented in the painting with writing, a fundamental axis of the piece, which articulated the history of a people with that of religion and culture. The different figures represented in the mural

²² This early text, evaluated by Rabel’s teacher as a 9 (nine) was viewed at the Paloma Woolrich’s archive.

²³ Fragment from the text on the commemorative plaque for the inauguration of the mural, transcribed by the author on May 12th 2011 *in situ*. Other fragments of this text will be quoted later on in this text.

²⁴ Halbwachs, Maurice, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* [1925], Paris, Mouton, 1976, and *La mémoire collective* [1950], Paris, A. Michel, 1997.

²⁵ Nora, Pierre, dir., *Le lieux de mémoire*, Gallimard, Paris, seven volumes, 1984-92.

are complemented as well by a set of Hebrew texts that emphasize and explain the visual contents of the image, highlighting the preeminence of the written word for Jewish culture. The following feedback pleased Rabel immensely: “this isn’t a mural anymore, it is like a book!”²⁶

In addition to a linear chronological reading that perceive the continuity of past and present in a persuasive manner, the narrative structure of the mural superimposes several compositional schemes and other visual devices that in spite of a certain apparent disorder allow the spectator to isolate or relate different sections in ways that reveal further readings and narratives. Citing Nora, in reference to the new historiography with which Rabel’s mural seems to be aligned, it is an “inventory of those objects, men or places that belong to a collective heritage” selected from the memory of a people. According to Rabel, the mural is made up of three main parts, revealing an affinity with writing: 1) the prologue or birth of the national spirit with Moses; 2) the life in the Diaspora, a theme that traverses the entire mural; and 3) the epilogue, in which a young warrior, emerging from of the Warsaw ghetto, begins to build the modern State of Israel.²⁷ In the center of the composition, interrupting its chronological development, Rabel painted the figure of Isaiah as a symbol of the spirit of prophecy that constitutes the central theme of the painting.

Justice, Peace, and Freedom

The mural presents an enormous quantity of mutually interrelated figures and symbols that complement one another, producing a painting of unusual iconographic wealth. Its complex thematic plan is also strengthened by visual strategies that Rabel deployed in a masterly fashion in order to highlight the narrative and emotional content of the painting. For example, from a compositional standpoint, one of the principal schemas used by Rabel to structure her mural is a monumental triangle of biblical figures, Isaiah in the center of the composition, and two representations of Moses, one at each end of the mural, which through their privileged compositional placement, highlight the central message of the work.

Precisely in the center of the mural, as the main focus of the profound symbolic content, the artist painted the prophet Isaiah, whose teachings centered primarily on the need to practice peace and justice, acting in accordance with the law, and defending the needy, be they the oppressed, orphans or widows. The Hebrew inscription over his image, translated into English, reads “And their swords will return as plowshares and their spears as sickles. Nation will not raise its sword against nation, and they will train for war no more.” (Isaiah 2:3) The intention of these words is fulfilled through the figure of the young man under the figure of Theodore Herzl, who points the

²⁶ Rabel, “Recuerdos...”, op. cit., p. 42.

²⁷ Rabel, Fanny, “Fanny Rabel y el mural...”, op. cit., p. 17.

way to the future, giving up arms to plow the earth through the liberation of the Jewish and the founding of the State of Israel.

Below the monumental figure, a visual representation of Isaiah's poetic prophecy of peace predicts the day when: "wolf will live with lamb and tiger will lie down with goat, calf and lion and domestic beast will walk together and a child will put them out to graze. Cow and bear will graze, their offspring will lie down together, and lion as ox will eat straw." (Isaiah 11:6-9) With the illustration of this beautiful biblical allegory, Rabel summarized perfectly, not only the messianic Jewish utopia, but also the dream of social peace and justice that animated the Mexican muralist movement and many other visionaries, regardless of their religious, geographical, or historical origins.

The mural espouses the ideal of a people governed by justice. The Jewish scholar Simon Dubnow explains that this devotion to social justice "aspires to put the weak on a par with the strong and abolish class differences."²⁸ In fact, in the allegory, all the animals are led by a child, and in spite of their individual differences, finally manage to live side by side and share the same source of food in an egalitarian manner. It is clear that both the historical genre and the main message of Rabel's monumental painting coincide fully with the ideology of Mexican muralism.

The other biblical figure included in Rabel's mural is Moses, whose image is placed at either end of the aforementioned compositional triangle. Beginning on the far right, Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the Two Tablets. Following the biblical account, Moses serves as a universal symbol for social struggles against oppression and injustice, a key theme of Mexican muralism. Rabel admitted that his gigantic figure was the first she painted, emphasizing that in her view, "*Moses had to be a strong man, a fighter but at the same time a dreamer.*" She wanted him to personify not just the ancient prophet, but the liberator, the man who envisioned a nation,²⁹ a view that coincides with one of the key ideals of the Mexican mural movement: cultural nationalism.³⁰

The figure of Moses appears again in the mural on far the left side, closing the narrative cycle. Here he is not standing, but recumbent and almost hidden beneath the earth, similar to the way Mexican muralists represented secular martyrs of the Mexican Revolution.³¹ According to the biblical narrative, God barred Moses from entering Israel. However, Rabel included him in her mural. He is situated below the modern State of Israel, as a symbol of his libertarian teachings, and

²⁸ Dubnow, Simon, *Manual de Historia Judía*, Editorial Sigal, Buenos Aires, 1967, p. 149.

²⁹ Rabel, "Recuerdos...", op. cit., p. 42.

³⁰ Although I am aware that the notion of cultural nationalism has lent itself through history, to very reprehensible discriminatory policies and violence, Rabel and many other intellectuals and artists of her time understood the concept as a way to achieve social justice.

³¹ See, for example, the images of Montañón and Zapata painted by Rivera in Chapingo in 1926.

prophecies. According to the artist, “a new generation was born under the sign of nationality, thus repeating Moses’ miracle.”³² Indeed, Rabel’s generation experienced genocide firsthand and understood the waning of faith under certain circumstances; perhaps this is why she chose to focus her attention on Moses as an model libertarian, one with whom she identified personally.

Diaspora/Promised Land

The narrative and compositional structure of the mural is based on two principal planes: the foreground, which represents the life of the Jewish people in the Diaspora and the background, where Rabel depicted the ever-present image of the Promised Land, the Land of Israel, a vision of hope.³³ Clearly, Rabel’s own experience of exile during years of migrating throughout Europe and in the years following her arrival in Mexico provided her with vivid memories that nurtured the profound sentiments she expressed so skillfully in her mural. Rabel noted that when she began to plan the mural, suddenly ideas emerged:

*life in the Galut (exile), that life that is ours, the one I knew as a girl, like all Jews. From the most obscure corners of memory, remembrances of the long maternal readings of Sholem Aleijam, Peretz, Asch emerged... All the Jewish theatre that I had absorbed during my childhood years and that is such a faithful reflection of life in the ghetto; the songs so many times heard and sung. I understood, suddenly and for the first time, that only as a Jew I could express all of that. That as the Mexican painter that I am, formed and educated in the Mexican School, I could use the knowledge I had acquired to give birth to elements profoundly rooted in my experience. That is why I believe it resulted in something very much our own ...*³⁴

To convey these ideas, and take advantage of the specific format of the mural, Rabel used “a concave perspective,” which allowed her to “present the foreground from a low vantage point, the medium ground from a high point of view, and the background on a very distant horizon.”³⁵ This dual, parallel vision depicted the dire reality of the Jewish community in the Diaspora at different moments in history in the foreground, and the dream of return to the Promised Land in the background. This efficient visual device enables the artist not only to narrate specific historical events, but also expresses ideals and spirituality. According to Nora, both the Diaspora and the Promised Land convert the past into present, actualizing history and transforming it into a “living memory.”

³² Rabel, Fanny, “Fanny Rabel y el mural...”, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³³ Such a desire for return is expressed in the Hebrew greeting and prayer that says “L’shanah haba’ah b’Yerushalayim!” - the year to come in Jerusalem.

³⁴ Rabel. “Recuerdos”, *op. cit.*, p.42.

³⁵ Rabel, Fanny, “Fanny Rabel y el mural...”, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

As the artist stated, terrible historical catastrophes occurred in the Diaspora: “the arduous struggle to resist moral, spiritual and physical annihilation,”³⁶ and most importantly, the memory that Kristallnacht (November 9-10, 1938, Germany) held and still holds on Rabel’s generation.

Collectively, these elements provide meaning to the second layer of the mural, that of the ideal, the Promised Land where culture can finally flourish permanently, perpetuated through oral and written memory, in spite of repeated historical setbacks. Rabel also painted other key moments in Jewish history: the “mishkan” or tabernacle that was built with the people’s contributions during their sojourn in the desert to house the “Aron Habrit” or Arc of the Alliance, which housed the the Tables; the “Beit Hamikdash” or First Temple of Jerusalem, built by king Solomon (whose name means peace); the “Shivat Tzion” or Return to the Land during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; the “Halutz” or pioneers, the first Jews that immigrated to pre-state Israel, who founded the Jewish state; the creation of the first cities in the modern State of Israel; the work on the land and new industries; the “kibbutzim”, agricultural communities that combined Jewish national and socialist ideals; the Technion of Haifa; and finally, the new generation of free and independent Jews born in Israel.

From the ground on top of Moses’ figure grows a new generation of Israelis, represented by a mother, her smiling child, and a masculine figure plowing. The rifle that was used during the war traces an imaginary arc in the painting, and thus is transformed into a farming instrument, a symbol of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Motherhood is another recurrent theme in Mexican muralism, except in this case, Rabel represented not a sad and self-sacrificing mother, like those painted by her male contemporaries, but a lively and vital woman, playing with her small child, beside two doves that reiterate the pacifistic message of the image.

Furthermore, the tree that grows over the prophet’s tomb is a cactus, one of the symbols of the land of Israel. The new generation of native Israelis is named after the cactus, “tzabarim” or “sabras.” The cactus symbol brings the mural closer to the local Mexican reality, because it is also one of Mexico’s most emblematic plants. The cactus then allows an association between Israel and Mexico, the land that enabled the absorption of Rabel and many other immigrants, who fled from Europe.

Rabel remarked that one of the frequent critiques was that her characters suggested a Mexican physiognomy, rather than a Jewish one. They said that Chaim Nachman Bialik looked like Ciudad Juárez, Theodore Herzl like Venustiano Carranza, and Moses like Cuauhtémoc, the last emperor of the Aztecs. Rabel defended herself by insisting that “*in the course of artistic creation*

³⁶ Rabbel, Fanny, “Fanny Rabel y el mural”, *op. cit.*, p. 17

throughout the centuries, artists have always reproduced the characters and atmospheres that surround them,” thus explaining the intentional iconographic adaptation in the mural³⁷.

In composing her mural, Rabel intertwined various scenes of daily life with portraits of outstanding figures in Jewish history: on the right side of the mural, a praying man covered with “talit”, the shawl used in Jewish religious services; the “Limud Tora” or study of the Bible; and on the left, the “Cheider” or Jewish religious school; a group of religious Hassidim dancing around the “Menorah,” an ancient Jewish symbol; the traditional crafts practiced in the “shtetl” or Jewish village in Eastern Europe, including a shoemaker and a tailor; and finally the “rikudim” or circular dance characteristic of the Jewish people.

On the left side of the painting, Rabel incorporated Rabbi Jonahán Ben Zacai, who co-created the center for Jewish studies in the city of Yavne after the destruction of the Second Temple. He “understood that the Jewish people would survive if they did not lose the spirit that united throughout the world.”³⁸ He holds a parchment with words alluding to the center and the need to always pursue the laws of the Torah.³⁹ Further to the left, Rabel painted the renowned Hebrew poet Judah ha-Levi (c. 1075–1141). She also included a written inscription, reproducing the first words of one of the poems known as the Zionides, which is usually recited in the synagogue on the “Ninth of Av” to commemorate the destruction of the First Temple. The text reads “Zion, wilt thou not ask if peace's wing Shadows the captives that ensue thy peace, Left lonely from thine ancient shepherding?” Poetry underlines the pain and sadness of those who mourn for Zion and are dispersed throughout the world. Close by, she painted the figure of Maimonides (1138–1204), a philosopher, legislator, physician, astronomer, linguist, and Talmudist, surrounded by his disciples.

On the right side of the painting, also intermingled with historical scenes from the Diaspora, Rabel painted important figures of modern Jewish literature, accompanied by some of their main literary characters. For example, Mendele Mocher Sforim (1836-1917) appears accompanied by a mare, referencing his famous work “Di Kliatsche” (1873); Scholem Aleichem (1859-1916) appears amidst multiple manuscripts, and under his desk there is an image of the main character from his book, “Menahem-Mendal” (1909), a dreamer who combines tragic and comical traits, based on the author’s own life; and finally, Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), a socialist writer whose serious social critiques demonstrate the many ideological connections between Rabel’s Judaism and muralism.

³⁷ Rabel, “Recuerdos...”, op. cit., p. 42.

³⁸ Rabel. Fanny, “Fanny Rabel y el mural...”, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁹ I profoundly thank Sara Segal, Hebrew teacher at the CDI, for her generous translation of this fragment, on May 13th 2001, *in situ*.

Slightly above and in a standing pose, Rabel painted the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934). A Hebrew section of *The Hatzipor* (The Bird) (1891) is reproduced here:

... Could my brothers, who sowed their fields with tears,
reap, their sheaves with songs?
Would that I had wings and could fly to the land
Where the almond and palm trees flower!⁴⁰

To the left, above the group of the first “aliyot” that populated Israel, and somewhat taller than the other figures, Rabel featured the Zionist leader, Theodore Herzl (1860-1904), to whom the phrase “Is it that (finally) you harvested the tithe singing?” incorporated in Bialik’s poem, is traditionally attributed.⁴¹ In compositional terms, Bialik and Herzl are at the same stature as Judah ha-Levi, and all three rise “above the stones, above nations [representing] the impulse of redemption.”

Emerging in the foreground of the Diaspora with the land of Israel in the background, or from the sky surrounding Isaiah, other notable personalities appear; they are key figures in the history of western thought — Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), Albert Einstein (1879-1955), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Their placement in the mural implies that the artist recognized prophetic spirit in these notable modern Jewish thinkers, and valued their contribution.⁴²

The Symbols

Rabel expressed the eternal battle between good and evil, not only through the representation of concrete historical figures and facts, but also through the use of symbols that she reiterated in her painting. Some univocal, such as books, symbolize the divine word; some are more complex and dialectical in nature, such as stone and fire.

In many of the scenes, the persistent love of knowledge and books that characterizes the Jewish people is underlined: Moses and the Tables, rabbi Johanan Ben Zacai; the traditional religious school; and groups of adults assembled to read the Bible.

The artist frequently referred to books, as symbols of Judaism, of an ideal world, and of civilization. In addition to depicting numerous books, Rabel also portrayed prominent thinkers and writers who not only created astounding philosophical and literary works, but also reflected on the

⁴⁰ To read the full poems, consult *Poesía Hebraica Postbiblica*, Millas Villacrosa (traductor y compilador), Barcelona, Plaza y Janés Editor, 1953.

⁴¹ I am profoundly thankful to my uncle, Dr. Jaime S. Dromi, for the translation of these sentences from the mural that he interpreted as an ironical question. Consultation made by e-mail May 11th, 2011.

⁴² The absence of Karl Marx’s (1818-1883) figure is noteworthy; He does appear in the numerous murals of the Mexican Painting School. However, it should be noted that his name is included among the burnt books in the fire that symbolizes the Shoah.

importance of the “book” for Jewish culture. Citing Heine, Rabel accentuated the concept of the Bible as a “portable homeland” for the Jews.

Stones are another key iconographical element in Rabel’s mural. On the one hand, due to their immutable character, they symbolize wisdom. The Tablets were inscribed in stone. The Tabernacle Altar was built of stone and the first Temple of Yahweh, in Jerusalem, was built of stone. Destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, it was rebuilt, again of stone, by Ezra and Nehemiah in 538 BCE, upon their return from exile in Babylonia, and stood until the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE. The exterior wall of the Second Temple, known as the Wailing Wall, serves as Judaism’s most sacred site.

Rabel explained that while different visual and thematic solutions for her mural were entertained, the key concept was “*the Ghetto! The walls of ghettos throughout the centuries,*”⁴³ which is the element that articulates the primary composition of the painting. The mural’s brochure says that “what was the territorial sign of the Diaspora is displayed: the walls of the Ghetto, risen from the body of Yohanan Ben Zakai himself, founder of the national stock for dispersion: Yavne’s academy.” The stonewall thus structures the whole scene, framing the Diaspora life, until it is finally destroyed in the scene of the Warsaw’s Ghetto uprising, when the stones fall, crushing the Nazi soldier.

The artist also ascribed a dual meaning to the symbol of fire, alluding to the public inquisitorial trials (auto de fé) and crematorium’s ovens, and also, following biblical sources, as a symbol of divine presence. The archetype of fire as the incarnation of evil is quite well known. As the poet Heine wrote: “there where books burn, human beings are also burned.”⁴⁴ Rabel clearly reflected this dramatic equation in the Medieval Inquisition scene with an image of a bonfire fed from books at its base and a man in its interior; and that of the Shoah, alluding to the cremation ovens in Nazi Germany’s concentration camps, where again a base made of books and musical scores is burning (and the names of important Jewish scientists, intellectuals and artists such as Einstein, Kafka, Freud, Heine, Buber, Stoller, Mendhelsson and Mahler are inscribed), the remains of some bodies and at the top of the pyramid, a family constituted by a mother, a father and a child, creating a dramatic symmetry with the fire, underlining evil throughout history.

However, and in spite of the horrific aspect of both scenes, in other areas Rabel represented fire as creator, as a symbol of divine presence. In fact, God appeared to Moses through the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15), a scene that appears in the first part of Rabel’s mural. Isaiah as well, with his

⁴³ Rabel, “Recuerdos...”, op. cit., p. 42.

⁴⁴ Heine, Heinrich, *Almanson*, 1821.

open hands waiting to receive divine inspiration, is represented in a glow of fire that indicates the presence of God. In all the abovementioned scenes, and particularly in the heroic scene of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising,⁴⁵ fire can be understood as a symbol of divine presence, even in some of history's darkest moments. Fire could allude then to suffering and to the survival of the Jewish people. Finally, fire appears in the lit candles on the seven branches of the Menorah, as a reminder of the sanctity of the Temple, and as a symbol of divinity. Uniting the symbols of fire and stone, the mural's pamphlet explains that "*the flames of the worst genocide that human society has known - the extermination of six million Jews - consume walls that crumble and fall, crushing the Nazi soldier who has fallen at the feet of the heroic defender of the ghettos.*"

Children

In Rabel's mural, children play a central role. It is through children that the Jewish people, like any other people, achieve continuity of their heritage. Additionally, the artist's realism includes children, not only in the bucolic scenes of the mural, but also as victims in the horrible events of the past, and in heroic ones, as active participants in the narrative (for example in the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion). Here, Rabel revealed originality, as well as honesty that invite a greater consciousness of the true dimension of history. Through the extreme contrast between good and evil, she facilitated the identification of the spectator with the victims.

The artist concluded the metaphorical depiction of childhood with an image of a baby that represents the new generation of Israel, an image saturated with the national and religious symbols of the Jewish people. She also painted a child who shepherds the animals in Isaiah's prophecy, her central message.

Allegorical Figures

In the upper register of the mural, Rabel included two allegorical figures, identified by the artist as "the minstrel of Purim" and the "klezmer"⁴⁶ or musician, who complement the mural by adding a cheerful and optimistic tone, in harmony with the central prophecy and with the iconographic display. The mural's leaflet points out that these two figures "*combine a yearning for happiness with anguish*".

The origin of these figures is related to the history of persecution to which the Jewish people have been subjected for centuries, but here a tragedy was inverted and ended happily and

⁴⁵ Though the Warsaw ghetto resistance is the best known, there were many other uprisings, for example in Bialystok, Vilna, Krakow, Treblinka and Sobibor, to which Rabel alludes through her representation of this particular case.

⁴⁶ Originally, the term was used for instruments, but later it was used to designate the musicians as well as the type of soulful music they perform.

symbolically with Purim, from which both allegories are derived.⁴⁷ Purim is the only celebration in which the miracle of the Jewish people's salvation is presented as a result of fate and fortuitous coincidence, rather than as part of a divine plan.⁴⁸

Conclusions

In December 1957, expressing a certain admiration for *The Survival of a People Due To their Spirit* with an undertone of ambiguity, the critic Jorge Juan Crespo de la Serna wrote in the "Israeli Tribune:" "[the mural] reflects the noble and refined style of the artist, and constitutes, without a doubt, a significant milestone in her professional trajectory... an example of dedication, of study and of true love for art, and - for the site where it is located - a motive for legitimate pride." Undeniably, the painting assumes particular value and significance in relation not only to the artist's career, but also to the specific circumstances of the Mexican Jewish community that commissioned the mural. Moreover, it is time to recognize that this mural is a remarkable work of art, which deserves a distinctive place in the history of Mexican muralism.

Even though the mural portrays scenes based on Jewish history, it has profound social and artistic messages that follow the ideology of the Mexican School of Painting School. Rabel's *The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit* is a strong and expressive call for reflection on the consequences of the abuse of power. History and collective memory are the central themes that merge Rabel's work with the Mexican School. The central theme of memory or "Zakhor" (Remember! in Hebrew)⁴⁹ is also a fundamental concept in Mexican muralism, which through the reconstruction of history on painted walls, aimed to contribute to the creation of a just society. Hence, as the mural's flyer claims: "national affirmation, a vision of world peace, and a recognition of the intellectual and emotional values that characterize the Jewish people is what the artist Fanny Rabel painted in the year of 1957."

⁴⁷ In Jerusalem and other ancient walled cities, the date for the Purim celebration is the 15th of Adar. It begins with a fast the night before and continues with the delivery of food to friends, the reading of "the Meguila" (the Book of Esther), giving donations to the poor and with a banquet of abundant food and drink.

⁴⁸ In 1997, when Rabel went to the CDI to visit her mural, the Center organized a celebration in which actors, dressed up as the different real and allegoric characters represented by the artist in her mural, participated. Rabel's children continued the family's acting tradition. Therefore, the presence of theatre imagery in the mural has a personal meaning.

⁴⁹ *Zakhor* is the title of an important book written by the Josef Hayim Yerushalmi, in which he describes the differences between "history" and "memory." See Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle and London, The University of Washington Press, 1982.

Images

Fig. 1. Fanny Rabel painting the mural (photograph by Akiva Gutman, originally reproduced in “Fanny Rabel and the C.D.I. mural”, CDI newspaper, June 1957, no. 37, year III, pp.16-17, CDI historical archive).

Fig. 2. Fanny Rabel, *The Survival of a People Due To their Spirit*, acrylic, 35 x 2.4 m, 125 m², 1957, located in the ballroom of the Israeli Sports Center (CDI), J. Gutiérrez de Mendoza no. 76, Col. del Periodista, Mexico City (photograph by Jorge Arreola Barraza)