

July 2024



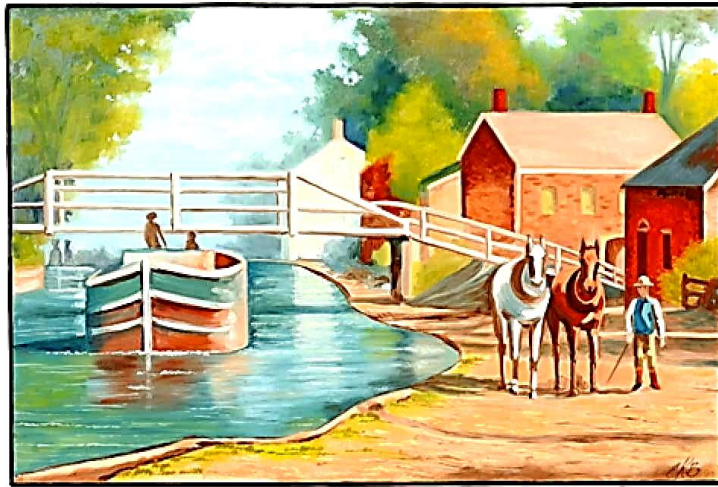
"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader



I AND THE VILLAGE 1946-1948

by Kevin Ahearn



WELCOME TO HIGH FALLS

Settled
1669



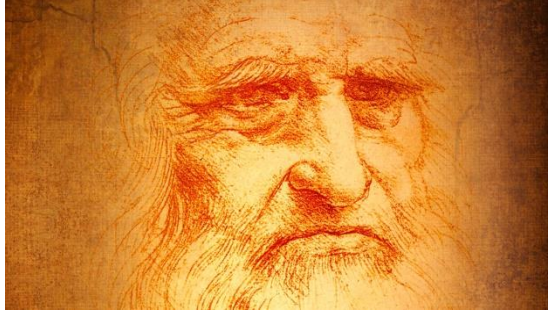
NINETY MILES NORTH OF NYC



MARC CHAGALL 1887-1985

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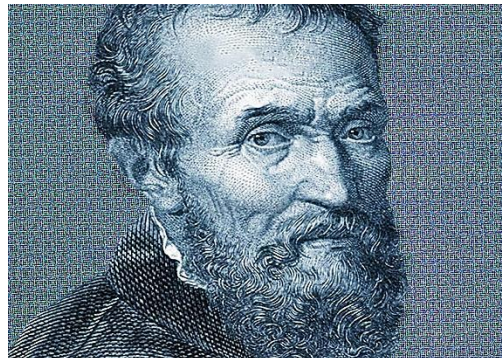




“Whatever you do in life, if you want to be creative and intelligent, and develop your brain, you must do everything with the awareness that everything, in some way, connects to everything else.”



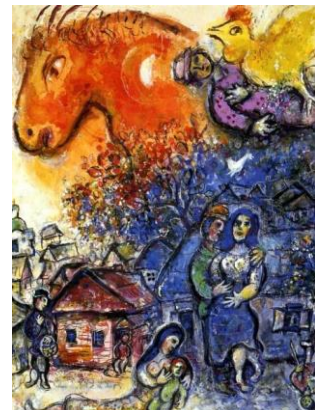
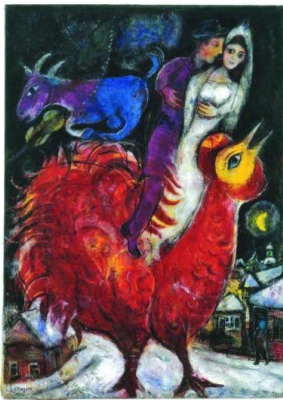
‘Marc Chagall is no artist. He’s a degenerate!’



“The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.”



J'm Marc. My emotional life is sensitive and my purse is empty, but they say J have talent.



In this Village just a hundred and fifty kilometers from New York City, J never felt freer and safer in my whole life. J'm a 'meteque' in High Falls, and at the same time, J'm at home because J'm a Jew.

My parents named me Movsha (Moses). and for most of my life, it looked like no Jew would ever get to the Promised Land.



"My colours first blossomed on Pekrova Street."

I came from a big family in Russia. Vitebsk, my sad and joyful town, would indelibly brand my life and my paintings. Mama bribed me into art school, and full of ambition, I moved on to St. Petersburg where I nearly starved, but I kept painting.



"It is because I remember my mother, her breasts so warmly nourishing and exalting me, and I could swing from the moon."



Then I met my Muse who ignited my life and my art...



"...Though I saw Bella for the very first time. I knew this is she, my wife. Her pale colouring, her eyes. How big and round and black they are! They are my eyes, my soul..."

We supported the 1917 Revolution and I was appointed Commissar for Fine Arts in Vitebsk and then director of the Free Academy of Art. But the Godless anti-Semitic Bolsheviks--they would make me compromise art.



"We 'voted with our feet.'"

Arriving in France in 1922, I soon got my first engraving commission to create etchings for a special edition of Nikolay Gogol's novel Dead Souls.



"If I create from the heart, nearly everything works. If from the head, almost nothing."



Next came 100 gouaches for poet Jean de La Fontaine's Fables, and a series of etchings illustrating the Bible.

"The entire world within us is reality, perhaps more real than the visible world. If one calls everything that seems illogical fantasy or a fairy tale, all one proves is that one has not understood Nature."



"Not just an artist. Buy my book!"

In the 30s, I became the 'Wandering Jew' traveling to the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Italy and Palestine. I stayed two

months in the Holy Land that would inspire my Bible etchings. When I finally returned to France I was fully ablaze...



"I didn't paint the Bible. I dreamt it."

But there was trouble brewing nearby...

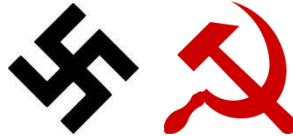


"Anyone who sees and paints a sky green and fields blue ought to be sterilized."

Bolshevik madman! Stalin has a new mate. The Russian people have been wedded to the Nazis!

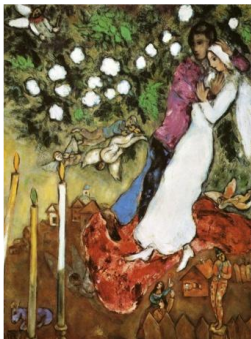


The very next day, the first of September, 1939!



The Wehrmacht and the Red Army quickly divided Poland. In France, we felt safe. Churchill had called the French Army 'the strongest in the world' and we had the Maginot Line to protect us.

While the rest of the civilised world awaited the Nazi's next move, in love with being alive with Bella, I worked and worked.



Spring came and so did the Germans, routing the French and the British.. Just in time, a group of Americans with help from the Museum of Modern Art, smuggled us out via forged visas!



"The new 'Babylon' and 'Mecca' to artists and creative zealots the world over."

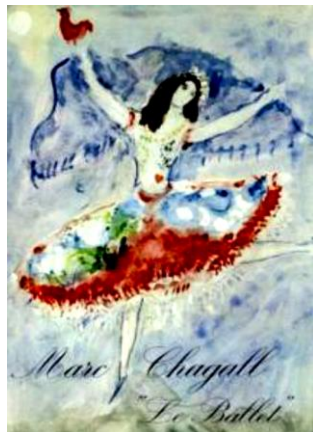
On June 22, 1941, the day after we arrived in New York City, the biggest army in history invaded the Soviet Union.



"The destiny of Europe's Jews will be decided by the Bolsheviks!"

Bella, Jean and I stayed in Manhattan apartments. Bella took me clothes shopping where they spoke French--As if we never left Russia or Poland or Germany or France - Yiddish spoken everywhere!

I got a new commission. Bella and I went to Mexico to design the sets and costumes for a new ballet, Aleko, by Léonide Massine.



"All colors are the friends of their neighbors and the lovers of their opposites."

July 10, 1941...



"My hometown conquered and occupied!

***"Should I paint the earth, the sky, my heart?
The cities burning, my brothers fleeing?
My eyes in tears.
Where should I run and fly, to whom?"***

***I locked myself in the dream that was New York, designing the
backdrops and costumes for Stravinsky's Firebird.***



***"The dignity of the artist lies in his duty of keeping awake
the sense of wonder in the world."***

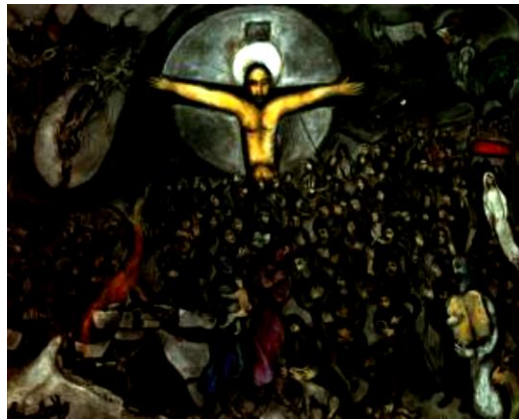
***Bella was not feeling well. We had to get out of the city and
into the country for peaceful beauty...at Cranberry Lake in the
Adirondacks.***



The war would not defeat me. Hitler would not destroy my vision of life. Bella and I have been together for twenty-five years, I was more afraid of losing her than I was of the damned Nazis!



February 2, 1943:



"God at Stalingrad. He is on our side!"



"In our life there is a single color, as on an artist's palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the color of love."

In the summer of 1944, my beloved Vitebsk was liberated by the Red Army. Once 240,000 lived there. Only 118 emerged from its ruins.



"The end of my origin, my Russian roots?"

On holiday in the Adirondacks. Bella suddenly got a sore throat. The next day she was feverish. I took her to the hospital run by nuns. Bella was afraid that they only served 'Christians and asked me to take her back to the hotel.

I obeyed. Penicillin might have helped but none was available, all sent to the war fronts.

The thunder rolled, the clouds opened at six o'clock on the evening of September 2, 1944, when Bella left this world. Everything went dark.



J wept and wept. Every canvas J turned against the walls. Couldn't bear to see them. Would J ever paint again? Three weeks later...



"Paris free! We can go back now?"

J couldn't go on without a woman. Soon J became involved with Virginia, my housekeeper. Young and pretty, she idolized my art. She also had a young daughter and an alcoholic husband.

We gradually worked things out and suddenly, in addition to my grown daughter, Jda, J had a new family.



The Nazis were finished. Six million Jews murdered in 'The Final Solution'. Six million! To destroy Hitler and save European Jewry, twenty-eight million Russian men, women and children gave their lives. Write that in your Holocaust history books!





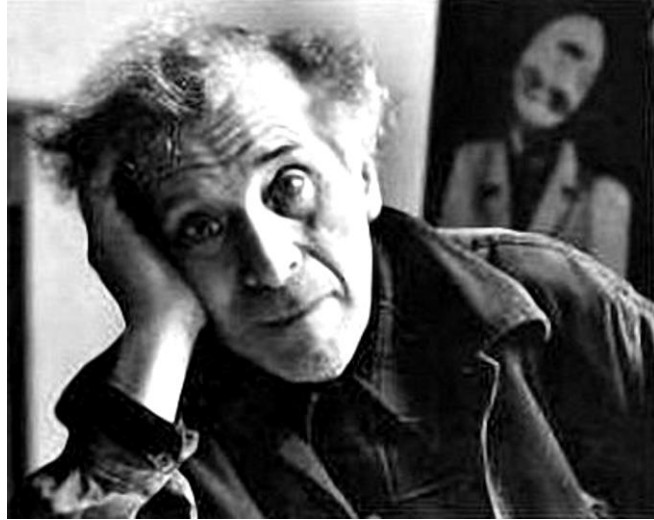
“Creativity takes guts.”



“Art is what you can get away with.”



“Nowhere man, the world is at your command.”



J needed new life, a new 'period'. America was dynamic, but the city was much too busy and J'd already done France. J wanted a pastoral setting, to find myself in the center of a yet-unpainted picture from where J would do nothing but paint pictures to astonish the world!

And Virginia was pregnant.

"Virginichka," J had Russianized her name. "Go and see if you can find a house in some quiet country place."

Virginia picked out a property and up we went to High Falls, a tiny village so unbusy that its central crossroads didn't have, nor ever would have...a traffic light.





Only a few miles from town, Virginia liked the bigger wooden house, its screen porches and the catalpa tree.

"That's my isba!" said J about the 'studio' cottage though it would need a lot of work before J'd use it. But we were off to a positive start: High Falls had its own aroma.

Back in my particularly stupid and happy days, my grandfather's house was filled with the sounds and smells of art.

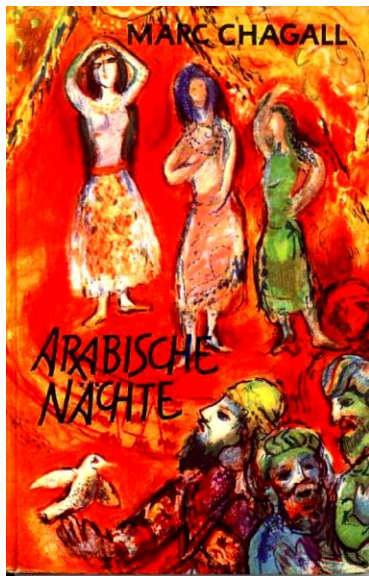


That's where they slaughtered the calves. The smells came from the hides, hung up and drying like linen.

High Falls, a world away, had a cleanliness in the air, a purity diminished only by the passing of a rare car and constantly enhanced by cows and deer, bear and fox.

My grandparents had ignored my art and valued their meats. How would J 'value' this unpainted High Falls?

J began painting in the living room of the big house even before we were fully moved in, painting gouache after gouache. And when J ran out of water to soak and drain them off, J'd spit.



To clean my brushes J'd use linseed oil and turpentine in the bathroom. The only casualty was the tub which underwent a colourful metamorphosis with each contributing hue.

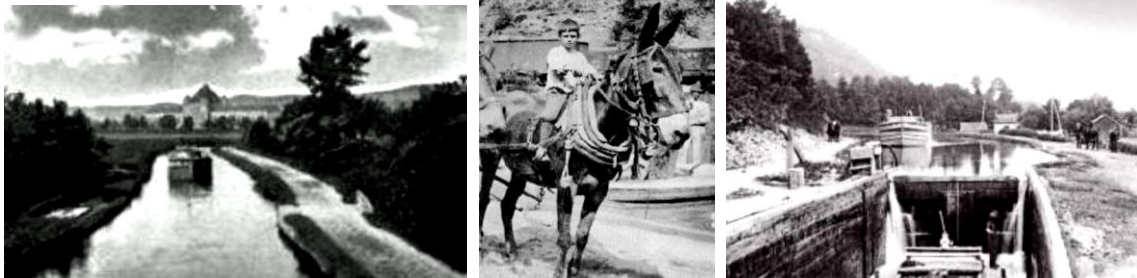
The girls were less than pleased, but scrub as they might, the porcelain bathtub refused to surrender its Chagall endowment.



"There are no rules for technique; anything is permissible as long as the motives are genuine."

High Falls, a seemingly insignificant hamlet by a backwater creek, had the power to remind me of..not my beloved Motherland...but Communist Russia!

In the last century, the Village had been a vital hub in the Delaware & Hudson Canal. The 108-mile, 108-lock waterway opened in 1828, giving rise to a seasonal society complete with its own Police force, and rumor had it, a floating brothel.



"Oy, New Yorkers!"

In 1898, the D&H was abandoned, put out of business by the faster, cheaper year 'round railroads who are now looking over their shoulders at the trucking industry, hot on their cabooses.

Between 1931 and 1933, the Soviet Union built its grandest engineering project using convict labor from Gulag camps to dig 141 miles of canal by hand using no machinery or horses.



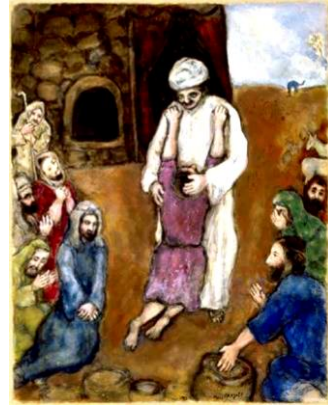
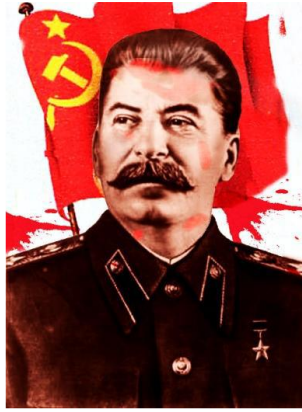
Thousands upon thousands of pitiful souls slaved on the White Sea Canal project with little food, water or warmth, giving the Party a way to do away with 'political dissidents' and 'enemies of the State' without executing them. Under their Communist masters, more Russians were worked to death building the White Sea Canal than there are Jews in New York.



High Falls was historically etched with the fossils of the D&H Canal, a bygone collective no local industry has since replaced.



***What future did I have here?
I wrote a personal letter to Comrade Stalin, begging forgiveness for my earlier Party squabbles, and pleading for an official invitation to visit the glorious and heroic Soviet Union.***



***"You can trust the Communists - to be Communists!"
I never got an answer.***

Virginia had to clean out the cisterns wearing rubber boots. No one in the Village would work for us. We were 'strangers', 'foreigners', an older man living with a pregnant younger woman he hadn't married, Jews.

There are other Jews up here. The joy of Yiddish. A New York 'Exodus' is just beginning. Soon a host of Hebrews will be invading the Catskills!

My immediate Mohonk Road neighbors were cows. I'd take sunny constitutionals and argue art with them.

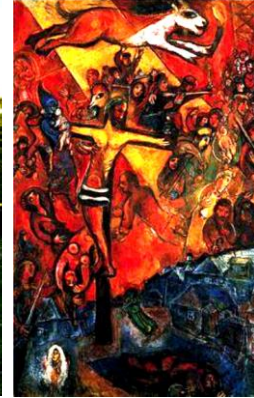


And appreciate their aroma.

We bought a secondhand Oldsmobile. Virginia quickly learned how to drive. She'd take us shopping.

"Don't leave the car too near," I'd warn her. "They'll up the prices."

Virginia and Jean went exploring, up Mohonk Road, around the hairpin turn and higher still, atop the mountain...an American matsuwd!



"One day, I'll go, when I'm selling like Picasso!"

I was getting a monthly stipend from the Matisse Gallery which kept us breathing, but there were expenses. To see my pregnant Virginia, the doctor made a house call in his brand new Ford. I offered him one of my paintings in lieu of fifteen dollars payment.

He turned me down, demanded cash.



"Mark my words. I'm an excellent long-term investment!"

My beloved Bella disappointed me only once: she never gave me a son and my daughter Jda has been living with my frustration most of her life and she happily accepted Virginia's pregnancy and was praying for a boy as hard as I was.



"She'd later sue me, claiming 'her share' of my paintings!"

I don't create art merely to be seen and sold, but, if only for a fleeting moment, to 'instantly transport patrons away from their world into mine. Paintings that make people imagine!



***"Do that and I've captured a customer for life
---even if it's only a cheap print."***

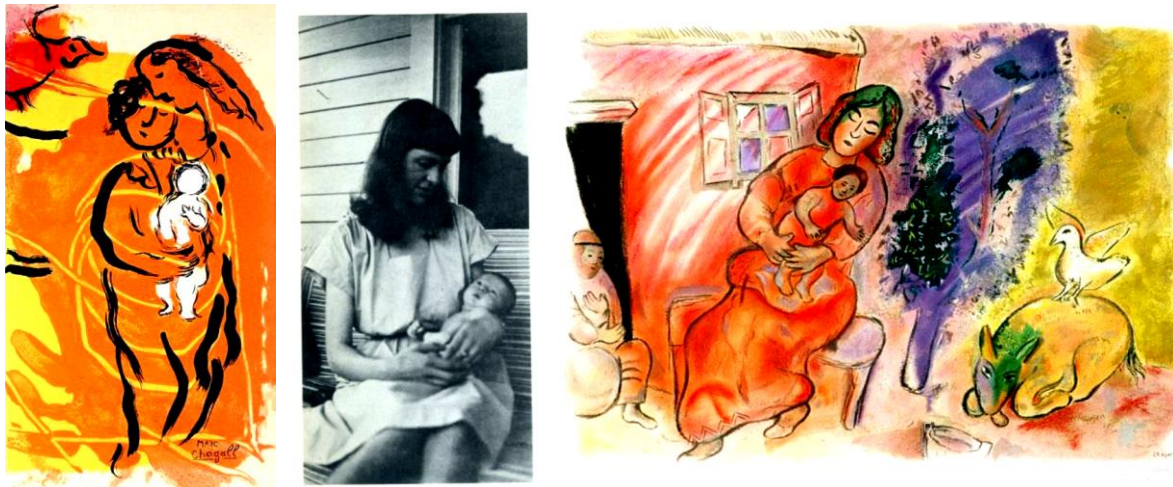
That first summer we made a number of trips back to the city. The see old friends and seek new patrons. Virginia's growing belly made her condition obvious. Sales would buy the baby new shoes.

The soil which had nourished the roots of my art was Vitebsk, but my art needed Paris—like a tree needs water—otherwise it would have withered.



In May, with Virginia eight months pregnant, with crates of paintings to sell, and food and commodities for my suffering European friends, I sailed.

Postwar Europe was a much-changed place. Its ravaged structure made me long for the isolation and the innocence of High Falls. On June 22, I got the blessed telegram - 'It's a boy!'



I wouldn't see David for two long months.

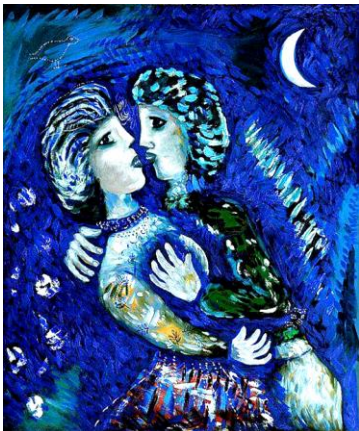
While I was away, a pair of FBI agents came up Mohonk Road with a warrant to search the house and the studio - 'un-American activities!' I'd been involved with Communists during the war. Fighting the Nazis!

They looked and looked and found nothing. Wish J had been there. They left empty-handed. J might have sold a painting to the US Government.



"Hanging in Hoover's office?"

Virginia, Jean and David met me at the dock. Had J come 'home'?

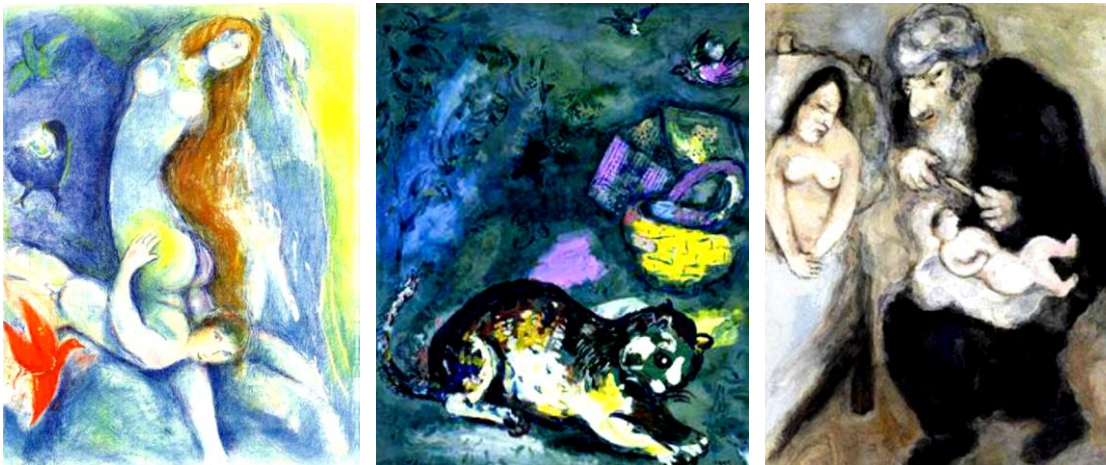


The studio had been readied for me. The garden was full of flowers and the sweet corn was ripening. (For Japanese beetles. Virginia refused to use pesticides.)

J went right to work, painting from dawn to dusk. Once you've been poor, you can never feel rich. Sell, sell, sell! J'd never have enough money.



Virginia and I would sleep upstairs in the studio which made for inspirational interludes: When daughter Jda was visiting, she couldn't get enough of the children which gave us an opportunity to perform 'additional housework' on the second floor. Of course, David got circumcised!



"For the children, and the mice, we got a cat."

Art is the quest for the indelible: to make the world see exclusively as I do, to believe in My Truth. The Nazis had burned many of my paintings. But they would not be lost. I would re-find them by painting a 'variant' that I could sell as an 'Original Chagall Classic' over and over again.

The collectors whined until the prices went up.



"Not the Jew, the marketer in me!"

High Falls made me feel so wildly free. And I had a son to work for. Mohonk Road could be a palette in itself. Unlike the brick and stone city, the Village came with an annual colour spectacular--the changing of the leaves.



"Great art picks up where nature ends."

But I'd miss the 1946 show. In October, I went back to Paris for the opening of my exhibition at the Museum National d'Art Moderne. It was a huge success. People recognised me on the boat. I was becoming a celebrity.

A house is never more a home than during winter. The coal stove in my High Falls studio glowed with a red I was never able to capture.

The snow piled high on Mohonk Road, had to be shoveled and shoveled. The children loved riding on sleds.



"I feel like I've hardly begun, like a pianist trying to settle down comfortably on his stool."

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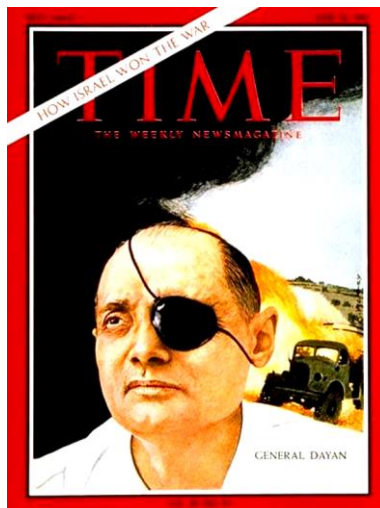




Jesus was the greatest of all artists."



"Painting is the grandchild of nature. It is related to God."



"Freedom is the oxygen of the soul."



Spring, with the Rondout Creek high and strong, brought forth new life and new possibilities...

April 15, 1947...

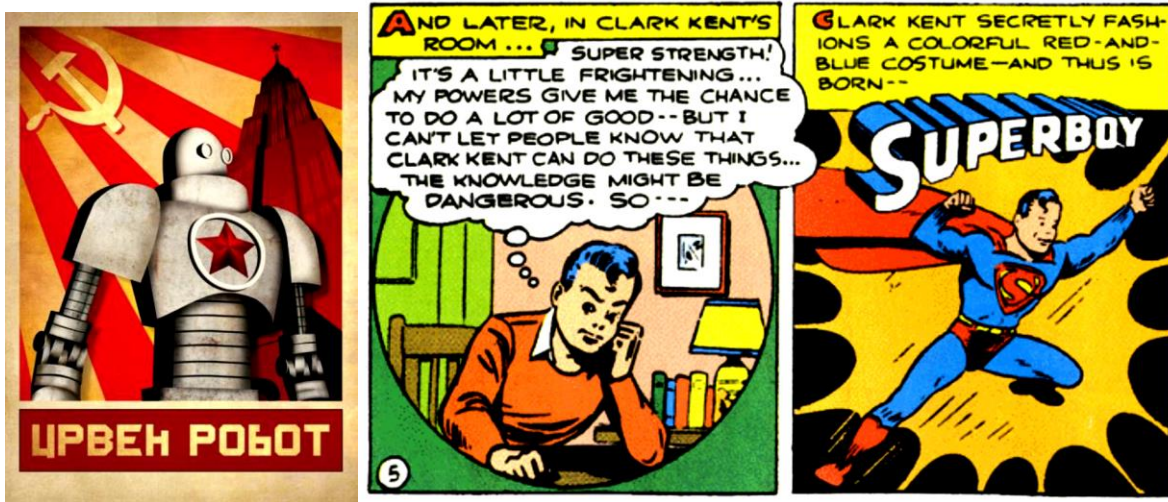


"Without a mystical element is there a single great picture, a single great poem or -- even -- a single great social movement?"

I wanted a wall to paint a mural, but my studio was hardly big enough. As hard as I tried, painting and repainting, I couldn't rediscover the passion of my Russian youth, so I cut the project into three pieces. And remained undiscouraged; there'd be other times and places for even grander productions.



A 'Cold War' has been declared! The Godless Soviet Union versus the idealistic United States. And who will be the new homegrown hero, the role model for American youth?



"Yet another Jewish art-form goes 'Up, up, and away!'"

The Art Institute of Chicago and New York's Museum of Modern Art held retrospective exhibitions in my honor. Would I become a 'celebrity' in the Village?



I lived in America during the inhuman war in which humanity deserted itself... I have seen the rhythm of life. I have seen America fighting with Allies... the wealth that she has distributed to bring relief to the people who had to suffer the consequences of the war... I like America and the Americans... people here are frank. It is a young country with the qualities and faults of youth. It is a delight to love people like that... Above all I am impressed by the greatness of this country and the freedom that it gives.

But America is not my country. Mine was in the bloody process of being born.

In the Middle East!



"Never again!"

Will painting ever become obsolete, no longer needed by humanity? Will we be usurped and surpassed by a machine of near-Biblical power, a magic picture frame in every last hovel, conjuring up endless imagery.



Not for a minute must this boxy device intimidate an artist. This 'television' lacks the talent to transmit colour.'

'People are waiting for him,' Jda wrote Virginia. Their expectation is something to be treasured, not despised. His return to Paris would be like a gift; it must be given at the right time.

'Don't be late!'

May 14, 1948



ISRAELI INDEPENDENCE DAY!

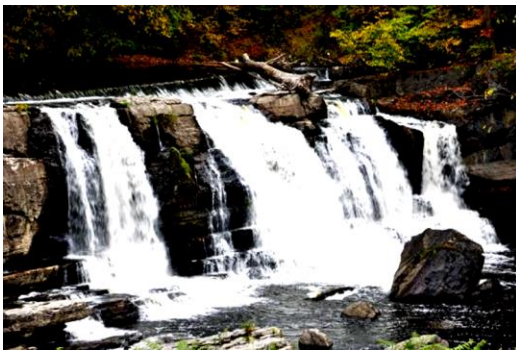
Joy to the world. We Jews have a homeland!



Our High Falls place is so beautiful, not Jewish at all--berries, worms chicken, wild grass--everything whispers to me; become an American, don't go.

But it was not to be. A good New York Jew, at best, but never an American. Assimilated far from the Bible, I'd have to learn how to drive and speak English. To be somebody I'm not. A kind of artistic Gulag.

I never made an effort to become part of the Village, never painted the town. So caught up with my art, and my family and the fate of My People that I failed to envision the fresh beauty up and down Mohonk Road. High Falls had been a culture awaiting its artist and it wasn't me. The Village remained a picture unpainted. If I had taken the time...



"A surge of myth and magic gushing over High Falls!"



"Give the Depuy Canal House a menu of Jewish/Russian/French colouring!"

There had been one indelible sight, an American metaphor spanning the Rondout. I'd set out in late August, when the Creek is low and slow. Borrow a rowboat to get to the Stone Ridge side, a stretch of flat rocks. Set up my easel and paint box. And with just one day's work...A pale blue sky with darkened clouds, the grand arches bridging the centuries, and swirling about, the ghosts of too many workers who died on the Delaware & Hudson Canal.

There'd be children jumping off it all day, but I'd paint around them.



"As Matisse immortalized the Pot Saint Michel in Paris, I might have saved the High Falls Aqueduct."

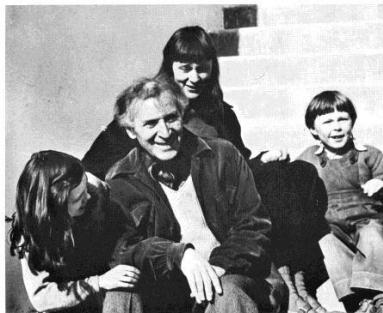
But I did nothing. Painting in America had been like shouting in a forest - no echo.

In 1956, the local power company tore down the High Falls Aqueduct. J and the Village have never forgiven ourselves. If only J had...

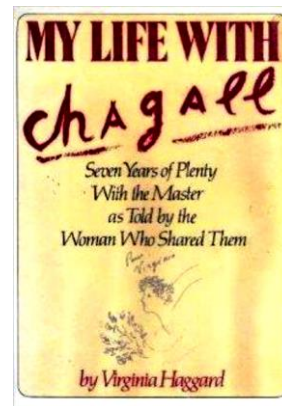
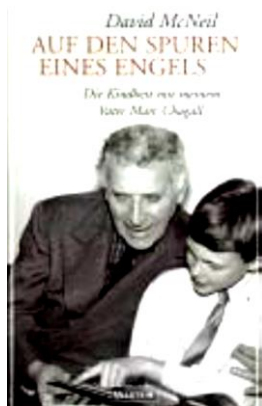
Wait one minute. J DJD paint something in High Falls!

August 17, 1948

We sailed for Europe in time to attend the opening of my exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne. None of us would ever see High Falls again. Jda returned a couple of years later, gathered up any remnants and sold the place.



In 1951, Virginia left me and David went with her.



***"Both wrote books about me. I painted more about them."
Not long after, J met and married Vana who inspired me, saw to my every need and managed my career happily ever after.***



I painted the ceiling of the Paris Opera House and refused to be paid for it.



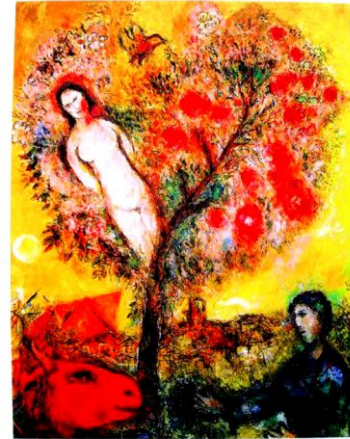
"I did accept lifetime tickets."

Saw God through church windows...

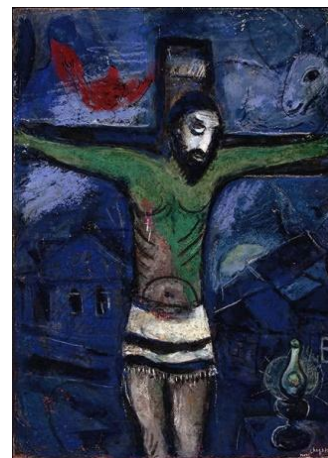
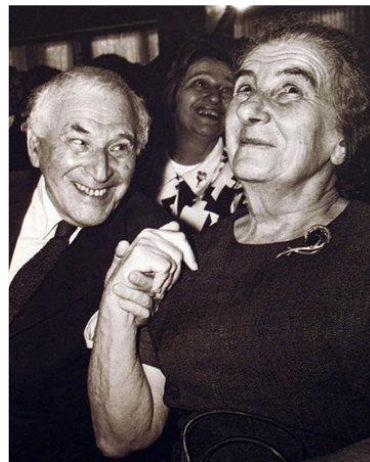




***"Don't miss my 1964 documentary."
And the next year...***



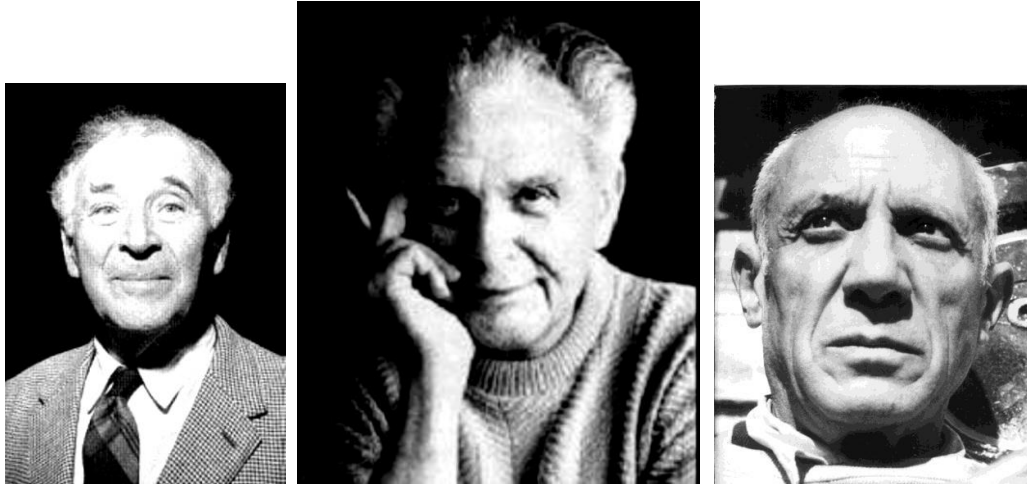
""Work isn't to make money; you work to justify life."



"I got to the Promised Land!"

At age 97, alone in an elevator going up to my studio, I fittingly became history on my way to work.

The most prolific artists of the twentieth century:



"Jacob Kurtzberg will outlive us all!"

All kinds of creations over years and years, thousands of works and millions of prints, lithographs and books still selling.



"When I am finishing a picture, I hold some God-made object up to it - a rock, a flower, the branch of a tree or my hand - as a final test. If the painting stands up beside a thing man cannot make, the painting is authentic. If there's a clash between the two, it's bad art.



Hudson Valley - Catskill Region MLS



Which reminds me. Ever since my 'pastoral period' on Mohonk Road, the fate of one my most uniquely colourful artwork remains a mystery - Did anybody ever buy that bathtub I painted in High Falls?

MARC CHAGALL