

## Pranas Morkus

### So that the world wouldn't stray or fall apart.....

They are not mentioned in the Holy Books, but from the beginning have been included in Jewish folklore. They repeatedly appear in stories, to un-do man's troubles. The trickster's schemes are released to the wind, the unhappy person is transformed into a joyous person. The quiet and humble tailors, blacksmiths, shoemakers and everyday shepherds didn't stand out. We are not convinced that their wishes and prayers have power. It is however said that the Almighty measures thirty and an additional six. For their every day toil is a sacrifice. Traditionally called lamed-vovniks, and in this lifetime they can be compared to precious stones in a watch, containing a fragile mechanism. The hope is that the world won't stray or fall apart.

I met Moshe Rosenthalis during the final spring of his life. He wasn't a tall man and was as light as a bird. The first time we met was in a foliage-covered house that displayed a set of still-life's and portraits full of vibrating shadows of days gone by. Some time later, we met at the artist's studio situated on a slope right by the harbor at Jaffa. There above the flat storage houses, you could see the masts of sailboats, and further on, the rippling waves of the Levanto, *Mare nostrum* dreamt since childhood. Generation after generation were laying stones and building towers. Foreign ships would then arrive and knock them down. The same stones were used to build again.... We went up such a hill with a decent set of stairs. When inside, along the walls was a series of paintings. Paintings from a New Age. And an easel draped with bright linen waiting for a stroke from the artist's palm. The master's kingdom, within which a piece seemed finished, and yet the artist was undecided, and would spend long time quietly glancing at the paths of the lines and colour fields until I estimate, Moshe Rosenthalis understood the secret of the trade. Perhaps before dozing off, he asked himself, "Is my journey without an end? If so, what is my purpose?"

There in the corner, facing the north, was the shore of the city, a turning point. On one wall, I spotted several small paintings from the artist's youth. Landscapes, peaceful shores, darker skies. Lithuania, the artist's homeland. During our talk, Rosenthalis would respond to every Lithuanian artist's name, and even twice recalled a particular moment with Justinas Vienožinskis, a true classic 20th century Lithuanian artist. Vienožinskis just after the war, saw the enemy in everyone. He saw a new first semester student walk in with a soviet uniform shirt. He said loudly, „OUT“. Later while defending his diploma piece, he apologetically stretched out his hand and complemented Rosenthalis' work, admitting that his work was the best of all. Hence, the military

shirt, which fated millions to die, saving this painter, distancing him from the bloody Jewish massacre outside of Mariampole. The summer of 1941. He was saved, but not all of his loved ones.

I was not fortunate to be able to visit the third location that Moshe worked at in the small city of Safed on the mountains of Galilee. The winding narrow streets of Safed resembling pre-war Vilnius, Frequently you could meet a western-influenced person, whose thoughts you couldn't grasp – a student, as the Kaballah would say. These people witness that the Word breathes life. After having read the word God and because of that, value the forces behind the creation of life, the

dedicated ones, one by one

descend for the journey without an end...

Isn't an artist's journey the same type of journey in which colours, forms, hidden images in the lines transforming warm colours into cold colours and vice versa? He was truly a pilgrim of colour. If only one fine evening Moshe could have felt like an undefeated master, unabashed in a chess game with an ice creature in the *Deep Blue*....

The artist's son Avner said that his father, during his last days on this earth sang Lithuanian songs. Maybe about a nightingale and her torn-up nest?

If this could only be a plea for forgiveness for our troubled country.....