

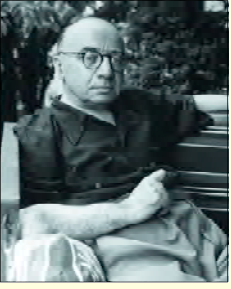
The Arthur Szyk Society
Art History Publication Series No. 1



Calling Out From the Depths:

Arthur Szyk's "De profundis" and Holocaust Protest
in the United States

Darlene Miller-Lanning, Ph.D



Here you will meet Arthur Szyk — a versatile artist whose passions were only exceeded by his talent.

For Szyk, the artist is a warrior: his arsenal consists of pens and brushes, paint and ink; his battlefield is a canvas, a sheet of paper; his enemies are injustice and oppression.

Introduction

On February 12, 1943, the Textbook Commission to Eliminate Anti-Semitic Statements in American Textbooks, organized by the *Protestant Digest*, placed a full-page advertisement entitled “The Living Voice of the Dead” in the *Chicago Sun*. Published several months after the first substantiated reports of Nazi actions against European Jews reached the United States, this advertisement condemned anti-Semitic statements in American textbooks, and announced an upcoming lecture on the subject by Dr. Preston Bradley, a popular inter-denominational “radio preacher.” In an essay written from the perspective of two million Jews murdered by the Nazi regime, the advertisement warned of the ways in which anti-Semitism would corrupt American society, and called for measures to prevent them. Published in conjunction with this dramatic and evocative text was a half-page drawing by the distinguished manuscript illuminator and political artist Arthur Szyk. Under the heading of “*De profundis*,” this work combined elements of Biblical text and Holocaust imagery to heighten readers’ awareness of immediate actions against European Jews and the causes underlying this aggression.

Textual References

As a trained calligrapher and illuminator, it was not surprising that Szyk, in his illustration for the *Protest Digest*, chose to address Holocaust events using textual themes. The focal point of Szyk’s “*De profundis*,” and the element for which the work was named, was a large passage of ornamented Old English text located in the upper third of the drawing. This Latin phrase, meaning “out of the depths,” referred in a Biblical context to Psalm 130:



Out of the depths I have called Thee, O Lord.
Lord, hearken unto my voice;
Let Thine ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications.
If Thou, Lord, shouldst record iniquities,
O Lord who could stand?
But with Thee there is forgiveness,
That Thou mayest be feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait,
And in his word I do hope.
My soul waiteth for the Lord
More eagerly than watchmen for the morning;
Yea, more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord;
For with the Lord there is mercy,
And with him is plenteous redemption.
And He will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.¹



The Living Voice of the Dead

In vain they have spoken in their own behalf—Now they speak in our behalf...

Out of the depths they speak . . . nor man nor committee nor organized 'hush-hush' can stop them 2,000,000 sensitive human beings tortured, starved, butchered, in an orgy of hate reaped by Hitler but sown in the very soil of Christian civilization, sown in the texts of intolerance.

What fools must learn tomorrow the wise will heed today. Listen then to the living voices of the dead — listen to the voices of 2,000,000 Jewish martyrs:

"You in America — we shall speak plainly, sometimes it is kinder to be harsh—you would not save our lives when you could have done so; at least make our lives worth losing. The heaviest casualty list in this war is behind these words of ours . . ."

"You, America, are in grave danger. Your pre-war isolationism was a black shadow. Your post-war isolation will be a blacker substance. Not splendid but shameful, far from proudly proclaiming it you will vainly disclaim it. The leprosy that was Europe will be America . . . unless . . ."

"No army conquered Europe. Europe fell exactly as America will fall, conquered by fiends whose secret brew of hate will poison democracy from within . . . unless . . ."

"Since democracy is the fruition of the Jewish Christian tradition where that tradition could develop freely, therefore if you wished to destroy democracy you would naturally cut the root of that tradition by setting Jew and Christian against one another. Especially so since this can be done easily by re-opening and aggravating the old wound of spiritual pride which is the devil's way with faith."

"There are many ways of serving man's ancient enemy, now incarnate as Fascism. One way is to speak of the Jews as a convenient scape-goat or of anti-Semitism as merely an incident of Fascism. To do this is to obscure the vital truth that anti-Semitism is the indispensable wrecking bar thrust into the 2000-year-old fissure in the foundation wall of Christendom."

There is no other wrecking bar to take its place, and therefore those who screen or play down anti-Semitism serve well the enemy of man, serve well the enemy of Christendom."

"Dwelling as we do in the fields of far horizons we can see the road you tread—beyond your power of foresight . . . and what we see fills us with dread unless an old thing reassert itself in your midst . . . an old stubbornness in facing facts however ugly and truth however bitter . . ."

"The ugly facts are that day after day in your schools your children imbibe the poison of falsehood and hatred . . ."

"The bitter truth is that unless you, America, take hold of this situation at once with vigor and determination and stop this teaching, you America, are doomed to reap a crop, worse, yes, even than Europe is reaping today. We pray you, even though it burn your hands, upset this broth of hate and keep its poison from the innocent lips of your children!"

Is Your Child Reading and Studying These Hate - Breeding Falsehoods?

"The Jews said no, but within forty years their nation was destroyed. The same violence that they used toward Jews, was used toward them. The same struggle and ambition and ambition that He condemned led them to fight each other and to fight Rome, and brought on the ruin of their nation."

"The Jews, dear children, seemed to love God not for His goodness, as we do, but for His gifts."

"The occasion for the introduction of the Inquisition in Spain was furnished by the Spanish Jews. The other European States had suffered, to the extent that Spain was then suffering from the mercenary system of money and organized extortion practiced by these dangerous aliens."

"From textbook in Religion for High School and Adult Groups These are statements from textbooks used in week-day and Sunday Schools in America. To avoid even the appearance of sectarian discrimination the Textbook Commission refrains from specifying the denominational sources of this material."

TEXTBOOK COMMISSION

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The Textbook Commission has been organized by the Protestant Digest, Inc. Funds made available for the work of the Textbook Commission are deductible for income tax purposes.

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100 NORTH LA SALLE ST., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
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IF YOU WISH TO ASSIST IN PLACING THIS ADVERTISEMENT IN OTHER NEWSPAPERS THROUGHOUT AMERICA, SEND YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE TEXTBOOK COMMISSION
HEAR DR. PRESTON BRADLEY AND KENNETH LESLIE ON THIS SUBJECT NEXT SUNDAY, FEB. 14TH, 3 P. M., AT THE HOTEL SHERMAN, FOR RESERVATIONS PHONE OR WRITE TEXTBOOK COMMISSION, 100 N. LA SALLE ST., CHICAGO, ILL. 60602

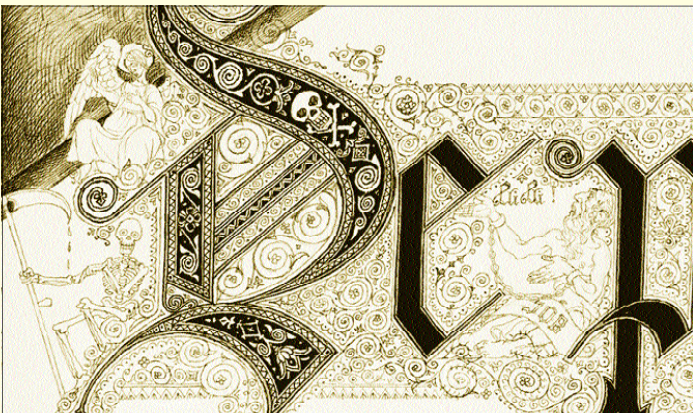
Published in the *Chicago Sun*, February 12, 1943. Full-page advertisement measuring 23" x 17".

The original drawing, "De Profundis" measures 12" x 16 1/2", and is graphite and ink on board. Signed and dated by Arthur Szyk, NY, 1943.

Widely interpreted in terms of sin, suffering, forgiveness and renewal, the *De profundis* was composed during the Babylonian Exile. It exhibited the characteristic structure of the psalms of complaint, which, as either individual or communal laments, described undeserved hardships and bemoaned God's absence or wrath before concluding with confessions of confidence and faith. It was one of the fifteen Songs of Ascent or Gradual Psalms (Psalms 120-134), sung by Jewish pilgrims as they ascended the Temple mount, or as part of a Levitical musical rendition sung on the steps of the Temple.

In the Ashkenazi rite, between Sukkot and Passover, the entire sequence of the Songs of Ascent was recited at the end of Sabbath Afternoon Service.ⁱⁱ Similarly, in Christian tradition, the *De profundis* was one of the seven Penitential Psalms, sung in the Divine Office of the Catholic Church every Wednesday at Vespers, and at the second Vespers of Christmas. Used in the ferial prayers of Lauds and in the Office of the Dead at Vespers, it was the psalm of the holy souls in purgatory, and was recited at funerals.ⁱⁱⁱ The *De profundis* was also used in many Protestant services for Lent and Easter, where, in conjunction with passages from the books of Job and Matthew, it conveyed a message of confusion and hardship followed by peace and regeneration.

Plaintive readings of Szyk's "*De profundis*" were supported by the artist's inclusion of symbolic words and figures within the main body of his calligraphic text. Ornamenting the capital letter "D", for example, were the figures of an angel with upraised arms and skeleton with a scythe, personifications of the Malach HaMavet, or Angel of Death, and Death as a Reaper.



A further allusion to death was found in the image of the skull and crossbones inscribed on the letter itself. This symbol, recognized for centuries as a *memento mori*, was also worn on the belt buckles of the Nazi SS. More complex referential signs appeared between the words "*De*" and "*profundis*." In this small space, the figure of a chained and seated man, labeled "Job", extended his arms and gazed upwards at an inscription reading "*Eli, Eli!*". This figure and inscription referred, respectively, to the Biblical stories of Job and Jesus, two pious individuals who, during times of great tribulation, questioned the motives of God in allowing them to suffer.

According to the Book of Job, Job was a wealthy and virtuous man whose devotion to God was tested by Satan. In a series of intense hardships, Job lost first his riches, then his family, and finally his health. Through it all, Job remained faithful to God, even though he protested his hardship, and refused to accept the explanation, offered by four friends, that he was somehow to blame for the misfortune that had befallen him. Similarly, the phrase "*Eli, Eli!*" carried connotations of pain and protest. First found in the Old Testament, the lament was part of Psalms 22:2, which read, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Later, New Testament accounts of the Crucifixion found in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 recorded that Jesus, too, repeated these words as he endured but protested his fate on the cross, crying out in the later hours of the day "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^{iv}

Within the context of "*De profundis*," Szyk further identified Holocaust persecutors and their victims in a smaller, second passage of text from Genesis 4:9, which read "Cain, where is Abel thy brother?"

Long recognized in the Judeo-Christian tradition as the first murderer, Cain, son of Adam and Eve, killed his younger brother Abel in a dispute over sacrificial offerings.

When questioned by God about his brother's whereabouts, Cain denied any knowledge of or responsibility for Abel's welfare, stating "Am I my brother's keeper?" For Szyk, the parallels that existed between Biblical accounts of the first murder and contemporary accounts of mass murder were clear: by interlacing a swastika and Star of David in the



capitals of the words "Cain" and "Abel," Szyk explicitly identified the Nazis as murderers of the Jews.

In keeping with the Genesis narrative of the first Cain and Abel, with this identification came accountability to both God and humankind.

Taken together, the textual references in "*De profundis*," with their accompanying symbols, characterized the Nazi massacre of two million European Jews prior to 1943 as a blow to be remembered and resisted by the American public. Acknowledging the magnitude of the Holocaust, Szyk eased his audience into the uncompromising realms of "*De profundis*" with rituals of sorrow and commemoration. The fact that commemoration would not bring complacency, however, was immediately evident both in Szyk's illustration and the first lines of narrative from "The Living Voice of the Dead," which, echoing the *De profundis*, began:

Out of the depths they speak...nor man nor committee nor organized 'hush-hush' can stop them...2,000,000 sensitive human beings tortured, starved, butchered in an orgy of hate reaped by Hitler but sown in the very soil of Christian civilization, *sown in the texts of intolerance.*^v

The "orgy of hate" had to be stopped, its progress protested by Szyk's figure of a questioning and resistant Job, who, with arms upraised and mouth wide open, challenged its senseless slaughter in the words of the crucified Jesus. Responsibility, too, needed to be assumed: confronted with the devastation of the Holocaust, American readers of "The Living Voice of the Dead" were, indeed, challenged to confront the Nazi "Cain" and become "their brother's keeper."

In conjunction with Szyk's illuminated question concerning Abel, a paragraph from "The Living Voice of the Dead" provided a warning:

You, America, are in grave danger. Your pre-war isolationism was a black shadow. Your post-war isolation will be a blacker substance. Not splendid but shameful, far from proudly proclaiming it you will vainly disclaim it. The leprosy that was Europe will be America...unless...

No army conquered Europe. Europe fell exactly as America will fall, conquered by fiends whose secret brew of hate will poison democracy from within...unless...^{vi}

Despite the incomprehensibility of its proportions, the Holocaust, for Szyk and his colleagues, was not a metaphysical event that transpired beyond human control or understanding. Instead, it was the result of unrestrained Nazi aggressions for which guilty parties could be held accountable. If the United States should fail to oppose those aggressions and maintain that accountability, it too would bear the burden of guilt.



Visual Imagery

Drawing upon his experience as a miniaturist painter and political cartoonist, Szyk, in *"De profundis,"* also produced dignified and powerful images addressing problematic Holocaust themes. From the 1930s on, artists had struggled to depict the overwhelming scope of Jewish persecutions under the Nazi regime: the inhumane treatment of victims, as well as the sheer number of deaths resulting from it, were difficult to portray in comprehensible ways. A common solution was to utilize artistic conventions of the "living dead," where representations of a discreet group of repeated corpses suggested murder on an unprecedented scale, while the depiction of personalized interactions between the bodies maintained the victims' individuality.^{vii}



In keeping with the "living dead" theme found in the text of *"The Living Voice of the Dead,"* Szyk, in the foreground of his illustration for *"De profundis,"* portrayed a mass of twenty-five fallen Jews. Behind them, beyond a row of thistles and a body of water, a second mass of bodies receded into a landscape including a barren tree and ruined building.

These background figures implied that this scene was only part of a larger whole, where countless victims met with the suffering, sorrow and death symbolized by the thistles, tree and river. In contrast, the foreground figures, with their highly-detailed faces, hands and clothing, acknowledged the personal circumstances of every man, woman and child depicted. Through specific costumes and groupings, Szyk demonstrated that no age or class was immune to persecution: in the lower left corner of the drawing, a



wealthy matriarch, dressed in a paisley cloak and ornamented headband, embraced an elderly man, while the prone figure of a young schoolboy gazed skyward from the center of the composition. Other groupings echoed Biblical themes.



At the bottom center of the drawing, a young veiled mother cradled an infant in a prayer shawl, recalling images of the Madonna and Child, while slightly above, a bearded, working-class man in a cap, adopting a gesture found in depictions of Mary, Jesus and Joseph, leaned protectively towards the anguished mother and son.^{viii}



In *“De profundis,”* further references to Jewish and Christian religious figures were found in Szyk’s depictions of a rabbi with a Torah and the crucified Jesus. The figure of a devout Jewish leader, who had perished yet continued to observe sacred rituals, symbolized the importance of Jewish identity through prayer, while the uplifted Torah served as a metaphor for the “Tree of Life,” indicating that even though Jews themselves had died, the Jewish faith would survive.^{ix} Similarly, Szyk’s figure of the crucified Jesus reminded viewers of Jesus’s own Jewish heritage, as well as the humanistic precepts of Christianity. Crowned with thorns and bearing the Ten Commandments on his left arm, Jesus was identified as a Jew who adhered to the law of Moses, and as the founder of Christianity who encouraged his followers to do the same. Cradling a dead Jewish boy in his right arm, Jesus also became the grieving figure in a Pietà, mourning the murder of an innocent child.^x



A final feature of *“De profundis”* based on the premise of the “living dead” was the depiction of corpses who could interact not only with deceased companions, but with viewers who were still alive. Communicated in the form of facial expressions and limb positions, the messages conveyed by Szyk’s figures to audiences beyond the grave dealt with issues of assistance, rebellion and blame. Most of the fallen figures in *“De profundis”* maintained in death, through a network of cast glances and clasped arms, the same human connections they had established in life. Two victims near the top of the composition, however, extended their hands not to each other, but to the viewer. Szyk represented the first of these as a man with staring eyes and gaping mouth located behind the figure of Jesus: with outstretched arm and open palm, this figure reached towards the phrase *“De profundis,”* reinforcing the text’s questioning call for compassion and aid. The second victim, in contrast, was located below the figure of the rabbi with the Torah. This man, darkly glowering under the cap of a middle-class worker, extended an arm with pointing finger towards the phrase *“Cain, where is Abel thy brother?”* highlighting the text’s message of guilt and responsibility.



As representations of the “living dead,” the visual images in *“De profundis”* were an effective means of informing an interdenominational audience about the dangers of anti-Semitism. By depicting linked masses of Holocaust victims whose interpersonal relationships endured even beyond death, Szyk generated sympathy for the persecuted Jews on a basic, human level. Through his inclusion of rabbi and Jesus figures among the fallen, he further emphasized the importance of compassion for the victims by placing it in a religious context.

Despite their differences, both the Jewish and the Christian faiths were rooted in a respect for human life, which should unite, rather than divide, Jews and Christians on issues of anti-Semitism and Holocaust rescue. If this imperative for rescue still seemed vague, particularly for Christian audiences, Szyk's representation of a slain Jewish Jesus carried another powerful message: if Jesus had lived in Nazi Germany, he, in all probability, would have been a victim of the concentration camps. Would Christians have hesitated to save him?

In running "The Voice of the Living Dead" advertisement, the *Protestant Digest*, through its initiatives with the Textbook Commission, condemned the publication of anti-Semitic texts in the United States. Within the narrative of the advertisement, however, this condemnation of anti-Semitism was unmistakably framed in political, as well as religious terms:

Since democracy is the fruition of the Jewish Christian tradition where that tradition could develop freely, therefore if you wished to destroy democracy you would naturally cut the root of that tradition by setting Jew and Christian against one another. Especially so since this can be done easily by re-opening and aggravating the old wound of spiritual pride which is the devil's way with faith.

There are many ways of serving man's ancient enemy, now incarnate as Fascism. One way is to speak of the Jews as a convenient scape-goat or of anti-Semitism as merely an incident of Fascism. To do this is to obscure the vital truth that *anti-Semitism is the indispensable wrecking bar thrust into the 2000-year-old fissure in the foundation wall of Christendom*. There is no other wrecking bar to take its place, and therefore those who screen or downplay anti-Semitism serve well the enemy of man, serve well the enemy of Christendom.^{xi}

In an era when popular logic maintained that American efforts to aid European Jews should be delayed until after the war with Hitler was won, Szyk and his colleagues argued that the defeat of anti-Semitism, achieved through both ideological reform and actual Holocaust rescue, was crucial to the Allied victory over Fascism. Confronting viewers with their pleading and blaming gestures, the "living dead" of "*De profundis*" reinforced this message. Directing public attention to the illustration's Biblical quotes, they demanded American acknowledgment of the Holocaust, and warned of dire consequences to the nation if such acknowledgment should be withheld.

Darlene Miller-Lanning Ph.D is the Gallery Director and an Adjunct Faculty member at the University of Scranton, Scranton Pennsylvania. An exhibition entitled "Arthur Szyk: Manuscript Illuminator, Political Artist, and Advocate for Humanity" was held on the University campus November 9, 1999—February 11, 2000 and was the inspiration behind this paper.

ⁱ Mortimer J. Cohen, *Pathways Through the Bible*, (Philadelphia, 1946), 438. In order to present Biblical passages in a translation that would have been current at the time Szyk was working, the quote for *De profundis* is taken from Cohen's *Pathways Through the Bible*, which Szyk illustrated. Numbering for the *De profundis* is also based on this text. According to Jewish tradition, headings for verses found in the Book of Psalms are numbered as verses themselves. Christian translations of the Bible, however, often incorporate these headings with their subsequent verses. Thus, in Jewish texts, the *De profundis* is known as Psalm 130, but in Christian writings is sometimes known as Psalm 129.

ⁱⁱ Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, (New York, 1989), 574-576; R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, (New York, 1997), 553-555.

ⁱⁱⁱ F.G. Holweck, "De Profundis," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Charles G. Herbermann, et al., eds., Volume IV, (New York, 1908), 738.

^{iv} Numbering for Psalms 22:2 is sometimes given as Psalms 22:1, for the reasons noted above. The verse may also use the words "abandoned" or "forsaken," depending on translation. *The Holy Bible*, (Philadelphia, 1938), 620; 1015 and 1039.

^v "The Living Voice of the Dead," *Chicago Sun*, (February 12, 1943). This work hereafter cited as "The Living Voice of the Dead."

^{vi} "The Living Voice of the Dead,"

^{vii} Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation. The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts*, (New York, 1993), 52; 65; 74. This work hereafter cited as Amishai-Maisels.

^{viii} As a manuscript illuminator, Szyk was familiar with this imagery, which was commonly found in illuminated medieval Bibles and prayer books. Similarly, Szyk used a Madonna and Child motif based on traditional depictions of Mary, Jesus and the Three Magi in his "Four Freedoms Prayer" of 1949.

^{ix} Amishai-Maisels 288; 297-299.

^x Amishai-Maisels 182-184. Figures of the crucified Jesus were often used in a Holocaust context to remind viewers of Jesus's own Jewish heritage, as well as the humanistic precepts of Christianity. One artist who repeatedly addressed this theme was Marc Chagall, who in works like his "Descent from the Cross" of 1941, clearly identified Jesus as a Jew, depicting him clothed in a striped prayer shawl and illuminated by a glowing menorah.

^{xi} "The Living Voice of the Dead"

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The Arthur Szyk Society, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1991, is dedicated to preserving the artistic legacy of Arthur Szyk (1894-1951) as a cultural hero and national treasure. The Society presents the artist's prolific body of works for broad and diverse audiences in the U.S. and worldwide. The goals of The Society are to: commemorate the art and messages of Arthur Szyk; facilitate scholarly research in art history and other fields of humanities related to the life and art of Arthur Szyk; promote public awareness of Szyk's life and works through education outreach to teachers, students, their families and communities; and catalyze social action through the arts.

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The Arthur Szyk Society is soliciting papers for publication on works of art by Arthur Szyk. Proposals should include your name, address, phone number, email address, institution, title for your paper and a one-paragraph summary, and a 25 word personal bio. Please email your proposals to: Curator@szyk.org.