

Introduction

Berlin, April 1923: A woman in her mid-thirties with dark hair and dark eyes walks from her studio apartment to the famous Romanisches Café, where she joins fellow artists and skims the newspaper headlines. What news? The German mark has just collapsed again. Rahel leaves the café and strolls through the nearby Zoologischer Garten, pausing to sketch a few animals: a panther, a giraffe. Her next stop is the women's fencing academy, where she spars with a more advanced opponent. Though she still has much to learn, she wields the fencing foil with the same precision and control she uses for drawing fine lines. "En garde. Ready? Fence!"

That evening she attends a gathering to celebrate Expressionist artist Ludwig Meidner's birthday. The host greets Rahel with a friendly nod but remains immersed in his conversation, gesturing animatedly. Looking around, she sees that this is an unreasonably festive celebration, tables piled high with meats, cheeses, rolls, and drinks that are not easy to come by during these hard times. But anything is possible when one has friends with foreign currency or access to other markets, and Meidner has many such friends.

Among the guests at Ludwig Meidner's party are prominent artists and writers from Germany and beyond. Rahel is thrilled and proud to be part of such an illustrious crowd. Different languages can be heard: German, French, Yiddish, and Russian. In conversation with writer Arthur Holitscher and painters Karl Hofer and Marc Chagall, Rahel describes her work: "Last year, I finished two portfolios of prints illustrating Yiddish literature. Then stories by Bialik and Dickens. Right now I am immersed in German poetry: Heinrich Heine's 'Hebrew Melodies.'" When an acquaintance from the party visits her studio apartment the next day to see her recent work, the modern, career-oriented Rahel seems worlds apart from the soulful faces of eastern Europe that look out from the drawings and paintings on her walls.¹



FIGURE 1 | Photograph of Rahel Szalit, date unknown. Courtesy of the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme, Paris. Photo © mahJ.

One could easily spend hours looking at Rahel Szalit's powerful images, transfixed by the characters they portray. Until now, however, it was not possible to find many of her works in one place. Like their creator, they were largely forgotten. Many are still lost and may remain forever absent from the record. This is the story of an extraordinary artist, told here for the first time at length.² These pages recover Szalit's life and assemble a collection of notable, representative works of her art.

Rahel Szalit (1888–1942; pronounced *Sha-leet*; née Markus) was once a sought-after illustrator and portraitist. Toward the beginning of her career, she used the hyphenated last name Szalit-Marcus, though she later shortened this to Szalit (initially her husband's last name). We follow her lead and give preference to the short form with which she signed most works produced after 1923. Today there is only one known photograph of Szalit (fig. 1). Though she hailed from eastern Europe, she was counted among Weimar Germany's most prominent Jewish artists, alongside very few other women. But she was not only Jewish in terms of background and upbringing: she also consistently made art with Jewish subjects. Her work appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines read by both Jews and non-Jews. In 1926, she was praised in the German-Jewish press as “quite simply the best modern female illustrator” and the “first female illustrator of Jewish

literature.”³ At times, her illustrations made a stronger impression than the literary works they depicted. By 1929, when she was just over forty years old, Szalit achieved international acclaim as a painter, and her star was rising. But Hitler and the Nazi Party brought her life in Berlin to a sudden halt. Forced to start again in Paris as a refugee from Nazi Germany, she struggled and was fortunate to find a modest amount of success, though this, too, was soon cut short. When she was arrested and murdered in 1942, her Paris studio was plundered, and most of her paintings were destroyed or went missing. Since then, Szalit has largely fallen into obscurity.

Another reason Szalit was erased from history is that her life and work spanned several countries and artistic movements, making it difficult to classify her. Was she Lithuanian? Russian? Polish? German? French? Art history often emphasizes an artist’s nationality—but, for Szalit, citizenship and national belonging were complex matters, complicated by such factors as migration, shifting borders, war, and marriage.⁴ Like many East European Jewish émigrés, Szalit was driven westward by the quest for personal and artistic freedom. On some level, hers is a familiar story of Jewish migration. She was born into a traditional Jewish world in Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. When she was young, her family moved within the Russian Empire to Congress Poland, where they remained. Even though Szalit never lived in independent Poland, and Polish was not her strongest language, she possessed Polish citizenship during the final decades of her life. Yet Szalit chose to spend most of her adult life in Germany and later France (map 1).

The porous boundaries of eastern, central, and western Europe, as well as complexly intertwined ethnic and linguistic identities—Russian and Polish; Yiddish, German, and German-Jewish—become increasingly blurred as we examine the works of this artist. Different national, social, and political contexts play key roles in helping us understand and analyze Szalit’s work. Szalit lived at an exciting time for modern art. Like many of her contemporaries, she experimented with new styles and forms, often with a focus on Jewish subject matter. The cities of Berlin and Paris and their thriving communities of artists are also at the heart of this story. Berlin was Szalit’s chosen home; Paris was a good backup plan (until it wasn’t).

Today we think of Szalit primarily as a literary illustrator because many of these works survive. We associate her with the Yiddish, Hebrew, and German books she illustrated (including German translations of English, Russian, and French literature). But Szalit also painted and drew landscapes, Berlin city scenes, animals, and portraits of women, children, and contemporary public figures (writers, critics, actors). She produced numerous lithographs and worked in pen and ink, pencil, pastel, chalk, oil paint, and watercolors. Women figured prominently in many scenes, from small-town Jewish life to snapshots of the metropolis. Some images employ currents of exaggeration in line with Expressionism, a movement that encouraged expression of the individual’s inner experiences



MAP 1 | Rahel Szalit's Europe, from Telz, Lithuania (then Russian Empire), to Paris, France, ca. 1910. Map by Kate Blackmer.

through intense colors and unusual perspectives. Others offer more realistic, unsentimental portrayals. Jews constituted a significant portion of her audience, but her work appealed to those beyond Jewish circles as well.

Internationally, the field of illustration provided many women artists with opportunities. Some found it possible to earn a living as book illustrators already in the late nineteenth century. By the 1920s, the profession expanded to include fashion illustration and other work for magazines. Yet only a few women became known for illustrating German books. Szalit's name is included on multiple lists of noted literary illustrators in early twentieth-century Germany, suggesting that she made a considerable impact in this realm.⁵ Still, Szalit's illustration work did not stop with books: she continued to publish drawings in magazines after Expressionist-style lithographic illustrations fell out of favor.

Szalit was a remarkably talented artist who created visually arresting, unforgettable scenes. Her story demonstrates that exceptional women artists gained simultaneous access to both the Jewish Renaissance and mainstream movements (Expressionism, New Objectivity) by engaging with different media and genres. As an artist of great breadth and versatility, Szalit followed broader cultural trends to meet the artistic demands of the moment, from printmaking to portraiture. Her work intersected with literature and

journalism in exciting ways. In these male-dominated fields, she often went against the grain by featuring female subjects and perspectives. Many images appeared in periodicals as eye-catching illustrations, and she authored a few short stories for newspapers as well.

Major art critics and art historians in Germany and France took note of Szalit's work and included her in discussions of contemporary Jewish art. Several lent her a great deal of support throughout her career. They, too, are protagonists in her story, especially Karl Schwarz, Adolph Donath, Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein, Max Osborn, and Jacques Biélinky. Szalit's renown in her own day shows us that female artists could earn a place in both mainstream and Jewish art circles. Since 1945, however, Szalit's work has been largely neglected by scholars and is usually omitted from broader discussions of both Weimar and interwar Jewish visual culture.⁶ Even today, relatively few women artists are represented in European Jewish art history. Including Szalit's work in the canon expands our understanding of what constitutes Jewish art—and art by women—and centers images that were previously only on the margins.

A Feminist Jewish Artist

Szalit unquestionably thought of herself as a Jewish artist.⁷ Asked to elaborate on her relationship to Judaism as part of a 1930 survey of artists, she wrote: "I am comfortable as a Jewish woman—I love my people. . . . I am an Eastern Jewish woman [*Ostjüdin*], and I feel closest to Eastern Jews."⁸ For Szalit, the label *Ostjüdin* was not a stigmatized one but rather an identity that fit and was highly relevant for her work. Various Jewish artists from eastern Europe were active in Germany (Jankel Adler, Joseph Budko, Leo Michelson, Abraham Palukst, Lasar Segall), but Szalit was the only woman to leave a mark on Weimar culture. Many other East European Jewish women artists spent time in or passed through Germany (for example, Regina Mundlak), but very little is known about their work and contributions.⁹ Most Yiddish-language periodicals in Berlin did not even mention women artists, with the exception of *Milgroym*, which had a female art editor.¹⁰ Indeed, few women artists were successful in foregrounding Jewish subjects in the context of avant-garde movements.

As the only woman artist, besides Else Lasker-Schüler, usually mentioned in conjunction with Expressionism and German-Jewish culture, Rahel Szalit arguably made more significant contributions to the Jewish Renaissance than any other female artist in Germany. Proclaimed by Martin Buber in 1901, this renaissance was initially linked to a cultural Zionist agenda of creating a national Jewish art. Buber and others called for modern Jewish artists and writers to take up Jewish subject matter in the face of

antisemitism and assimilation, thereby creating new Jewish traditions based on culture.¹¹ Ephraim Moses Lilien, for one, contributed well-known images in this vein to the cultural Zionist journal *Ost und West*; Hermann Struck, Joseph Budko, and Jakob Steinhardt also portrayed Jews in their art. Szalit, too, met this task with enthusiasm. Furthermore, at a time when women were often sidelined in artistic representations of Jews, Szalit went out of her way to make women the focus of her art, thereby establishing herself as a feminist Jewish artist.

With Rahel Szalit, we have someone who was at once talented at capturing specific scenes and had a special connection to her Jewish subjects. As journalist Moritz Goldstein observed in 1924, Szalit's perspective as an eastern Jewish "insider," not an outside observer, put her in the rare position of being able to relay and visually translate these experiences without promoting them as idyllic.¹² Nevertheless, it was Szalit's distance from the East, along with the experimental license granted by such movements as Expressionism and later the more realistic and socially conscious New Objectivity, that enabled Szalit's work to upend expectations for how Jewish subjects and experiences should be depicted. By representing Jews as striking, absurd, or grotesque (that is, deformed, exaggerated, the "inverse of beauty and rationality"), Szalit confronted viewers with an ironic and sometimes humorous form of criticism that invited both sympathy and repulsion.¹³ Jacques Biélinky, a Paris-based art critic, called her characters "outwardly grotesque and inwardly moving," noting that Szalit created "visions of ghettos where grimaces distort faces but not souls."¹⁴ This was especially perceptible in her illustrations of Yiddish literature, which highlight and respond to suffering.

Consider, for example, Szalit's illustrations of a short story by Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Sholem Rabinovich), best known for his Tevye stories, which later inspired *Fiddler on the Roof*. Under the title "Chickens on Strike: A Humorous Yom-Kippur Story," the story appeared in German translation in the best-selling newspaper *Israelitisches Familienblatt* (Israelite Family Paper) in 1931. In one of Szalit's images, a rabbi swings a chicken above his head to symbolically transfer his sins to the animal before Yom Kippur (fig. 2).¹⁵ The story pokes fun at this ancient Jewish tradition, known as *kapores*, by having the rabbi offer the chickens several ridiculous "perks" if they cooperate. Szalit draws the actual ritual in action, illustrating the second perk: the chicken is swung around carefully and slowly rather than wildly and quickly. Szalit focuses our gaze on the chicken in midswing, who regards the scene with a bewildered look, as implied by the Yiddish idiom *kukn vi a hon in bney-odem*, meaning "to peer like a rooster during the 'children of man' prayer," recited as part of this ritual.

This visual commentary complements literary works by such authors as Joseph Roth, who was at times ironic or mocking in his treatment of East European Jews and their customs.¹⁶ It further calls our attention to the perspective of the overlooked or oppressed

FIGURE 2 | Rahel Szalit, *Perk Number Two*, illustration from Sholem Aleichem's "Chickens on Strike: A Humorous Yom-Kippur Story," in *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, 1931. Digitized by the University Library J. C. Senckenberg Frankfurt am Main.



“other” in the story, in this case an animal. Szalit may have gained personal empathy for chickens by keeping them as pets or by participating in this ritual as a child—in some Lithuanian families, every child performed *kapores*.¹⁷ Within her larger body of work, Szalit generally privileged the viewpoint of women, children, and others who lacked representation and whose viewpoints might have otherwise remained hidden.

Szalit was one of many eastern Jewish émigré artists, writers, performers, and other cultural figures who migrated westward to such booming cultural centers as Berlin and Paris. They did so to flee armed conflict, to pursue artistic and economic opportunities, and to create, publish, perform, and exhibit their work alongside similar artists. Would Marc Chagall have been able to achieve such renown had he stayed in Vitebsk? Who would have had access to Joseph Roth’s satirical wit if he had published only in local newspapers in Brody or Lemberg? Works by Chagall, Roth, Szalit, and others became known in the West precisely because they depicted a supposedly authentic version of the East.

In fact, much of what is considered “Jewish art” from the early twentieth century was connected in some way to imaginings of authentic eastern Jewish folk traditions. By the broadest definition, Jewish art encompasses works that incorporate biblical or Jewish themes or that connect in some way to experiences from the Jewish past and present, including the notion of living in the Diaspora in a state of perpetual wandering.¹⁸ Much of Szalit’s work meets one or more of these criteria, including many of her literary illustrations, and she contributed to the creation of Jewish art in interwar Europe in numerous ways.

Weimar Berlin provided a home to many East European Jews in the 1920s, and Jewish culture and avant-garde culture flourished. However, the rise to power of the Nazi Party in 1933 created a new class of émigrés-turned-refugees who urgently sought asylum in France, Great Britain, the United States, Palestine, and elsewhere. France, which had no anti-immigration statute, absorbed a good number of these refugees, and Paris offered a thriving, if temporary, cultural haven.¹⁹ Despite the growing presence of antisemitism and xenophobia, many Jews did not believe that France, too, would eventually turn on its Jewish population. Some prominent Jewish artists and writers (among them Chagall, Eugen Spiro, Hannah Arendt, and Lion Feuchtwanger) later managed to escape Nazi-occupied France for the United States. Many of their rescues, for example those organized by Varian Fry and Hiram “Harry” Bingham, are by now quite well known.²⁰ These refugees found escape routes in the early 1940s through Marseille, Spain, North Africa, and Portugal, as popularized by the film *Casablanca*, which featured European émigré actors.²¹

But many less fortunate refugees could not escape, and their stories need to be told. Szalit was murdered in the Holocaust along with over eighty other Jewish artists associated with the School of Paris, most of whom were foreign.²² Citizenship often played a critical role: foreign or stateless Jews, and especially East European Jews, were among the first targeted in France. We must ask whether Szalit would have met this fate had she been able to find more support for her work, and in what ways gender and Jewishness mattered. What level of success or connections would have brought Szalit to the attention of international rescue committees? If Szalit had been a man, would she have had more opportunities through proximity to other male artists? Could she have become as well known as her male contemporaries Jakob Steinhardt, Ludwig Meidner, and Marc Chagall (who escaped to Jerusalem, London, and New York, respectively)? Certainly Szalit would be better known today if she had survived, or if more of her works had been smuggled out of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Finding Evidence of Rahel Szalit

I first stumbled upon Szalit while conducting research in Berlin archives in 2008, and I was immediately struck by how many of her images appeared in the Weimar Jewish press. Once I started looking for her name, I seemed to find it everywhere. Her images enchanted and haunted me; I could not stop wondering about the person who created them. I felt an affinity for Rahel Szalit that I could not explain, and this, coupled with a sense of moral obligation, led me to want to tell her story at length. No one else was able or motivated to do so. But it soon proved very difficult to find out more about the artist herself. I stumbled upon a few seemingly credible articles from the 1920s, yet details were

scarce. The information that has circulated about Szalit's biography is limited, error-filled, and sometimes contradictory, and there are still countless gaps and unknowns. Many questions will always remain unanswered.

For the last fifteen years, I have searched everywhere imaginable for sources that could help reconstruct her life. Drawing on thirty-five archives in seven countries, I tracked down public records, a handful of Szalit's letters in German and Polish, dozens of newspaper articles, and other archival materials, including those of artists' organizations. The extensive 1951 account from Hersch Fenster's Yiddish memorial book for Jewish artists who lived in France remains one of the richest sources of information.²³ Several journalists profiled Szalit during her lifetime, including three who interviewed her and described her personality. One even wrote about Szalit for American Jewish publications.²⁴ Szalit herself published an autobiographical essay and two short stories in Jewish periodicals, as well as an article about fencing in the Bauhaus lifestyle magazine *die neue linie* (the new line).²⁵ Many articles by and about Szalit appeared around 1930, when her star shined its brightest after her painting *Die Emigrantin als Bardame* (Emigrant Woman as Barmaid, 1929; fig. 75) won a prize.

Still, no diary or memoir survives that would allow us to hear more of her voice. We have precious few surviving letters, each one worth its weight in gold. On top of that, accounts of Rahel Szalit by people who knew her are surprisingly rare. Even though she circulated among well-known artists, writers, and other prominent figures, very few of them immortalized her in their own writings. It bears repeating that there is little evidence to be found, and it is thus necessary to speculate at times to create a fuller picture. I have made every effort to gather accurate information that sheds new light on this artist's story and body of work.

Though it might sound strange, I have greatly enjoyed the painstaking work of piecing together Szalit's story and the countless hours spent with her and her work. I feel closest to her when I walk the streets of Berlin-Schöneberg that she called home. Twenty-first-century Berlin is alive with Jewish history; visitors to her former neighborhood near Bayerischer Platz cannot miss the many memorials and commemorative markers, though none of these memorials remember her. Still, Szalit is as present as many others of her day. It is an honor to reintroduce her almost exactly one hundred years after the publication of her best-known literary illustrations.

So: who was Rahel Szalit? The only known photograph of the artist is a passport-style photo that tells us little about her personality (fig. 1). We also have several self-portraits; one shows her with a friendly smile and eyes downcast (fig. 3).²⁶ The line-focused sketch captioned *Das bin ich selbst* (This is me myself) magnifies her eyes and adds exaggerated eyelashes. From these and other images, including one of Szalit as a fencer (fig. 76), we know she had high cheekbones and cut a poised, athletic figure. Described as modest,



FIGURE 3 | Rahel Szalit, *Self-Portrait*, in *Menorah*, 1926. Digitized by the University Library J. C. Senckenberg Frankfurt am Main.

RAHEL SZALIT / SELBSTPORTRÄT

unpretentious, generous, kind, and good-natured, she had a way of relating to people that inspired confidence.²⁷ Her undeniable magnetism drew others to her; she thrived when among people. She became melancholic when she felt lonely, which occurred often toward the end of her life. Something powerful drove her from within. Like many women of her time, she faced an uphill battle in realizing her career ambitions. It was no small feat to convince male artists and critics that she was capable and should be taken seriously as an artist, and especially as a Jewish artist; this was an ongoing struggle and ultimately a major triumph on her part.

At once determined and vivacious, Szalit was a perceptive visual chronicler and commentator on the world around her. In the absence of accounts of her life, her artwork provides us with insight into who she was as a person and how she styled herself as an artist. Her art reflects the weight she placed upon her eastern European background and Jewish identity, and it also shows her deep engagement with women's circles and the image of the modern woman as resilient, self-sufficient, and athletic. Through Szalit's hand, we gain access to her unexpected sense of humor and the lighthearted approach she used at times to overcome adversity—her own form of “laughter through tears” (see chapter 5). We are surrounded by the warm glow that emanated from the works of many European Jewish artists right up until their world collapsed.

Key to This Biography

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A brief overview of Szalit's biography helps us understand the different places and phases of her life, which generally align with the four parts of this book. Rahel Markus was born in the summer of 1888 in Telz (Telšiai), a market town in Russian Lithuania, to a family of modest means. Like nearly all Jews living in the Pale of Settlement, the region of the Russian Empire where Jews were permitted to settle permanently, she was a native Yiddish speaker.²⁸ Early on, Rahel learned Polish, German, and French. Although she became remarkably fluent in German, it is almost possible to hear a Yiddish accent behind the minor errors and imperfections in her letters written in German and other languages. While she was growing up, the Markus family lived in Lodz, and they eventually acquired Polish citizenship. Rahel maintained contact with her family long after she left eastern Europe. The Markus family's origins and fates are explored in depth in the first and last chapters.

The first place Rahel (now Marcus) lived on her own was Munich. Though we know little about the phase that started in 1910, this was the beginning of her studies and career as an artist. She also studied briefly in Paris and London. As a foreigner, she was expelled from Germany as an enemy alien following the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, and she fled to Austria with actor Julius Szalit (1892–1919), whom she had met in Munich. They married in Vienna in 1915, though the pair separated before Julius's suicide in 1919. Rahel never remarried, but she had romantic relationships with both men and women after Julius's death. Her story fits into LGBT and queer history on several levels, as discussed in chapters 2 and 8.

From 1916 until soon after the Nazis took power, Rahel Szalit made her home in Berlin. Her Berlin years can be divided into two phases. Leading up to and during the early 1920s, Szalit experienced initial success, especially in Jewish circles; she painted, made lithographs as illustrations, and participated in a few exhibitions. Part 2 takes a close look at her illustrated books and print portfolios, nearly all of which were published by 1923. The second Berlin phase began in 1924, a year that marked both the end of hyperinflation and the decline of Expressionism. Szalit began regularly placing portraits, cartoons, and illustrations in periodicals, and her career became entangled with journalism by the middle of this decade. Starting in 1927, she participated in events and exhibitions of the Verein der Künstlerinnen zu Berlin (Association of Women Artists in Berlin, or VdBK), and through this organization she achieved international renown as a painter. She continued to be active in Berlin's Jewish community; one critic regarded her as a Jewish counterpart to Käthe Kollwitz.²⁹ Yet despite Szalit's relative success, she was never well-off financially, and she augmented her artist's income by giving lessons in drawing, painting, and fencing. Chapters 3 and 9 offer the most insight into how Szalit fit into Berlin's art scenes.

Szalit fled Germany in 1933 for Paris, where she took up residence near Montparnasse and began the final phase of her career. Despite experiencing tremendous hardship in exile, she was able to exhibit her work in Paris from 1935 to 1939. In Paris, as she had in Berlin, she spent time at well-known cafés frequented by émigrés and built connections to other artists. She tried unsuccessfully to flee to Switzerland. As a foreign Jew, Szalit was considered stateless and was arrested as part of the Vel d'Hiv roundup in Paris on 16 July 1942. After a month in the internment camp at Drancy, she was deported to Auschwitz and murdered, as discussed in chapters 10 and 11.

Among Rahel Szalit's surviving works are lithographic book illustrations, drawings and short texts printed in periodicals, photographs of oil and watercolor paintings, and a few oil paintings that have been floating around France for decades. One oil painting was exhibited in 2005 (plate 1); another, of a woman in a garden, resurfaced at a flea market in 2021; and a third, a landscape that also includes a small figure of a woman, turned up in Paris in 2022.³⁰ In addition, Szalit's original graphite-and-ink illustrations of Israel Zangwill's *The King of Schnorrers*, long presumed lost, suddenly reappeared in a New York auction of Judaica in 2023 and sold for the impressive amount of twelve thousand dollars. That several works have only just been found suggests there may be more waiting to be discovered, especially in France, Germany, and perhaps Israel. Indeed, all of Szalit's other paintings remain at large if they were not destroyed, as many certainly were. Rather than dwell on what is missing, we will focus on the somewhat miraculous fact that many works have managed to come down to us in one form or another. More than seventy of Szalit's works are reproduced here. Even small, grainy, black-and-white photographs of paintings that appeared in magazines hold some of the answers to our many questions. The images tell a story that was not preserved in any other form.

At the beginning of each chapter, a fictional scene (such as the one about Ludwig Meidner's birthday party above) expands upon historical facts to imagine what Rahel Szalit's days might have looked like in a particular period. Like reenactments in a documentary film, these invented scenes begin to fill in the gaps where insufficient evidence survives. They are designed to help bring Szalit to life. The work of scholar Saidiya Hartman serves as a model for how imagined scenes can tell the histories of marginalized individuals for whom there is limited archival material.³¹ Fictional scenes are set off with italics; the rest is a true story firmly rooted in historical sources and art. Let us now follow Szalit on her journey from eastern to central and western Europe.