

# JEWISH GUILD NEW YEAR ANNUAL

October, 1951

*It is a long road that Herman Wald has travelled, but the fruits have been rich and worth striving for.*

## The Art Of Herman Wald

By EDGAR BERNSTEIN

**W**E need memorials because people forget. Memorials are not for the dead, but for the living. Every time we are in danger of forgetting the six million dead, this figure will remind us. In this massive sculpture, Mr. Wald has devised a fitting memorial to the six million Jews killed by Hitler.

The speaker was Sarah Gertrude Millin, the famous South African Jewish writer, and she was addressing a gathering of Jewish communal leaders in the Johannesburg studio of Herman Wald over a year ago. Towering over the gathering stood the figure she was speaking about — a Hebrew figure, twelve feet high, tearing his garment in the act of "K'ria." And "K'ria" was the name which the artist had given the work.

Mrs. Millin turned to look up at the figure and said: "He is tearing his garment in mourning, yet through his grief there is also sullen defiance and pride on his face. The head is uplifted with determination. This is a figure not only of mourning, but the determination to carry on. Here is a breast bared to the world. Do what you will, it seems to say: here I am and here I shall stand. It is a figure of Jewish endurance which Mr. Wald has created, and we owe him our gratitude for putting these thoughts into concrete form."

My eyes turned from the noble, anguished face to search out the sculptor, standing unobtrusively by the wall. He was moved by the writer's words about his work, and as his eyes flamed moistly and the muscles round his mouth quivered, I looked suddenly back to the statue. Above the massive shoulders, the sculptor had moulded his own head. So "K'ria" was not only his monument to the martyred: it was also his personal identification with the suffering and the glory of his race. A daring concept, as daringly worked into clay . . .

The communal leaders present that day had come to launch a scheme to acquire "K'ria" as a memorial to martyred European Jewry. It is planned to set

**T**HE road that carries a man from his native Hungary through Austria, Germany, France and Britain to distant South Africa is long and arduous, with many a bitter patch to traverse on the way. So Herman Wald has found it in his forty-three years crammed with change and challenge. He started life as the son of a rabbi, and his father's orthodox home was opposed to the art that early made its call to the sensitive boy. He had to work at his carving largely in secret, risking paternal disapproval and punishment on discovery. Once he even ran away to the neighbouring mountains which he says, first fired him with the desire to become a sculptor. The childhood conflict reopened when he returned home until, he says, the day when he brought his first big attempt at modelling from the privacy of the pantry where he had worked upon it. It was a bust three times life size, and Wald tells that as his father inspected it, "I noticed a veil gradually lifting from his eyes — a screen that separated the religious prejudice from the instinctive understanding of the fine arts. But he only shook his head in a non-committal way, not knowing whether to be for or against my career."

to the sensitive boy. He had to work at his carving largely in secret,

Eventually, Wald decided to leave his home and, against family remonstrance, journey into the greater world, bent upon his art. His father had wanted him to be a cantor, but he felt no call to the pulpit. His brother, Marcus Wald (now in America) became the rabbi in his stead. One professional prop his father's home did, however, give him: the boy had an excellent voice, and his father trained him for choral singing. When he studied in Budapest, and later in Vienna, he earned his meagre living singing in synagogue choirs, and, later in opera choruses. He preserves his love of music to this day, and when the wine flows at a party in his studio, will let his deep, rich voice roll out in song.

In Budapest he studied at the city's Art Academy, and in Vienna under Professor Hanak. From his

October, 1951

best of all to work with wood, but it is in clay and plaster that he has done his most impressive work.

From Vienna he went to Berlin, but found no foothold in the German capital. From Berlin to Paris — "the nerve-centre of the art world, which," he says, "made my heart beat in a tempo that echoes the heartbeat of every artist all over the world." But Paris of the depression years gave the artist no living, and he turned to London. Here, though there was at the time what Wald calls "an awakening to the consciousness of modern art," there was also no living: at times the artist was so hard up that he was forced to dig clay from the river to model.

So in 1937 he traversed the ocean to South Africa. His brother was already here, holding a rabbinical post in East London, and he urged Herman to come. It was a new country, he said, hospitable, with new opportunities. Herman Wald found hospitality here — but scarcely the opportunities his brother envisaged. The hard, uphill struggle continued, with the artist slowly establishing himself in his new home.

### III

**T**HE work of Herman Wald shows all the influences of his life's wide journey — but all fused into his own personality, so that you cannot say he works after this or that school. Impressionism is here, as well as a classical austerity; realistic portraiture, and fancy's free rein. In wood, he makes sensitive use of the grain of his material, taking his line from the line it has followed in growing; he works, that is to say, "with the material," rather than imposes an alien pattern upon it. In stone, he likes to release the form he sees latent in the material. Only in clay and plaster does he mould the preconceived figures of his imagination.

His soul, conditioned by the mountains of Hun-

31

JEWISH GUILD ANNUAL

and he has a hatred of war and all that war represents. One of his outstanding works is a sculpture which he calls "The Unknown Soldier", — a great, supine figure lying face downward on a cross, the back knotted and gnarled like a blasted mountain; one hand grasping a broken sword, the other impotently resting on the cross of a soldier's grave. It is to be hoped that one day this, too, will be accepted by some public organisation as a

memorial; certainly no war memorial could carry a message more meaningful.

The home environment of his childhood, Hebrew legend and Hebrew lore, have worked indelibly upon his soul. A great deal of his work is essentially Hebrew in inspiration. There is a stone head of Moses, superbly executed, majestic and big (it is three times life size). A smaller figure depicts Moses with the Ten Commandments: the sculpture flows in a rhythm that surges upwards from outstretched toe to the top of the clasped Tablets of the Law. There is a group he calls "The Refugees" which presses all the horror of flight from persecution into the form of a mother attempting to save her child and herself. There are Biblical subjects of desolation and wrath. There is the symbolic panel he has carved for the new Springs Synagogue.

And then there is the work in which Wald has turned away from his anger and his grandeur, and given himself entirely to the native joy of creating form — breathless, rhythmic movements of plaster, wood and stone: the forms of power, of maternal love, of the love of a man for a maid . . .

It is a long road that Herman Wald has travelled in his forty-three years. But the fruits have been rich, and more than worth the striving. Today, in his



"K'ria" — Wald's Memorial to Martyred