

Herman Wald

By Dr. Joseph Sachs

BORN in Hungary, a country famed for its exotic beauties, its heady wines and gypsy music, Herman Wald imbibed at birth the romantic fervour which characterises his work. The majestic mountains that surround his native town of Kellesvar stirred in him the desire to become a sculptor and, having failed in most of the subjects he was taught at school, there was nothing left but to follow the call of the mountains.

On the surface his chosen calling seemed to clash with his faith, but a deeper realisation revealed something holy in the making of images. It was more difficult to convert his father, a Hassidic Rabbi imbued with the pious Jew's ingrained aversion to the graven image. Clashes with the family resulted in an early escape from home, which could not be sustained for long. On his return the struggle continued and hindered the normal development of his art.

In the meantime, life beyond the pale of the home and the synagogue held out its temptations, but, according to the humorous reminiscences of the artist, the challenge of Wine, Women and Song was tempered by the rabbinical tradition of the household, presenting no serious menace to the morals of the young Bohemian.

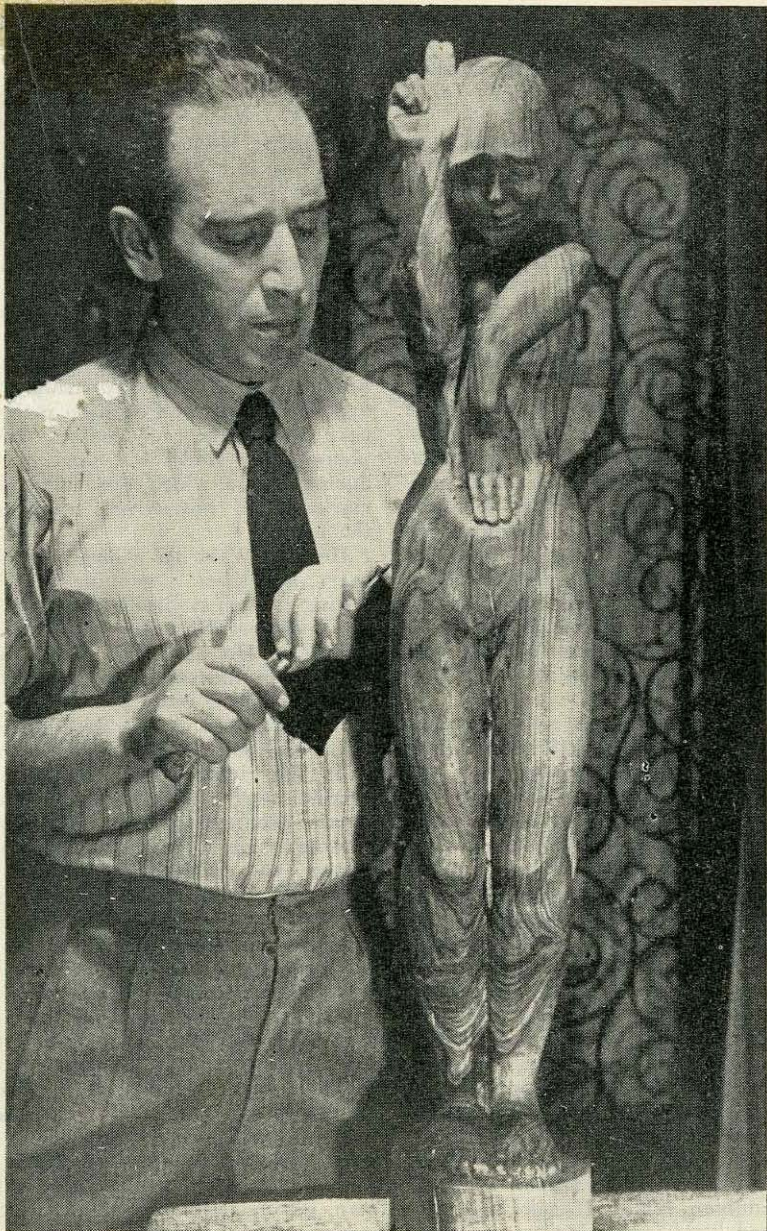
As far as the juice of the grape was concerned, the religious mission of carrying home the red wine which a pious purveyor offered per-

iodically to the priestly office of his father, was among the lad's most exciting adventures, for he never missed the opportunity of taking a long draught from the bottle before presenting it for his father's blessing.

Women, according to a personal confession, he followed for years—with a chicken-bone in one hand and a piece of bread in the other; but they were nothing more to him than distant Madonnas. Only later in life did he realise that to the artist woman was a means to an end while to other men she was an end in herself.

THE seduction of song was not so easily beguiled, and the way of transgression was small. For not only the graven image, but the secular song that flourished on the banks of the Danube was regarded as profane. To assuage his spiritual hunger, Herman was prepared to bear punishments and privations. At first the need of music was even more imperious than the urge for sculpture, and in his youth we find him bartering his carving tools for admission to the Opera.

"My first serious attempt at modelling," he writes, "started with an indescribable urge. I felt as if I were loaded with rocks to be blasted by the fuse of an inner



*Portrait of the Artist, Herman Wald, with figure in wood,
"The Witness."*

Photograph by S.A. Press Service

detonation of the spirit. Because of my parents' disapproval, it was no easy task to find a suitable manoeuvring field in which to let it explode."

This urge impelled Herman to face domestic strife and insecure material prospects for the sake of his art. Like many another artist, he had to choose between a life of comfort and one of hazardous creativeness.

His first milestone on this hard road of his choosing was Budapest, the most beautiful city in the world and the gatepost of East and West. Here the mystery and romance of the Orient met the setting sun of Western civilisation. In the Hungarian capital there was both passion and refinement, and if music is the measure of a nation's temperament, the music of Hungary had both fire and finesse; the Hungarian composer could write a song with the sophistication of a Frenchman and die for his art with the fanaticism of an Oriental.

Vienna, the next milestone, impressed the artist with her happy-go-lucky way of living. The Austrian capital was the lid on the boiling pot of the Balkans, and there was the constant danger that the pot would boil over . . . But there was a stimulating atmosphere and actual encouragement for struggling artists. Some of them were supplied with studios built in a corner of the Vienna woods by a benevolent Government. One of these studios was occupied by the young aspirant's teacher, Professor Hanak, a sculptor with tremendous vitality, many of whose sculptures seem to be bursting with an almost uncontrollable energy. Like Mestrovic and other sculptors in those Danubian lands, Hanak often allowed his imagination to run riot, producing figures and groups in violent action, with contortions of

body and pose that seem alien to our more sedate judgment.

WALD has inherited this baroque spirit. He loves to show the human form in violent tension, revealing the inner conflict and frustration of our generation. He uses the human figure to express an idea; his ever-insistent symbolism may be seen in such titles as *Self-Love*, *De Profundis*, *The Poet*, *Homeless*, *Beggar Woman*, *Challenge*, *The Gassed*, *The Refugees*. His symbolic ardour and his preoccupation to express thought and emotion rather than the relation of masses and planes often forces his hand, producing works which are more remarkable on the surface than in the mass.

Herman Wald has a loyal Jewish heart, and there is genuine Jewish feeling in such studies as *The Three Jews*, representing Jews in typical attitudes. He has, too, plenty of enthusiasm and spirit and a lyrical feeling which is often poetic rather than plastic in character. As a moral and political being, his heart is in the right place. He is an idealist with a firm faith in the innate goodness of man, and the determination to divert his inborn virtue to productive channels. Since his early work, *The First Consciousness*, representing the dawn of the spirit in the animal life of man, he has been concerned with man's hunger for the higher things of life. His later works deal with the horror and futility of war. *The Unknown Warrior* portrays humanity martyred on the crucifix of war.

More ambitious are his characterisations of Christ and Moses. Christ is a tired, disillusioned old man, gazing sadly on an unheeding world. More inspiring and sculpturally satisfying is the cubistic figure of *Moses on the Mount*, with

its well-organised masses emphasising the rugged strength of the Hebrew Lawgiver.

A WANDERER all his life, Wald has been stirred by the plight of the homeless, the unspeakable sufferings of the displaced persons in post-war Europe. *The Refugees*, which was exhibited in aid of the refugees, portrays a woman attempting to save her child and herself from her persecutors. There is a frozen expression of horror on the mother's face, yet she holds her child with a firm grasp; the child symbolises the homeless generations of the future.

Herman Wald's style finds its most eloquent illustration in *Kria*, his latest and most ambitious work. *Kria* is an enormous symbolic figure intended as a memorial to the sufferings of the Jewish people, but it is also a symbol of hope for the future. The statue portrays a prophet standing ten feet high, with his feet rooted in alien soil. With strong hands he tears aside his garment, thus mourning in the traditional Jewish way, the tragedy of his people. Yet, true to the biblical meaning of *Kria*, which is *Rend your Heart and not your Garment*, the general posture of the prophet, and his proud head flung back in grim defiance, symbolise the will which overcomes

sorrow and despair, and the hope for a better world.

Mr. Wald's ambition is to see the memorial, in bronze, erected somewhere in Palestine, as a monument to the past and a beacon to the future. It will remind mankind of the tragedy that has overtaken it, a tragedy which History must never repeat.

Wald arrived in South Africa about 15 years ago from London. He spent the war years on active service in the Union forces, and with the advent of peace has returned to his work with renewed vigour. Working with untiring energy, he is trying to recapture the striving of man in this fateful hour of his destiny, but his sculpture suffers from an excess of didactic zeal. His creations are largely conceptual; they are sermons in stone on the grandiose theme he wishes to preach. As works of art, they lag behind the noble flights of their moral intent. They embody tremendous tensions suspended in the air, their responding rhythms being left to the beholder who supplies a moral rather than an aesthetic response.

More satisfying are his smaller works, which are free from apostolic fervour and prophetic ire. It is by concentrating on the plastic character of his sculpture that he will achieve the calm and clarity which results from perfect control by virtue of which the moral grandeur is matched by the aesthetic grandeur of form.

The deepest search in life—the thing that, one way or another, was central to all living—was man's search to find a father. And the failure of the search leads to bitterness and frustration. Jew-baiting is an offshoot of such bitterness.—Thomas Wolfe, in *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Our own nature dictates our philosophy of human nature.