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UNCOVERING THE HISTORY OF THE NAZI HOLOCAUST IN SENEGAL THROUGH ARTISTIC AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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This paper describes the author's residency in Dakar, Senegal, where he created artworks in response to the history of anti-Semitic laws and the Sébikhotane concentration camp, established by the Vichy French Colonial Regime in West Africa. The artworks aim to inform audiences about this little-known history and use symbolism that Senegalese people can relate to. The paper discusses the research conducted, the positive reception of the artworks, and the author's role as an artist, researcher, and performer. The paper also provides descriptions and explanations of some of the artworks created during the residency.

Background

In 2020 I was invited to a residency with RAW Material Company in Dakar, to produce a body of artwork in response to the recently uncovered history of anti-Semitic laws and the Sébikhotane concentration camp, established and run by the Vichy French Colonial Regime throughout West Africa – at the time, *Afrique-Occidentale Française* (AOF), a French colony.

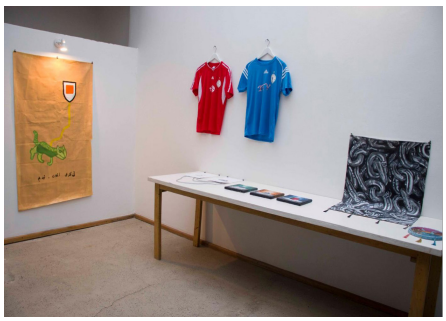
I spent January to March 2020 there, just before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in both Senegal and South Africa, doing artistic work and conducting research. The latter included a visit to the location of the concentration camp in the small town of Sébikhotane, archival document research at the Senegalese National Archives, and, most importantly, a meeting with Professors Alioune Dème at the Universite Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD); Ruth Ginio (Ben Gurion University of the Negev) and Mamadou Kandji (L'Harmattan Publishers). Without their help and research, this project would not have been possible. I had in fact first heard about this episode in history when Professor Dème visited the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in 2018.

The primary aim of this work is to inform art-viewing audiences about this little-to-unknown bit of Jewish Holocaust history on the African continent. Part of my methodology when making the works was to use symbolism that Senegalese people could identify with and thereby access the work. Each artwork responds to a story uncovered by historical research. As this historical research is recent and ongoing, each work and its meaning are to be imagined as threads in a tapestry still under construction. My roles as the author of this work are threefold: artist (creator), researcher (to inform the artworks) and performer (as disseminator of information/knowledge). The research comes before the art production, and the performance follows, in the form of presentations at art/museum/knowledge and conference spaces on the African continent.

During my time there, I produced seven artworks, one of them a video that I was able to bring home with me to Johannesburg. As is the nature of research-based artistic practice, each work has a story behind it, whether it was created for a specific reason or inspired by real or imaginary historical events and stories. I acknowledge that I approached this work with certain sensitivities implicit in my own subjectivity. I was sure that I did not want to depict any bodies, people or faces, whether of the actual prisoners, Jewish or otherwise in the Sébikhotane camp, or of Africans themselves who would have been subject to oppressive colonial rule at the time. This is because of the power that artworks assume when they represent bodies, representation that can be read as replicating past violence or current trauma. My intention was rather to produce artworks with signifiers that were immediately understandable to a contemporary Senegalese and African audience, to build connections between this history and their own experience and ideas. The work was generally well received by its first audience in Dakar, Senegal. Art critic Massamba Mbaye described the work as "philosophical," while reminding the audience that in the region, Jewish people were still a marginal group. To the question of whether the Sébikhotane camp was actually a concentra-



RAW Material Company – Centre for Art, Knowledge & Society, Dakar, Senegal (2020).



VOX Artis, Joe Turpin, RAW Material Company – Centre for Art, Knowledge & Society, Dakar, Senegal (February 2020).



Myself with Tabara Ndiaye & Dulcie Abrahams (RAW Material Company), and Massamba Mbaye, (21 February 2020).



Some of the audience at the Vox-ARTIS presentation, RAW Material Company, Dakar, Senegal, 21 February 2020 Many were hearing about this history for the very first time. The conversations with them afterwards were invaluable.

tion camp or simply a prisoner-of-war camp, the archival record provided an answer in its use of the word "concentration."

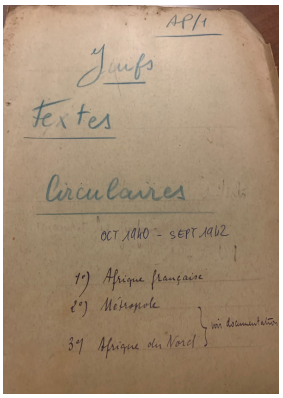
After a discussion with Jordan Saltzman – whose thinking and support have helped me immensely – the work was presented at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in July–September, 2021. A presentation had been given to the Ninth Street Artist Group in Johannesburg in November 2020, the first time the work and the history informing it had been introduced to the Jewish Community in South Africa.

A Complicit Victim depicts two drawings, united by a lace cord. The uniforms depicted belonged to two historical figures, active in and affected by this history in different yet similar ways.

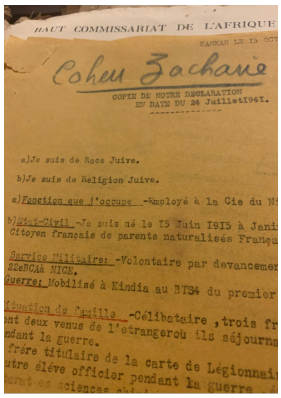
The white military uniform on the left belonged to Leon Géismar. Géismar was a Jewish and French colonial official stationed in a top position in the capital of the AOF region, Dakar. When the Vichy regime assumed power under the Nazis and inherited France's African colonies, Géismar did not particularly object to the politics and kept his position in Senegal. Eventually, however, Leon Géismar was forced to step down because he was Jewish. In the archives we found written objections from Géismar's colleagues testifying to his patriotic nature and requesting that he be allowed to remain in his post. But such was the antisemitism of Vichy that he



UNESCO Materials provided at RAW Material Company's library, RAW Base, in anticipation of my residency. The book is a reader for Senegalese school children to learn about the Holocaust in the Wolof language



The archived documents relating to the persecution of Jews by the Vichy colonial regime at the National Archives of Senegal in Dakar



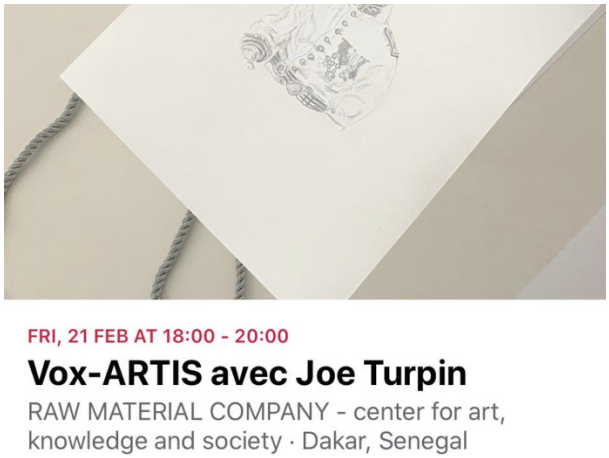
An example of the anti-Semitic stipulations for Jews in the region to register with the colonial authorities



Zines made at RAW Material Company's library, RAW Base, documenting the produced work



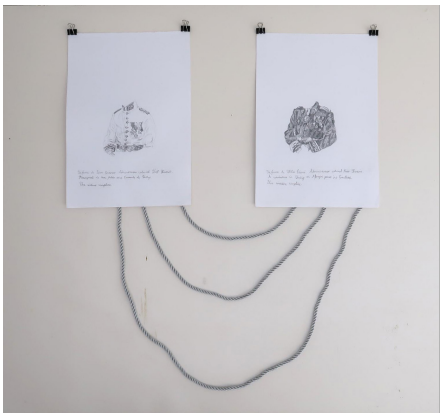
Meeting with Professor Alioune Dème in his office at UCAD



Advertisement for the culminating event of the residency.

was eventually fired. According to the Vichy regime's forced Jewish registration and declaration documents, most of which are kept in the Senegal National Archives, there were fewer than two hundred Jewish people in the whole AOF population of over 15 million people at the time.

The black military uniform on the right belonged to Félix Éboué. Éboué was an Afro-Caribbean of slave descent and a French colonial official, one of the highest-ranking Black men in the French and colonial military ranks. He was a Gaullist in his political thinking and already stationed in Africa, in Chad, when the Vichy took over. Éboué joined the French resistance, whose cross marker is visible on his uniform, and fought with the Allies against the Vichy forces on the continent.



A COMPLICIT VICTIM 2020 – 2x 210mm x 297mm, measurements variable, lace cord, graphite on paper

It was striking to me how similar their uniforms and photographic poses were, though perhaps serendipitous that the white official wore a white uniform, and the Black official wore a black uniform. Géismar was a victim of antisemitism, yet he was complicit in the colonial oppression of Africans. Éboué was a victim of racism, yet he too was complicit as a colonial official. The lace cord unites the two figures in their complicit victimhood.



WISE CHEEK 2020 – 3x 203mm x 203mm, acrylic on canvas

As I was searching for signifiers that could connect contemporary and historic African and Senegalese cultural symbolism with that of Jewish cultural symbolism, one thing that struck me was the ubiquity of the Sumbia or Laffa, a woollen hat (centre canvas). This hat is worn mostly by Muslim men in the region, having been popularised in African political consciousness by the leader Amílcar Cabral. The woollen hat originates in Scandinavia, where the cold temperatures required it, and Cabral and other leaders who spent time training in Moscow and other northern regions would have picked it up. Although designed to be worn in a cold climate, the hat remains popular in the heat of West Africa. The head covering on the left canvas is the Yarmulke, or Kippah, and is traditionally worn by Jewish men. It is not a common site in the region, but I did see some worn by a visiting Rabbi and at the embassies I visited for information. I also took my own Kippah with me which I wore for saying Kaddish at a gravesite and the Sébikhotane camp, and when celebrating Shabbat evenings in the residence. The fez/tarboosh hat (right canvas) has a double meaning on the continent historically. In Senegal and other parts of the continent, it is recognised as part of the uniform of African soldiers in the colonial armies. It has symbolic value and can be seen today in Senegal in the uniform of some political guards. The fez has a connection with Jewish history: during the Ottoman Empire, it was worn by non-Muslims, including the Jewish male population. My great-grandfather, who came from Egypt, wore one often. During the time of the Ottoman Empire, Jewish and Muslim populations lived side-by-side in relative peace.

The title *Wise Cheek* is chosen because the words for 'wise' and 'cheek' in both Wolof, the majority language spoken in Senegal, and Hebrew are the same – these being 'Hakham' and 'Lechi,' respectively. It may be a coincidence, but I like to think that there is some connection between their origins. That is what this work is about: connections.

This painting is based on a sketch I made the first time I visited Dakar, on holiday, in 2018. At that time, I was very interested in the symbols and visual culture of different places. The orange square (from a mobile company), colour pallet and cat are to be seen everywhere in Dakar, and so a combining of these elements is used to represent the place. I was already aware of the Sébikhotane camp, and included in Arabic a sentence meaning "Should I now think of death?" (Although most sig-

nage in Senegal is in French and therefore the roman alphabet, Arabic is also visible throughout the country on signposts and shopfronts, and the majority Islamic population can write in Arabic script.) This was because I was saddened by the connection I felt to the Jewish people who were incarcerated in a concentration camp in such an otherwise beautiful part of the world. There is no final confirmation yet that any of the seven or so confirmed deaths at the Sébikhotane camp were Jewish people, but it remains a strong possibility. It is also possible that not all the deaths were documented.

Engrained in the history and consciousness of West Africa is the painful era of the transatlantic slave trade. Outside Dakar is Gorée Island, where many slaves were imprisoned, shackled and taken away forever. As chains would have bound the slaves, so would they have bound the prisoners at the Sébikhotane camp – whether they were Jews, prisoners of war, people from enemy states or others deemed 'undesirable' by the Vichy regime. Chains are a common visual symbol of oppression, and the act of breaking them is to set oneself free. My position as an artist is one of openness to both African and Jewish perspectives, in a posture of veering away from Eurocentricity.

Jewish footsteps in Senegal also tell of a synagogue that once stood, now lost to the ocean, on the coast near the town of Rufisque. After their expulsion from Spain during the inquisition, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries Jewish people fled south into North Africa, some even into North Western and West Africa. These refugees, resident at the trading port of Gorée Island, would have built and prayed in this now lost synagogue. Over time, this population had descendants that became converts to Catholicism.

In imagining a lost or destroyed synagogue, it is easy to think of the devastation caused by the Nazis and their collaborators. But even before the Holocaust (and since, too), synagogues were the targets of antisemitic arson and destruction. To think that it was nature in the form of the ocean that took this synagogue away is a much more pleasant and natural thought. A history master's student at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop has proposed work with marine explorers to try and locate fragments and relics from this structure. At the time of writing, it is still a proposal. I look forward to the day that something is found!

This canvas depicts a landscape, the coastal site where the Sephardic synagogue once stood. There are two musical instruments, a Kora – the sacred and delicate instrument of the Griot musicians and storytellers of this region – and a shofar, the Ram's horn blown to welcome holy days in Judaism but also to warn of impending war. The image of the fist holding the shofar is inspired by the Holocaust memorial at the Jewish section of West Park Cemetery in my hometown of Johannesburg. I travelled with a blade of grass and a stone from this section, and let them loose on the ground at the Sébikhotane campsite.

Another notable sight for visitors to Senegal and West Africa today is the sheer number of football jerseys worn by people, men, women and children. It is another symbol that people would easily recognise and a convenient way of forming connections. I had previously made artworks using football jerseys, always changed or interrogated in some way to transform the garments into art objects.

This work comprises the home and away football jerseys of an imagined prisoners' football team from the Sébikhotane camp. It is highly unlikely that a football team was actually formed there, so this work probably uses the most artistic license. The choice of the shirts' manufacturer is not accidental or random: a famous German brand started by a former Nazi soldier. The club badge depicts prisoners walking free; two footballs; the name of the camp and the year of its operation (1940), surrounded by chains. Above the crest is the Star of David, the symbol of Judaism, in place of where many actual football clubs place a star after they've achieved a milestone.



GREEN CAT SENEGAL 2020 – 830mm x 1380mm, acrylic on canvas



LES CHAÎNES 2020 – 560mm x 790mm, acrylic on canvas; silk



I WOULD RATHER IT LOST TO THE FORCES OF MOTHER NATURE, THAN HANDS OF AN ARSONIST 2020 – 200mm x 200mm, acrylic, graphite, ink on canvas; silk

The central motif, usually that of the sponsor, represents the French national railway (TGV). The people in the town of Sébikhotane remember the railway being built in French colonial times, dividing the town yet connecting it to elsewhere. The TGV was complicit in the transportation of Jewish people to the death camps, as well as in ferrying weapons to the Vichy and Nazi frontlines. However, at the same time, workers on the TGV were active members of the French Resistance, and often purposefully sabotaged or delayed the weapon transports. The two kits, like those of modern football clubs, represent 'home' and 'away' variations. The TGV logo on the red 'home' kit shows the very first logo of the TGV (SNFC) (as it would have appeared during the Second World War), and the logo of the French resistance. The away kit variation features TGV written in cursive text, a common visual aesthetic of African football club kits.



SANS TITRE (MAILLOTS) 2020 – 750mm x 800mm, two individual garments, flocking, synthetic polyester material, wood, metal

This video work was filmed at the sites of the Sébikhotane Camp and William Ponty School in the town of Sébikhotane outside Dakar. It depicts the sites as they look; the blades of grass and stone from the Holocaust Memorial are scattered, and Kaddish is recited.



In Rufisque, the town where the lost synagogue lay on the coast, there is a single Jewish grave in the Catholic cemetery, bearing a Hebrew inscription. This grave belongs to a young woman who passed away in 1919, a significant time before the Vichy regime took charge. There is an understanding that a whole Jewish section existed in the cemetery beforehand, probably connected to the synagogue, as this cemetery overlooks the ocean, but many headstones have presumably been replaced and buried since those days. I placed a stone at her grave, and said Kaddish too, before ritually washing my hands as we left. These scenes are also depicted in the film because the rites of mourning are performed in memory of all who died in the Holocaust.



Postscript: Two More Works



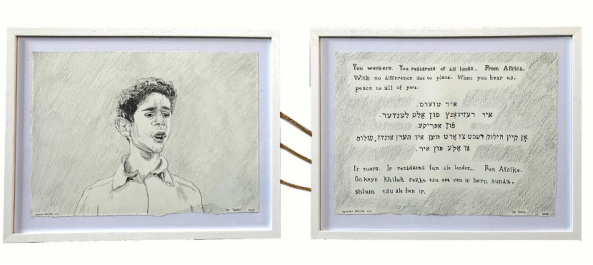
Stills from *GIVE ME A SIGN* 2020 – Video Piece (10:35)
Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWbjlUsF44A

I view this project as ongoing. There is still so much to be done, whether artworks to be created, research to be conducted and information to be discovered, even books published, events and commemorations held, etc.

There are many links between Africa and the Holocaust, mostly in South Africa, which has had and still has a significant Jewish population. I am also interested in the little links that appear, like working through research and history in Senegal – very much on the "margins" of the Holocaust, as Ruth Ginio puts it; little links like that of Anne Frank learning the name of Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, while she was in hiding, and recording this in her famous diary. One other small link like this took me by surprise.

For my personal artistic research, I recently purchased a collection of restored Yiddish cinema in high definition. One of these films, *Mir Kumen On* (1936), was funded by a Jewish workers' Bund in Warsaw and depicts a day in the life of a sanatorium in Poland devoted to the health of Jewish children. No actors or actresses were used in the making of the film – the actual children and workers at the Sanatorium play all the characters. It is known that all the people in the film met their fate at the hands of the Nazis, either deported to Treblinka or killed in the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

There is a scene in the film when a young boy calls out a united workers' declaration. Speaking in Yiddish, he mentioned men and women from places like France to China, so I started to listen more closely, wondering if he would mention Africa too. Lo and behold, the young lad includes Africa and announces that one's place of origin should not be a marker of difference. This can be seen as hugely progressive, considering that the film was made at the height of colonialism and twelve years before apartheid-style segregation was formalised in South Africa.



COMMON NATURE 2021 – 2x 380mm x 280mm, graphite on paper, lace cord

As an artist and researcher, I was very keen to search the archives at YIVO in New York when I arrived in 2021 to pursue my MFA at the Pratt Institute. This was after the residency in Dakar, Senegal (2020) described above. The project initiated then became ongoing after the work it produced was exhibited at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in 2021. Hoping to find some relevant raw material within the archives, I came upon the records of the Centre for Jewish History and the digitised archive of the Leo Baeck Institute. After searching the term "Senegal," I asked to see a drawing by the artist Hermann Struck. It was a portrait of a Senegalese prisoner of war named Samba Diallo. A lithograph, with ink on paper.



ETERNAL RETURN 2021 – 2x 310mm x 310mm x 310mm, Oil stick, oil, graphite on canvas, 1x 310mm, Oil, acrylic on canvas, lace cord

I had noticed a discrepancy in the archiving information and title of this drawing and was hoping to speak to somebody at the archives about it. I was eventually assisted in the matter over email. The discrepancy was as follows: In the archive, the title of the work by Hermann Struck was described as "Samba Hiallo, Christian man from Senegal." As someone familiar with the culture and history of Senegal, the surname of the sitter (who had also signed the Struck portrait of himself) seemed odd, as it did to Senegalese friends I spoke to about it. "Diallo" (with a "D") is a much more common surname in Senegal and West Africa, a name of Fula cultural origin. With the fine digitisation of this drawing, it was possible to zoom in on Samba's signature and see that his name in fact was Samba Diallo (although one could also see why the "D" was mistaken for an "H"). This is an error that Struck himself possibly made, as his writing in the bottom right of the drawing indicates. It seemed to me that the sitter's agency in writing his own name needed to be acknowledged. I politely requested that the correction be made in the catalogue record, and it was.

Naming is powerful, and agency is important, especially for people who are marginalised. I am someone with an openness to Jewish and African perspectives, and these worlds collide in this drawing and this moment. The artwork I produced, *Eternal Return*, consists of three canvas panels, two of them triangles, which drew inspiration from the shapes that make up the symbol of the Jewish people, the Star of David. The canvas subject inter-textualises Struck's portraits of both Samba and himself. Underneath the image of their faces, their surnames are written in the text of their own language. In Adlam script, the alphabet of the Fulani people, there appears the word "Diallo." The Hebrew text, the alphabet used by Yiddish speakers, reads "Struck." The colours of the triangles were loosely inspired by the flags (at the time of World War I) of the countries that the men were fighting for: France and Germany. From the two canvas triangles protrude gold and silver cords, which meet and unite, becoming entangled and flowing onto a white, this time circular, canvas on the floor. This represents the historical entanglement that brought these two men into proximity with one another, in an extraordinary moment of globalisation and cultural interaction, where the precarious and complex geopolitics of past,

present and future are somehow simultaneously there. This work also extends my project of tracing Jewish and Senegalese historical moments and footsteps beyond the historiography of the Second World War to embrace the First World War.

There are now a few online resources regarding the project put together by the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre. These can be found in the list of References.

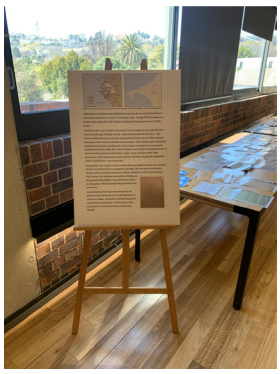


Images from the show at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in 2021

Conclusion

Inspired also by the kind visit of Jordan Saltzman, I am conducting some further research in other online archives. A starting point has been the Yad Vashem list of names (an online database), but I also plan on accessing the archives of the University of Southern California (a Sébikhotane camp survivor's testimony exists there), the United Nations and the South African Museum of Military History. Further suggestions or recommendations are welcome. Further research may also lead to the production of new artworks.

"*La chèvre est souvent le témoin de l'histoire*" (The goat is often the witness to history) – A Senegalese audience member at the presentation.



Images from the show at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in 2021

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to: the team of RAW Material Company in 2020 (Dulcie Abrahams Altass, Marie-Cisse, Marie-Hélène Pereira, Devin Hentz, Tabara Korka Ndiaye, Anna Wane, Mame Farma, Fall, Omar and the whole staff) – For all your help, advice, work and for providing this platform. Tabara Korka Ndiaye, for entering the archives and camp sites with me. Professors Dr. Alioune Deme, Ruth Ginio and Mamadou Kandji, for your time, knowledge and work. Assane from Elite Management Services Sarl, 12 Rue de Ziguinchor Point E, for your work printing the football shirts. Hajar Meddah, Arabic Translation for the painting. Dulcie Abrahams Altass, translation for the presentation. Massamba Mbaye, for your time, knowledge and engagement. Tonton Tamba, installation. 9th Street, Jewish Artists Collective, for receiving the work in South Africa. Jordan Saltzman, Tali Nates and the entire team at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre. James Lomberg, for inviting me to present this work at the Limmud conference in Johannesburg (2022).

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