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Illustrating a Jewish Life: Portrait Photography, Biography and the Creation of a Jewish Public Sphere

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Abstract: Portrait photography is a fixed element in the history of German Jewry. This article asks what we can learn about a Jewish biography like that of the German–Jewish writer Sammy Gronemann by seeking to follow his life’s trajectories through the images he and others created of him and the appearances he coined. It argues that photography not only represented but also actively shaped his work as a writer and a Zionist politician and that it influenced the worlds he inhabited. It does so by situating Gronemann, the German Jew, in the history of German portrait photography, Gronemann, the Western Zionist, in the history of international Zionist image politics and Gronemann, the writer in the history of the creation of a visible cultural scene in the Yishuv and later Israel. Pondering Gronemann’s relationship with visual arts offers insights into the ways public visibility shaped German–Jewish realities both in Europe and in Palestine, both before and after the foundation of the State of Israel.

Keywords: Sammy Gronemann; German–Jewish history; photography; migration; biography

In the autumn of 1916, Sammy Gronemann and Herrmann Struck had a camera memorize their shared time in the German press department Ober Ost during World War I. Standing in a forest behind their barracks in Kowno, wearing their uniforms and holding the local Yiddish newspaper *Letzte Najes* in their hands, they mark a presence for themselves as Jews in the German army (Figure 1). Their task was to censor papers like the one in the picture, but the photograph instead extends the paper’s visibility which has the image radiate a certain irony enhanced by the soldiers’ staged smiles. This constellation presents a vivid illustration of Gronemann’s first sentence in the report on the “Eastern-Jewish Episode” in his *Hawdolah*

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Figure 1: Autumn 1916. Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135\43-7p.

und Zapfenstreich: “Warning! In these pages, there will be a lot of talk about Jews and Jewish things.”¹ The image complements Gronemann’s satiric anecdotes about German Jews like him, who had to censor Jews, but who sabotaged such tasks in defiance of their German orders.² The photograph invites the Jewish experience into that of German soldiers on the front, and claims a presence for this German–Jewish story in the Jewish and the German canon.

What can photography tell us about a Jewish life such as that of Sammy Gronemann, so distinct and yet comparable to the lives of other German and Central European Jews of his time? What can it tell us about the spheres they shaped through

1 Sammy Gronemann, *Hawdoloh und Zapfenstreich: Erinnerungen an die Ostjüdische Etappe, 1916–1918*, ed. Jan Kühne and Hanni Mittelman (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2020), 7.

2 E.g. Gronemann, *Hawdoloh und Zapfenstreich*, 147, s.a. XII, 3.

their appearances and performances? Sammy Gronemann left behind a considerable archive of visuals which he amassed over the span of his life and which cover a variety of topics. For example, he collected and owned images of Palestinian landscapes and sights, which reflects a general fascination for illustrated travelogues and photobooks appearing on Palestine at the time, published both by Zionist organizations and by German photobook publishers catering to their readers' thirst for images of foreign geographies.³ The central topic in Gronemann's collection of images, however, is the human portrait – taken professionally of him or of others and collected by him. This abundance of portraits attests to a distinct intimacy with the camera and the knowledge of photography's capacity to help perform and foster roles both in the private and the public realm. It thereby offers itself to a test of the assumption that photography not only inspired the formation and presentation of the self for Gronemann and many of his contemporaries, but that it also shaped their work, their engagement in politics and the German and Jewish spaces they inhabited. Unlike Franz Kafka, Gronemann spent little time writing about photography.⁴ But photography helped him to observe and be seen and to remind his surroundings that modern Jewish politics and culture needed visibility to thrive.⁵ The causes and effects of this visibility for him and his contemporaries are at the center of this contribution.

The article will first discuss the role of formalized portrait photography in helping Gronemann to curate his appearance as a German, a Jew, a Zionist and a writer. The subsequent discussion will focus on photographic contributions to creating a Zionist portrait gallery of political role models and political celebrities through formal and less formal portraits taken, for example, during Zionist congresses and circulated in the Jewish press or as autograph cards. The last part explores the role of vernacular and snapshot portraits taken of Gronemann in Palestine and the ways they reflect his changing role from a Jewish politician to a shaper of an active cultural scene in the Yishuv. This last part also explores the vernacularization of personal views and the lack of control it entailed for the portrayed. Understanding the social, political and cultural role visuals, and photography in particular, played in

3 See for example Roland Jaeger, "Die Länder der Erde im Bild. Die Reihe Orbis Terrarum im Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, Berlin, und im Atlantis-Verlag, Berlin/Zürich," in *Autopsie: deutschsprachige Fotobücher 1918 bis 1945*, eds. Manfred Heiting and Roland Jaeger, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Steidl, 2012), 98–131; Rebekka Grossmann, "Negotiating Presences: Palestine and the Weimar German Gaze," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 137–172; Jasmin Daam, *Tourism and the Emergence of Nation-States in the Arab Eastern Mediterranean, 1920s–1930s* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023), 141–142.

4 On Kafka see Carolin Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5 On photographs as part of an autobiography "pointing to a plurality of selves" see Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 13.

Gronemann's life helps to further investigate the worlds he lived in, and the insights portrait photography offers to the study of modern Jewish history.

1 Visibly German–Jewish

Photography was ubiquitous in the West Prussian world Sammy Gronemann grew up in during the 1870s and 1880s. In the two decades prior to his birth, photography had entered European bourgeois sociability, presenting a tool of political, social and cultural participation.⁶ Tracing Gronemann's early engagement with photography, particularly portrait photography, provides substance to Steven Sheehi's suggestion that photography "participated in facilitating social relations among new individuals, classes and institutions," which it then naturalized and cemented.⁷ More specifically, in its being part and parcel of the creation of, in the words of Carolin Duttlinger, a "highly codified iconography of bourgeois subjecthood," photography was embraced as an enabler of integration – not only for Jewish sitters but also for photographers.⁸ The *métier* granted Jewish photographers agency as shapers of public culture while their Jewish sitters could use the studio as a contact zone enabling social integration.⁹ Through photography's nature of capturing a short moment and preserving it for an indefinite time, Jewish sitters and photographers could "fix" themselves into the appearances and practices of modern European bourgeois sociability.¹⁰ Photographic portraits were an element of cross border

6 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1988), 37–40; Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8, 51. While as an art form, early photography was attacked for distorting truths or jeopardizing the aura of paintings; portrait photography established itself as an important marker of modern culture and communication from the beginning of the medium. For an early critique of photography see Charles Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 83–89, especially 87.

7 Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1810–1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), XXVIII – xxix. See also John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 37.

8 Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography*, 7. See also Michael Berkowitz, "Photography as a Jewish Space," in *Space and Spatiality in Modern Jewish History*, eds. Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 246–62.

9 Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 61. Andrés Mario Zervigón, *Photography and Germany* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 30.

10 Leora Auslander indeed states that it was photography's distinct relationship to time and space that made it so attractive a tool of integration for Jews in the early twentieth century. Leora Auslander, "Reading German Jewry through Vernacular Photography: From the Kaiserreich to the Third Reich," *Central European History* 48, no. 3 (2015): 300–334, 334.

mobilities, communication and engagement.¹¹ They could serve as a memoir, “replace” a person’s presence or provide a “first impression” in a culture where increasing attention was given to a person’s individual personality.¹² Photography promised to be a space for expressions of this individuality and Jewish particularity including through group portraits which allowed for narrating connections as well as biographic tradition and pedigree.¹³ At the same time, the kind of portrait that was produced by Biedermeier photographic trends accompanied a certain withdrawal to domesticity, which allowed Jews to test articulations of German and Jewish belonging in the private realm.¹⁴ The studio presented an intimate space for new expressions of the self and photographers promised to distill individual traces of the sitters from the ways they captured faces and postures.¹⁵ They even went as far as recommending sitters to return as often as possible to capture and preserve the various changes a person’s identity underwent throughout a life span (even if such recommendations must also be seen as part of photographers’ marketing strategies).¹⁶

Gronemann appears to have found some truth in such statements, as he frequented photographic studios regularly, at least as long as he lived in Europe. The portraits attest to careful choices made by him in cooperation with the photographers. The props that form part of these images and the attire he chose to wear betray an intimate understanding of current trends and fashions and show that he was aware of the codes of German bourgeois sociability on the one hand and the ways to stretch it towards including Jewish elements on the other. Gestures and mimics support his attire in support of the role he seeks to play. Rarely meeting the camera’s gaze, he maintains a distance between him and onlookers which provides him with the possibility to play a variety of roles by never revealing himself fully. For example, for a portrait taken by the photographer of the Samson & Co studio in Hannover, Gronemann posed with an open book on a table – presenting him as a studious while simultaneously sophisticated and urbane citizen (Figure 2). His

11 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 164; Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 13–14.

12 Susan J. Douglas and Andrea McDonnell, *Celebrity: A History of Fame* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 89.

13 Richard Y. Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Arts and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1998), 147.

14 Zervigón, *Photography and Germany* 25.

15 Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 101. See also Martha Maas, „Neuzeitliche Fotografie“, Unknown Publication, Unknown Date in Stefan Maria Rother, *Martha Maas, geb. Rosenfeld: Eine jüdische Photographin aus Deutschland 1893–1970* (Berlin: Edition Rotor, 2009), 33–34.

16 The Aachen photographer Martha Maas would write about her photographs that they were “no luxury” but able to capture and preserve a character of a person. For this, however, they had to be taken repeatedly and renewed. Maas, „Neuzeitliche Fotografie“, 33–34.



Figure 2: Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135/43.

finger seems to point at a specific sentence which conveys an image of pedagogical prowess and determination. He looks like he is about to start explaining something to the imaginary interlocutor beyond the frame.

His other hand rests on his leg rendering him a patient but attentive conversation partner. The photo was taken at a time Gronemann underwent his legal traineeship in Nienburg between 1898 and 1900 marking the transition between his studies and the begin of his career as a prosecutor in Hannover, a time shaped by hard work and professional achievements which gained him additional social standing.¹⁷

Gronemann's European portraits also show that to him, photography was a distinct way of communicating with this environment by speaking its aesthetic language while consciously combining different facets of his self. Every move to a new place in these years to Gronemann seemed to postulate seeing a new photographer and experimenting with looks, poses, and mimics but maintaining a serious, confident demeanor, presenting himself as a worthy participant in the contexts that he was part of. Manifesting his identity as a loyal soldier, for example, Gronemann had himself taken on photograph with his brand-new – or “*funkelnagelneue*” as he called it – uniform in July of 1915 (Figure 3). The photo successfully conceals what

¹⁷ Jan Kühne, *Die Zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns* (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2020), 120.



Figure 3: *Juli 1915*. Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135\43-8p.

Gronemann mentions only in passing, namely that he was seriously injured and barely escaped death after months of hospitalization.¹⁸ Now, with his new uniform – metonymic for a new body and life – he would not return to the trenches, but “fight” in the press-department, the center of German war propaganda. Gronemann stands upright and looks to the side, determined. The photographer chooses to have him pose with his hand on the belt, a gesture that adds to an appearance of his composed

¹⁸ Gronemann, *Hawdloh und Zapfenstreich*, 147, s.a. XII, 3.

character and loyalty. The combination of gaze, pose and attire are to convey that he is as faithful and capable a soldier as ever, despite his injury.

Yet, Gronemann's portraits also speak of his aspiration to provide visual proof of inhabiting different Jewish subcultures. Rarely are the props as expressively Jewish as in the photograph with the Yiddish newspaper *Letzte Najes*, but Gronemann's photographic persona can be securely placed within a German–Jewish visual sphere. He seemed to consciously frequent Jewish photographers and presented himself as a fashionable member of a German–Jewish bourgeoisie, for example, in an early portrait of the Halberstadt *Dibbuk Haverim*, the student organization of the Halberstadt rabbinical seminary named after the virtuous description of a very strong bond between friends.¹⁹ Providing one of the first pronounced Jewish theater stages in Germany the *Dibbuk Haverim* enabled his early engagement with a Jewish theater culture.²⁰ While Gronemann chose to leave the seminar to study law, he kept the photograph as a trace of what was a decisive period in his life (Figure 4).²¹

The photograph is a result of a thoughtful choreography; the men's hands and legs are arranged in a symmetrical fashion. The close arrangement of meeting gazes, hands placed on shoulders and knees touching indicates the personal and friendly ties between the young men. The soft and flurry carpet gives a cozy atmosphere to the meeting of friends. Prominently placed in the center, on the table, appears a book, yet again, potentially a Talmud volume offering a visible marker of the studious atmosphere of Jewish learning. The group seemed to know that the photograph would not only present a memento mori for later times but that it was able to manifest their existence as a visibly Jewish group which rendered the photograph a confirmation of their connection and their shared dedication to Jewish tradition and theater.

The visual canon of his young adulthood Gronemann created for himself attests to his position as a knowledgeable spectator and participant in the various European Jewish realities that he inhabited or that he moved through during the early decades of his life. The roles he played and the scenes he saw also provided him with material to tell stories about these worlds. His protagonists move between Eastern European Shtetls and Western European metropolises on a shrunken European map that mirrors the acceleration of travel and communication that also coined Gronemann's routes. The wit he developed on his pages depended on descriptions that were true to detail provided by a photographic memory or in fact by actual photographs. Not without a reason would one of his reviewers, Shalom Ben

¹⁹ The term is taken from Pirkei Avot 6:6, wherein “Dibbuk-Haverim” (hebr., “Community of Friends”) depicts one of the 45 ways by which Torah is traditionally acquired and studied.

²⁰ Kühne, *Die Zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 115–119.

²¹ It was Gronemann's involvement in the *Dibbuk Haverim* that made Martin Buber aware of his talents whereupon he encouraged him to write the Jewish-Zionist play *Haman's Flucht* which Buber would then stage in 1901.



Figure 4: Dibbuk Haverim-Sektion Halbterstadt W.S. 94/95. (Gronemann sitting, first from the left) Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135/43.

Chorin, describe Gronemann as a “Shalom Aleichem of the Yekkes” reminiscing another master of detailed and vivid descriptions of European Jewish life.²² At the same time Gronemann’s multiple perspectives also allowed him to take on a critical, ironic stance towards his subjects tearing apart and rearranging ostensibly fixed and

²² Kühne, *Die Zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 46.

pre-arranged realities in the way of a montage.²³ He thereby translated his own experiences of the ubiquitous visibility and mobility of his environment onto his pages.

2 The Politics of Visibility

Gronemann's awareness for the effects of (public) visibility also shaped his political activism. He had been exposed to Zionist activities and ideas since his childhood and was an active participant in Zionist events and congresses from the turn of the century.²⁴ Reading his portraits in conversation with his engagement in Zionist politics, we see that he not only valued visibility as a marker for his own integration into modern culture but believed the same to be true for Zionism as a political movement. His contributions to the discussions at the Zionist congresses show that Gronemann was among the first to recognize that a public presence was an important factor in turning the Zionist movement into a substantial political voice. From the early Zionist congresses onwards, Gronemann was involved in Zionist "agitation," as it was termed by him and like-minded peers, and promoted the use of modern media to make Zionism known to larger Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.²⁵ As early as 1907, he advocated in favor of using images to be added as regular illustrations in the Zionist press.²⁶ As soon as photographing and printing techniques were elaborate enough to allow for the large-scale circulation of photographs the Zionist funds, the Keren Hayesod and the Keren Kayemet established a photography department dedicated solely to the task of widely distributing images of Zionist developments.²⁷ But it was not only the depiction of progress in Palestine that was believed to boost the visibility of the Zionist movement. Zionist political activism

23 Kühne, *Die Zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 61 and Christina Wieder, "Montages of Exile: Photographic Techniques and Spatial Dimensions in the Artwork of Grete Stern," *Jewish Culture and History*, 21, no. 1 (2020): 42–65. 57.

24 Kühne, *Die Zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 20.

25 For his speech on "Propaganda und Agitation" held at the VII. Kongress, in 1905, see *Kurzprosa und Nachlasstexte*, ed. Jan Kühne (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2023), 344–347, 346. The speech was published in abridged form in 1913 in a collection of selected congress speeches under the title "Zionist Propaganda," together with one congress speech each by Theodor Herzl, Max E. Mandelstamm, Arthur Ruppin, and Chaim Weizmann. *Ausgewählte Kongressreden* (Berlin: Verlag des Berliner Büros der Zionistischen Organisation, 1913), 21–35. See also *Stenografisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des VII. Zionistenkongresses und des Ausserordentlichen Kongresses in Basel*, 159–182.

26 *Stenografisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des VII. Zionistenkongresses und des Ausserordentlichen Kongresses in Basel*, 177.

27 Rebekka Grossmann, "Visions of Belonging: Photography, Mobility and Nation in Mandate Palestine," Diss. Jerusalem, 2020, Chapter 1.

itself was deemed worthy of documenting and showing to the world especially once other international political conventions and institutions, such as the League of Nations, started to gain increasing press coverage. Images of professional photographers such as Erich Salomon or Alfred Eisenstaedt, who made a name for themselves with their portraits of “famous people in unobserved moments,” personalized political ideas and heightened public attention for democratic processes while also merging them with a burgeoning celebrity culture.²⁸ Zionist events became popular destinations for photographers who imitated these portraits, true to the conviction voiced by Sammy Gronemann as early as the turn of the century, that Zionist congresses would belong to the most important means of raising public attention.²⁹

One photographer who frequented Zionist political events was Zeev Alexandrovicz. Born in 1905 in Cracow, Alexandrovicz acquired his skills as an autodidact and took photographs during extended travels across the globe in the early 1930s.³⁰ His proximity to Zionist politics led him not only to Palestine, which he visited several times before immigrating in the mid-1930s, but also had him closely follow Zionist leaders, for example, to the Zionist congress in Basel in 1931. The portraits Alexandrovicz took at this event closely resemble the insights into the larger political conventions of the time taken by the more established Salomon or Eisenstaedt.

Some photographs show participants during assembly meetings, as in the case of Zeev Jabotinsky (Figure 5). Jabotinsky, his hands at his lapel, is in the middle of giving a speech while the surrounding audience listens. His gaze is that of a concentrated orator. Jabotinsky must have been satisfied with the way Alexandrovicz portrayed him as he would choose to turn the portrait into an autograph card. The credo “I believe” printed below his figure reminisces an article that Jabotinsky published in 1928 in *Doar Hayom* – after it had been taken over by the revisionist movement – based on a speech he had given at the Zionist congress in Basel in 1927.³¹ In it he reminded his listeners that what had been built in Palestine was reason for confidence, not despair. He conjured the dreams and hopes of Herzl to remind audiences that what some liked to term a failure, was in fact a major achievement that could serve as inspiration for future activities. Jabotinsky’s credo underneath the picture

²⁸ This was the title of photobook Erich Salomon published at the time. Erich Salomon, *Berühmte Zeitgenossen in unbewachten Augenblicken* (J. Engelhorn’s Nachfolger: Stuttgart, 1931). On the effects of these images see Annie Rudd, “Erich Salomon’s Candid Camera and the Framing of Political Authority,” *Information and Culture: A Journal of History*, 25, no. 4 (2017): 412–435.

²⁹ *Stenografisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des VII. Zionistenkongresses und des Ausserordentlichen Kongresses in Basel*, 170–171.

³⁰ See <https://www.zeevaleksandrowicz.com/about> [8.5.2024].

³¹ Zeev Jabotinsky, “Ani Maamin”, *Doar Hayom* XI, no. 5 (2.12.1928). See also *Stenografisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des XV. Zionistenkongresses und des Ausserordentlichen Kongresses in Basel*, 120–131.



Figure 5: Zeev Alexandrovicz, “Zeev Jabotinsky at the 17th Zionist Congress, Basel, 1931.”

and his determined and perseverant pose as a speaker strengthen each other. His signature underneath the photograph, Vladimir Jabotinsky in Latin letters and Zeev Jabotinsky in Hebrew letters, provides additional authenticity, returning some of the ostensibly lost “aura” of the image back on the card.³² The fact that Zionist leaders

³² The claim of photography depriving an image of its aura was voiced most prominently by Walter Benjamin in his 1935 essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.” On

had such autograph cards created of themselves shows that they believed in the performative character of their visibility.

Another performative act caught by Alexandrovicz in Basel was the reenactment of Theodor Herzl's famous portrait on Basel's Three Kings Hotel balcony. While the bridge has changed, the pose can be immediately recognized as imitating Herzl some thirty years earlier. Soon after it had been taken, the photograph became a Zionist icon to be reproduced as wall hangings, stamps, or greeting cards.³³ In restaging the pose, both photographed and photographer knew what they were doing, manifesting a Zionist presence in Basel while remembering the beginnings of Zionism as a political movement and confirming their loyalty to Herzl's vision (Figure 6).

Gronemann did not stage himself in the way his peers did but he, too, was caught on photograph by Alexandrovicz in what forms part of the photographer's attempts to imitate patterns of more famous colleagues of catching politicians "at work" in informal settings. In it, Gronemann can be seen while having a drink on a terrasse near the congress venue on a summer afternoon next to a group around the American Zionist leader Louis Lipsky (Figure 7). The figures in the image look relaxed, contrasting the image of the concentrated crowd around Jabotinsky. At the same time, as photographers like Erich Salomon suggested with such images, it was on such terraces that politics were made.

It is in combination with such Zionist "unguarded moments" that the more official images turn the congress members into international politicians and confident political players on the European scene. While the initial focus is on the group around the American Zionist leader Louis Lipsky, Gronemann's relaxed pose renders him a feature of Basel's Zionist "landscape."

Portraits and visual traces of the congresses of this kind were not only circulated as autograph cards. They also made it into the Jewish and sometimes non-Jewish press. Indeed, one of the first official Zionist circulars, the Palestine Picture Correspondence, would feature long lists of portraits of the figureheads of Zionist politics of the past and present (Figure 8).³⁴ Demonstrating versatile Zionist leaders as a group of men of different character traits, these portraits were statements in favor of the democratic, discursive, and international outlook of Zionist policy making

the addition of text as a performance of authenticity see Özge Baykan Calafato, *Making the Modern Turkish Citizen: Vernacular Photography in the Early Republican Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 165–166.

³³ See Rachel Arbel, *Blue and White in Color: Visual Images of Zionism, 1897–1947* (Tel Aviv: Beit Hatfutsot, 1996), 13–14. See also Michael Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry Before the First World War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 135, 140–141, 167 and Micha and Orna Bar-Am, *Painting with Light: The Photographic Aspect in the Work of Ephraim Moses Lilien* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1991), 36.

³⁴ *Palästina-Bilder-Korrespondenz*, October 1928. CZA KH4/5511.



Figure 6: Zeev Alexandrovicz, “Dr. Hayim Arlosorov, Zionist Leader, Drei Könige Hotel, Basel, 1931.”

similar to nineteenth-century broadsides showing portraits of rabbis, cantors or other Jewish luminaries together to highlight their connections and influence.³⁵

A few years later, at the Zionist congress in Lucerne in 1935, Gronemann would even make it into a short documentary reel titled, “The Congress Jury at work” in which he could be seen in his role as chief judge of the Zionist congress court.³⁶

³⁵ Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 147–151.

³⁶ In the documentary, Gronemann presents the work of the Congress Court. The Spielberg Jewish Film Archive of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem – “19th Zionist Congress,” online: <<https://youtu.be/...>>



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Figure 7: Zeev Alexandrovicz, “Louis Lipsky, American Zionist Leader [second from the right], Basel, 1931.”

“Paris” appears in brackets behind his name in the credits, the city he lived in after he had left Germany in 1933. In the reel, Gronemann seems to speak to his fellow jury members about the responsibility that they have been endowed with in overseeing the Zionist elections. He reminds listeners before and behind the camera that the congress is the only option for Jews to become politically active as Jews which additionally increases the importance of the elections, particularly in this time of distress. Gronemann speaks in a clear and loud voice and the camera is first pointed at him and then shows the other members of the jury listening to him – some confirming his words with a nod – by means of a pan shot. While only being 90 seconds long, the reel establishes Gronemann, who by then was a seasoned and experienced participant at the congresses, as a political authority. Gronemann sits in the middle, on a desk, dressed in a suit that is similar to the ones he was depicted in at other occasions and that would become a stable element in caricatures drawn of him towards the end of his life. His gestures and posture project the self-confidence of an

be/tkqCAQvstsg?t=2207>, last access: 4.5.2024. For more information on Gronemann’s role as judge at the congress court see the contribution to this volume by Jan Kühne.



Figure 8: Palästina-Bilder-Korrespondenz, October 1928. CZA KH4/5511.

experienced orator. In spite of his advanced age at the time, Gronemann seemed to feel the need to become even more politically active than ever before, visiting local

Zionist groups across Europe, giving talks about Zionist and Jewish politics as well as about Zionist literature, and continuing to make connections.³⁷

3 (In-)Visibility Performed

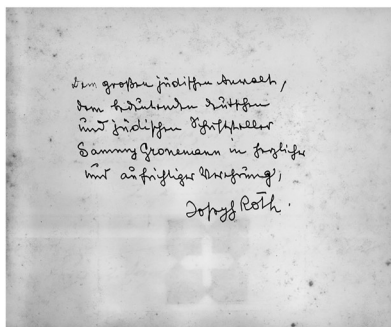
In the spring of 1936 Gronemann and his wife Sonja left Europe for Palestine.³⁸ For many Jews of the kind that engaged in Zionist politics at the level Gronemann did, the move to Palestine was the logical next step. But for Gronemann, as for many other German Jews, integration in Palestine proved difficult due to ideological, social and cultural reasons.³⁹ His archive of photographic prints parallels the move between continents visually, through a turn away from the classic studio prints and to more spontaneous imagery of snapshots and vernacular practices. A source that is able to tell about the immediate difficulties of departure better than other sources is an album given to Gronemann by a group of friends as a souvenir of their shared time in French exile.

Quickly amassed portraits appear next to collected greetings, scribbled in a hurry but with words that convey their affection for Gronemann, “the great Jewish lawyer, the important German and Jewish writer.” Amateur images have replaced expensive and elaborately staged studio portraits. The portrait of Joseph Roth, for example, looks like it has been made by a friend for the very occasion of the album (Figures 9 and 10). Many of the other photographs seem like they are passport photographs which in a time of repeated applications for visas and permits were ubiquitous in Jewish households. In their cold and frontal nature, they resemble mug shots symbolizing the criminalization of Jewishness by Nazi Germany. The absence of lighting or props in these images reflects the reduced ability of the sitters to stage their appearance hinting at their shrinking agency and increasing dependence on the goodwill of others. At the same time, despite their poor presentation, which also points to a dire lack of resources and time, these portraits – in combination with the handwritten personal texts of friendly dedications – convey a message of connectivity of the acquaintances with each other and with the culture of visual communication that has shaped them and has fostered these strong bonds. While some photographs fill in the whole space, others appear lost on the page, such as in the case of the image of Georg Bernhard (Figures 11 and 12), the publisher of the exilic paper *Pariser Tageblatt*. Not only is the photograph, a passport image, very small, but it has

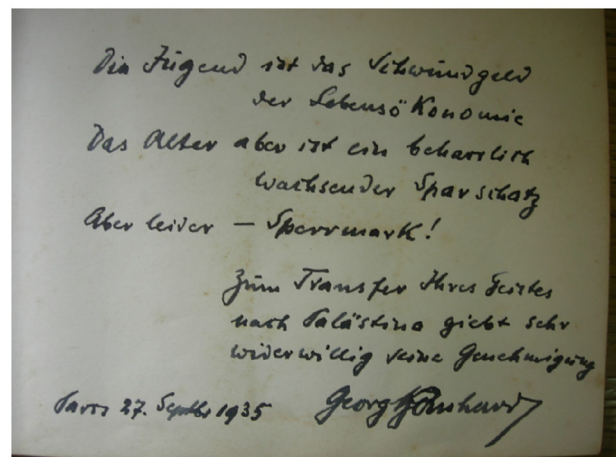
37 Kühne, *Die zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 256–257.

38 Kühne, *Die zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 25.

39 Hagit Lavsky, *The Creation of the German–Jewish Diaspora: Interwar German–Jewish Immigration to Palestine, the USA and England* (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2017), 108–112.



Figures 9 and 10: Joseph Roth. Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135/62.



Figures 11 and 12: Georg Bernhard. Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135/62.

also been randomly attached to some place on the album page where it hovers in space, just like the person it depicts. The photo corners are disproportionately large providing a very tight frame around the image, holding the photo on the one hand and closing in on Bernhard's face and visually suffocating him on the other. Bernhard's words for Gronemann are an ironic take on the economic metaphors of youth being like depreciative money and old age being a saved treasury which to refugees like them, however, can only be paid out in "blocked mark" and is therefore not accessible. Floating through the world like his image on the page, refugees like Bernhard were dependent on fate and friendships even as other rules and systems would be useless. Gronemann's friends could have opted for a simple notebook with a few written lines bidding him farewell. But they made the effort to collect a photograph of everyone no matter how basic its outlook, attesting to the fact that they deemed it important to provide a visual imprint of their existence at a time at which racialized exclusion sought to render them invisible. The images provide weight to their words conjuring Gronemann to not forget his friends. It provides one of the few proofs of their shared experience in exile and conveys the – justified – fear that for some this would be a farewell forever.⁴⁰

Gronemann arrived in Palestine as part of a mid-1930s immigration wave that also brought with it various photographers.⁴¹ Many of them tried to continue the careers they had begun in Germany, either by opening studios or by trying to make a living as freelancers covering daily occurrences.⁴² Photography had had a considerable history in Palestine with different Arab and Armenian photographers establishing studios and ties across the Middle East where they likewise forged views of bourgeois culture and facilitated the emergence of an Arab middle class.⁴³ They were joined by Zionist photographers, such as Avraham Soskin in the early twentieth century who through his images allowed Jewish immigrants to stage themselves as European inhabitants of a Middle Eastern space.⁴⁴ However, the

⁴⁰ Joseph Roth died in Parisian exile on 27 May 1939; Georg Bernhard died in New York on 10 February 1944.

⁴¹ Kühne, *Die zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 196. On émigré photographers in Palestine see, for example, Rona Sela, *Tsilum BePalestin: Erets Israel BeShnot HaShloshim VeHaArbaim* (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Art, 2000). See also Annette Vowinckel, "German (Jewish) Photojournalists in Exile: A Story of Networks and Success," *German History* 31, no. 4 (2013): 473–496.

⁴² One example is the studio Brenner. It closed its doors in Cologne and reopened in Haifa.

⁴³ See for example, Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016); Badr El Hage, "The Armenian Pioneers of Middle Eastern Photography," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 31 (2007), 22–26; Issam Nassar, "Early Local Photography in Jerusalem," *History of Photography* 27, no. 4 (2003): 320–332.

⁴⁴ Dor Guez, *Orientalism Trom-Israeli: Diokan Metsulam [Pre-Israeli Orientalism: The Photographed Portrait]* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015), 158.

interwar years saw a decline of professional studio photography, accelerated through increasing possibilities for vernacular photographic practices which also paved the way for a vernacularization of views.⁴⁵ Many immigrants arriving in Palestine in the late 1920s and 1930s came with their own cameras and countless adverts for Kodak cameras and films in local Jewish newspapers attest to the fact that there was no lack of means for amateur photographers.⁴⁶ Snapshots replaced carefully curated studio photographs, taking away some of the agency of the sitters while democratizing photographic practices for an increasing group of camera owners.⁴⁷ Cameras left the studios capturing what happened around them and providing imprints of “decisive moments” in the sense of new documentary patterns introduced across the globe.⁴⁸ The photographic archive of Zeev Alexandrovicz, the photographer who had documented the Basel congress, attests to this change.⁴⁹ Like Gronemann, Alexandrovicz arrived in Palestine in 1936 and like various other photographers, he tried to establish himself as a photographing insider of Tel Aviv’s cityscapes. One of his street views shows two men wearing western-style clothes interacting on a street wet from rain, presenting a variety of impressions gained from a stroll through Tel Aviv (Figure 13).

In the background, a camel caravan moves about the street next to a sign at a building reading “international” in English and Hebrew (transcribed, not translated). Cyclists on the street add another direction of movement and pace to the image, cutting it horizontally. The focus on loose ends and contingencies offered photographers new means of political participation by hinting at the lived diversity of Palestine in contrast to the kind of national uniformity some Zionist leaders envisioned and which they enforced for example with campaigns to buy local, Jewish products only.⁵⁰

Another imprint of Alexandrovicz’s Tel Aviv journeys shows two men playing chess in front of a café called San Remo embodying the merger of visual sights of European and Middle Eastern leisure cultures (Figure 14). Sitting in the sun, dressed in suits and smoking, the men defy the prevalent trope of Zionist productivity and

45 Anat Helman, *Young Tel Aviv: A Tale of Two Cities* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 107 – 108; Calafato, *Making the Modern Turkish Citizen*, 139.

46 See for example *Davar*, 18.06.1931.

47 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 30.

48 The expression “decisive moment” has been coined by Henri Cartier Bresson. On documentary photography see for example Helmut Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 1946–153.

49 See <https://www.zeevalexandrovicz.com/about> [7.5.2024].

50 See for example Hisky Shoham, “‘Buy Local’ or ‘Buy Jewish’? Separatist Consumption in Interwar Palestine.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 3 (August 2013): 469–98.



Figure 13: Zeev Alexandrovicz, “Intersection of Nahalat Binyamin, Sheffer and Grusenberg Streets, 1932.”



Figure 14: Zeev Alexandrovicz, “Chess Players at Café San Remo, 1932.”

progress. They have become involuntary protagonists of Alexandrovicz's visual creation of a cosmopolitan public sphere in Tel Aviv. Gronemann's photographs from his Palestine years mirror this development. A private photograph of him playing chess closely resembles the scene captured in Tel Aviv (Figure 15).

Sitting in the sun Gronemann leans over the chessboard in concentration; his chess mate likewise ponders a potential next move. On the one hand, the provisional arrangement of the folding table and chairs points to the men's adaptability to local conditions. On the other hand, the game in a groomed garden, Gronemann's cigar and hat and the men's overall attire appear as closely embraced relics of habits from before their migration. The image, like various others in Gronemann's collection, attests to a turn towards less orchestrated views. Neither Gronemann nor his chess mate pay attention to the photographer who might just have been a companion sitting in close proximity to them and practicing his own hobby, as the low angle suggests.

While this particular photograph seems to have been taken as part of a private pastime, public appearances likewise attained a less formal character. This can be seen particularly well in those images in which Gronemann mingled with actors and artists around theater premises. The steadily growing cultural scene – accelerated by



Figure 15: Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135/43.

immigration waves and increased possibilities for travel – also brought with it the emergence of the importance of public opinion expressed, for example, in the feuilleton as a new platform for reviews and images adding to the pages of newspaper an additional type of news and gossip. As a consequence, cultural agents such as actors, musicians or playwrights emerged as a new category of celebrities.⁵¹ Photography was a crucial tool of rendering these new stars visible to a public beyond Tel Aviv's theater stages and photographers mingled in front of their premises to catch images they could sell to the local press.⁵² Gronemann, writing and attending plays, became part of this burgeoning scene. While snapshots of the kind taken in Basel had manifested his presence in Zionist politics, in the Yishuv, he transitioned into the visual sphere of local actors and theater people. In images like the one printed in the newspaper *Kol Israel* we see Gronemann next to the actress Hanna Maron, who, in 1951, played the lead role in Gronemann's biblical comedy *Queen Saba* (Figure 16). The photographer has captured Gronemann in pointing with his index finger at the camera, as if to make Maron aware of the importance of her public appearance.

Yet, at the same time, the proximity to stars like Maron had her fame extended back to him and for some time Gronemann appeared to become a household name. Since the mid-1940s, he was known as the author of the successful play *King Solomon and Shalmai the Cobbler* which had premiered in 1942 at Tel Aviv's Ohel Theater.

While Gronemann was part of this process, he seemed to be uncomfortable with the new kind of short-lived fame created by the camera because to him, it was a symptom, of an unprecedented primacy of shallow ephemerality over approved values. In a 1945 theater review titled "On the question of topicality," he made a plea against the dismissal of works that don't reflect current circumstances which he felt had become a prevalent trend. Abandoning Greek drama or Shakespeare for the sake of ostensibly more topical issues, so Gronemann, would mean to embrace an "ignoble actuality" for actuality's sake. Instead, it was the necessary distance to an event or an idea that was able to guarantee "noble actuality" of timelessness.⁵³ Without being embedded within a certain tradition of theatrical writing, no play of substance was able to emerge; an artist needed to be versed in the traditions of classic artistic creation to produce new art. To substantiate his point he employed a comparison between "high art" and photography which would never be able to create true art but

⁵¹ Parallel developments can be seen in the United States of the nineteenth century. Douglas and McDonnell, *Celebrity*, 67; 88.

⁵² Douglas and McDonnell, *Celebrity*, 75.

⁵³ Sammy Gronemann, "Zur Frage der Aktualität (1945)," Sammy Gronemann, *Kurzprosa und Nachlasstexte*, ed. Jan Kühne (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2023), 344–347, 346.



Figure 16: *Kol Israel*, 30.8.1951.

was merely copying the achievements of more talented artists, devoid of what Walter Benjamin, in his 1935 essay on the technical reproducibility of art, had called the “aura” and only providing what Georg Simmel had come to term “surface verisimilitude.”⁵⁴ Given the intense relationship with photographic representation in the European years of his life, this dismissal of photography’s capacity to represent a “higher, vivid and always current truth, a piece of reality” of the kind more “established” arts were able to might surprise.⁵⁵ But it mirrors Gronemann’s increasing discomfort with the kind of public sphere he found himself thrown into in

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [1935] (Berlin, Suhrkamp 2010). On Simmel see Amos Morris-Reich, *Race and Photography: Racial Photography as Scientific Evidence, 1876–1980* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 78.

⁵⁵ Gronemann, “Zur Frage der Aktualität,” 347.



Figure 17: Sammy Gronemann collection, CZA A135/43.

the later years of his life. This was a community that reflected a new, more short-lived political and cultural sociability for the sake of short-term goals, of a kind that was radically opposed to the times he had come of age in and which he had helped to create at the same time. Another snapshot of him reflects this conflicted stance (Figure 17).

Gronemann stands in front of a public building, about to enter. The bright sun mocks his formal attire, a suit with a vest that also serves to carry his pocket watch. Gronemann, a cigar in his mouth, looks at the photographer with some dismay, potentially also a teasing irony. The stretched pose radiates confidence. The

photograph returns some of the agency that the snapshot seemed to have taken from him. It suggests that photography continued, by other means, to offer Gronemann and other European Jews a way to express the creation of a bourgeois culture not necessarily in defiance of but in addition to a local Labor Zionist iconography that sought to stress Zionist productivity and progress.⁵⁶ Gronemann knows that his appearance might be out of time and place, but that it is the very culture that bore such appearances that helped found a cultural scene under the bright sun of Tel Aviv. The photograph, thus, more than others, stands for the interplay of performance and perception that determined Gronemann's engagement with the camera and thereby his engagement with the different facets of both his own identity and the outlook of the state he helped create.

4 Illustrating Integration

The move to Palestine in many ways meant a loss to Gronemann, added to by the sudden death of his wife in a car accident only weeks after their arrival.⁵⁷ He had left the European environment in which he had felt at ease behind, and the Jewish society he saw emerging before him was different from the one imagined in Europe's congress halls.⁵⁸ In one of his last texts, Gronemann resumes that his forced departure from Germany was an irreparable break that in many ways cut his career and that of many of his contemporaries short.⁵⁹ The changing relationship with visibility is a mirror of this rupture. The spotlight he moved into in Palestine through his writing was brighter – metaphorically lit by the Middle Eastern sun – but it also reveals the unease Gronemann expressed about this new reality. In order to become “public,” he was to give up the kind of agency over his appearance he was used to from Europe; others would decide about his appearance. While presenting a means of integration and allowing for statements of belonging and attachment in Europe, the camera of the Yishuv created a society that he while becoming part of it, did not really feel he fit into even if the sheer mass of created photographs and the question

⁵⁶ See for example Rona Sela, *Tsilum BePalestin. Erets Israel BeShnot HaShloshim VeHaArbaim* (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Art, 2000) and Ruth Oren, “Zionist Photography, 1910–41: Constructing a Landscape,” *History of Photography* 19, no. 3 (1995): 201–9.

⁵⁷ Kühne, *Die zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 25.

⁵⁸ For a deeper discussion on Gronemann's visions for the Zionist state see the contribution of Jan Kühne in this volume.

⁵⁹ Sammy Gronemann, “Zu meiner Entlastung (1953),” Sammy Gronemann, *Kurzprosa und Nachlasstexte*, ed. Jan Kühne (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2023), 318–321.

to what extent private photographs entered the public realm might have helped to mitigate some of the fears of a loss of control.

At the same time, Gronemann seemed to underestimate the ways he continued to remain visible. It was through other means of visibility that some of the agency was returned to him.⁶⁰ During these later years of his life, additional art forms came to illustrate his paths, including caricature and painting. Their makers seemed to agree on Gronemann's trademarks being the crooked posture of an elderly, corpulent, bald man, with a cigar, a stick, glasses and a hat.⁶¹ Barely any caricatures that were created of him in these years lack these markers; the additional book under his arm completes the bourgeois habitus marking him as an outsider on the one hand but presenting him as a fixed element of Hebrew culture in the Yishuv. In offering a hyperbolic view of a figure that demands recognition, these portraits established Gronemann as a local celebrity (Figure 18).⁶²

The creator of this caricature, Josef Bass, seems to be quoting an earlier caricature drawn by Menachem Birnbaum who presented Gronemann from up front. In it, Gronemann holds some reading material under his arms, this time, a copy of the Zionist satire magazine *Schlemiel*.⁶³ In representing the opposite of the Labor Zionist ideal of bodily strength and health and a diasporic form of Jewish cultural production, the caricatures seem to attest to the successful manifestation of alternative views in the canon of Zionist arts and culture in Palestine and later Israel. It is ironic but not altogether surprising that it was through caricature that some of the agency Gronemann lost through the snapshot was returned to him. The relationship between photography and caricature, then, not only underscores the centrality of the interplay between appearance and reality, witty understatement and hyperbole that can be located as a red thread in his biography and writing, it also offers a way to connect the different modes of self-presentation Gronemann chose for himself throughout his life. Being printed in *Haaretz*, Baas' caricature salvaged some of the remnants of the kind of image, Gronemann had been busy creating of himself during his early European years in a world that was now lost. A photograph taken towards the end of his life looks like one of the caricatures being transformed back into a

60 This resonates with Joachim Schlör's suggestion of Jewish families having to acquire new "cultural techniques" upon emigration. For Gronemann, caricature seemed to emerge as a new cultural language which, better than photography, was able to communicate who he was. Joachim Schlör, "Irgendwo auf der Welt": The Emigration of Jews from Nazi Germany as a Transnational Experience," *Three-Way Street: Jews, Germans and the Transnational*, eds. Jay Howard Geller and Leslie Morris (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 220–238. 227.

61 See the contribution to this volume of Dan Laor z"l.

62 Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 46–47.

63 Jan Kühne, "Einleitung", in *Sammy Gronemann: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Kurzprosa und Nachlasstexte*, ed. Jan Kühne (Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2023), 8–10.



Figure 18: Caricature of Sammy Gronemann by Josef Bass, published on the occasion of Gronemann's 70th birthday in *Haaretz* (27.2.1945).

photograph, able to point to the different worlds Gronemann lived in and passed through (Figure 19).

Gronemann bows over a script; the glasses have become thicker. Half of his face is blackened by shade alluding to the divided identity that coined his and many of his fellow migrants' lives. Half present, half gone, it also points to the transient nature of his life and work and the limited impact he often felt he had. This dissonance is completed in the artistic quote of this and a second photograph which also suggests Gronemann's ability for self-reflection showing him watching over his own shoulder as "connected critic" (Figure 20).⁶⁴

The portrait by Käthe Ephraim Marcus captured Gronemann's multiple personas in a way that was able to reflect on the ruptured lives of a whole generation of

⁶⁴ See Jan Kühne's interpretation of the image in Kühne, *Die zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 52–53.

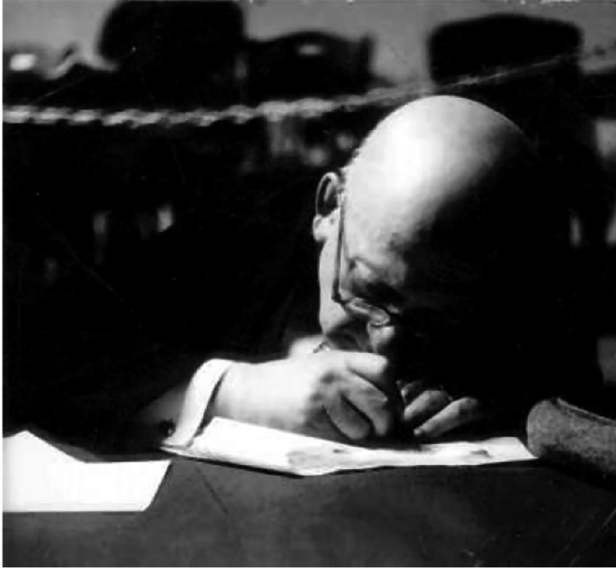


Figure 19: Sammy Gronemann writing. Photo published on occasion of Gronemann's 75th birthday in MB-Mitteilungsblatt (2.3.1950, p. 9f). The photographer could not be located. The publisher is happy to acknowledge the owner's rights.

German–Jewish refugees in Palestine.⁶⁵ She painted Gronemann into the visual canon of Zionist public figures in addition to what many cameras had done before her. Marcus' study presents a coda to this investigation in that it seems to combine both, his self-image and the perception others had of him.

Looking at a Jewish life of the kind lived by Sammy Gronemann through the lens of the visuals he collected of himself and others, and those that archives keep of him, helps to gain insights into a biography between the worlds that shaped a person and that this person shaped in return. The fact that Gronemann closely kept these different portraits and would take them with him to Palestine attests to their meaning for him even if the absence of an album makes it impossible to know how he would have arranged his experiences as part of a visual narrative. They highlight the roles he played and the characters he adopted and provide insights into the forms of sociability that coined his biography. In choosing to keep these images – including those snapshots that betray a certain unease – he created a combination of visuals

⁶⁵ The artist migrated to Palestine herself, from Berlin, in 1934. Kühne, *Die zionistische Komödie im Drama Sammy Gronemanns*, 52.



Figure 20: Käthe Ephraim Marcus, Sammy Gronemann.

that serve as memento mori of a journey that offers both parallels to and diversions from the biographical lines drawn by his texts. They help to understand his life as part of the many spheres he shaped.