

Eugeen van Mieghem (1875-1930) and the Jewish Emigrants of the Red Star Line

I) Eugeen Van Mieghem

The early years

Eugeen Van Mieghem was born at his parent's inn in Antwerp (Belgium) on October 1st 1875. His father, a former bargee opened a tavern at the bank of the river Scheldt around 1870. It was only in 1863 that a new spring for the Antwerp port started as the Belgian government bought from Holland the free use of the river Scheldt. Around 1880 the Van Mieghem family moved slightly further north to Montevideostraat on The Little Island ('Het Eilandje'), the port area surrounded by the River Scheldt and the docks. The new inn was situated right opposite the building belonging to the Red Star Line, the shipping company that transported nearly 2.7 million European emigrants (of which Jews from Eastern Europe) to their new lives in America and Canada. In 1892 Van Mieghem enrolled at the Antwerp academy of art but was forced to leave it after a clash with Professor Siberdt (the very same man who had dismissed Vincent Van Gogh in 1886). His father sent him to the port to look for freight for his shipping agency business. The new social trends of the beginning of the 20th century struck a chord with Van Mieghem and he began to form ideals he never renounced: he wanted to be the artist of the people in this fast-growing world port.

The world passed through his street

The Ellis Island Immigration Station was opened in New York on January 1st 1892 to receive the influx of exiles. Between 1892 and 1924 no fewer than twelve million would-be immigrants arrived at this entry point. Antwerp's Red Star Line was founded (mostly with American capital) in 1872 and continued to transport passengers until 1935. In 1893 this shipping company built a stone depot (now a listed building) on the corner of Montevideostraat and the Rijnkaai (where their ships berthed). There the travellers were examined by the doctor and their clothes disinfected before embarkation, so Van Mieghem was confronted by the flood of refugees on a daily basis. His compassion is reflected in an impressive series of drawings of these emigrants in black chalk and pastel. The artist, who avidly read the works of the Russian writers, did not need to leave home to see the world. Van Mieghem gave the anonymous, who filed down Montevideostraat past his door, a face in his art.

Now in dire financial straits, in November 1904 Eugeen's wife Augustine posed naked for her husband and a group of artists. A few months later Van Mieghem drew his ailing wife on the back of mourning cards, bills of lading and port telegrams. The young woman died of tuberculosis on March 12th 1905 at the age of just 24. Demoralized and desperate, Van Mieghem did not show his work at all in the period between 1905 and 1910. In November 1912, at the age of 37, the artist had his first individual exhibition but the German invasion of Belgium on August 4th 1914 and the First World War interrupted the growing international interest in Van Mieghem's work. In March 1919 he showed his extensive war oeuvre and art critics were comparing him to Steinlen, Forain and Kollwitz. In 1920 Van Mieghem obtained a teaching post at the Antwerp academy and his authentic social art gradually made its breakthrough in exhibitions at home and abroad. However, in 1925 health problems culminated in the artist's withdrawal from public life. On March 24th 1930 Eugeen Karel Van Mieghem died just 54 years old.

The compassionate observer

In the European social art of the turn of the century many artists admired the work of Jean-François Millet. Other artists strove to match this social authenticity: Constantin Meunier and Vincent van Gogh settled in the Borinage, Jozef Israëls lived among the fishermen on the coast, Max Liebermann and Henry Van de Velde headed for the countryside. As a child of the port, Van Mieghem did not experience their restlessness. Even as a young boy he was fascinated by the colourful hustle and bustle of life at the dockside. His origins determined his later art. He did not need to go in search of inspiration, for the world was on his doorstep. Driven by his youthful idealism, he left behind a unique and enduring oeuvre about the lives of ordinary people in a cosmopolitan seaport. Art-critic Grace Glueck wrote recently in *The New York Times*: "...*But Van Mieghem, a passionate realist attuned to the working class in his home city, Antwerp, Belgium, was a fine draftsman and colorist whose long-forgotten work evokes that of van Gogh and Käthe Kollwitz. Now it seems to be slowly returning to art-world memory...*" His works of the life in a world port and the emigrants are unique artistic and valuable historical documents, which provide abiding evidence of the sympathy of a single-minded observer of people often compelled to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

II) The Jewish Emigrants of the Red Star Line

Antwerp, Gateway to the New World: "One Foot in America!"

With its efficient network of Eastern European agents and competitive prices, the Red Star Line succeeded in transporting about 2.7 million emigrants up until 1935. Many emigrants would arrive in Antwerp after having travelled for weeks. It was often a journey lasting several weeks for the emigrants from their home countries to Antwerp's Rhine Quay, where the ships of the Red Star Line were moored. Before embarkation the emigrants had to undergo a medical examination to ensure that they were sufficiently healthy so as not to be sent back from the U.S. by the American immigration authorities – at the cost of the shipping line.

In 1893 the Red Star Line opened an office on Montevideo Street where the medical examinations were conducted, and clothing and luggage disinfected. The emigrants passed their last days before departure in guesthouses that offered little comfort or hygiene.

Typically, the journey from Antwerp to New York by steamship took anywhere from seven to fourteen days. For the steerage passengers, travelling outside on the deck or inside in the stuffy hold, it was a grueling ordeal. The food was unpalatable, the drinking water often impure, and many became seasick. Emigrants were motivated by a variety of forces: economic necessity, the longing for freedom, a sense of adventure, the lure of fortune and ambition. The Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia were driven chiefly by chronic poverty and unemployment, as well as continual oppression and persecution. Massive emigration followed the 1881 murder of the liberal Tsar Aleksandr II (1855-1881), who had introduced important reforms in Russia that improved the position of Jews living in the Pale of Settlement, that area of Russia where the Jews were legally authorized to settle.

The first major exodus began the summer of 1881, when thousands of refugees, in flight from pogroms that had spread across the whole of Ukraine, poured into the city of Brody. Starving and homeless, these Jewish refugees were sometimes forced to sleep on the streets, and suffered unanticipated harsh treatment by the Austrian authorities. These refugees presented a huge problem that extended beyond the Jewish community of Brody, which was obviously unable to care for them. The bloody pogroms that were carried out in 1903 in Kishinev, capital of Bessarabia (now Chisinau in Moldavia) caused panic among the east European

Jewish communities and led to large-scale emigration. Further pogroms triggered by the failed People's Revolution of 1905 contributed to the emigration to America. Jews from the Ukraine and southern Russia usually crossed the Austro-Hungarian border illegally before travelling by train to Vienna or Berlin and then regrouping for the journey to one of the major ports of embarkation: Hamburg and Bremen (Germany), Rotterdam or Amsterdam (Holland) and Antwerp (Belgium).

But discomfort, hunger and humiliation were nothing compared to the abject terror gripping all emigrants: that they, or one of their family, might be sent back or kept off the boat after the dockside inspection. In his book *Mottel: The Cantor's Son*, Sholom Aleichem describes a family waiting in Antwerp to leave with the Red Star Line: " ...People tell them that they should take a walk to the doctor. So they go to the doctor. The doctor examines them and finds they are all hale and hearty and can go to America, but she, Goldele, cannot go, because she has trachomas on her eyes... So they had to go off to America and leave her, Goldele, here until the trachomas would go away from her eyes... ". He went on: " ...No other city was I so sorry to leave as Antwerp. Not so much the city, as the people. And not so much the people as the gang of emigrants. And not so much the gang, either as my friends. Many have already gone. Vashti, Alteh, and Big Mottel are in America by this time making a living...".

Some of those leaving in the mass of emigrants went on to become famous Americans, including Irving Berlin, Albert Einstein and the writer Yuri Suhl, who wrote in his memoir:

" ...I don't remember exactly what the weather was like during those days, so I'll skip that. But I remember a few other things and remember them well. When we arrived in Antwerp my father heaved a deep sigh and said, "Now, thank God, we are with one foot in America already. Next stop is New York". (Excerpt from "One Foot in America"). Antwerp today has an important Jewish community. Just as the Sephardic Jews were major economic players during Antwerp's Golden Age, it was mainly Ashkenazi Jews who made Antwerp the diamond capital of the world centuries later. The multicultural city of Antwerp, with its concentration of Hasidic Jews, is today sometimes regarded as the last shtetl in modern Europe.

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