

Windows Into Paradise

by Lucy Gordan

In Mainz, Germany, one finds a remarkable set of stained-glass windows by Jewish artist Marc Chagall in a Catholic church — the last works of Chagall's life. How did they get there?

On the second day — August 19 — of his first pastoral trip abroad for the celebrations of World Youth Day in Cologne, the largest and richest archdiocese of his native Germany, Pope Benedict XVI paid an historic visit to the city's synagogue. It had been rebuilt on the site of the synagogue of Germany's oldest and largest Jewish community destroyed during "Kristallnacht" on November 9-10, 1938. Here, in the presence of many survivors of the "shoah" or Holocaust, including Fela Lehrer, the mother of Abraham Lehrer, President of Cologne's Jewish community, Benedict XVI pronounced a strong ecumenical message. "The past," he said, "has been forever scarred by an unprecedented crime which we must not forget. Catholics and Jews must look forward to the future, to their future relations, and stand vigil together against a rebirth of anti-Semitism and of a growing hostility against foreigners in Germany."

Thirty years ago in his native city of Mainz, only an hour's train ride south of Cologne, Monsignor Klaus Mayer, the son of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, a "Shoah" survivor himself, and today 82 years old, launched an earlier ecumenical message.

In 1973, he persuaded the world-famous Jewish Russian-born French artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985) to make stained-glass windows for his parish church of St. Stephan, which had been badly damaged by bombs on three different dates during World War II.

Today the Gutenberg Museum, the immense Romanesque (11th century) Cathedral with sculptures by the medieval Master of Naumberg, and St. Stephan's are the three great sights of Mayer's beloved city, founded long ago by

Roman soldiers in the first century B.C. Lucy Gordan had the pleasure of talking with Mayer about his long life, his vocation, and the windows he helped to create.



Monsignor Klaus Mayer

Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

Your father was Jewish, but you were brought up Catholic?

MAYER: I wasn't baptized until I was eleven years old — in 1934 — so I could go to a highly respected Catholic school.

What happened to you and your family during World War II?

MAYER: My grandfather was the President of the Jewish community in Mainz from 1908-41. In July 1941 my father, who had gone to Argentina in 1933, sent for his parents and my older brother, who had just graduated from high school. Otherwise he would have been drafted.

They left in the nick of time. My mother and I were blocked here in Mainz because after October 1941 the Nazis allowed no one to leave. At that time I was also expelled from school because I was "not Aryan." The Benedictines who ran my school — the famous boarding school in Ettal near Garmisch in Bavaria where our mother had sent my brother and me in 1934 — were also sent away.

I came back to Mainz, but was not allowed to attend school here either. I had to take my *Abitur* — high school — exams as an external private student. I was the only examinee. My oral interrogation lasted from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. It was extremely difficult, including questions in every subject of the *Abitur's* last three years, but I passed. This was March 1942.

I was not deported because I had a Catholic Aryan mother. It was not yet dangerous for me



Adam and Eve

Noah



— unless I was reported for falling in love with an Aryan, the only possibility since by that time there were no Jewish girls left in Mainz.

From March 1942 until the end of the war?

MAYER: In the hopes of getting me to Argentina somehow, my mother sent me to school in Leipzig to learn Spanish, but a fellow-student betrayed me. I was expelled after only three days, again because I was "not Aryan". My beloved mother, the person I've admired the most during my now long life — she had been decorated for her heroism and generosity to others as a nurse here in Mainz during the First World War — didn't lose heart. She found another language school for me, this time in Hamburg. I got a diploma there in 1943 in Spanish, started to support myself by doing translations, and joined a resistance cell headed by a priest. We helped Czech deportees, forced laborers, to escape to Sweden or England.

In the summer of 1943, I had to return to Mainz because the Nazi official in charge of our street told my mother I would be deported if I didn't come home. It had become dangerous for me now.

The husband of a school friend of my mother's owned a sawmill on a small island in the Rhine not far from Mainz. He protected me. I worked in his warehouse, more or less in hiding now, from the fall of 1943 until February 27, 1945 when Mainz was destroyed by the Allies' fire-bombs. It was my salvation that I was no longer in Hamburg because the Gestapo had uncovered and executed all the others in my resistance cell. None of them betrayed me.

And your mother?

MAYER: My mother lost everything on February 27, 1945. She didn't even have a toothbrush, but we were lucky. We had survived. Like Dresden, Mainz burned for three days.

We went by foot, 15 kilometers, to Bodenheim near Worms and then to Lörzweiler, where I was recruited to join the Volksturm, the Nazis' last cry, but my mother was again able to hide me until the American tanks arrived and I could go free.

Tell me about your vocation. How old were you when you decided to become a priest? Why? What did your mother think?

MAYER: I'd decided to become a priest during the war. I had seen too much suffering. Like my mother, I wanted to help others.

I entered a seminary in the summer of 1945.



My mother was happy for me. I was ordained in 1950.

How long have you been at St. Stephan's?

MAYER: Since May 1, 1965.

Tell *Inside the Vatican* readers the story of your remarkable windows.

MAYER: It's a long story. God meant it to be. It was my job to restore St. Stephan's. It had been a famous church, with a beautiful cloister. I had the cloister restored between 1968 and 1971, then the early Gothic Eastern apse (from 1290). The temporary post-war windows had to be removed in order to complete the necessary masonry work on the apse's tracery. I wanted to replace them with stained-glass windows, at least in the central window.

What about Chagall? How did you get the idea to ask him to make the windows?

MAYER: I didn't know Chagall. I only knew his reputation. I had two books about him and his works. One was about his twelve windows in the Hadassah Hospital of the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in Jerusalem (1962); the other about his windows in the Fraumünster in Zurich. Until then I only knew about Chagall through these two books. I'd never seen an original of his works.

One day in 1973, I had an inspiration. Perhaps because it was the year that the Musée National Message Biblique was opened in Nice, housing hundreds of Chagall's biblical works. I thought to myself, "If anyone could fulfill, actually overfulfill, my dream windows, it would be Marc Chagall." So on April 10th I wrote him a first letter. Only three things could happen: Chagall wouldn't answer my letter; he would say no immediately; or he would show interest. Chagall didn't answer himself; Charles Marq, his associate at the studio in Rheims, replied in Chagall's name.

"The project interests him," wrote Marq, who worked with Chagall for 28 years, "but the importance of the task requires deep consideration and

reflection." Marq said that, if I was in a hurry, I should approach another artist, but if I had time...

So Chagall didn't say no, but he didn't say yes either. I continued to write him letters and, after a year, on April 23, 1974, he invited me to visit him in Saint Paul de Vence.

Your first impressions of Chagall?

MAYER: He was very modest. Very attractive, but detached. Not cozy.

How did you persuade him to make them?

MAYER: For the first two years I didn't get a yes, but over time Marc and his wife Vava and I became friends. I regard this friendship as a gift of God. On December 30, 1976, I received a letter from Vava. She had written it on December 22. It said: "My husband is working on the plans for one window for St. Stephan's." I knew that, if Marc had allowed Vava to write this letter, he meant yes.

So patience is a virtue?

MAYER: Yes, my patience helped, but it wasn't only my patience. After my first letter, I had started writing Chagall short meditations on his works. My first meditation was about a painting by Chagall called "The Rabbi," which I'd just seen in the Stadelik Museum in Amsterdam. Through my meditations I wanted to show Chagall that he and I were on the same wavelength.

It took Chagall a long time to make the nine windows; did he design the whole project all at once or design one window at a time?

MAYER: As I said, he began work on the first stained glass window in December 1976. It was installed here on September 23, 1978. He was 90 years old.

As soon as he finished each window, he started designing the next. He was a mystic.

In 1979 he completed the two flanking windows; in 1981 three more; all six windows are in the eastern apse. He began work on the transept's windows when he was 96 and finished them two years later, on November 6, 1984.

He died only a few months afterwards, on March 28, 1985.

Chagall's Abraham and the Angels



The Crucifixion



The windows were Chagall's last work; did he live to see them in place in St. Stephan's?

MAYER: No, the last window was inaugurated on May 11, 1985.

What is the meaning of the predominant blue?

MAYER: Heaven. The glory of God, from Psalm 19. Blue is the color of mystery, the invisible mystery of God. The blue backgrounds of all the windows unify them.

The windows are meant to symbolize Christian-Jewish reconciliation and solidarity, German-French friendship, and international understanding and peace. Was that your idea?

MAYER: Mine and Chagall's. A joint effort.

I was aware of Chagall's deep religious faith and his genius. I asked him to select and design the message that he considered important for our times. I wanted a visible token to honor ecumenism, international peace, and the joy of life.

He chose the appropriate Bible stories. They all come from the Old Testament except for the Crucifixion because he wanted to show how Christianity grew out of Judaism.

It's also important to remember that, since 990 AD, St. Stephan's has been a universal church. In the Middle Ages its role was to pray for peace throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

What are the themes Chagall chose?

MAYER: For the central window: the indissoluble bond between Jews and Christians: their belief in one God. The Eucharist feast is prefigured in the feast of Yahweh at Abraham's table; the sacrifice of Christ is implied in the sacrifice of Isaac.

In the flanking windows: the history of human salvation from Creation to the everlasting Sabbath.

The three other apse windows: the Psalms.

Lastly, the three transept windows, for which Chagall refused payment, with their 18 shades of blue and no human figures: the entrance to heaven.

Indefatigable Mayer has written a guide book to St. Stephan's as well as three books, all authorized by Chagall and published by Echter-Verlag in Würzburg, about the windows. They concern the middle window, the flanking windows in the apse, and the side windows. All four have been translated into English and are available for purchase by writing to the parsonage: *St. Stephan in Mainz, am Römertor 12, 55116 Mainz, tel. 0049-6131-231640.*

Without a shadow of doubt, Johannes Gutenberg is Mainz's most distinguished native son of all times, but Monsignor Klaus Mayer ranks this great medieval city's most admirable citizen of today. Thanks to him, St. Stephan's is once again a universal church and place of pilgrimage with 200,000 visitors a year.

Lucy Gordan is the Culture & Arts editor of Inside the Vatican.

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