

AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM NEW YORK ANNOUNCES PRESENTATION OF *THREE WITH A PEN: LILY RENÉE, BIL SPIRA, AND PAUL PETER PORGES*

Exhibition features works by Jewish artists, driven from Vienna during World War II,
who survived and flourished thanks to their talent, humor, and resilience

On view March 11 through September 3, 2021 at sole U.S. venue

February 11, 2021 (New York, NY)—[The Austrian Cultural Forum New York](#) today announced its upcoming presentation of *Three with a Pen: Lily Renée, Bil Spira, and Paul Peter Porges* featuring works by the three Jewish artists driven from their homes in Vienna after the German annexation of Austria, the so-called “Anschluss”, in 1938. On view March 11 through September 3, 2021, the exhibition showcases examples of their signature work in comic books, *New Yorker* cartoons, *Mad* magazine spoofs, caricatures, portraiture, fashion design, advertising, and children’s books, among other formats. Biographical material and ephemera amplify the artists’ personal stories of survival and, in part, help contextualize their professional achievements.

Born in Vienna to Jewish parents, Lily Renée Willheim (b.1921), Wilhelm Spira (1913-1999), and Paul Peter Porges (1927-2016) each showed early promise as artists. When Nazi Germany annexed Austria in 1938 and the persecution of Austrian Jews began, Willheim and Porges’ parents placed them on children’s transports to what they thought were safe havens—England and France, respectively. Spira was repeatedly arrested, escaped multiple times, and finally interned in concentration camps for the duration of World War II. Willheim and Porges eventually settled in New York and Spira in Paris where they made successful careers as illustrators and graphic artists.

The exhibition, organized by the Jewish Museum in Vienna, intentionally displays the artwork and biographical information separately so visitors may consider the quality of the artists’ output apart from their experiences during the war and the Holocaust. Depicting a range of subjects and using distinctive techniques, some works were intended to expose and ridicule Nazism and fascism and comment on political and historical events. Others reveal aspects of human nature and contemporary society—both in satirical terms and affectionately.

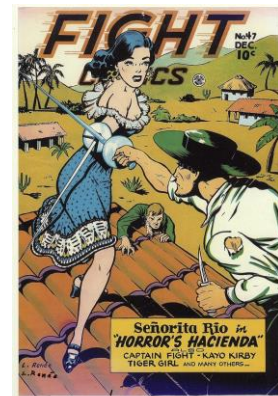
Michael Haider, Director of the Cultural Forum, said, “We are delighted to present this selection of work by these influential artists in New York City, where Lily Renée and Paul Peter Porges settled and where they launched their careers. While very different stylistically, they and Bil Spira produced a rich array of characters and stories based on current events, daily life, memories of Vienna, and their vivid imaginations. We look forward to welcoming visitors to our galleries and related programs illuminating the lives and practices of these three highly creative individuals who wielded mighty pens.”

Lily Renée

The only child of a well-to-do family, Lily Renée Willheim discovered drawing early, creating opulent fantasy worlds with mythical creatures. As a result of the “Anschluss,” her father lost his job, her school friends were no longer allowed to play with her, and, like many, the family endured a variety of hardships. In 1939, at age seventeen, her parents put her on a children’s transport bound for England where she briefly stayed with a British family.



Paul Peter Porges, *Dr. Sigmund Freud tastes his first banana split in America*



Lily Renée, *Señorita Rio* comic strip

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She reunited with her parents in New York City in 1940, where she lives today. After studying at the Art Students League and School of the Visual Arts, she was hired by comic book publishers. An exception in the male-dominated field, she created illustrations for several comic books including *Señorita Rio*, a glamorous Brazilian secret agent fighting the Nazis, the comedy duo Abbott and Costello, and others. Her later works include children's books, decorative motifs, and textile designs. In 2007, Lily Renée attended Comic-Con in San Diego to receive their Inkpot Award and was inducted into the Hall of Fame of Friends of Lulu, an organization promoting women in comics. She celebrates her 100th birthday this year.

Bil Spira

Wilhelm (Bil) Spira was precocious, producing work for newspapers while still in high school. After graduating, he attended the School of Applied Arts and collaborated on an animated cartoon in Paris before returning to Vienna.



Bil Spira, Drawing from Blechhammer camp

Shortly after the “Anschluss,” he was arrested and ordered to leave the country. He returned to Paris where he worked as an illustrator for various publications and as a portraitist of fellow exiles. When Germany invaded France, he escaped to Marseille. There he met Varian Mackey Fry from a New York-based organization helping to address the refugee crisis. Spira put his talents to work by forging identification papers and passports thereby helping save many. Betrayed by an associate, he spent the rest of the war in internment and concentration camps. He exchanged for cigarettes several drawings documenting life in the camps to a British POW with whom he was interned, examples of which are on

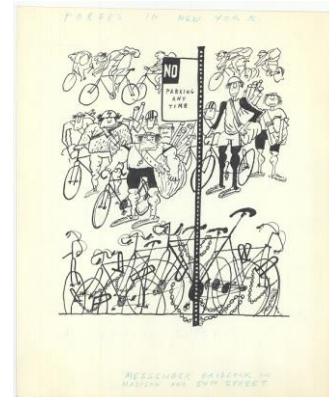
view in the exhibition. Liberated in 1945, he returned to France to work as an illustrator for various publications until his death.

With just a few strokes of his pen, he captured the distinguishing features of a person. His innovative use of blank spaces as formative elements made him a master of reductive technique. Despite his lived experiences and losses, Spira's work is imbued with optimism and humor.

Paul Peter Porges

Paul Peter Porges attended classes conducted by Franz Čížek for children at the Vienna School of Applied Arts. In 1939, he was put on a children's transport to France. He and dozens of refugee children lived in La Guette, a property in the French countryside that had been transformed into a progressive school structured as a “Children's Republic.” When Germany invaded and after a period on the run, Porges was interned. Nevertheless, at age sixteen, he escaped, made his way to Switzerland, and continued his studies in Geneva.

By then a talented graphic artist, he reunited with his parents and brother in New York in 1947. After a period traveling the country with a circus, he joined the U.S. Army where he created a popular comic strip published in *Stars and Stripes*. He went on to produce cartoons for the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Playboy*, *New Yorker*, *Look*, and other national magazines. At *Mad* magazine, he drew satirical caricatures and developed subversive content. The range of publications attest to his creativity, sly humor, and versatile practice.



Paul Peter Porges, *Messenger Gridlock on Madison and 54th Street*

Three with a Pen: Lily Renée, Bil Spira, and Paul Peter Porges was previously presented at the Museum Judenplatz (Jewish Museum Vienna), a Wien Holding museum, curated by Sabine Bergler and Michael Freund. Accompanying the exhibition is a fully illustrated German-English language catalogue published by the Jewish Museum Vienna.

Programming

Public programs will be announced at a future date. Visit <https://www.acfny.org/> for updates.

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A short profile on the exhibition is available on [YouTube](#) featuring interviews with Lily Renée, Bil Spira, and Paul Peter Porges' daughter.

About Austrian Cultural Forum New York

With its architectural landmark building in Midtown Manhattan, the Austrian Cultural Forum New York is dedicated to innovative and cutting-edge programming, showcasing the best of Austrian contemporary art, music, literature, performance, and academic thought in New York and throughout the United States. In addition to presenting three group exhibitions per year in its multi-level gallery space and housing around 13,000 volumes of Austriaca in its library named in honor of the late Vienna-born American writer and intellectual Frederic Morton, it hosts over 100 free events per year in its own auditorium and supports at least as many projects at partner institutions across the nation.

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Images:

Paul Peter Porges, *Dr. Sigmund Freud tastes his first banana split in America*. Proof, pencil and colored crayon on paper, c. 2000. © Jewish Museum Vienna.

Lily Renée, *Señorita Rio* comic strip, in: *Fight Comics* no. 35, December 1944. Reprinted in: *Good Girl Art*, Summer 1991 (reproduction). Collection of the artist.

Bil Spira, *Drawing from Blechhammer camp*. Gouache and colored crayons on paper, 1944. © Imperial War Museum London, Art.IWM ART 17121, Art.IWM ART 17127.

Paul Peter Porges, *Messenger Gridlock on Madison and 54th Street*. Proof, India ink and colored crayon on paper, New York. Appeared in *Crain's New York Business*. © Jewish Museum Vienna.

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