

The Shamir Brothers collection at the Central Zionist Archives - marking 100 years of founding the archive

Yoram E. Shamir, January 2019

[The Shamir brothers](#) did not take the trouble to keep copies of their works. My father, Gabriel Shamir, kept only what he considered to be "important" works: a final sketch of the state emblem (signed by David Ben-Gurion), 110 posters, 45 medals, a few items of packaging and a small number of other graphic works. He did not consider newspaper ads to be important, however, after two years of searching, we can now show 800 ads. My uncle, Maxim Shamir, meticulously preserved only the 2000 philatelic items the studio designed. A few other works were found by his son in a garden shed, under a lawnmower, in an old suitcase.

My uncle passed away in 1990 and my father passed away two years later. Their graphic work was intertwined in the Yishuv struggle for independence and in the State of Israel in its early decades. It was clear to us that the collection could not be kept in the possession of one of the four heirs. It is appropriate that work done for public institutions, as well as for enterprises and commercial companies in five critical decades in the history of our people, be made available to the public. Another consideration was technical - the entire graphic estate (except the medals) was built from paperwork. The Tel Aviv climate has never been paper-friendly.

I examined options for placing Shamir's artistic estate in institutions in Jerusalem, away from the humid air of Tel Aviv. During a visit to one of the reputable institutions, the curator asked: "Sarah, where are the keys?". The keys were hanging from a coat rack in the hallway outside the graphics department's door! In contrast, at the Zionist Archives, Director Yoram Mayorek took me to the depths of the earth, pressed security codes in the elevator and on every floor, at every door, and showed me the climate control systems.

Within a month I realized that the decision to place the collection in the Zionist Archives was correct. 110 Shamir brothers' posters were photographed and presented in an album available to the public; this avoids physical contact with the original posters. To my surprise, at the time, the Zionist Archives already had 40 Shamir posters, which were not found in the Shamir's estate.

The Shamir brothers opened the studio immediately after their arrival in Palestine in 1935 and their first jobs, like all immigrants, were for companies run by their Latvian compatriots, such as Dr. Lipshitz the Ford importer and Eliyahu Frumchenko, a chocolate producer. In 1935 they received one of their early public commissions for a poster for the [Levant Fair 1936 "Presenting Our Growth,"](#) showing the development of the Palestine economy since the previous fair.

The big leap into the public realm occurred during World War II. For the first two years, the brothers designed recruitment posters for the British Army and Royal Navy. After the threat of a German invasion of Palestine was removed, the Jewish Agency was harnessed to a "Jewish mobilization" effort and its posters for mobilization carried [messages of revenge and rescue](#).

To understand the importance of posters for propaganda, marketing, and publicity in the 1940s, it is worth remembering that not every house had a radio receiver. Even a daily newspaper subscription was beyond the reach of many families. The poster displayed on the streets or in factories and other spaces was visible to all without the viewer paying. The poster was therefore a major instrument in the advertising mix. A campaign planner strives to deliver a uniform message across all media. In 1957, a [Home and Garden exhibition](#) was held. The main motif in the poster was a woman holding a watering can in one hand and in the other a paint brush. This motif was also repeated in newspaper ads.

When I was a Public Relations Manager at Tel Aviv University, I recruited my father, who was

retired by then, to design posters, logos and invitations (pro bono). It was an opportunity to take a closer look at the creation of a poster. In 1989, an international [conference on breast cancer](#) was held at the university. My father was asked to design a poster for the conference. He was debating how to visually express breast cancer. He preferred not to show an image of cancer cells or the result of a breast removal op. He also decided not to show a photograph of a healthy female breast. The solution: to show a healthy female shape from art. He searched for days, and found: Michelangelo's "Night" statue.

With the establishment of the state, five Arab armies invaded Israel. The need for recruiting personnel for the security forces increased as was the need to raise resources to finance the war and absorb the large immigration. The Shamir brothers designed posters for the War Bonds, the National Bonds and later the Defence Fund. The Keren Kayemet (JNF) also commissioned fundraising posters through tree planting, Gold Book registration or the purchase of stamps issued by the JNF (a full collection of these can be found in the Archives).

The country announced an 'austerity' regime which meant [rationing of food](#) and other basic commodities. Shamir brothers designed posters for the Supply Ministry showing [the portions distributed each month](#). Soon, a 'black market' developed and the ministry went out to fight the speculators.

In the election campaign for the constituent assembly in 1949, the Shamir brothers used their experience of election campaigns for the Zionist Congress. In the following years, they worked for most of the Zionist parties – on the [left](#), [right](#) and [centre](#) of the political spectrum. It is likely that Shamir brothers did not display ideological leanings but rather showed loyalty to their families' livelihoods.

Alongside the various elements of government, Shamir Studio had another public client: The General Workers' Federation (Histadrut). Its messages were not those of a regular trade union but of a nationally responsible body. Thus, the Histadrut dealt with the absorption of immigration, the expansion of the use of the Hebrew language, the encouragement of moving from the city to the country, sports and more.

The image of two leaders charmed the brothers Shamir - Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion. They presented Herzl's portrait as a [3D sculpture](#) on one of Israel's first stamps. To mark the 50th anniversary of Herzl's death, they designed a full-size poster with a bizarre caption: "50 Years to death ---- " with a partial Hebrew date. In 2011, the mystery was solved: In the Palestine Poster Project Archives website, I found a poster in the same colours - blue and light blue - with the inscription (in the same letters font): "Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl" and the text "The work will provide us with bread, honour and freedom." That was clearly the lost half of the poster. A student at the Shankar Graphic Documentation Institute successfully combined the two halves and today it can be seen [in its entirety](#) on the Shamir Brothers website.

The image of Ben-Gurion was included in a Labour Party election poster, "[The Golden Calf or the Messiah's Day, Kremlin or Jerusalem,](#)" in the stamp of the JNF and on [a medal in honour of his 80th birthday](#). I see the draft drawings of the medal every day in a frame on my desk.

The use of posters in the marketing of cultural and sporting events was an important vehicle even after their decline in the era of television and the Internet. Shamir brothers designed posters for Hapoel and Maccabi and the theme from two of them were even reused after the brothers' death. From the poster "[Workers, Your Place is in Our Ranks](#)", by the Sports Association Hapoel, the image of a sportsman was used – with our permission – as a logo for a DVD set called "Hebrew Work". On the other hand, the poster of the 8th Hapoel Games was used – without our permission – for a poster promoting a Leibach show in Israel, a Slovenian band (with the Star of David in the national flag replaced by a cross). In the poster for the second Choirs Festival, my uncle Maxim

Shamir used the Exlibris he designed for his son Gideon, a music student, as a logo for the festival. This became the festival's permanent logo.

At the same time as the public clients, Studio Shamir worked, since its beginnings in Tel Aviv, for industrial and commercial companies. They designed posters for Assis products, Tempo, Samson tyres and many more. Many of the orders were for packaging for food products - two of which became icons: [Tnuva Cottage Cheese](#) and [Richard Levy's Loaf corned beef](#) for the IDF. Many packaging and ads were designed for various cigarette brands. But despite smoking no longer being favoured, we can still take pride in the graphic design if not the product.

The Shamir Collection in the Zionist Archives contains the [1958 Bank of Israel series of banknotes](#): woman soldier, fisherman, worker, scientist and pioneer. The portraits were drawn by Shamir brothers according to photographs of people who served as models. The scientist's model was the [photographer himself, Rudy Weisenstein](#). It is said that when Bank of Israel Governor David Horowitz showed the sketches to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, his response was: "Where is the Yemenite here?" Sixty years later images from these banknotes are still inspiring artists who used them in such places as: a restaurant in southern Tel Aviv, on the promenade of Tiberius and in an exhibition catalogue in Latvia.

The usual practice of the Philatelic Service was to hold a competition for every stamp issue or stamp series. Studio Shamir won 36 competitions. The service marketed the new stamps through newspaper ads, brochures and posters. The famous poster "[The Best-the Air Force](#)" was not commissioned by the Air Force but by the Philatelic Service to promote the sales of a series of stamps that came out on the 14th Independence Day. The Air Force provided the model, pilot Shabtai Gilboa (later Captain in El Al).

Shamir brothers gained their international reputation through the postage stamps they designed for 20 countries in Africa, South-east Asia and Central America. Israel's foreign aid to African countries included the design and the printing of the stamps by the Government Printer. Studio Shamir's "Foreign Aid" included design of [stamps](#), [first day covers](#) and [souvenir sheets](#).

The archived items can be used as building blocks for new works. Historian Dr. Mordechai Naor and others make extensive use of posters (including Shamir posters) and photographs. Pupils and students like to incorporate posters and other graphic imagery in their works. Exhibitions on different periods or on various topics often build on the use of past posters as a key element - "A Hebrew Woman to the Flag", "The Ma'abara" (Refugee absorption camps), "Made in Israel" and many more.

Last year, in 2018, Israel marked 70 years of the founding the state. At the same time, Latvia, the country of origin of the Shamir brothers, marked the 100th anniversary of its independence. The Israeli ambassador to Latvia and Keren Heyesod chose to jointly put together an [exhibition of Shamir works](#) for this occasion and asked me to be the curator. I chose the topic of independence. I did not settle just for symbols of independence - state emblems, banknotes, coins and stamps - but various aspects of nation building and the country development as expressed in Shamir posters. The exhibition was held in the National Library in Riga and in two other cities.

How did the brothers assess the design of posters? They differed in their ranking of the importance of their works. Gabriel thought that emblems and logos were the most important graphic work while Maxim rated postage stamps as most important. But both agreed that posters deserve a high place on the scale, above medals, banknotes, packaging, printed matters or newspaper ads.

A large selection of all types of Shamir Brothers' artwork can be found at this website www.shamir-brothers.com